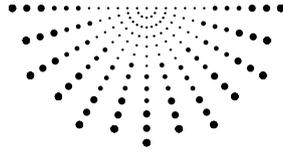


*Misunderstood
Protector*

NATALIE BELLE

MISUNDERSTOOD PROTECTOR

AN ENEMIES TO LOVERS, ROMANTIC SUSPENSE



NATALIE BELLE

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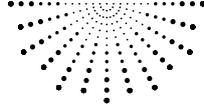
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Epilogue

CHAPTER ONE



REBECCA

I quickly began packing a bag because I'd be leaving Astoria, New York. I had been told by Mateo Steele, my new billionaire boss, that the mission required my presence immediately. My specialty was hacking, and my job was to help a group of former SEALs under attack. My destination, Mystic, Connecticut. It would be about a three-hour drive.

I loaded up my vintage sports car, a 1988 Subaru XT, stuffing it full of all my computer equipment and necessary items needed for me to be an asset for my new position. I jumped in the car, realizing I had forgotten some essentials: my chewy candy and 1990s alternative CD collection. It was short a small one, but a road trip just the same. I was excited. I started the car and picked out my first Seattle band with a fun, grungy feel.

The radio wasn't the original radio. It was old and would occasionally skip, but I found a quick hit to the side of it would often put it right back on track. I loved my car, born the same year as me. It used to be quick too, but the turbo died long ago. But it was a special gift from my parents for my 16th Birthday. It was the last Birthday my mom would see me have, as she died a few months later.

After several hours of singing the wrong lyrics of my favorite '90s alternative rock and pop bands and eating several bags of candy, I pulled over in front of Mystic's town hall on Main Street. It was already dark, but this quiet seaside town differed from my noisy little Queens hub. I liked the feel of the

stringed lights connecting the small boutiques on each side of the street.

I could see a lighthouse in the distance.

“Hey Siri,” I said, “directions for Steele Mystic Mansion.”

That was where I had to meet the group that had called me here. These men remained deeply connected to the world they had departed from.

I finally got to the property and pulled over in front of the gate. I wondered if I needed to call Mateo but realized the gate was open. Is this how they handled their security in this place? Open gates into a property that stretched far and beyond? Anybody could get in there and hide.

I drove in slowly, looking around. The driveway stretched long and spiraled round and round all over the place. Even though it was dark, I could see the lawn was neat, like someone could not wait for a blade of grass to get out of shape.

I kept looking around, expecting some security to appear in front of me suddenly. No one did. When I reached the mansion, it stood back and was far from the gate. It stood there like an aging man observing the world from the safety of its cocoon. There were trees around and behind it, and I suspected a garden was also nestled at the back of the house.

I stopped the car and opened the door. It was strange that no one had approached me yet. Where were they?

I exited the car with my hands in my pockets and stared at the mansion. A lot of money must have gone into this property, and whoever built this here wanted to be tucked away from the world. Why, then, were they still stuck inside the espionage world? The windows looked blacked out, and no lights appeared to be on. I began to question if I was in the right spot.

“You’re here,” a deep, sexy voice said.

I quickly jumped and spun around. I had not heard anyone come out of the house. A man was standing there, tall, about 6’5”, and absolutely beautiful. But quite intimidating to my

small 5'4" frame. His hair, mostly black, had some peppering of white, a start of a scruffy beard. His eyes, dark brown, and his body... amazing. He wore a t-shirt and jeans, but I was still sweating in his presence. He made me altogether nervous. His eyes took me in, and he stared intently at me. I felt uncomfortable and wished I put more effort into my first impression outfit and hair. Oh, dear God, I probably have sour patch kids in my teeth.

"Oh, you scared me, sorry...the gate was open," I said, almost stammering and rubbing my tongue along my teeth to get rid of any candy that may be there lingering.

The look in his eyes was intense, and he seemed slightly annoyed. The rough quality of his handsomeness made me want to know him a lot more.

"I know," he said. "I was told you were coming, Rebecca."

Oh my, I loved his voice. Was he feeling this instant connection?

Nope, he was not. He looked utterly unimpressed after staring at me before he looked away. I'm probably just not his type, and that's ok. I know men of his stock; they were all the same and after the same thing.

"I'm not sure why you are here, though, honestly," he said.

"I'm sorry...what was that?" I questioned with a bit of sarcasm.

"I think you heard me just fine," he scoffed, "You are just a kid and not cut out for this."

He walked away, and I stood there stunned. This guy sucks.

I began justifying why I was here in my head.

To start with, I am actually 35 years old. Did he refer to me as a kid? Perhaps people mistake me for being younger due to my blonde hair with a few pink streaks or my curvaceous figure and full cheeks.

And on top of that, I excel in cybersecurity and was top of my class. Furthermore, I possess exceptional weapon-handling

skills, thanks to a course Mateo enrolled me in a year ago. My reputation precedes me, and people have complete faith in my capabilities.

“I am a badass,” I said confidently but under my breath.

“I’m sorry...what was that?” he said, mocking my earlier comment. “Or are you just rambling to yourself right now?”

He turned away, and I gave him the finger. Childish? A little bit, but who did this guy think he was?

“Is there a problem?” I asked, with my arms crossed over my flannel. I did not want to burst out, even though I felt like it suddenly.

“Is there a problem?” he repeated. “Why should there be?”

He turned around and started walking back into the house.

“Come on,” he said. “Nice car.”

“Thank you,” I said in a questioning manner, wondering if was being a smart ass.

I followed him, stepping into one of the grandest hallways I had ever seen. The walls were decorated with original paintings and sculptures.

He continued into the house towards the door to the living room. The lights were on, but the windows were lined with blackout curtains.

“I didn’t get your name,” I said, trying to ease our tension.

“I didn’t offer it,” he replied.

“Hey, if you don’t want me here, just say it. What’s with the attitude?”

He stopped, and I almost panicked. I had to admit that I had a thing with difficult people who were hard to read. They interested me.

“Attitude?” he asked. “What do you know about attitude? You’re probably barely 20 and have been thrown into this world straight from school without any experience. We are all

about risking our lives for the greater good, and you want to talk to me about attitude? You shouldn't be here."

"You didn't hire me."

"I know. I wouldn't have."

"Look, Mister, you have a problem, and I imagine it's not me. You can fight Mateo or tell him I'm here. I will not put up with this."

"I'm banking on that. And I may not have hired you, but if you do stick around, you'll be answering to me."

"What's going on here, Stephen?" someone asked from the top of the stairs.

I looked up to see a face I recognized. It was Mateo; he was a former SEAL and ex-CIA. He was tall and in fantastic shape for his age. He was in his early 50s. His eyes were grey/blue, and his hair was blonde with some white along the sides. Undoubtedly, He was attractive, but I had developed a father/daughter-type relationship with him over the past year.

"Your hire is here," Stephen said and disappeared through one of the doors.

I stood staring at him after he had left. I yearned for his approval even though I did not know him and really didn't like him.

It was a problem I had, getting approval from men. Maybe because my father was always so proud of me and loved me for who I was, he thought I could do no wrong. I would never find anyone that could live up to the standards of my biggest fan, my dad. Or maybe it was because Stephen looked like he knew what he was doing. Or maybe I saw him as a test.

Whatever it was, I'd have to revisit it with my therapist later. After this mission, I'd have plenty to unload with how things were looking.

Mateo walked down the stairs towards me, smiling. When he got to me, the smile faded.

"Don't worry about Stephen. He will come around," he said.

“Is he always like this?” I asked.

“To newcomers. He would rather we hire a buddy from the FBI, but we don’t trust those buddies now. The FBI, the CIA. We think they are all compromised. They had to have been for us to be in the trouble we are in now. Come.”

“Trouble?” I asked as I followed him back up the stairs.

He stopped, turned towards me on the stairs and began to explain.

“Yes. I’m sorry I wasn’t very specific with the hiring brief. We have a security outfit and are all in trouble because of our connection to the SEALs and CIA. Our company is called Mystic Steele Security, and we offer security to big names and businesses, but right now, our staff needs protection. There has been a security breach either in the CIA or FBI. We believe they have a mole opening the files and sending our personal information to dangerous threats we have taken down. You and Stephen will be working together directly. Stephen is a former SEAL but wasn’t involved in the missions that have been compromised. We will need you two to head this up, you in the background and Stephen in the forefront. This way, the rest of the team can go into hiding if we need to.”

My heart dropped at hearing I would be directly working and answering to him. He would be my boss.

“Let me show you to the study and introduce you to the rest of the team. Hopefully, they will be a little more welcoming. I would like to extend my apologies for Stephen once again. He may come off as misunderstood at times, but deep down he is a good-hearted person.

I smiled while gritting my teeth slightly.

Misunderstood? Good-hearted person? We will have to see, but I won’t hold my breath.

Up the stairs we went until we got to the landing.

The banister was wooden and polished to a shiny cherry brown. There were images carved of every rail. They were so luxurious. I wanted to stop and admire each one and ask about

the inspiration that made them, but I could not. Mateo had something far more interesting and important to say.

Then we moved through the hallway and reached a slightly opened door.

“Heads up. The rest of the team are in there,” he said, looking at me.

I nodded, wondering if Stephen had somehow made it up here in another way.

We entered the room and found some men pouring over a piece of paper on the table. They turned as we walked in. Thankfully Stephen wasn't one of them.

“Guys, this is Rebecca Stanfield, the genius hacker I told you about. Rebecca, this is Craig...” Craig looked like he could bust my head open. He was an attractive tall bald man, heavy at the top of his body, and although there was clear evidence of him working out, it looked like a little bit of a beer belly was taking over. I would say he was in his mid-fifties.

He was also Mateo's best friend. Mateo had told me how Craig and his relationship had gone through some hard times when Mateo fell in love with his daughter, Darcy. Craig's daughter was now Mateo's wife, a real soap opera-type drama, but they have moved past it.

And built this company together.

Mateo pointed over and said, “...this is Archer, my nephew, here.” Archer Steele began nodding and smiling at me: a tall, slim, fit, dark-haired, good-looking man. “Hey, Rebecca, look forward to having you on the team,” Archer said.

“...Scott Keaton. He secures all our weapons. I don't know how he does it.” Scott did not look dangerous except when he smiled. His eyes remained serious. He was gorgeous, as well.

I felt like I was in a plot of a Marvel movie with these extremely strong and good-looking men surrounding me.

I nodded at the men, wondering if I was supposed to go around and shake their superhero hands.

“Oh, and my son Asher is here somewhere, as well. He’s visiting from Washington. He is also a former SEAL but has no interest in the new business.”

Mateo added.

“Maybe stay away from that one,” Archer, Asher’s cousin, laughed. “He’s a bit of a playboy.”

“-douche,” Scott added at the same time.

The men all laughed, minus Mateo, who shrugged and nodded slightly as if he agreed.

The reception from Stephen that evening was still stuck in my mind. I wondered how many of them felt the same way about me.

“Has she met Stephen?” Scott asked.

There was something underneath the tone of his voice, something not unlike dread and concern about what Stephen would think. But Mateo waved it away expertly as he was the group’s leader.

“Yes. Cold and unreceptive, but we must move on, and feelings cannot get in the way,” Mateo said. “He will come around.”

“You sure about her?” Craig asked, glaring at me.

“I have watched her for a while now. I’ve also trained her in New Haven with Mead at the Shooting Task Force.”

They were speaking about me as if I was not even there.

“Sure about me? For what?” I asked.

Scott sighed. “You are heading into dangerous territory. I don’t know how to break this to you, but the people who want to kill us will stop at nothing.”

“I’m aware of that,” I said.

Scott stared at Mateo before the rest of the men exchanged looks.

“Come, let me show you to your room. We will debrief you later tonight,” Mateo said.

I began to follow him.

“Oh, hello there. And who might this be, Dad?” another tall, dark-haired, built, handsome younger man said, as we crossed paths in the hallway.

“This is Rebecca,” Mateo answered. “Rebecca, this is my son, Asher. He won’t be getting in your way any. Right, Asher?”

“Nice to meet you, Asher. I heard a lot about you,” I responded.

“Oh, from those guys?” he said, pointing to the study, laughing, “I’m sure it was nothing but positive. I’ll see you around.”

He smirked and walked off confidently.

We made it to the end of the hallway. He opened the door to a room and let me in first, following me in after.

The room was tastefully furnished with a sofa, a king-sized bed, a wooden table close to the window, and expensive artwork on the walls. I let my gaze roam over the room—a side table by the bed and a bedside lamp on top. The drapes were made of a rich material. I walked towards it and ran my hands over it. The floor had a lush, beautiful white rug sinking my feet.

“I hope I can help you here,” I said before my eyes settled on the computers on the table.

“We have been able to get into the database of the CIA and the FBI, but the file we want to access is classified. No matter how much we try, we have been unable to get to the file,” Mateo said.

“That’s where I come in,” I murmured.

My heart beat a little faster. Stephen would be so glad to be proven right if I failed to open this file. His terrible behavior would be justified, and he would be vindicated.

I sighed.

Mateo was already at the door.

“Later tonight, we will all meet again,” he said, walking away.

I closed the door and flopped down on the comfortable, fluffy bed.

I was not supposed to be here. At first, I had started hacking for fun, getting into people’s things and playing tricks on them. Being raised by just my dad after my mom died when I was young, I was a loner and didn’t have many friends. I did that to keep myself busy. Then I went to school with an academic scholarship. I managed to keep all my activities under the radar while at the cyber security school because I had been warned that I could be caught and forced to work for the government with limited pay.

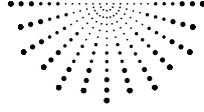
Somehow, this man, Mateo, had found out about me. He had knowledge of things that I believed no one should have known. Despite my efforts to cover my tracks, he uncovered everything. I felt impressed as I had been doing smaller tasks before this. This was my first major opportunity, and I was untested in this critical situation where life and death were at stake.

However, I believed that I was prepared for the responsibility. Mateo’s friend, Mead, had trained me in gun handling and I had attended numerous self-defense courses. Despite this, I understood Stephen’s hesitance to entrust their safety to me.

“I can’t wait,” I murmured, walking to the window.

I would surprise them. Especially Stephen.

CHAPTER TWO



STEPHEN

As soon as Rebecca stepped out of her car, I felt a sudden jolt of electricity run through me. It was an unfamiliar sensation that seemed to resonate within my very being.

Although it was hard to admit, I couldn't ignore the fact that she had a beautiful face and a curvy figure that caught my attention. However, I was trying to understand why I felt so angry towards her. I couldn't even explain it to myself. Was it because I was genuinely concerned about the team and myself, or was I worried about her well-being?

Sitting on the veranda, I grabbed a cigarette. A nasty habit I keep going back to in times of stress. I had a lot going on in my head right now.

I was appreciative of Mateo for saving me from my previous situation and bringing me into Mystic Steele Security. But I was confused that Mateo and the boys had difficulty trusting me and my connections, even though I could provide answers to the attacks they experienced.

Scott had almost been killed, and Archer and his family were being followed. And Mateo? He survived a gunfire exchange with people he thought were the police.

The attacks were premeditated and planned out. It meant that all of us connected with the former members of this SEALs team were in trouble.

Mateo needed to comprehend the magnitude of the situation fully.

Had he understood, he shouldn't have brought in an inexperienced newcomer.

To make matters worse, I was supposed to be the one to talk to this girl; Someone who saw hacking as a plaything. She did not know what she was getting into.

It was almost 10 pm. I would have to call and brief her in Mateo's study room in an hour. I was confident that the seriousness of what we faced would be lost on her. She was a kid, just what I needed at 43. To be her babysitter.

I needed to talk to Mateo. I didn't feel good about this situation. I decided that I had to see him again.

We could do something about all of this before it was too late.

I got up from the veranda and walked into the house. The lights from the chandeliers in the hallway were on, a yellowish, pretty light that washed the entire hallway with its pure illuminance.

In the living room, I found Mateo sitting alone in an armchair. He looked like he had been doing some thinking. Hopefully, I hoped it was about the mistake that he was making.

I sat on the opposite side, at the sofa's edge.

"Ready to brief her?" he asked.

I sighed. "I can still get Pope here. He would be here latest, tomorrow morning. We can stop ourselves from making this mistake."

"You don't get it, do you?"

"I know what you are trying to avoid. I trust Pope with...."

"I don't trust him. I don't trust the FBI or CIA, or Homeland Security. I don't trust any of them, and the others share that distrust with me. The last person that tried to kill me had a tattoo from an operation we did years ago. An operation that didn't exist. I would think you, of all people, would agree with us on this."

“But you trust her?”

“Yes.”

“She’s green.”

“Precisely the point.”

I slapped my forehead. I understood his fears, but now I was afraid that those fears were robbing him of his mind. He needed to be thinking more clearly.

“I still think...”

“Steve, Steve, listen. You cannot change my mind about this. Just give her the briefing she needs. The sooner you start working on this, the better.”

“The both of us?”

He nodded. “I imagine our attackers have not made you. She’s new as well. No federal stain on her.”

“You went to all that trouble.”

“Yes. I’m thorough.”

I stood up. There was no convincing him otherwise. I would have to work with the amateur who should be somewhere getting another degree instead of getting into this dangerous hole with us.

I hurried upstairs to her room and knocked on the door. At first, there was no reply. I knocked again, wondering if she had fallen asleep.

I heard footsteps being dragged across the floor.

“Who’s there?” a drowsy voice asked.

“Be in the study in ten minutes,” I said before I walked away.

There was no one else in the study when I entered.

I went to the laptop where we had pulled footage of the attacks on our men. I began to focus on one of the images. The one I was staring at was the attack on Mateo. The man in the footage wore a baseball hat and seemed to know exactly where

the cameras were. He put his face away just at the right time while shooting.

“Lucky bastard,” I said, referring to Mateo. Somehow, he had survived long enough for the police to come.

His attacker had dispersed without firing any more shots. There was no way to get the identity of this man. Perhaps Pope or Nico would know a way. It could be a mark on the hand of a former convict. The girl was new. She would not know what to look for. How many men of the underworld could she possibly know?

Someone knocked at the door and breezed into the room before I could say anything. I looked up to see Rebecca looking at me. For a moment, I was lost in her world. She did not look anything like her drowsy voice. Under the light from the bulbs and the chandelier, which every room here seemed to have, she looked like some perfect animated character that had wandered into our world. Her lips were cherry red and full. Her eyes were blue and dreamy. The shape in her pajamas was showcased even more. When she arrived, I noticed her nice curvy figure in a loose flannel and cargo pants. But now she looked even more voluptuous and sexy as hell.

My gaze strayed to her bosom, but I returned it to her face and reminded myself I did not like her. But right now, it was hard to say that I didn't want her presence in this place.

“What do you have?” she asked.

I grunted and motioned for her to approach the other side of the table. She moved to my side of the table. She smelled like vanilla and coconut and immediately intoxicated me. I began to inspect her body and became even more turned on. Her pants were slightly tight and could not help but reveal the full shape of her butt.

“What is this?” she asked, looking at the attack footage.

“What...” I grumbled, immediately moving my eyes anywhere but her butt. “You are to just focus on the file in the FBI database. You need to find a way to see who last accessed it.”

“I think I should know everything about this case I’m working on.”

“Case you are working on? You think yourself some expert when it comes to security, huh?”

“Hey, if anything I’ve said or done has made you uncomfortable, please let me know. I want to make sure we’re having a good interaction.”

I sighed.

“You shouldn’t be here. There are people better at this than you are.”

Her blue eyes had suddenly become fire as she glared at me.

“You know what? I don’t care. You can carry on however you want. I don’t give a shit.”

“Watch your tone.”

“Or what? Are you going to fire me? I would like to see you try.”

“Just get to work.”

I walked towards the door.

“Find the person who last accessed the file.”

I slammed the door shut and walked away.

Maybe it was harsh, but I was tired of people winging through things. What experience did she have to meddle in something of this magnitude concerning security? I was worried there could be a bigger picture to this, and she would be a pawn that would achieve nothing or make things worse. Pope could do this. I knew he could. And I knew he needed the money.

Outside the house, I searched my pockets for my pack of cigarettes, fished out one, and lit it before I inhaled. I watched the smoke curl up into the night sky. Three deep breaths were not enough to calm me down. I did not know how much longer I could keep this charade up. I would, one day, shout at her and lose my cool. Mateo wouldn’t like that very much, would

he? What exactly was he thinking bringing an amateur on board in a dangerous situation like this?

The door opened; it was Scott. He came and stood by me.

“Can I have one?” he asked.

I handed him one. He placed it between his lips and took out a lighter. I was not surprised that he always carried a lighter around. Anyone in the same situation we had found ourselves in would fall back to one habit or another to stay sane.

“How’s it going with the intern?” he asked.

Intern? Is that what they call her?

Scott liked joking a lot.

“This is not a job for amateurs or twenty-somethings. Our life depends on it.”

“Bro, I think Mateo said she is 35 years old; why do you keep calling her a kid? She’s grown.” Scott laughed.

“I think he’s making a mistake.”

“Who? Mateo?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t trust the intern?”

“Can you stop calling her that?”

“I didn’t catch her name.”

Rebecca. I realized the girl’s name was still in my head, as was her smell and beautiful body. This wasn’t good, and hiding my attraction to Rebecca wouldn’t be easy.

“You don’t think he knows that?”

“I don’t think he understands that.”

“Then you don’t know Mateo.”

Maybe Scott was the last person to discuss Mateo’s looming mistake with. He would always stand by him. Craig may give me a listening ear. I knew their history and how Mateo got married to his daughter despite his objections. I did

not think he would trust Mateo's decisions as fully as Scott did. Archer being Mateo's nephew, was hopeless.

"She may get us exposed. What does she know? She plays around with this sort of thing."

"Mateo has told her about the dangers of what she's undertaking."

"She still will not get it. This is way above her."

Scott sighed. I decided there was no use talking about this. I needed to check on Rebecca in the study.

"I should get back to the intern," I said, rolling my eyes.

I turned and left him standing there alone. Since the attacks started, we decided to hide on one of Mateo's properties. But we knew our time here was ticking. It was only a matter of time before an organized attack would track us here and attempt to take us out.

I found the door slightly ajar and slipped through it.

"Were you able to crack it?"

"No," she said.

Of course she wasn't. All of this was just a waste of time.

"I knew you wouldn't be able to figure it out," I said. "I'll let the others know, so you can start heading home tomorrow."

"There's something here," she said.

"Something?"

"Yes. Something important. I think you should see it."

"There's nothing as important as cracking open that file," I said.

"You may want to look again."

Her tone was aggressive.

I walked over to the screen and stared at it. There was an image there.

"Is this the footage I told you, you have no business looking at?"

I stared at the image again. It was the window of a car.

“What...what, is this?” I asked.

There was nothing there.

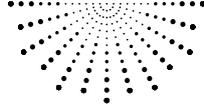
“Look closer,” she said.

I could sense some mockery in her tone. What was she trying to do?

“Stop wasting my time; just show me already,” I said.

She zoomed the image on the screen. What was that? It was a face. Damn! It was a face.

CHAPTER THREE



REBECCA

He had been so sure that I was going to fail. And in a way, I did. I could not get past the firewall. The security around this case file was the strongest I had ever seen. If I were to do anything, it would have to be physical. I would need to get a bug into the system first, but I did not think that was possible, or else they would have already done it, and there would be no need for me.

“What am I looking at?” Stephen asked.

“A picture of one of your attackers,” I replied.

“Who is he?”

Now that was the question that I would so very much like to answer.

“I have to run it through all the federal databases to see if I can find out.”

“Why haven’t you done that yet?”

Again, that condescending tone.

I chuckled and turned back to the screen. It was easy. I had been into the federal databases a million times and have yet to be detected. Getting back into them again was going to be no sweat.

Once the face match began to run, I leaned back on my seat and stretched my back.

“What now?” Stephen asked impatiently.

I was tired of his impatience and condescending attitude. It annoyed me.

“We wait. You haven’t done this before, have you?” I said confidently.

Stephen frowned and walked to the window. I wondered where the rest of the team had gone. Were they all already asleep and planning to wake up the next day to see their problems miraculously solved?

The rundown would take some time, an hour, maybe two. The more I waited, the more impatient I became. But I did not show it. I certainly didn’t want Stephen to see me stress over it.

Mateo and I went about a year back. He had watched me win, well, cheat, at a casino. It had nothing to do with all the money I had won. It was for the thrill, and it was so easy. I found it fun too. I thought he would hand me over, but he just told me to be more careful.

I had a feeling that he had been watching over me for a while, and he had. He asked me to be a part of something bigger. He began training me personally and introduced me to Mead at the Shooting Task Force in Hartford.

I was the perfect person for his job. No family, no love interest, nothing to hold me back from going ahead and plunging myself into danger. He had warned that it would probably get more dangerous as he was still in the dark about the people he wanted to find. But I loved a challenge, so here I was. It was not my small-time gig of hacking into offices and fooling around with things I had no business being around. This one came with real and present danger.

“Call me when that shows anything useful,” Stephen growled, leaving the room.

Stephen. I decided to see what I could find on him. I knew he was a part of the Mystic Steele Security team. But with how he was carrying on, maybe there was something that I did not know about him, something I should know.

My fingers clattered across the keyboard as I searched for more information about him. At first, there was nothing. But I continued to dig deeper.

Then I sat back and watched my accomplishment. Here it was. Something. This might be why he is so uptight.

Prison, Stephen was in prison up until a couple of years ago. The reason and how he got out would take more research. I wondered why and how a former SEAL gets locked up. It didn't add up. There was a story here.

I turned away from the computer and looked through the window at the darkness of the trees. The mansion was the tallest structure around here. It was built far from the small but bustling town, as if Mateo preferred to avoid seeing people. It was a little boring for my liking here. I was used to horns honking, people laughing, and music blaring from cars at this time of night. I began zoning off wondering what was happening back home in Astoria when I suddenly snapped out of it. I needed to focus on the task at hand.

I refused to give Stephen the needed ammunition to convince Mateo to let me go. I knew Mateo would not listen, but the others might be on Stephen's side.

The beep from the laptop pulled me back to reality. I turned and stared at the screen. The face I had taken off a car's window was even scarier than I thought. It was a convicted criminal who had somehow escaped jail time.

I read through the case file, unable to breathe freely while my eyes traveled through the words.

"What the hell," I muttered.

This was something that the guys had to see. The man on the screen was a hard-core criminal, and it hit me again that this was not play-pretend. This was real. This was happening.

I had to find Mateo or Stephen or anybody. I left the table and walked to the door. I could not call Stephen on the phone. It would have been easier than going around the house looking for him. I went through the entire floor before I got downstairs. He was not in the living room or the hallway.

I moved outside. The surroundings were almost shrouded in darkness except for the streetlamps on the driveway. There was no one here.

I walked back upstairs and into Stephen's room, whose door was open. He wasn't in there. I glanced around, trying to learn more about this mystery of a man.

I looked down the hallway to make sure no one was near as I went back in and began walking around looking at Stephen's belongings. I saw a frame on his desk. I picked it up and saw a picture of Stephen with two tall, beautiful brunette women. They had to be close to 6'. They stood on both sides of him, his arms around their small waists.

I scoffed, "Of course this man surrounds himself with supermodels."

I bitterly put the frame down, feeling what might have been a little jealousy.

I began walking back down the hallway to the study.

"What is it? Did you find something?" Stephen spoke from behind me, making me jump. I had not heard him walk up behind me.

I turned back to see him in a white tank top and gym shorts. He looked like he just got done working out. His biceps were bulging and glistening, and the hint of his six-pack was showing through his sweaty tank top. My eyes began to scan lower. His shorts were baggy, but I could still make out an outline. I immediately blushed and moved my eyes up to his. He cocked his head, squinted, and I think he smiled. Oh my gosh, I was busted. He definitely saw me admiring his gorgeous body and impressive lower half.

"There's something you should see. There's something all of you should see," I said, still embarrassed.

He nodded and began gathering the others.

In less than 5 minutes, everyone was in the study. I turned the screen to them and watched their faces for expressions. There was none except Mateo, who took a deep sigh.

“Recognize him?” I asked.

“Macken,” he said, sighing again. “He was supposed to be out of the country.”

“You know this guy?” Stephen asked.

“Yes. And he knows me. He knows us. We had many run-ins with him when I was with the CIA. Although he has been responsible for many terrorist acts, he has never been caught red-handed. He covers his tracks well. The most slippery son of a bitch that I’ve ever seen.”

“He isn’t so slippery after all,” I said.

“He can’t be working alone,” Scott said.

It was shocking to discover that the men were all wide awake. They hadn’t been around while I endured Stephen’s annoying display.

“No. He’s not that stupid. He knows we know him. He must have some insurance; someone else is putting him up to this. And for an operation of that magnitude, wiping us out? He cannot have come up with that alone,” Craig said.

I sat back, listening to the men talk. I was no stranger to the underworld or the business, but I had not been this close to people talking about their attackers as if they were studying for an exam.

“This man attacked you?” I asked, looking at Mateo.

“Yes. He must be working for someone,” Mateo said.

I was trained in hand-to-hand combat, I could shoot a gun, all because of Mateo. My mind traveled back to the past on our third meeting after he caught me at the casino.

“You strike me as someone who wants to do more, wants to get more from life,” he said, looking at me.

“Why?”

“Hmmm?”

“Why do I strike you as such?”

“I have watched you long before I came in contact with you. I knew what you would do at the casino, and I knew you did not need the money. You get money by doing odd jobs for people.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“You do. Remember I told you, no need to play coy with me. I don’t care how many people you’ve defrauded.”

“I don’t do frauds.”

“What do you do then? You hack into systems lawfully?”

“What do you want?”

“I want to ensure you know what you are getting into.”

“I’m not getting into anything.”

“You see, Rebecca, information is power. People kill for power.”

“Not me. I don’t.”

“You don’t get it. Whenever you hack into places you are not supposed to be, you expose yourself to people who would kill for power.”

“It’s just....”

“You are doing little, getting paid little. But the time will come when you get greedy and want to go into the sea with the sharks. You can either be eaten, or you will swim to safety.”

“What are you saying?”

“You need to protect yourself.”

“How?”

“Follow me.”

Wherever Mateo led, I followed because he had something over me. After the training, I realized he had nothing. He did not record any evidence of me cheating at the casino. I waited to hear from him, and then he called.

Are you getting greedy yet? He asked.

How greedy?

Fifty thousand dollars greedy.

And that was it. It was enough to pull me from the city to this little seaside. But I did not count on Stephen being part of the deal. I was told the gig was dangerous but didn't know I would have to work with an egotistical asshole. Stephen was going to make me work for this fifty thousand.

"The question is, why now? Why is this group resurfacing, and why are they after us?" Scott said.

"What group?" I asked.

"She does not need to know," Stephen said.

"A terrorist cell we thought we had destroyed. Someone survived. And we think this someone is working with one of the government agencies or has been a part of the agency throughout their whole time."

"How do you know it's that one cell he's working for?" I asked.

"Because that's the only thing linking us together. And before you found a face, we had already found a tattoo. But a tattoo is no good when we don't know whose hand it belongs to," Mateo said.

Craig and Scott exchanged uncomfortable glances. Stephen simmered in anger. I did not care. I was tired of trying to make him like me. He could dislike me for all I care.

"What next?" I asked.

"We have to find Macken," Mateo said.

"He would see us from a mile off," Scott said. "He knows us. And if that file is in their hands as we suspect, then we have a problem."

"But we still have to find out what he is doing, who he's meeting."

I was on it already. I could access where he was last seen hacking into federal satellites.

"I tracked him to a house on the outskirts of Mystic," I spoke.

“Let’s all burst in and take him,” Stephen said.

“And if he’s working for someone else?” Mateo said.

“We get the information out of him,” Stephen said.

“The terrorist group he worked with has been known to have members refusing to talk, even getting killed before speaking. I don’t think you will get anything out of him that way,” Scott said.

“We can trace him,” I said.

“Trace him?” Mateo said, turning to me sharply.

“Yes. We can trace him through his car and phone, so we know who he’s talking to and when they meet.”

“Stealth,” Craig said. “I like it.”

“He would see you from a mile off. You’ve already said. He would recognize you all,” Stephen said.

“He won’t recognize you,” Mateo said.

“What?” Stephen seemed flustered.

“You can get in. You can help us bug the place,” Scott said.

“Or I could go,” I said.

A sudden silence settled on everyone in the room. It trailed my voice, and the suspense got thicker and thicker.

“No,” Mateo said. “We can’t risk that.”

“Why not?” Craig asked.

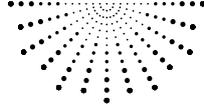
Stephen glared at the both of them.

“Stephen can go. He’s a professional,” Mateo said.

“Exactly. I don’t need her slowing me down,” Stephen said.

For once, Stephen and Mateo agreed.

CHAPTER FOUR



STEPHEN

“Or she can go with you. You two can both go,” Craig said.

“You can’t be serious,” I said, looking at Craig. Then at Mateo.

Mateo looked away. He looked concerned, staring at Rebecca. The man had lost his head. The only reason he would not want the girl out there was so that she would not get into any danger. For once, our goals aligned. I was also afraid she would get hurt but I refused to show this to the group.

Silence followed my outbursts. Were they actually considering this? Although I was a new team member, I still deserved to be treated with respect and professionalism. The length of time I had been with the company should not determine how I am viewed. Rebecca knew nothing about being in the field. She would fold and put the both of us in trouble.

“Scott?” I called. I saw him as the only reasonable person in the group. Craig and Mateo were involved in some power struggle, and Archer was significantly biased on the side of Mateo.

“Come on, you can’t tell me you are with him on this,” I said.

“What’s the problem, Mateo?” Craig said. “She knows what she is doing. She is combat trained and can shoot. She should be out there with him.”

“I don’t know, Craig. I’m not sure she’s ready,” Mateo said. But he needed to be more convincing.

Great. Just great. The one place where he should put his foot down was where he was being hesitant.

“She can’t come with me,” I said.

“You don’t get to decide that,” Craig retorted, frowning. “She will be of a great deal of help to you in the field.”

“An amateur is what she is. I’m refusing to bring her in on this. I do the work solo, or I don’t do it,” I said.

“I will go with you,” Rebecca said.

“What?” I turned around quickly to glare at her. “Is something wrong with you?”

“I came here to work, not to sit around. I intend to earn my pay.”

“Yes. You are a hacker. You hack into systems and get us what we need.”

“Sometimes I have to be close and hands-on. You never know when that can be.”

“That’s nonsense.”

“Oh, really, Mr. Big Time Hacker? Okay, come and show me what you know.”

“Mateo, don’t tell me you are considering this. She will get herself killed out there.”

“She can handle herself, I’m sure,” Craig said.

“Mateo?” I called again.

He stood up and walked across the room to where Rebecca was seated. What was going on?

“Are you sure you can do this?” Mateo asked.

“I can,” she replied.

“Getting greedy, huh?”

“Yes.”

I watched both. It was like a father talking to his daughter, but I was not impressed. Seeing that they were even thinking about this was unsettling. I began to realize I may have feelings for Rebecca. The thought of her out in the field made my stomach turn.

“She will go with you,” Mateo said. “It’s safer that way. Both of you have faces that are unknown to these men. If they are trying to take us out, I fear they have some treacherous plan cooking.”

“She will have to go alone,” I said.

“Come on, Steve. Don’t be like this,” Craig said.

I stood up and walked out of the room. I hurried outside and searched around my pocket for my cigarettes. There was only one remaining in the pack. I took it out and lit it. I inhaled, and warmth spread through my body. Maybe there was still some hope for saving Rebecca from this dangerous situation. I could sneak off at dawn, do something that would make Rebecca sleep late, and go on this mission alone. But I was not sure that would work. I couldn’t suddenly change my mind and agree for her to go with me now. She wouldn’t believe it. She was acting like she had something big to prove. I wish she would back down and stay here in the safety of the crew and Mateo’s house. I don’t think she has it in her to be involved in this mission. I didn’t go through years of military training and covert operations to be worrying over an inexperienced partner. Especially one that I have recently found an indescribable attraction to.

“Darkest night I’ve ever seen here,” Scott said from behind me.

I did not move or get startled even though I had not heard him come up here. I ignored him. There was nothing to say to him. When I needed him to speak, he remained mute. If the mission failed, it would be all their fault. And worse, if I could not save Rebecca from any potential harm, it would be something I would never forgive myself for.

“Makes me think of the last time I saw the moon,” Scott continued. “It was with my wife.”

“Scott, save your stories,” I said with a rude tone. I didn’t feel like hearing them at that moment. I believed that if I maintained my distance and acted aloof, he would be more likely to give me space.

“You don’t believe in partnership?”

” I never said that.”

“Then what are you saying?”

“God, she’s a newbie. You can see that. She has not been in the field before. And you all want me to carry this burden.”

“She’s the reason there’s any field at all.”

“Good. She’s done her job. So shouldn’t she stay back and wait until she’s needed again?”

“What if she could do more?”

“Or she could get us both killed. Don’t you understand?”

“Give her a break. Mateo’s trained her hard.”

“Mateo trained her?”

No wonder he had always been partial to her. He listened more to what she had to say than what anyone else had to say.

“You didn’t know?”

“No.”

“Does that make you feel better, knowing that she has been training with Mateo and Mead?”

“No, it does not. She’s still too damn green. On a mission of less importance, she can be taken by whoever is leading it. She must learn before she makes the climb up the danger ladder. You can’t just put her on it or me.”

“I don’t believe Mateo is making a mistake,” Scott said finally after we stood silently for a few moments.

I pushed him away from my mind. Afterward, I heard his footsteps as he retreated, walking back into the house. I sat down on one of the front steps and inhaled the warmth from my cigarette. I was already tired of the mission before it even started, but there was one thing that Scott said that was still

sticking with me. Mateo hardly makes mistakes. I allowed my mind to rouse up some memories buried there.

The prison smelled of dampness. Many people had passed through here. Those identities lingered in the wet humidity of the prison cell. I was stuck here being held for charges that weren't true.

I heard the footsteps of the correctional officer making his rounds. I was in a deep hole. It was a mess. I had been set up, and there was no getting out of this.

The guard's footstep led him to the entrance of my prison cell.

"Hey, you have a visitor," the guard said.

He had a red mustache and treated me like shit since I came here. It was even more annoying because this wasn't my cross to bear. I was here because I was stubborn. I was taking the fall for someone else.

"Who?"

"Come on, get out."

The cell opened, and the guard stood in front of me. I tensed in case it was a setup. I could snap his neck in two if I wanted to, but that would only make them right. It was the last thing that I wanted to do.

I followed him out. The man waiting for me at the visiting area had a baseball hat on the table, and his hair was white at the edges. His eyes pierced through me. He smiled, but it didn't travel to his eyes.

"Sold drugs and killed a man," he said.

"What?"

"Stephen Mitchell. Captain Stephen Mitchell. You could have been so much more."

"Who are you?" I asked.

"It depends on what you want to make me."

I did not have time for this nonsense, but there was an air of mystery around him, an aura that told me he had long reaches and could do something for me.

“I don’t understand,” I said.

“I can be a visitor, a strange one that will linger in your memory as you spend the rest of your life in prison....”

He paused for effect while he watched me, his lips still parted slightly in a smile.

“...or I can be the one who will take you back to what you know and help you enjoy your freedom again. You can walk away from this a free man.”

He spoke like a madman, but he still had that aura that was hard to ignore. I wanted to stand up from the table and leave after his ridiculous offer, but I could not. I found myself contemplating it. What if he had the reach to get me out of here?

“What do you want?” I asked.

He chuckled. “All right, you’re considering it. Being open to ideas will be very important for what you will face later.”

“What I’ll face later?”

“Yes. I have a team,” he said. “All you have to do is join us.”

I inhaled again, slowly, as the memory of the first time I met Mateo played in my head. He had always had that aura that made people listen to him even when he suggested the most ridiculous things. And he had always been right.

On Rebecca, however, I did not trust his judgment.

I realized I had smoked my cigarette completely down. I dropped it and stomped it out. Once it was out, I bent down and picked it up. Since the attacks, we have done this. Covered our tracks. I knew the importance of it, and I had to grudgingly admit to myself that Mateo was the one who had led us and kept us safe.

The property looked abandoned from the outside, and with the stories that Mateo had flooded the town with, people thought he had moved from there. But it would be soon that the people who wanted us dead would visit or, from what it sounded like, were already here and hot on our tracks. I supposed it was up to me and Rebecca to find their purpose. And keep everyone safe.

“Dammit,” I cursed, getting up from the front steps and heading back into the house.

The hallway was empty. The men must have all retired back to their rooms. I climbed up the stairs and moved slowly, trying as much as possible not to make a sound.

I walked by the study room and realized it was closed. My room was at the end of the hallway. Rebecca’s room was the door before it. I moved faster.

When I got to her door, I paused. It was open slightly.

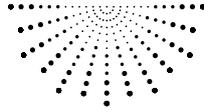
I looked in, feeling a little bad. But not bad enough to stop looking. There she was. A beautiful curvy goddess. She was hanging up her clothes next to the bedside lamp. The glow on her face, and the way her pajamas tightened as she bent down, I was half tempted to knock and offer to help her unpack. Call a truce. Then lean her against the wall as I slowly move in and kiss her luscious lips. I swallowed, still staring at her.

I realized I had been lusting for Rebecca this whole time. From the first moment I saw her in the driveway. I felt my pants getting tighter and my heart pounding harder when the lamp went off.

I went to my room and shut the door. What was going on with me?

I closed my eyes and pictured Rebecca.

CHAPTER FIVE



REBECCA

I could not open the file, but I was able to get some footprints off it. I woke up the following day determined to find out where it originated. Someone else had hacked into the federal database and could open any file they wanted.

I hurried through my shower while thoughts of getting the location buzzed in my head. I would be practically indispensable to the group if I could find out where this person was. Stephen would listen more to what I had to say and Mateo would not talk to me as if I were a child.

I got out of the house and moved downstairs. There was no one in the hallway. No one in the living room. I purposely woke up very early. Hopefully, they were all still asleep. I would be back before they knew I was gone and I'd come back with some groceries, as it would be my reason for leaving.

I found my car in some foliage. It had been hidden away in case of a suspected invasion. I quickly removed the leaves and tree branches placed on top of it to form the camouflage and got in. I started it and pulled out to the driveway. Before I started down the driveway, I looked back at the house and the windows, hoping no one had heard the car's sound. Then I zoomed down the driveway towards the gate.

It was shut and locked.

Damn.

I pulled over to the side, parked my car, and covered it again best I could. It may be better to walk. This way, they

couldn't track the car down later. The fence looked higher than I thought. I gauged it to ensure it was not electric before I found the closest part to the ground. I had done many things in training with Mateo. Scaling a 9-foot fence was one of the things I was taught, thankfully.

I got down on the other side and started walking. My tracker was leading me to the middle of the town. What was it about this town that was bringing questionable characters together? I wondered.

The sun struggled to reach the horizon when I started trekking up the road. A car, a Fiat, flew by me and did not stop. Even though my hand was raised high, waving them down for a ride.

Stephen had questioned my abilities the night before and worried about my well-being. I wonder what he would think of me hitchhiking on the side of the road. I began to question myself, knowing this was probably not my smartest idea.

Hailing a ride here would be difficult. The place seemed deserted.

The following car, a truck, pulled over the side of the road.

"Thank goodness," I said, hurrying up to the truck. "I thought you were not going to stop."

"Where are you headed?" the female brunette driver asked.

"I just need to go into town. Anywhere near main street."

"Well, you are in luck."

She unlocked the door and I got in. Then we drove off.

"Thank you," I said, turning to look at her.

"It's nothing," she replied.

Then silence settled between the both of us. I brought out my tracker again. It pinpointed the location of the only person who had somehow opened a classified file. This person, whoever they were, did not cover their tracks well. Or maybe they did. Perhaps leaving this behind was them covering their tracks. It was possible that I would get there, and there would

be nothing there. Or worse, what if they are leading us there on purpose? I began to second-guess myself and missed Stephen and his overprotective attitude towards me.

“Do you live around here?” she asked.

“Oh, no. My car died on the road. I wanted to get my mechanic,” I lied.

“I must have missed it.”

“Must have. I tried to move it away from the road.”

“There’s a mechanic just before you get into town. I could stop....”

“No, no. Thank you, though. If I can go into town, I’ll find him. I’m looking for someone specifically.”

“Do I know this garage?”

“No. He just moved to this place.”

“I see.”

I wished she would stop with the probing questions and focus on driving.

She glanced at me and returned to the road as if she wanted to say something but was trying to build her courage. I hoped she wouldn’t. I wasn’t wanting to answer any more questions.

Finally, we got into town. The sound of other cars humming along the road welcomed us. Seeing people busy on the sidewalks going about their business was nice.

“Here,” I said. “This is great if you could drop me here.”

She pulled over.

“I didn’t catch your name,” she said.

“Nita,” I lied again. I wondered how many times she wanted me to lie to her.

“I’m Chloe,” she said, pulling away from the shoulder of the road as I got down.

I waved goodbye and watched her truck disappear down the road. Now to the business of the morning.

I followed the direction of my tracker, feeling adventurous as I moved. In no time, I would have more information than Mateo and his crew bargained for. Stephen would realize I was just as crucial to the group as he was.

The tracker led me to the library. I passed it and then went to a garage next door that seemed not to be in business. I stood outside the garage and contemplated going in.

The place looked deserted, which did not mean anything. The person that hacked the classified file could still be in there. I wanted to know how they did it. Their footprint was easily detected. Which meant they either had someone on the inside or this was the work of some mastermind genius.

I approached the garage and walked under the shed. Old cars were sitting there, and no crew to speak of. A sign on one side of the wall showed “closed ‘til further notice.” That was bad, but it was also a tell-tale sign that the bad guys were here, and I would be damned if I did not get something from there before going home today.

The office was further inside. There was a level upstairs. I wanted to get there.

I walked slowly, looking around, very alert. The sound of a pin drop would startle me.

“Didn’t you read the sign?” someone said from the top of the stairs that I was heading to.

I froze. I had not seen the man come out of the office, and suddenly he was standing at the landing of the stairs, looking down at me. He looked rough, with his scraggly beard covering his face. He was tall. He looked to be about Stephen’s height.

“The sign?” I asked, feigning ignorance.

“That sign,” he pointed.

I turned and made a show of just noticing the sign.

“Oh,” I said. “I didn’t see that. Was that there a moment ago?”

The man started climbing down the stairs slowly, his eyes on me. *Stay calm, Rebecca*, I muttered under my breath.

What did I think when I embarked on my journey to this place? That this place would be abandoned? Yeah, I was banking on that. I also could identify the culprit from a mile off. But I had let my curiosity carry me to this place.

“I find that hard to believe,” the man said. He was at the base of the stairs and started walking towards me.

Inwardly, I flinched, but I stayed put.

“My car...”

“Who are you?”

“I’m looking for a mechanic,” I said.

“This is not the only mechanic shop in town. Go away,” he growled.

“I heard you have the best men.”

“You heard wrong.”

He turned and was about to head back up the stairs.

“A friend directed me to this place,” I said. “He had his car repaired here last year.”

The man paused and turned around.

“Last year?”

I nodded. Finally, we were getting somewhere. I just needed to get into the office to have bugs planted there.

The man walked back down the few stairs and headed toward me again.

“Harry!” he called.

Another man appeared at the top of the stairs.

Perhaps I could still find my way out of there with one of them, but with two, my odds were quickly shrinking.

“She said a friend got his car repaired here last year,” the first man said.

“Does he have a name?” Harry said, walking down the stairs.

“I’m not...he’s not a close friend, more like an acquaintance. Jerry. I think that’s his name,” I said.

I was getting uncomfortable. Maybe this was what Stephen was trying to avoid. Perhaps he did not hate me.

“I would remember a Jerry, wouldn’t you, Fred?”

“I think I would,” Fred, the first man said, rubbing his beard.

The two men approached me now, and I started to back away without thinking. I had given myself away without realizing it.

“Where’s your car so we can get it for you?” Fred asked.

“I think I’ll just find another mechanic,” I said.

“No, no,” Fred said.

He reached out and grabbed my elbow. I thought I had given them enough distance, but Fred’s arms were long. I tried to pull away, but he pulled me closer instead.

“We can do it for you. The repair is on the house. Free of charge. Now, where’s the damn car?”

His tone had changed quickly from light-hearted to menacing. I hit his hand soon with my fist, shocking him into freeing me, and I moved quickly away from them. The two men posed in a combat stance with me.

“It seems the little bird is not so lost after all,” Harry said, grinning. His teeth were crooked and stained by tobacco.

“Guys, you don’t have to do this,” I said, trying to remember everything Mateo had taught me. I had never really had to use it.

“Who do you work for then?” Fred asked. “Maybe we can stop if you tell us.”

They were two hefty men, so my chances of getting out of there were almost nothing.

Fred hit first with his fist. I dodged to the side, quickly side-stepping another from Harry before I landed a one on Fred's nose. He winced and moved back.

"Don't underestimate her," Fred said.

Harry nodded.

Fred stepped back and pulled out a gun.

"What the fuck!" I said.

It had all seemed like fun and games until now. I knew I could hold my own in combat. Mateo had drilled me so often that I was looking forward to it. But I never imagined being at the wrong end of a gun.

"Who are you?" Fred said, wiping the blood from his nose.

"I'm not some coward who can't beat a girl," I taunted.

He pulled the safety from the gun, and a chill ran up my spine.

"Who are you? I won't ask again," Fred said.

Harry moved away from me.

"We have to kill her. She knows," he said.

"I know what?"

"Shut up!" Fred yelled.

"Kill her."

Fred's eyes held nothing back. I could see he was going to shoot. At that moment, I saw my life flash before my eyes. Everything moved in slow motion, even his finger on the trigger.

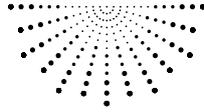
The sound of a gunshot shook me to the very foundations of my soul. Harry stared at me for a while before looking at Fred. There was a purple patch on Fred's red shirt, spreading across his chest. Fred's knees gave way, and he stumbled to the floor, kneeling first.

Footsteps announced the presence of another person in the garage. Harry turned quickly, pulling out his gun at the same time. But he was too late. The bullet's force threw him against the floor, leaving a hole in his head.

The shooter finally appeared, walking briskly. I had never been so happy to see someone I was at odds with.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Stephen asked.

CHAPTER SIX



STEPHEN

I was supposed to feel happy that I had finally caught her doing something that would put her out of the group, but instead, I felt frightened. I had almost seen her get killed. Relief flowed through me that I had arrived just in time to stop these men from shooting her.

“Stephen,” she said.

Her eyes were filled with shame, admiration, and respect. They melted my heart. I should be thinking of getting the details of this little escapade to Mateo to get her disqualified, but all I could think about was how thankful I was that she was ok and how happy I was to protect her.

“Hey!”

I turned around quickly. Three men were racing down the steps from the office building in the garage. They were drawing their guns and running toward us.

“Move!” I yelled at Rebecca, pointing my gun at the men and firing.

The bullets hit the first man while the other two quickly became smaller targets. They returned the fire, their bullets slamming into and ricocheting off the body of vehicles behind us. Rebecca was hiding there. I quickly joined her and peered out over the car.

The men were approaching while shooting continuously. They had a Glock pistol and probably had about 15 rounds

left, enough for them to round us up and shoot us into oblivion.

“Here,” I said, pushing a gun into Rebecca’s hand.

Her face was serious when I pointed out my plan to her. She nodded.

I moved under the car immediately. She drew their fire with one of her own. From under the car, I could see their legs. I squeezed the trigger. The first man fell to the ground. And I pumped his body full of bullets before he could get his bearings.

The second man fell to the ground with a bullet in his head.

Rebecca, I thought. She could shoot well. I slipped out from under the car and was back at her side.

“What are you doing here?” I asked again.

“We have to get into that office,” she said.

“What the... What is wrong with you?”

But she was off already, racing towards the stairs, my gun in her hand. This girl would be the death of me.

I hurried after her, quickly moving and still looking about the place. I had to make sure no hostiles were coming back for us. In the distance, I could hear police sirens. We had to be quick.

Up there, I found Rebecca with her flash drive in a computer. I watched her pick up the phones and turn towards the door. The sirens were getting closer.

“We have to go,” she said.

“No shit.”

We exited quickly before the first car turned into the street, joining a stream of people headed to work.

I led her to my car, and we got in.

I pulled into traffic, giving the garage and us some distance. My adrenaline was racing. Before now, we only

served as security to essential people. And by influential people, I mean people who could pay. Nothing like this ever happened.

“Now, if you will, please tell me what that was all about,” I requested to know.

“The insider,” she said. “I copied the information from the computer to help me trace who they were talking with, who gave them access to the federal database.”

“How? I don’t get it.”

“Keep up, Steve,” she said, grinning.

She still did not understand the importance of what she had done or what could have happened to her.

“Do you know what you’ve done?” I asked.

“I found the insider.”

“You went out and did something without consulting anybody? Are you crazy? Do you have a death wish or something?”

The outbursts just kept coming. I did not know what I was mad at her for. Was it for endangering herself or for endangering the rest of us? It felt like the former, but I could not admit that. The sexy scenario I had imagined and the figure I saw last night was still stuck in my mind.

“You could have been killed!” I yelled, pulling over to the side of the road.

“Wouldn’t that be good for you?” she asked, turning to stare into my eyes with her own blue, stunning eyes.

I pulled my eyes away from her.

“Don’t be silly.”

“You want me gone, don’t you?” she asked.

I could not answer that question. If I said yes, she could very well decide to leave. She would think I had become a softie overnight if I said no. It would go to her head. When exactly did I change from thinking she was a liability to

thinking she could be an asset? Or a potential partner in more ways than one.

“Come on, say it.”

“You messed up, big time,” I said, returning to the steering wheel. I pulled the car back to the road again and started driving towards the mansion.

On the way, I could not make up my mind on what to tell Mateo.

“Do you have my tablet?” she asked. “I would like it back.”

I pulled it out of my inner jacket and handed it to her. She wanted to be found! Who was this girl?

She took the tablet and scrolled through it. I watched her from the corner of my eyes, wondering how she was sure I would find the tablet that morning. She had banked on me looking for her and went to get herself into trouble. This was nuts.

“Did you even have a plan B?” I asked.

“Yes,” she replied.

I got to the dirt road that led toward the gate of Mateo’s property and slowed down. There was a car coming behind us. I waited until the car zoomed past and continued up ahead before disappearing up the road.

This was the tricky part. We always had to make sure we were not spotted taking this road. Otherwise, the mansion may lose its unoccupied status in the eyes of those who wanted us all gone.

I pulled onto the dirt road when I was satisfied that no other car was coming before us or in front of us. The ride got bumpy from there. The silence was choking me. I was dying to ask her what she had found, but I did not want to talk to her. I was still weighing my options. If I told Mateo, the others would vote for her to be kicked out of the group even before she got in.

At the gate, I stopped and turned to her.

“It’s supposed to be open,” she said.

I sighed.

“It was open when I got here.”

I slapped my forehead with my palm.

“We knew you were coming.”

She stared at me with distrust before she got out of the car and approached the gate. She pushed it open, and I drove through. I moved further up the driveway and decided not to wait for her.

She could walk the whole distance and get to the compound whenever she was ready. I continued driving towards the house. I saw her shouting and waving her arms from my side mirror. I ignored her, chuckled, and continued driving until I got to the mansion. Let that be her punishment for what she did.

I slipped the phones she got from the garage into my jacket and searched for the drive. She must have it. I rolled the car into the garage before leaving and headed towards the front door. Mateo, Craig, and Scott were sitting out there on the veranda.

“You went out?” Mateo said.

“Yes,” I said. “I was careful.”

“You went out with her?” Mateo said.

“Yes.”

“Do you realize the danger you are putting us all in?” Craig asked. “Going out like that without telling anyone.”

“I planned on getting back quickly,” I said.

“You don’t look all right,” Scott said, watching me closely. “Did something happen out there?”

“What can happen out there? Have you been out in small town USA yet?”

“You don’t think this is serious?” Mateo scolded.

I rolled my eyes. I was just a hair's breadth away from exposing his favorite.

"It is. I know how serious this is. If we fail, you die, I die, we all die. So yes, I know how serious it is."

"Where is she?" Mateo asked.

"She's coming up the drive..."

I paused. I could hear a car moving up the driveway. Instinctively my hand went to the band of my pants. My weapon nestled there. The other men did the same before we saw the car moving towards the house. It was Rebecca's, and she was inside.

I breathed a sigh of relief. We all withdrew our hands and watched her car drive up to the house. I turned and walked away. I wanted to protect her and see what she would say to Mateo, but at the same time, there was a feeling in my heart that I was struggling to put a name to. But it was there, though.

I went back to my room for a shower. We had been staying here for about a month at this point. I didn't mind it, of course. After all, it was much nicer than my previous living quarters. And the scenery was much nicer too. I thought about Rebecca in the tank top and how her butt filled her jeans earlier in the day. I needed to get closer to her. I wanted to protect her, and I also wanted to ravage her. Kissing every square inch of her body. I wondered how she looked at me. I had been so hostile to her at first. Did I even have a chance with her?

After the refreshing shower, I returned to my bed and sat on it. The time passed slowly while I tried to process everything that had happened. I hoped none of it could be traced back to us.

Someone knocked on the door, and I smiled slightly. I knew who it would be. I wondered if she had learned her lesson or if she would begin by shouting at me.

I slowly opened the door before remembering I was wearing only my boxer briefs.

"Hey," Rebecca said when I opened the door.

“Hey,” I said.

“Can I come in?”

I moved away from the door. Once she was inside, I shut it and turned to her. She was standing in the middle of the room awkwardly. She moved her weight from one leg to the other. She had on leggings and a white crop top. She looked amazing.

She turned away from me and looked around the room.

“They are on the table,” I said.

I knew she was looking for the phones we took from the garage. She walked towards the table, then turned around to look at me when she was halfway across.

“Why didn’t you tell Mateo?” she asked.

I sighed and walked to the bed. The comforter was fluffy when I settled into it, and I was almost tempted to ask her to join me.

“What’s the use?” I asked.

“You wanted me out, didn’t you?” she asked.

She was no longer interested in the phones on the table. She was focused on me.

“I did. But I suppose what you went there for...we needed to start there.”

“I see,” she turned back to the table and picked up the phones, then walked up to where I sat on the bed. “Thank you.”

“What?”

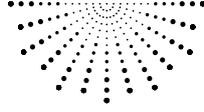
“You saved my life.”

“You wanted someone to come, didn’t you?”

That morning, I walked past her room to see the door open. There was no one in the room. In Mateo’s study, her tablet lay face-up, showing a map of the town and the red dot she was moving about. I searched for her with the tablet when I realized she was not in the house.

She smiled for a brief moment, and I got lost in all the beauty she was. Then she walked towards the door and left abruptly.

CHAPTER SEVEN



REBECCA

I returned to my room, confused about what I felt for Stephen. Since I came to join the group, he had been trying his best to kick me out. Now that I had done something to aid his cause, he wanted to look the other way. It needed to be clarified.

But then, even more, the look he gave me at the garage after saving my life was confusing. It was filled with something I did not understand, as if he did not want to lose me. He kept staring at me like I had gone mad for even thinking of putting myself in such danger. When I helped him shoot the last assailant, his eyes showed respect.

In his room, he had difficulty looking into my eyes. What was he afraid of? I also couldn't look at his eyes because I could only focus on his tight grey boxer briefs. But unlike the baggy shorts night, I saw all of it. And he didn't have a shirt on, not even a tank top. I couldn't help but imagine him on top of me and me running my hands over all his muscles and grabbing his strong shoulders and back. I was attracted to him. Had he been attracted to me this whole time as well? Is that why he questioned my ability? Maybe he was really worried about my well-being. This man had some layers, that is for sure. Now, I was more interested in ever to discovering them.

I connected the phone to my laptop and tried to break into it. It was going to be difficult, I knew, but it was something that I needed to do for us to get the information that we needed to proceed. This could open up another lead.

I kept replaying what had just happened.

Stephen; He had such a great body. Before opening his door, I thought he would get some clothes on, but he let me see everything: his big biceps, popping pectorals, muscular thighs, and the nice bulge in his briefs. It was difficult for me to stay in the moment like it is now. I'm noticing the way he looks at me too. I am sensing the sexual tension building between us.

The tension between us that was once about his dislike of me was turning into something else, and I found myself getting hot in the face thinking about the possibilities.

I smiled as I tried to find a way around the encryptions in the phone.

My laptop beeped, and I realized I was in. The messages all popped out. There were many of them, all to a particular contact. I quickly scrolled through them, discovering that they were setting up a meeting at a ball in New York in a few days.

Stephen had to see this, I decided. I knew I could call Mateo, Craig, and Archer, but I was already heading to Stephen's room. It was late, but I figured he was not sleeping anyway. I imagine he was probably lying on his bed, facing the ceiling, and allowing thoughts of me or us together to ravage his mind.

I knocked and waited.

There was no response. So, I knocked again.

"Who is it?" Stephen asked.

I took a deep breath. I did not know what the hell I was doing in this place. This piece of information could wait until the following day. Stephen didn't need to be the first to get it. Why was I standing outside his room late at night?

"It's me," I said.

He swore inside before he opened the door a little bit and stared at me. He was still bare-bodied, and I could not stop my eyes from taking him in.

"You can't be serious," he said when he saw me.

"There's something you have to see," I said. "Follow me."

I turned and started walking back to my room.

“Can’t it wait until morning?” he asked.

“No.”

I was still determining if he would follow me, but I wanted to find out immediately. I continued towards my door.

He was in my room within moments, still wearing only his tight boxer briefs. It would be quite a story if anyone saw him sneaking back to his room.

“What is so important that it can’t wait till morning?” he growled.

I shut the door to my room, wondering what I was doing, before waving him over to my workstation. He stood behind me. I felt like leaning back on his body and allowing his masculinity to engulf me. Only now did I realize that his cologne smelled earthy, like he had some connection with the generations of masculine men who had come and gone.

“What am I looking at?” he asked.

“Text messages from one of the phones I took,” I said.

“You broke through?” he asked, sounding surprised.

It was annoying that he did not trust me to break through the flimsy security on the phone.

“They were planning to meet at a ball in New York?” he said.

“Yes,” I said. “This is our connection.”

“Except these people are all dead now. Who would do the meeting?”

“I don’t know, but we now know they had help. We have to find the person on the inside. Either CIA or FBI has to have a mole.”

Stephen sighed. “This is going to be tough.”

He walked away from me and towards the door before turning back to look at me.

“Have you taken this to Mateo and Craig?”

“No. Not yet.”

“Why?”

“I er... I figured you should know what you are walking into.”

“I wonder if you know as well.”

I chuckled. “Of course I know.”

His eyes were softer now as he stared at me. He was no longer angry. They were filled with concern about me, about my safety.

“You don’t have to worry about me,” I said, smiling.

“Who said I was worried about you?” Stephen said.

The vulnerability that I had seen on his face quickly disappeared. In place of it was this plain expression that revealed nothing. He turned away from me and walked towards the door.

“I’m just concerned that you will fuck everything up like you almost did today.”

And he was gone.

I sat at my workstation, stunned minutes after he was gone. What was that? One moment, he was so soft and melting like a lighted candle. The next, he had become an emotionless rock. What was he hiding from? What was he running from?

I laughed in shock and stood up from my seat. To think that I had entertained something happening that night. I did not know what I had been imagining. I just wanted to go with the flow. And we were flowing well. But he had to spoil everything with his stupid ego and fear. Yes, he was afraid.

My bed welcomed me into its comfort. I realized I needed rest as I stretched my back on the bed. My adrenaline had soared through the roof today. I had been close to death, separated from the end by an inch or less.

It was a scary, but also exciting, life. Why were they all afraid for me? Why were they concerned that something could happen to me? Unless they were more concerned about their

mission, like Stephen said, and felt that I could spoil everything.

I slept off worrying about the mission and wondering if there was a way I could get through to Stephen. Or was I not his type? I mean, I didn't look anything like the women in the photo. I was more confused than I had ever been.

The following day, I had my shower and headed to the study with my discovery. All I had to do was tell Mateo. But everyone was gathered in the same place; that was the least of my concern. Stephen was the one on the forefront of my mind. He seemed to be developing feeling for me, but quickly decided to hide them. Nothing was on his face, making everything more complex and confusing.

"This is it," I said. "They plan to meet at the Ball in New York later this week."

"When did you get these phones?" Craig asked, looking at me.

I quickly stared at Stephen, wondering if he had told Craig about the mishap.

"I had a hunch on a lead and followed it," I said.

"You followed it without informing any of us?" Craig was getting frustrated. He just needed something to send him down the dreaded path.

"She told me," Stephen said.

"What?" It was Mateo this time.

"Well, at first, it was just to get a few things at the local supermarket," Stephen said. "Then we decided to check a hunch of hers out."

"I don't understand. You two could barely stand each other the other night. Now you are accompanying each other to the supermarket?" Scott said.

"Staying alive is more important than what we think of each other," Stephen said. "Besides, what difference does it make? She delivered, and she's here."

“She put herself in danger. She put the mission in danger.”

“I was there. There was no danger. She handled it well,” Stephen said.

I was shocked by the way Stephen was defending me. It felt odd, but he kept a poker face like it was nothing.

The others exchanged glances. I could feel the shock and surprise circulating the room. We were acting out of character, but things had changed. Or I thought they had until last night’s awkward moment.

“You should still have told us,” Mateo said.

He always wanted to be in control. Just like Stephen. It was like they both had something to prove.

“I know,” I said. “But then there would be a debate about it. One that would take precious time. And this was time sensitive.”

“How did you get their location?” Craig asked.

“Let’s just say I have my ways,” I said.

“I think she was right,” Scott said. “She took the initiative by herself and did not go alone anyway. She got what we wanted. We have a lead now, and we can find out who’s on the inside working for these people.”

Craig grunted.

“At what cost?” he asked.

It was a question that I was not prepared to answer.

“No one saw us,” Stephen said, frowning.

“No one saw you. Really? Then I suppose the news of five dead bodies at a garage in the middle of the town has nothing to do with the both of you?”

I sighed. News traveled fast.

“You two did that?” Mateo asked.

I nodded.

“Shit!” Mateo exclaimed. “We were trying to lay low, dammit!”

“Well, they are dead. They can’t talk!”

“And you didn’t think about cameras or the suspicion that we are in this town will make them intensify their search?” Craig asked.

“There were no cameras,” I said.

“Of course, you meticulously checked that out before blowing this up. What exactly do you not understand about lying low?”

Craig and Mateo seemed to be the only two distraught. I needed clarification. If they hated conflict this much, why were they still in this? Wouldn’t it have made more sense to retire and move to a peaceful beach where they were unknown and live out the rest of their lives? On the other hand, I knew they were experienced in this kind of thing, and when they started to fidget, it probably meant there was trouble.

Craig turned to Mateo with his hands on his waist. “She has to leave.”

“What? No,” Scott replied immediately.

Mateo seemed to be thinking about it. Was he serious?

“She has put the rest of us in danger. We must leave the mansion now and go somewhere that does not scream our names. You realize we have lost our first safe house?”

“I’m afraid Craig is right,” Archer said.

His eyes looked like they were offering his apologies when he stared at me before he looked away.

“No. No, you can’t just do that. She found us a lead. We know what we’re doing because of her. Okay, she brought about an inconvenience or two, so what? We are still alive, every single person. We have leads to follow. Let’s follow it. Rebecca and I can go to the Ball,” Stephen said in an outburst of passion.

I did not know what was more beautiful: how he said it or the fire in his eyes. I would think Stephen fancied me if I didn't know better.

“We have leads to chase,” Scott said. “We have already decided that both of them will go unnoticed. We don't have to change anything.”

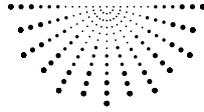
Craig looked at Scott in exasperation, shaking his head. “You don't have to kiss his fucking ass all the time,” he grumbled.

“We will return to this after the mission,” Mateo said.

“Then we should not waste time arguing about this anymore. Let's get them used to who they are,” Scott said, ignoring Craig.

“Who are we?” I asked before I realized Stephen and I had said the same thing.

CHAPTER EIGHT



STEPHEN

“**Y**ou are a couple, deeply in love with each other,” Scott said, smiling. He seemed to be enjoying this.

Craig turned and left the room, still grumbling under his breath.

“Deeply in love?” Rebecca asked.

“Yes. It’s the only way to distract attention from the fact that you two might not fit in,” Scott said.

“I don’t understand,” I said.

“People are usually embarrassed by public displays of affection. It’s your go-to. If you’re suspected and think your cover is about to be blown....” Scott paused for impact.

“We can’t just be friends?” Rebecca asked.

“Friends going to a ball?” Scott scoffed.

“She’s right. People do it all the time,” I said.

“What’s the deal with you two?” Archer asked. “You are confusing the shit out of us. First, you couldn’t stand each other. Then the two of you are on a secret “besties” mission together, but now, you can’t pretend to be a couple?”

“We did not go on a secret mission. We went to check something out,” I said.

“You did. And you are now the better for it,” Archer said. “So, are you doing this or not?”

I stared at Mateo as if I was looking for help, but he made sure he avoided my eyes. My eyes went next to Scott and begged. But he shrugged.

I sighed. “Is there no other way?”

“What? Are you frightened you might fall in love with her?” Archer asked.

Mateo jerked at the mention of that. He probably saw Rebecca as his daughter. My cheeks burned.

“Okay, playtime is over. We will do it,” I said.

“We will?” Rebecca asked.

I turned to her. Her eyes had the bemusement of one enjoying herself. I could not get over the feeling that she did something for me. It was a path that I had long since avoided because I did not want to be vulnerable. It was a death sentence in our line of work. So far, I had avoided emotional entanglement, only having one-night stands when possible. But the proximity that both of us were soon to experience might be my unmaking.

“Your name is Sydney. Sydney Haycross,” Scott said.

“Sydney? Strange name for a man, no?” I asked.

He handed me a passport. “You have been invited to this ball. It’s all been taken care of.”

He turned to Rebecca. “Your name is Sonia Watson, a billionaire entrepreneur with a share in Sony.”

“Sounds interesting, I get to play a rich girl,” Rebecca said.

“Yes, and you also have other business interests...”

I stopped listening. I was imagining the journey ahead, worried that I was not in the right frame of mind to take this on. I was afraid, but none of that showed in my face. If anything, I was more concerned about failing than fearful of dying. Failing meant everything Mateo had worked for, and everything I had worked for before joining them would mean nothing. I was also fearful for Rebecca.

I sighed.

My briefing was short and straight to the point. I hoarded gold. I dealt with it. I had a mine back in Africa somewhere. We chose Nigeria. My business was illegal, making it easier to have a shot at the bad guys we would be on the lookout for.

“We follow the chain until we get to the top,” Mateo said.

I nodded. That was the way it always had been. Killing a pawn would only make our enemies hire more pawns.

That night, I sat on the steps to smoke, forgetting I had smoked my last one earlier. This time my mind was free of the animosity I had felt for Rebecca since she came. My mind was blank. There was no thought of the danger ahead of us and the intricate ways we were to weave our pathway through it.

“May I join you?” Scott asked.

I nodded without looking up.

“Here, I brought you this,” he said, handing me a beer. He gulped a little from his bottle before he looked across the vast land that kept going and going. We could not see the front gate from here.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

He was the first person I had gotten close to when I joined this group. His unassuming self was the kind of friend everyone should have. It was almost as if he couldn't have an ego.

I was drawn to him quickly. He accepted me without the nose wrinkling the others did when deciding what to do with me. Scott trusted me much more than the others and often spent time with me even when I had no words.

“I think I am,” I said, taking a drink.

“Good. Nervous?”

“Not really.”

“That's not very good.”

“Why?”

“Being nervous means you are afraid. Being afraid makes you more careful.”

“Interesting theory.”

“Yes. Fear makes you realize anything could go wrong, so you are more careful.”

“Like I said, interesting theory. I’ve never really been afraid going into this kind of thing.”

“Why?”

“I usually think about my training.”

Morning came quickly, and we were already set to move.

“You know how to contact us?” Mateo asked. “The lines are not safe.”

I nodded. I had to send them an email with codes. Then we would speak through prepaid cell phones.

“We might be out of here before you are done,” Archer said.

I got into the driver’s seat. I had lied to Scott. I was afraid. I was worried about what could happen between me and Rebecca, fearful that something could happen to her. She had shown the capacity to think for herself, which was good. But the ability to act without genuinely thinking of how everything could play out could be her undoing. I was not just going to find this lead with her. I was there to protect her. And keep her from bringing harm to herself. And I must do this without showing any sign of being attracted to her.

Who was I kidding?

“So long, Sydney,” Scott said, waving.

“Smart ass,” I laughed as I started the car.

Craig was standing at the front door, still harboring some misgivings. Archer, Mateo, and Scott waved as we drove towards the gate and away from the house.

We were soon off the property, heading towards New York. In no time, we would find lodging and decide if we were

better off staying alone or apart. Even though I did not want it, I knew staying together was the best. We could protect ourselves better that way, but she would be so close that she would clog every thinking pore in me. It would be hard to keep my mind off her.

“You don’t look cheerful,” Rebecca said as we rolled down the road.

Our journey would take a few hours. It would be better if we got there by car, tracing our movements would be more complicated. Even with the changed identity, there would be some suspicion if our flights originated from Mystic or nearby.

I ignored Rebecca and continued driving down the road. Engaging her would only make her continue talking. She did not seem bothered at all but continued rambling on.

“I thought men like you joined this group for exciting missions like this. Missions that could be the difference between life and death, where you know you dare not fail. You must be very careful, but you must also dig into that reckless streak. Otherwise, you cannot find your way.”

I tried to shut her voice out and focused on the road running towards the car’s hood. But her voice washed over me, unyielding.

“I’m sure sometimes your training becomes difficult to follow. It’s hard to know which is which. This is when you kick in your...”

“Shut up, Rebecca. Please. I’m trying to drive.”

” Are you still learning how to drive because I don’t understand...”

“Shut up. Just shut up.”

It was a little harsh, but I had to do it. The more I heard her voice, the more I thought about what we could do that was highly prohibited between partners like us.

“I see,” she said, looking at me.

I wanted to leave the steering wheel and turn to her as well. I had not forgotten how her lips looked. I could not wait

to see if the softness I saw with my eyes was the same if I touched her lips with my own. They were red, cherry red, beckoning red. But I kept my eyes peeled on the road, away from distraction.

The silence lasted about 15 minutes before Rebecca plugged in her phone to the aux line on the radio and began singing every single song that played.

At one point, I began singing along. I looked over at her and asked,

“You don’t know the words, do you?” Laughing at her a bit.

“No, I like to sing it the way I hear it,”

“That makes no sense,” we laughed together.

I tried not to like her, but she had a light that I couldn’t put out. We talked about the ’90s. I realized that even though she was born in the late 80s. She was obsessed with everything ’90s, which explained her attire that first day. A flannel, jeans, combat boots, and pink streaks in her hair. My high school years were her favorite, and all the songs she sang, even with the wrong lyrics, resonated with me.

We stopped at a diner and walked inside, starved from the journey.

We began to order.

“I’d like a cheeseburger with jalapenos. Oh, can you add guacamole to that as well? And then French fries, maybe some onion rings, too. And a chocolate shake, thank you!” Rebecca said.

I looked at her, impressed with her order,

“I’ll take the same,” I said to the waitress.

“The girls you hang out with probably only order salads,” she laughed.

“I love a girl that can eat. There’s nothing more annoying than a girl that picks at her food or doesn’t enjoy the better things of life,”

She smiled.

When the food arrived, we laughed and oohed, and aahed.

Rebecca reached over and toasted me with her milkshake, “To enjoying life.”

I smiled and nodded in agreement and added, “And to Seattle grunge bands.”

As Rebecca ate, she stared around the place. My eyes followed everything she did and settled on her face only when she was not looking my way.

Again and again, she almost caught me staring, but I was quick enough to divert my gaze before she did. Just when we were about done, I noticed her eyes on mine and discovered that I had been staring at her for the past few seconds.

“What?” she asked.

I noticed whipped cream on her lips. Many images flashed inside my mind of what I could do.

I dreamed of licking it off with my tongue and wondered how she would feel.

The next thing I knew, my index finger was already on her lips. Realizing a napkin would have been better. But I could not pull back now. I wiped the cream off her lips, and as she looked, I took it to my lips and sucked it off my finger.

Her lips were parted. Her eyes were wide, and I could tell she was holding her breath, watching me do what I did.

“What was that?” she asked as we headed for the car.

I wished she would not ask questions about these things. I did not even know what I was doing. She was supposed to be my nemesis, but I was falling for her. I was in a state of confusion.

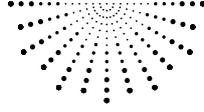
“Getting into character. I’m Sydney, and you are Sonia.”

It was a stupid response. She probably saw through it.

We continued our way to New York. Rebecca had become quiet. I wondered what she was thinking about. I missed her

endless chatter.

CHAPTER NINE



REBECCA

We soon crossed the New York state line. We pulled over to a hotel in Poughkeepsie. We walked through the reception hall, leaving our car for the valet. We had decided not to make reservations in case we were being trailed. It would make it impossible for the stalker to wait for us here.

“Available rooms?” Stephen said, walking up to the receptionist.

I still could not speak after what he did at the diner. I could still feel his finger on my lips. I wondered if he’s been craving to touch me. Still so many questions. Why was he so strange and short with me that night? A night that I was ready, and I wanted something to happen.

I had the inkling, however, that he would choose different rooms for the both of us. It made me think of kicking him. Did he not feel the same vulnerability I felt when I was around him? Did he not notice that something about him made it difficult for me to think? He was going to hide everything under the veneer of professionalism.

“We will take the room,” I heard him say.

Room, not rooms. Did I hear correctly?

I stopped looking about the hall, trying to identify cameras and exits, and turned to him.

“Come on, baby. Let’s go,” he said as a couple passed us by.

I followed him to the elevator. Smiling at the way he said “baby,” even though I knew he was in character. Inside, the craziest of thoughts filled my head. We were inside this elevator alone. I felt a magnetic draw to him; my whole body wanted him to touch me. I could tell Stephen was thinking the same thing that I was. I had caught him repeatedly looking at me in the diner while I pretended not to notice. When I turned towards him, I would turn slowly, giving him enough time to stop looking.

The elevator door opened on the 9th floor, and we entered the hall. I could finally breathe away from him. Being inside that confined space without him making a move on me was driving me crazy. Getting out and seeing the entire length of the hallway released some of the tension.

I let him walk in front as he had the key. My hand was on my suitcase as I rolled it along. He stopped before room 913 and flashed the key card across it. The door opened, and we got in.

“We are staying in the same room?” I asked.

“Yes. We are a couple, remember?”

I wondered if he meant that as our role or what he wanted us to be. I shut the door and faced the room. It was a smaller room, but it would serve. The room had only one big king-size bed and a big blue armchair.

Quickly, Stephen sent an email and waited till he received a response.

“Good. They know we are in New York,” he said, pulling off his shirt.

I did not want to watch, but his actions hypnotized me. The shirt he was wearing had been covering a lot. His shoulders were broad and built. His biceps were bulging. His six-pack was amazing, and as he turned, I stared at his back muscles, picturing myself holding on to them as he had his way with me. He sat on the bed and stared into his phone as if oblivious to what his action had caused. I felt warmth between my legs before quickly heading for the bathroom. Cold water would

calm the tension down. I also needed to return my pink streaks to a “normal hair color.” I couldn’t stand out among the elite big shots attending this event.

After the shower, I stepped into the room with a towel around my body and headed straight for my bag. I found fresh clothes and returned them to the bathroom before changing into them: shorts and a crop top. Two could play that game if he’s going to make me lust after his body.

I walked to the mirror and started with my skincare, my back to him. I could feel Stephen’s eyes on my back, and I liked it. But when I turned to look at him, I noticed he was on his phone. He got up and went into the bathroom.

I finished my routine and sat back down on the bed. It was going to be a long week being in here with him. It was almost like he could no longer see me. Was I imagining what I saw in his eyes when he was wiping off the whipped cream from my lips?

He came out of the bathroom, looking like a meal. I tried not to look at him but could not help it. He was wearing his briefs, this time white, like a walking temptation, moving about. His thighs looked like he did endless squats. I laid on full stretch in the bed and took my eyes away from him and his body.

I was excited for the night so that I could let out this built-up tension into something dangerous. We would be at a ball we had no business being at and would do things we had no business doing. Things that could get us killed.

“We leave in two hours,” Stephen said, walking to the window. From there, he could see the road. I wanted to join him at the window, but I needed to avoid appearing like I was after him.

Two hours later, I was dressed in a long, sequined black gown with a slit that hit the middle of my left thigh. It was sexy and high. It also would allow me to move freely. I pinned my hair back in the best version of an updo I could do in the tiny bathroom. I didn’t wear makeup often, but I cleaned up pretty well when I did. I even put on some long luscious fake

lashes after numerous failed attempts. I left the bathroom to find Stephen looking damn sexy in his black tuxedo. His dark hair was slicked back, and his cheekbones and strong jaw seemed more chiseled than ever.

He looked up and gasped.

“Oh, wow. You look.... good,” he said. But I know I took his breath away.

“Thank you, as do you. I am almost ready; one last thing,” I said.

I went over to the chair. Put my foot up as I pulled on my lace thigh-high pantyhose as seductively as I could, knowing Stephen was over in the corner watching my every move. I then switched legs and did the same, knowing I was teasing him.

I also had a thigh gun holster, the perfect accessory under my dress. I buckled it on high on my right thigh and glanced over and Stephen.

“I’m ready. Do you want to pick up your jaw, and then we can go?” I laughed.

I clung to Stephen’s hand and followed him to the elevator. It felt so natural and safe. Downstairs, we waited for the valet to bring a new car around. It was a new black Porsche 911 S/T, reserved by Stephen for this fancy gala so we could fit in with the rich. It was very pretty. I almost loved it as much as my little sportscar back home.

“Ready?” Stephen said after he got into the driver’s seat of the car.

“Ready,” I replied.

He put the car in drive, and we headed down the road.

“Let’s see what kind of turbo this thing has got,” I said, smiling.

He raised his eyebrow and responded, “You got it. Better hold on, babe.”

We went flying down a back road; it was exhilarating.

I could not believe my life right now. Dressed in a beautiful gown, with the most handsome man in the world next to me in a Porsche 911, headed to a Ball.

We laughed and screamed from the excitement. Soon we had to slow down, though, and came back to reality. We had a job to do.

I was nervous now, my heart beating fast in my chest. This was the first real test I was about to give myself, and I was terrified that I would fail. I didn't want to disappoint Stephen, Mateo, or any of the guys.

I started to say a little prayer to keep Stephen and me safe.

"Hey," Stephen said.

I looked up and found him looking at me. I loved his dark brown eyes and how they stared at me. I was losing it altogether. His eyes also showed understanding, as if he knew what was going through my mind.

"You will do well," he said. "We will move together."

"Thank you," I said. "I got it. We got it."

He turned back after staring at me a little longer.

The venue was a humongous mansion in a rich suburban area about an hour from our hotel, sitting by the side of the road. We pulled to the entrance, got out, and found a valet waiting to take our car.

Stephen spent a little time talking to the valet before we headed toward the entrance.

"Your tickets, please," the guard in front of the entrance asked.

Stephen produced two tickets from his pocket. I had no idea that he had them. I had yet to learn that we would be asked to show tickets.

"Sydney Haycross? Sonia Watson?"

The guard stared suspiciously at the both of us.

"Your name is in the system," he finally said.

“Thank you, sir,” Stephen said.

He moved aside for Stephen to pass through with me hanging onto his arm. I loved the way he moved intelligently in the tux. I was proud of him. And even more proud to be on his arm. I wished it wasn't fake.

The party hall was already filled with people, rich people judging by their appearance, mannerisms, and the jewelry and pendants that hung around the women's necks. The watches gracing the wrists of the men could fetch a fortune. I would have left this place very rich if I were younger and in a different circumstance. But that life was beyond me now. I was something else.

“Hello, welcome,” a gray-haired man said, walking up to us.

He was the host of the event.

“Mr. Jacobs,” Stephen said. “It's been a long time.”

What? He even knew the name of the host.

“I'm sorry, remind me...you are?”

“I'm Sydney Haycross, and this is my better half, Sonia Watson.”

Stephen spoke like the man was supposed to know who he was already.

“Oh, yes. Please come in and enjoy. We will catch up later.”

And like magic, Jacobs no longer questioned who we were and what we did.

Stephen led me to a corner of the hall, away from Jacobs, who had moved on to greet other people, and we snatched a glass each from a waiter walking past.

“Champagne,” I muttered, tasting it.

I poured the rest of the drink down my throat and deposited the glass on another waiter's tray.

Stephen glanced at me with a smile.

“Liquid courage,” I laughed.

Now, we had to wait for our chance. We just had to lay low until we had been forgotten.

We needed to make our way to their control room and sift through the names of the invitees to get a picture of the name of the lead we had. Once we had a face to him, whomever he met here would be our target. We had to move fast.

A few more waiters made their way through with delicious-looking appetizers.

Stephen whispered in my ear, “Damn, these look good. Should we try a couple before we get to work?”

“I’m so nervous I can’t even think about eating.”

“Oh, Cheeseburger sliders....” Stephen followed the waiter who had just rushed by us. He came back giddy like a child. “Oh, my gosh, babe...try a bite. They are amazing,”

“I’m good, thank you. Oh, look, there’s a door to the back. Where do you think the control room is?”

“I’m guessing it would be where all those security people are coming in and out from. Let’s roll,” he said, with his mouth full of the last bite of the slider.

Sensing that there was no attention on us, we started moving towards the other exit from the hall. We could face more problems in the control room because we didn’t know how many guards might be waiting there.

He slipped through the door, and I followed. We waited to see if anyone would follow before we continued down the hallway, bending our heads slightly to avoid being captured by the overhead cameras.

“We should have brought masks,” Stephen swore.

“Too bad it wasn’t a masquerade ball,” I giggled.

“What?”

“You know those masks, never mind,” I started to explain when a guard round the bend.

Stephen quickly flung me against the wall before I knew what was happening. His lips took mine quickly. They were soft yet hungry. He kissed me deeply, his hands traveling down my thighs as if he had always wanted this, and this was the only chance he would get. I played along only because of the approaching guard. At least that's what I told myself.

Shit, this was the hottest thing I had done, and I was scared that I would get lost inside it.

Stephen pulled me closer, raising my left leg through the slit to expose my thigh and against his body. Our groins ground against each other. I felt him getting hard, and I'm sure he felt me getting wet.

The guard approached us first before he cleared his throat. Stephen ignored him and continued kissing me. I wished the guard could disappear from this place, so we could take this to wherever it leads.

"Excuse me," the guard said. "Guests are not allowed here."

Stephen stopped and turned around. "Oh, my bad. I thought..." He sounded out of breath and embarrassed. I knew it was a hoax. Like lightning, he struck out his fist, hitting the guard in the throat, so he could not shout before he punched him again, knocking him out. He caught him and dropped him slowly to the floor before he turned to me.

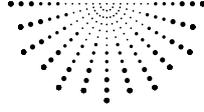
I must have looked like a mess of emotions. He had a smug look when he looked back at me. I wanted to wipe it out with a thunderous slap. He was so gorgeous, though.

"We have a lead to find. Come on," he said.

As if the kiss had meant nothing. As if when he held my thigh against his waist, he had not felt the want that vibrated through my body.

Damn you, Stephen. I wished I could say it out loud as I followed him.

CHAPTER TEN



STEPHEN

I had the name of the person we were looking for ringing in my head as we hurried to the control room. Just in front of the control room, we stopped.

I pulled a little canister and a pipe in my pocket and set it just below the door. The pipe entered the canister, and the other end went under the door. The only thing that I had to do was wait.

We waited.

After a few minutes, I tried the door handle. It was locked.

“I can open it,” Rebecca said.

It was the first time that she was speaking since the kiss. The kiss. It had been hot and passionate. I did not know what I had done, but I had not planned it. Her lips were warm and soft, and I realized she was still blushing when I looked at her.

I stepped aside and let her go to work, watching her figure instead of what she was doing. I could stare at her all day. She had a body made for sin and the most innocent of faces. And that wasn't the only thing she had going for her. She was a badass in how she handled herself back at the garage...

“It's open,” she said.

We walked into the control room. Three men were at the table. All were sound asleep from the gas that we had sneaked under the door.

“Find the name and the face,” I said and waited for her to do her thing.

We did not want anyone intruding on us, but I had to be ready if anyone came along. I shut the door while she worked.

And after a few minutes...

“There,” she said. “Willow Smith.”

It was a blonde man with very fair skin.

“Boy, he took a chance being that fair with that ridiculous white coat,” Rebecca said.

“He looks like snow,” I chimed in.

“Or an iceberg,” Rebecca quipped.

We both looked at each other and laughed.

I stared at his face, trying to memorize it, but the screen panned to other things.

It showed the live footage of the party and kept moving from face to face till it came to Willow’s face.

“He’s at a table in the back of the hall. Let’s go,” Rebecca said.

“No, we don’t need him,” I replied. “He’s just a conduit. The person he’s meeting is the one we want to see.”

She sat back there while we waited for Willow to find a seat. He did. In front of him, there were two people, a man, and a woman.

“I wish we could hear them,” I said.

“Knowing this place and the sneakiness behind it, it may be possible,” Rebecca said. She was strictly business right now. I liked it.

Her hands clattered on the keyboard, moving so fast that my eyes could barely follow them.

“We are through,” she said.

Great business, one of the two said. It was the man. The couple wore masquerade masks over their eyes.

“Hey, why are they wearing masquerade masks?” Rebecca asked.

“Oh,” I said, “I get your joke about the masquerade ball now.”

“Yes, Stephen.” She laughed, “See, we would’ve been hidden away. They are pretty gutsy, being the only ones with masks on.”

Let me go through this, Willow said. He had a suitcase in front of him. He opened it and ran his hands over the cash in it.

It’s complete, the woman said.

I have to make sure.

Well, it’s there.

I have to check.

Do you?

Willow looked hesitant, but then he clenched his teeth.

Yes.

I sensed that something terrible was about to happen. The couple took the masks off their eyes. Willow was taken aback, and I could feel fear.

You have seen our faces. You know how this goes.

It happened very fast before we could even do anything. Willow tried to move, but he was pushed back against the seat. The couple got up from their seats. The man patted him as if they had just concluded their business, keeping him upright with the same move.

“We have to move,” I said, moving away from the screens.

It was unbelievable. Nobody had noticed what had happened. Was it a shot of poison? It happened so quickly. Willow was still sitting there like he was resting while the couple exited.

I pulled the door open and quickly snuck back. There was someone in the hallway, a guard, two guards. They were

talking.

“What is it?” Rebecca said.

We had to act fast, or else the couple would disappear. They were the only lead to the group making attempts on our lives.

“Two guards,” I said, looking at Rebecca. There was no fear in her eyes, only worry. “Follow my lead.”

I stepped out of the control room before she had time to react.

“Hey, hey,” I said, walking quickly towards the security men. “You guys noticed something strange going on here?”

The men turned to me. When they saw that I had just come out of the control room, their stiff expression relaxed. I quickly got to the first one, striking his throat before he had time to move. The second man was still trying to draw his weapon when I slammed a blow into his face. He went down in a heap. I went for the other one, still clutching his throat. Another blow to the front, and he was out cold.

Rebecca arrived a moment later, staring at my work and me. Was that admiration in her eyes?

I fixed my bowtie and looked at her in a James Bond manner and flashed a smile.

She rolled her eyes and smiled before getting serious again. “We can go through the back,” she said. “We can cut them off sooner.”

She turned and started down the other way. Without asking questions, I followed her. We had to intercept these two. Otherwise, our mission here would be a disaster.

We found our way outside and realized that it was drizzling.

“Where are they?” I asked.

Rebecca held up her hand, indicating that I should shut up.

They came around the corner a moment later. We could not take them here, so we waited and watched as they got into a

car.

“Damn,” I muttered as I watched them driving off. I looked around thinking Rebecca was next to me.

She wasn't. Rebecca was already close to a car. Somehow, she got the door open and started the car. I dashed to the passenger side without a word, discovering the gem Mateo had brought to work with us. Why was I even fighting her? She was something different, something darker, so sexy.

She tailed the car out of the parking lot, a blue 2020 BMW. It was easy to follow it down the road as the roads were mostly empty, but it also increased the chances of our being made.

They pulled over to a small house in a quiet neighborhood.

Rebecca drove past the house and moved further up the street before she pulled over. The side mirrors served us as we watched them get up to the place.

“I will go for them,” I said.

“Something is not right,” Rebecca said.

I felt it too. The two of them could not be staying here. It did not fit their profile. They would be in the busier part of New York if they wanted to hide out in the open. Otherwise, they would have taken up lodging somewhere else. Not right here in this neighborhood where it seemed everyone knew everyone.

“Take this,” I said, handing the last gas canister and pipe in my pocket to Rebecca. “If something happens, just gas the entire house.”

“But you don't have a mask.”

I smiled and winked as I exited the car, putting my fingers on my pistol as it nestled against my holster.

I walked up to the house and tried the door. It was open. Again, the alarm bells went off in my head, but I chose not to listen.

I stepped into the house. It was dark. When the light came on, I moved instinctively, diving to the right. A gunshot

blasted through the air and blew a hole where I stood.

My pistol was out and pointed at the person shooting me, the man. He had a boy close to him, using him as a human shield. This was not their house. Dammit. Where is the lady?

“I thought you would come,” the man said.

“You thought right.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Let the boy go.”

“After I kill you. You would be a criminal who broke into the home of innocent people and got shot by a good Samaritan.”

“I want to see you try.”

“Put your gun down,” someone else said.

The lady came out from the shadows. I turned to see the barrel of her gun pointed at me.

Where was Rebecca? She should be gassing this place right about now.

“Put the fucking gun down!”

I felt dizzy before slowly lowering my gun to the ground, taking my time, watching the two. I stopped breathing immediately.

The first thing that fell was the gun. It clattered to the ground, and I was thankful that it did not go off. I watched the man with the boy in front of me gradually lose his hold of the boy before he stumbled about.

“What...what is happening? What did you do...”

He did not finish before he fell to the ground. The boy was asleep with him. I moved towards the door quickly, opened it, and took my first big gulp of air.

“Where are they?” Rebecca asked.

I took another gulp of air before I was able to speak.

“They are inside. We have to take them.”

It took a little more time, but we had the boy back in his bed and the two criminals tied up and inside the trunk of our car.

“We have to put them somewhere,” I said.

I remembered seeing an abandoned farmhouse on the way to the ball. We began to drive them there.

“Who do you think these people are?” Rebecca asked.

“I think they may be ‘The Couple,’” I responded. “After the SEALs, I began to work with the FBI as an undercover Special Agent. I had heard about them. They are dangerous if it is them.”

After leaving them inside, we came out to examine the content of their phones.

“You can open it, right?” I asked.

She nodded. There were three phones with them.

“This is not a phone,” she said. “This is something else.”

“What is it?”

“It might be what they bought from Willow.”

Unfortunately, we did not see them exchange anything. We would have to ask the couple themselves. I knew they wouldn’t cooperate. They would be too ashamed that we caught them.

Back at the hotel, Rebecca asked for help unzipping her gown. It fell gently to the floor. Leaving Rebecca in a sexy black lace bra and matching panties, her lace thigh highs, and heels. I watched her walk to the bathroom. She walked nonchalantly, like the sight of her body would not arouse anything in me. She needed to be corrected. I tried to keep it down but could not hide the feeling.

When she came out, she went straight for the closet.

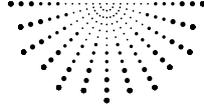
“Thank you,” I said without looking at her.

She had saved me again. We both owe our lives to each other now. It was wild. We were a team.

Rebecca did not reply. She was about to walk past me when I reached to take her hand.

She stared at me without saying a word. I stared at her without speaking. She was still in her bra and panties, and heels. Staring at her reminded me of the kiss we shared at the party. Her eyes were laser-focused on mine. Each of us waited for the other to make the move before I pulled her down to me on the bed.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



REBECCA

I allowed myself to be drawn towards him and lay down on his body. I went for his lips while he went for mine as if we were communicating telepathically. Truthfully, I could see what he wanted to do in his eyes, and he could see in my eyes that I wanted it all done to me.

His lips were still as soft as I remembered them being from the party, and he was still a damn good kisser. Nothing had changed, except now there was no doubt this was real and no longer an act. I was on top of him. His breath tasted like mint, and his eyes were shut. I also shut mine, taking in this feeling, and letting it lead me to wherever it would.

Mateo would not like this. Craig would advocate for my banishment from the group with some compensation. Scott would not encourage it. But all of this made the adventure we were about to make on this bed so intoxicating.

Stephen got bolder. I felt his hands on my backside. He squeezed lightly, and a moan escaped from my lips. From the first time I met him, I had decided that nothing would happen between us, but life took us all for a ride.

My hands went through his hair repeatedly as I tried to find a name for what I felt for him. I failed woefully. There was nothing, no words, that could describe the tension that I felt as my release drew closer. My feelings were everywhere. I lusted about his perfect body, and yet I felt a tenderness about him, about the part of him that he had kept hidden for so long.

His shirt crossed his forehead, and I continued kissing him, touching his bare, tight, colossal chest. I ran my fingers over his nipples as I kissed him, eliciting a deep, guttural groan from him.

He turned me over quickly as if he did not want to lose control. He was on top of me now. He unclasped my bra and stopped to stare at my breasts. There was wonder in his eyes and admiration and fear. They were so intermingled that it was difficult picking each feeling apart from the other.

He feasted on my nipples, running his tongue repeatedly over each, slightly biting and teasing them and causing me to moan over and over. He returned to my mouth and went for my lips. I was trembling with passion and desire, feeling the warmth and wetness between my thighs spread through my body. My panties were soaked.

Stephen kissed my neck as if he were my long-time lover, then went down to my chest and nestled his lips between my cleavage. The expectation that his downward trajectory brought with it made me arch up toward him. I was hungry with desire.

He continued past my breasts and licked down my tummy. I took a deep breath in. Feeling his stubble and lips on my sensitive stomach almost drove me insane. God, the way he moved, slowly and with intent, like he wanted me to feel every little stimulus. He went further down still till he got to my waist. He nibbled at my belly button. And I arched up to him.

He slowly took my panties, peeled them off me, and threw them on the floor. I took a sharp breath and waited. He lingered, lengthening the tension. Dammit. What was he waiting for?

I reached for his head and tried to push him down toward my middle, but he gripped my hands and pinned them by my side. He ran his tongue close to my center, then round and round my most sensitive parts. The expectation was killing me, the thought of what he could do. And he knew. He let me die in it before his tongue ran across the nerve endings, shocking me. I yelped and moaned, then tried to get away

from him. He had built every sensory nerve in my body to madness. Any touch made me react quickly. I wriggled under him but discovered with imprisoned excitement that I was stuck. The helplessness of my situation heightened the sensation when he ran his tongue around my wetness.

“Oh, Stephen!” I muttered.

He did not seem like he would ever be remotely interested in me, but here we were. The teasing continued until he started eating me out. It was so sudden that I was not expecting it. I was trying to get used to the teasing, to the nibbling around my nerve endings. So, when he feasted on them, I nearly ran mad. He sucked and licked and bit lightly, carrying me through the experience. I was wriggling and struggling, trying to get free, but I knew from his grip that there was no getting out of this one. Now that excited me. It went on and on, a spiraling madness of an emotional and lustful outburst. But that was it; he would not let me finish. Stephen was taking his time. My stomach quivered and trembled as I felt his tongue on me, in me, and around me. I arched, raised my legs, and wrapped them around his neck.

My breathing was getting harder. Stephen knew exactly what he was doing to me. I saw how he looked when he raised his head and stared at me.

Then he slid up towards me, losing his shorts along the way. When he slid inside me, I felt his hardness overtake every space. Then he started to move, grinding me slowly as he tried to get used to his new home. His eyes were open and on me. I tried not to stare into his eyes from below him but failed miserably. It was like a spell. I got more in sync with the rhythm flowing from his waist.

He placed my hands above my head, then pinned them with his left hand. With his right, he lightly grazed my left side while thrusting. It was unbelievable. Then he started massaging my boobs.

I was going to run mad from all these stimuli. The next thing he did was bend down towards me and take a nipple between his lips. He nibbled on it without losing his rhythm. I

was only discovering that Stephen was a killer inside and outside.

His latest act started unraveling a knot that he had built inside me. I was quivering violently when the end came. I struggled to free both hands from his grip to grab onto something before the climax swallowed me, but he did not let me. He held me there and watched as I struggled with it. He did not stop pounding, either.

I went through two more of those, my chest filling up with air and tension, which found a way out of my body. He shook forcefully before releasing it on my stomach. Then he fell sideways to the other side of the bed.

Both of us were breathing hard. I was surprised he could still breathe at all. The intensity of what I had experienced at his hands.

Our loud breathing filled the room as I wondered what this meant for us both.



It meant nothing. The following day, we carried on as if nothing had happened the night before. We had a meeting to attend, a lead to check out, and we had better arrive on time.

First, though, we had to have a video call with the group back home.

“Can you put something on?” Mateo said, notably feeling uncomfortable.

It was the first thing he said when we got through to them. Stephen, whom he was referring to, shrugged. He was wearing only his boxer briefs and no shirt. His tan chest and bulging biceps were on display. I did not mind. I had experienced the power beneath that chest. It was beautiful.

“Let’s move on,” Craig said. “What did you find?”

“We discovered it was ‘The Couple,’” I said.

I was wearing my pajamas, wondering if my disheveled hair would give away what Stephen and I had done in this room last night. I hoped not.

“The Couple,” Scott said, appearing thoughtful. “I’ve heard of them, but no one has ever actually seen them.”

“Well, we did. Last night,” Stephen said.

“They are working with our enemies?” Archer asked. “This is more serious than it looks.”

“I know. I woke up in the middle of the night to research the couple. They are two of the most dangerous criminals around. We caught them, though,” I said.

“Great work, you two. They are highly dangerous and have supplied weapons to terrorist organizations in the past. They are directly responsible for the deaths of 400 people with gunshot wounds, mostly to the head,” Mateo said.

“What?” Stephen asked.

Yes. I found it hard to believe too. This felt like it needed to be more challenging. And they killed Willow with what had to have been a shot of poison. Didn’t seem like their style? What if we were being set up? What if those two were not the actual couple?

“We have a meeting where we will pose as them. It would be the first contact we will have directly with the people seeking to kill us.”

“No. That’s too dangerous,” Mateo said. “What if they show up?”

“We tied and locked them up in an abandoned farmhouse,” Stephen said.

“You what?” Craig exclaimed.

“They are tied up,” Stephen replied.

“Something is not right,” Scott said.

“This is the only chance we have to get close. The meeting is tonight,” I said.

“I don’t like it!” Mateo insisted.



Night found us in an ordinary-looking bar booth with the couple’s phones in our pockets. We still needed to figure out what we were supposed to sell, but we knew it had to be something we got off the couple.

We each avoided looking at each other. The experience from last night was still raw. I could still feel his phantom hardness inside of me.

I reached for his chin and played with the stubble.

“What are you doing?” he asked, his voice low and under control, and shyly.

“The couple were madly in love with each other,” I whispered. “We have to play the part.”

He swallowed.

“Is this seat taken?” someone asked, standing before us, and pointing at the open seat. He looked frail like he could turn into dust any second. His hair was white. His eyes were blue.

“We are waiting....” I started but was stopped by a nudge from Stephen.

“State your business,” he said.

The man stared at the both of us, his eyes growing wide in some maniacal wonder.

“It is you?” he asked, helping himself to a seat.

The both of us remained silent. We had gone into this mission without knowing too much. If we spoke, we could give ourselves away.

I glared at him before I turned and gave Stephen a passionate kiss on the lips. The man watched.

“I can’t believe this,” he said. “It’s you two in the flesh and blood. Oh, I never thought I would see this day.”

“You know what that means?” Stephen asked, his voice gruff.

The frail guy nodded. “I can die fulfilled.” His face was parted in a smile. Then it quickly turned into a frown. He looked like a person with a mental health condition that recently escaped from the hospital. “Where’s the merchandise?”

“The merchandise,” I muttered.

“You said you have it in a phone,” the man said.

“Oh,” Stephen said. He started to move, but he stopped. He wanted to say something.

“You prefer meeting with Halco?” the frail man asked.

“Yes,” Stephen replied.

Halco had to be somebody higher up.

“I find it insulting that he didn’t come to see us himself,” I added.

The frail guy shrugged. If I were wrong about Halco being the top guy, he would know we were different from who he said we were. If I were right, we would be on our way to meeting people that we held accountable for the attempt on our lives. We could get these people and deal with them for the first time.

“He had to make sure you two were real and could deliver,” he said.

I stood up quickly.

“We meet here when Halco comes,” I said confidently.

Then I looked over to Stephen. We had to leave.

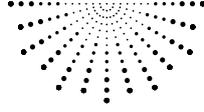
“When?” the frail guy asked.

“Same time, tomorrow.”

I had already started walking away.

Stephen must be wondering what had gotten into me, but I knew some arrogance would bring these people to do exactly what we wanted.

CHAPTER TWELVE



STEPHEN

What had gotten into her? We can't be walking away from leads like this. What if, somehow, he felt that we were impostors? We would lose our chance of meeting him again and not even come close to Halco.

I waited until we were outside and inside a car.

"What was that?" I asked.

"A way to string them along. We must tell them we are not interested in the deal."

I sighed. She was right. She knew more than she should at this age. My admiration for her took another leap into the sky, but I tried not to show it. I was the older, more experienced one here.

I started the car, and we headed back to the hotel.

Occasionally, I would look at Rebecca from the corner of my eyes.

"You're getting the hang of this," I finally said.

"I think we are being tailed," she said.

Great response. I had been so distracted by her that I had forgotten that part of this life. I sighed and stared at the rearview mirror. Sure enough, the headlamps of a car were behind us. It was not just any car. It was a black SUV. It looked suspicious and dangerous, suited precisely for this kind of thing. And it looked like they were not trying to hide that they were indeed following us.

I took a quick turn to the left. They followed. I turned to the right, and they were still behind us. Then I drove past our hotel. We had a problem and needed to solve it and couldn't give away where we stayed.

I continued down the road before I pulled over at a residential house. The house reminded me of the ambush we got into getting the couple.

I left the car and walked towards the house. Rebecca followed my lead. The SUV slowed down as it drove past us. I tried to get a look, but it was too dark inside the car.

They continued to drive past us, and we quickly hurried toward the flower hedges by the side of the road to hide and wait to see if they would loop back around.

They did and parked down the road from us.

It did not take long before the first man came up the driveway. He walked up to the door and knocked. After some time, another man went to the door. They were talking. Two more figures moved toward the house, running, and hiding on both sides.

I motioned to Rebecca to watch one of the men at the door and went after the first man.

I was very close to him before he saw me. Instinctively, his fist shot out. I knew what he would do, so I quickly reacted and punched him in the face. He went down with a grunt. His partner turned back then and saw me. With two steps and a jump, he came at me. I stepped lightly to the side, making him miss with his swinging fist completely.

He was on the ground and tried to sweep me down with his leg. I jumped over it, kicking him in the face as I landed. Someone hit me from the back, and I tumbled forward. I turned to see it was the first guy that I had hit. His blow came unexpectedly again. This time, he caught me right in the face. I staggered backward.

He jumped into the air, kicking with his feet. I managed to block his kicks with my hands while still stumbling backward. I fell to the ground and rolled over, getting up on my feet

quickly. I dodged another blow and returned with one of mine, catching the man in the face. I slammed him again, using this opportunity to get on top of him.

I heard the swish of something swinging right at me. The second guy had produced a large branch from the lawn. I rolled off the man I was on top of and bent backward to dodge the branch before I kicked him to the ground. I wondered how Rebecca was dealing with her own man.

Another blow came quickly, not giving me a moment's rest. These were skilled professionals. They had to be. There was no chance to do anything as the attacks kept coming.

I was getting tired of fighting them. It would be easier shooting them both. But I hadn't had time to reach for my gun yet. I dodged a blow and staggered back against the wall of the building. By now, our little scuffle would be attracting the neighbors' attention. I would not be surprised if I heard police sirens here soon.

I saw a flying, booted foot coming for my head. Quickly, I moved aside. The foot slammed against the wall, missing me. I hit the thigh hard and then hit it again, ensuring I weakened the leg enough for the fighter to consider withdrawing. I heard his partner approaching. I ran towards them and kicked one in the stomach. They staggered together and fell in a heap.

I pulled out my gun and pointed it at them. They raised their hands in surrender immediately.

“Who the fuck are you?” I asked. I was panting heavily.

“You wouldn't dare shoot.”

“If you have been following me, you would know I have no problem shooting people.”

“I would think twice about that,” another voice called from the corner of the house.

The man that came around the side of the building had his gun pressed to Rebecca's head and held her by the neck. My heart dropped. I continued to watch him without moving my weapon from the two targets on the ground.

“Let her go,” I said.

“No, no. You don’t call the shots here. I do. I won’t let her go until you tell me what part the both of you are playing in this. Are you the couple?”

“You don’t call the shots either. You would be crazy if you think I won’t kill your two partners if you do something stupid,” I said.

“It’s the danger they signed up for,” He shrugged.

“CIA or FBI?” I asked.

“CIA,” he said.

What was with the government and messing things up for law-abiding citizens? They had no business being in this mess. We had a lead to follow; they could ruin things for us now.

“Can I see a badge?” I asked.

One of the men on the ground took out his badge and showed me. It was real.

CIA men were generally pretty cocky. Often believing that bad men would not shoot them once they flashed their badges.

“Okay, I’m letting down my weapon,” I said. “You should lower yours too and let Rebecca go.”

“Fair,” the man holding Rebecca said.

I lowered the gun and put it back in my pants.

“You guys are making a mistake,” I said. “We are pursuing a lead.”

“A lead? Who are you?” the man asked.

He had let Rebecca go.

“We are from Mystic Steele Security.”

“Oh, Mateo.”

“Yes.”

“What are you two doing out here?”

“We are after a lead. I told you.”

“You met Halco?”

“What has this got to do with anything?”

The man sighed. His men were already standing up from the ground. They stood around. The hostile stance was gone now. They were at ease, yet I could feel a little opposition. Were we about to get into a standoff?

“You are impeding an investigation.”

“I think you’re the one in our way.”

“What did you talk about with Halco?”

“Damn, if I will tell you,” I responded, knowing we had yet to even meet with Halco.

“We need to know.”

“We didn’t break any law talking to him, did we?”

“You have no idea what you are meddling with.”

“We don’t, huh?”

“You don’t. You are meeting with a go-between for terrorists. You should give us any information you have. It will help us stop a major terrorist threat.”

“You would have to talk to Mateo. We have the license to operate as private security.” I began walking over to Rebecca.

“Shit,” he responded, defeated.

“You know what?” I said, grabbing Rebecca’s arm. “Why not give me your number? If something shows up, I’ll call you.”

The man sighed. He knew that he had nothing. We were at an impasse. Even if they took us in now, they would get nothing. Their best bet was to work with us.

He slipped his hand into his pocket and pulled out his wallet. From the wallet, he handed me his card. I took it and looked at his name.

“Agent Carter,” I said.

He nodded.

“Come on,” I said, taking Rebecca’s hand. “We have to get back.”

We walked towards the car, away from the men.

Rebecca wanted to turn around and look at the men.

“Don’t,” I said.

It would only make them suspect us. They would have reason to bring us in and waste our time if they did. Of course, a phone call would guarantee our release. Mateo still had influence in and around different agencies.

We got to the car, and I started it.

“They are CIA?” Rebecca asked. She seemed a little bit shaken.

“Yes. I’m so sorry I didn’t protect you first and foremost.” I said, grabbing her hand.

“No, it wasn’t your fault,” she squeezed my hand.

I leaned over and kissed her forehead. This incident put my feelings in perspective for Rebecca. I absolutely could not let anything happen to her. I was in love with her.

I guided the car back onto the road and started towards our hotel. We’d need to pack our things and find a new place. Staying in the same hotel after we were easily traced by the CIA could be risky. They could change their minds and come back for us. We could not afford to be delayed, not when so much was at stake. We were so close.

“What do you think they are after?” Rebecca asked.

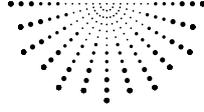
Her question drew me back to what the CIA official said about Halco and the group he might be affiliated with. Terrorists were no ordinary men. They were willing to die for their cause.

“They had said something about terrorists. We have to let Mateo know about this,” I said.

“But what do terrorists want with you guys?”

It was a question I could not answer.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



REBECCA

I was still confused and frightened while driving to a new hotel. I kept looking back to see if we were being followed. What if the people who came after us were not the CIA, but some terrible group interested in whatever Halco thought we were selling?

They had let us go too quickly. That could be a problem. Unless they were too afraid of Mateo and what he could do. They would still be following us. I would not put it past them to plant a bug in our car or phone.

“Do you think they bugged us?” I asked.

“You should check that out,” he said.

“My devices are in the back of the car.”

“I’ll stop. Let’s get them.”

He pulled over to the shoulder of the road. It was not the best place to stop the car, especially at night, but I greatly trusted Stephen’s ability to protect us. He had sent me after one of the men alone and went after two himself. He was still able to overpower them while I failed in mine. The man saw me coming. I felt like I let Stephen down, but he apologized to me. I thought I would’ve heard an earful about how I could’ve blown everything. But I didn’t get that. Instead, I received a genuine apology, fear, and gratefulness all at once in his eyes. He also kissed my forehead most gently. Is he falling for me?

I went for my bag in the backseat and got my scanner out. Slowly, I made a scan of the car. There was nothing in it.

“Clean,” I said.

“Good.”

We continued down the road while I kept looking out at the passenger mirror to ensure we were not being followed.

I had planned on pursuing a different path before teaming up with Mateo and trying to take on the hero role. But after careful consideration, I was so sure I wanted this. I am now contemplating my decision. Perhaps it would have been wiser to remain at home and fulfill the role of a 9-5 computer technician. Coming into this field has brought me close to death more times than I could count. With how everything was going, I was afraid I could be killed.

Stephen and the others’ words of concern for me before we left continue to play in my head now.

“We are here,” Stephen said, pulling over at another hotel.

I wondered how Stephen stayed calm and didn’t let fear creep in.

We left our car with the valet, walked through the reception area, and got to our new room. I decided I could no longer keep quiet as we headed toward it.

“How do you do it?” I asked.

The animosity towards each other was gone. We could as well be partners already. Life partners, not just partners in an investigation.

“Do what?”

He swiped the card, and we got in.

“Manage to stay calm in the middle of all this mess. How are we even sure we will get to the bottom of this? How are we sure we will be alive at the end of this?”

“We’re not,” Stephen said, pulled off his shirt, and settled on the bed.

My eyes went to his chest, and I swallowed. He looked like he was carved from marble. Even when he sat down, the abs were so visible that I could not stop longing after them. I

wanted to touch him again. I was jittery after the CIA interaction, but I'd love to be in his arms for comfort.

“So, how do you stay calm when you know you can die at any minute?”

“Everyone will die, you know?”

“Yes, but...”

“What difference does it make if you die by a bullet, a knife to the heart, or of old age, deep asleep on your bed? The end is the same. We will not remember any of this shit. We will be gone.”

“That's crazy.”

“I know. But it helps me stay calm.”

He left the room and went to shower. I went to the window and stared down at the road. I was afraid of someone showing up and trying to murder us again. I had already faced different murder attempts and had no desire to die from a bullet. Dying of old age in my sleep was the more comfortable option.

I pulled the armchair over and sat at the window. There was no leaving anything to chance. We would be ready to face any of them if I saw them.

The bathroom door opened, and Stephen walked out, looking like a god. He walked to the closet, and with the towel around his waist, he picked up pajama pants and pulled them on. I was looking at him from the corner of my eyes while pretending to look away from him.

“You should take a bath or shower, try to relax a bit,” he said.

“No. I have to watch the window.”

“Go. I will watch.”

I finally nodded and left the window. I bathed quickly, concerned that he was not as frightened and could overlook what I was trying to prevent.

When I got out of the shower, I found him sitting on the bed, speaking on the phone. It appeared he was talking to

Mateo. I wished he had waited for me before he made the call. I quickly put on my pajamas and walked back to the window. I would stay here for the night and ensure we were ready for anything.

“Mateo said he would speak with his contacts in the CIA. They will be told to steer clear. We can give them the location of the couple,” he said.

“Okay,” I replied, still staring out through the window.

“You should sleep,” he said. “I will call the CIA tomorrow.”

“I don’t trust them,” I said.

“I don’t either.” He agreed.

He watched me at the window for a while before he spoke again.

“Let me take the first watch,” he said. “I need you sharp in the morning.”

“I don’t mind.”

But he was already moving towards me. He touched me lightly, and my body shivered. I wanted him. I turned and stared at him. He returned my stare.

Slowly, he lifted me from where I stood and returned to the bed, where he dropped me. Our clothes flew off.

He laid on top of me, slipping inside me. I gasped as his length disappeared. I felt it engulfing every part of me. It seemed like it was getting bigger as it slid into me. I grabbed at his broad, muscular back as he began to move in motion with his rhythm. A blinding pleasure hovered around his thrusts, and I focused on it.

Gradually, as he moved, the pleasure washed over me. Damn, Stephen was good at this. It made me wonder how many lovers he had before me. I had never had an experienced, unselfish lover like Stephen. It was something I had only ever imagined. And now it was something I always wanted. Something I needed to have repeatedly.

I had been with three guys in my life. Stephen was different. He moved precisely and knew exactly what he was doing and what he wanted, and I moved with him, happy to let him lead.

His hand slipped under my head, gripping my neck from the back, keeping me in place. This was amazing. I couldn't help but wonder what Mateo and Craig would think about this. I had gone into this mission hoping to be professional and prove Craig and Stephen wrong. But I was at the mercy of Stephen's thrusting instead.

He gently grabbed my hands, held them, interlocking our fingers on both sides of my head, and kissed me deeply. The electricity I felt was indescribable; the kissing and his movement were passionate. It was slow and long and began going deeper. Then he slowly increased his pace. I couldn't think of anything else as mind-blowing sensations mixed with pleasure overtook my mind and body.

I opened my eyes to see his eyes on me. This was a different sensation than I had ever experienced. It had changed from having sex and was beginning to cross over to something else. I realized we were making love.

I felt the quivering from my insides. I tried to control it, but there was no holding anything back. Stephen was the one with all the control. We continued to keep our eyes on each other. I was sure I would scream at the end of this climax. He made grunting sounds as he pushed into me faster. Again, the pleasure was growing. The sensation was intense. His groans mingled with my moans, getting louder and louder.

He was in the last throes of his thrusts, each getting longer and slower than the former. Then he began to go faster when he saw me shaking with pleasure. I screamed at the end, finding no other way to let the pent-up tension out of my body. He began to kiss me passionately, then he groaned and poured everything inside me. All while looking into my eyes. I could feel the hotness of his seeds shooting through me. It had not been this intense the first time I did it with him. He stayed inside me, breathing heavily, still moaning with pleasure, and

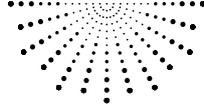
what felt like aftershocks of a few stronger final long slow thrusts. I reached climax again in those final moments.

Silence followed for over a minute as I tried to understand the sensations still rolling through my body.

He slipped out and moved off me to his side of the bed.

I felt entirely owned by him, unable to resist him. He pulled me over to him, and for a moment, I thought he wanted to start again. Then he held me close. I was going to spend the night in his arms. The next day, we would face the dangers again together.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



STEPHEN

The following day, I opened my eyes. The warmth of her body beside me did not encourage me to get up. I wanted to lay in bed with her all day, a feeling I had never experienced with another woman.

Rebecca murmured and snuggled deeper into me. She smelled nice. I was torn between waking up or making love to her again.

“Are you awake?” Rebecca murmured.

I pulled her closer in response. It was funny how my feelings toward her had changed in the blink of an eye. From having issues with her being with us, defending and saving her life, and finally, enjoying being with her.

“Come on. We have to wake up to prepare. We meet Halco by noon,” she said.

I rolled over with her in my grasp. She was giggling as she tried to free herself.

But I kept her in my grasp, nuzzling my face against her neck. She giggled. Damn, she was cute. I couldn't deny it; I loved this girl. I let her go, and she sprung up quickly, laughing.

I sat up on the bed, admiring her figure. She was still naked from last night and did not seem ashamed to show her entire body to me. I loved her full breasts and full hips and her round butt.

“Dammit, you are so strong,” she laughed.

“You are so beautiful,” I said. Realizing I said it out loud.

She looked at me, surprised but smiling.

“Yeah, right,” she responded shyly.

“You don’t believe me?”

“I’ve seen the kind of women you are drawn to,” she said.

“What, what do you mean?”

“Your photo, in your room. I know what your type is, tall, beautiful supermodels.” She said it a little sassy.

“Photo in my room?” I then began to laugh. “The photo of me with my mom and sister?”

“Oh, Mom and sister...yeah, I knew that,” Rebecca laughed to herself, clearly embarrassed.

“Baby, you’re my type.”

She smiled and walked away from me towards the shower. I waited until she was in.

I stood up and prepared to go after her, but a thought stopped me. What was I doing? This was not life for us. This was not the life for people like us. We would always have to stay vigilant and look over our shoulders. Romance could be a dangerous distraction for both of us.

I went to the window and looked outside. I should be more professional right now. I should be strong enough to resist her curvy body and beautiful face. This was the wrong time to be doing this. But at the same time, I realized we wouldn’t be able to do this back at Mateo’s. The other team members would disapprove, I’m sure of it. I would take a bullet for all my team members. I’m seeing now, though, Rebecca would be the first one I’d save.

I tried to push aside the pessimistic thought of something happening to destroy our newfound union. I’ve always been a loner. When I joined this group, I could not help but admire Mateo and Craig and their friendship. It seemed that there was something that they had over each other, but they would rather die than let the other come to harm, almost as if there was a

secret oath that they had all taken. I loved it. I wanted to get in on it. But I had felt like a stranger until Rebecca came along. Scott was the only one that really gave me any time or wanted to know the real me.

My first knee-jerk response was to protect her, even if I came off as mean. This was more than friendship. For the first time, I felt like I couldn't picture my life without someone.

I smiled to myself and hurried into the shower. Rebecca and I teaming together has made us a more powerful addition to the group. This could make the group accepting of us being together as lovers.

I pushed the door open, and she turned to me, surprised and giggled. I kissed her lightly on the head before I moved to her lips.



We were early. So, we sat in the car and waited for Halco to enter the restaurant. I tried to look around in the car, but it was impossible with her presence there. She smelled just precisely the way she looked.

She seemed to be the only one paying attention to this mission.

Occasionally, I would look at her, her lips, her legs. What was wrong with me? This was getting out of control. I had to do something about it. I had to either bury it deep down and deny it or...

Oh, forget it; who was I kidding? I cannot run away from her. It will kill me.

I scanned the place while thoughts of her nestled in my mind. I thought of what I could do to her, which brought in the ideas for what we could do together, places we could travel to, and places we could see—all of them with that amazing smile on her face.

I was lost. I'd completely lost my edge. I should call Craig and have him get someone else to take over this mission,

maybe work with Rebecca. No, dammit. I could not stand to see someone else work with her. What if they fell in love and found a way to make it work?

“Tell me about your supermodel, mom, and sister,” she laughed.

I quickly snapped out of it. “What, sorry,” I responded, slightly embarrassed I was so deep in thought about her and us.

“Are you three close? If you don’t mind me asking, is your dad in the picture or....”

“I’m very close with my mom and sister. My dad, I see from time to time. My parents divorced when I was five. They were married right out of high school and had my sister and me young. I believed he loved my mom and us, but my mom chose to separate us, which was the right decision. My dad, he’s.... something else.” I added, “He was a con man and had been getting in trouble with the law. And on top of that he is narcissistic. You know that type of person. If something isn’t their way, they blow up and think everyone is out to get them?”

“Yes, I definitely have a few of those people in my life,” She added.

“I think throughout my childhood, I felt I needed to protect my mom and sister even though I am the youngest. I had to be the little man of the house,” I laughed. “It was just us three for a long time, and sometimes my dad wouldn’t help out. Looking back he definitely should have.”

“Aw, the little man of the house,” she said. “Did he not want to leave? I’m sorry if I’m overstepping.”

“No, no, that’s fine. I haven’t really thought about this in a long time. I think he loved my mom , and honestly, I know he still does. But he still punished her for asking him to leave. The day after she asked, he came and took all the furniture from the house.”

“Really? Maybe he didn’t realize he was punishing you and your sister too,” she said.

“Yes, he picked me up off the couch and, said, ‘Sorry, buddy.’ He then told my mom this is how it would be if she wanted to divorce him.”

“What did your mom do?”

“She put the basketball hoop from the end of our driveway in one of our big empty rooms,” I said, laughing. “My mom tried to stay positive throughout our hard times. We would have dance parties to Elvis and we called ourselves The Three Musketeers. And each night, we’d look at each other in our unfurnished house and say, ‘Today was a good day.’”

I smiled and looked down and said, “You remind me of them a lot.”

“I do? I look nothing like them,” I said.

“No, but you are fun, positive, and a badass like my mom and sister. They are two of the strongest women I’ve ever met, and now you are also on that list.”

She leaned over and kissed me and squeezed my hand.

“Oh, I think I see Halco,” she said.

We watched as Halco got to the diner entrance and pulled the door open. We both got out of our car and hurried towards the exit. Today was the day he was supposed to take us to meet the man in charge of this operation. The one man we were looking for. Probably the one that put out a hit on my team for some past transgression.

When we walked past him, he looked around the place and found a table. He followed our lead and sat down. He looked through the window and saw nothing before he turned back and smiled at us uneasily.

“I did not know you two would be here,” he said.

“We keep to our word,” I replied.

The man nodded thoughtfully. His eyes roamed from me to Rebecca.

“We have to wait,” he said.

“Why?”

“To make sure we’re not being followed.”

Followed? It could be the CIA. I had called him last night, directing them to where the real couple was. Was that not enough to quench their thirst for meddling in our business?

“Who would be following us?” Rebecca asked, leaning forward seductively towards Halco. She was playing the game a little too well.

“The government. I have been seeing their men around for some time.”

The CIA was going to ruin this for us. They were not even being sly. We had a deal.

Halco stood up suddenly.

“I have to go,” he said, hurtling past us and further into the restaurant.

“Stop,” I said, grabbing him. As soon as I had him, he hit me instinctively. His blow landed on my face, and he was off towards a door that could only lead to the kitchen.

Rebecca was up, already after him. I clutched at my nose and hoped the fool had not broken it. I also went after him, motivated by the thoughts of Rebecca chasing after him. I noticed the movement to my left as I pushed through the door.

We found ourselves in the kitchen, dashed past pots and pans and some chefs hard at work. I could see Halco further up, with Rebecca just a little behind. Halco flew out of the back exit of the restaurant. I realized we were in an alleyway when I got to the exit. Rebecca was already running up it.

“Rebecca, down!” I yelled. I could see the glint of a gun from a building just across the road at the end of the alleyway. Rebecca stopped and squatted, taking cover when gunshots bit into the ground.

I pulled out my gun, knowing it would not do much good from the distance I was firing at. Yet I fired in the direction to distract them. We got to the end of the alleyway in hot pursuit. I could hear the footsteps behind me.

A van pulled over at the other side of the road. As Rebecca tried to get up, someone from the van opened fire. She dashed to one side and hit the wall.

Halco started to cross the road, but he was hit before taking further steps. I thought it was a mistake until two more bullets slammed into his body, and he dropped to the ground.

The van tires screeched noisily on the asphalt before it raced up the road. Our car was around the front; no other vehicle was in sight. I hurried towards Halco while Rebecca kept shooting off rounds at the van.

I felt Halco's pulse. It was tiny, and I knew it was not going to last.

"Halco, your people did this?" I asked.

He tried to keep his eyes from rolling, so he could focus on me. Then he tried to talk but only spurted blood. There was a hole in his neck where a bullet had passed through.

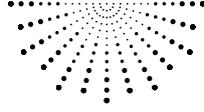
"Halco?" I called.

Again, he tried to speak, but inside came up with more blood.

"Call an ambulance," I said in Rebecca's general direction.

Our only lead was gone.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



REBECCA

“Step away from the body,” a cold voice said, walking up to Stephen.

I came up behind them, my smoking gun in hand. This had to be the CIA.

Stephen slowly got up. He was almost in the middle of the road, but the cars slowed down and diverted away from him when they came close. His face was filled with rage.

Another one showed up, flashing his badge.

“We will need this body for investigations,” the second man said.

“You fools,” Stephen said, walking up to them menacingly.

I wanted to dispel the situation, but I was hooked. I loved how he controlled the situation, towered over them in height, and intimidated the shit out of them.

“Sir, please step out of the way,” one said.

“Oh, I will do much more than step out of the way. How about stomping your face in? Do you realize what you’ve done!”

“I went after a suspect.”

“Where’s your superior?”

“If you want to follow us back to the station for questioning and debriefing, you’ll meet him.”

“Fuck you! Do you know what you have done? You’ve just lost us a major lead, and there are no more leads, you asshole. If anything happens, I will have fun watching you explain to your superiors how you broke a deal and came out here to mess things up.”

The men had been standing at the same spot, watching Stephen get everything off his chest. Stephen turned to look at me and was almost deflated like he did not want me to see him get angry like this.

“Good job,” he said to the men.

I knew he wanted to search Halco’s pockets to find something on him, but it would turn into a fight, and he had already lost his cool.

He walked over to where I was.

“Come on, let’s get out of here,” he said. Then he paused to look at me. “Are you okay?”

I nodded.

“Come on,” he said.

We walked away from the agents and Halco’s dead body, away from the restaurant. He held my hand on the way back to the car. Inside the car, we sat silently, exhausted from the chase and angry that it did not lead to anything.

“What now?” I asked.

“I don’t know.”

We could not return to Mateo and Craig with reports that we had lost our only lead. The couple we locked up at the barn were probably already in CIA custody.

We had nothing. Leave it to the government to mess this up, giving little heed to anybody’s interest but theirs. Stephen had been telling me how these agencies work and that they always felt that whatever they were doing was more important than anyone else. They would let us die and claim it was for the greater good.

It was not until today that I started feeling anger towards the government. I had always managed through the establishments, throwing government rules aside. I would have still been at the bottom if I had not. Those rules were designed to keep everyone down. He then let me in on his past and the reason he went to jail.

“I told you how I was helping the FBI after the SEALs, right? He asked.

I nodded.

“I began doing undercover work with them as a Special Agent. I was to track down and kill a man that went by the name Eagle. He was a terrorist that the FBI could not legally obtain. I was hot on his tracks and had found some evidence that would put him away legally. I was working with an agent named Grey at the time, and together we were going to bring him down,” he continued.

“But then I was contacted by a new FBI handler. A man I never met sent me on my last mission. He said they knew Eagle’s location and I needed to kill him. The evidence I gave Grey was insufficient to put Eagle away forever. I showed up ready to complete the mission... but they tried to kill me instead.”

“Who tried to kill you?”

“I’m not sure, still. At first, I thought it was Eagle, but my handler was the only one that knew I would be there. I could only come up with the FBI trying to kill me. I escaped death and went off-grid, only to later be set up and put in prison for killing a man and selling drugs.”

“Oh, Stephen...I am so sorry. I can understand why you all have misgivings about the government agencies,” I said.

“Yes, and that is why Mateo found me and helped me. He knew that I had most likely been set up. So that is my life. If we can find who’d behind this mess with the rest of the crew, it will, in a way, make me feel a little vindicated. Well... I suppose we might have to call this in,” Stephen said. “See where Mateo could get with the agency.”

“Not yet,” I replied.

I wanted us two to be people who only sometimes needed help. I was sure we could figure out something that would not involve Mateo, Craig, or the damn government.

Stephen’s hand was on the armrest in the middle. I took his hand, squeezing it, and looked at his face. I saw his strong, ruggedly handsome jawline and profile. He was a beauty of a man and seeing him roar at the government agents had turned me on.

“We should get back to the hotel room,” I said.

“What’s there?” he asked.

I squeezed his hand again, and I supposed he got his answer. He grinned and freed his hand to turn on the car before easing it into the traffic. We had nothing regarding any more leads on the case, but at least we had each other.

When we stopped in front of the hotel, I was already throbbing. I wanted this man to dominate me in every way. As we headed into the hotel, I fantasized about him standing over me, with that same intimidating look in his eyes when we first met.

Once we reached the elevator, I could no longer wait. I pulled him by his collar and stood on my tiptoes to get to his lips. At first, he was not entirely into it. Then he became aggressive, threatening to rip my clothes off in the elevator. Fear mingled with excitement as we made out until the elevator reached our floor.



We finally got into our room, and his lips came down on mine, shutting out my moans. It seemed like he had wanted to do this all day, and my body wanted it too. My panties were soaked.

It was frightening how it was almost like being under a spell. Not long ago, I wanted to punch him in the face, the next, he had me captured, and I wanted him so much. He kept kissing me and biting my lips lightly while holding both hands

behind me. As I responded to his kiss passionately, he squeezed my backside, setting off the bells in my head. He owned me just like I wanted not long ago, and I could not resist him. I could already feel a tingly feeling and more wetness between my thighs.

He released my hands, and I pushed away from him.

He moved closer, his face filled with tension. We started kissing again. He led me towards the table in the room and pushed everything aside before placing me on top of it. Then, he paused. His eyes were inflamed with burning desire, and his lips trembled.

In a matter of seconds, the clothes that I had on were on the floor, including my wet panties. At the same time, his hands caressed my skin. He placed his lips on mine again, kissing me and sucking my tongue while his hands fondled my breast. I was ready. It was enough foreplay. I wanted him inside me as fast as possible. But that was not for me to decide. He took his lips off me and placed them on my boobs. At first, he played with my nipples with just the tip of his tongue. Then he took everything into his mouth, sucking on it as though he had been deprived of food for a long time.

The more he sucked and nibbled at my breasts, the more I wanted him inside me. He kissed me on the lips, moved to the neck, then my chest, before proceeding to my belly button. He did not stay there for long before he reached the junction of wetness between my thighs. He wiped the moisture off with his tongue before pleasing me with all of his mouth. Rivulets of pleasure ran through my body. I felt like I was losing myself and my mind. I didn't care what anyone thought I was doing anymore.

I could no longer remain silent, so I began to moan. The sound my mouth produced was low and trembling. It was my effort to control the pleasure that he was making me feel. It became louder when he stroked my wetness with his finger while he continued to lick and kiss my clit.

I had dreams of doing something crazy one day, far removed from my dull existence in New York. But I had not

imagined it would be like this. I had not imagined that I would be so consumed by it. And I never thought I would be with a man like Stephen.

When I met him back at the house, I knew I should not have, but I had daydreamed about him doing something crazy to my body. It was a harmless thought, a fantasy I knew had little or no chance of happening, even with him antagonizing me. But now I wondered if I had somehow communicated the same dream and imagination to him because he was doing exactly what I had been fantasizing about.

Suddenly, my legs quivered as his head was buried between them. He was not the first man I had sex with, but he was definitely the best. He knew the exact things my body wanted. He removed his pants as soon as he released his mouth from my wetness. I almost lost my breath when my eyes saw his cock again. It was long, hard, and fat.

I gasped the moment I felt it inside of me. Then he started to send gentle strokes into my body.

“You want this, don’t you?” He whispered into my ears.

In response, I gasped at an intense stroke. He was covering the entirety of me. He placed one of his hands on my neck, grabbing me lightly, while the other hand went to my boobs, fondling them as he fucked me. One thing was sure. He was going to make me lose my mind. That had to be his mission.

Again, my legs began to quiver. I was close to the climax, very close. But then he pulled his hardness out of me and turned me around. He had me placed in the doggy position and against the table. Then he grabbed and squeezed my ass a little just before he slid his hardness back in again. The intensity of his strokes got faster. I could no longer take it and began to scream in pleasure. At that point, I did not care if anyone could hear me or what anyone would think. Not even the lady that had scowled at me as I walked in with him. Suddenly, I became silent. I was close to the apex. I held on to the table tightly as though it were my lifeline. The only thing I could hear was the sound of his groaning. He pulled his hardness out

of me and finished on my back. He grabbed a towel and kissed my neck as he cleaned me off.

We were both spent when we collapsed on the bed. I got on top of his body and lay there, breathing hard and listening to his breathing. It was fast as well.

He looked at me, smiled shyly, and said, “Rebecca, I...”

His phone started ringing, an annoying intrusion into our moment.

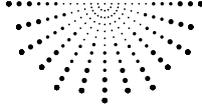
“I have to take this,” he said, reaching for his phone. “Yes. What? No, no...”

It was all very fast. He dropped the phone and gently pulled me aside. He sat up in bed. From the bed, I watched his muscular profile. What could be wrong? I wondered.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Asher has been kidnapped.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



STEPHEN

It was the opposite of what we wanted. I had come out here with Rebecca to ensure nothing happened to us. But somehow, before we could get to our lead, Asher had been kidnapped. Soon it could be one of us getting killed by the faceless men we were still trying to figure out.

I was pacing the room, confused, unable to think. Mateo should have acted faster. We could have gotten to the end of this sooner. Then, the meddlesome CIA. I despised security agencies in the past. I still did.

My mind floated back to my time with the FBI:

After retiring from the SEALs, I was glad to be back courting danger and finding a purpose for my life.

This was the mission that would make or break me. I already had a half a million dollars in my account for this. After the task, I would have a million. My previous contact at the FBI, Agent Grey assured me this would be my last mission.

I would be leaving the danger soon and starting a new life and venturing into opening a new business.

He said I'd be receiving directions from my new handler.

"Are you ready, Stephen?" the new handler's voice said over the phone.

I had never seen him, and there was no indication that I was going to.

"Yes, I'm headed to the room," I replied.

I checked to ensure my gun was still where it should be before I made it across the abandoned hotel lobby. I knew what room he was in. The mission would be quick: get in, shoot, get out.

It was a straightforward mission but still dangerous. A man known as Eagle led a fanatic cult that wanted to purge the world of sin. They had already taken out clubs, bars, and other places they considered sinful, leaving burnt carcasses and ruined buildings in their wake. But none of that could be traced to him, not properly. He could not be charged. So, the FBI did what they knew best: ordered a hit on him.

I took the stairs, taking my time, counting it slowly as I made my way up.

At the floor, where they said he was hiding, I accessed the landing and walked slowly down the hallway. There was not a single guard on the floor. It set off an alarm in my head, but I was not about to be deterred from my mission, especially since the building was empty otherwise.

After leaning against the door slightly and listening for sounds in the room, I get it open and walk in the room. It was then that I realized something was wrong. It was empty.

My phone started ringing. Instinctively, I knew what was going on.

The beeping from the center of the room sounded like what a warning would be if it was in my head. I went to the window barely having time to get out on to the fire escape where I jumped...

“What’s that sound?” Rebecca asked.

I realized I had stopped pacing in the middle of the room, carried away by my thoughts and past memories.

“What sound?” I asked, wondering if she had somehow gotten into my head and heard the beeping sound that ushered in a bomb blast that I survived before going off the grid.

She moved towards her bag where her tools were and started rummaging through them.

“What are you doing?”

She did not reply but kept going through her bag. The next moment, she brought a tablet and stared at the screen.

“Could this... Could it be...?”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“I... I don't know how to explain this, but I did something that might help us get the lead we want.”

“What?”

“You know my bullets?”

“I don't get what you are saying right now. What is it with your bullets?”

“Oh, my gosh” she muttered, then turned to me wide-eyed. “We have our lead, but we must act fast.”

“Act fast?”

“We have to move now.”

She was already sweeping through the room. I followed her, picking up the needed bags and getting ready for the car. My eyes were still heavy from last night. After the news of Asher being kidnapped, I could not sleep.

I followed her through the hallway, into the elevator, and the car, and all the while, she had her eyes on her tablet's screen.

“Before he gets to the hospital, we have to get there,” Rebecca said.

I started the car. “Where am I going?” I asked.

“Straight ahead. Then make a left turn.”

“Are you sure about this?”

“Not really. Move fast. We don't have the luxury of time on our side.”

I stepped on the gas and the car lurched forward. In no time, we were speeding through the relatively open roads. It was still early morning.

“Right turn here. Get to the roundabout and use the first exit.”

She couldn't explain what was happening or where we were going. As I drove, my mind returned to last night and the thought of her clawing my back in pleasure. I could still hear her moans in my ears. But right now, she looked like a different person, set for the kill, prepared for her job.

“He has stopped moving. Drive faster!”

What is all this about?

She looked at me like she had gone mad, looked out the window, then turned back to me again.

“It was a crazy experiment, but I was testing out something and decided to track every bullet I had. One of those guys, I shot. The bullet must have lodged in his body, and he's now moving about. The sensors came on when he started moving.”

“Damn. How did you think of that?”

“I don't know, it just came to me one day,” she mumbled before she glanced down at the tablet again. “Take a right here. The turn is sharp.”

I followed her instructions, wondering what type of projects she was previously involved in that made her think about trackers in bullets.

We stopped in front of a hospital.

“He stopped here,” she said.

We got out of the car. I couldn't help but stare at Rebecca as we walked toward the hospital. She was wearing long, tight black slacks, and a white tank top, she looked ravishing. I could see the strength in her thighs, and I loved how they stretched the slacks.

We hurried into the hospital, looking both ways to make sure we were not being followed. All we needed was some information.

The hospital hallway was mainly deserted, lightly populated by medical personnel leaving after their shifts and

those coming in.

“Where?” I asked Rebecca.

When she did not reply, I turned to realize she was already at the elevator. I hurried to it. She pushed every stop on the three floors above us. We waited. Her eyes were still on the tablet as if she feared the bleeping link would disappear if she looked away.

The elevator door opened on the first floor, and we waited with bated breath for it to close, hoping that no one else would make it to the elevator. Whoever we were looking for was not on this floor. Finally, the doors pulled shut, and the elevator continued its climb to the next floor.

“Here,” Rebecca said, and I quickly pulled out my gun.

The hospital prohibited access to this floor and had cones and under-construction tape at the doors of the elevators. We pushed through into the dark and empty hallway. We heard a commotion down the way. Rebecca looked at me and nodded. Damn, she’s good.

We got to a door, and Rebecca nodded.

I pushed through the door of an operating room.

“You are not supposed to be here,” the doctor said.

The appearance of my gun silenced him as he put his hands up and walked back. Before the man on the bed could move, I was already on him. Rebecca had her gun pointed at the doctor now.

There was a bloody tray nearby. The patient had been freshly bandaged. He was the sniper.

“I think you don’t want to die,” I told the patient.

He looked tired. He stared first at the doctor, then at the window as if he could somehow make it out of there before a bullet tore him down to earth.

“Fuck you,” he muttered.

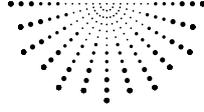
I frisked him and got his phone out of his pocket. The bandage around his abdomen was already getting stained.

Whatever the doctor did here was quick. Just enough to get the assailant on his feet so he could be on his way.

I smiled at him, almost feeling sorry for him. His forced confidence would soon be a thing of the past.

“I have a feeling you are familiar with pain,” I said.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



REBECCA

With my gun still aimed at the doctor, I wondered what we should do with him. Maybe he was part of this team that just took down Halco, or maybe he was just a doctor here trying to help an injured person. But they were on a deserted floor. I figured I better play it safe. I moved towards him, with my gun still on him.

“Turn around,” I said.

“What?”

“Turn around.” My voice was stern, like I meant it.

The doctor turned around with his hands still raised. I struck him at the back of his head and watched him weaken at the knees before crumbling to the ground.

“Get out,” the patient on the bed said. “The police will soon be here.”

“And what will they say when they see your rifle? When they realize you killed Halco?” Stephen asked.

I knew Stephen was bluffing. We had no time to look for his rifle. There was no way anyone would know that he was the killer. It was our words against his.

“They won’t believe you,” the man said.

“All right. Well, newsflash, no one is coming. You ensured this when you left the first and second floors for this one. This is where you get treated in secrecy. You have an arrangement with the doctor,” Stephen continued.

“Fuck you.”

“How much pain can you bear?”

There was no time for the sniper to come up with another retort before Stephen dug into his injury with his gun. A scream escaped from between the man’s lips. But Stephen was not done. He looked at the man dispassionately as he caused him even more pain. Then a cold smile broke across his face like he was enjoying what he was doing.

“Stop! Ahhhh! Ok, Ok!!”

Stephen stopped briefly.

“Are you ready to talk?” Stephen asked, still smiling.

“What do you want?”

“Who does Halco report to?”

There was some silence while the man considered his answer. He looked about the room, at me, then at Stephen.

“I can’t tell you the...”

He began to scream again as Stephen dug his gun deep into his wound. The bandage was soaked with blood. I wondered if the man would ever recover from this.

“Shit! Shit! Stop!”

Again, Stephen stopped and looked at the man with a question on his face.

“Ready to tell us now?”

“They are expecting me in less than 20 minutes. If I’m not back, they will know something is wrong,” the man said, breathing hard.

“No, they are not,” Stephen said, raising a phone. It was the man’s phone, which we had fished from his pocket. “You already told them you did the job.”

The man sighed, looking defeated. Stephen went to his side again.

“Wait! Wait! Dammit! Halco answers to Eagle.”

He was speaking fast now, spilling the words out as quickly as possible, hoping we would let him go.

Eagle? The same Eagle Stephen was after before he was set up? Would this make Stephen spiral?

“Eagle...” You could see the wheels spinning in Stephen’s head, “Where can we find him?” Stephen asked.

“At the Kelsey Nightclub. He goes every Wednesday and Friday.”

“Now, that was not so hard, was it?”

Before the patient could say anything, a sharp knock on his face made him sleep. Stephen walked towards the door before he turned to me.

“Come on,” he said.

I followed him after a last look at the two unconscious men. I was disturbed about the troubles they could cause when they woke up. They had seen our faces. I just hoped that we had seen the last of them.

But Stephen did not seem to bother. It was almost as if he wanted them to know who he was.

We walked outside the hospital’s parking lot to get in our car. I was at the passenger door when I heard footsteps. Before moving, I listened to the safety click come off a gun.

“I wouldn’t,” a voice said.

I stared at the other side of the car to see that Stephen was in the same situation.

“Told you to stay away from this,” a familiar voice said. It sounded like one of the CIA agents. “Hands behind your back.”

Stephen turned around instead to face his own man.

“Hell no. What the hell is wrong with you federal agents?” he asked.

“You think I can’t shoot you because I’ve got a CIA badge?” the man said.

I turned to face mine.

“Don’t do it,” the man said.

They were only two, but they already had their guns out and aimed at us. There was no chance of me getting my gun out before they shot. That did not scare Stephen.

“This is serious,” Stephen said. “You don’t know what you are doing.”

“I see. I don’t, eh? How about you’re impeding on a government investigation?”

“We are licensed private investigators.”

“Even her?”

There was silence.

“Well, boy, you are fishing in an ocean that will swallow you whole. You should go back to the little stream where you belong.”

“I’ve met your likes before,” Stephen said as he began to open our car door and ignore the men completely. Just then, the man shot Stephen. He fell against the car painfully.

Reflexively, I almost went for my gun, but the agent that had his gun on me reminded me of his presence again.

“Don’t do it.”

“How’s that for my likes?” the man asked.

“You shot him! You pig!” I screamed.

“Yes, he tried to shoot a federal agent.”

“What? That’s not true. He was walking away from this situation!”

Stephen was no longer moving. I was shaking with rage and pain.

Stephen had become something more than a partner on a mission to me. Seeing him on the ground, not moving, had my world crashing down.

The man then moved his gun to me,

“Cuff her,” he said to the other agent.

I was cuffed under a gun barrel’s careful supervision before being dragged to the other car.

“You are going to tell us everything you know,” the agent said.

The car started. Stephen still had not moved.

Tears began filling my eyes. I needed to think. I needed to be Stephen; what would he do in this situation?



I was blindfolded. The only thing I could feel was the movement of the car. There was no way to know what was happening or where we were going. When the car stopped, I was dragged down to the ground and taken through a hallway and into a room.

They set me down on a seat and pulled the blindfold off.

“Welcome... Who are you again?”

“You kidnapped me... and you don’t know who I am?” I laughed.

The man chuckled. “There’s no reason to be smart mouthed about this. You will lose in every possible way.”

“You shot someone I care about for no reason,” I said.

“He was going for his weapon.”

“Oh, you think that will save you?”

“It’s the truth.”

“Fuck you.”

“So, tell me, where were you two headed to?”

“None of your damn business,” I said.

The man glared at them before his face slowly broke into a smile.

“I see. You think you are doing something noble. What did they tell you when they drafted you into this little security team? That you are making the world a better place? Or was it the money? It was too good to be true, right?”

I ignored him. My mind was still on Stephen. It was hard imagining a life that he was no longer part of. And even worse, picturing him lying in a pool of his own blood.

“You killed someone. You shot someone; you fool.”

“Your friend? Or was he something more? Were you lovers?”

“Such an idiot.”

“I didn’t shoot your boyfriend in the head. He might still be alive, you know?”

“What happened?” I asked, “Did you just panic? I thought you all were trained better than this?”

“Listen. There are some terrorists that are planning to kill many American lives, and you stumbled into this shit. Do you understand that your life is nothing compared to the lives of millions of Americans? Do you understand that I will easily give up your life for the glory of my country?”

“Psychos make excuses to murder.”

The man turned and walked away. The door slammed shut behind him, and I heard the bolts clicking into place before it was locked. I was in so much trouble, and Stephen was not here to save me. We couldn’t maneuver this dangerous terrain together. I did not want to admit it, but I was terrified. Not only was I scared, but I was also in pain. My heart was hurting. It appeared that Stephen was gone. It was still shocking. He had seemed like a Superman to me.

“Fuck this,” I muttered. I was still working myself up to pick the handcuffs lock on my hands.

I want to get to Stephen with the hopes that he could still be alive and that I could help him. I still could not believe that he was shot. He had to be okay. He just had to. I sighed and

leaned against the seat, trying to kick any negative thoughts out of my head.

The next time the door opened, I was dragged out of the seat with a gun pressed to my head. Stumbling through the hall with two men by my side, I had no idea where we were headed until we came out to an open field. They forced me to kneel with the barrel of their gun pressed against the back of my head.

I had started working on the handcuffs, but there was no way I could free myself now to fight three men who were all aimed and seemed ready to shoot.

“You know what? I don’t care about what you guys were doing there. I just got my orders, and... I don’t need you.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

He removed the safety from the gun. The click announced the beginning of the end for me.

I took a deep breath.

“I will put you out of your misery, Rebecca... Yes, I know your name. I got your name the same we found out you were after Halco. Your crew will soon find out who is helping us. And no, we don’t want the terrorists discovered by people like you.”

The pause preceding the gunshot lasted seconds, but it felt like years. There was no pain...there was no pain! I opened my eyes, realizing there were other gunshots apart from the one that was supposed to take me out.

Slowly, I looked around. The men, my captors, were all on the ground, just the way Stephen had been. I turned around and stared into the darkness from where the bullets had come, wondering if there was one for me.

“Bad eggs,” a familiar voice said before Mateo stepped into the light. He was wearing camouflage baggy shorts and a grey T-shirt. Craig and Archer followed, and then Scott appeared.

“Mateo,” I said thankfully, working the locks the rest of the way.

“Find the key and get her out of these,” Mateo told Archer.

But the handcuffs were already off of my hands. I hurried towards Mateo, embracing him, and holding him tight. He was the closest thing I had to family, minus Stephen.

“Away from Mystic Mansion so soon?” I asked.

“They were discovered there,” another voice said.

I could not believe it.

Stephen walked into the light. He still looked the same as the last time I saw him. His hair was a little ruffled, but there was no sign that he had been shot.

“Stephen?” I said, wondering if I was hallucinating and looking at the others to ensure they were seeing what I was seeing.

“He was taking care of some of the guards around the front,” Mateo said.

I left Mateo and walked with uncertainty to Stephen. There was a slight smile on his face. I began running and jumped on his body when I got to him. I pressed him so tight against me that he winced in pain.

“Oh my god, you are hurt,” I said, pulling back.

“It’s a flesh wound,” he replied.

“It was awful. I thought you were dead,” I cried in relief.

“Don’t ever do that to me again, or I will kick your ass!”

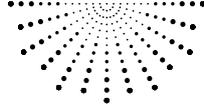
I went for his lips this time without thinking about the presence of the four other men.

When I was done, I turned to all the men wide-eyed, their mouths hanging open.

“Don’t even ask,” We both said.

Stephen leaned down and picked me up and kissed me again.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



STEPHEN

I had work to do. I grimaced at the pain as Rebecca tried to clean up the wound. I was lucky the agent did not return for another shot to ensure his work was done. If he had, I would have reached for my gun. He was probably conflicted about shooting me and had to make a quick getaway. I don't think shooting me was in the plans. But after it was done, he had to get rid of Rebecca, and he very nearly did with his gang of corrupt officers.

Mateo was sitting on the chair in our hotel room. Craig sat at the table. Scott and Archer were standing, looking out through the window. Tomorrow was Wednesday, and we had to go to the club for Eagle. He would have the information that we needed to get to the bottom of this. I no longer understood what was happening but knew who we were chasing now. Eagle. Although, I have never officially seen him. I had almost caught him and wouldn't let him get away this time. Ultimately, I wanted to get to the bottom of it and find the one in charge of this fiasco to end it.

I winced when Rebecca dabbed at my wound while I sat on the bathtub's edge.

"For God's sake, will you stop screaming?" Craig grumbled.

"I didn't scream," I said.

Rebecca taped me up so much that it was nearly plastered. She then bent towards me to kiss me.

“How long has this been going on?” Mateo asked disapprovingly while watching us.

“You don’t need to know,” I said through clenched teeth.

I had been shot at and nearly escaped death more times than I could count, all in the course of this mission, and I was not going to shy away from the fact that I was in love with Rebecca. Not even Mateo would make me do that.

“I told you we had to get rid of the girl,” Craig said. “She’s got Stephen’s mind twisted.”

“I don’t think it’s the girl,” Mateo said. “Stephen knows the nature of this kind of mission.”

“Yes, I do,” I said to Craig and Mateo. “We’ve found leads where you had no hope of finding any. We’ve chased each lead, consistently unraveling the thread till we got somewhere, and you two are still not grateful about that.”

“Your leads didn’t prevent Asher from being kidnapped,” Mateo said heatedly.

“Well, then you should have been more careful. What the hell were you doing in Mystic Mansion anyway? It’s like a house on a hill, calling everyone to it. Sooner or later, they would look.”

“He’s right,” Scott said. “We stayed in Mystic for far too long.”

“That does not change anything. The girl has to go.”

“I think the four of you should go so that we can complete our mission. You all will only impede our progress,” Rebecca said. I could see that she was tired of taking shit like I was.

“We saved your ass,” Craig said.

“No, actually, you didn’t,” I said. “I did.”

Mateo and Craig had nothing else to say. They glared at us before each stared at Scott, who shrugged.

“Wrap this shit up before the week runs out,” Mateo said. “Let’s go find somewhere to lay low.”

We watched them leave. Immediately the door closed after them. Rebecca turned to me, her eyes wild with desire.

“That was sexy!” she said.

I nodded, but she was on me, pushing me into the bed and getting on top of me. Her lips found mine, and her clothes were the first thing that left the bed. This was certainly not what I was expecting after the near-death experience. But perhaps it made sense to try to feel more alive when one had just been close to death. I grabbed her and kissed her back, holding her tightly.

The bullet wound did not do much to get in the way of what I was feeling. It was still painful but only a graze by my side. Nothing much.

She slid down and pulled my pants down with her. Although my briefs tried to keep my hardness in place, the bulge was still visible. She kissed it before moving back to my chest, playing around the pectorals before sucking my nipple.

A tremor accompanied the sensation as I tried to get used to her being in charge. Her tongue trailed down to my stomach and rested a bit among my abs before pulling my briefs below my waist. The hardness was turning into a dull pain. It was so hard it was throbbing.

She took it with her hand and gave it a good, slow rub. I groaned. It seemed to energize her. She moved faster, rubbing it harder. I grabbed the sheets of the bed, trying to find control. But before I could, I felt the warm enclave of her mouth and her lips around me. She stretched out her hand to get to me and touched my chest, inching closer to the left nipple.

She held it, gently running her hand over and over as she continued working wonders on my hardness with her mouth. It was as if she had prepared for this.

She took her mouth off me and crawled up my body, where she mounted me, slowly lowering her smooth wetness down my hard shaft and moving slowly in a circular motion. Her hips moved like a belly dancer. Her hands settled on my chest, and she continued driving, slowly increasing the tempo. I

began licking my lips and closing my eyes, feeling every sensation she created.

I opened my eyes to see her staring down at me, a smirk on her face. She had control, and she knew it. She could do whatever she wanted with me now. I felt her wetness all around the base of my shaft. She loved seeing me squirm in excitement like I've done to her so many times now. I let her do what she wanted to me.

"You're so wet," I whispered breathlessly.

She then began lifting her butt and slowly going up and down my length. She was letting me feel just how wet she was. She was driving me crazy I needed to finish and wanted nothing more than to finish in her. And here she was, starting it all over again- teasing me. She then grabbed the top of the headboard and began bouncing up and down. I could not keep the moans from escaping from my lips, and she couldn't either as she began to scream in pleasure. She knew how to do this.

I pulled her forward and held her close. Then I started pounding from under. My hands lifted her ass cheeks. She leaned forward and down into me, her full bosom on my face.

"Fuck me," she moaned.

Then I turned her over and brought her to the edge of the bed so that her backside was dangling over the bed and the floor. I knelt before the bed and sank into her wetness again with her legs on my shoulders.

I could not believe we had been close to death, yet here we were, enjoying life to the fullest. If Mateo happened to get into this room, he would be disgusted. But that only increased my hunger to explore Rebecca's body. She wanted me as much as I wanted her.

She was screaming now with each thrust that landed. I reduced the intensity and made each slide smoother, so she could feel my entire length as it slid along her wet walls. Her screams turned into a slow moaning sound. This was more effective than mindless plunging into her.

She gripped the bedsheets and rippled them as she tried to get control of herself. I reached for her breasts. I played with her nipples, going round and round until they were taut and stretched, hard as a rock. I wanted to go down and suck it but maintained my position while she moaned my name.

I could not imagine anything wrong happening to her. That was how far gone I was in this, how deeply I had fallen. Craig would be mad that I had lost myself for this girl, but I couldn't help it.

I was still inside her when the spasms started, and her movement triggered mine. Together we stretched out pleasure until we reached the limit and tumbled down from the height of it. I shivered uncontrollably before I began to fill her. As I leaned down to her, I whispered, "I love you."

Before she rolled over in bed, she stared at me curiously like I was something that she had not seen before, like she was seeing through me, really seeing me for the first time. Glazed over with passion, her eyes looked lost, and I was her compass. I smiled at her.

"I love you, too," she said back.

I went into the bathroom and got her a glass of water. She drank it all.

Looking at her, I decided she wouldn't be coming with me to meet Halco. I would feel safer knowing she was back here and not getting into trouble with me anymore. The last few times had been close, and I was sure I didn't want her risking her life anymore.

I laid back on the bed beside her and listened to her breathing while I planned my visit to Eagle.

My goal was to keep the device safe and go in at least to see Eagle's face.

But as I lay there, I still could not figure out how to save Asher. For all I knew, he could be dead. What bargaining chip would they want to use him for? Why would they kidnap him when they could have just quickly shot him?

The night wore on, and I decided to write a note and leave it for Rebecca. Hopefully, she would not come looking for me, spoiling my plan. Of course, she would be mad at me, but I hoped she would understand what I was doing it for.

I went to sit at the table to write something meaningful but could not take my eyes off her figure lying on the bed. I hoped I would be back here later to meet her. But rather than let anything happen to her, I would take the fall repeatedly.

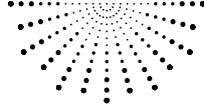
I finally managed to stare at the note and write something. I did not know if it made any sense, but being this may be the last time I could say something to her, I knew it needed to be done.

Then I started to get ready for my operation. Hopefully, after tonight with Eagle and his men dead and Asher rescued, there would be no more assassination attempts on our people, and Rebecca would be safe. Perhaps, we could even try to get an everyday life and be like ordinary people rather than face death all the time.

The hour hand inched closer to 9 PM. I would soon be out of the hotel. I walked over to the bed and planted a kiss on her face.

“I will see you soon, I love you,” I said.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



REBECCA

The morning came unannounced, like most things. One moment, the room was shrouded in darkness. The next moment, the light was everywhere, breaking through the blinds, filling the room. I felt like a vampire. I did not like how it forced my eyes to open. I rolled over, still feeling drowsy. I was not supposed to feel this way. I had done nothing except make love the day before...

The day before!

I quickly sprang from the bed, like an insect had stung me. I was not supposed to be asleep right now. I was supposed to be out there with Stephen, solving this pandora's box we opened.

"Steve?" I called.

It felt strange calling him that, but it also felt personal, which I liked. I wanted him to know I accepted everything his eyes told me the last time he was inside me. I wanted him. We were tired of not knowing what to call this. Was it passion or lust? No, it was love, and we have both felt it. I was going to bear his mark on my body. He already owned me. It was a risk, but everything worth doing in life is. I was ready to be a part of Stephen.

"Steve?" I called again, remembering the mission.

Where the hell was he?

There was no sound of water from the shower. There was no sign that he was in the room. I felt the side of his bed and

realized it was cold.

I got up from the bed and stared around the room slowly, praying against the thought growing inside me.

No, no, no, no...

I started muttering under my breath. I hoped he didn't do something stupid.

There was a piece of paper on the desk. I walked towards it, afraid of the worst. It was something that I had done at Mystic Mansion, but I had hoped that Stephen would be more sensible than I was and not try the same shit I did. I was convinced he would come looking for me when I did it. I did not realize the men would want me dead. It made what he was doing even more dangerous. If those men could want me dead, and they were at the bottom of this hierarchy, what would Eagle do to him when he calls his bluff?

Hey Becks,

It wasn't right to leave you here. But it was necessary. I have gone to look for Eagle. When you come to the bar, it will be too late. I can't stand to see you in any more danger. I almost lost you, and I can't risk that anymore. If I succeed, I will return to you and hope you see me the way I see you. If I don't return, I need to thank you for showing me love and letting me love you. You have made me a better man.

I love you,

Steve

It did not sound like anything Stephen would write, but I knew I had not seen half of him. His hard exterior could be the cover for things like this.

"Stephen," I muttered.

Why did he not understand? I signed up for this. I was not forced. I did not think I could lead any life that did not have some adventure in it. Now, he wanted to take that away from me.

I started pacing the room. I went to the closet and discovered that some of his bags were still there. He intends to

come back. The weapons, however, were gone. He left some of mine.

Going to the club now would be the most sensible thing, but it would also be predictable. I begin to hope that Eagle would not go near that club because Halco was just killed.

Why would he do this to me? He wanted to be the one that I would get worried sick over. He wanted me to stay back and die slowly while I thought of all the bad things that could happen to him. Was a fast death not better than this? What if he did not return?

Then it crossed my mind. I had to report this, but the men would get so angry at Stephen that they would probably let him go even if he was successful.

I walked to the window and stared out through it. He put me in a challenging position. I had no idea what to do.

“Shit!”

I changed into fresh clothes and headed downstairs to check out of the room. If I start to move around, it could help me think.

Stephen had the car, so I had to get a taxi to take me through town.

“Where?” the driver asked.

“Just drive.”

He kept driving until I saw a bench before a big cathedral.

“Stop here,” I said.

I paid him and got out. I went over to the bench. I needed to sit and find some clarity.

I watched a bird in flight settle on a nearby tree. As I tracked its movement, I wondered about following Stephen. I had never thought that I would have to do that. Then I remembered the bullets. As long as they were inside a gun, they could be activated. I could use them to track his location. But I was not sure he took any of my bullets with him.

Still, I pulled my tablet out of my bag. It was not worth it leaving anything to chance.

I tried to activate the tracker, but nothing came on.

“Damn,” I muttered again.

Stephen was lost to me. It was time to call this one in. My eyes were drawn to the high-rise buildings near the church. It was the perfect place for anyone to get assassinated. If someone were looking for me, they could easily nestle up in one of those buildings and have a clear line at me. I would be dead before I even realized what was happening.

I got up from the seat and left. There was no need to stay around here. The buildings were creating some fear and paranoia in me.

“Stephen, you dick,” I said as I walked away.

He could be anywhere now. He could now be caught, tied up, or even shot dead. I knew I had to tell Mateo and the rest of the team, but Stephen would want me to trust him. When I went off on my own, he had my back.

I found myself in front of a bar. I stared at the sign and walked inside. It was still morning, so only a few people were there.

“The strongest thing you have,” I said, sitting on the high stool close to the counter.

I wanted to grow the courage to do what I must do, even if it meant betraying this newfound love. In a way, calling this into the team would show Stephen, I did not trust him. He would be mad, but it was better than him being dead.

“Hey, little lady, a little early to be drinking, don’t you think?”

I did not need to turn. I knew whose voice that was. I did not see when he walked into the bar. We all had our moments of weaknesses. This was mine.

“Did you come with them?” I asked.

“No,” Scott replied. “They don’t drink in the morning.”

I gulped down a glass of vodka and felt the hot sting inside me. I turned to look at Scott. His eyes were on me, concerned. He had been the most reasonable, unbiased team member since all this started. Mateo and Craig were constantly bickering and always at each other's throats. And Archer was kind to me but would always side with his Uncle Mateo.

"Do you drink in the morning?"

"Not really. I came here because of something bothering me."

"Aren't you supposed to be lying low?"

"Not with Asher's life in danger."

"Oh."

"I got information from where I'm not supposed to get information. I know where Asher is being held."

"Where?"

"Downtown. In a storage facility."

"How did you know this? Who told you?"

He looked at me and shook his head.

"I can't tell you."



I ran out of the bar, searching for a cab, and saw a man jump out of his car. Leaving it next to the curb with his hazards on. He worked for a food delivery service and was waiting to pick up an order at the restaurant next door. I immediately ran to the car and drove off.

I heard the man screaming, "HEY!!!" as I looked back in the rear-view mirror at him standing there, confused with a bag of food in his hand.

I drove to the storage facility as the sun settled at the top of the sky. The thought of rescuing Asher from wherever he was held trumped my confusion about Scott. He had always

seemed like he'd be the least informed one. The others had people who were still loyal to them working with government agencies, people that owed them some favors. They were always calling to collect. Scott was quiet, and suddenly, he knew where Asher was being held. Stranger still, he could not tell Mateo or Craig. He did not ask questions about Stephen. It was as if he knew I was alone, and Stephen had run off on his own. Maybe he was preoccupied with thoughts and did not think about it.

I pulled into the parking lot of the facility and stopped. There was no one in sight, not even a guard. It looked like a perfect place to hide a kidnapped victim.

I stayed in the car for a while, watching for any unusual movements before I stepped out, holding my bag of tools with one hand and the gun with the other.

Slowly, I inched towards the storage number Scott had given me until I stood right before it. I took one more cautionary look around. There was nobody in sight.

It was locked, but that wasn't a problem for me. I moved fast, and the lock clicked out of place quickly. I pulled the gate up.

“Asher?”

Someone groaned inside.

I stepped in with my gun and found him lying on the floor, bound with hands and feet. There was tape over his mouth. His eyes went wild when he saw me.

I hurried towards him, quickly cutting the zip ties, and pulling the tape from his mouth. He took a deep gulp of air before he turned to me.

“Did anyone see you?” he asked.

I shook my head.

We moved quickly out of the unit and into the car.

“Where's Mateo, Craig, Archer?” and then he said with anger, “Where's Scott?”

“Lying low.”

“The bastard. Where’s Stephen?”

I drove out of the deserted parking lot and returned to the road. We were on the outskirts, and I could not wait to return where there were more people.

‘What bastard?’

“I need to speak to my dad quickly. Do you have a phone?”

“In the glove box in front of you. What’s this about?”

He got the phone and quickly dialed the number, placing it against his ear and ignoring me.

“Pick up the phone, dammit!” he growled.

“What’s going on?”

“You don’t need to know.”

“Oh, ok. Great way to say thank you for saving my life.”

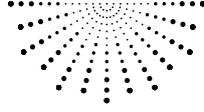
“How did you know I was there?”

“Scott told...”

“Scott? Asshole!”

My tablet chimed.

CHAPTER TWENTY



STEPHEN

I entered the crowded club. Loud music was blaring, and I could see a dance floor in the distance.

It might be difficult to find Eagle here.

I needed to figure out who he was without drawing attention to myself.

“What can I get for you?” a bartender asked.

“Something to lift my spirit,” I replied.

He chuckled. “That’s a new one.”

I thought it was a common phrase. It was pretty generic, something anyone of the thousands who had gone through here would have said at some point.

“Yeah, sure,” I replied, taking the offered drink.

He looked at me closely as if he was looking for something.

“You don’t come here much, do you?” he asked.

“No,” I replied. “But I’m looking for someone that comes here often. I could take care of you for some info,” I said, sliding over a \$100-dollar bill.

His face broke into a smile.

“Okay, who is it? Got a name, description?”

“Eagle,” I said.

The smile vanished from his face immediately. I noticed that behind me; some people were no longer just drinking and chatting amongst themselves. I felt their eyes on my back. They must have heard something over the noise of music.

“What?”

“Eagle, can you tell me where he is? We have some business.”

“I don’t want any trouble,” he said.

“Trouble? It’s business, not trouble, I assure you.”

I had to raise my voice above the music, and the sound carried to some of the tables.

“I have never heard of an Eagle, not here,” the bartender said.

Fear was visible on his face like a living thing breathing through him. I wanted to reach out and tap his shoulder and tell him he had nothing to be afraid of. But who was I kidding? I knew why he was scared. Eagle was something. Something evil.

“This man disturbing you?”

I had heard the heavy footsteps dragging towards the counter before a hoarse, deep bass voice spoke.

“I don’t want any trouble,” the bartender said.

Two men were standing beside me now. A third stood behind me. They were all huge and had heavy beards. It was as if they were all carefully selected. Knocking them down would require speed and surprise.

“That’s the problem I have with you, Kyle,” another of the men said. “You do want trouble. Or you wouldn’t have spoken or taken money from this man.”

I turned to the one who had just spoken. He had a scar just above his left bushy eyebrow. His lips were twisted in a sardonic smile as he looked from me to the bartender. While staring at him, I was still acutely aware of movement from my

back and beside me. I knew when the first hit would come. I would be ready.

“Perhaps, you can help me, good sir,” I told him. “I’m looking for Eagle.”

Again, silence. I saw rage building up in the man’s face.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“You don’t need to know,” I replied.

“Oh, I will know. It’s just how is it I don’t know yet.”

Here comes the first.

I moved quickly to the left, and a furious fist flew. The man before me lost his balance as I climbed into the counter. I slid on the counter, pulling his head towards it and banging it against the wood. The other man grabbed at my legs and missed. The silent one pulled out a knife and went stabbing the counter. I rolled over, falling on the other side of the bar with the bartender.

I quickly grabbed a bottle just as the stabber tried pulling his knife out of the wood. I smashed his head with the bottle, seeing him go down on wobbly knees. He was the smallest, and it looked like he was the weakest. The first man tried to hit me again. I drew back, pulled him over the counter, then got his hands and pinned him against the counter. My head connected with his in a headbutt before I left him. The other man came at me again, I grabbed another bottle smashing it against his head.

He grabbed his head, still on his feet, unlike the other two, blood trickling down his face. A couple of blows later, he was on the floor with his friends.

The sound of the safety being shifted in many guns greeted me at the end of my victorious fight. I sighed. This shouldn’t have surprised me after the scene I had just caused. There were over 10 barrels with their gaping hole of death facing me menacingly. Even the bartender had a gun pointed at me. There was no way out of this one.

People were still dancing at the other end of the club, some too high to realize or care what was happening there.

“Well, shit,” I muttered.

“People, people, that’s not how to treat a first timer,” someone said, walking through the crowd of guns pointed at my face. He stopped in front and stared at me, standing at the other side of the counter. He was tall, but not as tall as the men who had just fought me. Clean-shaven, his glassy green eyes made him look exotic, and his black suit made him look untouchable.

“I’m sorry. Shouldn’t you be standing over here? He motioned at the front of the counter.

“I was trying not to die,” I said.

He chuckled. “If you didn’t want to die, you shouldn’t have come here. We are phoenixes here. We die, and then we resurrect.”

The guns were still in my face. I wondered if he planned to force a resurrection out of me. For the umpteenth time, I was glad that I had gone alone. In this situation, I had no idea what to do. Rebecca would be in grave danger here with me.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“Part of ‘The Couple,’” I replied.

“Impossible. They’ve never been seen.”

“But you wanted to see me,” I answered, knowing I was taking a risk. I was counting on the fact that every criminal wanted to see legendary criminals.

“Not like this, beaten down. You have nowhere to go.”

“Don’t be so sure,” I said. “Besides, we have a business. I’m only here because your man, Halco, was compromised and killed.”

The man before me seemed to wince.

“I heard,” he said. “But who’s to say you didn’t do that?”

“And then come here to expose myself, right? We have a business. That’s all I’m interested in. I’d be damned if I let any stupid people ruin it.”

“You have the controller?” the man asked.

“I’m supposed to answer that with the guns pointed at me?” I asked.

The man sighed. “Put the guns down. The man wants to see me.”

“I thought Eagle would be a bit bigger,” I said.

“A bit bigger? What...is that a joke?”

“Joke? No?”

He burst out laughing.

“Okay, you passed the test. But wait. Where’s she?”

“One face isn’t enough for you?”

“Okay, okay. I will have to make do with just you. Come on.”

I got over the counter and followed him. The men followed behind, and we began to weave our way through the sweaty dancers. Some were swaying with reckless abandon. Some were staring at nothing, smiling to themselves.

We made our way up the stairs and into a lounge.

“Sit,” he said.

I sat down, counting the guards. Straight-faced bluffing would be the only way I make it out here.

“The device,” he said, sitting before me.

“What do you want it for?” I asked.

“We agreed, no question.”

“I’ve changed my mind.”

“You shouldn’t,” he quickly responded.

It was a warning that he would suspect something was wrong if I heeded it. “The Couple” were strong-willed and

erratic sometimes. It was evident in the kind of crimes they committed. But they were also calculative, making for fascinating people.

“I have,” I insisted. The bluffing had already begun. I stared right into his eyes. “What do you want it for?”

Eagle sighed. “To aim a bomb. Now where’s the device?”

“It’s not here with me,” I said.

I saw the man struggling to control his rage.

“Where is it?” he asked slowly, stressing every syllable.

“Somewhere safe. I will send it to you as soon as I get paid.”

Eagle chuckled. But this time, his chuckle did not have the lightheartedness he had forced into the earlier ones. It was menacing, foreboding, bearing evil as he looked around the place before he set his eyes on me.

“You think I will let you leave here?” he asked.

“That’s the idea. It’s why I left the device somewhere safe. You can never be too careful.”

“I see. We don’t trust each other. Is that it?”

“Maybe.”

“Without trust, it will be hard to get anything done, you know?”

“Let’s build trust. Send the money, and I will lead you to where I kept the device.”

“I don’t trust you. How do I even know you are who you say you are?”

Good question.

“It’s simple. You don’t get the device after payment. You shoot me.”

“How about...” he got up, and a gun appeared out of nowhere, the barrel breathing down on me. “...I shoot you now?”

“You don’t get the device.”

“I can make another.”

“You can’t. Each device is built specifically for one bomb. You’d have a useless bomb on your hands. Remind me again how much you got it for. You want to use it. And you need to use it soon. The window of your opportunity is closing. When will you have this chance again? Years later? Maybe never. You need me, Eagle.”

“It’s Macken; I’m not Eagle,” he puffed angrily. He brought the gun down and glared at me.

I had a smirk on my face as I looked at him. I did not want to, but I couldn’t help it. My bluffing had worked so well. But where the hell and who the hell is Eagle?

“I think I need more time with you,” Macken said.

“You don’t have time.”

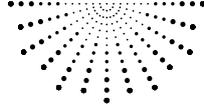
“Lock him up!”

What?

I was pulled off the couch and dragged towards the door, down a hallway, and finally down the stairs. Guns were on me, so there was nothing that I could do. A bullet took four seconds to reach a target, even when standing 10 feet away. How much faster would the bullets travel if guns were fired at closer range? I would be dead before I could do anything.

I was blindfolded and forced into a car after I was patted down, and my guns removed. They missed the little knife in my belt.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



REBECCA

I wanted to ask him what he meant about Scott, but the beeping from my tablet was too loud to ignore. I fished around in my bag for the tablet, pulled it out, and stared at it, confused.

“Yes, thank you, Stephen,” I smiled, said, realizing he put in one of my bullets in his gun so I could track him if needed.

“We need to find my dad,” Asher said.

“No,” I replied.

“What? Are you crazy? This is important.”

“My tracker just picked up Stephen. He’s pretty close. Something must have been blocking it earlier. He’s not where he said he would be.”

“That can wait. This...”

“What?”

I pulled over to the side of the road quite suddenly, stamping the brake so hard that Asher was thrown forward, and the seat belt had to pull him back.

“Are you crazy?” Asher asked.

“You tell me. What big news are you keeping a secret? And why is it more important than Stephen’s life?”

“Stephen is in danger?”

“Well, you are catching up. Very slowly, I must add.”

“How? Where?”

“Now, if you don’t interfere with my driving again, maybe we can find out where and how.”

“You don’t understand.”

I was about to shift the gear into drive, but I pushed it back to the park.

“Understand what?”

“We are all in danger. Scott knows. My Dad, Archer, and Craig, they all need to know.”

“What danger?”

Asher sighed. “They’ve targeted places. Mystic is among them, only because of my dad’s presence there. He had foiled their mission years ago when he was in the SEALs. So they came for him.”

“What has Scott got to do with all this?”

“He was working for them. He was the reason I was kidnapped.”

“What?”

“Yes. He gave them information on our locations. That is how they found me.”

“Shit.”

I could not believe it. Scott seemed like such a nice, thoughtful person. He was the only one who did not look at me like a threat. This kind, lean, muscular man was a mole? It was hard to believe. But it meant Stephen was in trouble now.

“Shit!”

I shifted the gear so fast that Asher did not have time to say anything before he realized we were on the road again. I was in a race against time. I had to find Stephen before these guys figured out who he was. If Scott was feeding information to these terrorists, then it was just as likely that they had the description of Stephen and mine’s faces. Did Stephen know? Was that why he sidelined me?

My feet were down on the car pedal as I weaved through traffic, following the tracker. I had to find him.

The tracker led us away from the city towards the outskirts, and I knew we were on the right track. Asher had been unable to say a word until I was forced to slow down with the thickening of traffic.

“Where the hell are you going?” Asher asked, breathless.

“Just hang on.”

The tracker pointed us onto the dirt road by the side of the highway. We were close. I took the turn, moving slowly, aware that there would probably be guards around, and I had to be extra careful if I wanted to leave here with Stephen.

Further up the dirt road, I stopped and pulled into the foliage. It would provide enough cover for whoever was not specifically looking for a car out here.

“Where are you going?” Asher asked again.

“To get Stephen out of that place. He’s with the terrorists.”

“How do you know?”

The look on my face showed how serious this was and that I would save Stephen.

“I hear you are a fighter, Asher. And you were top of your class with the SEALs,” I said. “I guess I will have to see.”

“See what?”

“See if you’re a hotshot military man Archer and your dad told me, or the douchebag Scott said you were. Or maybe, you would feel safer staying in the car. If you need a gun, check the glove compartment.”

Asher laughed, saying, “All right, little girl, show me what you’ve got.”

I was already moving without waiting for him. I began wading through the vegetation slowly and occasionally stopping to look for signs of life, any movement, a twig breaking underfoot, shuffling of leaves.

I slipped the safety off my pistol and kept moving, following the tracker's direction, hoping I was not too late. I could almost picture him lying on the ground, lifeless again. I had already experienced this scare before, and I was not wanting it to be true this time.

As I gazed out, I noticed a clearing with a cabin situated in the center. Two guards were stationed at the entrance. A man was lounging on a recliner nearby. At the same time, another was engaged in conversation with another standing man. I looked around and heard voices coming from inside the house. It seemed like most of the men were inside, probably armed.

I spotted a cage. There was the shadow of a person in the cell. I could not see clearly.

“So how do you plan on dealing with that?” someone asked.

I almost jumped out of my skin before I realized it was only Asher. He had the gun from the glove apartment and a smirk on his face.

“He's in that cage,” I said.

“We should get reinforcements,” he said.

“Yes. We should call Daddy and wait while they move out again. Then we can trace them all over again.”

Asher looked like he had been slapped in the face. He glared at me before he moved the safety.

“Damn, ok, smart ass. I will distract them,” he said. “Go for it.”

Before I could say another word, he was gone.

“Shit,” I cursed.

I didn't mean it. I feel embarrassed about my behavior. I allowed my insecurities to get the best of me and acted foolishly. I was envious of the attention that Mateo and Craig received from others. They were all interested in getting him home safely. But at the same time, they did not feel the same way I did about Stephen. We didn't have any time to wait.

A gunshot filled the air that had to be Asher, and the men sprang into action, returning fire. I made a beeline for the cage, watching for the men.

“Stephen?” I called.

He sprang up. It was him, all right. Thank God.

“Rebecca. What are you doing here?” He said with concern and relief all at once.

“Looks like you have had one hell of a day,” I said.

“Stand back.”

There was no time to work the lock. The men could turn back any moment when they realize Asher was a distraction.

I aimed at the lock and shot at it. Two shots burst it open, but it also attracted some of the men.

“Hey!” one yelled.

I aimed the gun at his head and silenced him before he drew attention to where we were. More men, however, had heard the shot. It started to dawn on them that they had been misled.

“Let’s go!” I yelled to Stephen.

He was out of the cage and running toward the vegetation in no time. I followed him, hearing shouts and gunshots behind us. We made it into the foliage, but there was still a long way to go before getting to the car. There was no sign of Asher. He should be racing towards the car with us.

We were close when we hid behind a tree to catch our breath from the bullets whisking past us from all directions.

“How did you get here?” Stephen asked.

“I have a car out there somewhere.”

“Only you?”

“No. I came with Asher.”

“Asher? What the hell is happening? Where did he come from?”

“Scott told me where to find him.”

More gunshots. I stuck my head around the tree and pumped a bullet into the chest of an overzealous attacker. He was pushed back by the bullet’s force and landed on the ground.

“Scott? How does he know?”

“Long story. We must get out of here first. Move, I’ll cover.”

I turned and started shooting again. The men were relentless. They shot back, and I barely had time to run past Stephen to the car. I got into the passenger seat and threw the key to Stephen. Luckily, he caught it.

He started the car and quickly pulled from the trees and bushes, bouncing along the dirt road toward the main road. Screams and chatter died behind us. They all chased after us but hadn’t planned on us having a vehicle.

“That was close,” I mumbled.

It was too close. A bullet had shaved my hair. I had seen one whisk past my face. We were lucky.

“Where is he?” Stephen asked.

“Who?”

“Asher.”

I could not believe it. I had forgotten him. In my happiness at rescuing Stephen, I had forgotten entirely our teammate.

Stephen pulled over to the side of the road.

“He’s still back there, isn’t he?”

I swallowed. We did not have a plan. Asher went off shooting before I could tell him what to do. Now he was trapped there with some of the world’s deadliest terrorists.

“We have to go get him. Do you have any more weapons in this car?”

I did. I pulled them out slowly from under the backseat.

“We have to call for reinforcements,” I said, grimacing at how much I sounded like Asher, realizing they would have been close by now if I had taken Asher’s advice.

“There is no time,” Stephen said.

De ja vu?

I refused to be too proud this time and got my phone out and dialed Mateo. He didn’t answer, so I left frantic messages and 911 texts. All the while, Stephen parked and was already trudging ahead on foot as if he had a date with death.

I ended the call quickly and followed him back into the woods. I had found him. I did not want him to get caught again. At the same time, we could not think of leaving Asher behind.

“Do you think they have him?” I asked.

Stephen looked worried but said nothing.

I knew what that meant. The chances of them letting Asher live would be slim because he had already escaped their captivity once.

We got to the clearing and found the men moving around, cleaning up the place after the fight. Some of them were carrying their dead colleagues. There was no sign of Asher.

Then, suddenly, someone opened the door to the house and dragged Asher out. There were three men on him. Thankfully, he did not look too beaten except for a small amount of blood on his face. But who knows what they had in store for him.

Macken stood in front, facing the woods, facing us. Stephen quickly filled me in on the man’s name and who he was.

“I could’ve killed you, Stephen, and Rebecca, but I wanted you two alive, so I played along to your charade. Do you hear me? I know you are out there.”

What?

Immediately, what Asher said about Scott came to my mind. We had all been sold out early in this mission.

“You think you look anything like ‘The Couple’?”

“How could he know that?” Stephen whispered to me.

I shook my head. It had to be Scott. I wondered what he could have promised Scott that would make him compromise the entire operation.

“Come on out before I kill him,” he said, clicking off the safety pin of his pistol and pressing it against Asher’s head.

Instinctively we moved forward slowly, my weapon still in my hand. The rest of Macken’s crew aimed their guns at us.

“Drop your weapon slowly. Then step forward,” Macken said.

We did as we were told, moving farther into the clearing. Macken had a crazy smile on his face.

“Yes. I wanted Mateo to show himself. But I need one of you. This one.”

He pushed his gun against Asher’s head and turned back to us. The smile had not left his face.

“You look surprised,” he said. “Surely, you should have known. I was always two steps ahead.”

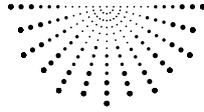
If I was surprised, I didn’t show it, but I suspected he just wanted to have his moment. He wanted to show us how he had beaten us at the game.

“I know everything. And since you will die, you should know the Eagle is still in Mystic. He has the device you claim to have, and he’s waiting for my instructions.”

“You bastard,” I muttered.

“You two are always spoiling things. Tie them up and take them somewhere far from here. Make it look like an accident.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



STEPHEN

I really should have waited for that backup.

I had my hands behind my back tied securely with a taut, strong rope that kept biting into my hands. I did not want to look at Rebecca's face now. I had failed her. This was the reason that I left that night.

We were loaded into the back of a pickup truck with two guards. The other two were in the cab of the truck.

"You left me," she said as if she was finding that out now. She must have been so busy trying to track me that she did not have time to think about it.

"Why did you do that?" She sounded angry and, at the same time, grateful.

"This," I said.

She looked flabbergasted, then frustrated.

"We go together," she said. "That was the agreement."

"It was too dangerous."

She sat silent for a minute and then asked,

"Why did you make fun of my car that first night?"

"What?"

"The first night. You said, 'Nice car.' Did you mean it, or were you being an asshole?"

"Really? This is something you want to ask me in possibly our last moments together?"

“I love my car. It’s special to me, and I always wondered what you meant by that.”

“I was being serious. I love your car, too. A Subaru XT was my first car. I drove all through high school until the turbo went out.”

“No kidding,” she laughed. “My turbo went out too.”

“I guess when I saw you, I was instantly drawn to you, and I was mad at my feelings. I saw your car and thought, ‘I’m supposed to be with this person.’”

“I thought you hated me until you didn’t, more recently,” she said, blushing.

“I loved you instantly; everything in my body wanted me to fight the feeling. I just wanted to protect you, and being mean was my way of pushing you away from this dangerous situation. I think I was protecting myself, too. I’ve always been a loner. I’ve never felt this way before.” He continued, “I’m so sorry, Rebecca. I love you, and this is not how I wanted things to go. I was picturing a real life for us just yesterday. But thank you. Thank you for pushing me into being someone I never knew I could be. I’ve liked myself with you.”

“Enough,” one of the guards at the back said.

“Do you want to be involved in this bombing?” I asked the guard. “Any idea why he’s doing this? Did Macken tell you, or he left you in the dark as usual?”

“Shut up.”

“You are like his dog. He sends you on errands and does the real business inside.”

I was expecting the blow, but it knocked all the air out of my lungs when it came. I grimaced, trying to control the pain.

“You will pay for this,” Rebecca said, and I knew she meant it.

The guard approached her menacingly.

“Oh yeah? How will you make me pay?”

“You should be quiet like your friend there,” I said, having recovered and gesturing to the quiet guard. To him, this looked like a job, just a job. He might as well be a cashier at a fast-food joint. He had a bored expression like he was thinking about another world, and we were not in it.

“Not another word from you, or I’ll start the killing now,” the guard said.

I tried to rotate my belt so the little knife holder could come around the back. It got stuck on the loop on my pants halfway around. I coughed and shifted, freeing it, before I pulled it around again.

There was a vacant look in Rebecca’s eyes. I wondered if she had given up or was waiting for a miracle.

I pulled the knife out behind me, away from the guards’ views, and straightened it out. Then I started cutting. Thankfully, the sound of the van’s engine was enough to cover for me to do what I was doing. I was sawing through, moving fast.

The van bounced after hitting a bump on the dirt road, and the knife tumbled out of my hand. The sound of a metal landing on the truck bed raised the guards’ heads. Their eyes laid on me, but there was nothing on my face. It remained blank. Same with Rebecca.

They looked away, and I began to search for the knife. I had to keep my face expressionless. Any little sign of stress or strain, they would know that I was up to something, and then it would be game over.

I found it! My heart almost leaped for joy. I jerked, my leg touching Rebecca, where we sat on the floor.

“Quit fooling around, you two. Do you want to die now, or I could...”

The guard turned to the quiet one, his eyes filled with mischief.

“Don’t even think about it,” the quiet one said. It was the first time that he had said anything.

The rope came loose, and I remained calm. I couldn't get on my feet in time to reach them with a little knife before they would get to their guns. It would be a botched escape plan. I had to wait until I was being lifted from the back of the truck.

I sat silently, trying not to expose what I had accomplished, waiting for the van to stop. It started to slow down.

It was time.

"Up you go," the first guard said, coming for me.

He used both hands to yank me up. I moved fast, swiping the little knife across his neck, severing the arteries. He staggered back, grabbed his neck, and immediately fell over the truck rail. Luckily the road was bumpy, and the truck was still moving. It didn't alarm the two in the front. The other guard was close to Rebecca and seemed lost for a few seconds. That was all it took. Before he could reach his gun, I stabbed the knife deep into his neck repeatedly.

I helped him fall quickly and as quietly as possible bleeding out in the truck.

"You could have told me," Rebecca said through clenched teeth as I helped cut the rope around her wrists with a bloody knife.

I had to be fast because the two guards at the front would soon come to a complete stop.

When they did, I was ready, firing with the gun I had taken from the one dead guard still in the truck. They fell to the ground with shock on their faces.

"You had a knife with you the whole time?" Rebecca asked.

"Yes, they missed it when they searched me."

We exited the truck bed and tried to understand our surroundings. We were still in the woods but further from the clearing where the terrorists had made their den.

"We have to go back," Rebecca said.

“What? Without backup?”

She was the one who talked about backup the first time. Right now, I believed she was right. There were too many of them. A sniper would give us a good cover.

“I already called Mateo,” she said.

We returned to the car and started towards the terrorists’ camp. There was only one thought in my mind: end this bullshit. I was tired of dealing with people like Macken, whose sinister plot would cost thousands of lives.

We drove slowly as the car bounded over rocks and uneven terrain. Without a backup, we could catch them by surprise, but there was only so much a surprise attack could do. If they regrouped and returned for us, it would be impossible to get away from them.

I counted over twenty men back at the camp as we scanned from the car hidden away. I wished we had a grenade. It would be the perfect thing that would have plunged them into confusion.

“You shouldn’t have left me,” Rebecca said.

Oh God, no, this is not the time.

“We were supposed to go through this together and come out at the end stronger.”

“I just wanted you safe,” I said.

“I’m not a child in need of protection!” she screamed, her eyes fierce and wild.

I reached for her across the seat, she did not understand what was happening until our lips were inches apart. Her eyes were filled with confusion, lust, desire, and love.

I took her lips on mine, unable to hold out, and kissed her so hard and long that she was panting for her when I was done. Her eyes had softened, but they had a careful expression in them. They pondered on my craziness, but they also loved it. Otherwise, I would have gotten a slap across the face by now.

“I love you, Rebecca. And yes, I know you can handle yourself, but I could not bear to see you go in there with me when I had no escape plan. I just wanted...”

She grabbed my head this time, pulled me close, and then quickly moved over the gear shift and console. She was sitting astride me, her lips to my lips, her hands on my head, her breath on my face. I sensed hunger and fear and happiness. This was definitely love we were both in.

Little did we know as we continued our passionate kissing, the car was rolling slowly down the hill towards the camp. Rebecca must've kicked the gear into neutral. My eyes were shut as she kissed me. It felt like we were transferring souls through our lips. I loved this girl so much and could not bear to lose her.

Boom!

There was smoke and heat. Someone had just attacked them.

An explosion rocked through the place, throwing us out of our love exchange. Rebecca quickly got off me and grabbed her gun. I pulled out my revolver and clicked off the safety pin as.

The car luckily, moved slowly and stopped hitting a tree.

“Mateo,” Rebecca mouthed.

Of course. He loved to make an entrance.

I hoped Asher was not in the right place and had been missed by Mateo's attack.

Sounds of gunfire continued. They were already at the clearing. The sound of more shootings let us know we were late to the party. Mateo would not leave any stone unturned until he made sure the people close to him were not in any more danger.

We jumped out of the car.

We moved fast yet stealthily through the foliage till we got to the edge of the clearing.

“Stop!”

It was Macken. And he has a gun pointed at Asher’s head. Some of his men were still standing, about 5 of them. Mateo, Craig, Archer and Scott had their back to us, their guns drawn and aimed at Macken and his men.

“You are an old, stupid sore that just won’t heal. How many times now have you tried to foil my plans?” Macken asked. He seemed angry this time. The crazy smile on his face was nowhere to be found.

“Maybe stop making stupid plans,” Mateo said.

“Drop your weapon, or he dies,” Macken said.

The four held their ground.

I motioned to Rebecca. We had to get around to the back of those men to even the chances for Mateo and the crew. None of them had seen us yet.

We slunk into the woods and began circling back, hoping Mateo would hold out long enough for us to get into position.

“And what happens after we drop our weapons?” Mateo asked.

“You will get merciful deaths,” Macken said. “You know too much.”

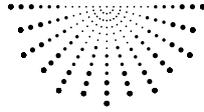
“What happens if we don’t?”

“You all die slowly and painfully, starting with him.” Macken pushed the gun against Asher’s head.

“I don’t like either of those options,” Mateo said.

I wondered if he had seen us. I was in position. I aimed at Macken’s hand. I wanted his head, but he could squeeze the trigger from the shock.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



REBECCA

I heard the gunshot before I saw anything as I was still trying to get into position. Macken's voice called louder with threats. Then a gun went off. He screamed and grabbed his hand as his pistol fell. An exchange of gunfire ensued, with his men trying to find out where we were hitting them from. I saw Craig go down. Then saw Mateo pump a man's chest full of bullets.

Before I knew what was happening, Macken was on the run. It contrasted sharply with the man I had seen threatening us not long ago. Turning and running with his tail between his legs seemed like the most cowardly thing to do, and I had never associated cowardice with the man. Madness, yes. Craze, certainly. But cowardice? He looked like a man who could swallow a grenade out of spite for his opponent. Before I could go after him, he was already crashing through the woods, leaving injured plants in his trail.

I went after him, the gunshots forming a background noise to this epic chase. He dashed out of the foliage and found the car we had left there.

"Shit," I muttered.

I shot off a round of bullets at the vehicle, but that did not stop him from backing away down the dirt road before he stopped and hurriedly swirled the car around to the front. I followed, trying to shoot at the tire, but no matter how many shots I took, none of them hit it.

"He's getting away!" a voice shouted beside me.

I turned to see Scott running after the car. He stopped at a point and tried to aim with his rifle.

“You!”

Someone slammed into Scott from behind. Fuck! The car was getting away. Scott and his attacker, who turned out to be Asher rolled around on the ground, with Asher trying to hit Scott while Scott struggled to defend himself. The rifle was lying on the ground. The car was speeding away up the road. It would soon get to the paved road, and from there, it would be, ‘So long Macken...and more terrorist plans loading.’

I picked up the rifle and aimed. I had not trained or used a rifle before. I found them clumsy, preferring instead to get up close and dirty.

I judged the speed of the moving car. Then I pulled the trigger. I missed it completely.

Beside me, the grunts from the men rolling around on the ground with Asher accusing Scott of being a betrayer did not help with my concentration. But I knew it was what I had to do. If Macken escapes, then there was no point of all of this or coming here in the first place.

I aimed again and fired. I thought I hit something. The car struggled forward before it swirled out of control. I had hit the tire. Macken was trying to move faster than he should. Macken began to lose control and veered right toward a tree. It hit the tree with some force. I heard the shattering of glass from the distance. I dropped the rifle and took out my handgun.

“Hey!” I yelled at the fighting men. *Where the fuck were the others?* “Hey! Stop fighting! Let’s get Macken!”

But I was racing towards the crash site alone. I saw Macken step out of the car, his steps unsteady as he tried to get to the road on foot. He must have been injured in the crash.

I fired a warning shot beside him.

“Stop!” I yelled.

But he did not stop. He continued moving. The next shot hit him in the thigh and pushed him forward before slamming him to the ground.

Before I got to him, he had turned to face the sky instead of lying face down. My pistol was out and aimed at him.

“Don’t go for your weapon,” I said. “Don’t even think about it.”

He chuckled as he lay there, blood dribbling from the bullet wound in his thigh. His face was no better. There were cuts and bruises. They made him look as evil as he sounded.

“You came too late,” he said. “You lost.”

“This is not a game, you sick freak. It has never been,” I said.

“You were just pawns, drawn into this. It would be best if you stayed away. I took you out of Mystic, at least. You won’t die. Just the town and a few other places.”

“Where’s Eagle?” I asked.

“You think I’ll tell you?”

The men were walking up to me now. Scott and Asher looked battered. Mateo, Archer and Craig stood between them. Stephen was in front.

“Where’s Eagle?” Stephen asked, walking over to Macken.

“He’s already halfway gone. You’ll never find him,” Macken said.

Stephen slipped his hand into his pocket and brought out his phone.

“Or maybe we can use this to find him,” Stephen said.

I saw the look of panic in Macken’s eyes when he saw the phone that Stephen now held in his hand.

Mateo and Craig came up beside him.

“You idiot,” Stephen said. “You called Eagle. You had no idea we would catch onto you, did you?”

It was too simple and easy that I suspected something was amiss.

“Fuck you,” Macken said.

Stephen stamped on his injured thigh, squeezing it until he could not hold back the scream.

It was strange but satisfying.

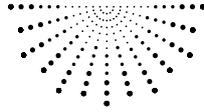
“I’m telling you; we have to shoot Scott!” Asher yelled.

“You have some explaining to do,” Mateo said, turning to Scott. “Did you sell us out?”

“They have Annalise,” was all Scott said.

I understood now.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



STEPHEN

We had to find Eagle, and we had to get to Annalise. Otherwise, this would all be in vain. We were in a van on our way to Mystic. There was no time to waste.

Rebecca's hands gripped mine tightly while the van shook occasionally.

"Where did you get this old thing?" I asked Mateo, who was in front of Craig, driving.

Asher was in the back with us, glaring at Scott, who paid him no mind. What Scott did, I didn't know what I would do for sure. But I think if Rebecca were kidnapped, I would sell everybody out. And I wasn't even married to her yet. Scott did come back for us. He led to Asher being freed.

"Leave the man alone," I told Asher.

He glared at me, then looked away towards the front.

I pulled Rebecca closer to me.

"Get a room," Asher groaned.

"Get a partner," I replied. Then I realized that might be insensitive to Scott. He didn't react if my comment did bother him.

Rebecca stayed against my body for a while before she decided that she had work to do. Macken's phone was encrypted, but I trusted her to break through every security measure.

She sat up, plugged the phone into her laptop, and started working. I watched her closely. The way she cocked her head to one side when she was working on something serious was beginning to grow on me. I wanted to reach out and pull stray hair away from her face, but I did no such thing. I just watched her while a smile formed on my face.

Someone scoffed. It was Asher. He had become unbearable since he learned that Scott was the creator of his ordeals. But he was also the reason for his escape.

“Mateo should have sent you away for a holiday somewhere away from here,” I said.

“But then you wouldn’t be with me as it would be an adult camp,” Asher retorted.

“Young adult camp,” I corrected. “A fancy name for kids.”

“Can you two quit squabbling?” Archer complained.

“Asher is terrible, man. Why is he not sitting up front somewhere between Daddy’s legs?”

“Hey,” Mateo shouted. “You better stop that.”

“People risked their lives to save him, and all he can think of is being a pain in the ass.”

“I wouldn’t have been there in the first place if you two were not such snails at your job.”

“A job that none of you knew where to start.”

“You decided romance was the answer instead of doing your damn job.”

“Rebecca should have left your ass to suffer in that storage unit.”

“Enough,” Scott yelled.

Then, he looked up at me.

“I know where they are,” he said.

“What?”

“I know where she is being held. I am just thinking about it now; the call she made. They let her talk to me.”

“What are you saying?” Craig asked from the front, turning around to look at us through the net partition.

“She said, ‘Do you remember when you proposed? I keep thinking of that night.’ She repeated that twice.”

“Does that mean anything to you?”

“Yes. Annalise will be at or near Cloud, the restaurant in upstate New York. It’s where I proposed to her.”

“Maybe they’ve moved her from there,” Rebecca said.

“You got something?” I asked, turning to Rebecca.

“It’s a text between Macken and Eagle. They are meeting at Mystic Mansion tomorrow.”

“You think they are at Mystic Mansion now?” I asked.

“We can’t risk it,” Scott said. “I have to go to the restaurant or near and see.”

I knew where this was heading and didn’t like it, but we had no choice.

“We have to split up,” Mateo said from the front.

We got into Mystic towards evening but knew we had no time to waste. If Eagle and his group were lying around Mystic Mansion, they wanted to start the blast there. But then there was Scott.

We found one of the safe houses we rarely used and pulled into the garage.

“Rebecca, Asher, you come with me to Mystic Mansion. Craig, you go with Scott and Stephen to find Annalise,” Mateo said. “And, Archer, I want you to set up shop here in case either team needs help.”

I wanted to protest the separation of Rebecca and me, but this was not the time. This was about Scott’s Annalise. And it was about all our safety. We could walk away from this, Rebecca and I, when this was done.

“We have to move tonight. They would not be expecting it,” Craig said, checking out his gun. He was always itching

for a fight. Now, he's got one.

I walked about the house aimlessly, looking at the drab furnishing and plain walls.

I walked towards the door immediately. I saw Rebecca near it.

"Hey," I said.

She turned and hugged me without a word. Usually, I walked into these missions with little fear and more excitement. But now, I had something to lose, and I was terrified that it would be her. I realized she felt the same way, and it did nothing to alleviate my fear.

I held her close, wondering how long we would have to stay away from each other.

"Maybe after this, we walk away, you and I," I said.

She chuckled. "Walk away? You don't look like you would walk away."

"You already know that about me?"

"You look like you live for these things."

"What if I'm just pretending? What if I want to seem tough?"

She moved back and held me at arm's length so that she could look up into my face. I smiled down at her.

"We will see. You stay safe out there, Steve."

"I will try. You too, Becks."

"You know me."

I felt Mateo's eyes on me from the other side of the room. He certainly didn't like what was going on between me and Rebecca. As the team's newest member, I was the one he trusted the least.

"Ugh, you two," Craig said as he brushed past us.

I turned to Scott.

"Are you sure about this?" I asked him.

“One hundred percent. I’m just realizing it now. I wish I would have realized it sooner.”

I wanted to ask why he changed his mind even though he knew Annalise might be in danger if her kidnappers found out he was back in with the crew and helping us.

It was late at night when we set off with the sedan parked in the house, primed and ready for any mission I decided to ask.

“What changed your mind, Scott?” I asked from the back seat.

Scott was in the passenger seat, and Craig was driving. So far, neither had spoken to the other, but I knew Craig would understand Scott’s situation.

Scott had loyalty to Mateo and Craig and was trying to defend it. Besides, Scott was a brother to him. They had fought together or something.

“It’s useless doing what they want,” Scott said. “If I help them, they may still have Annalise killed. If I don’t.... This is the only chance I’ve got.”

We didn’t have time. Otherwise, I would have found another way, especially with the tech guru, Rebecca, by my side.

We could see what was so dear to these people, take it, and demand Annalise’s release.

But the matter could get to the FBI or other security agencies, and safeguarding Annalise’s life would be the least of their worries.

After a couple of hours of driving, Scott said, “Stop here.”

“Here?” Craig asked.

“Yes.”

Craig pulled over to the shoulder of the road, dimming his lights before he did so.

“The restaurant is close,” Scott said. “We will have to go the rest of the way on foot.”

Craig groaned, but he came out of the car, carrying a bag where he loaded his weapons.

“You will have sniper duties,” Craig said, turning to me.

I nodded.

We always needed a sniper in situations like this. It could be the difference between making it out of here alive and ending up in a bloody spot on the ground.

We inched closer to the location. My chest was beating. I hoped Scott was right about this thing. I couldn't bear to see the disappointment on his face if we found the restaurant empty.

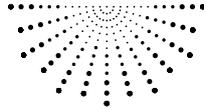
I searched for a high ground where I could see the entrance and helped myself settle in there.

Because we rushed off to the mission, there was no communication. I had to be more alert to eradicate the danger before it would get to them.

It looked like an abandoned place with overgrown bushes and vegetation. I couldn't believe this was where Scott and Annalise had made memories.

It didn't add up. No light could be found anywhere. Even the streetlamps looked shot out, which increased my suspicion that something might have gone amiss here.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



REBECCA

Mateo handed me a mic and earpiece before returning to the table to look at the guns he had spread out there. There were so many to choose from.

“Are all of these licensed?” I asked.

He sighed, “More or less.”

It was funny how we broke some parts of the law if needed. It was like trying to color between the lines but having some shadings slightly go outside.

“I can’t believe you let Scott back on the team,” Asher said, looking at Mateo.

I pretended I could no longer make use of my ears. This was a family matter.

“These are trying times, son,” Mateo said. “We need all the hands we can get.”

“How do we know he’s not lying?”

“I’ve been with Scott for almost ten years now. If he’s lying, I would know.”

I just hoped that Stephen was all right. I couldn’t wait for them to return, even though I had a potentially greater danger ahead of me.

“Grab a mic, Asher,” Mateo said.

He turned to me.

“So, Stephen? Really?”

I had been waiting for this reaction for so long, and now it was finally here.

“Is something wrong with him?”

“I just want to know that you are getting into this with your eyes open.”

“I do, and they are. Stephen may come off as misunderstood at times, but deep down, he is a good-hearted person.”

Mateo looked at Asher and shrugged. Mateo shot me a smile and a wink, knowing I used the line he gave me about Stephen that first day arriving.

We loaded our bags and made our way outside. The van we came here with was waiting for us in the garage. We all filed in, and Mateo started it.

“Now, you two, this is going to be very dangerous, and if it were up to me, you two would be sleeping in the house,” Mateo said fatherly. “But the reality is you could get murdered sleeping in there. These people have a great reach. Luckily, they don’t know about the tunnel we escaped from when they came for us.”

I began to think Mateo was trying to keep all his “kids” close. Asher and I are with him, and Archer, his nephew he raised, was back at the new safe house. I began to worry about Stephen.

“There’s a tunnel?” Asher asked. He was sitting up front with Mateo.

“Yes. One of the secrets of the Mystic Mansion that I had never revealed to anyone until recently. It saved our lives.”

“Hopefully, no one has discovered it.”

“They haven’t. I have a sensor that would have gone off.”

“Good,” I said. The surprise was always the best form of attack. They would not see us coming.

Instead of going through the front route, we stopped a little distance from the mansion. Mateo led us into the bushes, and

we started trudging, hoping to avoid being discovered in the woods before we could find the entry to the tunnel.

Mateo's face was focused entirely on this mission, and I knew he couldn't stop thinking of evicting the unlawful tenants from his house in the most painful way.

The wind whistled through the foliage, making us stop and listen to see if we had missed the sound of footsteps in all that noise. I hoped that if we missed any, they would also miss ours.

Asher moved like a predator, his heels barely touching the ground. He moved silently, too, as if he was some ghost. He might be a jerk, but I know he was an excellent SEAL.

After rescuing him from the storage facility, my perception of him as an annoying daddy's boy was starting to fade. Even though he wanted no part of this business and was only here to visit when all this happened, his natural instincts and previous training will make him a valuable asset, especially if we encounter hostility.

"It should be around here," Mateo said and stopped.

Again, the wind howled past.

Somehow, we were almost at the back of the property.

"Down," Asher said.

The alarm in his voice forced me to move before I could enquire what the matter was. Just along a path we had avoided were two armed men. They seemed like they were looking for something.

Every nerve in my body was on overdrive. I was not only thinking about my safety but also Stephen's safety. I shook my head. I had to be here, at this moment, to help him.

"How did they know we would be here?" I whispered, still not giving words to the fear in everybody's heart.

Someone knew. Someone must have told them we would enter from the back. Or was it simply an act of precaution on their part? How many were they? How many men could they spare to be in the back?

“I don’t think they know,” Mateo said stubbornly.

We waited for the two to get closer while being one with the foliage. We couldn’t just shoot them. That would tip the scales against us from the start and destroy our purpose of sneaking in from the back.

There might also be others in the woods with these ones. What did they hope to find here?

I was still thinking of what to do when Mateo and Asher moved swiftly. They grabbed the men before they could realize what was going on.

There was no struggle. Both enemies dropped to the ground slowly, their necks showing a thin, red line that got wider and wider.

Asher and Mateo quickly returned to hiding.

Assets, I thought.

“How did they know we would be here?” I asked again.

“Shh,” Mateo said.

I waited in silence. Mateo and Asher both seemed comfortable, and I understood why. This was their area of expertise. They were used to being praying mantises, blending in with the environment, and waiting for enemies to fall into their trap. I didn’t have that training, so I felt like the odd one out.

After some time, they left their hiding place, and we proceeded toward the tunnel opening. They stepped on plants and weeds in many other places, then walked on tiptoe to the tunnel opening.

It was covered by weeds and looked like a dead end. But Mateo pushed against the belly of the hole, dislodged the rock surrounding it, and we were inside. Dutifully, Asher moved the stone over the mouth of the tunnel again.

“Why didn’t you tell me about this?” Asher asked.

“I was going to,” Mateo retorted.

“When? When you are dead?”

“I’m not dying so fast.”

“You never know.”

“Are you planning my death?”

“Don’t you miss Mom?”

It seemed like Asher hit a sore spot. Stephen had told me that when Mateo was in the CIA, something went wrong on a mission, and his wife, Asher’s mom, was killed. Mateo discovered her in their bed, shot to death.

Both went mute as we started up the tunnel. I could hear a flowing stream somewhere above ground. The further we moved inward, the more disturbed I became. I was not claustrophobic, but it seemed my body was starting to be. The tunnel had many diversions.

“Where does that lead?” I asked, pointing to the right.

“It’s a dead-end,” Mateo replied.

“So why put it there?”

Almost immediately, the importance of misleading turns dawned on me. Even if this tunnel was mistakenly discovered and we were chased into it. The deceptive bends would help in reducing the number of pursuers.

But that also meant Mateo had to know precisely where the right turns were; otherwise, it would become a nightmare.

We heard footsteps and froze.

I slowly clicked the safety off my pistol. The other two didn’t do the same. Instead, Asher produced a glinting knife, and Mateo watched the turn ahead with more focus.

We listened for some time, and nothing happened.

Slowly, we started forward again, alert and ready for a fight.

We made the turn and froze. There was something there in the semi-dark dampness of the tunnel.

“Shoo,” Mateo said.

The cat looked up at us, its eyes shining through the dark. Then, it turned and slipped away.

“A damn cat,” Asher mumbled.

My heartbeat was having trouble stabilizing. I began second-guessing myself. Maybe I wasn't made for this.

It would have been better to be in a house somewhere safe, hacking through firewalls and taking control of home cameras rather than this. This was torture. With Stephen, it seemed like a romantic adventure.

With these two, it was the difference between life and death.

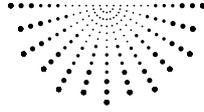
We continued up the tunnel till we got to a ladder and paused. This was it. If this place had been discovered, the door would have been locked, or worse, they would be waiting for us there.

Mateo turned to look at the both of us to be sure we were prepared for what came next, then he went up the ladder and slowly pushed the latch on top.

At first, it didn't move. I stared down the tunnel, afraid that somehow, we had been discovered and the men would start running after us. I thought I heard some noise coming down from the mouth of the tunnel, but I was not sure.

Mateo pushed again, and this time the latch opened.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



“**W**here the hell is everyone?” Craig asked as he and Scott headed toward the spot.

I hoped this would not be the last time I saw Craig. He was like an uncle to me among the team members, saying he wished I had met his daughter before she met Mateo.

I adjusted myself where I was and waited. After a while, I got up from where I had set up my position. I decided I needed to move my location. Somewhere that seemed to be more protected by vegetation. I moved over and settled among the plants, and God knows what other creatures were there. I could feel crawling sensations on my skin.

I watched as they made their way to the restaurant entrance. Scott pulled the door open, and they were inside.

I aimed the rifle at the restaurant’s window and squinted my eyes to see better.

Suddenly, the blinds were drawn as if someone knew that I was outside, looking in.

“Dammit,” I muttered under my breath. There was no way to warn them of the people inside that I was sure were there.

I was caught between abandoning my post and running down there or sitting tight to help in any way I could. It would not make sense if all three of us were captured or killed.

I scanned through the windows, poking for just one opening that might give me a clue about what was happening inside. But there was no opening.

They were on their own in there.

That was when I realized I could still send text messages. I quickly took out my phone and typed fast.

Trouble. Blinds closed. Others might be in there.

I sent it to Craig and returned to my gun. If other people were in there, they were doing an excellent job of hiding.

After waiting five minutes, I noticed movement around the first spot I had chosen. I stared long and hard, but the action seemed to be one with the greenery surrounding the outside of the restaurant.

Slowly, whomever it was inched forward until they thought they had gotten to me. He stopped and looked around when he discovered I was no longer there.

He turned to flee, seeing that he had been made, but I fired a warning shot close to where he was standing. Still, I didn't leave my hiding place.

"Stay where you are," I yelled, looking around for signs of an ambush.

There was none.

I proceeded to go where the man stood. It was not hard to recognize Scott's physique. I had not wanted to believe it, not after what he had put us through the first time.

"Scott?" I called.

"You don't have to see this," he said.

"Turn around."

"No."

I fired a shot again. This time it was closer to Scott's leg.

"You can't shoot me, Stephen," he said.

I thought of shooting him to let him know I could do whatever I wanted, but I refrained from it.

"Turn around, Scott. What's happening here? Where's Craig?"

“You should put the gun down and leave while you can.”

“The fuck I am! What’s happening here?”

I noticed that he was inching closer. I had the rifle still locked on him, but I didn’t want to have to shoot him.

“Stay where you are,” I said.

“You have the chance to get out of here. Go live your life with Rebecca. Go somewhere far away. The rest of us are done.”

He was close now, so he tried to grab the gun. I swung it out of his way, but that did not stop him from lodging his body against me, hitting me with his shoulder. I stumbled backward and almost fell, but I held onto the gun.

I saw his fist swing but was not in time to stop the blow from catching me in the face. This time, I fell to the ground, and the sniper rifle fell beside me.

“There’s nothing here, kid,” he said. “I’m trying to save mine. I suggest you do the same.”

He bent to pick up the rifle, a big mistake. I swung at his legs with mine while I was still on the ground, got him good on the ankle, and flung him heavily to the ground. Then, I jumped up from the ground and dusted myself.

“You’ve betrayed us? Again!”

I didn’t want to believe it, but it was a fact. Scott didn’t get any cryptic message from Annalise that she was there. He just wanted to lead us into a trap.

“What’s the play here?” I asked him. “They pick us up and give you Annalise.”

“They just want Craig and Mateo,” Scott groaned, picking himself up.

His eyes went to the rifle at the same time my eyes went to it. He was close, but I could seriously maim him if the gun were the first thing that he went for.

“You can walk away from all of this.”

Shit. It meant that Rebecca was in trouble because she was with Mateo. This was fucked up on so many levels.

I decided that I was done playing games with Scott. Before he could reach for the rifle, I aimed my pistol at his head.

“What are you going to do? Shoot me?”

“Asher would be eternally grateful, considering you want his father murdered.”

“I don’t want his dad murdered. I want Annalise back.”

“I’m sorry, Scott. You leave me no choice.”

“What?”

I shot him once in the leg and watched him collapse on the ground with a groan, shaking his fist.

“Fuck you, son of a bitch!” he yelled.

“I want to help you get Annalise back, but you’re not making things easy. I’ll have to tell the team.”

I frisked him with my gun pointed at his face until satisfied that he had no hidden weapon. Then I hurried down towards the trap.

I pushed open the door, and the first thing that greeted me was the image of Craig tied to a seat. He had been knocked out too.

I shook him awake.

“We have to go,” I said.

I could hear the distant sounds of approaching cars, and I would bet an arm and a leg that they were not ours.

We were back in the bushes when the cars arrived. Craig was on the phone, trying to get through to Mateo. When that didn’t work, he texted.

“Let’s get out of here,” Craig said.

“Wait,” I said.

There were three cars in all, and they all were filled with men armed to the teeth. I counted twelve men in all.

If we still had Scott on our side, we could attempt to take on these men, but now, it was worrisome.

I then saw someone in the backseat. Could it be Annalise? As if they wanted to satisfy my curiosity, one of the men dragged her out of the car.

“Where’s Scott?” Craig suddenly asked. “You said you had him.”

“Yes. But then I went to get you.”

“Shit.”

“We have her!” one of the men yelled.

They were waiting for Scott to appear. I held my breath. Craig took his phone out of his pocket and stared at it.

“They got the message,” he said, turning to me.

Good. We didn’t need to rush to Mystic Mansion to save our people. They knew they were in danger now and would act accordingly.

“Scott?” one of the men yelled again.

They yanked Annalise forward. She looked like she hadn’t bathed in weeks. Her hair was tangled, and her tank top and pants were filthy. I felt terrible for her.

“Let’s leave,” Craig said.

I wanted to, but I couldn’t. If Rebecca got kidnapped, I would do anything to ensure she was back in my arms again.

And if I couldn’t do it, I would hope one of my boys would.

“No,” I said.

Maybe this was redemption for Scott.

I grabbed my rifle. I looked at Craig, and he nodded in agreement.

Craig fired off two gunshots at the men, causing a commotion.

I then began to follow with my own fire. The men tried to run away, but it was futile. It was easy to pick them off, one by one. In no time, bodies were littered on the ground.

I saw Scott limping towards Annalise. It was a terrible mistake to make while the fight continued. Annalise was looking around, scared.

Craig was dashing toward the restaurant, tired of shooting from the ridge.

Two men dashed into one of the cars and swirled so fast that I could hardly follow. I focused on the fuel tank just as the vehicle cleared the parking lot. I pulled the trigger.

The first bullet slammed into the side of the car. I cursed and aimed again. The second hit the spot.

“Yes,” I muttered.

I turned back to the parking lot only to see that one of the men was holding Annalise at gunpoint.

I couldn't hear him, but Scott was in front of him, and I was sure he wanted Scott to drop his weapon. Scott could barely stand.

Craig stood by his side.

I aimed for his head. I had wasted enough time. When I pulled the trigger, I panicked. I wasn't sure that I had aimed well. Annalise could have the bullet lodged in her head instead.

On impact, the captive and hostage fell apart and landed on the ground. I watched them intently.

I breathed in relief again when I saw the red spread on the hostile's face.

I hurried down towards the parking lot until I reached where the men were. Craig looked at Annalise and Scott as Annalise hurried over to the injured Scott.

“You know you can't come back with us, right?” Craig asked.

He seemed to understand the motives behind Scott's actions as I did.

Scott nodded. Annalise looked from Scott to us and back at us, confused.

"What is it?" she asked. "I knew you guys would come for me. What's the matter?"

"He should tell you himself," Craig said.

I nodded at Annalise.

I was sure Annalise would see him as her savior, the one who was ready to give up his life and sacrifice everyone else's for hers. To her, he would be her legend, her hero.

To us, unfortunately, he would be the snitch, the betrayer.

We helped Scott and Annalise into one of the assailant's cars.

"You can drive?" Craig asked, looking at Annalise.

She nodded.

"Good. Take him home."

Dawn was breaking.

We walked away from the couple back to our car and headed towards the safe house.

Hopefully, the other team was back from Mystic Mansion. But if they were not. Then we would have to look for them.

"Why did you let him go?" I asked.

Craig remained quiet for a while before he turned to look at me.

"Why do you think we do what we do?"

"For money? Thrills?" I responded.

"That's so pedestrian."

"Well, that's why I'm in this."

"I know you can't be telling the truth," Craig laughed.

“What? Do you want the generic answer? To make the world a better place?”

“To protect those closest to us, to provide for them,” Craig said. “Granted, the thrill is there, and we get hooked on it as a coping mechanism, but that is all. We are doing this to protect those closest to us.”

I knew what he was saying. I had been thinking about it anyway.

Scott was only trying to protect Annalise, but that meant we could no longer trust him. He would give us all up in a blink of an eye to save her.

Given the same situation Mateo, Craig, Archer, and I would have done the same for our loved ones.

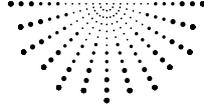
This is a career where you shouldn't have loved ones.

But what kind of life would this be without love? I had gone years without any attachment like Rebecca.

However, the past few weeks with her have given my life meaning. I'm hooked. I could never be who I was again.

I wondered how we would tell the others when we found them at the safe house. I had to stand up for Scott.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



REBECCA

There was no one in the room when we got inside. Not a sound in the mansion.

The room we found ourselves in was a storage room. Filled with odds and ends. Boxes of old toys, photos, and camping supplies. There was also a giant statue that was once in the front drive or the back garden area.

Mateo walked towards the door, placed his ear against it, and listened.

Then he brought out his knife. Asher also brought out his. I preferred using my gun. I screwed on a silencer to the mouth of my pistol, cursing myself for not remembering it earlier.

I would have been able to help when Mateo and Asher were jumping about, ninja-style, getting rid of the men outside.

Mateo motioned that he was going to open the door, so we took up our positions and got ready. All I could think about was getting back from here alive so I could get into the arms of the one that I loved.

Suddenly, Mateo stopped and took his phone from his pocket. He clicked on the screen.

“Holy shit,” he muttered before he slipped it back in.

“What?” I asked. I wanted to know.

“Nothing,” Mateo said.

“Well, I’m not leaving here until you tell me what is wrong.”

Mateo shook his head in desperation. Asher looked from me to him.

“Well, you have to tell us. Is someone waiting on the other side?” Asher asked.

“They were ambushed at the restaurant,” Mateo said.

“What?”

“That means they probably know we’re here,” Asher said.

“We can just look around. See if they are still here,” Mateo said.

“I think we should leave,” I said.

“I knew it. Scott did this,” Asher said, gritting his teeth. “I told you we should put a bullet in his head, but no one would listen to me.”

BOOM!

The building shook, throwing us all to the ground. I found myself on the other side of the room. I struggled to my feet and heard the sound of cement breaking. I looked up to see the life-sized statue losing its big head. Asher was lying just under it.

Without thinking, I aimed with the gun still in my hand and pulled the trigger. The head exploded into particles of sand and stone, raining down on Asher before he got to his feet.

The building was unstable now.

“Move! Move! To the tunnel!” Mateo screamed, getting to his feet.

I didn’t need any more prodding. I turned to the manhole, but I couldn’t see it. The hole we had emerged from had disappeared and was one with the floor.

Mateo dashed past me, pushing a button on the wall behind a shelf. A part of the floor came up, revealing another exit and a small staircase led down to the tunnel.

“Go!” Mateo screamed.

Asher was the first down. I tried standing, but the building shook so violently I had to get down on all fours and crawl towards the spot. Mateo followed.

We then started a mad race to the mouth of the tunnel.

The sound of explosions behind us was loud and frightening. The whole building was coming down.

They planned to get us into the mansion and ensure none of us made it out.

My heart was pounding out of my chest as I ran.

Parts of the tunnel were coming down in front and behind us. As we ran, we tried to avoid being hit by debris. A huge rock just missed my head.

Mateo was about to turn right when part of the tunnel crumbled to the ground. He had to screech to a sharp halt to avoid being buried under the debris.

“Fuck!” he yelled.

There was no time. Mateo turned to the left, and we followed him without knowing our destination.

He ran faster. He seemed to know another route through this place. The faster we ran, the faster the tunnel came down behind us. My mind was racing more quickly than my legs.

Finally, I saw Mateo’s silhouette against the light at the end of the tunnel. Mateo slipped through and ran faster ahead. I could hear the tunnel crumbling down. I wonder if Asher was okay behind me.

I jumped out almost at the same time the tunnel collapsed behind me. My heart sank as I turned around to see if Asher had made it out.

He was on the ground just beside me.

“Come on,” Mateo said.

We moved further away from the tunnel toward and into the woods. From there, we watched Mystic Mansion

completely collapse. It was gone. It was all gone.

On the way home, we couldn't speak to each other. We had been fortunate to survive. Mateo had lost his home, and the criminals that still wanted our lives were still at large.

"Scott knows about this," Asher said. He was still fuming. He would have his dad's friend's head on a spike if up to him.

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Maybe? He almost got us killed. You've lost your house. And we still have no lead on these people."

"Let's get somewhere safe first."

In the backseat, I said nothing. I had been in tricky situations before, but never one that would have had me killed in this way.

I couldn't imagine how close to death I had just been. The tunnel would have been our graves. And what if there was no secret tunnel? We would have died inside the mansion, crushed.

"Are you all right back there, Rebecca?" Mateo asked.

"I'm fine," I replied.

Asher turned to look at me before he turned back to watch the road with Mateo.

I pushed the negative thoughts out of my head and tried to focus on being grateful that I was alive and would soon be meeting Stephen. I hoped he was okay.

"Have you tried calling the others?" I asked.

"Are you worried about Stephen? You shouldn't be," Asher said.

"Have you tried calling Craig?" I asked, facing Mateo and ignoring Asher.

"They are back at the safe house."

I could breathe freely now. The only thing that I needed to be worried about here was myself.

I maintained my silence as the car pushed towards the safe house. I kept looking and was relieved that no one was following us.

Whatever this was, the terrorists were confident that we were all dead in the mansion.

I could not wait to get back to the safe house, to Stephen.

Mateo's phone started ringing. He answered the call with his eyes still on the road.

"Mateo?" a voice came from the other end.

"Hello, who's this?"

"Special Agent Parker, FBI. Gray directed me to you."

"Gray? What could the FBI possibly want from me?"

The call was on speaker.

"You were meddling with a federal investigation."

"Fuck. This again? I'm a licensed private investigator."

"I know all that, but you went far over your head. Is this line secured?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Where can I see you in Mystic?"

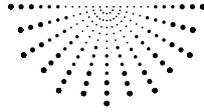
"I'll let you know when I'm settled in."

"This is a matter of national security. The threat starts from your mansion. Then the whole town. Mystic is under threat, and I think you know why."

"No, I don't know why. All I know is that my people and I have been under attack, and it seems the CIA is also involved in bringing us down."

"We have to meet."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



REBECCA

We finally got to the safe house.

We had to wait for a while at the gate before it was opened. The other group had faced something that had shaken them up and made them more security conscious.

“Hey,” Stephen said once he saw me.

I didn’t wait a moment more before I found my way into his arms. We held each other tight. I felt eyes boring into our backs.

They would never understand. I was finding it difficult to understand as well. We were strangers not long ago, strangers competing with ourselves to get in good with the rest of the group. Now we cared more about each other than we did about the group.

“Are you all right?” Stephen asked, pulling away from the hug.

His eyes pulled me in. In response, I went for his lips. We were still standing on the front steps of the gated house. The others had gone inside without us.

“I’m fine,” I replied. “Are you?”

“I’m all right,” he said.

He led me into the house. Asher was inside, still complaining about Scott, but this time to Archer.

Craig and Mateo seemed to be discussing something on their own.

“We have to find him,” Asher said.

“Why?” Archer replied.

“Why? He almost had us all killed. He had me kidnapped!”

The men shook their heads. They seemed like they were in shock. I turned to Stephen and whispered.

“What happened?”

“I will tell you later.”

I couldn't wait to be alone with Stephen. I wanted to take him to another room now. I wanted to feel the touch of his hands on my body. I just wanted to be held by the man I loved.

“He doesn't know where these terrorists are. Nobody knows, okay?” Archer explained.

“Well, that's messed up. But we can have him punished for fucking us over.”

“Son,” Mateo said coldly. “It seems you don't know who you are talking about.”

“Come,” Stephen said and dragged me along to a room. He shut the door and turned the lock before he walked to the bed, holding my hand.

I sat astride him on the bed, looking at his beautiful brown eyes.

“We were ambushed,” he said. “Scott...”

“Shhh.” With my index finger, I stopped him from speaking. Something else was on my mind now.

I pushed him down on the bed and positioned myself on him.

“Fuck, that's hot,” he said.

I bent forward until I was close to his lips. Then I kissed him deeply, running my hands through his hair. I was so hungry, starved, and close to death that I was determined to enjoy everything.

“I missed you,” I murmured.

“I missed you, too.”

His clothes were annoyingly in the way, so I started to get rid of them, pulling his shirt over his head and pulling my top off, so our bodies could meet and feel each other’s warmth.

I kissed him again before I came up to get rid of my bra. He feasted on my nipples as soon as the bra was gone, pulling me down and keeping me in place while he encircled one with his lips, then the other.

I pushed him down and slid off him to remove his pants and mine. Then I got back on top. I had missed him so much and wanted him to see and know that.

His body felt warm and rugged. I ran my hands along his biceps as he pulled me up by my waist. They bulged when he exerted pressure. My hands went to his shoulder. But before I could continue savoring his body, he trapped my nipple again with his lips.

I moaned as he sucked. The feeling of his hardness nestling against my warmth made it even more impossible to resist the urge to sigh. I grabbed his head as he continued sucking and nibbling. He lifted me and guided his hardness inside of me.

I raised my hips to let him enter, feeling the massive tip against the wetness. God! How I’ve missed this! Then, I slowly slid down on his hardness, feeling his cock filling every inch of my cave.

“Damn, you are so wet. I love it,” Stephen groaned when he had the time to set my nipple free.

I could feel his light bite marks on my right nipple. He moved over to the left, grabbing my butt with his palms as he pushed his inches deeper into me.

“Fuck, you will kill me,” I moaned.

The feeling intensified. Stephen didn’t help when he started moving his hips up and down rhythmically. It was like he was playing a song that I had to dance along to. I had no choice. The sensations soon carried me away.

I pushed his upper body down again, away from my boobs, rested my hands on his chest, and started riding him. I started slowly, trying to get in sync with the sensations threatening to drown me. The more I rode, the more it seemed like I was getting in control. The one sharp sense would knock me off my perch, causing me to feel a tremor down my spine.

“You like it?” I murmured, reaching for his nipples and kneading them between my fingers.

He shivered. God, I loved him. I loved this. I loved that I was having that effect on him. I loved that he was under me and could do what I wanted with him.

“Yes,” he groaned.

I cupped his big pectoral as they popped and continued my ride. I was making it fast as I watched the expression on his face.

It came fast and suddenly—the tightening of a knot around my abdomen and the resultant release. I shook uncontrollably on top of him, unable to stay in control.

More tremors shook me. I didn’t know I was this close to the climax already. I enjoyed every second and didn’t want it to stop.

He firmly held my hips and legs on him as I climaxed.

Stephen pushed me to the side and spooned me, so his body covered me entirely from behind. He wasn’t done. He slid in from behind as we lay on our left side.

His hand slid forward till he cupped my boob and squeezed. At the same time, he started his thrust. My scream turned into a moan. I couldn’t contain it.

He massaged my boob with one hand. With the other, he rubbed my clit gently.

“You are killing me,” I murmured.

He pulled my hair slightly in response. It was hot. It felt sinful and sexy and caused all the pores in my body to bleed pleasure.

His hand went to my neck. His big palm encircled my neck. He pressed gently. He continued to thrust while holding my neck. He was doing his best not to make a sound, but his moans started getting faster and louder.

I was ultimately out of breath when I got to the second climax. Stephen released immediately as the spasms overtook me.

I felt his warm cum inside me.

Ten minutes after, we were tucked in bed. I loved his scent. So, I snuggled closer.

“You smell nice,” I said.

“Want to eat me?”

“You, insatiable dog,” I said.

He chuckled.

We stayed that way for a while before he spoke again.

“It was Scott. He sold us out.”

I didn't speak for a while as I let the impact of what he had said settle in.

“Again?”

“Yes. I don't have the full story of it. We didn't ask. We just let Scott go.”

“You let him go?”

I turned around to look into his face.

“Do you realize he could lead them straight to this place?”

“Craig wouldn't have agreed if it thought that would be an issue.”

I tried to get up from the bed, but he pulled me back.

“Listen. He got Annalise back. She was the one he did all of this for. He was ready to sell all of us out to get her back.”

I laid back down. It was making sense to me, the hush-hush of everything. Of course, Scott couldn't come back to

join us again, not after what he had done. But it made me wonder if Stephen would do the same for me.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he said. “Don’t ask.”

I turned around on the bed to stare right into his face.

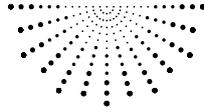
“So, you wouldn’t do the same for me?”

A loud bang on the door saved him from the question.

“We have to leave! Now!”

It was Mateo. The urgency in his voice stirred me into action.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



STEPHEN

I pulled Rebecca up with me as I jumped out of bed. We dashed around for our clothes. I knew that voice. That voice meant there was trouble and no time to stand around asking what the problem was. We had to get away from here.

We took what little belongings we could pack into two bags, grabbed a third bag for some of our gear, and I pushed the door open.

The others were already rushing towards the door. I didn't ask questions. I followed them, dragging Rebecca along. We got to the garage and filed into the van.

Mateo started the van and sped out through the automated gates. We had our guns ready, prepared to shoot whatever we met outside those gates. Mateo had not told anyone what was wrong, but we knew. We knew that we had been made.

Asher would be talking about this for days.

As we sped through the gates, we heard the explosion. Mateo stepped down on the gas pedal. I was at the back with Rebecca and Asher. Archer was in front of us, and Craig was in front of Mateo.

I shivered at the sound of the explosion and pulled Rebecca closer.

"Dammit. What was that?" Craig asked.

"Gray had someone call me," Mateo said.

"Gray?"

“Yes. We have been made. Fucked over by the government.”

“How the hell did this happen?” Craig asked.

“Scott. It must be Scott!” Asher yelled from the backseat. “I told you guys we had to get rid of him.”

I saw the headlamps behind us a few seconds later than Mateo saw them.

“Shit!” Mateo cursed.

It was early morning, and we should still be sleeping after last night’s failed mission. But no, these bastards wanted to be the end of us.

“They are definitely following us,” Craig said, stating the obvious.

There were two cars behind us. The road was still empty as Mystic was that typical sleepy town that had not awakened. A long stretch of road lay before us, and Mateo made the most of it, pushing the car to its limit.

But our pursuers seemed ready and waiting for us this morning.

“Shooter!” Craig yelled.

We all dodged down and away from the shooter. The bullet glazed off the metal, making a clinking sound. More bullets showered down on us from both cars in hot pursuit.

A particularly zealous bullet slammed against the back, and the glass broke, showering down on us from the back.

“Fuck! Shoot these fuckers back!” Mateo yelled.

Driving was becoming difficult with a barrage of bullets raining down on us from the back and the other cars threatening to catch up to us.

Asher pulled out his pistol and leaned out of the window. He shot at one of the guys leaning forward and shooting at us. One bullet was all it took for the menace to stop.

I aimed at the driver from the back of the car and the broken glass. It was better to stop the vehicle than pick out their shooters.

I pulled the trigger. The car jerked, and I missed, watching the bullet hit the side mirror instead.

Another rain of bullets followed, which I dodged, pulling Rebecca down under with me.

“Fuck this!” Asher yelled and got up again to shoot.

I followed, knowing that he would provide the cover that I needed. This time I had time to aim well, and when I pulled the trigger, it made the impact I wanted.

The car accelerated forward and veered to the side, careening off the side of the road and slamming into a tree. We heard screams and shouts. We had only one car following us now.

Asher concentrated on them, shooting everything and everyone in sight. I aimed for the driver of the BMW SUV racing towards us. I squeezed twice, aiming for his head. The second one was in case the first had missed.

“Watch out!” I yelled.

The guy was down and had probably slammed his feet down on the car pedal. The car was moving dangerously fast towards us.

Mateo saw the next turn and took it to the right. I reached out quickly to grab Asher just as he was almost thrown out of the car. I held him steady.

The BMW zoomed past. I heard the sound of metals raining on the concrete as it smashed into another unfortunate car. Then I pulled Asher back into the van.

“Shit,” he muttered and nodded at me.

“You’re welcome,” I said.

Rebecca looked from me to Asher and back to me again.

“What?” Asher asked.

Rebecca turned away from him.

“Strange way to show gratitude for someone saving your life,” she mumbled.

“Last I checked, it wasn’t you,” Asher said.

“I should have left you in that storage facility,” Rebecca responded.

“You should have. Maybe you are working with Scott. Come to think of it, you’re new, and they still managed to trace us to the safe house.”

“What did you say?” I yelled at Asher, prepared to take this way past whatever limits Asher thought I heard. He mellowed down then.

“You guys quit squabbling in the back. Our location has been compromised. It wasn’t Scott or anyone else. Someone hacked into the FBI database,” Mateo said.

“They are keeping tabs on us?” Craig asked.

“It would seem so.”

“The bastards.”

We continued driving. The sun was already peeping out from behind the clouds. The morning was well on its way, and we were still driving around town, trying to find a haven. Mateo’s phone rang.

“Hello, tell me you’re safe,” the voice from the other end said.

“We barely got out in time. Who was keeping tabs on us?”

“Come to the park. We can talk out in the open,” the man said.

“That doesn’t sound right.”

“In half an hour. I’ll send you a message.”

The call ended.

“Out in the open?” Craig asked. “I’m not going out in the open. I’ve just survived being killed by criminals and

assassins, and this guy wants us to meet out in the open. What is he thinking?"

"Maybe it's the best place to meet," I said. "They will be expecting us to be in hiding."

"They never finish, do they?" Asher lamented.

"We are mostly fighting hired hands. The ones moving the pawns are in hiding," Mateo said.

"Great," Asher said.

I pulled Rebecca closer to me. Once again, we had been near death, and somehow, we had managed to stay alive.

"Received a text," Mateo said. "He said we should look for a black van."

We pulled over at the park and got out of the car. This problem has lingered far longer than I thought it would.

Or were we destined to fail right off the bat on this mission?

If the FBI database had been hacked, Rebecca and I may have slipped by and survived in the city because we were not on the same SEALs mission as the older guys.

Mateo moved fast towards the van. The van door opened as soon as he approached it, sliding across to reveal a thin man who motioned for us to get into the SUV.

"I'm Parker," he said.

There were two cushioned benches at the bank of the van. We saw the driver through a partition as he drove up the street.

"Gray said you'd be pissed," he said.

"I am," Mateo said.

Parker nodded. "He also said saving you at the safe house should count for something. We knew you had been made, and they were coming."

Mateo grunted.

"Gray?" I asked.

“Yeah,” Mateo said, “Do you know him?”

“He was my contact at the FBI before I was set up,”

Mateo gave me a look as if to tell me not to say another word in front of Parker.

Still close to Rebecca, I thought we should both sit this one out. It had nothing to do with us. We should have left from the beginning. I knew who Gray was and didn't like all this FBI entanglement. I had a bad feeling in my gut. With the government involved, it only meant one outcome. This was bound to go up in flames.

We drove towards the outskirts of town before we turned into a dirt road, went down it for a while, and came upon a gate randomly in the middle of nowhere.

We drove through the gate, and it was like we were in another community entirely. The van pulled over at one of the buildings enclosed within a fenced area, and we all got out. Parker led the way into this building. There were five more buildings within the compound.

We stopped at the door, and Parker waved us to the waiting area.

“You can all take a seat,” he said.

We settled down and waited while Parker went to fetch Gray.

“I can't believe that they had tabs on you,” Asher said, looking at Mateo.

Mateo shook his head.

“I always knew they would, especially when we all retired after that last mission.”

“What mission?” Rebecca asked.

She had been silent up to this point.

“The one that requires you to sell your soul. They didn't believe I had sold it completely. So, they had to be sure. I didn't think they would be stupid enough to let the file get into the wrong hands.”

“Mateo, my man,” someone exclaimed, leaving the office.

Craig dashed after the man and punched him in the face. He wanted to deliver more punches, but Mateo, Asher, and Agent Parker held him back.

“What the fuck,” the man said, using his handkerchief to wipe the blood from his nose. “What’s wrong with you, man?”

“I took you as a friend,” Craig said, still fuming. “But you almost had me killed.”

“Almost got you killed? I saved your life, goddamn it!”

“You wouldn’t have had to if you weren’t keeping stupid files on us. What are we, huh? High risks? Can’t someone get away from all of this?” Mateo asked.

The man who had just walked out from the office shook his head.

“I didn’t have a choice, okay?” he said.

“We always have a choice, motherfucker,” Craig cursed.

“Would you rather someone else did this shit? Do you know how careless they would be with it? I had safeguarded this for as long as I could. When my computer was hacked into, I knew. I learned what they wanted to do and promptly sent you a warning. Do you think any other person would have done this?”

Mateo walked away with Craig to find a seat. They were tired of complaining. The government would still fuck them over if it wanted. That was usually the reward for service.

“I’m Gray,” the man said, grinning at Rebecca and Asher through the bloody nose. “Stephen? How are you? I didn’t know you were part of Mystic Steele Security. When did that happen? I actually thought you were still in jail. Good to see you out and about,” Gray reached out to shake my hand. I reciprocated with a pit in my stomach.

His gaze moved to Mateo and Craig before he continued talking.

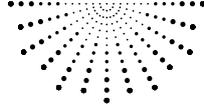
“We are here because of a threat against Mystic. We believe terrorists who are angry with you two want to erase Mystic. But that would not be all. It’s progressive. They have to be stopped now.”

“I just wanted to take out the people who are after my life. I have a wife I had to send away because of this,” Mateo said.

Craig shifted uncomfortably.

“How’s that working for you?” Gray asked.

CHAPTER THIRTY



REBECCA

“**Y**ou have been tracking these guys, we understand?” Gray asked.

Mateo nodded.

“Well, we need some help here. Contacting them is the hardest thing. They seem to be off the grid. We have been after them for a long time but haven’t had results.”

He was walking through the hallway toward the room at the end. We followed him. He opened the door, entered, and let everyone else in with him.

There were screens on the wall, and one of the men sitting was manning the screens.

“It’s okay, Luke. I’ll take over for a while,” Gray said.

Luke stood up and walked away. I couldn’t help noticing that his body was painted with tattoos. Something about the screens got my attention. I tried to see better, but the men’s voice pulled me out of my observation.

“We traced them to this place. But since then, they have gone under. There’s no way of finding out where they are.”

“Maybe they are moving with disguises now,” Stephen said.

I thought so too.

“You’ve been close with these guys. Is there anything that you can tell me or perhaps show me to help catch them?”

Mateo sighed. “They have been evading us as well.”

“What about Scott?” Asher asked suddenly.

I had forgotten that he was here with us. His angst against Scott was still very much alive and kicking.

“Scott?” Gray sighed. “He came to us. Wanted us to help him disappear.”

“And you did?”

“He gave us something. We couldn’t resist.”

“There goes your information,” Asher said.

“There has to be something that you know,” Gray said, moving closer to Mateo. “You have to give me something to help you here.”

I thought of giving him the phones I had gotten from Macken, but Stephen said nothing about it. Maybe he didn’t remember, or perhaps he didn’t want me to say anything.

“I barely escaped with my life; you know? Everything that we had on them was back there in that fucking house.”

“Shit.”

“Well, you can stay here for now. We will keep trying to get these men.”

“We’re not staying. I have to leave with my team. We have to be out there looking for these men,” Mateo said.

Gray looked at the rest of us like he was helpless and needed someone to help him. We did no such thing. He shook his head.

“You don’t appreciate your situation. You don’t understand the mess that you’re in.”

“A mess that you pushed us into.”

“You’ve been made. Every murderer will be out in the streets looking for you. And that goes for the rest of you.”

“You found a phone, didn’t you?” he asked suddenly.

“She did,” Mateo replied.

“Where is it?” Gray said, turning to me.

“I couldn’t get it as I ran out of the house,” I replied.

“That leaves us with very little,” Gray said, “Follow me, I’ll get you somewhere to rest up before you leave. I’ll get you all water and coffee.”

I kept my thought to myself. We began walking down a hallway. There were many rooms, but I preferred to stay together with Stephen. With him there, the place felt a whole lot safer. I didn’t know this Gray and didn’t trust him like the others did. Stephen and I took the first room, and the others kept walking down the hall.

“Hey, are you all right?” Stephen asked.

I hugged him tight so my mouth was close to his ears.

“I think we’re being watched. Don’t talk.”

He didn’t pull me off to stare at my face but held me tighter. We had to find a way to communicate, and I didn’t trust anywhere in this room.

I looked around the room, trying to find the angles and places hidden cameras and mics could be. Then, I dragged Stephen to a couch in the room and started kissing him.

I didn’t feel safe enough to have sex in this room, but I wanted whoever was watching to be distracted enough for me to get my phone out of my pocket and fix the SIM card I got from Macken’s phone in it.

I sat astride Stephen, slipped out the phone, placed it on his chest, and quickly switched the cards while kissing him. I had gotten the angle right. I had seen where the camera would watch us, but I didn’t want them to know.

I wondered if Mateo, Craig, Archer, and Asher were all right.

Stephen played along. Almost as quickly as I got on top of him, I got off, sat in a chair next to the couch, and pretended I was too distracted.

“We should check in with Mateo,” I said.

I got out of the room with Stephen behind me. We had our guns ready.

“Hey, where are you headed?” Gray asked.

The hallway had people walking up and down it, seemingly busy with FBI business.

I remembered now what it was about the screens that pulled me in. I had hacked into secure databases enough time to know the screen of a hacker when I saw one. The people in that room were hackers, not the FBI. We need to determine if the FBI knows who they are working with.

“We’re looking for Mateo,” I said, turning and walking with Stephen.

“Oh, they went to the other building, bigger room, bigger space.”

I paused. Stephen paused as well. I could sense the tension in the air. I felt the men and women walking past were watching us closely to see if we would make a move.

“Oh, I think I’ll have to use the restroom first before seeing them,” I said.

I moved. Stephen followed.

“He knows,” I murmured.

We got to the restroom, and I slammed the door shut, bolting it. We had to think fast.

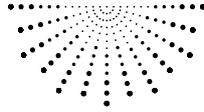
My phone starts ringing just then. At first, I thought it was someone else, but we were the only people in the male restroom I had hurried into with Stephen.

I froze. Outside, footsteps approached the restroom slowly.

“Stephen?” Gray called from outside. “Is that your phone ringing?”

I checked the phone in my hand. The call was from the new SIM that I had inserted. The screen showed ‘Gray,’ probably the name Macken saved his number with.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



STEPHEN

“**M**aybe you should take your call,” Gray said from behind the door.

I was looking at the windows high up in the restroom. It would be challenging to get out through those. I wondered where Mateo was. Quickly, I brought out my phone and started calling. I was then stopped. They might be in the same situation. I sent a text instead rapidly.

Gray is suspicious. We have to get out of here.

“I don’t think I want to,” I replied to Gray.

“Why?”

“What are you doing here, Gray?”

“I think you know.”

“No, really, I don’t.”

I pulled out my pistol and slowly moved the safety pin while talking. It made a clicking sound. I winced. I didn’t want him to know I had a gun in here.

“What was that, Stephen?”

“What was what?”

“The phone. Who was calling?”

“What is with all the questions? Isn’t this an FBI safe house?”

“I think you know what this place is. Hand over the phone, and I’ll ensure nothing happens to you or Rebecca.”

“What about Mateo and Asher? What about Archer and Craig?”

“Sadly, they have to go. You know this. Mateo and Craig are the reason for all of this in the first place. Asher and Archer? Well, they were born into the wrong family.”

“Have you told them that?”

“The phone, Stephen. Bring the phone.”

“Maybe you should come get it.”

I walked to one of the stalls and climbed on the toilet seat to get to the window. I pushed it open. We could barely squeeze through here. I hoped no one was on the ground level waiting for us.

“Stephen. It would be best if you thought about it. You and Rebecca are freshly in love. Scott made a wise choice. He’s somewhere he can’t be reached by anyone.”

“Why are you doing this? What’s in it for you?”

“Many things, Stephen. One of them is money. The other is power. The men you serve, they are the old order. You can’t keep staying under them. They have to go.”

“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Remember your time with me in the FBI? Don’t you trust me, Stephen?”

“No, I don’t. Was it you? Was it you that set me up?”

I helped Rebecca climb up. She took a look outside and nodded at me. I let her slip through. Then I pulled myself up.

“Oh, Stephen, that’s neither here nor there. This is about protecting our country. This country has many enemies, which is a problem, and we must get the government to act against them.”

“By bombing Mystic?”

“Small price to pay. That and the old team. They took out some of my partners a long time ago. This took years to plan,

you know. And I'm sorry you were just too close to finding our leader all those years ago."

I slid slowly down the other side. I could no longer hear him talking.

Standing at the back of the building, we watched cars move around the compound, people walk quickly by in and out, and I wondered if everyone here was in on this with Gray.

"How do we find Mateo?" Rebecca asked.

I didn't have the slightest idea, but I knew we had to get out of there as fast as possible.

My phone rang, and I took the call, sliding against the wall and trying to stay out of sight.

"Where the fuck are you?" Mateo asked, his voice hoarse.

"Outside," I replied.

"Gray is a mole. He's not FBI. He's their man here..."

"He's Eagle," I said, realizing. That is why he set me up years ago. He was Eagle and I was about to uncover him to the FBI.

"Shit," Mateo exclaimed.

I heard gunshots from the phone and from outside the building.

"They are still in their rooms," Rebecca said.

We were already running back to the entrance without thinking.

As we rounded the building, I pulled Rebecca back just as a hail of bullets slammed into the side. The men were already out and after us. We had to find the car for our getaway.

All around us, agents were getting into fighting mode, pulling out their pistols. Our only way out of here would be with the car.

I peeked around the bend and shot two bullets into two chests rushing at us. Rebecca followed closely behind. As we ran past them, the men dropped. We continued heading into

the hallway and away from the new threat growing in the street.

We headed towards Mateo's room, finding the hall empty. The employees who were not field agents had found hiding places.

At their door, there were three men. We shot them immediately after we saw them. I felt a slight pain in my shoulder as I was pushed back. A bullet has grazed me.

"Mateo!" I screamed as Rebecca pulled open the door.

Someone started racing down the hall. I shot twice closely to discourage him. Then I walked up to the man.

"Gray," I said. "Where are you off to in such a hurry?"

Mateo, Craig, Archer, and Asher filed out of the room.

"You can't kill me. Everybody here will come for you."

"Do they know what you're planning? Do they know what organization you are working for?"

"For all they will know, you are running from the law."

I pressed the barrel of my gun against his nape.

"Where are the bombs set to go off, Eagle?"

"Eagle? That's a new one. I haven't been called that in a while."

We held him hostage as we exited the building, got into our car, and drove toward the gate. It was opened before we arrived, and we were out into the night.

"The whole FBI will be on you in seconds, you know? There's no hiding place for you."

"I can recover the records of the texts you sent to Macken," Rebecca said, her voice cold.

She was sitting at the back with me, Asher, and Craig, while Gray sat up front with Mateo with my gun behind his head. I wouldn't think twice before blowing his brains out if the need arose.

"You are bluffing," he said.

“We will see. But first, you have to show us where you have these bombs buried. Macken told us what you were up to here.”

“Ah. So, you got Macken, then.”

“He’s dead,” I said.

“The poor fool. I always knew he was going to get himself shot.”

“You are in so much trouble.”

“Not me,” he said, looking behind and smiling.

Cars were already in pursuit. Unmarked cars made me wonder if they were with Eagle in forcing the president’s hands to engage in enemy countries. I was sure the bastards had several countries they wanted the president to attack. They were not thinking about the retaliation.

More cars were coming up from behind us now while Mateo strained to keep us ahead.

“Can you get the texts now?” Mateo asked.

“No. I will need a workstation, laptop, and a few gadgets.”

“Damn, we might need to hand ourselves over to the FBI first.”

Gray chuckled. I hit his head with the butt of my gun.

“Asher, frisk him.”

“No, you don’t want to do that,” Gray said.

I noticed the panic in his voice. He had tried to hide it well, but there was a slight tremor when he spoke.

Asher came away with a phone. But it was locked.

“Unlock your phone,” I said.

“No.”

I slammed the butt of the gun into the back of his head again.

“Goddamn it! Will you stop that!”

The car sped up, and Mateo started his many weaves and turned through the streets. The cars followed.

I was getting tired of this uncertainty. Once again, I told myself I would have to quit this life and get on a boat or something with Rebecca. She would lie on my body, and we would stare out across the sea and up at the blue sky. The car jumped over a bump, bringing me back to the present.

I was zoning in and out until I heard the car screech to a halt. We were in an alleyway.

“I think we lost them,” Mateo said.

Gray started laughing.

I knew something was wrong.

“You both, you’ve gotten old and slow. They will trace me to wherever you take me,” Gray said.

“We will see about that,” Mateo said.

The next place we found ourselves in was an abandoned warehouse still on the outskirts of the town.

We dragged Gray into the warehouse and sat him down on the ground. I wished we could get a rope to bind his hands and feet. His freedom was annoying. Seeing him still using his hands, stretching his legs, and looking all smug there infuriated me. I wanted him to make one wrong move.

“You can’t get anything off the phone?” Mateo asked Rebecca. I knew what the answer would be.

“No. I need my equipment.”

This wasn’t good.

“Give me some time with him,” I said.

“I’ll be happy to help you, Stephen,” Archer agreed.

“You would be wasting your time. Eagle knows everything there is to know about our methods. He would rather die than crack,” Mateo replied.

“Well, we have to do something, and fast. Otherwise, we would be sitting ducks here,” Asher added.

“I might have to call in a few favors,” Craig said, grimacing.

Gray was the last favor they could call in at the FBI. He had turned out to be a spy for criminals and terrorists.

“Your bombs. When do they go off?” I asked.

“Tomorrow,” Gray replied. “Why do you care?”

“They won’t find us before tomorrow. I can assure you of that. You’d be here with us when the bombs go off. I think you are doing this for the money. Trying to claim it as patriotism,” I scoffed.

“You don’t know how to bluff,” he said.

“Okay. How about this? We will tie you up here and leave with your phone,” I said.

His face changed a bit.

“You need me to get across checkpoints,” he said. “I’m your hostage.”

“No. We don’t. If we’re caught, we hand over your phone. If we’re not, we will find a way to pry open the contents of your phone.”

“You can’t do that.”

“Watch me.”

I walked to the car to look for some ropes. There were none. I walked back to where Gray was seated smugly, watching me. He had been shaken only a moment ago. But now, he seemed to have regained his composure.

“There are no ropes,” I said.

Gray chuckled. “I told you...”

The sound of my gun startled everyone.

Gray screamed, grabbing his thigh. The bullet had made a hole just above his kneecap. He cursed profusely, making fists in the air.

“What the fuck, Stephen!” Craig yelled.

“We have to leave,” I said. “But we must injure him first and drive him far into the woods, away from houses.”

“We need him!” Mateo yelled.

“We don’t,” I said. “You said I can’t get anything out of him. He can stay here and enjoy the show. We have our evidence.”

The others were considering my suggestion. I turned and walked towards Gray.

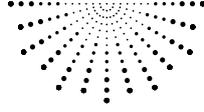
“Come on, nap time,” I said, raising the butt of my gun.

“No, no! Wait, dammit! You can’t leave me here!” he yelled. “Mateo. I can’t still be...”

“We sacrifice Mystic. And you are dead with it. We don’t face this nightmare again. We evacuate the town. Hit him, Stephen,” Mateo said coldly.

“Okay, okay! You’ve got it! I’ll show you the bombs. Fuck! But we have to move fast.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



REBECCA

“**Y**ou should go,” Stephen said. “Go to the city and wait for us.”

“No,” I replied.

“Come on. We can’t put all of us in danger. What if we don’t make it before the bombs go off? We are still wanted men...”

“Stop talking,” I said, mustering as much coldness and calmness into my voice as I could. “If one of us does not make it, then all of us do not deserve to make it.”

Mateo walked by and stopped where we were standing.

“We have to move now. It’s a race against time,” Mateo said. He turned back to look at Gray. “I’m sending Asher to the last man I trust in the forces. They will open the phone and have this man exposed.”

I nodded. Gray had put us through so much trouble.

While we were out there fighting to save our lives, he knew our every move.

His mistake was thinking he could contain us before we figured out what was happening.

I sat up front with Mateo while Craig, Stephen, and Archer sat at the back with Gray in the middle.

If he tried any dumb thing, he would be asleep before he knew what the end would be.

“We need to change cars,” Mateo said.

We drove a little distance before we filed out of the car and stood by the side of the road. Any car at all would be welcome at this time.

Mateo waved down an SUV. Before the driver knew what was going on, he had guns on his face.

“We need your car,” Mateo said. “It’s a matter of national security.”

“You’ll find it in town somewhere. Don’t call the police,” Stephen said.

We got into this new, unbattered car, feeling safer and more secure. Gray had not said a word since. He knew that his game was over.

“Next stop?” Mateo asked.

“The supermarket,” Gray said.

“You bastard,” Stephen cursed.

I knew he was trying hard not to punch Gray in the face. A bomb in the supermarket was the craziest thing. Tomorrow would be the start of the weekend; the market would be packed.

“You say you’re doing this for your country?” Craig asked. “My wife goes to that supermarket.”

“You hid your wife away early this week. If we wanted your wife, we would have gotten her.”

We stopped in the parking lot when we got to the supermarket. Someone had to go in there and find the bomb and also disarm it.

“How’s it disarmed?” I asked, turning back to look at Gray.

He sighed. “There’s a code. 64113#.”

“I’ll do it.”

“Hey, are you sure?” Stephen asked. He looked at my face and knew how serious I was, “be careful. I love you.”

I was an ordinary lady walking into the supermarket. It would be hard to suspect a thing. Even with the FBI looking for us, seeing me walking alone would throw them off our scent. Besides, I was the only one with some tech knowledge if things went sideways.

I walked into the supermarket. The bomb was somewhere in the female restroom.

I moved faster, feeling unsafe with each step I took away from the guys, away from Stephen.

The restroom was locked from the inside. I knocked on the door. There were stalls inside, but I couldn't get in. I was told to check the third stall from the left. Inside the ceiling, that was where the bag was hidden.

I knocked again. There was no response. Whoever was in there didn't want to be disturbed.

"I need to use the bathroom, please," I yelled.

Probably a couple having sex.

"This always happens," someone said.

I spun around and found a blonde-haired lady beside me. I quickly turned away. Maintaining facial and eye contact would have been risky if our faces had been plastered on screens nationwide.

"Why? What's happening?"

"What do you think?" She knocked on the door and said, "I'll be calling security."

She started walking away. I didn't want more people here. So, I breathed a sigh of relief when the door started opening. First, a man, his face bushy with a beard, came out and glared at us before he passed, buttoning his shirt. A female, brunette and delicate, came out next, giggling.

The blonde employee walked back to the restroom.

"Works like magic," she said.

I followed her in, wondering when she would leave.

She went directly to the third stall from the left, got in, and shut the door.

“Damn,” I cursed before I walked to the mirror.

It was going to take a while. I waited, hating every moment.

My phone rang in the first five minutes of waiting.

“You can’t find it?” Stephen asked.

“I’m working on it,” I replied.

“I think they are here.”

“Who?”

“The FBI.”

The woman came out of the stall just then.

“Hey, I think I know you,” she said.

I brushed past her and ran into the stall, slipping the phone back into my pocket. I climbed over the toilet bowl and felt around the ceiling tile. I found an opening. Sure enough, the bag was inside.

I took it down and zipped it open. It was a small device with a keypad to input the code. The ominous red timer showed it was counting down to ten hours.

What was the code again?

6—4—1...

I heard the door of the toilet open.

“Someone here?” a deep male voice asked.

I stayed silent. After the man left, I replaced the tile and waited in the stall. I looked around and saw a window. I needed to decide if going out the window or just walking out would be the better option. I quickly moved to the counter with the sinks, climbed up, and leaned over to look out the window. FBI was standing about 30 feet away.

I jumped down and decided to try my hand at just walking out. I strolled out, trying to look inconspicuous. I walked over

to the fruit and examined an apple. Put it down and headed for the door. I saw the SUV in the distance. I could do this. I was going to get there.

“Don’t move,” a voice said.

Was he really from the FBI?

I turned slowly, raising my hand.

“What’s in the bag?” the man asked. He did not look as intimidating as his voice sounded, a skinny 6’.

“I think you know,” I replied.

I saw Stephen creeping up behind him and tried to keep a straight face. Then I heard the thud and groan. He helped the man to the ground.

“Come on,” he said.

We raced across the grounds to the car where Mateo and Craig were waiting.

“What the fuck! You brought the bomb!” Gray exclaimed.

“The code!”

He called out the code again, and I punched it in as we drove away from the scene.

I turned to look at him.

“How did they find us?” I asked.

“Who? What are you talking about?”

“How did your men find us?”

“I don’t know,” he said.

“I think we should strap him to this car and leave him in town,” I said. “Would save us a whole lot of trouble.”

We continued along the road. Gray gritted his teeth, and I saw him look crazy for the first time.

“You know what? Maybe you should do it.”

We pulled over.

“Where’s the next location?” Stephen asked.

“I’m not telling you,” Gray replied.

Mateo’s phone started ringing then.

He took the call and listened. After a while, he ended the call.

“Looks like we’re leaving town,” he said.

“Strap me in nicely. I’ll burn before you leave,” Gray said. He was looking excited.

“You’re coming with us,” Mateo said.

“I see. Had a change of heart? The things I did for you, no one else....”

Craig punched Gray hard across the face, shutting him up.

“The FBI does not need you looking like you’ve been treated well. If you’re alive, they will take you,” Mateo said.

“You are taking me back to my office.”

“You still don’t get it, do you? Asher got your phone into the right hands. Your phone has been opened. The locations of your bombs are all there. The people you spoke to, your plans. So, yes, the FBI would love to chat with you.”

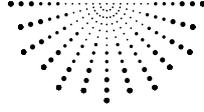
He became so still and quiet that I was tempted to check if he was still breathing.

“It’s impossible,” he kept muttering.

The worst was behind us now.

“Now what,” I said, looking at Stephen. He smiled at me and said, “Let’s start our lives together.”

EPILOGUE



REBECCA

Archer's house played host.

We sat at the veranda, all the boys and me, pouring drinks and watching Stephen tend to the meat on the grill.

Darcy, Craig's daughter also Mateo's wife, came over with more tequila shots.

She hugged Craig, "Thank you for caring for my husband."

Mateo laughed and said, "Yes, thank you, Dad."

After eating a slice of watermelon, Craig spat a seed and landed it below Mateo's eye.

Mateo wiped it off as Craig said, "Oh, sorry, son."

Everyone laughed.

"Stephen, get over here and take a shot with us, Mateo yelled.

We all grabbed a shot.

"Thank you all; you are all my family. This was a different mission for us, and I appreciate you all for not dying and helping each other not to die. Let's get back to the easy money and securing billionaires. I love you all," Mateo cheers. "More importantly, you'd think we would all get something for all that trouble, some kind of award."

"It's just another day in your life, superheroes," I chuckled. "Mystic Steele Security- Saving small towns, nations, and the world, one day at a time."

They laughed and agreed.

Asher said, “Rebecca, I know you didn’t think much of me during our time together, but I appreciate you. Thank you for saving me from the storage unit. You’re all right. And your boy over here is pretty cool, too.”

“Holy shit did my cousin just thank you and show gratitude...well, if wonders never cease,” Archer joked.

Asher went over and started wrestling Archer.

My eyes went to Stephen’s bare back. It was wide and had this muscular definition that I wanted to run my hands over. He turned and waved at us.

“Tell your boy to put on some shirt,” Craig grumbled.

“Are the old men getting jealous?” I asked.

“Jealous?” Craig scoffed.

“I still can’t believe it, Gray,” Mateo continued.

“He screwed us all over,” Craig said, “Nothing to beat yourself up about.”

“What about Scott?” Asher asked.

I saw the sigh visibly go through everyone.

“I can’t believe nobody wants to do anything about him,” Asher continued.

“We have done something. Scott’s not with us here,” Stephen said.

Mateo agreed, “Asher, let him live his life. You should feel a little empathy for him. If I had the option to save your mom by giving intel or betraying my brothers, I would have. I’m sorry. I think everyone here with a significant other would agree.”

“I’m not saying Scott deserves to return, but he is like a brother to me, Asher, just like you are. He is one of my best friends. Let’s cut him some slack. Please,” Archer added.

Just then, Scottie, Archer’s beautiful wife, came out of the kitchen and into the yard carrying potato salad. Lindsay, their

2-year-old daughter, followed.

Scottie put the bowl on the picnic table and approached Archer, hugging and smiling at him. Lindsay went running to him, calling out, “Daddy!”

Archer picked Lindsay up, spinning her and nuzzling her.

Archer and Scottie had become very close with us and have been trying to convince us to purchase a house near them. Stephen and I had been staying at Mateo’s hotel he owns in town for the time being.

Seeing the guys in their family life not dodging bullets was fun. I wondered if Stephen and I could manage both. We had talked about running away and traveling, but is that the life for us? I am done in the field, but I would be ok continuing to do things behind the scenes, maybe raising children.

Life-threatening excitement, I believe, is in Stephen’s blood. The whole team had it in their blood.

Asher was most likely headed back to Washington; I’m sure, to live his old wild ways before visiting his dad and getting kidnapped. But he was very good at this and wouldn’t doubt if he eventually found his way back to Mystic and was a part of the Mystic Steele Security Team.

Archer and his loyalty to his uncle would not be leaving anytime soon.

Craig and Mateo had a special relationship, too, and even though it was complicated, they were good friends and partners.

I smiled while looking around at the couples. I stood up and walked towards the grill, towards him. The voices behind me faded into nothing. When he turned, he met me with a smile on his face.

I had to stand on tiptoes to reach his lips.

“Marry me,” he whispered in my ear.

“Absolutely. Tell me when and where, and I will be there.”

Stephen

A few months later.

“Thank you, boys, for standing up here with me today,” I said, holding back tears in a small church in Mystic, “You have become a part of our family.”

“Of course, we are proud of you two,” Archer said, patting me on the back.

“Absolutely,” Craig agreed.

Mateo walked over, shook my hand, and hugged me, “Take good care of her. I know you will.”

Asher piped in, “So, Stephen, you didn’t tell me you had two sisters...”

“I don’t,” I sighed, “I swear to God, Asher stay away from my mom and sister.”

“I’ll take both,” he laughed.

“Aw, there’s the Asher I know and love,” Scott said, walking up to us all.

“Scott...,” Asher said, nodding respectfully but grudgingly.

“Good to see you again, Scott,” Mateo said, shaking his hand.

Scott came over, shook my hand, and grabbed my shoulder, “Congratulations, Stephen.”

“Scott,” I said, surprised he was here but thankful, “How? Is everything...”

“We had a sit-down, the boys and I,” Mateo said. “We’re all good...right, guys?”

“This is your and Rebecca’s Day,” Asher said, nodding.

Just then, the wedding coordinator says, “It’s time.”

As the wedding march begins to play, I can feel the anticipation building up inside of me. When Rebecca and her father finally approach me, my eyes fill with tears as I make a heartfelt promise to love and protect her for the rest of my life.

The End.

Did you like this book? Then you'll LOVE Next Door Billionaire.

Read more about Archer and Scottie in this stand-alone book in the series The Billionaires of Mystic series.

I'm carrying the next-door billionaire's baby.

Three months earlier...

My beautiful white Vera Wang dragged behind me. My old dirty Nike high tops soaked.

I run to Mystic, Connecticut, or Small Town, USA.

It is quiet and nice, if not a little boring.

And then the hot neighbor moves in.

Archer Steele. Not only does he look like a superhero, but he is also named like one.

A Former Navy SEAL with dark hair, a strong jawline, and amazing abs.

Oh, and come to find out, he's my boss at the bar where I started working.

His beautiful green eyes have been on me since he moved.

But when my dangerous past comes knocking at my door, will Archer be there to save me...

Our unborn child and I need him now more than ever.

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