



ROGUE
MERCENARIES
BOOK
THREE

Operation
PROTECT

U S A T O D A Y B E S T S E L L I N G A U T H O R

LINZI BAXTER

OPERATION PROTECT

ROGUE MERCENARIES

BOOK 3

LINZI BAXTER

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Operation Protect

Rogue Mercenaries, Book 3

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Published 12/29/2023

ONE
MCKENZIE

16 Years Ago

McKenzie's gaze shifted from the grainy photo of three men to the window. The Eiffel Tower's lights danced in the night sky, a stark contrast to the darkness of her secrets. She wished she could rewind the clock back twelve hours to when Xavier's kiss had momentarily lifted the weight of her double life. But in her world, wishes were dangerous. Often they led to a path of betrayal, where a wrong turn meant not just heartache, but a perilous dance with death or torture.

The echoes of her conversation with Kasey Nash, the informant she'd kept hidden from the CIA, lingered in her mind. For two years, she had kept her double life hidden from Xavier Smith. He wasn't only her partner in the field; she also loved him and dreaded the moment she would have to choose between him and her secrets. The time had come for her to face the grim truth of her existence as a double agent, a path that led her away from any chance of the happy ending she had allowed herself to imagine. 'Pictures don't lie,' Kasey had told her when she handed over the envelope. For a second it made her hesitate. Pictures lie all the time, and she would know. It's all about getting the best angle at the worst time, and anything could be made to look a certain way.

Her fingers gripped around the corner of the photo, crinkling the paper. Xavier would be back soon, and she had to weed through the information Kasey had handed her about Pierre Briere, the owner of the oldest textile company in France, Soierie de Seine.

Mr. Briere came from a noble bloodline. Even if France didn't have royalty anymore, he significantly influenced the French Republic. McKenzie leered at the third man in the photo, Aung Myat Min. Aung owned a gem mine in Myanmar and had a brother high up in the ranks of the Myanmar military.

Her stomach turned as she wondered if the Noble Society had intel about Xavier's connection all along and wanted her to take Xavier down. The Noble Society was her actual employer. One she could never escape. No matter which decision she made, her life would change. She would betray the man who saved her life more times than she could count and the only man to chip away at the thick layers of ice around her heart. Scratch that. His gray eyes and deep, commanding voice had melted those layers away.

McKenzie dropped the photo on the bed before standing up and crouching next to the nightstand. She pried the floorboard back to access a secret compartment. Inside the dusty hole lay her go bag, a burner phone, and a laptop. She crawled back onto the bed and hit the power button. The computer took only a moment for the screen to light up. She typed in her sixteen-character password within the login screen prompt and waited for the camera to scan her eye. As an added layer of security, she kept the link to her programs hidden. She double-clicked in the top corner of the desktop, revealing an invisible link to the Noble Society's network.

The Noble Society was an ancient group created by George Washington's wife, Martha. She believed her husband had been poisoned and hadn't died from a throat infection. In her grief, she formed the Noble Society, a group of ten men and ten women who were tasked with investigating her husband's death. The group never found any evidence of President Washington being poisoned, but their investigation did uncover corruption within the government. Over the years, the Noble Society had expanded, with one member always being a descendant of the original twenty and another marrying into the organization; however, the Grandmaster was the one who chose the bride or groom.

McKenzie was a descendant of Eliza and Alexander Hamilton on her mother's side. From a young age, she was trained to believe that her only reason for living was to protect the United States. After years of working missions, she never hesitated to do what she was told. Except her new intel made her hesitate. Like many other sources, Kasey hadn't a clue who she really worked for. Kasey only gave her information in exchange for money to feed her family.

The Noble Society would verify all intel she received. She used the camera to scan each photo and upload it to the network drive. The tech team worked twenty-four seven, supporting everyone in the field. Ten minutes hadn't even passed when a new message appeared. *Photos are authenticated. Eliminate Pierre Briere and Xavier Smith by morning.*

The screen blurred as she read the two sentences over and over. Years of missions and she had never once stopped to question any directive or how fast the Society could make a decision. She sat her laptop to the side and flipped through more photos. Pierre Briere and Aung Myat Min stood on the deck of a cargo ship with an open shipping container filled with young women. Her finger traced over the white symbol on the container. The photos were grainy, but she knew it was the logo of Xavier's family's company.

As she continued to flip through the photos, they played out a movie of Aung Myat Min handing Pierre a briefcase. Next, Aung and his men left with the women. The date in the right corner lined up with the same day Xavier had met with the two men. Even if she tried to rescue them, the women would be gone already. All she could do was stop them from doing this again.

The Society's kill mission would blow up the CIA's objective. They had wanted Xavier to form a relationship with Pierre, because of the textile company. Her stomach turned at the thought of Xavier having played her. He'd told her he didn't know Pierre, and the meeting wasn't scheduled for a few more days.

They both had secrets, and she had to do what was best for the United States, even if that made her world crumble around her.

For the first time in years, her mother's words floated into her consciousness: 'Love only leads to a bullet in the chest.'

She had to kill Xavier, and her fairy tale ending would die with him. He was supposed to be her prince, but had turned out to be a villain in this story. Her next actions would define the rest of her life. Even if he wasn't the villain and had an explanation for the photo, the blood oath she had taken on her tenth birthday made it impossible for her to disclose what she knew to Xavier.

She'd attempted to steer him in other directions based on intel from the Noble Society. He often pulled rank on her all because he had one year longer than her in the CIA.

Taking a deep breath to steady herself, she picked up the burner phone and dialed her handler's number.

The phone rang once before a distorted voice barked out the code name. "Jinx."

"Are we sure these photos aren't taken out of context? I understand they are authenticated."

"It is not your place to question the Grandmaster's decision. Your mission is to kill Pierre Briere and Xavier Smith."

She glanced at the photograph of Xavier at the table with Pierre. "I'm not sure how you expect me to accomplish this without blowing my cover with the CIA. Xavier and I were chosen for this mission, because of his family ties to the shipping industry. Maybe I could try to sit with Xavier and find out what is happening."

There was a pause before the mechanical voice spoke again. "Kill him. He is a threat to the cause, and his usefulness has come to an end. The completion of this mission is more important than your CIA cover. You will be debriefed in Texas and given a new assignment."

This wasn't the first time she had received a kill order for someone close to her. At eighteen, she'd been ordered to kill her own mother. For most people, that would be an

unthinkable act. But the emotional and physical torture her mother had subjected her to made taking her mother's life easy. Now, for the first time in her life, she hesitated.

She had shed more tears in the past hour than she had since her tenth birthday. McKenzie had always dreaded her birthday, unlike most children who looked forward to them. Birthdays for her marked the start of the next stage of her harsh training regimen. According to the Noble Society, ten was the age to teach her how to withstand torture. She lightly touched the scar on her wrist, a brutal reminder of that training. She had eventually blacked out from the pain and blood loss. The only reprieve had come when her father returned from a business trip, requiring her mother's assistance.

Two days of recovery were all she got before her training had resumed. Her mother had always reminded her that the only reason for her existence was to serve the Noble Society. But the line between good and evil had blurred over the years, and McKenzie was no longer sure which side she stood on.

"Did you hear what I said?" the distorted voice crackled through the phone.

"Yes."

In twenty-three years, she had never disobeyed a direct order.

"Make sure to burn him as a reason for the kill"

"I'll take care of it," she said, ending the call.

McKenzie pulled a red folder from her go bag. The information it contained could ruin Xavier's career with the CIA. Her entire life, she had dealt with spies. Until she met Xavier, she had never worked with another CIA agent so committed to his country. Nothing about this added up.

She thought back to their first mission together—an intelligence-gathering operation in South America. They had posed as a married couple. The moment their eyes met; she fell hard. Xavier was the man who took her on her first date, and he was the first man she ever kissed. Trained from childhood to follow the mandates of the Noble Society, she had been instructed to remain pure for a man they would

choose for her. However, that one kiss made her question her life's path. Just as she had begun to reconsider her priorities, the CIA abruptly reassigned Xavier, leaving her to complete the mission alone.

During the following nights, she found herself scouring the internet for information about him. Xavier was an anomaly among spies since his family owned a large shipping company. Her research led her to information about his ex, Sara. From what she could gather from Page Six gossip articles, Sara had left him for Carter when she went to college. Carter and Sara got married when she finished college. Then a few years later was when she disappeared and Carter took the life insurance policy. Not long ago Xavier's company took Carter down before he could sell a state of the art bomb. McKenzie had hacked into Xavier's email and read correspondence about how he loved Sara. Hungry for more information like a grade-A stalker, she searched the CIA's database and found a classified report. Sara was dead, but the sequence of events in that report conflicted with what McKenzie knew from her work with the Noble Society.

Two months passed by before she found herself paired with Xavier once again. The instant she walked into the same room as him, every fiber of her being wanted to collapse into his arms and let him take on her struggles. To maintain her emotional defenses, she reminded herself of an email she'd seen in his sent folder—one where he had pledged that Sara would be the only woman to ever capture his heart.

Despite her best efforts to compartmentalize her feelings, her emotional walls had crumbled the night he took her to bed. Over the past two years, those feelings only intensified, escaping the fortress she had tried so hard to maintain around her heart.

Her phone buzzed and brought her out of her thoughts and back to the present.

Unknown: You have two hours, or a cleanup crew will handle everything, including you. Remember, someone's always watching.

She weighed her options. She could let the Noble Society take them both out, kill him herself, or fake an attempt on his life and leave the file that would incriminate him.

As she pondered her choices, a flutter in her stomach startled her. Until this moment, she hadn't given much thought to the positive pregnancy test she took. The realization struck her like a lightning bolt—she hadn't told anyone or entirely accepted it herself. And now, her unborn child chose this moment to make its presence felt, just when she had to decide the fate of the man she loved.

She grasped the burn file and opened it on her lap. Another tear trickled down her cheek and splattered onto the page, smearing the ink. She flipped to the next page, where a photo of Xavier stared back at her. Gently, she traced the edge of his jaw with her finger.

She wondered, if she were to reveal all her secrets, would he change? It was a futile thought. The Noble Society's influence reached across the globe. There was no escaping them. The only way out was death, but even that couldn't guarantee Xavier's safety. Only her actions could protect him from the Society's wrath.

The distant rumble of a motorcycle engine reached her ears, and time appeared to slow. She tossed her things in her go bag and pulled a gun from its holster, screwed on the silencer, and left the incriminating file on the bed. Entering the living room, she stood against the far wall, her gun by her side.

Standing there, she didn't try to stop the tears streaming down her face.

In her mind, she recited the oath to the Noble Society. *I vow to protect the Noble Society's secrets and power by all means. I will give my life for the cause. I will not let anyone stop me from protecting our rights.*

The doorknob jiggled, and Xavier strode in, looking disheveled. Blood dripped from the corner of his mouth, and the top buttons of his dress shirt were missing.

"What happened?" she asked, her voice tinged with concern.

Xavier ran a hand through his sandy blond hair. “Nothing you need to worry about. The timetable’s been moved up.” He paused, his lips tightening. “But first, I want to know who made you cry, Little Star.”

Hearing her nickname broke another dam inside her, and she felt a fresh wave welling up. As he took a step toward her, she raised her hand to stop him, and his eyes flicked to the gun she held.

Before he could say a word, she threw the question into the air—the question that would decide her next course of action. “Whose side would you pick if I told you I thought this mission hurt the United States?”

His light gray eyes narrowed. “This mission came from Agent White, and he’s been my handler since I was sixteen. I’ve never had a reason to question him. Just because we’re intimate doesn’t mean my allegiance lies with you. I took an oath to the CIA. This mission will further my family’s company and make allies of two powerful families. Agent White and I just met, reconfirming everything. He raised questions about your loyalty, and I had your back. Can I trust you?”

“No,” she replied, her voice barely above a whisper. She tightened her fingers around the handle. A memory from her sixth birthday flashed through her mind of when her dad handed her a Beretta. From that day forward, she had spent at least one hour each day practicing her aim. One of the drills her father had made her run involved him spraying pepper spray in her eyes. Then she would have to shoot until she unloaded ten bullets and hit the two-inch red circle. Those years of practice helped her in the field, and even with blurry vision from crying, she knew her aim would be on target.

“Little Star, don’t cry,” Xavier whispered. “You don’t have to do this. We can figure out a plan together.”

“I’m doing this for our country,” she said as she squeezed the trigger. The silencer muffled the gunshot, but not enough to silence the heavy thud in her heart. Xavier’s white shirt

bloomed red as he pressed his hand to his chest and staggered back into a dining room chair.

She pulled a burner phone from her pocket, dialed 911, and reported a gunshot. They would arrive before the cleanup crew.

“I’m sorry...” she whispered, walking toward the door. Even though every fiber of her being urged her to go to his side.

“Wait,” Xavier’s hand slid into his pocket and pulled out a small box. “Take this. Even if I live, I’ll never open my heart to another woman.”

She couldn’t stop herself and stepped toward him. He grasped her wrist, pulling her in until her ear was mere inches from his mouth. “I hope this makes you happy, because you’ve crossed a line, you’ll never be able to return from.”

Except she would be fine, it was his career she destroyed. She planted a kiss on his cheek. “You’ll survive, but promise me you won’t let the next few months turn you cold.”

Xavier coughed. “The moment you shot me, my heart iced over. You’d better run and never stop. Because if I survive this—when I survive this—I’ll use the full force of the CIA and every favor I have to find you. You won’t get a bullet. No, I’ll make sure you spend the rest of your days in a place they call the Black Hole.”

Her pulse thrummed in her ears as she clutched the gun. “I know you don’t believe me, Xavier, but I love you. This was my only choice.”

“Bullshit!”

Just then, the distant wail of sirens had grown louder. She turned toward the door as he whispered her name—a last plea or perhaps a curse. But she didn’t stop. With a heavy heart, she slipped out the front door and turned down the back alley, her heels clicking an ominous rhythm on the cobblestone.

Xavier would survive, but his government career would be in tatters. As she descended the stairs, her phone buzzed.

Agent White: I know who you are.

She still had to finish her mission in Paris.

TWO

MCKENZIE

Present Day

McKenzie ‘Jinx’ Stuart glared at the set of security monitors on the wall. Not a single inch of her property was off camera. The long private road to her house had pressure sensors placed under the pavement. However, that wasn’t her only form of security. When she had put in the gates, she’d ensured a state-of-the-art license plate scanner was installed. Years of working for the Noble Society had left her anxious and a bit paranoid about what could happen next.

The fact that she hadn’t killed Xavier had put a significant black mark on her record. When she later arrived at headquarters, she was escorted to a cell. She’d spent three months locked away, awaiting her fate. Each day, when the guard arrived, she had assumed it would be her last. Then, to her surprise, a tall man with a deep Southern accent had appeared in the middle of the night and introduced himself as Seth Monroe.

His imposing presence initially frightened her, but years of training had taught her how to mask her fear. She listened as Seth explained that Xavier wasn’t corrupt. Her killing of Pierre Briere had opened the passage for a large trafficking ring.

Boyce Briere, Pierre’s son, was actually the mastermind. Just as she had feared those photos were taken out of context. Pierre was trying to stop Aung Myat Min, but her actions had helped Boyce and Aung Myat Min’s operation.

Seth explained that the Noble Society was corrupt and wanted to restore the political environment back to what the founding fathers had wanted. They also wanted members high up in the president's cabinet making decisions. Still, it would take him time before he could take over. If she agreed to cooperate, he would release her. She pressed her hand to her belly and asked if she could kill the men who had wanted her to eliminate Xavier.

“Already dead, along with six others,” he replied. For the first time, all she wanted was a hug. She flung herself at him when he opened the cell door, and he wrapped his strong arms around her. Seth felt like a father figure, a concept she understood only from television—certainly not from her upbringing.

On the way to his ranch, he laid out his plan and explained that she would work with his son, Jasper Monroe.

For the next fifteen years, she worked alongside Jasper when needed. Together, they helped his father fight the evil in the Society, and finally, Seth took over as Grandmaster.

It had taken over a decade to seize control of the Society, and they had all made enemies along the way. McKenzie would do anything for the man she considered a father figure. Even though she viewed him as such, she didn't fully trust him. There was only one person in her life whom she had trusted, and she betrayed him.

Movement on the screen pulled her attention. The far-right monitor flashed an image of the license plate registered to Jane Doe. Her heartbeat against her chest as she zoomed in the camera. The driver wore a plain black baseball hat pulled low, and shades covered his eyes.

No matter how hard he tried to hide his identity, the missing tip of his finger gave him away as he gripped the steering wheel. She vividly recalled the day he'd lost that fingertip. It had been their first mission together. They'd scaled an apartment building in downtown Washington, D.C. and climbed through a window into a suspect's house. The man wasn't alone. He had a private chef preparing his dinner.

Confident as ever, Jasper had insisted on dealing with the chef himself. While he wrestled the chef among a row of gleaming knives, she had taken aim and shot the target in the head. The man had laced drugs with poison and distributed them on the street, killing nearly thirty people. She wished she could kill him a second time. She stood back and watched Jasper struggle with the chef. When the knife came down on his finger, she stepped in. One shot and the chef dropped. As they left the place, she accepted this would be her life moving forward.

Her eyes flicked back to the monitor as Jasper parked his SUV near the garage and stepped out. He was six feet two inches tall, with black hair and amber eyes—a complete contrast to Xavier. Shaking her head, she cleared away thoughts of the man she had betrayed. Yet she couldn't help but compare every man to him. It didn't help that she stalked him online and kept tabs on his personal life. She tracked him so much that his gray eyes haunted her in her dreams. A part of her wanted to crawl back to him, but his threat to personally put her in the Black Hole kept her from reaching out. She had hated living a double life, a life she had always been told was her birthright. The older she got, the more she wondered if that was true.

The burn file she had left at the house had ended Xavier's career with the CIA as an agent. However, now the CIA often reached out to him for favors, unconcerned about his compromised identity.

Jasper and her had made a deal years ago to never show up at each other's house. His arrival meant her identity was compromised, or he was there to kill her.

She pulled her iPhone from her pocket and opened the encrypted messaging app. She typed a message to Seth quickly.

McKenzie: You sent your son to kill me?

Grandmaster: How are you, my dear? It's been too long since you called.

McKenzie: Phones work two ways. Answer me.

Grandmaster: Not everyone is like your parents. Now, how is Cooper doing?

McKenzie glared at the screen. Seth had allowed her to stay at his mansion until she gave birth, and that had been the last time he saw her son in person. Over the years, she had sent him photos, but deliberately skipped all the holiday celebrations to which he had invited her. Her avoidance was mostly out of fear. She didn't want any pressure for her son to undergo the same fucked up training that she had endured. Her stomach dipped as she wondered if that might be the reason for the unannounced visit.

McKenzie: I hope I don't have to kill your son.

Grandmaster: Please don't. His mother wouldn't be thrilled.

Thankfully, her son was at school, allowing her to deal with this situation involving Jasper before he returned home. She hoped the confrontation wouldn't end in bloodshed. Jasper glanced over his shoulder before he knocked on the door.

McKenzie wiped the sweat from her hands against her mom jeans. She hadn't anticipated a fight when she woke up and headed to her home office this morning. Had she known company was coming, she would have been in full tactical gear, not a Hello Kitty shirt without a bra. She grabbed a gun from the lock box in her top drawer and tucked it into the waistband of her jeans. Rising from her desk chair, she also snatched the ankle holster containing two knives and strapped them to her ankle. Lastly, she picked up another gun and kept it in her right hand. Jasper was deadly. He never seemed to have an emotional attachment to anyone. They tolerated each other and completed missions. Even though Seth's text had made her feel slightly better, she still didn't let her guard down.

She closed her office door, tapped the silver button under the handle, and waited for the three metal bars to snap into place. It would take several blocks of C4 to breach her study. Though if someone did manage to get through the door, all of her computers would offload their data and self-detonate.

The chimes of her doorbell rang through the house.

People often underestimated her because of her size, thinking they could easily overpower her. Growing up, her father had insisted she practice against him for hours, pushing her well past her limits when she was just a child. She had learned ways to use her size to her advantage, but she wouldn't hesitate to shoot first. If someone were foolish enough to invade her turf, she would kill them and dissolve the body in a barrel of acid.

Keeping the gun hidden at her side, she opened the door. "Since when do we show up at each other's homes?" McKenzie asked, her voice tinged with irritation.

The corner of Jasper's lip twitched upward, and he held up his hands. "Not armed. We need to talk." He glanced over his shoulder and then back at her. "Inside." When she didn't budge, he continued, "You know I wouldn't show up unannounced if it weren't important."

"SITREP," she replied.

"Come on, Jinx. Sixteen years, and you still don't trust me?"

"We are spies. Why the hell would we trust each other?"

Jasper's eyes widened. "I think we are a bit more than spies to each other. We are practically brother and sister if it was up to my father."

"Only way you can come in is if you strip."

He groaned before removing his jacket, folding it, and setting it on the deck. "You know this is a seven-hundred dollar suit."

Jasper flaunted his family's wealth. On missions, they had always stayed in thousand-dollar-a-night hotels. Once, they'd parachuted from a plane with engine failure and hiked ten miles to a run-down motel. She had never seen a lethal killer throw such a temper tantrum. He hadn't shown that much emotion the day he lost part of his finger.

"My white carpet is expensive, and I don't want to deal with your blood all over it. Stop whining and strip."

He unbuttoned his white shirt, revealing a colorful dragon tattoo on his chest. A woman's name was near his heart, but

she didn't ask who the mystery woman was to him. Deep conversations would lead to emotional attachment. She only had room in her heart for her son and the man she had betrayed. When he unbuckled his belt and began to lower his pants, exposing the top of his ass. "Where the hell is your underwear?"

"Our relationship never reached the level where I would inform you that I don't wear underwear. Not something I ever thought I'd discuss with my sister," Jasper said.

That was the first time he had called her his sister. The man unnerved her.

She held up her hands. "Fine, keep your pants on and come inside. But I swear, I'll put a bullet through your head if you try anything. Please don't. The last thing I want to do is upset your father."

After a moment, she stepped back and opened the door wider for him.

"I'm impressed with your security," he noted as he walked further into her home.

When she turned to close the door, she saw the long scar running down the center of his back. There were so many things she didn't know about Jasper. But for now, she only wanted to know why he was in her house.

"Follow me," McKenzie grunted, leading the way past Jasper toward the kitchen. She glanced at the clock on the stove. It wasn't even noon yet and she wanted a glass of wine. She opted for a bottle of water and tossed one to Jasper as well.

Jasper twisted off the cap and took a swig. "I assume you're curious about why I'm here."

"I've only asked you a few times already," McKenzie replied. She rested her hand near the gun on the counter. "Your father gave me no information. It can't be another mission. I'm supposed to be on medical leave. My knee still hurts from the mission I assisted you with two months ago. So, are you here to kill me?"

"No," Jasper said, taking a seat on a barstool.

Her eyes flicked back to his chest when she noticed a tiny kitten tattooed on the back of the dragon. “What the hell is that?”

“You like what you see?” He puffed out his chest.

“Screw you! I’m trying to figure out why a cat is riding your dragon.”

“That’s a story for another time when we can share an entire bottle of liquor,” he said before he took another swig of water. “And for the record, my feelings for you are strictly platonic. The last person you fell for, you shot.”

Jasper was one of the few who knew how much she had loved Xavier. The night he cut his finger, they’d shared a bottle of Don Julio 1942, and she accidentally let it slip how much she loved Xavier. That was the only night she had ever spoken his name to him, and she figured he was too drunk to remember. “Don’t flatter yourself thinking I have feelings for you. I made you strip, because I don’t trust you,” she said bluntly.

He nodded. “Fair enough. Despite my father considering you family, we never built a friendship beyond being coworkers. But I’d like to think our years together at least made us somewhat friends.”

“Friendships lead to complications,” McKenzie said, recalling her years of training as a spy and the protective emotional walls she had built. “In the field, I’ll protect my partner, but we don’t need to know anything more about each other.”

“Except now you know I have a fetish for dragons and cats. And I know you still love Xavier.”

“Xavier is in my past. You showing up at my house jeopardizes everything I’ve built here.”

“Sara Porter,” Jasper said, uttering the one name that made her veins turn to ice.

She had closely followed the news articles detailing how Xavier and his team had taken down a criminal organization and rescued several captive women. One article had featured a photograph of Xavier carrying Sara in his arms, his eyes awash with concern. That image crystallized what McKenzie

had already suspected, Xavier loved Sara. Admitting to herself that her fixation on Xavier bordered on being a grade A stalker, she had read every story about him she could find. And really, Xavier made it easy since he had never bothered to change his passwords. Her years of spy work for a well-funded underground organization had afforded her access to advanced black-market technology, which facilitated her ability to keep tabs on him.

The only issue was that she never let Sara Porter's name appear in any of her searches. When Xavier spoke of Sara, he clearly loved the woman—she was, and always would be, his first love. So, when she read a report that Sara's death had been faked, she couldn't resist tracking Xavier to see if he'd returned to her. The image of him carrying Sara from that dark warehouse months earlier haunted her still. She knew he would never look at her the way he had looked at Sara.

"I don't know anyone by that name," McKenzie shot back, not wanting Jasper to know anything about her personal life.

"Oh, then this USB is useless to you? You know she disappeared again?"

No one gave away intel without expecting something in return. "What's the catch if I want it?"

Jasper shook his head. "Not everything is a transaction."

Her damn curiosity got the best of her. "And why do you think I would want it?"

"Even if you don't, I consider you part of my family in spite of you always ignoring Dad's invites and honesty. I like you better than my brothers too and wouldn't mind making you, my favorite."

She rolled her eyes and went to the fridge to grab two beers. Water felt wrong for this conversation. Jasper's eyes twinkled with amusement when she handed him one.

"Jasper, you're driving me crazy. Tell me why the hell you have information on Sara Porter and think I want it."

He took a couple of swigs of his beer. "How much do you know about me?"

“You’re Seth’s eldest son. Also born into the Noble Society like me. Your father now runs the organization. I believe your mom comes from oil money. You’ve tried to distance yourself from your family name. But you’re not estranged. You visit the Monroe family estate for Sunday dinner when you’re not on an operation. You and your two brothers have homes on your parent’s properties.”

She hadn’t been able to find out much about his social life, but then, she hadn’t been looking too closely either.

“I do attend Sunday dinner,” he admitted. “I don’t stay at my house in Texas though. I usually fly out and—”

“At your North Carolina cabin?”

“Yes.”

“Cut to the chase,” McKenzie snapped. “Why did you bring the thumb drive?”

“You’ve made enemies,” he said, leaning forward. “Did you think that side mission of yours wouldn’t attract attention? You hit some deep pockets hard.”

Boyce Briere hadn’t stopped growing his criminal empire, and she never planned to let him continue his business. However, the mission wasn’t easy alone. Seth had removed the bad apples from the Noble Society, but nobody corrected the mistakes she had made years prior.

“Nothing I can’t handle.”

Jasper took another sip of his beer. “I’m your partner. I’ve had your back for years. You’ve changed since the photo of Xavier and Sara graced the news. It’s like you don’t care if you live or die. That stunt you pulled on the last job could have gotten you killed. Luckily, all you hurt was your knee. Cooper needs his mother.”

McKenzie winced. He was right. Over the years, he had proven to be a trustworthy partner, even if she had never fully accepted him as such. “I’m sorry,” she said. “You still have me confused. Are we talking about my actions on the last case, my side mission, or Sara?”

Jasper sighed. “You have serious trust issues, and that’s partly due to your upbringing. Honestly, I wouldn’t have believed what your parents did to you if I hadn’t seen the tapes myself.”

She hadn’t been aware that he’d seen those videos. Her parents had recorded her grueling training sessions, proud of their techniques and eager to have them adopted as the standard. A committee had created a training guide with the methods. Although many members considered the methods barbaric, her parents had vehemently endorsed them. She was a living example of what the Society could produce.

“I don’t need your pity,” she snapped.

“Good, because you don’t have it,” Jasper retorted. “What you do have is my admiration. And that’s why I’m here—as your partner, your brother, and most importantly, as the person who’s got your back. Dad wanted you to fly to Texas to discuss the unwarranted attention you’ve garnered. I convinced him to let me speak with you first.”

Nobody knew the laws of the Society better than her. The meeting would end in bloodshed.

“When a member attracts undue attention, the Society has a standard protocol for handling it,” she said, her hand inching toward the gun on the counter.

“Yes, but that is not my father’s plan. He wants to put you in a safe house. We’ve cleaned up the Noble Society, but we still have leaks. A few members aren’t happy about how Dad wants to handle your issue,” Jasper said.

Seth had told her they still had a few members who wanted to change the new protocols. With uncertainty in the Society, she wouldn’t take her son Cooper to a safe house anyone knew about.

“Thanks. I’ll figure something out. You realize this could have been a five-minute conversation over the phone.”

Jasper ran his hands over his bare chest. “But you wouldn’t have seen me partially naked. As for the safe house, I don’t think that’s the right move either.”

“And what is the right move? I’m not going into hiding with you.”

“No, you’re not,” Jasper agreed, his hand shooting out to grasp hers. “Not because I don’t want to protect you. But I’m pretty sure, Xavier Smith is one person who would have your back, no matter what ... He is the only person you can trust right now.”

“Fuck you!” she snarled, ripping her hand from his grasp. “You’re sending me from an unknown threat straight into the arms of a man who would kill me the moment he laid eyes on me.”

Jasper waved a USB drive in the air. “Not if you have this. This USB has answers to many of his unanswered questions. And for the record, he’s looked for you.”

She rolled her eyes. “Because he wants to throw me in the Black Hole.”

“Maybe. But it’s common knowledge that he’s gathering information on Sara Porter. What I have could help him. Trade the info for protection while I figure out who exactly is after you. Dad didn’t want to discuss this over the phone, but he sounded more worried about you than wanting you dead. You’re not safe.”

She could clean up her own mess. “I will dig into what you said. If I determine we aren’t safe, Cooper and I will leave as soon as he gets home.”

“You don’t get it, Jinx. Boyce Briere is pissed and has a connection to the US government or another unknown entity. Your file the CIA had was compromised and all over the dark web, everyone has all the information they need on you. Every place you’ve ever been is documented.” Jasper pointed to her arm. “Which means if someone in the Noble Society is after you for something they read, and it will be easy to find you.”

If she removed the tracker in her arm, the Society would think she was running. Seth might be able to stop the hunt for her, but it would raise questions about why she ran.

“The hounds will search for me the second I remove the tracker.”

“Right now the best strategy is to make it look like you’re on the run. I’m flying to meet Dad the moment I leave here. Check your burner phones for any information. Go to Xavier with what is on the thumb drive. He will help you.”

Over the years, he hadn’t given her a reason to question him. But that didn’t mean she planned to follow what he said blindly. She made that mistake once, never again.

She searched Jasper’s face, “Are you secretly in love with me? You are going out of your way to protect me.”

He laughed heartily. “No, but I do consider you family. I hope one day you’d do the same for me.”

McKenzie tried to relax, but couldn’t shake the feeling that approaching Xavier was a bad idea. She would collect her son, drop off the package, and leave. “Can I see the USB?”

“Sure, but I can tell you’ve already made up your mind not to go to him. Which is a horrible decision.” Jasper tossed her a small red flash drive. “Come out to the SUV with me. I have a few things for you.”

She followed him through her house and outside. He opened the back passenger door, pulled out a green bag, and handed it to her. Before she knew it, he embraced her tightly, pressing her face against his bare chest.

“Jasper?”

“I wish you’d listen, but I know you won’t. Keep the phone on, so I can reach you.”

He pulled away, jogged around his vehicle, and climbed into the driver’s side, still half-dressed. McKenzie carried the bag back into the house and straight to her office. She scattered the contents on the floor and grabbed the bug detector from her desk.

She waved it over the contents. Nothing. She should trust Jasper. He’d never let her down. The burner phone on the floor beeped.

Jasper: Told you there were no bugs. Now, get your son out of school and hit the road.

Jinx: Talk to you soon.

Still unconvinced, she inserted the USB drive into a spare laptop not connected to her home network. The one folder was chock-full of files. Part of her wanted to dig through each report, but Jasper's request for her to leave hung thick in the air. She pulled the drive and stuck it in her pocket. A sensor at the edge of her property buzzed, followed by an alert siren indicating her perimeter wires had been cut.

She grabbed the burner phone.

Jinx: Someone's here.

Jasper: Get the fuck out of your house now.

She looked at the security monitor and saw a man in full tactical gear aiming a grenade launcher at her home. She barely had time to snatch the green bag and her go bag as she sprinted toward the escape route she'd built beneath the house. She knew she might not make it to the hatch before the grenade shattered her sanctuary.

THREE
XAVIER

His fingers drummed against the steering wheel as he wound his way around the mountain. *She broke into my private sanctuary.* Though he hadn't seen her face, her fingerprints had registered on his state-of-the-art doorknob. When the alert popped up on his phone, he'd scoured the security footage, only to find her face absent. Moments later, his exterior cameras had gone dark for five minutes, and his administrator access to the system had been revoked.

Lucas, his former Chief Information Officer, questioned why he had to leave his party early. Except Xavier wasn't ready to talk about ghosts from his past. There was no doubt that Lucas, or any of the tech-savvy people he'd hired, could have easily hacked into the system to restore his access. But he couldn't bear to discuss the woman who had bypassed his six-figure surveillance system and overridden his admin privileges. The moment he realized his access had changed, he knew how she'd gained access. She knew his damn password. It was his own fault for retaining the same one from years ago.

The past few years, he had stood on the sidelines as his friends and coworkers fell in love. Sometimes he even played a role in bringing them together. Everyone close to him always assumed Sara Porter was the one who got away. He never once corrected them either. He never wanted to talk about the woman who had captured his heart, only to put a bullet in his chest.

The road narrowed the closer he got to his secluded hideaway. The conversation he replayed many times over the years began

on a loop in his mind. He struggled to understand why she had been so adamant that the operation they were working on was wrong. They'd had orders from the CIA, but she wanted to ignore them. Yet she couldn't give him proof of why. Her constant pressure had made him call a meeting with their handler.

Part of him wondered about Agent White's motives at times, and McKenzie's incessant questions had only deepened his suspicions. The meeting with his handler hadn't gone smoothly. In fact, when Xavier asked questions, White got visibly angry and even suggested he keep an eye on McKenzie. He thought she might be working against the government.

For years, Xavier's loyalty was to the agency. But when Agent White had made a comment against McKenzie, he knew she was his world and he would protect her. He'd dove at Agent White, and the two beat the crap out of each other. Xavier had left him on the ground and headed back to the apartment he shared with McKenzie. On his way home while nursing a bloody lip, he had hatched a plan. They could run the family shipping company together. He'd even bought a ring and planned to propose. But when he'd walked into the apartment and saw the gun in her hand, all his handler's warnings flooded his mind. Years of training failed him. At that moment, he realized he couldn't be with her—but neither could he live in a world without her. He'd let her shoot him, because even with the acrid taste of betrayal, he couldn't bring himself to harm her.

McKenzie had always been his equal at the gun range. She never wavered, so he knew her bullet would be fatal. Except she had missed every vital organ, and he had woken up in the hospital. He had two detectives wanting answers about a file they found on the bed at the scene. She'd destroyed his career.

The CIA turned its back on him, and he had to pick up the pieces of his life. Less than a year later, he opened Rogue Mercenary. The CIA showed back up, needing his help and connections. He had agreed, but wanted information on McKenzie. All they would say was, "They dealt with her." At

that moment, he stopped his search because he thought they had killed her.

Except the CIA lied. It shouldn't surprise him.

He gripped the steering wheel tightly as he turned off the winding road onto the gravel road that led to his cabin. If he hadn't been paying close attention, he would have overlooked the car hidden beneath a pile of tree branches. Bringing his truck to a halt, he noted the car's strategic location—far enough down the mountain to avoid detection by his surveillance cameras and motion detectors.

Eager to investigate, Xavier leaped from his truck and marched toward the concealed vehicle. It had to be McKenzie's. To unravel the mystery, he resolved to cover the last mile and a half on foot. Snatching his bag from the truck, he jogged along the road until he reached the spot where his sensors were positioned. He cursed under his breath. The sensors were indeed on the ground and along the fence just as he had set them up. Still if someone jumped from the fence and landed three feet away, the sensors would not be triggered. To confirm his theory, he vaulted over the fence and landed without setting off any alarms.

Next, he had to identify the blind spot in his motion cameras. Xavier crouched and kept his eyes on the camera as it rotated. If he timed it perfectly, he could dart past without detection. Foregoing any further tests, he decided it was time to confront the woman who had shot him years before. Perhaps she had returned to finish the job.

As he neared his house, Xavier drew his gun from its holster. Reaching the front door, he laid his hand on the biometric pad, and the door unlocked. Inside, the lights were off, but her perfume filled the air, and his cock twitched at the scent. His body hadn't gotten the memo that McKenzie was off limits.

A dark figure was seated on the couch, staring at a blank television screen.

“Did you come back to finish the job?” He asked.

She rose from the couch and faced him, her hand casually resting on her hip. “I’m surprised you haven’t rigged this place with C4. I spent the first hour searching for explosives, anxious I might miss something.”

Making a mental note to add C4 to his shopping list, Xavier retorted, “You didn’t search everywhere. I didn’t get any alerts you accessed the basement. I’m not going to blow my place up to kill you. You’ve already cost me enough. I can save my home with a bullet to your head.” His gun remained lowered, but he was prepared to use it.

Just then, a young boy around the age of fifteen shuffled into the room, pointing a gun directly at Xavier. The setting sun made it difficult to discern his features, but his wavy blond hair matched his mother’s.

“Cooper! What have I told you about handling my guns?” She limped over to her son and snatched the gun. “He won’t kill both of us.”

Xavier chuckled darkly. “I wouldn’t be so certain. I’m undecided about you, but the kid is safe. Now why are you here, McKenzie? You never sought my help before, opting instead to double-cross and attempt to kill me.”

“Don’t be so dramatic Xavier. We both know the wound I inflicted wasn’t fatal.”

“You’re correct—the evidence you left behind was far more damaging than the bullet’s impact. You do realize your bullet could have easily hit a bone and ricocheted, right? With each passing second, the odds of me pulling this trigger are becoming less favorable for you. So, speak up.”

The boy she’d called Cooper positioned himself protectively in front of McKenzie. “I won’t let you kill my mom.”

She pushed the young man to the side. “Honey, why don’t you go check on the lasagna? Xavier and I have some matters to discuss.” She waited until Cooper had exited the room before turning back to Xavier. “If I’m here, it means I’ve exhausted all other options.”

“A phone call would have sufficed. My assistant has a list of companies you could have contacted for help.”

She took a step forward, stumbled, and fell to the floor. The once-graceful CIA officer was now sprawled out before him. Flicking on the light switch, Xavier saw her injuries for the first time. A black walking boot covered her left foot, a white gauze bandage wrapped around her left arm, both of her eyes were swollen and bruised black, and a gash ran across her forehead.

Goddamn it. His immediate impulse to throw her out vanished. He holstered his gun, approached her, and—before she could object—scooped her up in his arms. It felt unsettlingly natural to carry her. He set her down on the couch, then swiftly stepped back—disgusted by his own desire to hold her close.

“You look terrible,” he stated, unable to ignore her frail appearance.

“Ah, your eloquent words were always the height of romance. Do tell me, how do I really look?”

He arched an eyebrow. “I recall a time when just a whisper in your ear would make you scream my name. But I suppose that was all part of your scheme to betray me.”

She rolled her dark brown eyes. “Whatever I say about the past will either fall on deaf ears or fuel your anger. So, how about we strike a deal?”

“I don’t make deals with the devil.”

Reaching into a green bag beside the couch, McKenzie pulled out a red USB drive. “What if I had information about Sara and how to find her? I know you’re searching for her. Help us, and I’ll provide everything you need.” She slipped the drive back into her pocket.

The prospect of gaining valuable intel tempted him. The teen boy lingered at the edge of the kitchen door. Xavier had a few questions about him too.

“I’m not committing to anything yet. Let’s go to the kitchen and eat. I haven’t been here in over a year, so I’m curious how you managed to make lasagna.”

Struggling to her feet, McKenzie ignored his offered arm and retrieved a cane leaning against the end table. She walked past him into the kitchen, where Cooper stood holding a butcher knife. After muttering something unintelligible, she took the knife away from her son. The boy was a spitting image of his mother, down to the way his brows furrowed when he glared—which he was now doing, directed squarely at Xavier.

Extending his hand, Xavier introduced himself. “Xavier Smith. You must be Cooper?”

“Yes.”

“Have a seat next to your mom. I’ll finish up the cooking.”

Ten minutes later, Xavier pulled the lasagna from the oven and set it on the counter. Cooper poured glasses of water for everyone.

“So, how did you end up with a broken leg and the messed up arm?” he inquired between bites of pasta.

“I didn’t reach the escape hatch in time when the grenade struck my house, so I got trapped under some rubble. The secondary machine guns I’d installed provided me with cover until I could clear the debris and crawl a mile through the escape tunnel.”

He found it hard to believe that the CIA had just now decided to kill her. She must have crossed someone else. Over the years, he had developed deep connections in the CIA. Many times, he’d considered leveraging one of his favors to learn what had happened to her.

“Did you try to kill another partner? Is this one retaliating?” he asked with a smirk.

McKenzie sighed and set her fork on the table. “Do you really want to dredge up the past, or will you help us?”

“Give me one reason why I should help you.”

She gestured toward Cooper. “Isn’t he reason enough?”

“Your son?”

Her eyes widened for a second, he'd almost missed the reaction. That's when he stared into Cooper's gray eyes. *Impossible.*

Pinching the bridge of her nose, McKenzie spoke, "I told my contact you wouldn't help us. Can we at least stay the night? I'll give you the drive in the morning right before we leave, and you'll never see me again."

Right, the drive. But he didn't care about Sara at the moment. He had more questions for the woman who ruined his life.

"So, when the going gets tough, you cut and run again?" Xavier inquired.

"You're an asshole," Cooper growled.

"Cooper, don't swear."

Cooper shrugged. "You also say I shouldn't lie. But I'm pretty sure you lied to me, Mom."

Suppressing his laugh, Xavier swiped his napkin over his lips. "Your mom and I share a complicated history."

"I know," Cooper responded.

Xavier wanted to ask the glaringly obvious question, but he wanted to do it privately. "So, what stories has she told you?"

Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted McKenzie shaking her head, piquing his curiosity even more.

"Mom always speaks highly of you. She told me about you, the man who saved her life multiple times. I can't even tell you how many times I've heard the London story," Cooper grumbled.

The memory burst forth from the mental vault he had sealed years ago. He and McKenzie had been tailing a target in London, infiltrating a charity event the man hosted at his home. They were discovered while downloading intel from his computer. With only a split second to decide, Xavier had shoved McKenzie toward the window, and they both plunged into the backyard pool. Despite the complication, the mission was only a partial failure. Before jumping, McKenzie had

managed to secure the USB drive containing the vital information.

“We had some memorable missions. But for some reason, the bad ones tend to overshadow the good,” Xavier mused.

Cooper tilted his head thoughtfully. “People often focus on anger and overlook the good in the world. Does one bad deed make someone irredeemable?”

Xavier let out a sharp laugh. “You’re spot-on about people dwelling on the negatives. You could receive ten compliments, but that one nasty comment will be the one that gnaws at you. You’ve got a pretty mature outlook for your age. I’ve witnessed some of the worst the world has to offer. So let me ask you, Cooper, should a person forgive someone who has killed a loved one?”

“No,” Cooper answered without hesitation.

“Suppose a person—”

McKenzie interrupted him by clearing her throat. “That’s enough hypothetical discussions for tonight. Cooper, why don’t you take your plate and computer to the bedroom, and work on your homework?”

“Mom, our house exploded, you had a vet fix your leg, and we drove across the country. Is homework really the priority right now? We need a plan.”

Xavier appreciated the boy’s loose lips. He’d offered more information than McKenzie was willing to disclose. So, they had been hiding on the East Coast.

“This is non-negotiable. Your teacher said she would send you your homework, and I expect you to complete it. Now go.”

Cooper had barely left the room when McKenzie narrowed her gaze onto Xavier. “You were going to tell my son that I shot you?”

“I don’t think it’s fair. He believes I’m the bad guy for being upset that you broke into my house and disrupted my work. Have you ever considered that there might be other people who need my help?”

Rogue Mercenaries, over the past year, underwent a significant transformation. He'd welcomed new employees while others moved on to different adventures. More often than not involving love, which he couldn't begrudge them.

With each passing second, his resolve to evict her weakened. The longer he sat with her, the more he wanted to know what kind of mess she had gotten herself into. First, they had to talk about Cooper. "Is he mine?"

"Do you really need to ask?" McKenzie shot back.

"Yes," he insisted. "I deserve to hear you say it."

"He's yours."

Xavier felt an urge to scream, but resisted. It wouldn't alter the past or the current situation. Regardless of his feelings towards McKenzie, he wouldn't abandon his son.

"Did you know you were pregnant before you shot me?"

A tear escaped the corner of her eye, and McKenzie hesitated. "Would my answer change anything?"

He genuinely didn't know, but he deserved so much more than she had ever offered him.

"Mom!" Cooper's panicked voice rang out from the other room.

McKenzie sprang from her chair. She could run, but he planned to get his answers. But for the first time in years, Xavier found himself unsure of his next move.

FOUR
MCKENZIE

“Coming!” McKenzie jumped from her seat and grabbed her cane. Her heart was about to pound out of her chest. She quickly wiped the tears from her cheek and took a couple of deep breaths to stop any more threatening to pour from her eyes.

During the drive across the country, she had prepared herself to have a conversation about Cooper. Yet when the moment came, she couldn’t do it. No matter how often she rehearsed what she planned to say, she had never considered Xavier’s presence. Years later, he could still bring her to her knees with his icy gray eyes.

As she darted for the door, his hand reached out, and his callous fingers brushed along her forearm before grasping it. The damn sparks between them hadn’t faded either, but she had her son to worry about. “McKenzie. You can run now, but I want answers.”

She couldn’t admit it—not to him—that she was pregnant with his son when she had betrayed him. Out of all the secrets she held deep inside, that one she planned to take to the grave.

“Cooper needs me right now. After he goes to bed, we can discuss my next move. Our past is in the past, and I only care about keeping my son safe.” She pulled her arm from his grip.

She hobbled down the hallway, determined to get away from him and bury her emotions deep down. Her heart settled as she pushed open the door to the guest room. Cooper had his books scattered across the bed.

“What’s up?”

“Two things,” Cooper waved toward the wall to his right.

She had taken the guest bedroom next to this one. So, she could be close to her son at all times. She never stepped foot in Xavier’s bedroom, since she couldn’t bear seeing anything that would lead her to believe he brought other women to this house.

Cooper continued, “I heard your phone ring.”

More than likely, it was Jasper. He’d checked in with her each night.

“Thank you. I’ll call Jasper in a minute. You mentioned something else; do you need help with your homework?”

Cooper shifted his computer and flashed his screen at her. “Mrs. Wiggins is asking questions about where we are, and I’m unsure how to reply.”

As she read over the email the wording felt angry compared to when she had spoken to the young teacher. It didn’t sound like the same person. With a few clicks, she exported the email to keep all the metadata and forwarded it to herself. Over the years, she had learned a few things about technology. But a majority of the time, she had relied on the hackers the Noble Society employed.

For now, she would fish for more information and research who sent the email. “I’ll reply to her. When you submit your assignments, make sure—”

“Mom. I know not to use the computer without a VPN. I’m fifteen. When are you going to stop pretending you’re a wedding planner and just tell me that you work for the CIA, or is it the FSB?”

For years, she had tried to make sure her worlds would never crash together. The Noble Society would want her son to take her place one day, and she wouldn’t let that happen. “The KGB doesn’t exist anymore, and before you ask, I don’t work for the FSB or the CIA. I have a thriving wedding planning business.”

Cooper glared at her, and she had to cover her smile with her hand. The older he got, the more he looked like Xavier.

“You’re telling me a bride and groom got so mad about a wedding you messed up that they blew up our house? I’ve seen enough movies, Mom, and TikTok shorts. No normal house has a bunker, a shooting range, and the amount of security cameras we had. Not to mention, nobody in my grade uses a VPN or even knows what it is. Last week, we had an assignment to find our house on Google Maps. Somehow, all the kids in our class had no problem except me. How is it possible our place doesn’t exist on Google Maps or the County records?”

“Those are very valid questions.” Xavier’s deep voice came from the hall. “I know you aren’t with the CIA anymore.”

“Yes! I was right.” Cooper fist-bumped in the air. “My mom is a CIA agent. This is so cool.”

“Cooper,” McKenzie sighed.

“Don’t lie to me, mom. I want to know what is going on.”

“I don’t work for the CIA.”

Cooper tapped his finger on his chin. “Then who is Jasper? I thought he was your partner. When you weren’t telling me anything, I pulled up the videos from the house. The information is still in our cloud account. He stripped almost naked at the front door before you let him in the house. He didn’t put his clothes back on until he was in his SUV. Plus, he calls you every night. Not only all that, but there’s a TikTok of you two online.”

Her stomach dropped. “Still?”

“Who is Jasper, McKenzie?” Xavier’s voice had a hint of jealousy.

But she needed to see the video.

Cooper pulled up TikTok and went to his liked tab, scrolling until he came to one where her face was perfectly visible. “Yeah, this one.”

A video of Jasper and her on their last mission played on the screen. It was a wedding she had planned and the caption read, 'I hope for love like this one day.'

The whispering he kept doing in her ear was updates on the target. Her hand rested inside his jacket on a second gun. The Noble Society had a team that scoured the internet and social media, then removed anything with members' faces. This one had over a million views.

"Fuck, I have to call Jasper."

"I'm not going to repeat myself. Who the fuck is Jasper?" Xavier growled.

She bolted for the door, and Xavier stuck out his arm, blocking her path.

"Give me a few minutes," McKenzie pushed past Xavier's body. She didn't need to look over her shoulder to know he was on her heels. For a moment, she contemplated if she should lock the bedroom door, but he would open it within a minute. She ignored him and grabbed her phone from the nightstand, calling the only number programmed for speed dial.

"Thank fuck! You're—" Jasper's words were cut off as Xavier yanked the phone from her fingers and, a moment later, hit the speakerphone button. "Trust no one."

She reached for the phone, but Xavier held it over her head like a bully on the playground with a height advantage. "Could you repeat that? An oversized ogre pulled the phone from my hands?"

A husky laugh echoed through the phone. "Your height has always been your one flaw."

"She has more than one," Xavier shot back. "Now tell me who the fuck you are."

"Interesting..." Jasper paused. "The great Xavier Smith hasn't figured out McKenzie's secret. If I didn't need to go dark, I would fly to Montana just to watch what happens next."

Xavier's knuckles turned white as he gripped the phone. "You don't know jack about me. All I want are some answers and to get back to my life."

"But you're wrong. I know a lot about you. I bet you wanted to return to California to spend your free weekend at the sex club you frequent. It's interesting how you spend each weekend with a new woman and how much they all look the same. Were you going to sit alone in your mansion working all night with a bottle of Kavalan Whiskey? You might act like you hate the fact Jinx walked back into your life. But even with that trail of women you fuck your way through, you only have a picture of one woman in your office drawer. And McKenzie, I know you think he's in love with Sara. It'll ease your mind to let you know it's not her photo."

All the information hit her at once. She was sure he only had her photo in his desk as a reminder of her betrayal. Over the years, she had slept with her share of men, but hearing about Xavier with a different woman each night hurt.

"Watch your back, Jasper. I don't know why you made it a priority to research me. But I'll make it a mission to destroy you," Xavier growled.

She ignored Xavier's threat, because Jasper had more important things to worry about. "Jasp, a video from a wedding you helped me plan went viral. You were wrong about the chatter only coming after me. Please, you have to follow protocol."

Jasper sighed, "It will be down soon. I'm going dark to search for some information."

Xavier raised a brow in her direction, more than likely expecting her to fill in the blank.

"Give me an hour to say goodbye to Cooper, and I'll work my way toward you," she told him.

"No!" both men growled at the same time.

"Someone tell me what the fuck is going on!" Xavier growled.

"Jinx and I both work for the Noble Society. It's an organization you're born into and one you can never escape

unless they kill you. My father is the current Grandmaster. So, the chatter to take out Jinx might be linked to the Society, but I think it's something else. Dad thinks there's a force working against us, and we aren't sure what started the domino effect."

Any discussion about the Society outside of marriage or family was punishable by death. Jasper had always followed the code we live by, and she was speechless that he'd just outed them to one of the most dangerous mercenaries.

Xavier's frown deepened. "A fucking cult? God, I'm really getting sick of these underground organizations."

She placed her hand on Xavier's forearm. "It's not. Jasper even mentioning the Society to an outsider is a death sentence. Please let Cooper stay with you, and I'll hunt down the men who are after me and now Jasper. When I'm done, I'll come get Cooper, and you won't have to deal with us again."

Xavier ignored her and talked into the phone. "Jasper, since you were so great at investigating me, get my team all the information you have on possible suspects. You won't have your partner for this mission. If she even tries to leave this house, I'll handcuff her ass to the bed. I'll call my team in and brief them tomorrow."

Jasper chuckled. "I knew making Jinx show up at your doorstep was the right call. She should have told you everything years ago, but we were trained to be operatives and keep our secrets before we were out of diapers. I know your team has worked with AA Security before. Sorry, but getting the information from them might be easier. Stay safe, Jinx."

The line went dead. Xavier held out his hand with her phone. She sat down on the bed and put her head in her hands. Being locked in a house was not how she worked. The grenade launchers had blown up all of her equipment. Now, with Jasper going dark, she had no clue which contacts she could trust.

Xavier cleared his throat. "So, you worked for an underground agency while working for the CIA? That means the entire time, you were betraying your country."

She knew he wouldn't understand.

"You will always have a misconceived notion about me. There are things I can never tell you. Please just keep Cooper safe, and I'll be back once the threat is taken care of."

"I've told you no already. You did shit your way last time, and I almost died. This time, I'm taking control."

She rolled her eyes. "I made sure not to hit any organs. You're being a little dramatic."

"When the person you loved shoots you, the victim can be as fucking dramatic as they want. We have a lot of shit to talk about, but first I have to make some calls and get my team to start digging." He turned on his heels and heading to the door. She kept her eyes on him until he made it out of her room.

McKenzie pulled her laptop from the backpack next to the bed. She knew he wouldn't like it, but she had to leave. Cooper was safe with him. But if she stayed in the house much longer, she could endanger both of the men she loved. With a couple of clicks, she found the thirty-second clip. She couldn't remember anything off from that night though.

She pulled up the email from the teacher and dug into the header details, comparing them to her last email. They weren't sent from the same location. Though this could happen if Mrs. Wiggins wasn't at home, but both emails were sent during the day. It meant the new one wasn't from the teacher. She didn't bother responding. Instead, she closed her laptop and put it in her backpack. In the middle of the night, she would leave. The only way to escape would be the way she had snuck in. More than anything, she wanted to say goodbye to Cooper, but that wasn't an option.

FIVE
XAVIER

Fuck! She's part of that cult. Of all the things Xavier had expected to hear today, learning that McKenzie was part of the Noble Society was not one of them.

He was still trying to wrap his head around the fact that he had a son. Lying in the hospital all those years ago, he had tried to figure out why on earth she shot him. Instead of investigating the past, he had buried memories of her deep down. They only resurfaced when he drank too much and would pull the photo of her from his desk—the same photo the man on the phone knew about. Clearly, his security wasn't as top-notch as he had thought, but there was too much else going on to address it right now.

He thought of the one person who could help him navigate all of this, but he was hesitant to make that call, especially considering he was spending time with the people he cared about before he moved to London. Nevertheless, Xavier headed to his office and went straight for the bottle of Kavalan he had gotten on one of his trips to Taipei, Taiwan. He filled the glass halfway and gulped down the dark liquid. The burn did nothing to ease the turmoil in his mind.

After pouring another drink, he went to his desk, sank into the leather chair, and waited a few minutes before pulling out his phone to dial Lucas' number. The phone rang just once before rustling bed sheets could be heard on the other end.

“Hey, boss,” Lucas whispered, the worry evident in his voice.

Taking another sip of his whiskey, Xavier replied, "Lucas, I know this isn't the best time, but with the mess I've found myself in, you were my first thought. Damn it, maybe I should just figure this out on my own."

Lucas' reply was immediate. "Stop being so dramatic. Everyone knew something was up by the way you left the celebration."

"This has to do with the damn cult you are part of. Well, one like it anyway."

Lucas chuckled lightly. "Boss, how many times must I say it? Royal Bones is not a cult."

Any organization that doesn't allow members to leave seemed like a cult to him.

"We can agree to disagree," Xavier shot back, tension building in the back of his neck. "What I need to understand is how much you know about the Noble Society here in the US."

The rhythmic tapping of a keyboard filled the silence. Xavier could picture Lucas, surrounded by his state-of-the-art setup, capable of accessing virtually any information ever needed. Yet, he wasn't certain if even Lucas could shed light on the puzzle that now consumed him.

As Lucas detailed unsettling discoveries about the Noble Society's past, especially the rampant corruption prior to Seth Monroe's rise to power, Xavier's thoughts raced. Corruption appeared to be deeply embedded within their ranks, even now initiatives to 'clean up' were ostensibly underway. The silver lining was that the Black Brothers in Texas and AA Security, led by Anthony Ross, were now stepping in to help straighten things out. During Xavier's time with the CIA, he had collaborated with Bryson Black and Antonio Ross on several missions.

The mention of a 'membership list' caught Xavier's attention. Lucas had become a pawn in the game between the Royal Bones and the Noble Society only months ago. His own parents had orchestrated his kidnapping over the retrieval of a box filled with secrets that could expose some of the most

powerful politicians and CEOs. The team's rescue mission remained fresh in Xavier's mind.

"You're telling me you have detailed information on their members?" Xavier asked, his tone demanding clarity.

Lucas replied, "After Arthur and Seth decided to join forces rather than work against each other, they shared a list of past and present associates. Arthur tasked me with investigating each person, while the Noble Society reciprocated the effort. From what I've found, the Ross family wasn't on any of the lists, but I think they have ties in some way. Antonio's sister-in-law, Sophie Ross, has started to dig into our list. She's a good hacker, but I spotted her trail when she tried to investigate me and Willa."

Xavier's heart pounded as he weighed his next question. He hesitated momentarily because he knew Lucas would be able to start piecing together parts of his past. Things he kept hidden from everyone. Nobody except Fin Grayson knew about McKenzie. "Is there a McKenzie Stuart on that list?"

The interlude of keystrokes sounded like a ticking time bomb to Xavier. Each tap heightened the suspense, and each second of silence intensified his anxiety. He wasn't sure if he wanted her story earlier to be a lie or the truth. If it was the truth, she could be in more danger than either of them thought.

The past and her betrayal loomed large, but the present was filled with danger. It was clear to Xavier, despite Lucas' possible blindness to reality. These cults, under the control of wealthy, powerful families, attracted corruption and a hunger for more power.

"Yes."

"Send everything you've discovered about her to me and Ajax. He's not supposed to start until next week, but I'll see if he can help. Also, I want him to investigate any enemies she might have made over the years," he instructed, finishing his drink.

Knowing he was intruding upon Lucas' final days in the States, with a hint of remorse Xavier added, "I'm sorry to drop

this on you. Forward the file to the team, and I'll have them dig deeper.”

Lucas' response came an octave lower, “Fuck that. Our bond runs deeper than you sometimes remember. Willa and Thane will understand my need to assist you. It will be easy to reschedule our flight. We've always had each other's backs, and now, in your hour of need, you think I'd step away? Hell no! Remember when Willa was in trouble? You were at my side. Does Grim know what is going on?”

Grim was his friend from childhood. He'd dated her sister through high school. They broke up when she went to college, and he had gone to the CIA. Only a year after she left, she married Carter and dropped out of school. On their second anniversary, she died in a boating accident. Except now we know it never happened. Grim and him had grieved together, only deepening their friendship. “Just have the team gather the data. I'll arrange for Grim to oversee the operations in my absence.”

Lucas' voice was firm yet reassuring, “I assume McKenzie is with you in Montana. Stay safe while we find more information about her. Don't worry about calling the team. I'll loop Grim in, and we can chat again in a few hours.” And just like that, the call ended.

Xavier barely had a moment to wonder about Lucas' uncanny knowledge of his whereabouts, because a fleeting shape caught his eye. Her movement was quiet even with the cast on her leg, but the flicker of a shadow was a clear giveaway. He had let her run the show last time and he ended up in the hospital with his CIA cover blown, and a million unanswered questions. Not this time.

Xavier pushed back from his desk, his eyes scanning the room. Instead of heading for the exit of his office door, his fingers sought a discreet lever hidden amongst the spines of old books on his bookcase. A soft click echoed in the silent room, revealing a secret passage. To his left, the staircase led to the basement and to the right, a narrow corridor allowed him to move through the walls of his home, promising a swift passage to the house's main entrance.

As he navigated the dimly lit hallway, a sense of urgency propelled him. He flung open the concealed exit, half-expecting to startle McKenzie, who was already nearing the door.

Her voice was laced with anger. “What the hell, Xavier? You nearly gave me a heart attack!”

His form cast a tall shadow against the white wall. With arms folded he eyed her, unsure of how to handle her anymore. “Where were you headed in such a hurry?”

She hesitated, her gaze flicked between him and the door. “I... I wanted a drink. Just some water from the kitchen.”

He arched an eyebrow, and a wry smile tugged at his lips. “Do you ever not lie?”

Her defense was immediate, her eyes narrowing. “What’s that supposed to mean? Can’t I get thirsty?”

He gestured to her attire. “So, you felt the need to swap pajamas for a coat and slung your backpack over your shoulder just for a midnight run to the kitchen?”

She rubbed a hand over her face. “Coming here...it was a mistake.”

Xavier closed the distance between them in a few strides. “Yet here you are, dragging a storm into my world. Those enchanting eyes won’t save you this time...” He paused. Their breaths synched, old memories stirring emotions long suppressed. “You chose how things would go last time without discussing it with me. This round, McKenzie, I take the lead.”

His gaze locked on her defiant eyes. “You can’t stop me, Xavier.”

He leaned closer. The weight of their shared past hung in the air. “I’ve never been one to back down from a challenge, McKenzie, and that sounded a lot like one.”

A flash of vulnerability washed across her face, and a single tear slid down her cheek. She turned away, attempting to shield her face. “This isn’t about you or me, Xavier. This is about my son. I’ll do whatever it takes to keep him safe.”

He cupped her face gently, forcing her to look at him. “Our son,” he emphasized, wiping the tear away with his thumb. “I won’t let you face this danger alone. You can choose to accept my protection, or I will ensure it, by cuffing you to my bed.”

Her voice was tinged with disbelief. “So, what? You want to take me to your room for sex?”

One word from her plump lips and his cock stirred. Sex had been farthest from his thoughts, but now he couldn’t stop wondering what she looked like naked all these years later.

Xavier smirked, raising an eyebrow in amusement. “Jumping to conclusions? Is sex on your mind? I don’t recall saying that was the plan.”

Her face flushed a light shade of pink. “Then why suggest taking me to your room?”

“Because, my dear,” he started, exasperation evident, “it’s easier to restrain you in my room than in the jail cells downstairs. But if I have to confine you there, it means I’ll be forced to sleep on an uncomfortable cot just to ensure you don’t escape. So, the choice is yours, my bed or the cold, unforgiving floor of the dungeon. We both need rest. Tomorrow will be busy as my team gathers information and strategizes our next move.”

McKenzie’s eyes darted towards the entrance, a clear sign of her intention to flee. Reading her move, Xavier wasted no time. In one swift motion, he scooped her up and threw her over his shoulder. Her surprised shriek filled the entryway and her fists pounded against his back. Still, he remained resolute, as he carried her toward his room.

Once they reached the center of his room Xavier stopped and lowered her to her feet. “So, do you want to change into pajamas, or will you sleep in what you’re wearing?”

McKenzie rolled her eyes. “I sure as hell don’t remember you being this bossy. And for your information, I usually sleep without clothes, so I don’t even have pajamas.”

His eyebrow quirked up, a teasing glint in his eyes. “Convenient since I also prefer to sleep nude.” He waved his

hand in her direction. “I advise you to strip or you’re wearing what you have on because, in just a minute, you’re going to climb in that bed, and I’m going to handcuff you to the frame.”

She smirked as she let her backpack slide down her arm. Her chest rose and fell before she pulled her white t-shirt over her head, revealing a white lace bra. As she stepped out of her jeans, Xavier took a moment to appreciate the woman before him. McKenzie had always been breathtaking, but in the past years, she had only got sexier. He battled the urge to reach out, to trace the scar on her lower abdomen. A vivid reminder of their shared history. Sleeping next to her would be an exercise in self-control.

His eyes scanned back up her body, stopping on her luscious breasts, only slightly hidden by lace, but her hard nipples poked the thin fabric, making his cock harden.

As if she could read his mind, she winked before she turned and sashayed toward the bed. Her movements were deliberate, challenging. Her silhouette beneath the soft lighting was both an invitation and a dare. She slipped under the covers, peering out with a playful smirk. “Thought you said you sleep naked?”

He normally slept naked, but there was no way he could trust himself next to her. Instead of answering her, he approached the bed, grasped a leather strap attached to the headboard with handcuffs on the other end. McKenzie’s eyes widened; her playful demeanor flattered a bit. “Seriously? Do you think that’s necessary? You’d hear me if I tried to sneak away.”

He slipped the metal around her wrist and listened to the lock engage. “Perhaps. But this way, I’ll sleep without any doubts.” With a swift motion, he tested the lock to see if she had flexed her wrist when he slid the cuff into place.

“And I’ll sleep like crap.”

“You’re the only one to blame. It was you who tried to sneak out of the house tonight.” Xavier replied as he walked to the other side of the bed.

As McKenzie glared at the cuff, her eyes clouded with suspicion. “How many others have you used this on? Maybe I’d be better off in your dungeon.”

There had been no other women in this house. She didn’t know he had it built for her. Well, the original concept was, but then she’d betrayed him before he broke ground. But he wasn’t keen on admitting that so soon. He methodically stripped down to his boxers, catching her stolen glances toward his hard cock. It was clear the tension between them wasn’t solely hatred. Both were aroused by the sight of each other.

Sliding into bed beside her, Xavier broke the silence. “When I first designed this place, I thought maybe there’d be someone special enough to bring here, to share it with. So, just to clarify, you’re the first woman to step foot inside this home.”

The room darkened as he switched off the lights, leaving only the dim glow of the moon to illuminate their space. Despite the late hour and his exhaustion, questions swirled in his mind, gnawing at him. Why, after all this time, did the hatred evaporate at the sight of her? Why did the thought of her in danger tighten a vice around his chest?

A soft sob beside him brought his thoughts to a halt. Instinctively, he drew her close, wrapping his arms around her trembling form.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured against his chest, the cold metal of the cuff rested against his side. “I’ve messed up so much, and I’m lost on how to right my wrongs.”

“Starting tomorrow, you’ll lay everything bare. From there, we navigate this labyrinth together. No more solo acts,” Xavier whispered, his voice firm.

“I’m not even sure where to start,” she admitted, her voice quivering.

“We’ll figure it out together,” he reassured.

Only after what felt like an eternity, McKenzie’s uneven breaths gave way to soft, rhythmic snores—a sound that had lulled him to sleep all those years ago. Xavier teetered on the

edge of slumber when the sharp vibration of his phone against the nightstand jerked him back to reality. He moved with stealth to retrieve it, careful not to disturb McKenzie.

Lucas: Sent over some intel. I found six different hits out on her head. She has an enemy list a mile long, and none are connected.

A chilling wind seemed to sweep through the room. Xavier's spine stiffened, his senses on high alert. The very walls of his sanctuary suddenly felt too thin and vulnerable. He glanced at McKenzie's serene face and knew he would risk everything to keep her safe. He hoped it wouldn't end like last time.

SIX

MCKENZIE

McKenzie's eyes fluttered open, and last night's events rushed back. She had broken down in front of Xavier. When he'd pulled her against his chest, time seemed to freeze, and she found herself in happier days—before she'd betrayed him. As she sat up and raked her fingers through her hair, she let out a sigh. Her wrists were free from cuffs. While many would be mortified at being locked to the bed, she simply twisted to get a closer look at the bindings, running her hand along the smooth wooden frame until she found the strap.

Their passion had always been electric, yet he'd never used cuffs before. These days her Kindle was full of erotica. She couldn't help but wonder how he'd changed. Did he require his partners to call him master like she'd read in her books? Her stomach clenched at the thought of him sleeping with other women. Letting go of the strap, she pushed back the covers and climbed out of the king-sized bed.

Her duffel bags sat beside the bed on the floor. Xavier's decision to move them into this room left her unsure what to make of the gesture. She had to go. Overwhelmed by fatigue last night, she'd allowed him to stop her from leaving. They both knew a simple cuff was easy to break out of.

But today, after a few hours of sleep, she knew she had to regain control. She didn't get a fairy tale ending.

She rummaged through her bags and found a clean shirt, pants, and a plastic cover for her walking boot. Her foot sank into the plush carpet as she headed for the master bathroom and opened the door. Upon stepping inside, she marveled at the

modern design. White marble covered the walls, and dark chrome fixtures provided a perfect offset of color. She thought she might never want to leave when she spotted the dual rainfall showerheads. She quickly shed her bra and underwear, then covered her boot with the plastic sheath before stepping into the shower. The water warmed instantly, and as she stood under the cascading stream, much of her stress washed away. Usually, her operation plan emerged in the shower. However, today, her thoughts were consumed by Xavier's embrace from the night before—a rare feeling of safety she hadn't experienced in years.

Realizing she couldn't hide in the shower forever, McKenzie turned off the water, dried herself, and prepared to go head-to-head with Xavier's stubborn ass. Not in the mood to fuss over her curly hair, she swiftly ran a comb through it and twisted it into a messy bun. She dressed quickly, and approached the master bedroom's exit. Gripping the doorknob, she braced herself for the confrontation ahead—a battle she was determined to win. She had already caused Xavier enough trouble and refused to add more.

Walking down the hallway, she smiled at the sound of her son Cooper's laughter filling the house. However, the moment was tinged with sadness. She couldn't remember the last time he had laughed so freely. For years, her focus was to protect him from the evils in the world. Until this moment, she hadn't realized she had become the one person she never thought she'd resemble—her own mother.

In some ways, she had become like her parents. The only thing missing was putting Cooper through spy training. She hadn't tortured him. However, she had kept them both under the radar—always moving, on edge, and never truly living life, only waiting for what might happen next.

Although figuring out what was happening would force her to leave Cooper with Xavier, she knew it was in her son's best interest. The thought of leaving Cooper tore at her, but she found solace knowing that Xavier would look after him. That, above all, was her priority. Her footsteps were muffled by the

cold marble floor as she continued toward the kitchen, where the voices of Xavier and Cooper grew increasingly louder.

Upon entering the kitchen, McKenzie found Xavier by the stove, shirtless and wielding a spatula. Her eyes trailed over his tanned skin, moved up to his perfect abs, and finally rested on the scar upon his chest. She winced at the jagged mark before tearing her gaze away to focus on Cooper. Her son sat at the counter, a laptop in front of him with a glass of orange juice beside it. His hair was a mess, but his smile was radiant. Just last night, he had been siding with her against Xavier. They looked like best friends, and she felt like an outsider. When their eyes landed on her, the smiles on their faces faded slightly, and she fought back tears.

“Join us,” Xavier commanded. “I’m making breakfast.”

“Mom, did you know Xavier can fly helicopters?” Cooper gestured toward the back window, where a V-22 Osprey helicopter was visible. Having followed Xavier’s career, McKenzie knew he had the financial means to afford such a luxury. Most likely it would be equipped with all the latest features, including tilt-rotor capabilities.

Flipping a pancake, Xavier looked puzzled. “You never told him?”

For years, McKenzie had constructed a cover story about being a wedding coordinator. Cooper had only learned the previous night about her CIA involvement. She locked eyes with Xavier. “In Cooper’s world, I am a wedding coordinator, and my parents died in a plane crash long ago.”

Cooper crossed his arms. “So, are you finally going to start telling me the truth?”

Before she could respond, Xavier interjected. “Your mom was an extraordinary pilot, nicknamed Jinx. She could evade ground missiles by counting down the seconds it took for them to lock onto her helicopter and then maneuvered away. It’s a skill called ‘jinxing.’ She was so good that’s how she earned the nickname.”

“That’s amazing, Mom! Can we go for a ride later?” Cooper asked, practically bouncing in his seat.

Xavier set down a plate of pancakes, butter, and syrup before pouring her a cup of black coffee.

She weighed Cooper’s request. It had been years since she’d flown just for the thrill of it. “Maybe another time. After breakfast, why don’t you play some games while Xavier and I talk?”

“I’m not a child, Mom. I want to listen if you’re talking with *Dad* about our house blowing up.”

Hearing Cooper refer to Xavier as ‘Dad’ felt like a body blow. She glanced at Xavier, but his expression was unreadable. “We’ve been through a lot in the past forty-eight hours. You can resent me all you want, but my sole concern right now is ensuring your safety.”

“How about this, Cooper?” Xavier proposed, taking the last bite of his pancake. “After your mom and I have a quick talk, the three of us can take a ride.”

McKenzie shot Xavier a narrow-eyed glance. He’d backed her into a corner, putting her in a situation with no easy way out—none of it aligned with her plans. She opened her mouth to object, but the elated smile on Cooper’s face left her speechless.

Cooper quickly polished off his pancakes and downed his orange juice. “I’ll go to my room so you two can talk. Can’t wait to brag about this at school when we get back!”

McKenzie bit the inside of her cheek, holding back words that could shatter the fragile happiness Cooper was experiencing. North Carolina was now their past. She was haunted by the uncertainty of whether she’d even survive the upcoming mission since she planned to take down the person who figuratively and literally blew up her world.

“He’s a good boy,” Xavier said softly, gathering her plate. “And he deserves a living mother.”

McKenzie bristled at his remark, unsettled by how effortlessly he had read her mind. “I don’t know what you’re talking

about.”

Xavier tossed his head back and laughed. “Your eyes give you away. You’re plotting every conceivable escape route to undertake this mission solo.” In a fluid motion, he rounded the counter and stood before her, his hands gripping the surface on either side of her, effectively trapping her. “But this time, we’re doing things my way. If I have to cuff you to me, or even my bed again, I will. Your lone-wolf act last time earned me a bullet.” Xavier’s unyielding eyes met hers, filled with a quiet intensity. “That’s why you listen first, and then we make decisions. Together.”

“Jesus, Xavier, you make it sound like a marriage counseling session. The stakes are much higher here,” she retorted.

“You don’t have to tell me about the stakes, Jinx. I know very well what’s at risk. Even if I spent years pissed at you, that boy deserves his mother alive.”

She took a deep breath, her resolve wavering for just a moment. “Fine. I’ll sit through your team meeting and hear what you all have to say. But that doesn’t mean I’ll blindly follow any plan, yours or anyone else’s.”

The thumb drive that Jasper had given her remained in her possession. Sara had been Xavier’s true love, and she knew it would be her leverage. He would want the USB drive more than he cared about her. A wave of relief had washed over her as a plan clicked into place in her mind. Although technically that had been the first step, she still needed to figure out where to start once she hit the road.

Xavier took a step back, his eyes searching hers before settling into a more relaxed expression. “Fair enough. But we got a ride with Cooper first. He’s looking forward to it, and God knows he deserves some joy amid all this chaos. Lucas texted, and the team should be ready around two for the meeting. We have plenty of time to spend with our son before we rip open old wounds.”

She hesitated, glancing toward the hallway where Cooper had disappeared. It was a risky detour from her mission-focused mindset. Yet, it was an opportunity for Cooper to have an

unforgettable experience and a chance for her to temporarily escape the relentless tension.

“Alright,” she finally conceded. “We’ll take him up.”

Xavier’s eyes softened, the barest hint of a smile gracing his lips. “Good. Don’t think you have fooled me. I see the storm brewing behind those eyes. You are plotting something.”

“I’m not an enemy that you keep having to analyze.” She shot back.

“No, you’re much more dangerous than any enemy I have,” Xavier said, dropping his hands from the counter and stepping back to give her space. “Because blindly following anyone isn’t in either of our natures, is it?”

She snorted. “Clearly not.”

He exhaled, his expression softening. “I know you’re suspicious of me, and my motives. I get it. But you should know that my primary concern is Cooper. And you. In that order.”

“Is that so?” she questioned; one eyebrow arched in skepticism.

“Yes,” he affirmed. “And if Monroe or any other Noble Society need to be involved to convince you, then so be it. I really wish years ago you would have told me you were part of that damn cult.”

“It’s not a cult. The Noble Society was established years ago to protect this country. When you’re born into it, it’s your birthright to continue doing what is necessary, regardless of the cost,” she recited. Those words had been pounded into her as a young child.

Xavier cocked his head to the side. “So, it will be our son’s birthright?”

She scrubbed her hand over her face and sighed. “Seth Monroe hasn’t forced Cooper yet, not like the prior leader did, or what my parents put me through. My goal is for our son to have a choice if he wants to join. And I’m conflicted if I want him to join.”

“There are many ways to protect our country besides joining,” he countered, raising his hand to stop her from interrupting. “Nothing I say at this moment will change your mind, so let’s take a break from this argument and go for a ride.”

She looked at him, trying to gauge whether he was sincere or if this was just another layer in some elaborate plot. The problem was Xavier had always been an enigma, even when they were together. “Alright. We’ll go on this helicopter ride, then I’ll listen to your team and make informed decisions from there. And for the record, I want to say again the Noble Society isn’t a cult.”

His lips curled into a faint smile. “You’ll never change my mind. Now, let’s have our first family activity together before we start dodging bullets.”

Before she could stop herself, she reached out and grabbed his arm. She ignored the slight shock that coursed through her body when she touched his skin. “I really shouldn’t have brought this to your doorstep. When Jasper mentioned you, my mind zeroed in on getting Cooper here to safety. But I was only thinking about me and Cooper, not what I just dropped at your doorstep. I have a lot of enemies.”

“And luckily I have a lot of bullets,” he countered. “You and I have a lot to work out. None of that is going to happen this second. Let’s make the most of the next few hours before we meet my team for a virtual meeting.”

McKenzie felt the weight of his words. They hung in the air, as palpable as the tension between them. She couldn’t predict how this precarious balance of power, trust, and old feelings would tip. Yet as Xavier walked away to tell Cooper they were ready; she felt an unexpected emotion amidst her concerns and calculations.

She glanced out the window at the helo and knew she could be in the air before they returned, but she stopped. Once again, she would make the decision for her and Xavier. Damn it! She owed him a chance to hear out his team. A moment later, he returned with their son in tow. Cooper’s eyes were shining with excitement.

“All set?” Xavier asked, grabbing the keys to the V-22 Osprey from a hook by the door.

McKenzie nodded, her pulse quickening with a mix of anticipation and caution. “Let’s do this.”

The three of them walked out of the house, the cool Montana air breezing across her skin. Cooper practically sprinted toward the helicopter while Xavier and McKenzie moved at a slower pace. Her heart pounded in her chest, not from the thought of flying, but rather because she was about to be in a confined space with Xavier. When they reached the sleek machine, Xavier opened the door and lifted her in before she knew what was happening. She grabbed a headset, put it on, and handed another to Cooper.

His voice came through loud and clear. “Mom, this is so cool! Can you really fly one of these?”

“I used to,” McKenzie admitted, a flicker of her past life flashing before her eyes. “This one’s a lot nicer than the ones I got to pilot.”

Xavier gracefully climbed into the seat next to her, his hands instinctively checking switches and dials. He slid a pair of headphones on and told Cooper to buckle up. Before she could do the same, Xavier reached over and slid the strap across her chest. The back of his hand brushed against her nipple, causing it to harden. She squirmed in her seat, trying to relieve some of the tension her body had suddenly experienced.

He knew what he was doing, because his hand brushed against her other nipple. She clenched her teeth since anything she said would be heard through the headphones.

She could sense Xavier glancing her way as he prepared for takeoff. Finally, the rotors started to spin, the noise building until it enveloped them, and they lifted off the ground. Everything else faded away for a moment—the looming threats, the hidden secrets, and the complicated web of their past all stayed behind on the ground as they rose in the air. They were just a family sharing a unique experience.

As they ascended, she glanced back to see Cooper's eyes glued to the window. "Look how small everything is! This is amazing!"

Xavier leveled off the helicopter and turned to McKenzie. "Want to take the controls for a bit? Show Cooper what his mom can do?"

McKenzie hesitated. It had been years since she'd flown, and the stakes were incredibly high. But she looked at Cooper's eager face, then back at Xavier's encouraging eyes, and her decision was made.

"Alright, let's see if I've still got it," she said, gripping the controls. Even after all these years, her hands seemed to remember exactly what to do. She executed a smooth turn and then a gentle climb, the helicopter responding obediently to her touch.

"Mom, you're really good at this!" Cooper exclaimed, his voice filled with a blend of awe and pride.

Time stopped as they flew through the mountains. Xavier pointed out historical facts about Montana and its landmarks. She stayed quiet and flew the chopper as Xavier and Cooper chatted about sports and school. The two men bonded over their love for football. Something she didn't even know her son liked.

"It's getting close to meeting time." Xavier's voice echoed through the headphones.

She hadn't realized they had been in the air for a few hours.

As she handed control back over to Xavier, McKenzie caught his gaze. For a moment, they shared a look of unspoken understanding, their eyes acknowledging a history filled with love, pain, separation, and now, a flicker of the unknown.

As Xavier navigated them back toward the landing spot, McKenzie's thoughts turned to the tough decisions ahead. Whatever happened, she had been reminded of something crucial today—family mattered. Cooper needed his dad.

A low curse through the headset tore McKenzie from her thoughts. Her eyes scanned the area and spotted three SUVs

speeding down the gravel road toward Xavier's home. She instantly reached for the controls and spun the helicopter in the opposite direction.

Her hand went for the throttle, but Xavier gripped her wrist. "It'll be fine. Let's head to the house."

"What's going on?" Cooper asked, sensing the sudden tension.

"My team must have decided they wanted to have the meeting in person," Xavier said, his voice a controlled calm that belied the urgency in his movements.

McKenzie glanced back at the SUVs, unsure how he could determine they were his team. "I think it's best we head somewhere else. You can't be sure who's down there."

Xavier held up his phone. Her eyes scanned over the message.

Grim: Hey Boss! The team is in the SUVs. Don't shoot.

"But you said the meeting would be virtual." She didn't care that she sounded like a two-year-old.

"And every member of my team is a pain in the ass. None of the fuckers listen to me."

Her stomach rolled, knowing Grim would be at the house. She was Sara's sister, just another reminder of how entangled Xavier was in their lives. The freedom she had felt from flying a moment ago vanished, replaced by utter dread at having to deal with his team in person. She didn't know how much the team knew about her, but figured that she would be hated when they found out what she'd done. The one thing she knew about teams was that they protected their own and would take care of Cooper.

The helicopter landed with a thud. Before the blades had even stopped spinning, Xavier had unbuckled and jumped out, moving toward the front of the house. Her hands still gripped the controls. He'd left the key. She was sure this was a test.

"Mom, are we going in?" Cooper asked.

He'd stayed with her.

"Go ahead. I'll catch up."

Instead of listening to her, Cooper climbed into the seat Xavier had vacated. “I’m not getting out without you. That man might be my dad, but you’re my mom, and I’m not leaving you.”

She released her seatbelt and turned to her right. “Someday, you might not have a choice. Xavier will protect you with his life. All that matters to me in this world is you. Everything I do is to make sure you’re protected.”

“But who’s going to watch out for you?” Cooper countered. “Mom, maybe it’s time you let someone help you. I don’t understand everything that’s going on, but I know you trust him. For years, you’ve told me my dad is an amazing person. He seems like he wants to help you.”

Which was something she didn’t understand. She had betrayed him. And love couldn’t conquer betrayal, especially since he loved Sara, not her.

McKenzie reached over and grabbed Cooper’s hand. “Your father has many reasons to hate me. Some he might not even be aware of. This meeting might bring to light many of the missions I had in the past, some of which deceived your father.”

“But Mom—”

“No Cooper. I’ve done a lot of bad things in my life,” McKenzie admitted, her eyes avoiding Cooper’s. “And there’s a part of me that’s terrified this meeting could rip open some secrets I’m not sure I’m ready to face. But know this—no matter what comes to light or who turns against me, I will protect you. Even if it means I have to vanish, I’ll fight like hell to come back to you.”

Cooper snatched the keys from the ignition. “I’m not going to lose you. The other day, you almost died. Nothing you did in your past will change how much I love you. See what this team has to say. If you don’t agree, I’ll leave with you.”

“When did you grow up?” She sighed.

“I’m strong because of how you raised me.”

She didn’t want to dwell on her parenting style. It was time to confront her murky past, and stop running. Even if every

instinct screamed at her to bolt, she was tethered here by something far stronger—her love for Cooper and, though she didn't want to admit it, Xavier.

Her ankle shot a flare of pain up her leg as she stepped down from the helicopter onto the uncertain ground below. Cooper was beside her in an instant, gripping her hand as if he could shield her from what lay ahead. Hand in hand, they began the slow, heavy walk toward the house.

For years, she heard talks about Xavier and his team in hushed, reverent tones. They were the best of the best, legends even among other legends. The military had relied on them for classified operations, too dangerous for anyone else. McKenzie knew they had resources that could unearth even her darkest secrets. As they neared the house, her heart pounded so loudly in her chest that she was sure everyone inside could hear it. Her only hope was that Xavier, against all odds, would choose his son over the unsettling truths that might come to light. And despite her being haunted by her past and hunted in the present, somehow, she would make it out alive.

SEVEN

XAVIER

Xavier's hand wrapped around the door handle and paused momentarily to scan the room. His entire team had gathered in his kitchen, and they weren't alone. Lucas had brought his wife and partner. Cassanova stood beside his wife, Grim, and their adopted kids. Doc had an arm wrapped around Yara with his hands rested on her stomach. The hum of conversation ceased the instant he tugged the door open. The tension in the room grew with each passing second.

He remembered the countless missions they had gone through together, the sleepless nights, and the shared laughter after a mission went well. Cassanova, with his sharp skills and good looks, had always been reliable in the most unpredictable situations. His relationship with Grim added an extra layer of trust, knowing they had each other's backs professionally and personally. Their relationship dated the farthest back.

Despite all the shared memories and the bonds they'd built over the years, Xavier had always kept a part of himself hidden, a part he wasn't ready for them to see.

Yara, his Senior Administrative Assistant, had been privy to some of his secrets, but she didn't know everything. He had always appreciated the respect she had shown for his privacy, never prying and always professional.

Her fiancé Doc, on the other hand, wasn't part of his team. Doc was a SEAL and had run missions with his team. One operation was where they had rescued Yara from her husband. The few times they had spoken, Xavier had noticed the fierce protective streak he had for Yara.

Drake was currently pulling food out of the fridge.

Glancing around the room, Xavier realized that his buried secrets were about to come out.

Jasmine, Cassanova's sister, giggled, breaking the tension as she ran through the kitchen and launched herself into the air. Xavier caught her and held her against his chest. "Uncle Xavier, I like this house of yours in the middle of nowhere. I spotted black and white horses on the car ride here."

"I'm sure Grim or Cassanova will take you to pet the horses before you leave."

Grim's heels clicked against the marble as she strode across the kitchen, pulling a wiggly Jasmine from his arms. "Are you going to tell us what the hell is happening and who those two people are in the helicopter? Lucas has told us nothing."

He raised a brow. "You had no clue what you were walking into, and you thought it was okay to bring the kids?"

"It's not like Lucas gave us time to find a babysitter. Now, tell me who the fuck those people are."

"Bad word," Jasmine chirped.

Taking a deep breath, Xavier motioned to the backyard. "McKenzie and Cooper...they're my family."

Conversations broke out, but he kept his eyes laser-focused on Grim. Her eyes darted behind him and back. "Is that your son?"

"Yes." Xavier ran a hand through his hair. "I expect all of you to be kind to McKenzie and my son, Cooper. Lucas, is there a reason you showed up in person and not over the computer like we agreed?"

The intensity in Lucas's stare softened slightly. "I wanted to share some of what I found in person. I don't think that it should be shared remotely in case you weren't aware of everything I've dug up. Could we speak privately first?"

"Hell no!" Grim growled. "I want to know what's so secret. Xavier and I have a past that dates back a hell of a lot longer than any of you. I want to be in this meeting."

Lucas exhaled deeply. “Give the Bossman and me ten minutes. What I found might not be accurate.”

Xavier reached out and touched Grim’s arm. “I’ll fill you and the team all in soon. I expect every single one of you to welcome McKenzie and Cooper with open arms.”

Taking a step back, Grim scrutinized Xavier’s expression, searching for any sign of deceit. “We always have your back. However, we’re of no use if kept in the dark.”

Xavier inclined his head, acknowledging her point. He turned and trailed Lucas through the living room and down the hall to his office. He wasn’t surprised when Lucas effortlessly located the hidden switch that opened the doors to his basement.

The secret area was missing from the blueprints. Still, he assumed Lucas had hacked into his home security cameras and found the prior videos of him in his office.

As they descended the stairs into a spacious meeting area, Xavier noticed Lucas’ fists tightening and relaxing in a rhythmic pattern. The far right of the room had a pool table and couch. The other side had a glass conference table. Three steel doors lined the far wall. Two of those led to steel-reinforced cells, and the third was an interrogation room.

Dropping his backpack onto the table, Lucas narrowed his eyes at Xavier. “What the hell, man?”

“I don’t believe that’s how you address your Boss.”

Lucas retorted, “Firstly, you stopped being my boss last week. We’re on equal footing now. So, enlighten me, what the fuck?”

Xavier had anticipated that if Lucas dug into McKenzie’s past, he might unearth secrets regardless of how well the CIA covered up how McKenzie burned him. “If you want an answer, you’ll need to be more precise than ‘what the fuck, man,’” Xavier responded coolly.

Frustration evident on his face, Lucas sank into a plush leather chair, shaking his head. “I know you’re not oblivious. The woman upstairs tried to take you out. She shot you and blew your cover. Which ended your CIA career. I need to

understand why you didn't let her leave last night. Don't say because of your son. She planned to leave him with you."

"Mine and McKenzie's problems are between us. My primary concern right now is identifying her pursuer." Xavier's gaze remained fixed on Lucas.

"The real question you should ask is, who isn't after her? How do you expect us to trust her? She burned you. This could all be a ploy. As your friend, I need to tell you she spells trouble. You should've ensured that the door remained shut and killed her yourself."

His vision clouded red at the threat to her life. Taking three quick steps, he was near Lucas, and he grabbed his friend by the front of his shirt and ripped him out of the chair. "Nobody hurts a hair on her head," he growled, not bothering to cover his emotions. "My past with McKenzie is between me and her. You have two options: either assist me or join the others upstairs and get the fuck out. I'm perfectly capable of managing this on my own."

A prolonged, intense stare-down ensued between the two men. The tension in the room was thick, each trying to gauge the other's next move. Lucas finally broke the silence and pushed a step back. "For once, talk to me. I've tried to figure this puzzle out since our call. I've gone over all the conversations. We all thought it was Sara for years—the one you lost, the reason behind your nightly escapades at the club with different women. The individual responsible for turning you into such a reserved, secretive bastard. But we were all wrong, weren't we? It was never about Sara; it's always been McKenzie."

He took a deep breath and ran his fingers through his tousled hair. Xavier wrestled with his emotions, trying to maintain his composure. Memories of the day McKenzie had shot him flooded back, reminding him of the oath he had taken then. He had vowed to shield his personal affairs from everyone, avoiding unnecessary drama. But Lucas' unwavering, inquisitive look made it clear that his friend wasn't about to drop the matter.

Laced with frustration, Xavier finally responded, “What does it matter to you who she is to me? My primary goal is to ensure my son’s safety. If McKenzie has adversaries, then he’s in jeopardy as well.”

Silently, Lucas retrieved his laptop from its case, catching Xavier’s attention. Setting it on the long glass conference table, he proceeded to connect it to the overhead projector. When the screen finally illuminated, it displayed an image of Xavier hunched over with his white shirt covered in blood. The following photo showed the evidence McKenzie left for the police. He figured the CIA had buried these photos deep in a classified archive, but Lucas found them.

His eyes returned to the evidence and a photo of him in a tux. Half of the picture was missing. He could remember the night like it was yesterday. McKenzie wore a breathtaking red gown that accentuated her curves. They spent hours on the dance floor. She’d used a vanilla body scrub before the mission. Something she never did, but knew he loved the scent. Scents could be used by enemies for identification in the field.

Lucas cleared his throat. “The missing part of that photo is her, isn’t it? Even without the entire photo, you’re staring at her. A man deep in love.”

Though Lucas’ observation struck a chord, Xavier wasn’t prepared to confess his profound emotions for the woman who had once derailed his career. The undeniable truth was that despite everything, McKenzie remained the unyielding anchor of his heart.

“It’s irrelevant whether my past with her influences my decisions,” Xavier retorted defensively. “We’ve always been professional, taking on missions based on merit.”

Lucas threw his head back and laughed. “Come on! You’ve dismissed potential clients over trivialities, even when they were willing to offer hefty sums. As for this particular ‘mission,’ who’s even compensating us? While McKenzie might be flushed with cash in her offshore accounts, I haven’t seen any paperwork sealing a deal.”

Desperation tinged Xavier's voice. "What are you driving at, Lucas? What do you want me to say to get you on board with this operation?"

Lucas's demeanor shifted to one of contemplation. "My suggestion? Hand over the reins to the team. Your personal history with her muddies the waters. There's a real risk she might deceive you again. Frankly, I'm worried your emotions will cloud your judgment."

"I'm no longer the gullible young agent who would get easily swayed. Did you forget I own the damn company?"

Lucas' expression showed he had a retort ready, but Xavier preempted him, raising a hand to halt his friend's words. "You met with your family before calling for backup."

A resigned sigh escaped Lucas' lips. "True, but I also called you after the first meeting with my parents."

"Didn't help much since you still got yourself kidnapped," Xavier replied, a hint of vindication in his tone. "Just as you were adamant in your decision then, I am the same in mine now."

"I have a bad feeling about all of this. The intel I've gathered on McKenzie highlights her extensive experience—with numerous missions, many undertaken solo and a few with Jasper Monroe. She is ruthless as they come, and I want to go on record saying I don't trust her. The Nobel Society wanted her mother dead for something she did. McKenzie took the mission and killed her own mom with a headshot."

The mission didn't always lay out the entire picture. Fuck. He kept making excuses and knew she was his downfall. "We can let her explain."

"Boss, this is all a bad idea, but I'll listen to her anyway."

Xavier had yet to bring up the USB. He'd meant to get it from her, but Lucas was right. He would need to be careful with anything she handed them. It could all be a setup to get what she wanted. "We keep our guard up and run big updates through me."

Lucas visibly relaxed. “Yesterday, we talked about contacting AA Security for additional information on the Noble Society. Before we do that though, I wanted to point out that I found a bunch of links between Kat Ross, Antonio’s wife, and McKenzie. This links back to Kat’s time in the CIA.”

During his time in the CIA, he’d never worked with Kat. He’d seen the stories of how she took down the director. “Can we trust Kat Ross?”

Lucas nodded in affirmation. “I’d blindly trust Antonio Ross. Highly doubt he would bring anyone untrustworthy into his life. I say we reach out to him and see what he can tell us.”

With a determined nod, Xavier replied, “See if you can get him on a video call.”

Xavier paced back and forth as Lucas typed on his computer. “He can take our call.” Moments later, the projection screen lit up, revealing a familiar face.

His voice laced with a blend of astonishment and caution, Antonio remarked, “Xavier? What on earth? It feels like a lifetime.”

Pushing past the initial pleasantries, Xavier stated, “Something is pressing we need to address...concerning your wife, Katharine Ross.”

Antonio’s brow shot up. “If there’s a dead body, my wife didn’t do it. Hell, if it’s any crime, my wife isn’t responsible. I challenge you to send me proof.”

Xavier stared at the man on the wall and tried to figure out if he was serious when a soft voice floated through the speakers. “Stop being so dramatic. You know I never leave evidence behind for a crime to link back to me. I’m sure Mr. Smith is reaching out to get one of the new alligator shirts I posted on TikTok for sale. Or maybe he’s finally buying an alligator for his clean-up company, to dispose of bodies.”

Lucas chuckled next to him. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Ross. I’ve heard the rumors about you, but thought they were a stretch of the truth.”

The short redhead winked. “I’m pleased you’ve heard about my stories. Please check out my TikTok for a video of my shirts for sale.”

Xavier sighed, choosing his words carefully. “I don’t know of any crimes you’ve committed, and I don’t even have a TikTok account.”

Kat’s green eyes twinkled mischievously, “Then why all the cloak and dagger? I mean, reaching out to Antonio just to get to me? It must be something fascinating. I’m available for hire. Even have a barrel of acid nearing its expiration, so the sooner we embark on this mission, the better.”

Not often could a person leave him speechless. Lucas took control of the conversation. “We came across some older missions during our research, some of which showed a collaboration between you and McKenzie Stuart. We’re trying to piece together a timeline of events, and we thought perhaps you might be able to provide some clarity.”

Kat’s smile disappeared. “Hypothetically, if I knew who this person was, why would you want to know my connection with her?”

Antonio interjected, his patience visibly thinning, “Kat, perhaps it’s best if you stay out of this. Xavier, whatever you’re digging up, remember that my wife has been out of the field for a long time.”

Lucas chimed in, leaning closer to the screen, “Antonio, it’s not about accusing anyone. We’re merely attempting to understand the extent and nature of their collaboration. Anything Kat can recall could be crucial. Especially McKenzie’s ties to the Noble Society.”

“I’ve never heard of the Noble Society.”

Xavier’s lively hood depended on his ability to read when a person lied, and he was impressed by her deception. “McKenzie is the mother to my son and they are staying at my house. I’m trying to protect them, but I need some information.”

Kat looked thoughtful momentarily, playing with a strand of her fiery red hair. “Do you have a private jet?”

Xavier exhaled his frustrations. “Yes, but what the hell does that have to do with information about McKenzie?”

A slow smile spread across Kat’s face, “You have until tomorrow at five pm to arrive in Fort Lauderdale with McKenzie and her son. If you are a minute late, I’ll hunt you down and kill you myself.” The screen went black.

“What the hell just happened?,” Xavier asked, waving at the screen.

Lucas pressed the call button to Antonio again, but no one answered. His phone dinged, and he glanced at the unknown number. He clicked the message.

Unknown: Sorry, man. But I have my wife’s back on this. I’ll see you tomorrow.

Well, that hadn’t gone to plan at all. The entire mission just got more complicated. If he took them to Florida, it could make them vulnerable. But if they didn’t go, a whole mercenary team led by a crazy person might come after them in Montana.

“We need a plan,” Lucas finally said, breaking the heavy silence. “Going to Kat’s unprepared is a suicide mission. She’s not one to make idle threats from the rumors I’ve heard.”

“I’m well aware,” Xavier replied, his jaw set. “But I also know that if Kat wanted McKenzie dead, she wouldn’t have waited for us to come to her. There’s more to this than meets the eye.”

Lucas raised an eyebrow, a hint of curiosity in his eyes. “What are you thinking?”

“First,” Xavier began, pacing the room, “we need to secure a safe house in Fort Lauderdale. Second, we need to look deeper at McKenzie’s past missions, especially those involving Kat. There must be a reason she’s invested in her safety.”

Lucas nodded, already pulling up files on his laptop. “And third?”

“Third,” Xavier said, his gaze hardening, “we play Kat’s game. But we do it on our terms. She might have set the rules,

but I've been breaking them for years.”

Lucas chuckled, a hint of admiration in his voice. “Always a step ahead, aren't you?”

The club scene was small, and Fort Lauderdale had an exclusive club. He knew the owner and had stayed in the apartments above the club before.

Xavier smirked, “Add Kat's picture to the one you have of McKenzie's enemies list. I want to see how she handles it. Also, don't mention Kat's name when we discuss our plan. I'll call to see if I can get a room at Sanctorum.”

It was time to see if McKenzie was being honest with him. Xavier texted Drake and asked him to bring the team to the basement along with McKenzie.

EIGHT
MCKENZIE

McKenzie stepped into the kitchen and drew in a measured breath. The atmosphere was saturated with a tangible silence; she felt as though she could slice it with a knife. As she scanned the room, her stomach curled as all eyes shifted from her to Cooper. With a steadying breath, she broke the hush that loomed.

“Hello, everyone. My name is McKenzie, and this is my son, Cooper. I’m really sorry Xavier dragged you all out here. I genuinely believe there’s another way to resolve whatever this is,” she said, a hint of tension in her voice.

A woman, standing at about five foot two with shockingly bright purple hair, cocked her head to the side. She had an enigmatic presence, and behind her stood a tall man, his hair neatly pulled back into a ponytail. His arm was protectively wrapped around her.

Taking the initiative, the purple-haired woman spoke up. “I’m Willa, and this is my partner, Thane. My other partner, Lucas, is with Xavier, having a pre-meeting talk. Nobody’s briefed us on anything. But hey, I’m always game for a bit of an adventure.”

Thane, the towering figure behind her, bent down and tenderly kissed the top of her head. “Willa, you know I respect your thirst for excitement, but we’ve already discussed this. You are not a mercenary.”

Willa rolled her eyes dramatically. “Oh, please. I probably know more about what’s happening here than you do, love.

McKenzie, you're part of the Noble Society, right?"

McKenzie blinked, surprised. "Uh...Yes, I am. How did you —"

"Thane and I are part of the Bone Society in the UK," Willa said. "Think of it as your sister society across the pond. Though our organizations weren't exactly on speaking terms for a long time."

Thane emitted a low, disapproving growl. "Willa, we've talked about this. You're not supposed to spill secrets so freely. And how do you even know McKenzie's a part of the Noble Society? We've all been kept in the dark."

With a coy smile, Willa bit her lower lip. "I might've been a little too curious and snuck a peek at Lucas' notes when you guys were preoccupied."

To McKenzie's left, Grim stood with her arms crossed and brow furrowed, silently assessing the unfolding drama. She wondered what role Grim played in all this and how the diverging societies would resolve the mysterious situation they had all found themselves in.

"I'm not sure why, but I don't trust you," Grim declared, casting a wary eye in McKenzie's direction.

Next to McKenzie, her son Cooper tensed. She gently squeezed his arm in reassurance.

"That's okay. I don't exactly trust any of you either," McKenzie retorted.

A man standing beside the refrigerator with a sandwich in his hand frowned deeply. "But I haven't done anything. Why don't you trust me?"

Then, a strikingly handsome man standing beside Grim spoke next. "I'm Cassanova, Grim's husband. Since my wife seems to have forgotten her manners, let me introduce the others. The jubilant voices you hear in the other rooms are my sisters. Over there, you'll find Yara, Xavier's administrative assistant, and her fiancé, Doc. And the glum fellow by the fridge is Drake. Grim has a complicated history with Xavier and tends to be guarded. It takes her a while to warm up to people."

McKenzie faced a dilemma. She could continue pretending she had no prior knowledge of these individuals or start being forthcoming. “Or maybe it’s because she’s Sara’s sister, and she’s not thrilled that Xavier might be interested in another woman,” she ventured.

Grim stepped forward, but Cassanova wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her back.

“All this tension is making me famished,” Drake interjected with sandwich still in hand. “Arguing on an empty stomach just makes everyone more irritable, you know? Also, are all of us going to gang up on a petite injured woman. Seems a little unfair.”

“Don’t let the boot fool you. I can take you all down.”

“Let’s test that theory,” Grim shot back.

Drake’s phone buzzed, and he glanced down at it. “Maybe later, Boss man wants us downstairs,” he muttered.

With the tension only increasing in the room, McKenzie spoke. “Since part of you already made it clear that you don’t like me and obviously don’t want me here...perhaps my son and I should just be on our way.”

Just as she had thought of making her exit, she realized she’d let her guard down. A crowd of skeptical faces now stood between her and the doorway, making their departure complicated.

“Mom let’s give everyone a moment,” Cooper whispered to her, his young eyes filled with wisdom beyond his years.

She sighed, conceding to his point. Maybe, just maybe, things could be resolved—if not in this room, then perhaps downstairs, where the so-called ‘boss man’ awaited them.

McKenzie listened as a woman gleefully clapped her hands together. “Oh, how exciting! I get to be a part of the mission this time!”

“No, Willa, you’ll stay upstairs with the kids. Cooper, why don’t you join her? Your mom can go downstairs and sort things out,” Cassanova suggested.

The notion of parting with her son and leaving him with strangers she neither knew nor trusted gnawed at McKenzie. “How about this instead? You all go ahead. Cooper and I don’t need to be involved in the meeting.”

Drake’s phone buzzed again. “Boss man says if you decline to come, we should bring you down by any means necessary.”

“I’d like to see any of you try,” McKenzie retorted, a challenging glint in her eyes.

Cassanova threw his head back and laughed heartily. “I like you; you might just make it out of here. We won’t harm you, as Xavier already instructed us not to. But make no mistake, you will be in that meeting downstairs. If you wish to bring Cooper, that’s your choice. However, if Boss Man specifically wants you there, it’s likely to be a revealing affair. Are you sure you want your son to witness whatever is about to be disclosed?”

The man had a point, one that made McKenzie pause and reconsider. “Alright, you guys go on ahead. I’ll be down in a moment.”

But nobody moved from their spots, their eyes locked on McKenzie. Everyone awaited her next move.

“Fine,” she sighed, her gaze shifting to her son. “Just give me a moment alone with Cooper. After that, I’ll head downstairs.”

As the group didn’t move, McKenzie was left contemplating the gravity of the situation. What could be so crucial that it warranted such measures? And would she come to regret involving her son? Only time would tell.

“You all can stand outside the door, but I’m speaking to Cooper alone,” McKenzie asserted, her voice leaving no room for argument.

They reluctantly retreated, filling the space just beyond the kitchen door. McKenzie turned so that she and Cooper faced the outside, all too aware that lip-reading would be easy for some in the group.

“Mom, you’re kind of scaring me,” Cooper’s voice trembled slightly.

“I don’t trust these people, Cooper. They may be fine for Dad, but you’re my priority. Stay upstairs with them. Though before you do, go into my bedroom and grab my bag. If anything feels wrong, you run. Head back to the car and use the burner phone to call Jasper,” she instructed, her eyes searching his.

“But what about you, Mom?” Cooper asked, concerned, knitting his brows together.

“I can handle myself. I’ve been in trickier situations than this,” McKenzie reassured him.

They turned back to find everyone still clustered at the door, their eyes fixed intently on McKenzie and Cooper. With a determined stride, McKenzie moved through the throng of people, squeezing Cooper’s hand one last time before separating from him. She navigated down the hall to Xavier’s office, noticing that the secret passage leading downstairs was already open. She had yet to explore it, but was aware of its existence.

The footsteps behind her starkly reminded her of her risky position. Still, McKenzie refused to display any sign of vulnerability. She continued her descent, keeping her fears and doubts locked away.

Once she reached the bottom, she found herself in an expansive area. Xavier was seated at the head of a glass table with Lucas beside him. The faces of several of her enemies were projected on a screen—not all, but a disquieting number. She chose a seat at the opposite end of the table, distancing herself as much as possible from Xavier. A silent declaration she wasn’t there as an ally, but as a necessary participant in whatever drama was about to unfold.

McKenzie seethed at the audacity of the situation. Xavier had left her to navigate the minefield of his employees upstairs while he had prepared to discuss the most intimate, classified details of her life in front of everyone. Two spots beside her remained vacant as people took their seats around the glass table. Well, that suited her just fine; she wasn’t here to make connections or win friends. They were Xavier’s people, not

hers. The sole exception was Willa, who had stayed upstairs with Cooper. McKenzie took some solace in that.

Xavier finally broke the silence and said, “Our original plan was for everyone to meet us on a Zoom call to discuss the mission. However, while digging into McKenzie’s life to determine who might target her, Lucas stumbled upon some sensitive information. He believes I’m too emotionally compromised to handle this case.”

He paused, glancing around the room at his team, his eyes landing on McKenzie momentarily. “However, I’m not stepping away from this. If any of you have an issue with how this is being conducted, then you’re free to get on a plane and leave.”

Drake raised his hand, breaking the palpable tension. “Hey, Boss Man, why would we have an issue? Isn’t this just like any other mission? Someone’s life is in danger, and it’s our job to figure out who’s behind it, right?”

Xavier’s eyes locked onto Drake as he spoke. Still, McKenzie could tell he was really addressing everyone in the room—including her. The situation might be far more personal and precarious than most, but ultimately, it boiled down to the same core elements: danger, intrigue, and a life hanging in the balance.

“Lucas wanted to talk to me alone because of what he found. McKenzie and I were partners in the CIA. Our partnership ended when she shot me in the chest and left behind a burn file.”

“Sit down, Grim. Like I said, if you can’t deal with my past involving McKenzie, you can leave,” he reiterated, locking eyes with his longtime friend. “Friendship isn’t about always agreeing. It’s about standing by each other, especially when the going gets tough.”

Grim looked like she was on the verge of exploding, but before she could, Xavier continued. “And as for Sara, I’ve never once declared love for her to anyone in this room. My feelings for Sara are different than what I feel for McKenzie. I’m the only one who should have a problem with McKenzie’s

past actions. And since I'm okay with it, everyone else in this room needs to be too. Because the mission at hand is to keep her and my son safe."

Cassanova, lounging in his chair, interjected, "But how do we know McKenzie isn't a plant? That she's not here to finish what she started years ago?"

McKenzie's eyes met Xavier's, revealing a vulnerability she had not shown before. "I had orders to kill him years ago," she admitted, her voice tinged with regret. "The Noble Society wanted him dead. But when it came down to it, I couldn't do it. I chose to ruin his CIA career, over taking his life, fully aware that I'd be risking my own life for defying my orders."

Xavier turned toward her, eyes filled with a complex mix of emotions—relief, confusion, and perhaps even a touch of gratitude. "And for that, you're still alive. So, I guess the Noble Society didn't follow through on their threat."

Grim rolled her eyes—clearly unsatisfied, but momentarily silenced. The room was filled with a sense of an uneasy truce.

Lucas cleared his throat, "Here are the names and photos of everyone I could gather who had a beef with McKenzie as of last year."

"None of those people on the board are after me," McKenzie retorted, her eyes locking onto Lucas' own. "Trinity Reynolds...a sex trafficker from South America? What would he have against me? He's dangerous, sure, but not the kind of person I'd expect to blow up my house with a grenade launcher."

Lucas' eyes narrowed even further, clearly unamused by McKenzie's boldness. But before he could speak, Xavier intervened. "She has a point, Lucas. Is there a particular reason you suspect Reynolds?"

"I looked into some of McKenzie's missions, and she's shut down multiple human trafficking operations. I assumed—"

"You assumed incorrectly," McKenzie cut him off. "If it were Reynolds or someone like him, they'd have taken a much more direct approach. Kidnapping and killing me with their

bare hands. Not blowing up my house and warning me beforehand.”

Xavier leaned back in his chair, taking it all in. “Alright, let’s redirect then. Who do you think is after you?”

Her number one suspect, Boyce Briere, wasn’t on the list. However, she wasn’t ready to bring his name up to the group. The conversation would lead down a trail she wasn’t prepared to explore with the people in the room. Especially when many seemed to not like her.

“I’m not sure, but I think it’s someone from the Noble Society. My file was accessed along with all past missions. That doesn’t make sense. I don’t have a relationship with anybody, but Monroe.”

The room went quiet, processing the gravity of her words. It was clear to everyone that this was no ordinary mission.

Lucas flipped to a new photo, and my mom’s picture appeared across the screen. “Would someone have an issue with the fact you killed a Noble Society member?”

Her cold eyes stared directly at me. “You mean would they have an issue that I put a bullet in my mother’s head?”

McKenzie pulled her eyes from the photo of her mom and glanced around the room. Xavier’s eyes were on her. She was a mission to them. Being on the other side and having to answer questions wasn’t something she had ever expected to do.

“All I’m asking is if she would have people in the Noble Society that would have an issue with what you did.”

“Yes,” she paused. “You all seem somewhat familiar with the Society, which I don’t understand how. But to be in it, you are born in or married in. I was born. My mother was also a descendant of the original twenty. I’m unsure when, but a group created a training guide for future generations. I learned to shoot at six. Target practice was done with pepper spray.”

Grim even gasped, but she continued. “At age ten, I learned to take waterboarding. Mind you, I passed out a lot, but the training continued. If you dig, you can find the videos, Lucas.

My mother only gave birth to someone she could train. There were a few members who raised their kids this way. But I wouldn't have seen it coming if they had come for me. So, no, this is not connected to my mother. “

“I'm sorry I acted like a bitch.”

McKenzie rose from the table. “Pity is something I don't need. I'll let you decide if you want to work with me while I'm not in the room. I almost forgot this, here.” She pulled the red USB from her pocket and slid it across the table. Without another word she turned and headed for the stairs.

As she reached the top of the stairwell, she paused and collected her thoughts before stepping into the living room where Cooper was with Xavier's friends. She pushed the door open gently. Her eyes immediately met Willa's, who gave her an assuring nod.

Cooper glanced toward her. “Hey, Mom. You weren't gone long. Everything okay?”

“I'm letting the team work things out,” she replied, treading carefully around the truth. “How have you been up here?”

“Good, good. Willa and I were just talking about school stuff.” Cooper gestured towards Willa, who stood up, silently offering to give them space.

“Thanks, Willa,” she said.

“I'm going to head into the kitchen and grab some food,” she smiled, motioning for the group to follow her.

McKenzie sat down next to Cooper. “Listen, I'm not sure what they will decide. Things are a bit complicated right now, but I want you to know that everything I'm doing is to keep us safe.”

He looked at her, his eyes echoing the maturity that had started to surface these past few years. “I know, Mom. I trust you.”

Feeling a blend of relief and concern, she hugged him tightly. “I love you, Cooper. And I promise, once all this is sorted, things will return to normal.”

Cooper pulled back. “I love you too, Mom. And for what it’s worth, I know you’re strong enough to handle whatever this is.”

His faith in her bolstered her resolve. She kissed his forehead and left the room, heading to call Jasper for an update. If the team decided against helping her, she needed a backup plan.

NINE

XAVIER

Xavier's gaze followed the flash drive as it slid across the table, with Lucas snatching it up before it could fall off the edge. "Are you going to tell everyone what is on here?" Lucas asked as he held up the drive.

Xavier weighed his words carefully. "Jasper, McKenzie's partner, knew she couldn't just walk back into my life without leverage. He gave her this flash drive containing information about Sara."

Grim shot up from the chair. "We've been searching for my sister for months, and you've had information for over twenty-four hours? Why the hell haven't we looked at it already?"

A week ago, he would have stopped at nothing for information on Sara. Not because he loved her, but because he wanted answers for Grim. The entire team had invested hours in Sara's first rescue mission and spent more time searching for her current whereabouts. Except when McKenzie had stormed back into his life, all he cared about was answers from her.

"I planned to discuss it at the meeting today," Xavier replied, sensing the growing tension around him.

Cassanova rose and placed an arm around Grim. "Let's stay focused. We're a team," he reminded her.

Lucas produced a second laptop from his bag. "Give me a moment to scan the USB. I'm not plugging that directly into my laptop," he declared.

Xavier didn't blame Lucas for being cautious.

“Are we going to run both operations simultaneously?” Drake asked. “Half the team supporting you and the other half sorting through potential dead ends?”

Xavier ran his hand over his face. “I’m not sure yet. We don’t even know what’s on the drive. Every piece of intel from the USB will need to be triple checked.”

He barely trusted McKenzie and sure as hell didn’t trust Jasper Monroe.

The beep from Lucas’ computer indicated the completion of the scan. Lucas transferred the drive to his primary computer. A folder appeared on the screen, containing over a terabyte of data. Each file was labeled with a date. Lucas opened the most recent folder, revealing hundreds of thumbnails, each taken with a high-powered camera lens. The woman in the photos had black hair, but despite the change, Xavier recognized Sara. She was with a man on the government’s terrorist most wanted list. A man even his own team had searched for.

Grim paced beside the table, her frustration evident. “These can’t be real. They must be photoshopped to discredit my sister. Kinda feels like a way for McKenzie to make you not like Sara,” she exclaimed.

Before he could reply, Lucas interjected. “Let me verify the authenticity of the photos.” He opened a specialized program on his laptop, a tool Xavier had seen him use before to authenticate photographs. As the analysis ran, a green indicator appeared, confirming the photo was not doctored.

Memories of the day they had rescued Sara flooded Xavier’s mind. She had clung to him as he carried her out of the warehouse. Only now he questioned if it was all a ruse. She had left them hours after the rescue, claiming she needed time.

“We should revisit the photos from her rescue,” Xavier muttered, feeling torn. “Something doesn’t add up.”

Grim shook her head, her expression a mix of disbelief and confusion. “You’ve known my sister for years. Are you really doubting her allegiance over a few photos?”

Xavier struggled with the notion, but the combination of the photos and Sara's actions raised doubts in his mind.

"We need to consider every possibility," he insisted, his voice tinged with exasperation. "These photos are real, but the 'why' remains a mystery. Why would she act like a captive, and why would Carter play along with it?"

"He wouldn't," Grim relented. "If anything, Carter would have wanted to rub your face in the fact he won my sister over you. Everyone always believed she was the only woman you loved."

He had never crossed Carter until he needed to take down the organization. The team might have overlooked a minor detail, even though they were the best. He trusted them; taking them off the case now could cause Sara to slip through their grasp. She could be the key to the answers they needed.

"I'm flying to Fort Lauderdale with McKenzie and Cooper tomorrow. I'll use Antonio Ross and his team. For the first meeting, I need Drake to fly out tonight and be on stand-by by in case I need him," Xavier paused. "The rest of you fly back to California and dig through all the past case information."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea, Boss," Grim interjected. "I think you should take a couple more of us with you. The team is only doing information research. You're putting a lot of trust in Antonio."

Xavier shook his head. "Drake will have my back, along with McKenzie. If things go south, I'll call."

Grim, whose skepticism had been palpable, was not easily placated. "She already tried to kill you once. What's stopping her from trying again?"

"Yes, and I need to gain her trust," Xavier sighed. "I'm still unsure about McKenzie's role in the intel I just gave you. It will be easier for me to get the information I need without all the other team members around. She's going to think we are ganging up on her. Plus, she has a connection to Kat Ross, whom she ignored on the screen today. It's my way to figure out why she didn't explain Kat."

“You don’t even trust her. Cut her loose!” Grim shouted.

Xavier lost his temper and barked, “Everyone, get the fuck out! Except for Grim.”

As the team dispersed, Cassanova, who had been silent until then, spoke, “She’s my wife, Xavier. Whatever you’re discussing with her, I should be a part of.”

“I need to talk to Grim alone,” Xavier asserted, leaving no room for argument. “I would never hurt her.”

“I’ll be fine. Go upstairs with the rest of the team,” Grim reassured.

Cassanova leaned in, gave Grim a quick kiss, and then retreated upstairs, his face a mask of unreadable emotions.

Left alone, Grim stared at him. “What the hell is going on? None of this is like you.”

“You’re right,” Xavier admitted, feeling the walls close in on him. “Something feels off, and I can’t put my finger on it.”

AS IF ON CUE, Grim’s eyes filled with tears—something Xavier had seldom seen. Walking over, he pulled her into a hug. “What’s wrong? I thought we were about to have a screaming match.”

She shook her head, her voice tinged with despair. “I feel like I’m about to lose my brother.”

Xavier never considered that she would think his relationship with McKenzie could make Grim feel as if he didn’t care about her. “I’ve always seen you as family, Grim. Just because I’ve developed a connection with McKenzie doesn’t mean you’ll ever be replaced. You’re irreplaceable to me.”

Grim’s eyes filled with fresh tears, and Xavier, taking a leap of faith, decided to probe further. “You’re not usually this emotional. Are you pregnant?”

A snort erupted from Grim, and then her eyes widened in disbelief. “Crap, that would explain so much.”

“Congratulations. Even more reason for you to head back to California.”

“I’m not removing myself from the field just because I might be pregnant,” Grim retorted, her determination clear.

Xavier shook his head, still smiling. “You’re like a sister to me, Grim. Whether by marriage or blood, no one can replace the bond we’ve shared for years. But if you are pregnant, we’ll need to think about what’s best for you and the baby. Now, as for McKenzie, she’s a part of my life, but she doesn’t negate the relationship I’ve had with you or anyone else on the team.”

Grim sighed. “I get it. But remember, she tried to kill you once.”

“We were young, in our twenties, and naive. She thought it was the only way to protect me,” Xavier defended, a hint of sadness creeping into his voice. “Let’s just say I’m willing to give her the benefit of the doubt. Now, let’s go upstairs and join the others. I could use some levity right now.”

As they ascended the staircase and entered the living room, a wave of camaraderie washed over Xavier. Half the team was deeply engrossed in a game of charades, the room filled with laughter and shouted guesses while others were perusing movie options for the night. Xavier felt a momentary peace wash over him as he observed his team, their laughter filling the room. His eyes shifted to Grim, who had taken a seat next to McKenzie. He noticed McKenzie’s shoulders tensed when Grim pointed toward the kitchen. As they walked near him, he raised a brow. “Do I need to come with you?”

McKenzie shook her head. “We need to talk in private.”

He placed a quick kiss on McKenzie’s forehead, surprising her and himself. “If you need me, come get me.”

The two disappeared into the kitchen, and he joined his team in the living room. He couldn’t stop glancing back at the kitchen door. Grim and McKenzie emerged an hour later. They both had smiles on their faces as they rejoined the games.

Later, after the team dispersed, he escorted a sleepy McKenzie to his room. “How are you doing?” he asked.

“I like your team,” she said softly. “They all care about you, and that makes me happy. People should care about you.”

He smiled at her words. “Let’s get ready for bed. We still need to talk about the plan for tomorrow.”

As she discarded her clothes, keeping on a black lace bra and panties, Xavier realized that discussing the operations would be complicated with a practically naked McKenzie in his bed. When he emerged from the bathroom, McKenzie was nestled under the covers. He discarded his own clothes and climbed in next to her, wearing only his boxers.

“The team is heading back to California tomorrow to dig deeper into the files you handed over. You and I are heading to Fort Lauderdale to meet with AA Security to get additional help with your case,” he said.

McKenzie nodded and rolled over.

“Don’t you want to talk about the plan?”

“It’s clear your team wants to work on Sara’s case. That is what is more important to you and everyone who works with you,” she said.

“Look at me,” he insisted.

She rolled over, and her glossy eyes punched him in the stomach. “The information you gave us has Sara working with a terrorist organization. It’s not the team picking her over you. What we need to figure out is if we had the intel wrong in the past. Many of the team members offered to come with us, but we have to work on both missions at once. Did your conversation with Grim make you think I would pick Sara over you? I don’t understand why you would think that.”

McKenzie bit her lip and was silent at first. “I saw emails between you and Sara. She is the love of your life?”

“Emails?”

“In your Hotmail account,” she said.

Running a hand over his face. “From when I was in high school?”

McKenzie pulled the cover up to her neck. “You kept old photos of her, as well. It’s okay, I know you love her.”

He let out an aggravated sigh. “We were close growing up. She, Grim, and I did everything together. I kept pictures of both of them. As for those emails...I was a young, horny man trying to sleep with his girlfriend. I have no romantic feelings for her.”

“Ohh...” McKenzie whispered. “But there’s a lot you don’t know about me. As more comes to light, I can’t help but wonder if you’ll even want to be my friend. I’ve made mistakes and did things I’m not proud of.”

Xavier nodded, his eyes locking onto hers. “We’ve all got a past, McKenzie. We have a son together, so no matter what, we are going to be in each other’s lives. I’m willing to try if you are.”

She nestled her head on his chest, and in that quiet moment, Xavier felt the gravity of what lay ahead. Whatever came next, whether filled with clarity or chaos, he knew one thing for sure—he wouldn’t be facing it alone.

“I get it. Trust doesn’t come easily. Seth encouraged me to see a therapist a few years back, but it’s not like I can open up about my past. I have a hard time believing anything or thinking someone would want to help me when my own parents only cared about the person they could mold. Their goal was for me to take over as Grandmaster one day, something I never wanted. Hell, many days, I wished I could walk away.”

He ran his fingers through her curly blonde hair spread across his chest. “The Nobel Society pulled us apart years ago, and maybe we were too young back then. We can look at this as a second chance. Our attraction is strong, and we have a son together.”

McKenzie turned on her side. “Attraction was never an issue between us. No matter how much I try, I have a hard time trusting. I was taught dependence on anyone other than myself was seen as a weakness.”

Xavier nodded, understanding what they had would take a lot of work. “Last night, when I handcuffed you and held you against my chest, you fell asleep. A spy would never do that if they didn’t trust the person on some level.”

“I trusted you enough not to kill me with my son around. Plus, I hadn’t slept in three days,” McKenzie tapped her finger on his chest. “But I’m not the only one with trust issues.”

He didn’t think she would attempt to kill him again, but he also knew she wouldn’t tell him everything. “Correct. Jasper said it the other night, and I’m not sure you caught what he said, but I belong to a BDSM club. Do you know what that is?”

“Yes,” she replied.

Jealousy raged in him, which was unwarranted since they hadn’t seen each other in years, and he had slept with many women during the interim. But the thought of her with another man pissed him off. “You’ve had a Dom?”

“No. But I’ve read a lot of erotica and watched porn,” she said.

An image of her masturbating crossed his mind, and he couldn’t hold back a groan. “I’d like to see some of the videos that got you wet. But we can address that later. Trust is a big part of the lifestyle. To build that level of trust, you have to communicate. Lack of communication leads to injuries. Going forward, we talk everything out.”

This would be hard for him too. So much of his life he’d kept locked away, and now he was about to make sure everything was talked about.

“So, you want to have kinky sex to rebuild the trust between us?” she asked.

“In time, but I think we use aspects of the lifestyle to build trust. As for sex, we can take our time,” he replied softly.

She slid up the bed and pressed her naked body against his.

She kissed him.

He hadn’t kissed another woman since her. Yes, he had sex with plenty of partners. But kissing was too intimate, not

something he cared to do with any of the past women he had been with. Her plump breasts pressed against his side. His hand wrapped around her and pulled her closer. His cock ached to be deep inside her as their tongues tangled together. He deepened the kiss, and her hips pressed against him. For the first time in years, his entire body felt alive.

She broke the kiss. “I don’t know what came over me,” she whispered, her hands still resting on his chest. “It’s like no time has passed, and my body yearns to be close to yours.”

XAVIER UNDERSTOOD PRECISELY what she meant. “I’ve missed you too, McKenzie. More than I thought was possible. But we need to take everything slow. We both have a lot to work through.”

“I think I’m even more confused about where the future might lead us,” she admitted.

“We take one day at a time. I mentioned the BDSM lifestyle, but we need to talk about your past if we explore sex where I tie you up.”

“You tied me up last night. What the hell does my past have to do with our sex life? I sure as hell don’t want to talk about the women you’ve slept with.”

“Your past could cause triggers,” he tapped the scar on her wrist. “I’m not sure if anything your parents did to you as a child would cause you to panic in a scene.”

McKenzie shook her head. “I don’t want to talk about my time with my parents. Can’t we slowly try each thing and see how I feel?”

“Do you not trust me enough to talk about your past?” he probed.

She tried to pull back, but he tightened his arms around her. “I don’t want you to have pity on me.”

He leaned forward and pressed his lips to her forehead. “I’m sure I would be proud of you for surviving what you went through. I hope one day you will trust me with your stories,

but we can work around them. It's late, and we have a full day ahead of us. Good night, McKenzie."

"Good night, Xavier."

And as he turned out the lights, he felt uneasy about the information he'd kept from her. He'd wanted McKenzie to trust him, but he hadn't been able to trust her.

TEN
MCKENZIE

Cooper squeezed her hand in the back seat of the blacked-out Ranger Rover. Xavier had his phone pressed to his ear the entire flight from Montana to Fort Lauderdale. She wished she'd asked more questions the night before about AA Security. Hell, she didn't even know who they were, and he expected her to trust them.

Thirty minutes into the car ride, he'd finally ended the call.

"Did your team figure something out?" she asked.

Xavier glanced up from his phone. "They were briefing me about the information on the drive. Nothing you need to worry about."

Before she could ask a second question, his phone rang, and he answered it immediately.

Damn, tears threatened to leak from her eyes. She needed to remind herself no matter what he said, Sara would be his main priority. When she had woken up and found the bed empty, she walked to the kitchen to find Xavier on his computer at the counter. His entire team was on the screen. She didn't even know they left. Not one person said anything to her the night before about leaving. Not even one of his team members stayed back.

She never expected to make friends with any of his employees. Yet they left without a word to her, reminding her she wasn't part of his team. As they drove through the streets of Fort Lauderdale, she regretted her choice to not take the mission into her own hands.

The entire morning, he had acted like she didn't exist.

Though when he ended the call, she couldn't hold her tongue. "Clearly, Sara's case is more important. Why don't you take the flight back to California? I'll meet with this team you're handing me off to on my own."

Xavier turned his steely gray eyes on her. "Do you know who owns AA Security?" Xavier shot back.

"Hopefully, someone who will take my case as seriously as you take Sara's."

His jaw ticked, and he opened his mouth to reply when the car pulled into an empty parking lot outside a two-story warehouse. "Cooper, can you give me and your mother a moment?"

Her son jumped out of the vehicle along with the driver. Xavier had the entire morning to talk with her. *Fuck this!* Ignoring him, she reached for the handle to go meet AA Security. Xavier wrapped his hand around her arm, keeping her in place. "Let go."

"Talk to me. What is with this attitude?"

"Talk to you? I wanted to do that all morning. But you couldn't take two minutes of your time and tell me what the fuck is going on."

His eyes widened, and he dropped his hand from her arm. "McKenzie, I'm really confused. Why are you so pissed at me?"

She stared into his gray eyes, unsure of how he didn't understand. "You tell me to trust you and your team. Your team all left this morning without a word to me. I knew they weren't going to be my friends, but they couldn't even fake liking me for one morning. From the moment you woke up, you've been on the phone with them. And now you're handing my case off to another company. Why did you even fly out here?"

He pulled her close, sliding her across the leather seats. When he wrapped his arms around her, she couldn't help but lean into his body. One touch from him, and she melts.

“First, the team headed back because they wanted to get a head start on Sara’s case. So, they would have time to join our meeting and help you. Grim and Willa wanted to wake you up, but I told them to let you sleep. I worked on the phone with the team this morning so I could spend the rest of the day on your case. They know once we dive into things deeper today, I’m not helping with Sara’s case until we kill the fucker who blew up your house. Also, this isn’t AA Security’s offices. We just arrived at Blackwood Mercenaries, and Antonio Ross, the owner of AA Security, is meeting us here. For the record, and it stays in this car, those guys in that building are the best I know. Don’t ever think I don’t have your back.”

Well fuck, she’d let her brain go to the worst-case scenarios. “I don’t want to keep bringing up my past, but I’ve only ever had one friend...we lost touch years ago. Trusting people aren’t out for themselves is hard for me, and I’ll probably get stuck in my head again. I’m sorry.”

He squeezed her hand. “And I’ll probably do something and not realize it’s wrong, but thank you for telling me. Now let’s go figure out your case, so we can spend some time together after the meeting. The girls want a video call at happy hour to go over your case and make sure you are getting the help you need. I’ve been told I’m not allowed.”

“I don’t know if I’ve said it, but thank you. You didn’t have to help me.”

He nipped her ear. “And I would have helped you years ago too...at least this time, we are doing this together. Communication is what broke us last time. We can’t have that happen again. Later tonight, we can check out the BDSM club, and we can talk about our contract. We will work on building trust.”

Xavier opened the door and extended his hand to help her out. The hot Florida sun blinded her for a moment. When her eyes adjusted, a woman with fiery red hair sprinted in her direction with her arms spread wide. She only had a moment to realize it was Kat before she was wrapped in a python-like suffocating hug. Xavier stood off to the side, watching. “You brought me to a person you thought might want me dead?”

She remembered Kat's photo was on the slide with all her known enemies.

"No," Xavier sighed. "Kat and I had a conversation yesterday. I asked about your missions together. Then she threatened to rain down war if I didn't bring you here. So, I put Kat's picture up as a possible enemy to see if I could find out the connection from you."

"Though if you want him killed, just let me know," Kat whispered in her ear. "You know I'd do anything for you."

Xavier grunted. "I made your deadline. Now are we going to keep standing out in the open or head into the building?"

Kat squeezed her one last time before she dropped her arms.

She had no doubt if she told Kat she wanted Xavier dead, her friend would make sure he never saw the light of day. McKenzie would do the same for Kat any day of the week. The bond they shared was something that could only be formed in the most desperate situations. And every time they'd worked together, it seemed the events spiraled out of control to where one of them was almost dying.

Kat looped her arm with hers pulling her mind from going down a rabbit hole of old memories.

"Let's head in and talk with the team. Lucas sent everything over, and we started to dig through your enemy list. Girl, I'm so impressed...A little sad so many are already dead though. I really need to use this acid before it expires."

"Acid expires?" Xavier asked.

Cooper walked next to Xavier, and a man in a white dress shirt and black dress pants stood at the door with his arms crossed.

"I get mixed information online," Kat retorted. Pulling McKenzie's attention from the man watching every step Kat took.

"Mixed information?" McKenzie asked.

"Even with all the security and firewalls we have on our internet I try to stay away from googling 'will expired acid

still dissolve a body within nine days,” Kat replied like this was an everyday normal conversation.

Damn she missed her friend.

“You could always do a few tests. Let it expire and test it out,” McKenzie offered.

“No!” The man at the door yelled. “Do not give her ideas like that. For fuck’s sake I’ll have barrels with labels on them in the garage. When the police show up, they will think I’m the serial killer.”

Xavier held out his hand and shook the man’s hand.

“Who is that?” She asked Kat.

“My husband, Antonio Ross...” Kat paused. “Don’t you ever read the gossip magazines? We get posted about, at least once a month. Mostly rumors about him cheating on me. Except last month they did write I was sleeping with the gardener.” She leaned in closer. “Don’t tell my husband, but I planted that story. I was sick of the paparazzi’s always making it out like Antonio had so many women. I wanted a story of my own. Let me tell you, when he spotted the article, he came home and fucked the hell out of me.”

McKenzie didn’t even know how to reply. The conversation had changed so quickly. She still wanted to know more about the acid, but as usual her friend kept her on her toes.

Antonio’s arm jettied out, and he pulled Kat into his arms. “I have a bad feeling that you two will cause trouble if left alone. Hello McKenzie, my wife has told me nothing but good things about you. I’m Antonio.”

Her and Kat did get in to a lot of trouble. A memory from a mission she and Kat had about seven years ago flashed in her mind. They were in the Maldives tracking an oil prince. McKenzie couldn’t remember his name, but she and Kat worked their way into his harem and caused discourse with the other women. He’d been so tied up in the fighting he hadn’t even noticed that she and Kat had stolen his laptop and jet.

“Nice to meet you.”

Antonio pushed the door open, and they stepped into a modern reception area. To the right of the desk were two doors. One said employees only, and the other was just black with a bar. Antonio led them through the employees only door and up a flight of stairs. From there they walked down the hall to a conference room.

Frosted glass covered the far wall. A man with licorice hanging out his mouth sat typing at the head of the table, and a woman with short blonde hair next to him twisted a Rubik's cube.

The man pulled the stick of candy from his mouth and stood. "Welcome to Blackwood Security. I have someone taking yours and Xavier's bag up to your apartment. Cooper's stuff we will put in Antonio's car."

"What the hell is going on? My son is staying with me!"

Kat pressed her hand on my forearm. "I know you. Every instinct you have is wanting to take the person out who came after you. No way Xavier is going to let you be the lone ranger. The best option is for Cooper to stay with us while you take this fucker out, or—you stay and watch my kids, then Antonio and I will do the mission."

"He will be with you the entire time?" McKenzie asked.

"Yes, as long as you need." Even if she didn't want to leave her son, it was the best solution. She planned to eliminate everyone tied to the explosion at her house. Bringing Cooper along was out of the question, even though she knew he would ask to come with her.

She knew Kat would keep her son safe. "Let's make it through this meeting first, and from there, we can figure out our next step."

Cooper nudged her side. "I'm sixteen, mom. I want to come with you."

Kat tilted her head to the side. "That was around the age I went to Camp Peary. Hell, my oldest son, Ant went on his first mission when he was six months old. Let me tell you juggling a bottle, a baby, and a diaper bag while taking out a target is a

challenge. Luckily, they solved most of the issues by the time I had my second child. And baby carriers have pockets to hold extra ammo.”

“I don’t think that is what those pockets were for.” The blonde at the table interjected. “But I like your thinking. Maybe we should develop a baby line for the working mom. Dedicate a section in the diaper bag to carry an extra gun.”

Antonio tapped the table. “I think we are getting off-topic. Xavier’s team is already on the call.”

Xavier took the chair next to her. “Let’s get this meeting started. Cooper, would you mind hanging out in our room while we have this meeting?”

“I want to stay.”

“I’ll fill you in after the meeting. Please do this for me.”

Brock pulled out a set of keys from his pocket. “Head up the stairs outside this room. It’s the last door down the hall. There is a PlayStation with tons of games waiting for you.”

Cooper grabbed the keys and left the room.

The far wall had two seventy-five-inch televisions. One flickered on and displayed a conference room where Lucas, Cassanova, and Grim sat waiting.

“Hi, McKenzie,” Willa waved from the side of the room. “I’m sorry we all left before you got up. When you come to California, I want to meet up.”

“Willa, you are not part of this mission planning,” Xavier sighed.

Yesterday she was always cheerful and bubbly, but in an instant, her demeanor shifted. “McKenzie is one of us. Either you let me help like this, or I’ll find another way you’ll like even less.”

Lucas frowned. “Come here and sit with me. You can stay.”

Antonio chuckled. “Your staff listens as good as mine.”

Grim leaned forward. “Did you find anything Brock?”

Brock leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. “We aren’t going to wait for the other guy?”

McKenzie glanced at the monitor and then at Xavier. His teeth were clenched, and he held Brock’s gaze for a beat. “I don’t know what you mean.”

Brock raised his brow. “So, you didn’t have an employee fly out of Montana and stop in a few locations to make it look like he didn’t travel through. He arrived last night, scoped out our building, and Antonio’s house.”

Kat huffed, but before she could speak Antonio cut her off. “You’re lucky he didn’t get eaten by one of Kat’s pet gators. Why the secrecy?”

“You ended the call with a threat and didn’t answer when Lucas called back,” Xavier growled.

Movement on the screen caught her attention, and she had to take a double look. Willa had a bag of popcorn in her hand, and she tossed a piece in her mouth.

“I wanted to make sure you had McKenzie’s back, and my son has a basketball game tomorrow night. So, this was my way of bringing McKenzie here so I could help,” Kat shrugged. The lengths she went to help warmed McKenzie’s heart.

“Let’s get started,” Xavier motioned to the screen.

Now, two images appeared on the screen: the one with her enemies that Lucas had the night before and a second with three photos.

Kat chuckled. “I made the enemy list page. Brock, can you print that for me? I’d like to hang it on the fridge.”

“Do not print that,” Antonio grumbled.

“Honestly, none of these people make sense.” McKenzie waved her hand. “You really think a single dad who works as an insurance broker blew my house up with a grenade launcher?” I didn’t wait for them to answer as I assessed the second photo.

Brock pointed at the screen with his piece of licorice. “Arnold Kingston might be an insurance broker, but he also has an

extensive stockpile of guns...plus he is obsessed with you.”

She didn't want to talk about the meal she had with Arnold in front of Xavier. That man was so boring. “We had lunch together. Not sure you would even call it a date.”

“Except I hacked his home network. He has a folder with hundreds of pictures of you.”

Xavier leaned forward and put his elbows on the table. “Can we map out his location now? He should be easy to eliminate.”

McKenzie felt her jaw drop. Xavier was being dramatic. “It's not him. Yes, the people who tried to blow up my house were sloppy, but still not him. Furthermore, Arnold's son goes to school with Cooper. He could easily find a way to get close to me.”

“I'll send Drake there to monitor him,” Xavier's eyes flared as though he'd thought she would challenge him. Arnold was strange, but she shouldn't completely rule anyone out.

McKenzie nodded. “Intel gathering only. Do not give Drake orders to kill or kidnap.”

Brock sat back. “I'll send Mia with Drake. He also has an underground bunker off the grid. They can check that out. Let's move on to Gavin Newser. First, he is not dead. He had a twin brother, and that is who you killed.”

McKenzie thought back to that mission from two years ago. She'd broken into his house in the middle of the night and eliminated him in his bedroom. After she took him out, she picked the lock on the door that led downstairs. That night, she had rescued seven women. There were supposed to be twenty, but the ladies there said the others were taken away four days prior. “So, you think a family that traffics women would kill me? I'm older, so they wouldn't get much for me on the market, but they would sell me before considering murder.”

Brock nodded. “You are right. I almost didn't put him on the list, but he stayed at a hotel only sixty miles from you the night before. Which places him back on the suspect list. I really think it has something to do with Kasey. The mission you two were supposed to run in Paris is the key. You need to

find out how Kasey got the photos to make you turn on your partner.”

McKenzie knew that everyone around the table had faced moments when they questioned their missions—the decisions haunted them, the intel gathered through means that left them restless at night. It was the nature of the spy world to always wonder if there had been an alternative, another way.

“Who is Kasey Nash?” Xavier sat forward with his brows drawn together. “I’ve gone over that mission in my head a million times. I don’t remember a Kasey Nash.”

She knew they would have to talk about what happened sometime in the future. Airing out how she had betrayed the father of her son in front of a group of people didn’t sit well with her.

“The Noble Society has informants. Kasey’s one of those and she reached out to show me proof of your meeting with Pierre and Seine.”

“Bullshit,” Xavier growled. “I’d never met with them.”

She glanced around the room all eyes were on her. “I saw the photo. You were with them. At first, I didn’t believe it was real. But the Noble Society authenticated the photo.”

Lucas cut in. “What do you know about a guy named Paul Barker?”

McKenzie shivered at the sound of the guy’s name. “He’s part of the Noble Society. His parents and mine were close growing up. Honestly, the guy gives me the creeps, so I try to stay away from him.”

Brock grabbed a folder next to his computer. “I have access to the Noble Society’s network and permission to access anything I want. The server had two photos, one with Xavier and another with a young blonde woman. Of course, she turned perfectly not to get her photo taken, almost like she knew it was being taken.”

“Why now? It’s been sixteen years,” she asked.

“Seth Monroe hired my company to audit all the missions the Noble Society worked. He wanted detailed information on every case. It is a big task. We started with recent cases and worked backward. The case you worked is the next one on my list. My guess is you know something. Which brings me back to Paul Barker. He was tasked with the authentication of the photo.”

All she had to do was confront Paul and ask him why. There was a good chance she would kill him. “Do you know his location?”

“Yes, he’s at the Houston County morgue. The same day you were almost killed, Paul died of a heart attack, which makes me think it has something to do with that case.”

Damn it. She never thought she would have to walk back through the events that had led up to her betrayal. Then she remembered. “While I was locked away, Seth had all the people who orchestrated the setup killed. During that time, why wasn’t the mission reviewed?”

Xavier shot up from his seat. “So, we were set up years ago, and the people behind this are still out there pulling strings.”

“Paul still worked for the Society, which means nobody knew he was corrupt. Who gave Seth the list of people behind the mission?”

“You already know the answer,” Brock said.

“Is Kasey still alive,” Xavier asked.

“She has no digital presence. Never had a social media account. I did access her bank records and she still lives in the same house. With Paul being killed and the attempt on McKenzie, I would say there is a fifty-fifty chance she is alive.”

“Then we leave for Paris tonight,” Xavier pointed out.

“I’ll meet you there.” Grim’s voice came through the monitor. “You need your team on this. Are we positive they won’t come after you as well?”

For a moment she was excited Grim wanted to assist them, but then it made sense she wanted to protect Xavier.”

“Hold on a second.” Antonio sighed. “Leave tomorrow after Brock or Lucas gathers some more information.”

Kat nodded. “I’m normally the first to tell you to go in guns blazing without any thought, but I have a bad feeling we are missing something obvious.”

“We will be in Fort Lauderdale tonight,” Grim said. “You won’t have Drake since he’s going to North Carolina. I’m sure McKenzie can kick ass, but she still has the boot on her leg.”

“I always planned to take a couple of AA Security’s employees with us. You need to find your sister,” Xavier said, the statement was like a cold bucket of water. He was still focused on finding Sara.

Grim shook her head and stuck her face close to the camera. “Cassanova and I are coming. You made a point the other night that family isn’t always blood. You are my family. Lucas can keep working on the data. After we make sure you and McKenzie are safe, I’ll go back to helping find my sister. You’re the one who has always been there for me. You can say no all you want. I’m coming.”

The screen went dark before Xavier could reply. “They never fucking listen.”

“Cooper isn’t going to Paris,” Xavier said.

“I agree, but he’s not going to be happy,” McKenzie sighed.

Brock took a sip of his Mountain Dew before he spoke. “I’m going to see what else I can find. If you want, you can join Jessica and me later in the Dungeon.”

Her stomach flipped at the thought of going to a sex club with Xavier. She couldn’t stop the feeling that Sara was who he really loved.

ELEVEN

XAVIER

Xavier held out his hand and helped McKenzie out of the chair. If he hadn't watched her face closely, he would have missed her wince when she took a step. "Do you want me to carry you?"

"I'm perfectly fine walking myself. Let's go find Cooper. I want to say goodbye and let him know what is going on. Kat and Antonio, do you want to come with me, or do you want me to bring him back down here?"

"We can come up," Kat said.

McKenzie walked with Kat down the hall. Antonio was next to Xavier as they followed the girls to the stairs. He heard the faint hiss from McKenzie's lips as she took the first step. She was too damn stubborn to just admit her foot hurt. At least her black eye had turned a faint purple.

Before she could take the second step, he swept her into his arms, and she let out a loud squeal. "Put me down."

"No." Her arms wrapped around his neck, and she rested her head on his shoulder. "We are going to talk about the fact you didn't let me know your foot was bothering you."

Kat giggled behind them. He carried her up the flight of stairs and down the hall. Antonio opened the door to the lavish room. The accommodations were more than just a room. It was a huge apartment. Cooper was in front of a huge television with an Xbox controller. His eyes widened when he saw me carrying McKenzie.

"Her foot is bothering her," he offered.

Cooper huffed. “It’s because she refused to fill the pain prescription the doctor gave her.”

McKenzie wiggled in his arms. “You can put me down.”

He ignored her and strode over to the couch and set her next to Cooper. Kat and Antonio followed them further into the apartment. “Why the hell did you not fill your prescription?”

McKenzie’s eyes shifted down before she answered. “It’s not my first broken bone and I didn’t take meds the last time.”

His jaw ached from clenching his teeth. “How about we compromise? I’ll get you a Tylenol and make you some lunch. You and Kat can catch up. Cooper you can join us or stay here with your mom.”

Cooper glanced at his mom and knew the boy was going to stay close to her. His eyes were filled with worry. “I’ll stay here.”

Xavier turned and headed for the kitchen. He was thankful when he opened the fridge to find it fully stocked.

“Do you want a whiskey or a beer?” Antonio asked behind him.

“Whiskey.”

He pulled out ham, lettuce, tomatoes, and onions to make cold-cut sandwiches. “I have a question for you, Antonio.”

The corner of his mouth ticked up, and he slid the glass of brown liquid over to him. “You don’t even have to ask. I already know what you’re thinking. The answer is you have to let her go with you.”

He grabbed the glass off the counter and took a sip of the smooth liquor. “You can read me that easily. Damn, I must be slipping.”

Xavier worried about what the old case might dig up. For years he thought McKenzie had turned into a bad agent. Back then he’d let his pride in the way of finding out what really happened.

“You still have the poker face mastered,” Antonio chuckled. “I would want to keep Kat back if she was hurt. We both know how much of a risk her being in that boot adds too.”

“Then why the hell would you say I need to take her? She can stay with Kat, and you can come.” He pulled a knife from the top drawer and sliced through the onion, keeping each piece thin. Sixteen years and he still remembered how she liked her sandwich.

“You didn’t let me finish.” He glanced over his shoulder to the living room. Kat and McKenzie were both laughing. A sound he didn’t hear from McKenzie often. He continued, “McKenzie is a lot like my wife. Neither had proper childhoods. They learned to fight like hell. You tell McKenzie to stay back with Kat. They will be on a jet the moment yours takes off. I also guarantee they would figure out a way to arrive before you. And if you leave it up to them those two will take on the mission alone. I guarantee they would leave a trail of destruction in their wake. It’s better to keep her next to you.”

“McKenzie wouldn’t leave Cooper here alone.” He felt a twinge of regret using their son to keep her back in the States.

“You are one hell of a spy, but a complete idiot when it comes to women,” Antonio chuckled. “My wife has a support system of women just like her. One group text message, and she has a crew larger than you can imagine ready for war or to help take care of your son.”

When the hell did he lose control of the people around him? His staff didn’t listen to his damn request. And he had a gut feeling Antonio was right about McKenzie finding a way to do it on her own. Too bad he had to fly overseas, or he’d tie her to a bed for a few hours.

“You cannot tie her to a bed or lock her in a dungeon either,” Antonio sighed.

He paused for a second, not realizing he’d said his thoughts out loud. “Didn’t mean to say that out loud.”

Antonio unscrewed the top of the whiskey bottle and poured more into his glass. “You didn’t. But those are the thoughts that go through my head every day. My wife has ten favorites saved in her phone for quick dials. One for me and one for our son—five are for black market dealers, and the last is a clean-up company. That’s if she isn’t feeding the bodies to the gators in our backyard. Like I said earlier. I see a lot of my wife in McKenzie. She is trained to escape. Brock showed me her Noble Society file. I’ve seen some fucked up shit over the years, but what McKenzie went through for training is not something anyone should ever experience.”

His fingers tightened around the knife. He hated that another man knew more about the woman than he did. One quick call and Brock would send him the file, but he wanted to hear it from her. Years ago, he was an arrogant spy running all around the world. He never took the time to dig deeper into her past. Mostly because he didn’t talk about his either.

“How do you do it? She’s the mother of my child. It’s my job to protect her.”

He shook his head. “You are a team. If you don’t look at her as an equal, it will never work.”

McKenzie was a rock star in the field. The agency had pulled him off an operation with her, and he had to fight to get them paired back up. He’d never told her that it was him who got the agency to pair them up. The CIA wanted his family’s connections he’d refused to use them until they put them back together as a team. “I never imagined we would have this conversation.”

“I wouldn’t change anything about my life. Even the part where I thought she was dead for years. Brock also pulled the file from what happened to you. My only advice is to talk about her past. I think it will help you understand why she did what she did,” he told him quietly.

“Thanks for the help. I’m still pissed you hung up and left things in the air.”

Antonio smiled. “Kat’s protective. I also knew you would come because you knew I had your back.”

They talked for a while longer as he made a sandwiches. When he finished, they all sat around the table, and Kat told a story about the first time she'd met McKenzie. Cooper argued for a while about having to stay behind, but Antonio promised they could go spend some time at his brother Aaron's house. Cooper immediately dropped coming with his parents to get to meet his favorite superhero actor. Antonio's younger brother was an A-list movie star who came out of retirement a year ago to be the lead in a new movie. It was an instant blockbuster hit.

The apartment was quiet once it was just him and her. He got up and started to clear the table, well aware of everything they needed to discuss.

She stood and collected the silverware from the table.

"Leave that. Why don't you get us a couple of drinks and settle in the living room while I clean this up?" He placed the plates in the dishwasher.

"I can help," she said. "You need to stop treating me like I'm weak."

"You're not weak. I thought we could multitask."

McKenzie barked out a laugh. "I'm pretty sure that wasn't what was rattling around in your brain, but I'll let it slide."

He put the last of the dishes in the dishwasher and met her in the living room. She had her foot propped up on the coffee table. "This is the first time we've been alone."

She glanced up at him, and he lost himself in her brown eyes. "Why do I feel nervous? Like first date butterflies?"

"Is it that or are you nervous to talk about that mission?" he prompted.

McKenzie closed her eyes for a second. "Maybe. I made a mistake. A huge one."

Xavier nodded. "We can't go back and change the past. Tell me what happened that led to you shooting me." She flinched.

He reached and grabbed her hand. "Let's talk through this."

“I met with Kasey, and she handed me an envelope of pictures which included you meeting with Pierre and Seine. Then I got a call saying you were working with them, and you needed to be taken out.”

Anger washed over him, and he took a couple of deep breaths. How could she think he was the bad guy in the situation? “Did you ever stop and think about talking with me?”

“Yes,” she said. “But I couldn’t tell you about the Society, and their reach is so large they would have found us.”

He really hated these underground organizations. “Neither of us knows how I would have reacted. What else can you tell me?”

“I didn’t know much else. After I didn’t kill you, I was put in the jail below headquarters. I spent three months incarcerated before Seth showed up and released me. That’s when I learned I’d got bad intel, and my handler wanted you dead.”

“Then Kasey is our only hope.”

They sat in silence for a couple of minutes. “You have every reason to hate me,” McKenzie whispered.

He cupped her cheeks and brought his mouth to hers. Her lips were like satin, and her tongue velvety soft when it slid across his. This kiss was slow and purposeful. She twisted and wrapped her arms around him. They sat there kissing until he pulled back and rested his forehead against hers. “I don’t hate you.”

He pulled her into his lap, and her ass brushed against his hard cock. “This is what you do to me,” he whispered.

“We should really talk things out more, but all I’ve wanted since I saw you is to feel you deep inside me.”

His control hung by a thread. “You’re injured. I really should go take a cold shower.”

McKenzie huffed. “We’ll be careful, I need you.”

He stood and picked McKenzie up, before he carried her down the hall to the bedroom. He put her down on the edge of the bed and dropped to his knees and unhooked the straps of the

boot. Her fingers were already working the buttons of her jeans as he pulled off the brace. He gripped her jeans and helped her slide them down her legs, making sure to be careful with her ankle. His mouth watered as he slipped his fingers around the thin lace panties and pulled them off her body.

McKenzie pulled the shirt over her head and tossed it to the side before she unlatched her bra and dropped it to the ground.

He swallowed hard as he stood, running his eyes up and down her body.

“You’re so fucking beautiful.”

For years, he’d tried to convince himself he hated her. Though if he was honest with himself, he hated that she left. “Slide to the middle of the bed.”

McKenzie stuck her bottom lip out and whined, “But you still have clothes on.”

He unbuttoned his dress shirt and let it hang open as he unhooked his belt and pulled his pants down. McKenzie scooted to the middle of the bed while he tossed his shirt to the side.

Her breath hitched as he climbed on the bed and settled between her legs. “I can’t wait to taste your pussy. I remember it was the sweetest thing I’d ever had.”

He trailed his fingers along her thighs, then lifted one until my knee rested over his shoulder.

“Always so wet for me,” he said. Her back arched when he leaned forward, and with his tongue licked from her clit down. The taste was addictive. He licked and probed as the world around him disappeared. All that mattered was McKenzie at this moment. “Talk to me. How does this feel?”

McKenzie’s eyes shot open. “You want me to talk while you press your fingers deep inside me?”

“I haven’t pushed my fingers in you yet. Is that what you want?”

“Yes.”

He leaned forward and ran his tongue along her folds again, and she let out a frustrated grunt. “I need more than, ‘yes.’ I want you to tell me what you want.”

McKenzie sat up, propping herself on her elbows. “Can’t you just do those things you did before?”

“I could. But I would rather hear them come out of your mouth.”

While he waited for her to answer, he pushed one finger into her and then followed it with another. He pumped his hand slowly. He kept it up until he saw how close she was to having an orgasm and then would stop.

“I’ve never done this before.”

He raised his brow, “Really? I remember us having sex before.”

“No, I mean asking for you to do things.” She laid back and rested her arm over her face. “Please faster and touch my clit.”

He obeyed her request. His lips dropped to her sex, and he sucked her pearl into his mouth. McKenzie painted harder each time he pushed his fingers deeper into her sex.

It didn’t take long for her orgasm to hit fast and hard. He kept pumping his fingers as he watched her body flush. Her sex clamped down around his fingers. When she relaxed back on the bed, he leaned forward and ran his tongue along her folds. He wanted to see her fall over the edge a second time and he picked up the pace.

“Sensitive,” she panted.

He ignored her and flicked his tongue faster. The second orgasm ripped through her body, and she screamed out his name.

“I want to taste you,” she breathed out.

“I’m not done with you yet.”

He slid up the bed and lay next to her. His finger traced along her collarbone and down her chest. “Your breasts fit perfectly in my hand.”

“I need a boob job. They are saggy,” she grumbled.

“Absolutely not!” He pinched her nipple between his fingers.
“Give me your hand.”

She hesitated a second before she raised her hand. He rested his hand on top of hers and pressed it to her breast. “Show me how you play with your breasts.”

“Xavier!”

“This is us starting to share everything together. Even our most intimate actions. Now show me how you play with these luscious breasts.”

Her fingers pinched both of her nipples. “I think you can go a little harder.” She moaned as she increased the pressure.

He pulled her hand away from her right breast, and she dropped her other. “No, keep playing with that one.” He waited until she repeated the action. His cock was painfully hard as he watched the most beautiful woman pleasure herself.

“You’re so damn sexy.” He leaned forward and wrapped his lips around her nipple. She wiggled as he skimmed his hand down her body and ran his fingers through her slit.

“How is this possible? I’m going to orgasm again,” she told him.

“I think you need to hold off.”

He stopped right before he thought she was about to explode. He dragged his hand back up her body and took her chin between his thumb and finger, then kissed her with all the passion a person could have. Just when she was breathless, she nudged him to roll onto his back.

She pulled away and broke the kiss. Her hand slid down his body and gripped his cock. Fuck, her soft hands felt like velvet wrapped around his cock. She smirked as she started to slide down the bed.

“No. We have to be careful with your foot.”

“My foot will be fine. I only need to use my mouth.”

His gaze followed her as she maneuvered towards his waist and wrapped her mouth around his cock. “Your lips feel so good.”

She took a couple of passes before he wrapped his fingers in her blonde locks. “Slower.”

He couldn't stop himself from thrusting his hips up and going deeper into her mouth. She leaned back and wrapped her fingers around his cock. “I want to be inside you.”

“It's my turn to play, and I'm not done...yet.”

She ran her tongue along the underside of his cock, then lower, swiping over his balls.

He thrust his hips and held her in place as she hummed against his cock. Even if her mouth felt like heaven, he wanted to be inside her.

“Climb back up here. When I come I want to do it deep inside your pussy.”

“Condom,” she whispered.

He closed his eyes and tried to get his body under control. “I don't have one on me. I'm sure Brock has some. I'll go get one.”

“Or we could risk it. I don't want to wait and I'm clean.”

The thought of getting her pregnant and watching her stomach swell with his kid was intoxicating. “Never run from me again.”

She blinked her eyes, but he caught the small tear in the corner. “I'll always regret my choices in the past.”

He swiped the tear from her cheek. “No regrets. I'm saying no running. I'll find you if you do and handcuff you to my bed so you can't escape.”

“Promise?”

He sealed the promise with a kiss. Desperately wanting her more than anything.

“Spread your legs wide for me.”

He climbed between her legs and hovered over her body. She wrapped her one leg around his back, and he sunk deep inside her. Her folds gripped his cock so tight he had to pause and regain control. She felt perfect sheathed around him.

“Move,” McKenzie panted.

She clenched her pussy around him. “Your pussy is so wet.” He pulled back and thrust, starting a slow rhythm. When he reached down and circled his thumb over her clit, she completely lost control.

He loved to watch her lose control. “Play with your nipples.”

“My body feels so sensitive.”

“If you want me to continue, you better do as I ask,” he growled into her ear.

“I’m so close.”

“When your foot heals, I can’t wait to take you from behind. I love watching your sexy ass as I thrust deep inside of you.”

McKenzie pushed at his chest. “Let’s do that now. You get so deep when we do that.”

He leaned forward and nipped her ear. “It’s not safe for your ankle.”

“I could lean over the bed. It’s high enough that my foot wouldn’t touch the floor.”

She groaned when he pulled his cock out.

“If it bothers your foot, we stop.” She moved to the edge of the bed and hung her feet over the edge.

Xavier gripped his cock as he stood and moved behind her. Her perfect ass stuck straight up in the air. His hand twitched, wanting to smack down against her creamy flesh.

They both groaned as he sunk deep inside her again. She tilted her head to the side, and their eyes connected.

“Is this what you wanted?”

McKenzie groaned, “Yes, but you used to smack my ass as you took me from behind.”

“Damn woman,” he cursed, then brought his hand down. Her sex clenched around his cock, gripping him hard.

He wanted to savor each second with her. When he knew he was close, he wanted to come with her staring at him. He pulled back, and her eyes shot open. “Roll over.”

She pouted for a second, but did as he ordered. “I need you inside me.”

He pulled her to the edge of the bed and slammed in again. His lips came down against hers and he wrapped his hands around her back lifting her up in the air.

His hands gripped under her thighs. There his chest pressed against hers as he pumped deep inside her.

“Does this hurt your ankle?”

Her eyes shot open, “No. I need you stop talking.” Her leg loosely wrapped around his backside as he walked to the wall. He made sure to keep her held under her thigh so she didn’t need to use her strength.

Their tongues tangled together as he fucked her against the wall. Her hand snaked between their bodies and pushed against her clit. “I’m so close,” she panted.

Her sex clamped down around him, and he went over the edge.

He stood holding her against the wall, both panting.

“I love you,” she whispered.

A memory of the last time he’d said the words flashed like a slow movie. He’d declared his love as she shot him. The shove against his chest brought him out of the flash back. The tears pooling in her eyes was a clear sign he had messed up.

“Please let me down.”

“McKenzie.” He wasn’t sure what to say.

“I can’t do this. Clearly, we are on two different pages.”

He walked with her still in his arms to the bed and carefully set her down. He’d barely put her down before she shot off the

bed. A loud scream erupted from her throat as she fell to the ground.

“McKenzie.” He dropped next to her. “Let’s talk.”

The tears streamed down her face. “I’m already embarrassed enough. Please just leave me alone.” His phone, at that moment, went off. But nothing matters more than McKenzie, the rest of the world could wait. He wasn’t sure how to explain his hesitation.

“I can explain.”

Her brown eyes connected with mine, seeing the pain he caused her felt like a dagger through the heart.

“Please don’t. All I want is a moment alone. Bring me the boot and give me a second.”

He worried this was one of the situations in which everything depended on his next action. “I’ll give you ten minutes, but we need to talk this through. I want to explain before I say the words.”

She flinched at my comment.

“Please just leave me alone for a moment,” she whispered.

He rose, grabbed her boot, and handed it to her. He grabbed a pair of shorts before he left the room. When he stepped into the hall, the sob coming from the room crushed him.

His phone dinged again, and he walked to the living room.

Lucas: We are here. If you need anything, call.

He slipped on his shorts, grabbed the bottle of whisky, and took a long swig. The burn of the amber drink did not help. He had given her enough time. When he went back to the room, the door was shut. He jingled the handle, it was locked.

“Let me in. We need to talk.”

“I need a moment. Please just give me this.”

He wanted to break down the door, but he would give her time. There was no doubt he loved her, but he still had unresolved issues from his past. He sat down on the couch and

started to work. If she wanted time, he would give her the night, but then he would explain.

TWELVE
MCKENZIE

Kat's fingers tapped against the steering wheel. McKenzie stared at the cobble stone street. She bit the inside of her cheek to stop the tears threatening to pour from her eyes. How could she be so dumb to blurt out those words in the middle of sex? Deep down, she knew he did love her like she loved him. In the end, she did what she did best—she ran. Only this time she had help. Luckily, Kat knew an escape route through the vents in the master bedroom. Also, it helped her friend was rich with access to private jets.

By the time she'd escaped the building, Kat was in the parking lot waiting in her Range Rover along with her sister Sophie. They even had a change of clothes for her. Kat had somehow managed to get them all matching black shirts, with a black alligator near her chest. You could see it up close or if you ran your hand over it. She also had a pair of black cargo pants for her with a holster.

McKenzie's eyes glanced at the dashboard clock. They'd left Fort Lauderdale eight hours ago. Kat and Sophie didn't probe for any answer to why she was running. Instead, Sophie hacked Brock's systems and was able to get Kasey's location. It was the same small apartment where she'd lived years ago.

They all left their phones behind. Kat had reached out to a connection in Paris. When we walked out of baggage claim, a man handed Kat the keys to a car. In the trunk, we found an arsenal of weapons along with burner phones.

The GPS announced the next turn, and Kat slowed before turning.

“Don’t take this turn, turn at the second light,” Sophie said from the back seat. “We want to park on the back side of the building.”

Kat nodded and continued down the streets of Paris. It was the middle of the night, and the streets were empty.

McKenzie would be indebted to Kat and Sophie for helping her. Daisy helped too. Kat and Sophie had told their husbands they were going to have a group slumber party at Daisy’s house with all the kids. Daisy was Kat’s sister-in-law and her husband was in California for work. She didn’t know if Xavier knew she was gone or even cared.

Her eyes started to leak again the moment she thought about him.

The horrified look that flashed across his face when she said the words told her everything she needed to know. After she figured out who was after her, she would figure out a way to be civilized with Xavier for her son, but nothing else.

“Park in that spot over there,” Sophie leaned forward and pointed to the right side of the road.

Kat pulled into the spot and turned off the car. “I’m all for going rogue. But you want to talk about things before we head into the unknown. You’re a good shot, but your vision will be blurry if you keep crying...and I’m not really feeling like taking a stray bullet.”

“Don’t worry about it. I was taught to shoot with my dad spraying pepper spray in my eyes.” A few tears wouldn’t make her miss a shot.

“Talking helps, so does killing someone. Let’s go talk with Kasey and find out who set you up years ago.” Kat said before she exited the car.

The three of them met at the back of the car. Kat opened the trunk, and they each grabbed three guns and two knives. Sophie also grabbed the only pair of brass knuckles.

“I have some truth serum to make sure we get what we need,” Kat explained, waving a syringe in the air.

Sophie just shook her head. McKenzie wasn't even phased by anything Kat did. "Let's go." Kat's heels echoed against the cobbled road as they crossed the street. With each step, she scanned the area, looking for anything out of place.

The intel Sophie had stolen said Kasey was last seen at her place today. They walked up to the door. She raised her hand and knocked on the door. The wooden door slid open.

"That's not a good sign," Kat stated.

McKenzie grabbed her gun and held it ready in her hand as she stepped through the doorway. The strong scent of copper assaulted her the moment she entered the house.

"Well, we are too late," Kat said.

"Someone is looking for something," Sophie pointed out the obvious.

The entire apartment was ripped apart. Stuffing from the couch cushions covered the floor. Not a single section of the place was left untouched, everything destroyed. Kasey's lifeless body lay in the middle of the mass of destruction.

Kat pulled a flashlight from her pocket. McKenzie hadn't even seen her grab it. "This much destruction makes me think they didn't find what they were looking for."

"Not sure there is a place left to look. How could things get any worse? This was the only lead."

Sophie scrunched her nose. "I don't do a lot of field work. Most of the time I'm sitting behind a computer. But stating 'how could things get any worse?' might cause us some issues."

"I'm pissed we didn't get to fuck someone up," Kat pouted as she continuously flashed the light around the room.

"Well, we can head back home," McKenzie said, defeated. The tears started again. She didn't even have a home or anywhere to go. And the person after her had succeeded in covering their steps.

"Let's think about this for a second," Kat tapped her shoe.

Sophie crossed the room and crouched next to the laptop. “They took the hard drive.”

“So, this woman was an informant for the Noble Society and I saw in her folder she worked for the CIA and for others that would hand over money.”

“Kat spit it out.”

Kat strode across the room. “She would hide documents like a spy. Not some off-the-street informant who put shit in a couch cushion.”

“Where do you keep your hiding spots?” Kat asked.

That is a taboo question to ask any spy. “Where do you keep yours?” McKenzie countered.

“Okay. But let’s look around this room and see what a good place would be.”

For thirty minutes, they searched for the best place to create a false wall or floor. They covered the entire apartment. The only area they hadn’t checked was under Kasey’s body.

“Fuck, your words from earlier are coming to bite us in the ass. We have to move the fucking body. That right there is how things can get worse,” Sophie grumbled.

Kat grabbed one leg, Sophie grabbed the other, and McKenzie grabbed Kasey’s hands. “On the count of three. One. Two. Three.”

They heaved the body up in the air and moved Kasey two feet over. Kat dropped to one knee and tapped on the floor. The floor echoed. “Can you pry it open?”

Kat tucked her flashlight away and pulled a switchblade from her pocket. A moment later, she popped the floorboard open. Inside was a gray lock box. Kat removed it from the hole. The front was locked with an ordinary key lock.

“Let’s take it and get out of here,” McKenzie said.

A moving red dot caught her attention. The beam found its way to Kat’s shoulder. McKenzie launched herself through the

air and toppled Kat to the ground. “Sophie, get the fuck down. Someone is here.”

“Now things are about to get fun,” Kat giggled.

The adrenalin burst from the sniper beam died a little, and the pain from her ankle intensified. “Fuck. I think I did something when I took you down. Why don’t you guys leave with the box? I’ll lead the people another way.”

“We don’t leave anyone behind to have all the fun,” Kat crawled across the floor and popped up near the window. Long enough for the dot to appear again, and she dropped a second before the glass shattered.

Kat smiled as she crawled back across the floor. “I think I have their location; we should be okay leaving through the front and heading to the car.”

“I’m just going to slow you down. You both need to go,” she reiterated.

“Let’s all crawl towards the door and exit that way. The sniper shouldn’t reach there,” Kat explained.

The three crawled across the floor and out the door. At the end of the sidewalk three people in full tactical gear were flat against the wall.

They had the equipment, but none of them seemed trained. A true mercenary team would blend into the surroundings. It reminded her of the team that had shot at her house.

“Stay,” Kat barely whispered. Like a trained professional, she disappeared, melting into the shadows of the night.

The echo of a bone breaking followed by a thud had McKenzie getting up. She wouldn’t let Kat do this alone. With each step she took, pain radiated through her entire body. A second shadow fell to the ground. When McKenzie made it to the end of the building, she saw two large bodies on the ground, not moving. The third man stood across from Kat. She had her gun trained at the center of his chest. “Who the hell do you work for?”

“I will take it to the grave,” the man said in perfect English.

“How about you tell me and then I shoot you? See you’ll kind of take it to the grave then.”

“Never.” The man raised his hand to his mouth. Two seconds later foam flowed down his chin, and he fell to the ground.

McKenzie limped over to Kat. The building blocked them from the sniper. “What do we do with them?”

“Well, that did not go according to plan. I left one alive for information,” Kat grumbled.

Sophie approached us and, in the distance, the faint sound of police sirens echoed. With each passing second, they sounded like they were getting closer. “We need to get out of here.”

“No way we can leave three bodies in the street,” McKenzie pointed out.

Kat waved her hand in the air. “I have a guy.”

The sirens got louder. “I hope your guy is fast because the cops are on the way.”

“My contact can handle it. Now heading to the car will have us in the open for the sniper.” Kat paused. “Can you push through the pain? Or do we need another plan? Leaving you is not an option.”

Her childhood training had prepared her for this. “Let’s go.”

They took off across the street, and a soft pop of a bullet hitting metal announced the shooter. She didn’t have time to look for the red dot. She pushed through the pain as they raced for the car. Her fingers reached for the handle when pain shot through her arm. She was hit, but needed to keep going. Her ass barely hit the seat, and Kat had the car peeling out of the parking spot. Pain lanced through her as she tried to close the door with her injured arm.

“We did it,” Kat fist pumped as she sped down the street.

McKenzie pressed her hand over her bicep. “Do you happen to have a doctor in that huge Rolodex of yours?”

Kat’s eyes widened as she glanced over. “Fuck!”

THIRTEEN

XAVIER

Xavier's head shot up from the couch as someone pounded on the door. He would have to kill the person on the other side if they had woken McKenzie up. Despite the light from the television, he tripped over the end table. Pain shot through his shin, but he needed to punch the fucker who wouldn't stop knocking, so he jogged to the door and flung it open.

Brock, Antonio, Lucas, Zane, and Grim shoved their way into the apartment. "What the fuck?" he growled.

"That's our question for you. How badly did you mess up?" Antonio ground out the words, his voice deadly low.

Xavier didn't want to admit to anyone what had happened. When she woke, he planned to grovel and make it up to her.

"I don't know what you're talking about. Leave before you wake McKenzie up."

"McKenzie isn't here," Brock countered.

"And my wife is not supposed to be in the field," Zane shouted.

Xavier had never met Zane in person, but seen him on television enough to know who he was. Zane Tucker the brother of the former president Zack Tucker. Rumors filtered around the spy world that his wife worked as a Hacker for the CIA.

He had passed out on the couch, but there was no way she could have sneaked by him. Without bothering with the conversation any longer, he turned and strode straight to the

bedroom. His fingers gripped the door handle and twisted, but the knob wouldn't twist. "She is sleeping in the room. I think you guys are mistaken."

"No. I bet my entire company that McKenzie isn't in that room, and it has to be all your fault. You are going to have to pay for the cleaning crews that will be needed from the destruction my wife will leave in her wake. Especially when she finds out someone was wronged."

This was insane. He pulled the pocketknife from his pants and pried the lock open. "You all stay out here." He slipped through the door and shut it behind him. With a flick of his finger, he turned on the lights. The sheets were tossed aside, and the bed was empty. His stomach clenched as he scanned the room. There was no sign of McKenzie anywhere. He strode to the bathroom, hoping to find her there, but it was empty. Her phone was gone from the bedside, and her backpack wasn't next to the bed.

Still not convinced she'd left. He yanked his cell phone out of his pocket and dialed her number. It went straight to voicemail without ringing once. The muted chatter outside the door increased with each second he remained behind the closed door. She had run away. He wanted to be angry, but couldn't blame her. They needed to talk shit out. He'd have to watch her closer so when they fought, she wouldn't run.

The door slowly opened, and Grim slipped inside. "Hey."

"I messed up."

Grim nodded. "Well, you're a man. Of course, you messed up. The best course of action is to figure out the next step, and the people out there could help."

He had to find McKenzie and handcuff her to the bed until they worked out all their problems. Running wasn't an option anymore, and he needed to explain that to her.

"You're right." He replied and strode back to the living room. Brock flicked the switch on for all the lights in the main area. Both Brock and Lucas pulled out their laptops and took over the dining room table. Antonio paced back and forth,

grumbling under his breath. Zane leaned against the far wall staring at his phone.

“Is she at your house?” he asked Antonio.

The deadly mercenary stopped and stared. What he hadn't expected was for Antonio to throw his head back and laugh. “You truly don't know what your screw-up is about to cause, do you? They mobilized. Not just Kat and McKenzie. All the women.”

“Honestly, I was a little hurt McKenzie didn't ask me or Willa for help,” Grim pouted.

A surge of dread washed over the room. “Where is Cooper?”

Antonio waved his hand dismissively. “He's fine. Kat told me all the women and their kids were having a sleepover at my brother's house. But that was a way for me and everyone else to be kept in the dark. My brother and Neal are currently out of the state. When we arrived Daisy and Jessica were watching all the kids.”

“Then where the hell is McKenzie?” His frustration grew the more Antonio didn't address the main issue. “Moreover, how the hell did she get out of this building without setting off some alarm? She couldn't have just walked out the front door since I was on the couch. Furthermore, this place was supposed to be secure. Why did no alarms go off?”

Brock glanced up from his computer. “This place is wired, but when you piss off one of our own, they know how to bypass everything.”

“Not only that Kat pulled Sophie into this. My dear wife can take down Brock's system with her eyes closed,” Zane added.

“I wouldn't go that far. She is good, but you make it sound like my systems are easy to navigate.” Brock said, staring Zane down.

“We don't have time for this same argument. Our goal now is to find McKenzie, Kat, and Sophie. From what I pieced together, McKenzie called Kat about seven hours ago. Approximately two minutes after that call, all the women decided to have a sleepover,” Antonio said, scrubbing his hand

over his face. “From the camera footage, we found they only met at Daisy’s house for ten minutes before the three women jumped back in their SUV and left.

He didn’t understand why he hadn’t tracked their cell phones. “What did the GPS on their phones say?”

“How could you be this dense?” Antonio questioned. “You are dealing with three former CIA agents. Two are deadly field agents, and the other one is a hacker. And you seriously think they have their phones on?”

Brock cut in before he could reply. “When one of the girls gets hurt, they do everything possible to protect each other,” Brock paused. “Kat had to have talked McKenzie through an escape hatch in the bedroom which leads to the ventilation system and then outside. The cameras didn’t catch any of the activity, because Sophie logged into the system and altered the cameras and alarms for the route Kat had McKenzie take. The only reason we figured this out was Lucas had come and asked me for help with some of the data on the USB. When I went to log in, my authentication didn’t work. I was kicked out of my own damn network.”

Grim huffed, “The more you talk, the more upset I am that they didn’t invite me. Especially since they seem like the better team. Very well organized and thought everything through. You’re locked out of your own system. McKenzie climbed through the vents to escape unnoticed, and here we are, just staring at each other.”

“Why don’t you track the vehicle?” he asked.

“They disabled the tracker before even Kat left the house,” Antonio said as he strode over to the open bottle of whiskey and took a gulp straight from the bottle. “Kat took her go-bags too. The first thing I checked was my wife’s tracker. She had disabled it. Sophie took over the system, so we can’t override it. They’ll be hard to find.”

“Well, if they flew somewhere, we could get the flight plan,” he shot back.

Brock grunted. “That would work if we were dealing with a normal person. A rented jet left the private airfield around the time we think they mobilized. Two minutes into the flight, it disappeared. No trace of it anywhere. Next, we tried contacting the Black Brothers, who own Nova Satellite Systems, to locate the plane. You won’t believe it, but the satellite over that area had a glitch during the time they took off.”

If he hadn’t been worried about McKenzie and the fact that someone wanted her dead, he would have been impressed with their skills. “Well, fuck!”

“What I need to know is whether they are planning on blowing up your life or if they are going after the person who tried to kill McKenzie?” Antonio asked.

Xavier would bet she had headed to Paris to contact Kasey. His heart threatened to pound out of his chest. She already had an injured foot, and he was worried about the danger she was in. Why the hell had he given her time to cool off? This mission had torn them apart years ago. There was no way in hell he was going to let history repeat itself. “I’m heading to Paris.”

“How sure are you that’s where they went?” Lucas asked.

She loved him, but he also knew she would walk away if he let her. He didn’t have time to feel guilty or think about how he had messed up. All he had to do was what he did best every fucking day, hunt people down. It was time for a mission, and he would walk through a million bullets to get her back.

“McKenzie wants to find out who is after her,” he answered. “You have access to the Noble Society’s network, right?”

Lucas nodded.

“Can you find Jasper Monroe’s number? I’ll call him once we’re wheels up. You all can come with me or stay, but I’m leaving now.”

He turned toward the door and pulled out his phone. He scrolled until he found his pilot’s name and pressed dial. Gunther answered on the second ring. The crew was already

near the airport and would have the jet ready when they arrived.

Antonio grabbed his arm and stopped him as he headed toward the Range Rover in the parking lot. “You ride with me, and everyone else takes that car.”

“Boss?” Grim asked.

“It’s fine.” Except nothing was fine. He followed Antonio to his SUV, and everyone else followed Brock.

His ass barely hit the seat when Antonio barked out a question. “What the fuck did you do?”

He slammed the door shut and leaned back into the leather seat. “It doesn’t matter. McKenzie and I will work things out.”

The vehicle lurched forward as the tires squealed against the street. “You don’t have to keep everything bottled up inside. Sometimes talking things out helps.”

“But nothing I say will change what happened,” he sighed.

Antonio snorted as he sped down the streets of Fort Lauderdale toward the private airstrip. “We’ve known each other a long time. In our industry, it’s no secret you don’t talk things out. Bottling this shit up only makes you distracted.”

“And you talk shit out?” he asked bluntly. “Didn’t I hear a rumor that your brother didn’t even know you had married Kat until she came back from the dead? I’m sure that’s something people would confide in someone about. Why are you giving me advice you’ve never followed?”

“I was where you are for a long time, never talking things out. I’ve learned from my mistakes. My guess is you told her she couldn’t go on the mission. Honestly, with her injured leg, I wouldn’t blame you.”

“She told me she loved me.”

The vehicle was silent for a solid minute. “I read the CIA’s report. She burned you and shot you. The evidence photos showed a wedding ring box on the floor in the living room. Let me guess. You heard those words, and your mind went back to the day she betrayed you.”

Only now he knew she hadn't done it based on real evidence. Once he knew she was safe, he planned to burn to ashes whoever had fucked with his life. "Yes...and I didn't say anything back."

"Fuck!" Antonio groaned. "You're going to have to grovel for a long time."

Antonio turned down a private road that led to the airfield. Brock and the rest of the group were in the car behind of them. They stopped at the guard station. The light flashed green, and they drove through.

He hated that she had run again. Part of him wondered if he should cut all ties and walk away from her after he eliminated the threat. Except this time, he would have to walk away from his son, and that was something he couldn't do. For once, he wasn't sure how to handle the situation with McKenzie.

The SUV came to a stop next to the plane.

Xavier followed Brock up the stairs of the jet. Less than twenty-four hours prior, he'd sat on this same plane next to McKenzie. Grim and Casanova were already sitting in the seats around the conference table. Brock placed his laptop down before he took a seat.

Xavier took the seat next to Grim. She reached out and squeezed his hand. When he glanced at her, her eyes were shifting from side to side, filled with worry. From years of working with her, he knew she wanted to ask him what happened, but she also knew he wouldn't tell her. The fact that he had told Antonio had shocked him.

"I'm close to hacking back into my systems," Brock said as his fingers tapped against the keyboard. "From what I can see, Sophie hadn't intended to lock me out for long. Either the mission they had planned was short, or Sophie was worried about what they were doing. Once I'm in, I can override Kat's and Sophie's trackers and turn them back on."

Antonio had sunk into the chair next to him. "The only problem is that Kat has a head start, which means we'll have a mess to clean up."

“On the USB drive, Grim found the photo that had been used to make McKenzie think you were the bad guy,” Lucas said. “Why would Sara have anything from that mission?”

With each mission linked to Sara, he had wondered how much she had changed from the girl he knew in high school. “Maybe it’s time we called Jasper.”

“I agree,” Antonio stated.

Xavier pulled his phone from his pants and dialed Jasper’s number. Earlier Brock had gotten him the number within minutes of him asking.

By the third ring, he wasn’t sure if Jasper would answer. His finger hovered over the end call button when a deep voice finally came through.

“Xavier.”

“McKenzie has taken off to handle this mission with Kat Ross. Please tell me they’ve contacted you.”

The plane roared as it sped down the runway.

“She hasn’t contacted me. I tried her today, and it went straight to voicemail.”

“We think the person after her is trying to kill everyone from the mission that split us up. My best guess is she went to Paris. Do you happen to know where she would go if she were in Paris?”

“Have you looked at the USB?”

Xavier ran his hand through his hair. “Are you going to answer my question?”

“Maybe...” Jasper paused, and the sound of a foreign ambulance siren blared through the speaker. “Before I reveal McKenzie’s safe house in Paris, if it came down to choosing who to save, would you choose Sara or McKenzie?”

Grim’s fingers curled into a fist. Xavier had hoped he would never have to make such a choice, but deep down, he knew he would always choose McKenzie. “I love McKenzie, and she is

the mother of my child. If it came down to it, I would choose McKenzie, and the rest of the team could help Sara.”

“I’m not that far from Paris. I’ll make my way to the safe house I know of to see if she’s there. Word on the street is there was a break and entry a couple of hours ago, and the person who owned the place was Kasey Nash.”

“Any casualties?” Antonio barked out.

“Three hired guns dead on the sidewalk and Kasey dead inside the house.”

“Send me the coordinates. If you do find her, don’t tell her we’re coming.”

“McKenzie is my partner. Not sure I can promise that,” Jasper said. The phone crackled for a second. “Look at the data I gave you on the USB. I think there is—”

The plane dropped two feet in the air and oxygen masks fell from the ceiling. A moment later, an explosion erupted from the right side of the plane so loud it caused his ears to ring. Fire shot out of the side engine.

“What the hell!” Jasper yelled.

His hand clutched the phone. “If I don’t make it. You need to protect McKenzie.” The roaring of the plane made it impossible to hear Jasper’s response.

“This is your captain speaking. Prepare for evacuation.”

Before he could stand, the flight attendants had appeared with rigs for everyone. The plane had dropped another foot as he slipped his arm through the strap. Once they were all strapped in, they had moved toward the emergency exit.

“I’ll let the pilot know you’re ready,” the young woman said before she ran toward the cockpit.

Antonio stood next to him. “Why do I feel like this is sabotage?” Xavier shouted.

“You think another attempt on McKenzie’s life?” Antonio asked.

A second explosion from the left of the jet shook the plane so hard that he stumbled backward, taking Grim to the floor with him. He rolled to the side and got back up, helping her along the way.

The airplane speakers crackled. “I was able to head back a little, so we are only a mile off the coast. We are at ten thousand feet; everyone needs to jump.”

The flight attendant pulled the latch on the door, and wind blasted into the plane. Lucas and Brock went first, followed by Zane, Grim, and Casanova. Antonio and Xavier helped the flight attendants next. Antonio nodded at him, and he leaped out of the plane, falling toward the ocean. Only a few feet away, Antonio fell with him. He sighed when the two pilots jumped. There was only a moment of relief before the plane exploded. Debris rained down around him. If he opened his chute, there was a good chance a piece of metal would cut through it.

His heart raced as the water came closer. The wing of the plane dropped past him, missing his leg by an inch. Antonio screamed something, but he didn't understand. He opened his mouth to ask him to repeat it when searing pain struck his head, and he spun in the air. His vision blurred as he wrapped his fingers around the ripcord. He tugged hard at the strap, but it wouldn't budge. Below him, his entire team had released their parachutes. Fingers wrapped around his arm, and he tried to jerk away. But it was Antonio, and he tightened his grip. They spun in the air as Antonio reached for his strap, but he couldn't get it to release either. Xavier went to grab the emergency release, and the strap didn't exist.

“Hold on to me,” Antonio screamed.

Xavier wrapped himself around Antonio. When Antonio pulled his cord, they jerked in the air. His grip slipped a little, but they still had a way to go before they were in the clear.

“Thanks, man,” Xavier yelled. He was almost certain he would be dead if it weren't for Antonio.

Hell, they might still die swimming in the ocean.

FOURTEEN

MCKENZIE

McKenzie dug her nails into her palms as the doctor tied the last stitch. Kat had driven them to a small veterinary clinic outside of Paris. The man closing the gash from the bullet grazing her arm didn't speak a word of English. Clearly, Kat and her had two different ideas of what she had meant when she asked for a doctor, but she didn't have a choice.

Kat and Sophie occupied two chairs against the far wall in the small exam room. Sophie had her laptop propped open on her lap, and Kat held the silver case we took from the apartment. They would need to pick open the lock and find out what was so important inside. She hoped it had the documents from years ago.

McKenzie winced when the doctor pressed a bandage over the stitches. He turned toward Kat, and they spoke in rapid French. For a moment, the two stared each other down before he threw his hands up, grumbled something she didn't understand, and left the room.

"What's going on?" McKenzie asked.

"Nothing to worry about," Kat said as she stood. "Dr. Babault has a small apartment above the clinic. We can stay there tonight."

McKenzie grabbed her backpack off the floor and threw the strap over her shoulder before she stood. Sophie followed Kat out of the exam room. The three of them walked down the white hallway toward a steel door in the opposite direction of the front entrance. Kat twisted the knob of the door and pulled

it open. McKenzie should have asked the doctor for some painkillers, but she wasn't sure where he'd gone. Each stair she climbed sent a jolt of pain through her lower leg.

At the top of the stairs was yet another door with a keypad to the right. Kat pressed her finger against the pad six times, and a faint click filled the air. Sophie grabbed the handle, twisted it, and held it ajar. McKenzie hobbled through the open door and into the small apartment. Near the galley kitchen was an old wooden table with four chairs. The wood creaked as her ass hit the seat. Kat followed her and placed the silver box in the center of the table.

Since they pulled the box from the floor, she'd wanted nothing more than to see what was inside. Her fingers grasped the outer edge, and she slid it closer to her. The locks were standard and would be easy to crack. She pulled her lock pick set from her bag.

“Sit down at the table. We can work on it together.”

Kat and Sophie joined her at the table.

McKenzie unzipped a black leather case that held all of her tools. Her fingers gripped around a thin silver tool with a jagged edge. The end slid into the keyhole, and she used the small pick to unlock the rollers inside.

When the last pin of the lock clicked into place, and the lid popped open, McKenzie's heart raced. She pulled out a stack of cream folders. She had hoped to find case files or anything that would lead her to understand what had happened in Paris all those years ago. However, each file was labeled with a name, and inside was information on that person. The second and third were the same, with none pointing to a specific case or operation. A lump formed in her stomach as she realized these documents might not be what she was looking for.

Kat reached out from her seat across the table, pulled one of the folders, and opened it. Inside, there were photos of a younger man trading guns with an associate. It was a series of photos, all of them featuring the same individual. McKenzie then opened another folder, this one labeled Andrea Goldstein. It contained pictures of a woman at different times and

locations, along with sheets that tracked her whereabouts and meetings. The last sheet listed Jasper Monroe a Noble Society's associate that worked the case, hinting that these files might lead them somewhere significant. Except she never heard of this person. Also might mean she can't trust Jasper.

Grabbing a second folder, Kat skimmed the contents. This one held documents that detailed a case and locations, and even included a sheet listing bribes.

"I think these files contain blackmail information," Kat said, not looking up from a page outlining the person's interactions over the span of five years.

The silver case contained about forty of these folders. They needed to sift through them all, searching for that one piece of information that could lead to their next target or provide answers about the past.

McKenzie scrubbed a hand over her face. "I think you are right. Now all we have to do is find someone who was bribed or connected with the mission Xavier and I worked."

Sophie pushed her laptop aside and joined them, grabbing a stack of folders. McKenzie stared at the one in front of her, reminded of the heinous crimes she had encountered during her time working for the CIA. These folders outlined the worst of humanity: human trafficking, drug trafficking, arms deals, and even low-level financial crimes.

As McKenzie continued her search, she noted that not only men were involved in these crimes; women were too. After over an hour of reading, with only five folders left to go through, she came across something that made her pause. She recognized a name, but its presence in this particular collection of files set off alarm bells in her mind.

Shakily, she opened the folder to find photos of a woman she had stalked in the past. The first photo was taken years ago. As she flipped through the file, it became clear that Sara Porter was connected to some of the most nefarious individuals in the world. Midway through the folder, McKenzie's breath caught. She had seen this photo before, showing Xavier at a table with

two men. But in this photo, it wasn't Xavier—it was Sara Porter.

The discovery was shocking. Sara Porter appeared to be deeply entwined with some of the most dangerous people on the planet. This realization forced McKenzie to reassess everything she knew about Sara, setting off a cascade of thoughts and suspicions about Sara's real identity and how deep she was tied to the underworld of corruption.

As McKenzie studied the photo in disbelief, she realized Brock had authenticated the photo with Xavier was not fake. So, she wondered if this photo of Sara Porter was altered. "This can't be right," she murmured, her mind racing.

Sophie, who had been examining another folder, looked over and recognized the woman in the photo. "That's Sara Porter, the one Xavier is supposedly in love with," she pointed out.

"I think it might be another fake. Brock proved the photo of the two men together was real, but the one where Xavier was added in, was fake. So, we should assume the same for this one."

McKenzie remembered the peculiar circumstances surrounding Sara's supposed death. The story had been Sara was presumed dead, allegedly killed by her husband for the life insurance years prior. However, it turned out she was alive and held captive by a man. Xavier and his team had reportedly saved her from Carter, her ex-husband and captor. But Sara's reaction post-rescue was strange; she had abruptly cut off all contact with her rescuers.

Kat snatched the photo from her hands. "The picture Brock authenticated could be from before Sara arrived. If I remember right. The photo he put up on the screen had no food on the table. This one does though. You read the report about her rescue. She's not what people think."

Sophie had hacked into a Rogue Mercenary's computer system, allowing them access to confidential case files. McKenzie remembered seeing a photo of Carter, the alleged kidnapper, in the files. Flipping back through the stack of photos, she found the one she was looking for: Carter and Sara

walking hand in hand, not appearing as captor and captive. Another photo showed them together meeting with an arms dealer, where Sara appeared to be in charge.

McKenzie leaned back in the chair, wondering if Kat would think she was crazy. “What if Sara had been in control the entire time, setting up Carter to take the fall and making it appear as if she were kidnapped?”

“You might be right.” Kat laid out three photos on the table. “These men are on the FBI’s Most Wanted list. Look, Carter is present in each of the meetings, but he’s off to the side. Sara is doing all the talking.”

As they delved deeper into the files, she found more men all tied to criminal organizations the US was attempting to shut down.

One photo in particular stood out, showing Sara in her high school days with the old Grandmaster, a man she wished she could have killed. This connection to the Grandmaster threw her. McKenzie wondered why Jasper, who had provided a USB drive full of information on Sara, hadn’t informed her of these connections.

Sitting back, McKenzie contemplated the web of deceit and manipulation she was unraveling. It appeared that Sara Porter’s role was far more complex and sinister than anyone had imagined. The revelation made McKenzie question what little trust she had placed in the people in her life, including Jasper and Seth. She realized that in the world of espionage and hidden agendas, nothing was ever as straightforward as it seemed.

McKenzie, plagued with doubt and suspicion, questioned everyone’s motives, including Jasper’s. As she pulled out her burner phone and dialed his number, he picked up almost immediately, his voice laced with worry and frustration. “What the fuck, McKenzie? You just disappear, take a plane unmarked, and don’t let anybody know of a way to get a hold of you. You know how dumb this is?” His tone, though harsh, carried an undercurrent of concern.

McKenzie rolled her eyes at his scolding, which reminded her of an older brother's chastisement. "Jasper, I'm not alone. I have two other people with me. I'm fine," she reassured him.

"You have people worried about you. When are you going to get it through your thick skull that not everyone is out to get you?"

Her cheeks heated with embarrassment. "If you want me to trust you, then why the hell did you keep things about Sara from me? Like the fact she knew the Grandmaster."

"Are you serious? I had suspicions Sara wasn't what people thought, but I didn't know about that. I'm on the way to your safe house. We can talk more when I get there. I have something I need to tell you."

When they'd touched down in Paris, she considered using her safe house but knew Jasper had the location. So instead, she decided not even to mention it. "I'm not there. Just tell me what you have to say."

"This isn't a phone type of news."

"Spit it out."

Jasper sighed and his voice went soft. "Xavier is worried about you. He figured you went to Paris. When they took off, he called me. Fuck. During the conversation, there was a loud explosion. Now the news is reporting on it."

The room blurred as her thoughts went directly to the idea that Xavier died. No, that can't be possible he's a spy, untouchable.

Glancing at Kat and Sophie, McKenzie realized the gravity of the situation. Their husbands might have been on that plane as well, given their protective nature.

"Uh...Are you sure it was his plane?" McKenzie asked, struggling to accept the reality. Jasper confirmed, his voice heavy with certainty and concern. He suspected the bomb was meant for her and Xavier, indicating that someone wanted them out of the picture permanently.

Sophie's fingers flew across the keyboard, and the scream that erupted from her throat was enough for McKenzie to know

that whatever her friend read confirmed her worst nightmare.

McKenzie took a deep breath, her mind racing. “I don’t know what to do.”

Kat wiped the tears from her eyes and reached for the phone ripping it out of McKenzie’s hand. “Tell me what happened.”

“I was talking to Xavier when a loud explosion came through the phone. He told me to get to you guys and help you.”

A smile spread across Kat’s face. “They are fine.”

Sophie glanced up from her computer. “That’s not what this article says.”

“Think about it. It’s been an hour since the crash, and the media reported everyone on the flight died. They don’t release that type of information with names to the public until family is notified.”

McKenzie sighed and realized Kat was right. But she still worried since there was a possibility someone could have been hurt. The damn plane was scattered in pieces across the ocean.

“What do we do now?”

Sophie had her phone pressed to her ear and frowned when she pulled it away. “Nobody is answering. Not even Daisy. I think something is wrong.”

Kat, the strong woman McKenzie had always admired, reached for her phone and dialed. When she didn’t get an answer, she tried two more times. Nothing. McKenzie felt a deep sense of responsibility, realizing that them helping her had potentially put their loved ones in danger.

The atmosphere was tense with anxiety and uncertainty as they kept trying to reach their husbands. McKenzie’s decision to search for Sara and unravel the truth behind the Noble Society’s involvement became more urgent than ever, especially as the stakes had never been higher. They needed to do the mission as a team. But her drastic emotions put everyone in danger.

McKenzie, consumed by a mix of regret and urgency, grew sadder not having Xavier’s number. He had been on his way to

her, yet she hadn't thought to establish a means of communication with him. Around her, the tension was palpable. Kat paced anxiously and Sophie's hands trembled, both unable to reach their loved ones. Their phones went straight to voicemail, deepening their fear and frustration.

Sophie, ever pragmatic, suggested they first adjust their trackers before heading to the airport.

"I think we should head back to the States."

"No!" Jasper yelled. McKenzie jumped, forgetting he was still on the phone. "You all stay put."

"How about no?" Kat countered. "I barely listen to my husband. I sure as hell won't be listening to you. We have the information we need. Once we return to Fort Lauderdale, we can all regroup."

Jasper growled. "Did you not see the reports? They took down the plane. Then, when you went to Kasey's house, you were attacked. Whoever is after you is watching the airport."

Despite the risks, their only viable option for returning was by air, but the threat of another attack loomed large.

"How about we send the plane we came in on to Amsterdam as a decoy while we board a different private jet?" McKenzie asked.

Sophie nodded. "Then we hire some doubles to board the decoy plane, creating an illusion of our departure."

But McKenzie worried they would be putting innocent lives in danger.

"There are risks, but I think this might work."

"I think it's a horrible plan. At least wait for me to get there," Jasper said.

"No," McKenzie shot back. "Stay in Paris, I might need you to do more research. Also, you need to dig deeper into Sara's ties to the Society."

She hung up before he could answer. The three of them grabbed their things and headed for the car.

The drive to the airport felt endless, a reflection of heightened anxiety and urgency. Sophie sat in the passenger seat typing away and making call after call. Surprising how endless amounts of money along with connections can get you anything you ask for in a matter of minutes. Once there, they executed their plan with precision. Using fake IDs, they passed through security, careful to avoid drawing attention. Their decoy plane, along with the hired doubles, would depart first, followed shortly by their own jet.

As they boarded the new plane, a mix of emotions overwhelmed McKenzie. Her thoughts were dominated with guilt, fear, and a relentless drive to uncover the truth and ensure the safety of their loved ones. She found herself longing to hear Xavier's voice, hoping against hope that he was safe.

The stewardess greeted them as they boarded, unaware of the complex web of espionage and danger that enveloped her passengers. As the plane prepared for takeoff, McKenzie, Kat, and Sophie braced themselves for what lay ahead, knowing the answers they sought and the safety of those they cared for all hung in the balance.

Kat sat next to McKenzie, typing on her phone. Sophie had reenabled the tracking devices she and Kat wore. So their husbands, if safe, would know they were on their way home.

The pilot announced their imminent departure over the intercom, and the plane began to move forward, leaving the hangar. Through the window, McKenzie watched the decoy plane ascend into the air. She hoped it would fly long enough to distract any potential threats before safely returning.

As their plane sped down the runway and ascended into the sky, McKenzie felt a mix of relief and anxiety. They were finally leaving Paris, heading back to Florida, armed with critical information about Sara. Once the seatbelt sign turned off, she reached for the silver box containing Sara's folder. McKenzie was determined to uncover every detail of Sara's misdeeds, firmly believing the woman deserved to face justice for her crimes.

Sophie, sitting beside her, was still working on her computer while Kat was busy on her phone. Each was absorbed in their own thoughts, processing the tumultuous events. Suddenly, the unsettling sound of a gun being cocked snapped McKenzie out of her reverie. She looked up to see Sara, flanked by two large men with guns, standing before them.

Dressed in a black pantsuit Sara had her hair styled back in a sophisticated bun. She looked more suited for a corporate boardroom than a high-stakes confrontation on a plane.

Her demeanor was cool and collected as she taunted them, clearly unimpressed by Kat's reputation.

Sara's stared them down with her nose turned up. "I've heard a lot about you, Kat. For some reason, people are scared of you in this world. I think it's all show, and my clout will go even higher when I take out the great Kat Ross, along with her husband. Oh wait, I already did that. Nothing happens in the Paris Airport without my knowledge. Do you really think your plane and another one booked just five minutes later wouldn't be suspicious and send a notification to me? Wasn't that hard to figure out. I'm not sure what you three are running back for. They're all dead."

"What about your sister? She was on that plane."

"She's not my sister. Her parents kidnapped me from my family, my real flesh and blood when I was a baby. It wasn't until my seventeenth birthday that I found my true parents. They came to me."

"So, all these years, you could have told her this or your parents. None of that makes sense." Sophie stated.

McKenzie stared into Sara's eyes, noticing the resemblance. She flipped through the folder until she found the picture. "Your dad was the Grandmaster? You have those same creepy, almost black eyes. This can't be right. Then why didn't you join your father in the Society?"

Sarah walked over to the leather chair opposite her and lowered herself. "You should know that more than anyone. Your parents always had such high hopes for you, but you just

turned out disgraceful, a bad name to the Society. But I will restore it back to its glory, what it should be. As for why I went along, it was all because of Xavier. I needed his family's connection to the shipping industry.”

Sara leaned forward, her voice a mixture of pride and scorn. She continued, “Daddy really capitalized on that. Being around Xavier's house allowed me to gather blackmail on his parents and report back. Once Xavier started working with the CIA, I had access to even more intel, and that's how I found Carter.”

“Why did you fake your death? Furthermore, didn't that cut your ties with Xavier's family's shipping company?”

With chilling calmness, she replied, “See, I had enough blackmail on his parents at that point. I didn't need him anymore, and I sure as hell didn't need the family that stole my birthright. So, I did what anybody would do—I eliminated that part of my life and was reborn into the life I should've always had. Everything was going great until Xavier, and you got put on that stupid mission. It would've blown my entire operation.” She sneered, exposing the depths of her treachery. “Xavier, you, and the CIA were known entities, something Pierre and Aung Myat Min were aware of all along. That's when I had Kasey take photos we could manipulate, but at the time I hadn't known she took ones with me in them.”

“Why now?” McKenzie asked.

“Because Seth Monroe can't leave shit in the past. He's digging, and that digging would have brought attention to me. So, it's time I move on with my plan.” Her voice dropped to a malicious whisper. “Also, I was the one who told Daddy to make you kill Xavier. Daddy did what I said and put in the order for you to kill Xavier. We both found it amusing. That's when I realized you were weak because you couldn't do it.”

“You're crazy,” Kat pointed out the obvious.

Sara shrugged her shoulder. “Think whatever you want. I'm motivated. None of this would be an issue if Seth Monroe hadn't intervened all those years ago. He will pay now. And I

will regain control of the Noble Society. It is my family's birthright to lead it and no one else's."

Her words hung in the air, a dark testament to her ruthlessness and the lengths she would go to in order to reclaim what she believed was rightfully hers by blood and through betrayal.

FIFTEEN

XAVIER

The four walls of the conference room felt like a cage to him. He was indifferent to the fact that he had nearly died in a plane crash just two hours ago; his sole focus was on getting another flight to Paris. Except Antonio had put his foot down and said they needed to regroup. Even though Xavier tried to argue his point, Antonio pulled the trump card about saving his life.

If it hadn't been for Antonio, he would have been dead, considering the parachute was clearly sabotaged. Despite their efforts, they were still no closer to understanding who or what was after them. He never heard the information Jasper had on Sara, either.

Antonio and his team, along with his own, had disseminated false information that they had died in the plane crash. He didn't like the plan, but understood it might give them some more time to lay low. When they arrived back at Blackwood Mercenaries, it was discovered Kat and Sophie's trackers had come online. The team was puzzled about why they were on a different private jet and why the jet they originally went on was headed to Amsterdam.

Brock glanced up from his laptop, "Tracked the plane. Its original flight plan was to Fort Lauderdale. Five minutes before taking off, it changed to Dallas."

Xavier stopped pacing for a moment and stared at the FFA dashboard on the projection screen. "She's going to Seth Monroe's house in Texas," he realized aloud.

After they made it to land, he had wanted to call Jasper back, but the team overrode his decision to play dead. They didn't know if they could trust him.

Lucas leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. "Boss, you're not thinking rationally about this. Kat and McKenzie are trained spies and assassins. There has to be a reason they're going through so much effort to switch planes, and at the same time, they activated their trackers. We need to figure out what they know and what we're walking into. We don't want to jeopardize a mission they might have underway."

He was right, but his gut told him something was off. "Or they could be in danger and that's the reason they turned the trackers back on."

Unable to contain his impatience any longer, he pulled out his phone, which had been submerged in the ocean. He was about to test if the waterproof case had indeed protected it. Pressing the power button, the phone chimed to life. A rampant flood of notifications came through from people he'd worked with over the years. Not one from McKenzie, but he wasn't sure she had his number.

"Couldn't you fucking listen? You just turned on your phone and alerted someone if they were tracking your location. Dead people don't walk around," Antonio exclaimed.

He shrugged off Antonio's concern, confident that the tech team in the room could block and hide his information. "I'm calling Jasper," he declared, thumbing through the messages on his phone. The most recent one was from Jasper, a mix of concern and frustration: "Fucking call me. Your ass better not be dead."

He clicked on Jasper's number, and the call was answered immediately. "Fuck, you're not dead. Kat was right," Jasper had exclaimed. "I wasn't one hundred percent sure her reasoning was correct, but she was. They should be there soon."

Before he could respond, Antonio took three steps forward and snatched the phone out of his hand. "What the fuck do you mean they're headed toward Fort Lauderdale?" Antonio

demanded, his tone a mix of urgency and disbelief. The situation was rapidly evolving with every new piece of information.

Lucas refreshed the plane's itinerary, and the path was set to Dallas.

"They sent a decoy plane to Amsterdam in case the person that took down your plane planned to do the same to them. Then boarded a different plane to Fort Lauderdale," he explained.

There was a sigh on the other end of the line. "Well, if you guys had put your fucking phones on right away, we wouldn't have been in this situation," Jasper retorted.

He had wanted to snap back—they had to swim a mile after falling from the sky, track down a car, and find a ride back to Blackwood Security. And when they made it to the beach, they had all agreed to keep their phones off until they figured out their next step.

"Tell me why they would switch from Fort Lauderdale to Dallas," Xavier said.

"They were able to retrieve a box from Kasey's apartment. Like I said before, Kasey was already dead, and they had to fight off three mercenaries," Jasper explained.

Lucas was the next to ask a question. "What was in the box?"

Now Jasper paused. "...It was blackmail files. But I think Xavier should take me off speaker, because I don't know who's all there, and this is going to be a touchy situation."

The entire room shouted in protest, and he agreed with them. They were all in this together. No matter what, they would take down the bastard who had put his life in danger, the lives of the people around him, and McKenzie, the woman he loved. He was sure as hell going to make sure she knew it when he found her.

"Just fucking spit, it out, Jasper," Antonio urged.

"Remember I asked to be taken off speakerphone because this needed to be private," Jasper reminded him. "But the file...it was Sara Porter."

“Bullshit,” Grim yelled.

“See, I told you to take me off speaker. You can believe me, or you can just sit there, and you guys can figure it out on your own. I reached out to a few contacts, and they confirmed what I thought. Sara Porter is the key. It’s not going to be in a way you like either. The intel McKenzie recovered had Sara meeting with two men in Paris at a restaurant, and the photo used to incriminate you had actually been of her with them. There were two photos taken, one before Sara arrived, which they photoshopped you in replacing her, and the second was from when Sara arrived,” Jasper continued. “And it goes deeper than that. There are photos of Sara Porter with the prior Grandmaster of the Noble Society, back when she was in high school,” he added.

He glanced at Grim to see her face go white, and he had racked his brain to think about the woman he had known back then.

“Photos can be faked.” Xavier reminded him.

“True, but would someone have gone through this much trouble to make sure doctored photos never saw the light of day?” Jasper retorted. “Furthermore, from what Kat and McKenzie were able to deduce from the file, it looked as if Sara Porter had been running the operation, and Carter was her henchman. Somehow, she had been in charge from the beginning.”

He didn’t know how that could have been possible. There wasn’t anything he hadn’t known about Sara—or so he had thought. Their teenage years flashed through his mind. Had he been so blinded by her perceived innocence that he hadn’t realized who she truly was?

“So, I’m guessing you found more information to back all of this up, and that’s why you’re telling us this, as well?” he questioned Jasper.

“I’m still digging, but the final evidence might be on that USB I already gave you. From what I’ve gathered from a few of my contacts who had dealt a lot with the old Grandmaster, Sara worked for him. She had ties to the Noble Society, but I can’t

figure out what they are. The old Grandmaster was adamant about the Society never working with outsiders. So, him working with Sara on missions...I haven't been able to put those pieces together yet," Jasper explained.

"But if they're heading to Texas, my guess is they're heading to my father's house. I'm not sure what she expects to find there—answers, help, or...but why didn't she call me. Again, I'm confused."

Antonio tapped his fingers on the table. "Have you let your dad know what's going on?" he asked.

"I've tried, but he's not answering. I stayed back for McKenzie. She needed someone to investigate more. Kind of surprised she needed me. You guys are a hell of a lot closer to Texas than I am."

Xavier didn't plan on waiting any longer. He was going to head to Texas. "Thanks for the information," he said before ending the call.

Casanova stood next to Grim with an arm wrapped around her waist. "We saw her in the cage. The way she fell into your arms."

Grim bit her lip for a moment. "Sara could cry on a dime. She used it to her advantage a lot growing up. Furthermore, not sure why we hadn't thought it was strange she wanted to be by herself after being captive for years. You would think she would be scared and want protection. Also, where did she find money to use to just go off?"

"Hell, she didn't even want to come to our wedding," Casanova noted.

"The only way we can uncover more answers is by going to Texas, and I'm heading out now. You can come with me or stay," Xavier announced.

"With what plane? Yours is at the bottom of the ocean," Antonio pointed out.

Except Xavier had unlimited funds. "I'll just grab a private jet."

“You’re dead. Brock froze everyone’s bank accounts for protection.” Antonio countered.

“What the fuck do you mean? I don’t remember having that conversation. I’m not even going to ask how you accessed my funds.”

“It’s protocol when we fake a death,” Brock added like Xavier should know this information.

Lucas snickered, “Rogue Mercenaries have never been in this position before. Guess we need to take notes and come up with ideas for when we have to fake your death next time.”

“I’m fucking Xavier Smith. My ass is about to rise from the dead. Turn my bank account back on this second or so help me, I will spend eternity making your life miserable.”

“Dude, you fucking yourself. How is that going to help?”

Xavier took a step toward Antonio, ready to kill the man who had saved his life mere hours ago.

Antonio rolled his eyes. “You’re so dramatic. We can take my parents’ plane. Now, are you going to keep throwing a hissy fit, or are we going to see if someone tries to kill us again?”

He didn’t answer the fucker. Instead, Xavier turned and headed for the door.

SIXTEEN
MCKENZIE

McKenzie's head throbbed as she opened her eyes. The last thing she remembered was a needle jabbed into her neck when Sara had distracted her. She glanced around the room and recognized it immediately even if she hadn't stepped foot in the building since, she was a teenager. The old, abandoned building used to be a training facility for the Noble Society.

When she surveyed the location, her eyes landed on a spot only ten feet away. A memory from when she was thirteen flashed through her mind. Her father had fastened her to a chair in this very room, her feet submerged in a water bowl, with jumper cables connected to a car battery. The excruciating pain of electricity coursing through her young body was one of her earliest encounters with torture—a method of 'training' she had endured multiple times before fleeing her home. The memory was so intense she could almost smell the odor of burnt skin.

"Hey," Kat whispered urgently, snapping McKenzie back to the present, "what's going on in your head?"

"Thinking."

Sophie groaned to her right. "What the hell?"

"Work your handcuffs loose, but make it look like you're still secured." The guards, engrossed in their game of cards, were oblivious to the brewing escape.

McKenzie tilted her head toward Kat. "We don't do anything until Sara's back."

“I want to kill the bitch,” Kat murmured, her voice laced with a deadly promise, the corner of her mouth ticking up in anticipation.

Sophie interjected with a mix of frustration and fear, “You both realize I’m a Hacker, right? I hate fieldwork, for fuck’s sake. I’m supposed to be unraveling terrorist plots from the safety of my desk, not chained up in some godforsaken abandoned building.”

Kat’s soft chuckle pierced the heavy air, a brief moment of dark humor amidst the danger encasing them like the walls of their makeshift prison. “Don’t lie to us. I know you like the fieldwork.”

“Not as much anymore. I’m not that young, and my body takes a while to heal. And the only person I like cuffing me is my husband.”

“Well, sometimes you just have to have a little fun, and don’t worry, we are definitely going to have some fun,” Kat whispered, her voice tinged with a venomous edge of anticipation. “The only thing we have to hope for is that she shows up here before Antonio does, because you know those men are on their way. I’m going to make that bitch pay for hurting my husband.”

Revenge was the only thing she could focus on since determining how she was going to act if Xavier came was not something she wanted to think about.

“We aren’t sure they weren’t hurt. You both saw the news photos of the crash. That plane was in hundreds of pieces. Someone could have easily been hurt,” Sophie whispered.

Kat shook her head. “Then let’s take out all that anger on Sara when she arrives. No matter what we don’t kill her. Few broken bones and bleeding, fine. No killing,” Kat said.

“Really, you’re the one going to lecture us about killing. How often do you leave people alive?” Sophie countered.

Before Kat could respond, the door to the building flew open, and Sara, still dressed in her power suit, entered with two men dragging a lifeless body. The man’s head hung down,

obscuring his face, but McKenzie hadn't needed to see it to know it was Seth Monroe. They dragged him across the floor and dropped him only a few feet from her. A low groan escaped his lips as his body had hit the concrete.

When he rolled his head to the side, McKenzie's heart stopped. His left eye was swollen shut, his lip cut, and blood dripped down from a long cut on his cheek.

"Why are you doing this?" McKenzie growled.

Sara rolled her eyes, revealing her twisted motives with chilling nonchalance. "Didn't you pay attention on the plane? I want power. Dad never brought me into the Society. So, unless Seth puts me in my rightful place, I can't take over. Just seems like he needs a little motivation. I'm pretty sure he will indoctrinate me as a member, or he can watch as I slowly take each of your fingers off," she had declared.

Kat snickered, despite the danger. "Seriously, that's the best you got. You're going to chop off our fingers. You couldn't be a little more creative? You've been hanging out with mafia guys too much. There are so many new drugs on the market that can make people scream from using a small amount. The last one I used on someone caused them to feel like their blood was boiling. Mind you it's all a mental trick, but so much fun."

McKenzie groaned. She couldn't believe Kat was giving Sara torture advice.

Sara's heels clicked against the concrete as she approached Kat. Her arm pulled back and swung forward, punching Kat directly in the cheek. Kat's head swung back, but she shook off the hit. McKenzie knew Kat could have blocked the hit, but she kept her hands in place.

"Is that all you got?" Kat taunted; her tone defiant.

It happened so quickly McKenzie almost missed the flash of a red beam when her gaze swung over to the thugs that accompanied Sara. Backup had arrived, but McKenzie wanted to get a few hits in first.

As the red laser beam landed on the forehead of each thug. A third dot appeared in the center of Sara's chest. Any other bad

guy, she would let the shot happen, but McKenzie worried they needed more information out of her. The folder McKenzie had seen earlier was likely just the tip of the iceberg, a mere glimpse into Sara's dark world.

Distracted by Kat, Sara had let her guard down, giving McKenzie the opportunity to leap from her chair and strike. Pain shot through her ankle, but she continued forward. The cuffs around her wrist clattered to the ground. Sara reached for her gun. But McKenzie was quicker even with a hurt foot, snatching the weapon from the holster.

Sara twisted and bit down hard on McKenzie's arm and the gun slid from her hand. They both reached for it as glass shattered, and the two thugs fell to the ground. Kat leaped from her chair, reaching for the gun. Sara's knee came up, hitting McKenzie in the chest and knocking the air out of her.

McKenzie used her left leg to wrap around Sara and twisted her to the side, giving her easy access to wrap her arm around Sara's throat. When she tightened her grip the stich in her arm pulled but she fought through the pain. Sara wiggled under her strength, and McKenzie missed as Sara pulled a gun from the holster near her boot. McKenzie jerked when the metal touched her side.

The door on the east side of the room flew open. Six men and women in full tactical gear poured through the small opening. They moved with deadly precision. Sara was outnumbered, but she kept the gun pressed to my side.

"You're not going to win," McKenzie said in her ear.

"Maybe. But I saw the way he looks at you. He never looked at me that way, and if I take you out, at least I'll take something from him. Like he took Carter from me."

"You set Carter up," McKenzie said. She'd read the report file.

Sara pushed the gun in harder. "No. I made a mistake trusting the wrong person and caused an opening in the operation. Carter was protecting me, helping me keep my cover."

The longer McKenzie kept Sara talking, the closer the team approached.

“Drop the gun, Sara,” Xavier growled. His voice was so low and deadly that even McKenzie gave him her attention.

Sara, sensing her control slipping, loosened her grip on McKenzie, but remained vigilant. “If you want to see this bitch live, you will let me walk out the door...otherwise, I’ll kill her,” she demanded.

Grim’s gun slightly lowered as she said, “I don’t understand. You actually tried to kill me today. Why are you doing this?”

“You’re such a stupid bitch. We’re not sisters. Your dumb parents kidnapped me.” Sara stood, pulling McKenzie to her feet with the gun still pressed to her side. The tension in the room thickened palpably. “My dad was the Grandmaster. You guys were just pawns in my game. I even tried having Xavier killed years ago, but the assassin was a joke.”

Xavier hadn’t lowered his gun. “You know I won’t miss. Let McKenzie go or I’ll put a bullet through your forehead.”

“No! I’ve seen the file Kasey had on her. We can’t kill her yet,” McKenzie yelled.

Xavier’s jaw twitched. “You’re in trouble as well, but we will discuss that later. Asking me not to kill this bitch might be a little hard, my finger is really twitchy at the moment.”

“Mine too,” Grim declared, her gun now raised and on target.

Great. McKenzie would have to handle it herself. She raised her foot with the boot on it and brought it down hard on Sara. Her hand dropped from her side, and she used that opening to grab Sara’s arm and break it at the elbow. The echo of the bone-shattering was music to her ears. Not stopping, McKenzie pulled back and placed an upper cut directly under Sara’s jaw. Sara’s head bounced back, and her body fell to the ground. She was out cold. McKenzie wanted to get one more strike in. Except she was bodily pulled back when an arm wrapped around her waist and lifted her into the air.

She didn’t need to turn to know it was Xavier. His mountain-fresh body soap filled her nose.

“Fuck that was sexy as hell how you took her down,” Xavier said as he spun her in his arms. “Don’t ever run off like that

again. We need to talk shit out.”

“Do you think this is the right time to have this conversation?” McKenzie asked. Xavier’s team was busy hauling Sara out of the building. Antonio and Kat knelt next to Seth. While Sophie was wrapped around Zane.

“The team is handling everything. I need you to know I do love you, woman. And if you ever do anything like that again, I swear to God, your ass will be red for weeks.”

“I love you,” she had whispered back, lost in the moment she leaned forward and pressed her lips to his.

SEVENTEEN

XAVIER

Xavier stared across the table at the woman he'd once cared about at one time. The team had escorted Sara back to Fort Lauderdale and locked her in an interrogation room. She hadn't spoken a word since she woke up though.

"I want to start from the beginning, and we aren't going to stop until we get answers," Xavier said for the hundredth time.

The door to the interrogation room opened. Kat and McKenzie walked in, and Grim followed a few steps behind them with a cart. On it was a row of different vials and syringes. Xavier glanced over his shoulder at the two-way mirror knowing Antonio was on the other side.

"You can leave," Kat told him. "It's time for me to do a little bit of magic."

Kat pulled a syringe off the table and the first glass tube. "Remember how I told you I had a better way to torture? You messed up when you tried to kill my husband. Don't worry I'll get my answers from you now. Later Grim, and I plan to cut your body up and feed it to the gators. See, this is what a speech should sound like. Not chop off fingers and drone a monologue."

"I have to admit it does sound so much better," McKenzie added. "Are you going to boil her blood first, or are you using the truth serum?"

Grim stepped forward, pulling the needle from Kat's hand, and jabbed it directly into Sara's neck. "I think we wait and see which one Kat put in. For the record, I ran your blood. DNA

doesn't lie, we are sisters. You were played and used all because of the connections you had. But after what you did, I don't even care what Kat does to you."

"Impossible!" Sara screeched.

Xavier glanced at Kat and Grim, the two of them and the rest of the team had shit handled. He could read the report later, since right now all he wanted was to have McKenzie in his arms. "Seems like this is handled. McKenzie and I have something to go work out."

He swooped her into his arms careful of her injuries. Sara screamed as he exited the door and headed to the apartment they had at Blackwood Security. McKenzie and he had called Cooper on the flight home. He was having fun at Daisy's house. She'd kept the news of the crash from all the kids. Brock was working to scrub the internet from all news of the crash.

"You can put me down."

"No, you might run again. I've noticed it's a pattern with you."

Xavier shifted McKenzie, so he could reach out and open the door. When he stepped inside, he promised to send Jessica flowers. She'd done an amazing job. He slowly lowered McKenzie to her feet. Her eyes widened as she looked around. "When did you do this?"

"I might have had help." Daffodils covered the apartment. "Do you know what flower represents new beginnings?"

"I assume it's this one," McKenzie claimed as she plucked one from a vase on the counter and pressed it to her nose. "They smell so good."

Her eyes filled with tears as she brushed her hand over another vase of flowers. "Nobody's ever done anything like this for me. I—I don't deserve this."

"Wrong," Xavier murmured gently. "You deserve the world. But I think we need to have a conversation first."

Her head bobbed in agreement. "How about tomorrow?"

He pressed a quick kiss to her nose. “Go sit on the couch, and I’ll bring you some wine and food.”

She hesitated for a moment before she walked over to the couch. He poured a glass of wine for her and grabbed chocolate-covered strawberries from out of the fridge.”

McKenzie put the flower down when he handed her a glass of wine and took the seat next to her. “Why did you run?”

“I’ve told you about my childhood. No matter what, I can’t get it through my head that anyone could possibly love me. Sara, in my mind, was a better fit for you.”

He barked out a laugh and said, “She is a crazy psycho bitch.”

“Well, I didn’t know that twenty-four hours ago.”

“We need to communicate more. No more going rogue.”

McKenzie bobbed her head. “I’ll try, but sometimes the voices are strong.”

Xavier pulled out a strawberry from the box and pressed it to McKenzie’s lips. Her tongue peeked out and licked the chocolate. “How about each time you come to me instead of running, you get a reward. I promise it will be filled with lots of orgasms.”

“Can you give me a preview of these orgasms you are promising?” she whispered.

“I think that’s only fair. Let’s head to the bedroom.” He stood holding out his hand. She wrapped her fingers around his, and with his other hand, he grabbed the strawberries.

They entered the bedroom, and he couldn’t help but smile. The room was filled with flowers as well.

Xavier’s hand smoothly trailed down her side and then across her back, descending further to caress her ass. McKenzie moaned into his mouth, her fingers gripping his shoulders more firmly. Her response confirmed that the events they’d gone through only made them need each other more.

“I was so worried about you,” Xavier whispered, his lips lightly grazing hers, the air charged with their mutual longing

and desire.

Xavier had wanted to keep McKenzie locked away and safe, but knew that wasn't possible.

"My heart stopped when I saw the article about you."

He closed his eyes for a moment, knowing he would have torn up the world if he had seen an article like that about her.

"Fast and hard?" Xavier asked, his voice a blend of desire and urgency. "And then slow?"

McKenzie bit her bottom lip, a gesture of anticipation, and nodded in agreement. It was his cue. He passionately kissed her, swiftly unzipping his pants while simultaneously lifting her shirt. His hands ran up her arm and stopped on a bandage. "What the hell is this?"

"Oh, uh," McKenzie's hands worked to push down his pants. "Nothing to worry about."

He leaned forward and nipped her ear. "Tell me what happened."

She sighed and leaned back. "It's just a graze wound."

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Demanding she leave the spy life in her past was not something he would do. Because he would never allow someone to ask him to give up what he loved, but that didn't mean he wouldn't be glued to her ass every minute to keep her safe.

"Any other injuries I need to know about?"

"No."

He brushed her hair back off her shoulders and ran his hands softly down her back. Their kisses were gentle, barely brushes of their lips. But soon, they turned into more. He wanted his hands on her skin and his mouth on her body.

He cupped her face and kissed her in a less gentle way. Not gentle anymore, they were hard and demanding before he tilted her head back to take the kiss deeper. His tongue slid across hers, causing her to moan into his mouth.

Now they had all the time in the world, he began to unzip her pants slowly. He dropped to his knees and motioned for her to sit on the edge of the bed. She followed his command. He worked the boot from her ankle, then removed her pants and underwear. He knew he would have to be gentle with her.

He ran his hands down her bare legs before he stood and stripped off his own clothes. Every inch of her bare skin meant more places for him to touch her.

When he stood next to the bed, McKenzie didn't hesitate fisting his cock in her hand. She pumped it twice and he could see where she was headed. When she moved ready to drop to her knees, which was something he very much wanted her to do, he grabbed her elbow to stop her.

"Not tonight," he told her. "Let me take care of you. I don't want you to hurt your ankle anymore."

McKenzie swallowed hard, and her nostrils flared slightly before she nodded.

"Move to the center of the bed. Make sure to keep your ankle to the side, or I will stop." She followed his orders, and her beautiful body spread out across the comforter like a feast open just for him. He slid along the bed, kissing his way up her left leg.

He had something specific in his mind that he wanted to happen right now. "Keep your eyes on me," he told her.

She bit her bottom lip and nodded.

She braced herself on her elbows. His mouth watered with anticipation that it didn't have to wait long to be fulfilled. He locked gazes with his woman and licked her. Her instincts made her drop her head back. But then she wasn't watching him, so he tightened his grip on her thighs and waited.

Once she looked down at him again, he buried his face between her legs, taking in everything that was McKenzie. She was smooth and pliable, her legs hanging loosely beside each side of his face as he licked her again and again, sucking her clit in between my lips.

McKenzie moaned and made sounds that he hadn't yet heard from her, all of which kept him going without touching himself. Because his cock was fucking begging him to stroke it. Except he wouldn't do it.

Her orgasm built with every movement he made and every sound escaping her lips. When she began to come, her legs tightened, and she wanted to close them desperately, but he wouldn't let them. He just kept right on licking her pussy until she came to the end of it.

Then he kissed her breathless body on his way to her lips.

He pushed into her painstakingly slowly, fighting every urge inside of himself to pound the hell out of her. She was warm and tight, seeking his cock like gloves that were slightly too small. It took everything in him not to release.

Her nails dug into his back once he had reached all the way inside of her. He kissed everywhere he could and touched everywhere else that he couldn't kiss. Her good leg tightened around his hip, holding him where he was as if he had any intention of going anywhere.

There was nowhere and no one else he'd rather be with right now.

As much as he wanted this to last for her, even he only had so much fucking control. He'd thought he might have lost her again.

Still, he moved with slow, languid strokes through the tightness in his lower back and the aching in his balls.

Even when he knew he was about to come, he kept the same pace, slowly pushing himself to let her find her own release. When he spilled inside of her, it was too soon. He planned to spend the night making love to her.

They were both still left breathless and fighting to get closer.

After another long kiss, he rolled off her. He went to the bathroom and retrieved a rag. McKenzie blushed when he climbed back on the bed and ran the warm cloth over her folds. Afterward he pulled the sheets back, and she snuggled against his chest.

“I love you,” Xavier said. He would tell her those words every day for the rest of his life.

He tucked her into his side. All he wanted was to have McKenzie asleep in his arms.

“I love you,” she told him. “The entire world disappears when I’m with you.”

He kissed the side of her head. “Yeah, it does.”

But he needed to get something else out before she drifted off for the rest she so desperately needed. “I want you and Cooper to come back to California with me.” He held his breath and waited for her answer.

“I think we can make that happen.” She paused. “But then what?”

“We spend the rest of our lives figuring that out, as a family.”

Drake

“I don’t like it, Drake,” Grim growled through the receiver. “Why don’t we talk about a new plan in the morning after the boss gets up?”

“Look, I already have my in. You confirmed my thoughts already from your interrogation with Sara. My only option is tonight.”

“Bullshit. He will come back again to visit his sister. That will give us time to see if you can even trust Iris.”

The thirty-year-old schoolteacher had captured his attention the moment she tried to push him out of her office. She hadn’t wanted to get the information about Cooper and his location. But her brother had her son in a location she couldn’t figure out. He’d taken him the day McKenzie’s house blew up. Iris’ brother was part of Sara’s organization and Sara had confirmed it during her interrogations. Mia had headed back to Fort Lauderdale once they knew McKenzie was safe. However, he couldn’t leave Iris to deal with this on her own.

“I trust her.”

Grim sighed. “Promise me you won’t go dark. Check in every day and feed intel to the team.”

“You know as well as I do. When you cut the head off the snake, another one pops up. This could give us access to who will take over next. Maybe even answers on Yara’s ex-husband.”

“We don’t do solo missions.”

She sounded like Xavier. “Give me a week. He’s coming for her tonight, promising to take her to her son.”

“I hate this!” Grim exploded. “But stay safe.”

“Will do.” He clicked off the phone and turned to the woman next to him.

“What did your boss say?” She asked, biting her bottom lip.

“I’m staying with you.” He wouldn’t tell her that his team didn’t trust her. In twenty-four hours, he was blinded by this woman. “Now, tell me everything about your brother before he gets here.”

For the next few hours, she spilled everything she knew about her brother. He seemed low in Sara’s organization, but planned to work his way up. They’d fallen asleep on the couch. The doorbell ringing woke them. Before he could stop her, she’d walked to the door and opened it. He jumped off the couch to chase after her. Cussing to himself when he reached for his gun and he’d left it in the other room. The door pushed all the way open, a man dressed in black wrapped his arms around her. Iris’ scream echoed through the room. The intruder raised his gun and fired twice. Pain seared through his chest as he took a step. A second shot hit his leg and he pushed through the pain, but he wasn’t fast enough. Iris was taken. He limped to the door as the world faded.

Tires squealed as the black truck speed away.

He was too late.

He’d let another person down, but this time Drake would fight for her to his death.

MAKE sure to join my newsletter so you get a notification for when Drake's story comes out.

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PURSUING PHOENIX

“He’s out.” Kat sighed into the phone.

Those two words changed my life. Again. My phone shook in my hand. “Are you sure?” Maybe Kat’s person on the inside received the wrong name. Greg was a common name, right? That’s what happened. No way my ex-husband was released from jail. He hadn’t even gone to trial yet.

Kat let out another sigh. “Lily, we’re looking into how he got released.” She was quiet for a second. “Antonio is one hundred percent certain Greg is no longer in jail.” Antonio was Kat’s husband and the owner of a mercenary company in Ft. Lauderdale.

I heard the muffled voices of Kat and Antonio as they discussed my situation, while pacing in front of my floor-to-ceiling windows and contemplating the rain falling like sheets outside. The weather here in Houston wasn’t much different from that of Ft. Lauderdale, both cities were known for their wet, humid climates. Tommy and I just finished unpacking from our cross country move and now it looked like we’d have to do it again. “I don’t know where to go.”

“You stay right where you are. Abe is staying in Houston until we figure out where your ex is. He’s one of Antonio’s top bodyguards and instead of you putting Tommy into daycare like you planned, Abe will watch him while you’re at work. Nova Satellite Security has Neal’s technology running through the building, plus they have security guards at the entrance. I’ll talk to Jacob tonight and make sure nobody gets into his building unannounced.”

I leaned my hip against the kitchen counter and gazed out into the dark night. “What do you mean, you don’t know where he is? Doesn’t he have to go to a halfway house or report where he’s living?”

“The only information we’ve received so far is that one of the officers who worked on the case contaminated some of the evidence. We’re told the evidence was thrown out, and Greg’s lawyer got him released and the charges dropped. Antonio has a call in to find out what evidence could’ve been contaminated. The story we got doesn’t add up. The main part was your testimony along with your photos. When we find out, you’ll be the first to know.”

The bruise on my face from his fist last week still hurt, and I wondered what more evidence they needed. “He’s going to come for me. This time, when he finds me, he’s going to kill me, Kat. I need to get Tommy out of here.”

I owed everything to Kat Ross. When we met, she was a volunteer at the Women’s Shelter in Ft. Lauderdale. Each day, she would help me study for my GED, helped me learn how to use a computer and talk with Tommy. The day she wrapped her arms around me, gave me a hug, and I flinched under her contact, our friendship changed. It wasn’t the hug from Kat that made me flinch. It was when she touched the bruise along my side. Greg had been upset— he’d lost yet another job, and instead of trying to find a new one, he took what little money we had left and hit the bars. When he finally came home, he was plastered and blaming me for him losing his job. He used me as a punching bag, only stopping when I passed out yet again from his rough hands choking me.

Each day, Kat and I talked about our lives. When she tried talking me into leaving Greg, I was scared—nobody would be able to stop him. But Kat confided in me that she was a retired assassin for the CIA and married to Antonio Ross, one of the richest men in the world. I burst out laughing when she told me she’d been an assassin, but when she didn’t laugh back, I started to wonder if it was true. She told me stories about her work for the agency, and when I started to hang out with her outside of the shelter, I learned she’d killed a few men who’d

hurt the women at the Ross Women's Outreach Center. Kat's husband tried to stop her from taking matters into her own hands, but she was protective of the women she loved, and Kat kept her gators happy by feeding them the bodies.

Kat's voice broke through the fog in my brain. "He's not going to find you. I won't let that happen. Just trust me. Please, Lily, stay in Houston and start your new job tomorrow. If—and I mean if—we think he's heading your way, I'll let you know."

A flash of lightning lit up the sky, followed by a crack of thunder. The sound alone triggered a memory I wished I could forget, of Greg wrapping his fingers around my neck as I begged him to let go. It was only one of the many times he'd squeezed my throat until I passed out. Storms always sparked that particular memory. It was the first time I'd watched Greg hit my son as I fell to the ground gasping for air.

"Breathe, Lily." Kat's voice was soft and full of concern.

Remembering the technique my therapist at the Ross Women's Outreach Center in Ft. Lauderdale told me, I took three deep breaths and counted back from a hundred until my heart no longer felt like it was going to beat out of my chest. I wiped my sweaty palms against my jeans, another item Kat Ross had purchased for me. Before she helped Tommy and me pack up our small apartment, she took me shopping for clothes to wear on my first day working for Jacob Black at Nova Satellite Security. "Sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry for. I know storms bother you. Just promise you'll stay. We covered your tracks. Make sure to use the cash we gave you, and don't use your debit card. The Black family owns the building you're in. They know what's going on and kept your name off all the paperwork. Jacob put a different name on your new-hire paperwork, and they plan to pay you in cash."

I would do anything Kat asked. I owed her my life. "I'll stay. But why would they want to keep me around? I'm causing everyone so much more work."

"We care about you, Lily. This is just a rough spot in your life. When Greg is taken care of, Jacob will change your

paperwork, and you can stay on with his company. Now get a good night's sleep, and good luck tomorrow on your first day. Call and tell me about it when you get home. Jacob is the nicest of the Black brothers, but if he crosses you, let me know.”

“It’ll be fine. I’ll call you tomorrow night.” I said goodbye then ended the call before turning toward the gourmet kitchen. The condo Kat had set up for me was breathtaking—the place Tommy and I lived in Ft. Lauderdale could fit in the kitchen. Once we were on our feet, I vowed that we would leave the beautiful condo and get our own place. I didn’t want to keep relying on Kat to pay for things. I wanted to take care of myself.

“Mommy! Mommy! Mommy!” Tommy came running down the hall and slid across the cherrywood floors. “I opened the closet, and it’s full of toys!” He scampered over and grabbed my hand.

I jogged to keep up with my six-year-old pulling me down the hall. He pushed the white door to his bedroom open and tugged me over to the closet. “Look, Mom! A police uniform and police cars.”

My eyes had watered numerous times at the store when Tommy would look at the toys but never ask—he knew I couldn’t afford them. Kat must’ve had Abe, who had arrived in Houston a few days before us and set up our condo, stock my son’s closet. For the past hour, Abe had helped to drag the few boxes from our lives up into the condominium. Kat had called when I set the last box down.

It was sad that Tommy and my whole life fit into the trunk of my nineteen-ninety Ford Escort. Kat and I had battled about my car. She’d wanted to buy me a new one for my trip to Houston, but I’d put my foot down—she had already given me too much. She finally stopped going on about the car as long as I allowed her to take the Escort into the shop to get everything fixed.

Tommy grabbed my hand again and pulled me over to his bed. “Mommy, look, I have my own bed. I don’t need to sleep with

you anymore. And look.” He pulled the blue comforter back to show me the police sheets. Kat had thought of everything. “Mommy, why are you crying?”

“I’m just happy, Tommy.” I tousled his hair. I didn’t know how long the happiness would last. Greg being out of jail hung over me like the black clouds outside. I grabbed Tommy under his arms and swung him onto the bed. He giggled as he landed, and the sound was magic to my ears—I hadn’t heard that giggle in a while. When I tickled his sides, his laughter filled the room.

“Stop! Mommy, it tickles.”

I leaned down and kissed his forehead. “Why don’t you play for a little bit, and I’ll go see what food is in the fridge.” Before leaving us tonight, Abe said he had stocked the condo with some groceries. “I’ll make us a quick dinner before bed.”

Tommy nodded before he rushed back to his new toys. The couple of toys I could afford to buy him sat in the box next to the bedroom door. A siren blared from his new fire truck as he pushed it across the floor. I glanced at my little boy playing with his trucks before I went to go make us dinner. When I rounded the corner, tears streamed down my face. I hadn’t been able to provide in the way most mothers could. I’d failed my son.

I reached for my phone as I walked back to the open kitchen then sat on a barstool, pulled up Kat’s name, and sent her a quick text thanking her for the toys. She replied immediately: *Anytime.*

My stomach growled as I set my phone on the counter and walked to the fridge. When I opened the door, I saw that Abe had filled it as if a family of eight lived here. I had no clue how Tommy and I would be able to eat everything in it before it went bad. I reached for the chicken breast and veggies before closing the door and placing the items on the counter. I started opening all the cabinets and was blown away by the number of items packed into each one. I must have just about every type of pot, pan, and utensil known to man. I sat on the floor and cried. When I heard the sound of Tommy running

down the hall toward the kitchen, I quickly wiped my eyes and stood. He rounded the corner and threw his arms around my legs.

“I like our new home, Mommy. Did you look at your room yet?”

I pulled Tommy into my arms and put him on the counter. “Not yet, honey. I wanted to cook dinner first.”

I spent the next half hour making a chicken and vegetable stir-fry. When it was done, I set Tommy on the stool next to the counter, and served him a bowl of his favorite dish.

My son looked up from his plate. “Do you think the kids at pre-K will like me, Mom?”

“You’re not going to start Kindergarten quite yet. Abe is going to stay with you tomorrow.” I wondered how the mercenary was going to like spending the day with Tommy. Abe didn’t talk much—his usual reply to questions was a grunt.

“I like Abe, he’s funny.” I let out a sigh when Tommy didn’t pressure me more about going to school. After he popped the last piece of his chicken into his mouth, he jumped off the stool and ran around the kitchen counter. “Come on, Mom. Let’s look at your room.”

I grabbed my suitcase from the living room where Abe dropped it before he left, and we walked down the hall towards the bedrooms. I opened the double doors at the end of the hall and I could feel my eyes go wide. The room was jaw droppingly beautiful. White linens covered a dove gray bed, and the matching furniture was set off by the cool, crisp linens. Off to the left looked to be a massive bathroom, decorated in the same soft colors of the bedroom. Tommy and I slowly walked in, taking in the beauty of the room. Upon checking out the bathroom, I discovered a walk-in shower large enough to easily fit two people. While perusing further, I was brought to tears. When I opened the closet door, I realized it was full of clothes. Kat must’ve sent more clothes—I wouldn’t let her buy much when we’d gone shopping, but it seemed she’d gotten her way.

Tommy sat on the bed while I lifted my suitcase then set it next to him. He helped me unpack. I hung up a few pieces of clothing while Tommy flipped through TV channels.

“Wow, Mom, we have cartoons!” He sounded so excited that it sent a pang to my heart. I quickly wiped the tear from my eye so he wouldn’t see.

I could finish hanging up these clothes another day. I put my suitcase on the floor and climbed on the bed next to him. “This was one of my favorite shows growing up.”

Tommy looked from the TV to me. “You had a TV growing up?”

I leaned over and tickled my son until he pleaded for me to stop. Tommy had never met his grandparents, and I didn’t talk about them much. He didn’t know I had to sneak to watch cartoons at a young age. Mother thought they would lead me to do wrong. I couldn’t help but roll my eyes as my mother’s voice came through my mind, telling me cartoons would lead to devil worship. “Yes, I had a TV. How old do you think I am?”

Tommy giggled. “Old.” He threw the covers over his head.

“I’m not old!” I protested.

He peeked his little head out from under the covers. “I know, Mommy.” He scooted closer and laid his head on my arm. “I like it here. I feel safe.”

“Let’s watch cartoons for a little longer, and then you need to get to bed.”

“Okay.”

Neither of us made it through the first ten minutes. We fell asleep while *The Flintstones* played in the background. I woke to the sound of thunder later that night and carried Tommy to his room. I couldn’t help but stand by the door and watch my son sleep. The next day was the first day of our new lives, I hoped.

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Linzi Baxter lives in Orlando, Florida with her husband and lazy basset hound. She started writing when voices inside her head wouldn't stop talking until the story was told. When not at work as an IT Manager, Linzi enjoys writing action-packed romances that will take you to the edge of your seat.

She enjoys engaging her readers with strong, interesting characters that have complex and stimulating stories to tell. If you enjoy a little (or maybe a whole lot) of steam and spice, don't miss checking out White Hat Security series.

When not writing, Linzi enjoys reading, watching college sports (GO UCF Knights), and traveling to Europe. She loves hearing from her readers and can't wait to hear from you!

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