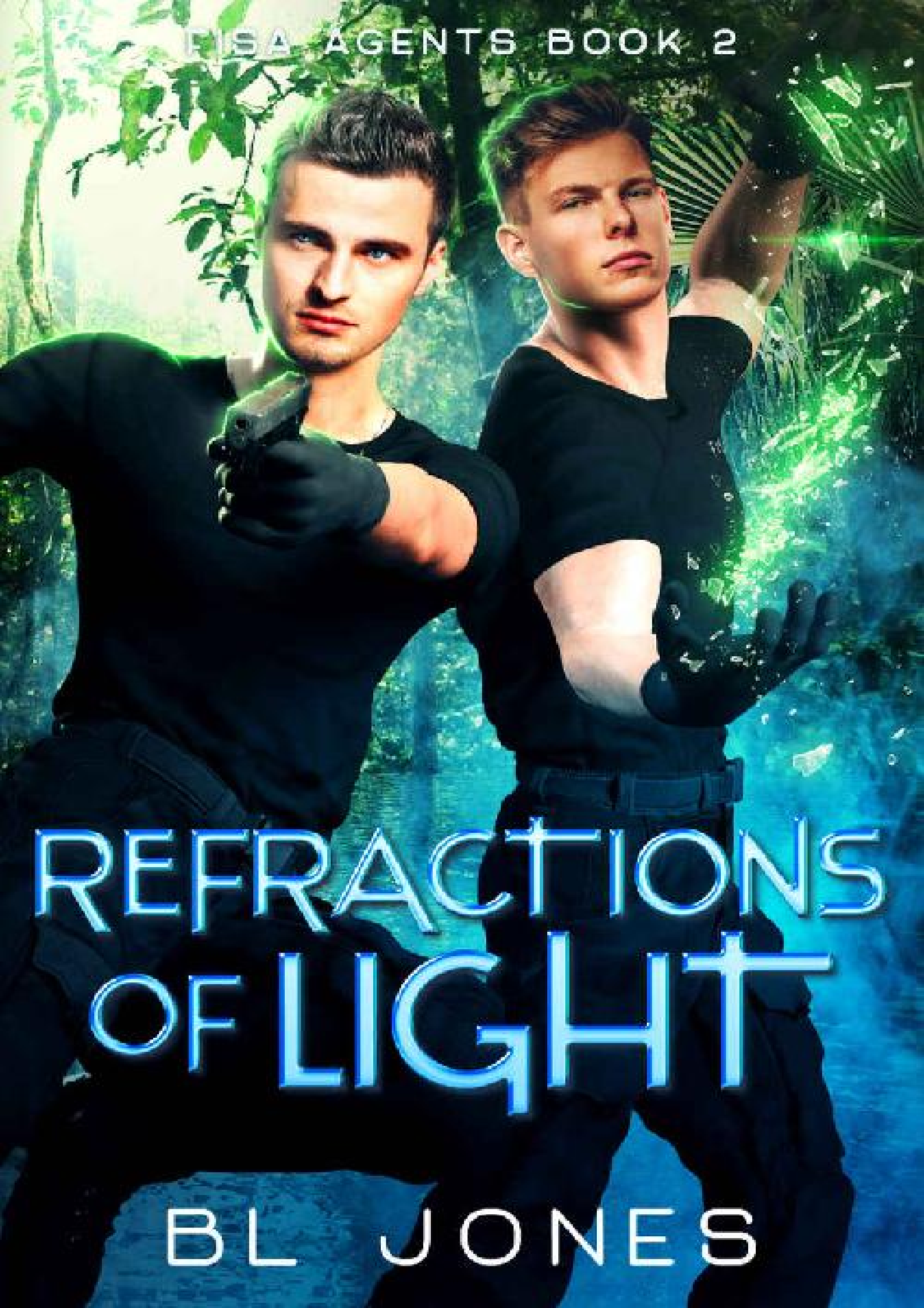


FISA AGENTS BOOK 2



REFRACTIONS OF LIGHT

BL JONES

Refractions Of Light

BL Jones

Blurb

Our eyes are broken windows capable of using light to bring truth into focus.

Some months ago, a ruthless assassin and a British intelligence agent met on a dark street in Danger City. One saved the other and from this new alliances were formed that have the potential to change everything.

Jack Roth is caught in the liminal space between hero and villain, his every decision planted firmly in the grey.

Leo Snow is a good man still desperately trying to make the right choices in a world that constantly forces him to question what that means.

Now, both men have been sent out on a rescue mission that will test the endurance of their new partnership and the depth of their feelings for one another as the past comes calling and the future casts shadows neither can escape.

Refractions Of Light

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CONTENT WARNING:

This book contains sexually explicit material that is only suitable for mature readers. Depictions of murder and graphic violence. Mentions of past eating disorder, assault and child abuse.

No HEA or HFN as this is part of an ongoing series. Cliffhanger ending.

This book is part of a series and should be read in sequence.

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Prologue

Rohan

Five years, three months, four weeks, and two days.

That's how long it's been since I left. That's how long it's been since I defected to FISA. That's how long it's been since I last saw my father.

Five years, one month, two weeks, and three days ago, my mother was brutally killed by the assassin my father sent after her.

I keep these numbers in my head. I repeat them to myself over and over and over again as men clad in grey Obsidian Inc. uniforms use their considerable skill to turn my body into a wrecked and bloodied mess. Hits give rise to fast-healing bruises. Knives cut raw meat and spill oil-stained blood. Strong and practised hands snap finger bones like twigs under heavy boots.

It's been two weeks since I was attacked in the middle of the street for the second time by another of OI's Liquid Onyx survivors. This one was far more ruthless than Jack Roth had been.

We fought for a long time, minutes that stretched on and on, until we devolved into the creatures we are behind the masks of civility stapled on us by the same organisation that baited and starved the snarling monsters beneath. Under the flimsy façades, things like us are little more than feral dogs with cocaine rubbed across our gums, fully prepared to shred and rip our way to victory.

But as hard as we went at each other, my loss seemed inevitable from the start. The other Liquid Onyx survivor had every patch of skin covered, including a mask for their face, leaving me no opening for attack with my power.

I woke up in an OI cell, chained to the wall. They've kept me drugged and barely coherent since I arrived.

Every day, men dressed in grey come into my cell and embarrass themselves by asking me the same set of questions, in between bouts of incredibly tedious violence. In my more lucid moments, I verbally analyse and critique their clumsy attempts to torture information out of me.

I offer up suggestions for improvement, which seems to enrage them, causing their violence to become even more erratic and useless. This in turn satisfies me greatly.

It was my father who insisted on having me trained to withstand torture. So really, this situation is of his own making. He'll know that and hate it almost as much as I relish it.

He wanted me to be his heir, which meant sharing information with me he wouldn't have with anyone else. If I was taken by one of his enemies, they could attempt to pry my father's secrets out of my brain. This made him vulnerable, something my father abhors and does not tolerate with any semblance of grace.

His only response to fear is cold calculation. He doesn't know any other way to deal with it. Anything that threatens the ironclad control he has over his business and his life must

be pinned down and dissected, then fixed with brutally applied solutions.

I was a potential weak point in his castle wall, and the only way to know how to successfully fortify that weakness was to test it for durability under fire.

One of my torturers gets a triumphant look on his face, a sure sign of impending moronic behaviour. He produces a crowbar from the black bag where he keeps his numerous, and oftentimes crude, torture devices.

“A *crowbar*?” I rasp out at him, my mouth swollen and filled with a mixture of fresh and dried blood. “Really? Why don’t you just dangle me over a balcony? At least then I’d get some fresh fucking air.”

Every part of my body aches from wounds new and old. As a Liquid Onyx survivor, my pain threshold is high, but that doesn’t mean I’m not pissed at being beaten as if I’m an animal in need of breaking.

In the end, that’s all I am to my father. Another experiment, another creature in a cage, with limited use.

Why he thought he could get away with killing my mother and still keep me on his side, I don’t know. I thought he understood her importance to me, but perhaps he assumed his own disinterest in my mother, a connection born of necessity rather than love, held true for me as well. If so, he was incorrect. My mother was the only bright spot in my entire shitty life, and I stayed as long as I did to be near her.

With my mother gone, leaving was an easy choice to make. Choosing to join FISA began as more of a *fuck you* to my father than anything, even if he wasn't aware of it. I knew how much he would hate his son and heir becoming a FISA agent, turning traitor in the worst possible way, and that was enough to entice me into signing up with the British spy agency.

Plus, my mother grew up in England. She spent her whole life there until my father took her away, like some kind of evil wizard, to a tower, where she would remain until her attempted escape.

The genius with the crowbar doesn't appreciate my disparagement of his weapon choice and proceeds to take it out on my innocent kneecap, slamming his crowbar into it with a vicious glee that would have me rolling my eyes if they weren't so busy leaking moisture in response to the pain.

"You're lucky Mr. Stone wants to talk to you today; otherwise, that hit would have been for your face." My wannabe torturer grins at me wolfishly. "See if you have such a smart mouth with no teeth to talk with for a few weeks. Maybe I'll come back and smash them up every time they grow back."

Jesus. Christ.

"Okay." I make a point of sounding bored. "There are numerous problems I have with the crap you just shat out of *your* mouth. But since I barely expect you to know how to form words with more than two syllables, let's just get to the

most important thing and say that your adult teeth don't *grow back*, you absolute *cretin*."

I'm saved from my idiot torturer's wrath when the door opens, and my father sweeps into the room with an air of vaguely threatening purpose.

I look up at him with a fierce scowl of impudence. Swishing the liquid black around inside my mouth, I hock a spit of it in his direction. My father comes to an abrupt stop but doesn't react to the spitting in any meaningful way, which is a disappointment. He once backhanded me out of my chair when I accidentally spilt milk at the breakfast table. But then maybe he thinks I've already been smacked around enough by his useless "interrogators."

I jerk my chin at the crowbar-wielding idiot. "What exactly is the interview process to become an OI torturer these days, Dad? Are you hiring any old psychopath who stumbles out of prison, or what?"

Ian Stone cuts an imposing figure. Tall and broad, classically handsome in the way of 80s film stars. His eyes are as dark as mine, as dark as pitch. If I were the sort to believe in fuckery such as souls, I'd say his eyes are as dark as his soul. But I don't, so I'll have to settle for thinking he looks like a malevolent son of a bitch.

He did this to me, gave me the blood that runs through my veins in more ways than one. I am his son, but I am also his project. His experiment. His *mistake*.

A mistake because making me what I am, hell, making me at all, is going to be the thing that fucks him one day. If it's the last thing I ever do on this earth, I will burn my father's carefully constructed world to the ground and piss on the ashes.

Father watches me for a handful of seconds without expression. He's wearing an outrageously expensive pair of jeans and a black Henley. Unlike his competitors, Ian Stone doesn't dress in the typical style attributed to business moguls. No sharp suits and ties. I've rarely seen him in anything other than jeans and casual shirts. Of course, the clothes themselves are still top-shelf, but if you didn't know that, then he would look deceptively non-threatening. As if he's just another charming billionaire, which is the image he's always played into.

When he finally speaks, it's with the same dryness and lack of inflection I'm used to from him despite our current circumstances. "I see your mother's spirit is still alive and well inside you, son."

I don't react to his mention of the wife he had murdered, but the rage roars inside me until it becomes a bonfire in the pit of my stomach.

"Is that what all this is about?" I scan my eyes around the room, stopping momentarily on the man with the crowbar, before settling back on my father. "Trying to beat the ghosts out of me?"

His mouth slices up on one side, a severe show of amusement that stokes the fire in my belly more than any violence or foul words ever could. He turns to the man with the crowbar and orders, "Leave."

The man shoots me a nasty look, likely at the fact I've managed to escape his attention for the time being. When I blow him a mockingly flirtatious kiss, his hand tightens on the crowbar, much to my satisfaction. His anger drives him to ignore my father's order and step towards me instead, like he's going to take another swing, consequences be damned.

Absolute idiot. As if hitting someone could ever be worth incurring Ian Stone's wrath for disobeying him.

Father catches the movement made in my direction. There's nothing in my father's body language or expression to suggest he's infuriated, but I know him. This man will be lucky to get out of wherever we are alive, let alone with a job.

The idiot notices my father's shift in focus and freezes like a deer in headlights, proving he does have some survival instincts, however late they are to kick in.

Father holds his hand out, indicating towards the crowbar. The man looks wary but seems unwilling to make the mistake of hesitating over another order issued by his boss and gives it up.

There's a pause where my father shifts the crowbar around in his hand, looking down at it and then back up at my torturer, who for his part seems to have gotten with the program and

seems mildly terrified of whatever reaction my father is going to have.

When my father jerks his head at the door, my ex-torturer proves his idiocy tenfold by thinking he's been given the chance to book it out of the room. I resist the urge to sigh as the man turns around to leave, and my father uses the opportunity to pull the crowbar back and swing it with brutal efficiency. The crowbar cracks open my ex-torturer's skull, and he collapses to the ground, still alive.

My father proceeds to beat the man to death without hesitation or a single word uttered. The only sounds he makes are grunts of exertion as he wields the crowbar. The murder is somehow both cruel in how measured he is about it and ruthlessly violent to witness from a third-party perspective.

When he's done, and the man who spent hours trying to break me is nothing more than a bloodied and disfigured lump, a mess smeared across the floor, my father drops the crowbar with a loud clatter. He lets out a deep, slow breath to calm himself after the show of temper.

I hum thoughtfully, tilting my head to study both the dead man and my father for a handful of tense seconds before murmuring into the silence, "Well. That's certainly one way to get out of having to pay a bill. Of course"—I nod my head at the blood splattered across my father's extortionately posh jeans—"now you're going to have to pay a little extra for the dry cleaning. Blood does *not* come out easily."

I should know. There are only so many times you can bleed on your shirt from a split lip or broken nose before you start learning some shit about stain removal.

“Rohan,” my father admonishes, turning to face me again. He isn’t angry anymore. I guess murder helps some people simmer down. “Just because you have a sharp tongue doesn’t mean you have to use it every single time a thought pops into your head.”

So many people are obsessed with the way my mouth chooses to expend its intelligence today.

This is my father, you see, giving me grief about my lack of self-control whilst a man he beat to death with his own beloved crowbar lies right there beside him.

I’d laugh if I thought it would earn me anything but more quiet time strapped to this chair. Not that I’d mind bothering my father, and I’m hardly an impatient man by nature. But. Seriously? I’m getting bored. I hate being bored, more than almost anything.

When I’m bored, all I have to do is let my brain run like a hamster on a wheel, around and around and around at an ever-increasing speed. I need my work. I need the distraction. Otherwise, one day that hamster is going to fucking explode, and then all I’ll have inside my head are the remnants of what sanity used to look like smeared across the walls, much like the skull and brain matter of the man my father just murdered.

“Nag, nag, nag,” I simper at him, offering a droll smile, blood no doubt still staining my teeth, transforming the smile

into a macabre version of itself. “Is that why you’ve dragged me in here and had your underlings poke me with sticks? So you could berate me for the bitchy personality I inherited from you?”

My father’s nose flares, the only sign he’s becoming annoyed with me. I won’t get any more than that. I never do. He just strikes, like a snake, or a spider resting on the edge of its web, waiting for its prey to stumble into a carefully crafted trap.

“Do you feel like explaining where you’ve been the past few years?” he throws out at me like it’s a counter-argument.

Honestly, I’ve wondered ever since I left if he would find out exactly where I’d run to. It seems he hasn’t, which is both very lucky and somewhat disappointing.

Guess I’ll have to lie. Fun.

“Decided I’d try my hand at going private.”

If he was capable of it, my father would be giving me the double eyebrows of scepticism, I can feel it.

“You’ve been freelancing. On your own. For years.” There’s stark disbelief in his voice.

Well, I didn’t think he’d believe it that easily. He wouldn’t be the man I know if he did.

“Think what you like.” I shrug as much as my bindings allow. “I wanted out. I got out. Did my own thing. What were you expecting me to say?” I scoff, laying it on thick. “That I’ve secretly been building my own supervillain empire? That

I secretly *am* a supervillain, waiting to make my big reveal and kill a couple supers as my opening act?”

If I were a supervillain, I'd certainly do a better job of ridding the world of all the superheroes running around, I'll tell you that. How hard is it to hire a handful of snipers? Just place them strategically throughout Danger City and let the suited-up heroes catch bullets whilst they're out on patrol. Supervillains like to complicate shit, and that's why they fail all the time. It's pathetic. I get exasperated just hearing about their escapades, so the supers must be twice as done with it by now.

My father completely dismisses my goading and sighs, taking another few steps forward and reaching out to grab my chin. I resist the very real urge to turn my head and bite a chunk out of his hand. It wouldn't be the first time I did something like that. Our relationship could be told in the scars we've given each other.

“You ready to get out of here?” my father asks, turning my head from side to side, his grip on my chin bruisingly strong. “Or do you want me to leave you alone in here, strapped to this chair, until you piss yourself again and make even more of a mess than you already have?”

If shame were a thing I fucked with, I'd probably feel it now.

It's true that I've had to empty my bladder more than once since I was put in this chair. It was either that or let the damn thing burst. I assumed it was part of my torture, the humiliation and degradation of it all. Load of shit, that is.

People often think taking away someone's choices and forcing them to degrade themselves is a power move on their part, when in reality, all they've done is give that person the *excuse* of having no choice. True power comes from getting someone to destroy what they care about of their own volition, to not only hang themselves but also create the noose they'll use to do it.

But then as Director Snow once told me, the concept of choice is subjective.

"Depends," I respond demurely, gazing up at the impenetrable force that is Ian Stone. "Will I be going somewhere fun?"

His answering smile sends a litany of shivers racing down my spine. "We've been working on something big around here lately, and since you're back, I thought you'd like to offer your input," he drawls. "If you're so determined to behave like a child, you might as well think of it as going on a playdate."

My father seems inordinately pleased with himself, which is always a concern.

I narrow my eyes slightly. "A playdate, huh? Who with this time? Not another one of your stick pokers." I dart a glance at the dead man on the floor. "We don't want to get a reputation for dining and dashing our hired torturers."

My father leans in closer to me for a handful of seconds, studying my face like he's trying to see all the secrets carved into the other side of it. After a few moments, he moves back and lets go of me entirely.

“It’s another successful experiment,” he answers with unsettling congeniality. “One that’s proven more useful to me than you have in recent years.” Then, like he knows I was waiting for the other shoe to drop, he adds with a wicked glint in his eyes, “Your brother.”

Chapter One

Jack

“This is what happens when you don’t wait for backup!” I bark at Leo, making zero attempts to hide my frustration.

“Really?” Leo asks, tone wry and unconcerned despite the hive of armed Obsidian Inc. agents that have swarmed around us like they’re performing an interpretive theatre piece about wasps. “I thought this is what happens when you break into places and go around touching things and shooting at people.”

Leo turns his head slightly, and I catch a maniacal grin spreading across a face currently speckled and smeared with the blood of dead or dying Obsidian Inc. agents. He has this frenzied look in his eyes, too, like ocean water storming beneath ice. His hair is a tangled, sweaty car crash. There’s blood on his *teeth*. The whole thing is diabolically sexy.

In the last month, as we’ve been working together, travelling the globe to storm every Obsidian Inc. facility I know the existence of, I’ve learnt a few things about my partner. One of the most staggering is his apparent fearlessness in the face of impossible odds when out on a mission. It didn’t surprise me to learn this about Leo. He showed a similar lack of respect and care for his own life when we met. His behaviour since then has only reinforced my belief that the biggest threat to Leo Snow’s personal safety is himself.

Leo becomes particularly bullheaded in his recklessness when he’s trying to save people. That’s what all this has been about: attacking OI bases and facilities in a desperate attempt to find Rohan Sathe and regain custody of him.

So far, we've failed to get even a glimpse of the stolen genius, and Leo has been running himself ragged doing everything possible to track the bastard down. He seems to feel some kind of responsibility for Rohan although I have no clue why. He's not even friends with the man. But whatever the reason, he's like a horse with a bit between his teeth, and he won't be dissuaded from risking his life on a near-constant basis.

He refused to wait for FISA to send more field agents to help us storm the facility tonight, going in on his own with only a tranquilliser gun and his sense of valour for protection.

You know who doesn't give a shit about the knight's honour code? That's right, OI agents with *real* guns.

Leo, showing zero signs of commitment to his continued survival on this fucking earthly plain, elbows my side and nods at the three massive windows to our left. Just as the OI agents are raising their guns to open fire at us, Leo drops to the floor, and I use my Liquid-Onyx-given superpower to shatter each of those three windows, blowing the glass inwards like a tornado-level gust of wind hit them.

The shards of glass fly through the air and hit the cluster of OI agents in a blast of tiny projectiles. Glass cuts into the OI agents, slicing at their skin, causing them to throw up their arms in front of their faces in belated protection and aim their guns away from us.

Leo and I take the opportunity to escape. I grab hold of Leo and pull him roughly to his feet, proceeding to yank him along

with me to the now-glassless windows. Leo doesn't hesitate to jump through the empty gap, heedless of the three-storey fall. I grab Leo in mid-air and wrap him up in a bridal carry, landing on the tarmac below with him in my arms.

This is a move we've perfected over the last month, Leo completely unafraid to play the part of the damsel, trusting me to make sure he doesn't hit solid ground.

Once Leo gets his feet under him again, we make a mad dash for the escape route we scoped out during our earlier recon.

There's a barbed fence surrounding the facility, but we found a weak point where there were no cameras and enough of a foothold to climb the fence from inside. It was no way to get in undetected, but for getting out when they already know we're here, it's perfect.

I encourage Leo to climb the fence before me since I'm more likely to survive a bullet if the OI agents on the lower floors spontaneously decide to get their shit together long enough to come after us.

Leo makes quick work of hauling himself up and over the fence, landing on the other side with an easy grace I was both surprised by and glad to find out my partner possesses. He's surprisingly agile for such a big man. It's not often large men are taught to hone their agility rather than forgoing it almost entirely in place of using their natural size and strength to compensate.

OI trained me to be as light on my feet as a man half my size, to be silent and dexterous. They did not accept

limitations. I was expected to become a shadow of a man, a ghost, and over the years, I did just that.

I didn't think Leo would have been forced to obtain such a rigorous skill set. But it seems I was mistaken in thinking FISA offers limited training to their agents. Either that or Leo is truly exceptional, which is something I'm inclined to believe based on what I've witnessed so far.

I'm self-aware enough to realise I've become emotionally compromised when it comes to Leo. If I thought having sex with the man was going to somehow dampen my growing attachment to him, I was sorely mistaken in that belief. My need to remain close and protect him has grown at an alarming rate since we met, and becoming physically involved seems to have just exacerbated that desire even further beyond my control.

The man is a nightmare. A travesty. My fucking undoing, probable death sentence, and the unfortunate reason for every bit of happiness in my life.

I did not ask for this, Universe. Thanks, and fuck you.

Leo waits for me to climb up the fence and throw myself over to the other side, landing hard and taking off at a run as soon as my feet hit the ground. I don't need to look to know Leo is doing his best to keep up with me. That would be impossible if I was to run at my true speed capability. I will always be faster and stronger than him, than anyone without Liquid Onyx running through their bloodstream. But Leo puts up a good showing, his long legs covering the distance

between the fence and our parked van a few streets away with ease. Leo is no slacker, happy to spend almost every spare moment training or exercising. He'd be a dream agent for OI. Dedicated, fearless, and highly capable.

Of course, OI would also take everything good about Leo Snow and crumple it up into a ball, then set fire to that ball, turning it to ash they could force down his throat and choke him with. That's what they do: strip out all the good and reform it into a weapon which can only be used against you.

Leo takes the driver's side of our nondescript black getaway van and barely waits for me to close the door on my side before he's shoved it into gear and slammed down on the pedal, taking off down the street.

This time of night in a commercial area, there's no one around to see us as we drive through the quiet streets of Rogue, a small city in Ireland.

Leo and I don't speak for a little while, the adrenaline of our near miss giving way to frustration at the failure of our mission overall. I can see Leo going over everything in his head, his fingers clenching on the steering wheel, his jaw getting tighter and tighter as the minutes drag on.

Unlike our other missions, this one held a particular kind of significance. We've checked over a dozen OI facilities since Rohan was snatched up. Every single one has been a bust. This was our last shot at being able to find Rohan, based on the information we already possess.

Now we'll be flying blind and clamouring for intel from whatever source we can find. I know Leo had his hopes pinned on this facility being the answer, which is likely why he behaved even more recklessly than usual.

I can understand his frustration. I share it although perhaps not for the same reasons. Of course, I want to get Rohan back. But that's mostly because I'm afraid of what his father might end up forcing him to do. Unless Rohan is willing to die in the name of protecting the world from Ian Stone's machinations, we'll all be fucked to have a man with his intellect working for OI.

Leo seems to believe Rohan wouldn't flip on FISA. But since the man has already flipped once before, it's possible he would do so again. When I pointed this out to Leo, he got indignant and reminded me I also turned on OI to work with FISA. I agreed with him, making no effort to conceal what I meant by the easy acceptance of the parallel between Rohan and me.

After that, Leo got all quiet, like the idea of me betraying FISA never occurred to him, which can't be possible. He's naive in some ways, but Leo isn't a complete idiot. He knows I don't believe in FISA the same way he does, that I've offered them my loyalty now, but it's only because I made a deal with Director Snow to exchange my skills as an assassin and my knowledge of OI in return for their protection and freedom from a British prison cell.

But maybe there's a difference between knowing something in the abstract and having it be expressed out loud in no uncertain terms.

With the aim of removing some of the tension from Leo's broad frame, I settle back in my seat, purposefully relaxing my body in the hopes of getting him to do the same, and attempt to prod him into conversation.

"Think we should go back and blow that OI facility all to shit? Firebomb the fuck out of it, maybe?"

Leo doesn't respond at first, clearly still working through his own low-simmering anger at having failed in our mission to rescue the Stone heir. But after a few seconds tick by, Leo seems to force himself to unclench slightly, loosening his fingers on the steering wheel and relaxing back into his seat a little bit.

There's still a tightness in his expression, but hell, he's no saintly angel. The man's got a temper on him. That's another thing I've learnt over the last month. Watching Leo go fucking *off* when he gets genuinely pissed has become one of my new favourite pastimes. He's stunning when he's in a rage. It's like watching a firework pop off inside a small, dark room: dangerous and exhilarating in the same breath.

"*Nah,*" Leo says, drawing the word out with sardonic slowness. "We'd be better off calling Rogue's local authorities to report the extremely theatric vandalism you committed and compromising the facility's location with a police

investigation. OI doesn't officially own that building, remember? It's meant to be abandoned. They're *squatting*."

Leo sounds absurdly pleased by that concept, like he's imagining the big bad OI as a load of drifters from a 60s flower-power documentary.

"How is that better?" I ask, making a pinched, annoyed face at him. I don't want to imagine OI as anything other than the behemoth of doom and ruined lives that they are.

Leo doesn't react to my irritation even though I know he's clocked it from the corner of his eye. He makes a low humming sound, which triggers the need in me to smack him in the mouth, and I'm not sorry, because I don't actually do it, so well done to me.

"Not all satisfaction when defeating an enemy has to come from exploding shit," Leo argues.

"Course not." I put my all into a scoff, really heaving it from the chest to communicate my derision. "Sometimes we utilise physical violence and get satisfaction that way."

"Meh." Leo shrugs, his lips spreading out into a jaunty smile. He spares me a quick glance. "You know I like a bit of bureaucratic inconvenience with my triumphs over evil."

"Yes, yes, the infamous rich-boy mentality," I mock, glowering out at the series of shadowy buildings we pass as Leo drives on through the night. "Why get your hands dirty when you can beat people into submission via the biased judicial system your ancestors helped to create?"

Leo appears positively delighted by this. “Ohh, look who’s been reading the *Guardian* with his cornflakes.” He tilts his head, considering. “Are assassins considered blue-collar workers?”

“Being an assassin is a very hands-on job,” I respond dryly. “Lots of manual labour involved with killing people *in person*.”

“Have you got a union?” Leo asks, voice droll.

I make an incredulous noise. “Who the fuck joins a union anymore?”

Leo gives a short nod. “Fair point.”

“I just think we should be taking on OI from an underdog perspective. They’re a corporation,” I reason. “They are The Man. And I think we should be using more Molotov cocktails in our war against them. For appearance’s sake if nothing else.”

Leo seems to consider this for a handful of seconds before venturing, “Since we’re government agents, are we not also considered part of The Man?”

I make a low humming sound, pretending to think about it, then offer, “Only if you care about things like the truth and have no appreciation for irony.”

“Fuck that!” Leo exclaims, bashing his hand against the steering wheel. “The truth never did anything for me, and irony is my son. I am now convinced by your argument.” He shoots another look at me, adding with fierce sarcasm, “For

the sake of the working man, we'll ask Senior Agent North to let us firebomb the OI facility."

"Ask? Why?" I imagine asking North to commit arson. It might be worth it just to see his jaw twitch in that way it does when Leo and I do something to genuinely upset him. "You know he'll just scowl at us and do that selective-hearing bullshit he does, where he pretends we didn't just say the insane thing."

"Exactly." Leo's eyes spark with enthusiasm. "If we tell him about it and he doesn't expressly tell us not to do it, that counts as permission."

I squint at him. "In what world?"

"In the fictional world where we'd have time to get back and firebomb the facility before OI has cleared out," Leo answers wryly.

I make a shocked sound and grab at my chest. "Wow, reality, way to crush my dreams."

Leo lets out an extended sigh. "There really is no such thing as fairy-tale happy endings that involve gratuitous use of Molotov cocktails."

"Life," I curse, shaking my fist in mock anger, "you disappointing bitch."

Leo pulls into a parking garage, which sits beside the safe house FISA designated to us for this mission. It's a small space our van barely fits into and requires us to climb out through the back doors.

I take the lead, getting out of my seat and going to open the doors, checking the surrounding area, my superior Liquid Onyx eyesight allowing me to scan darkness more thoroughly than Leo can. Seeing no possible threats or issues from surrounding neighbours, few as there are on a street like this, I beckon for Leo to vacate the van after me.

Leo and I go around the side of our safe house to enter through the back door. As soon as we moved in a few days ago, I wired the front door so anything trying to break in that way would get a nasty surprise. Leo didn't think it was necessary, rationalising that if anyone were going to break in, it would be a homeless person or some kids, not Obsidian Inc. agents and the like. Our safe house is little more than a derelict building, made up of old stone and held together by eroding cement and hostile obstinance.

Despite genuinely believing this, he didn't stop me. He knows by now I err on the side of super-fucking paranoid. I wanted to wire the back door as well, but Leo convinced me to settle for putting alarms on the windows. If anyone tries to get in through them, we'll be alerted to it immediately.

The interior of our safe house is equally as bland and crumbling as the outside, containing two bedrooms upstairs and an open plan downstairs. Every wall is painted an unflattering dark yellow, and the flooring has been stripped back to reveal lumpy stone.

There's a table set up in the otherwise-empty would-be living room, with a computer and a couple of monitors. Most

of them are used for security, linked to the camera we have positioned outside the property. Another was set up for surveillance purposes, the camera itself placed inside a streetlight near the OI facility from which Leo and I just escaped.

Senior Agent North is waiting for us inside the safe house. He's sitting on a suspiciously frail chair in front of the monitors, posture deceptively relaxed. He's dressed all in black, and there's a Glock strapped to his side.

North turns to face us when we come in through the back door, his expression decidedly grim. It's been that way ever since Rohan was taken by OI, and we found out what happened to the dead scientist, Ryan Rush.

Our medical team did their thing and confirmed that Rush committed suicide via cyanide. He had one of his molars replaced with a cyanide capsule inside a plastic fake tooth. All he would have needed to do was break the plastic and swallow. He'd have been dead within minutes.

After some digging, we found Rush was paranoid about OI, or someone similar, coming after him for his research, and he wanted to be prepared to off himself in the name of protecting the secrets locked inside his head.

I had to give it to Rush: at least he wasn't an idiot. He knew it was better to die on his terms than to let OI throw him around like a dog toy for months before they terminated him. I can appreciate the forethought and practicality that went into his planned-contingency suicide.

Leo was not happy when I pointed this out in the team meeting with Dru and North. He gave me one of those mildly scathing looks I've come to associate with his more delicate sensibilities being prodded with a sharp stick by me.

"Agents," North greets perfunctorily. "How was the mission?"

"Fuck off," I answer, earning me a sharp elbow in the ribs from Leo.

He's so oddly respectful towards North. I don't know if it's because he's Damon's father, or if Leo genuinely thinks the light shines out of North's arse, like so many other junior agents seem to.

"What?" I growl at both of them, irritated by their heartfelt dedication to professionalism and protocol. "He knows how it went. Fucking badly is how. Sathe wasn't there, and we almost got old school court-martialled, and I didn't even get to firebomb anything. Total waste of a break-in."

North is completely unruffled by my outburst, which is typical of him. I'm starting to want to find something that will get him all puffed up and annoyed with me for real. Dan would have made a hobby out of trying to piss off our new handler. He was just that kind of asshole.

"We knew it was a long shot," North says amiably, like we were sent out to see if we could find organic vegetables at a corner shop. "Since this was our last go at the known OI facilities on our list, we'll need to begin expanding our net of possible avenues for gathering actionable intel."

“You have a specific cast in mind?” Leo asks, brows furrowing in inquiry.

“Yes,” North answers, nodding like he was waiting to be asked so he could begin a briefing. “We’ve made contact with someone who has deep ties to Obsidian Inc., and who’s made it clear in the past that he would be willing to sell what he knows about their movements and plans to us for the right price.”

I shift my body sideways, leaning against a beam that stands between the living room and kitchen, crossing my arms and mentally preparing for whatever bullshit I can tell this is about to become.

Leo doesn’t look any more enthused by North’s vague suggestion. If it were a good lead, we would have found out about it way before now. Snow had likely been leaving it as a last resort, which means whoever it is we’re going to be dealing with must be a right piece of work.

“Who is it that we would be paying for information?”

North hesitates for a moment, his eyes skittering over to me and therefore racheting up my sense of impending dread. If it’s someone from my past, then this can only be terrible because I don’t know anyone influential from my past who isn’t a mass murderer, a corrupt government official, a tycoon criminal in some capacity, or a mixture of all three.

“He’s an infamous arms dealer. Goes by the name ‘Titanus Bullet.’ He works mostly out of Southeast Asia, based

currently in a small country that sits somewhere between Malaysia and Indonesia, called Senjatas.”

Oh, fuck no. As in, a big fuck no. The biggest fucking *fuck no* you can mentally picture in your head, then doubled.

Leo must notice the look of furious dismay on my face because he comes to my side and goes to touch my arm, to offer comfort. It’s his usual instinct where I—or pretty much anyone else—is concerned. He stops himself at the last second, remembering we’re not alone.

Since having sex that one time, Leo and I have been careful not to be at all physically demonstrative with our, for lack of a better term, *affection* for one another. We don’t want North, or God forbid, Snow, to realise the depth of our shared intimacy. I would rather not have to deal with whatever those two judgemental pricks would have to say about it.

We haven’t slept together since, so it’s not like there’s anything to analyse and get all worked up over. Leo hasn’t tried to bring it up once, which I appreciate even if it makes me feel confused about how to handle him, what to do when he treats me with casual warmth and displays a caring for me that goes beyond the professional.

Leo is my partner at FISA, so workwise, I get where we stand and what some of the rules are. But when it comes to our personal relationship, if that’s something we can claim to have at this point, I’ve got no clue what Leo expects from me. If we were fucking on the regular, I would tweak my understanding

of our expanded partnership to include stringless sex, but that's not how things are between us.

We aren't exactly friends either, because I don't know how to be anyone's friend. But I feel responsible for him, and I want to keep him alive because he's the only person who matters to me. I don't think Leo would like to imagine me being so cold and isolated, but there's not much I can do about it, especially as I have no desire to form connections with other people even as a pretence.

I don't want anyone else. Taking care of one person is hard enough, and I fucked it up the first time. I won't let that happen with Leo. I've decided that no matter what form our relationship takes, I need to be by Leo's side to protect him. I want to make sure he gets to keep all that light he has inside him, to stop anyone from snuffing it out.

"What's wrong?" Leo asks me, drawing all my attention to the concerned quirk of his full mouth.

I remember taking that mouth and Leo allowing it to be taken by me. By something like me. It seems almost immoral, somehow, to have defiled him with my touch, my lips and spit and cum. I filled him up with my very essence, pressed dark bruises into his skin, and wanted desperately to keep him locked in against me for the rest of our days.

It scares me, a bit, how much I craved him then, and how that feeling hasn't abated since. I had him once, and whatever pull we felt towards one another should be done with.

It doesn't feel anything close to done.

“I know Titanus Bullet,” I say, addressing both Leo and North. “Trust me, you don’t want to work with him.”

“Why not?” Leo frowns, searching my face for information he won’t find.

“Apart from the fact he’s a piece-of-shit war-profiting arms dealer?” I sneer, unable to hold in a scoff of disgust. “Okay. He’s also a lying bastard. Whatever he told you he wants from us in exchange for intel, I guarantee you that won’t be the extent of it. He’ll want more. He always does.”

I met Titanus Bullet numerous times during my tenure with Obsidian Inc. They buy weapons from him as well as trade in secrets, political and otherwise.

“Do you think he would lie about knowing where Rohan Sathe is being kept by OI?” North asks, detached curiosity on his face.

“Is that what he’s promised?” I demand, needing clarification to understand what game is being set up for us. “An outright answer on where Sathe has been locked up by his daddy?”

North doesn’t outwardly react to my jibe or the acidity in my voice, ever the government drone.

“Yes,” he answers, with no inflection to suggest how that conversation went although I can imagine, knowing Titanus as I do. “That’s what he’s told us.”

“Then he probably does know what we need,” I allow begrudgingly. “But that’s not the point. If all he’s asking for is

money, it's bullshit. Money wouldn't be enough for him. He'll ask for more, and he'll do it when we're down to the wire, so we won't have time to think around him. That's his style, guerrilla negotiating tactics."

Plus, he'll be a right dickhead about the whole thing. He'd made it no secret, the times we were in the same space, that he saw me as little more than another gun to sell. He wasn't wrong, and that's what pissed me off the most. I was exactly what he thought I was: a weapon hewn from flesh.

I hated how he looked at me, like I'd be a prize worth making a fuss over, just so he could turn me into the centrepiece of his weapons exhibit. Made me want to cut him open, just so I could grind some glass into the wound. I was disappointed every time OI didn't order me to kill him after our dealings with him were done. OI is usually big on that. Wiping the slate clean, resetting the board, no loose ends dangling in the wind for anyone else to grasp onto.

Titanus made it no secret he was loyal to absolutely no one, villain or hero, government or criminal organisation. He was a mercenary salesman through and through. Pure-fucking-bred sociopath. One of those rich arsholes who think they have a clearance level above everyone else for all corners of life.

I've met plenty of creatures like him, twisted up and sharp like barbed wire and well suited to this world, but Titanus always stood out as someone I'd happily become a hero for just to put him down. Make like I was doing a public service by setting fire to a pillar of gunpowder and metal. As if it

makes a difference, lighting a match in a whirlwind of smoke and shadow.

Leo is giving me another one of his searching looks, attempting to decipher the deeper truth behind my condemnation of a piece-of-shit international arms dealer. It annoys me that he's right; there is more to my intense dislike of Titanus than just his chosen career path as a gunrunning tycoon.

North appears to be crunching my words around inside his head, intellectual teeth breaking them down into digestible pieces.

“You believe he's telling the truth,” he muses. “But that he will extort us for more than the information is worth once we enter into the deal.”

“North, gotta tell you, if I was the type to be in charge of shit, I'd promote you from captain to major, no question.” I lower my voice to an acerbic drawl. “Your ability to regurgitate the obvious is truly second to none.”

North pretends to consider this idea, then responds wryly, “Either way, I'd be your superior. You are, of course, allergic to respect, self or otherwise, so we make allowances. But you should be aware I don't cut my knuckles on my subordinates' teeth, so I'm unlikely to live up to the standards of your previous handlers.”

Self or otherwise? Oh, this bitch, though. That was *enchantingly* mean.

“Don’t put yourself down.” I flash my teeth at North. “My incarceration and enforced servitude are no less meaningful and fulfilling with you and FISA than they were with all the OI fanboys who held my leash before.”

North doesn’t sigh, because he’s better than that, but I can tell he’s coming close to getting all finger flexy and nostril flary, like a bull who got magically transformed into a person one day and keeps reacting to every bit of red that I whip in his face.

“So can I take it you’re suggesting we don’t send you and Agent Snow to meet with Bullet?” North asks with forced calm.

“Oh, no, you can send me.” I let my mouth slit up sharply at both ends. “If it means I get to rip his throat out with my teeth on FISA’s orders?”

“That would be a negative, Agent. He’s part of an ongoing investigation, many in fact, so we need to keep him alive.” North gives me one of his top-five stern looks. “To be absolutely clear, using your teeth for blood sport is not authorised, I’m afraid.”

I make a show out of demonstrating my disappointment. “No lie, North, FISA’s limp-dick energy when it comes to killing bad guys in the name of big-picture bullshit is becoming a real turn off for me. Gonna be bringing that shit up during my quarterly performance review. And just so you know, your name will be mentioned. I’m not afraid of some crude office backstabbing.”

“Always productive speaking to you, Agent Roth.” North sighs. He gets up from his seat with the decisive air of a man who wants a conversation to end. “I’ll be sure to pass along your objections to Director Snow.”

“Yeah, you do that.” I snort. “Make sure they write it in the mission file. The note should read: Agent Jack Roth, murderer and superfreak, objected to making deals with gun-smuggling war profiteer, and in response, the British government agency said, ‘Yeah, thank you for your concern, but, like, *we’re gonna*, so,’ then put a shrug emoji in brackets at the end. Just to be certain that kids from future generations who read it will understand.”

North doesn’t bother to respond, likely knowing the pointlessness of trying to meet me blow for verbal blow. He wouldn’t get anything out of it even if he did somehow manage to win. North might be many unpleasant things in my eyes, but petty isn’t one of them. I’d know that just by how he’s managed to raise his son. Damon is painfully noble in a completely different way from Leo. There’s too much agent in Damon, and it makes me antsy to be around him, like he’s got some ability to accurately judge people using his own parameters and the self-conviction to act on those conclusions.

I’m glad Leo was chosen to be my partner and not him. On the surface, it would seem like Damon would be the better match for me. He’s not afraid to use a gun with lethal force, for one. He’s also a lot less likely to allow sympathy or sentiment to get in the way of taking me down if he had to. But I know if we’d spent any extended amount of time, just

the two of us, we'd have pushed each other into the red and triggered a clash with rooftop-level acrobatics and alley-fight rules.

He's too intense, takes the job too seriously as Leo once said.

Leo works for me as a partner because there's barely a drop of agent in him. He's what some might call a rare good man. I've learnt precious few things in my violent and stunted life that are worth knowing. But I know good men aren't heroes or agents, driven by duties or crusades; they're the ones who are kind to people without any agenda or ulterior motive behind it.

North turns to address Leo, easily dismissing me with the cut of his eyes to my less hostile counterpoint. He gives Leo another one of his top-five stern looks, this one meant to convey the seriousness of his impending mic-drop statement.

“Agent Snow, you and your partner are to go to the local airport in the morning and catch a flight. Your tickets, passports, and all other supplies needed for the trip are in these bags.” He nods at two black travel bags dumped next to the table. “I will be going ahead to sort out the money and transport it to Bullet's current stronghold.”

Leo gives our handler a nod in both acceptance and understanding. “See you on the other side, sir.” He even manages to make the “sir” sound respectful rather than mocking.

North gives Leo the briefest of smiles, been and gone in a blink, but it was there, which says a lot about how much he likes his son's best friend.

When North looks at me again, the smile is very much absent. He regards me with a placid kind of resignation. Sometimes I get the feeling he believes Director Snow made the wrong choice in attempting to rehabilitate the ex-OI assassin who wound up in their cells. I can't really blame him, as most days I agree with his assessment: that it was a bad call on Snow's part.

"Agent Roth," he says, voice a deep rumble of warning, mixed, surprisingly, with some amusement. "Do not blow up the OI facility tonight. They'll be cleared out by now, and none of us wants to be responsible for the death of innocent architecture. Plus, think of the cover-up costs. British intelligence doesn't want to owe Irish intelligence any favours."

"Got it." I let my mouth twist up at the corners, still leaning against the wall with a casual arrogance I know irks most people. "Wouldn't want to deprive any future heroin addicts of a good holiday home."

North makes a humming sound, which could be agreement or could be condemnation. Either way, it's the last of his contributions. He walks out the back door and disappears into the night like a ghost, an agent through and through, from his reflexes to his mercurial shadow to his genuine belief in the system he fights for.

With North gone, Leo and I are left alone again to deal with our failure of a mission, not to mention the new one now hanging over us.

“So,” Leo says, moving to sit in the chair North vacated. He looks at me with a tired expression adorning his attractive face. “Do you want to tell me what your real problem is with Titanus Bullet?”

“Already told you,” I mutter, irritated at Leo’s inability to let anything go, to always feel the need to dig and scrape at the dirt covering my numerous psychoses, to try and find the bones of truth buried underneath.

“Yeah, okay, I’m gonna need more than *the shady arms dealer is shady* as an explanation.” Before I can protest this, argue that Titanus being shady is both an understatement and enough of a reason to be wary about going to meet with him, Leo tacks on knowingly, “You’re way too amped up about this for it to be that simple.”

“Fuck off, Leo. I don’t owe you an explanation. And fuck you for not believing me when I tell you shit,” I bite out, unrepentant at the disappointment that swims behind Leo’s eyes at my refusal to play his game.

“Jack, come on!” There’s a sudden flash-bang of real anger in Leo’s voice, his frustration having given way to allow for a purer state of emotion. He sighs, leaning back in his seat and crossing his arms, giving me the look I hate, the one that says he’s searching for an angle, a way to *handle* me like I’m a difficult child and a barely tamed animal at the same time. “If it’s going to affect the mission,” he tries, seeming to realise it’s the wrong thing even as he says it, “I need to know—”

I make a loud, furious noise, part scoff and part incredulous bark of laughter.

“Oh, if it’s going to affect *the mission*. Right.” I pin Leo with the glare I usually reserve for the various no-name FISA agents I’ve been forced to deal with. “You know what, fuck you times three.”

Leo doesn’t snarl back like I want him to, doesn’t let me see his teeth bared and countable. He doesn’t retreat either, which is what makes him so different to anyone else I’ve met. Leo can’t back down from a fight, doesn’t even seem to know that’s an option most of the time. It reminds me uncomfortably of my brother: a bomb without wires to cut. Unlike Dan, however, Leo is also capable of reining himself in, taking control of his emotions, and curtailing his initial reaction, to wind down and regain power by leaving the bait to dangle. It’s the part of him that reminds me the most of Snow. They both seem to know the value of staying still amidst chaos.

“The fact you’re getting so defensive about this only makes it seem more like there’s something you’re holding back.” Leo’s tone is maddeningly calm, like he doesn’t care what my reasons are, like he’s just asking to cover his bases, to be able to tell himself or anyone else that he tried.

Leo can’t hide his feelings for shit, unlike his aunt. But I’ve seen him blatantly pretend the things he does feel don’t touch him as deeply as they should. It’s a conditioned response, born from years of growing up with an addict for a mother, learning over time to take direct hits centre mass like they’re glancing

blows because there could always be something worse coming, and no one can afford to absorb a near-constant barrage of strikes at soul level.

“Nice try, Snow.” I sneer at him, using his surname because it puts distance between us, a distance I’m finding both harder and easier to traverse the more we know about each other. “But I ain’t some easily manipulated civilian. You’re gonna have to fine-tune your reverse-psychology bullshit skills if you want them to work on me.”

Leo makes an exasperated sound and gets to his feet. He’s back in my space within three long strides, completely unaware, for about the millionth time, how easily I could break him if I allowed that switch in my head to flip to red alert. He still doesn’t realise how hard I have to work to keep myself in check when I’m around him. No one at FISA, with the possible exception of Snow, understands the hair-trigger instincts that were trained into me all my life by Obsidian Inc. I sometimes wish Leo would get how difficult it is for me not to strike out at the smallest provocation, how against my nature it is to offer mercy when every impulse I possess screams for me to react violently to perceived threats.

“Jesus Christ, you dick, would you just listen to me?” Leo gets up in my face, unafraid and obstinate, trying to reach for me yet again even though all I ever do is back away and bite at his fingers, confused by his insistence on giving me chance after chance to prove myself worthy of his faith and friendship.

Leo's brows pull together in a sad frown that kick-starts a familiar pounding guilt in my temples. I never really let myself feel guilty about shit before him. I couldn't afford to indulge in such luxuries. Being Leo's partner has made me sloppy, has made me weaker, has given me reasons to want to be selfish.

"I'm trying to understand what the problem is so I can help you," Leo says, a note of pleading in his voice. "If there's some really bad history between you and Bullet, I'll tell North you shouldn't be forced to go on the mission. If he kicks up a fuss, I'll just go meet Bullet on my own—"

"No fucking way." I push myself off the wall, practically ramming into Leo with the force of my panicked anger. I take hold of Leo's arms and give him a hard shake, snarling at him. "I'd knock you out and lock you up in the most secure basement I could find before I let you meet that twisted bastard without me there to blow his brains out if he makes a single fucking move to touch you."

I don't want Titanus Bullet in the same room as Leo. Hell, I don't want them on the same continent. It's like Titanus would corrupt the very essence of who Leo is just by being close to him and sharing the same air.

I'm holding onto Leo too tightly. I can see it in how he's trying not to wince from the pressure of my fingers, digging into his biceps. It takes a lot, far too much, of my shaky mental willpower to calm down enough that I'm able to loosen my grip on him, going so far as to drop one hand from his arm entirely.

I don't want to loosen my grip; I certainly don't want to calm down or let him go. What I really want, if I'm being honest, is to hold on tighter and shake him again, harder this time, until his teeth clack and his bones creak.

I want him to *understand*, to get it into his thick skull that he shouldn't be letting FISA put him in this position. He shouldn't be risking his life for them, for anyone. He's too good for it. He's *worth more*. Let FISA send someone else to make a deal with that gun-selling motherfucker.

Leo shows yet more bad judgement by picking up the hand I dropped from his arm and putting it back there like he's trying to make some kind of statement with it, like it's a show of trust, like he's giving me permission to hurt him with my fear if that will make me feel better. It ignites a dark fury inside my head that is a legit danger to everyone around me: that Leo thinks anyone should have the right to hurt him for any reason at all. For him to think his own pain is worth giving someone else relief and reassurance.

"Jack." Leo looks at me, eyes darting all over my face, desperation in his voice. "Please, just tell me—"

I do the only thing I can think of to shut him up before I lose control of myself and all those hazardous emotions Leo has a knack for inspiring within me, a thing he's been able to do almost since the first time we met.

My lips close over his with a vicious snarl of want and rage, mixed together and diluted by the agony it elicits in my chest

to feel Leo the way I've wanted to feel him since we last had each other like this.

Leo surprises me by not hesitating to return the kiss, instead pushing forward and taking my mouth in an answering attack of tongue and lips and teeth. He bites at my bottom lip, swiping his tongue over it afterwards like an apology meant to soothe. I push my tongue into his mouth, sliding it along his and licking at the top of his mouth and the backs of his teeth.

“Been wantin’ this, Jack.” Leo pants hotly against my mouth, pushing his forehead to mine like he’s trying to bash some truth into my skull. “Been aching for your cock,” he admits with a low, throaty sound of embarrassment. “Fuck, never thought I’d miss being stretched out by anyone this much.”

My prick gets hard so fast it’s goddamn painful. With a primal rumbling sound, I take his mouth again, wanting to push past every boundary, to overwhelm his senses and fill him up with as much of me as it’s possible to get inside him.

From there, things only descend into further chaos.

It’s a mess, really, on both our parts. There’s no refinement or skill to it, the two of us grasping frantically at each other and pushing in hard, hands tugging and tearing at clothes in our urgent attempts to find the hot and scarred skin beneath. We take turns yanking one another’s jackets and T-shirts off, haphazardly discarding them.

Leo groans into my mouth when I work on the front of his black cargos, undoing his belt and yanking it out through the

loops, throwing it to the side before going back to undo the top button and pull down his zipper. I reach into his cargos and palm his hard cock through his underwear, squeezing with purpose and earning another groan of appreciation from my partner.

In retaliation, Leo knocks my hand away and starts pushing me backwards until I hit the wall. Then he drops swiftly to his knees and goes to work on my cargos, opening them up and pulling both the cargos and my underwear down around my thighs, releasing my hard prick from its confines.

Leo presses one hand to my stomach, presumably to keep me in place, the taut muscles rippling under his touch. His fingers ghost over the large scar on my abdomen, and I have to bite down on the gasp that threatens to come bursting out of my mouth. The scar has always been sensitive, but for some reason, it becomes a live nerve whenever Leo brushes the pads of his fingers across it.

“Want your cock down my throat,” Leo tells me, looking up with wide, pale-blue eyes and a slight curve to his lips, desire radiating off him like a sonic wave. “Gonna let me take it, Jack?”

Something in my stomach does a triple backflip, my prick twitching at the thought of pushing into Leo’s pretty mouth. I want it. Badly. I want to shove inside him and make him choke, want to use him until I’m half mad from how it feels and ready to burst, to empty myself in him, stake the kind of claim only sex allows.

In answer to Leo's question, I shove a hand into his dark hair, the strands so much softer than seems right given how roughly I'm touching him. He lets me drag his head forward until his mouth hovers just in front of my cock. I use my other hand to take hold of myself and rub the head of my cock over his lips, swiping pre-cum along his mouth.

Leo doesn't hesitate to lick out with his tongue and taste the pre-cum, making a low humming sound of approval.

"Open up for me, Leo." I smack the head of my cock against his lips again.

Leo obeys the command, opening up wide and taking my cock inside him when I simultaneously yank his head forward and push my hips out. I go in shallowly at first, testing the waters, filling his mouth with my cock again and again, controlling the depth and speed with my hand in his hair, letting Leo get used to the girth of me. I'm not a small man, and I know I can be a little overzealous when it comes to sex.

Most of my previous trysts were fast and hard encounters, no time to be careful and considerate to whoever I was with. I want things to be different with Leo, not only because we *do* have the time for it, but because he's *Leo*. It doesn't seem to me that Leo's had much attention paid to his comfort before, emotionally or physically. The only person who truly seems to give a shit about him is Damon, and I don't want to think about what Damon and Leo did together. It makes something hot and angry crackle inside my chest to imagine anyone else touching Leo like this.

I've never felt this before. Is it jealousy? It might be, which is a concern. I don't need or want to be jealous of other people. I don't want to feel out of control regarding my emotions. I'm afraid of what I'll do if those feelings get a stranglehold on my mind and make me do stupid shit in the name of keeping Leo to myself. Leo deserves more than that if nothing else.

As Leo stares up at me, trust and yearning in his eyes, I feel the sudden need to ruin it. To wipe the trust away, to stamp it out and kill it dead. It's visceral, how strongly I need to show Leo he should want more than this, so much more than me. I can't afford for him to start thinking that maybe I can be someone he should depend on in any other capacity than in our work as agents.

"Tap my thigh if you want me to stop," I tell Leo, voice rough and quiet, like a warning. "Because I'm gonna go in hard and mess you up a little."

Leo's brows furrow slightly at the change of tone or possibly something I'm broadcasting that he's picked up on, but he doesn't try to pull away.

I wait for another beat, just in case, then let myself loose on him.

My free hand pushes into his hair, fisting it in a tight hold. With both hands controlling the movements of his head, I keep him still and start rolling my hips, shoving my leaking prick in and out of his mouth, filling his throat and pausing there for a bit until Leo starts choking, either from the lack of air or the pressure put on his gag reflex.

One of Leo's hands goes to his erection, and he starts jacking himself, arm moving fast as I use him with a harshness I was previously trying to avoid.

I piston my hips, stretching Leo's lips so beautifully around me that it takes genuine effort not to come too quickly. I'm unable to hold in the sounds of pleasure Leo manages to rip out of me without even trying, just by looking up, keeping his eyes latched on mine like a vice, unwilling to let go for a second, to give me a moment of reprieve so I can regain my equilibrium. It's as if he knows I'm trying to distance myself, and he's fighting tooth and nail to stop that from being possible.

Leo groans around my cock, over and over again, like he's trying to make a point, not backing down and taking everything I give him so perfectly. His eyes start to water, hot salty tears gathering at the corners and spilling down over his flushed cheeks.

My orgasm builds in my spine and erupts out of me like lava from a volcano, intense pleasure and ferocious emotions ravaging through my gut and making me feel bowled over with the power of them.

Leo swallows my cum and keeps on licking and sucking at my spent cock when I pull it from his mouth, my hands loosening enough on his hair that he's able to lean forward and continue his attention.

Once I've collected my wits enough to think somewhat clearly, I notice Leo has yet to come. I make moves to rectify

this, grabbing onto his broad shoulders and giving him a strong shove, pushing him over onto his back.

Leo looks up at me in dazed surprise until I slam to my knees, snatching hold of his cargos and underwear to wrench them down and lean over to wrap my lips around his weeping cock. It takes a few hard sucks and a rough twist from my hand moving over his prick to make Leo come with a fierce shout.

Copying Leo, I swallow down his come before taking my mouth away from him and moving up to press a rough kiss to his mouth, mixing the tastes of us together.

Leo puts his arms around me and uses all his weight to roll us over until he's on top of me. He pulls away from the kiss with an admonishing bite to my bottom lip, and the heated look on his face as he scowls down at me makes me think I'm about to be told off.

“Jack, what the fuck?” Leo's voice is scratched and rasping, which is sexier than it should probably be given how pissed off he has every right to be.

“I'm sorry for being so rough with you,” I murmur, guilt beginning to coil in my chest.

Guilt is almost as foreign to me as jealousy. Two emotions that Leo seems to be inspiring in me with frightening ease and frequency.

Leo gives me an even angrier look then and gives my side a quick thump. It doesn't hurt, but the shock of it is enough to

catch me off guard.

“That’s not what you should be sorry for, you twat. I *liked* the roughness,” Leo tells me like I’m a small, stupid child. He lowers his head and presses a confusingly soft kiss to my jaw. His expression melts from enraged to sad, and it’s far more painful to think I’ve upset him in that way.

“Then what?” I ask, feeling out of my depth and weirdly scared, unsure if I want to know the answer.

Leo lets out a tired sigh and regards me for a moment, like he’s trying to see into my head and understand the hieroglyphics scraped into the walls of it.

“You don’t need to protect me like that, Jack. I’m not afraid you’ll hurt me.” He sounds so sure, so convinced of his belief in me. “You *wouldn’t*.”

It’s clear to me that Leo isn’t just talking about how I could hurt him physically. He means the other stuff too.

“I might. I could let you down. I’ve done it before.” With Dan. He meant everything to me, but I still failed to protect him.

I’d rather slit my own throat than let that happen again.

Leo offers me a kind, almost fond, smile. I want to take a mental picture of it and keep it folded away in my mind forever. No one has looked at me like that since my mum. My memories of her are few, but I *do* remember. I remember that she loved me, that she thought I mattered, that I was special to her. I was special to Dan, too, although we could never afford

to treat each other with the same gentleness. Now they're both gone, and I'm here with a good man who I'm terrified of losing, let alone being the cause of that loss.

"I can handle myself," Leo tells me, and it's both a truth and a lie. He presses another kiss to my jaw, and in response, I curl around him, holding him close and safe against me. His eyes shine with that same golden light of emotion, pleased by the gesture. "You won't break me," he says, quiet and sure.

"You won't let me?" I ask with honest hope.

That sadness returns to his face, and I want to banish it immediately.

Leo lowers himself back down to take my mouth in a kiss that lasts and lasts and lasts. He kisses me until my mind is pleasantly buzzing, and my mouth feels as used as his throat probably does.

Leo pulls away to speak against my lips, whispering like he's making a promise to both of us. "Jack, come on. *You* won't let you."

Hope fizzles and dies, scorched from existence by the lightning power of Leo's reckless faith, ashy remains blown away with the wind.

Chapter Two

Leo

We pretend to sleep for a couple of hours before getting up to head for the airport. It takes a little over an hour from our FISA safe house. Jack is confusingly subdued after last night, drawing back into himself like a turtle retreating to the safety of his protective shell. I'm unwilling to poke at him any more than I already have, afraid we'll just end up fighting or fucking, neither of which would be very helpful to our latest mission.

I feel like all we've done for the last month is fail. Every lead we've chased down has led to nothing but near misses and dead ends. Jack doesn't think Ian Stone will kill his son, because he always asked for Rohan to be retrieved alive. But there's a gulf of difference between alive and safe, a lot of space for terror and despair to seep in and spread like an infection.

I shouldn't have pushed Jack so hard about Titanus Bullet. He clearly didn't want to talk about whatever the real issue is between him and the infamous arms dealer. But for some reason, I felt the need to dig my heels in and demand answers he wasn't ready to give.

As much as I want to respect Jack's right to his secrets, I'm also aware of how precarious our situation is. One wrong move could lead to disaster. I'm afraid if we go into this new mission having only shared half the information between us, it might wind up the same as all our other ones. Just another big "X" to mark on a report form, another tick of the clock, the countdown on Rohan's fate.

Jack seems to think it's a matter of trusting him, but it isn't. Do I believe Jack will have my back no matter what? Yes, absolutely. Do I trust him not to withhold vital intel? No. If he thinks my knowing about it will only cause a hassle, he'll lie right to my face. If anything, I'd say it's Jack who doesn't trust me to have his back. He still sees me as vulnerable, and I suppose, in comparison to him, I am. But that doesn't make me useless or weak. I don't need his protection, certainly not to this degree, and not at the expense of our missions.

We get to the airport a few hours before our flight is scheduled to take off, but it takes at least an hour to get through security. We're held up because of our weapons, having to provide our FISA credentials to scores of people and answer a hundred questions with the same "it's classified" style response.

Jack becomes visibly agitated the more time we spend with airport security. I would have suggested just leaving our guns at the safe house, as it's likely we could have gotten new ones from North when we touched down in Senjatas. But I knew Jack would refuse to be parted with his precious Siggy, which incidentally, he treats more like a trusted partner than he does me. Probably sees it as more reliable in the killing people department, which I suppose is true. Guns can't hesitate.

Once we're released from the avid attention of airport security, we only have a little time to grab some food before we head to our gate and load onto the flight.

Faced with hours on a plane with Jack, trapped in awkward silence, I finally decide it's worth prodding at the Do Not Disturb barrier Jack has erected in my honour. I turn to him from my seat nearest the plane window. Jack always insists on taking the aisle seat. He doesn't like to be pinned in, especially as we're already trapped on a massive tin can flying through the air.

"Want to hear a funny story?" I ask.

Jack regards me warily. "Depends, will I be laughing with you or at you?"

Ignoring the acerbic bite to his tone, I go on as if he eagerly agreed to participate in today's sharing circle.

"Okay, here's the opening gambit. Once upon a time, my aunt Anabelle came to me for relationship advice."

Jack pulls a face, wrinkling his nose like he smells something horrid in the air. He glances off to the side as if needing a moment to process.

"I don't know what's more disturbing about that, the idea Snow has a love life of any description, or that she would involve you, the self-proclaimed romance failure. I mean"—he turns back to me, his troubled look deepening—"that's a choice."

"Hey, my romances don't simply *fail!*" I proclaim, offended by the suggestion. "They crash and burn like planes flying into a mountain."

Jack's lips curve up on one side, and he gives a short nod of approval. "Nice metaphor."

"Felt it was appropriate," I reply amiably, suppressing a smirk at having drawn him into a conversation. Success!

Jack offers one of his softer smiles, mouth curling at both corners, a mix of fondness and reluctant amusement. The sight of it makes my heart give an extra-painful thud behind my ribs.

I shouldn't have slept with Jack last night. It was a mistake to have sex that first time, a mistake we both acknowledged as such before it happened. I told myself in the following weeks that our only option was to minimise the damage by making sure it was an isolated fuckup. This second incident was downright reckless of us both. It's almost certainly kick-started our inevitable downward spiral as partners, let alone friends, which is what I hoped we were genuinely becoming.

Sex doesn't have to mess things up between mates; Damon and I are proof of that, but things with Jack are so much more complex than they were with Damon. I knew right from the off what my feelings were when we slept together. With Jack, I have no fucking clue. It's so messy between us already, and we've only known each other a handful of months. What's going to happen if we keep doing this shit, complicating everything, giving in to this *whatever-it-is* neither of us wants to admit exists between us?

Something changed in the middle there, too, last night. He was making his best effort to be gentle, or at least Jack's

version of gentle, at first. But then it was like a switch got flipped in his head, and he tried to initiate a very specific kind of self-destruct sequence. I could have predicted it happening, but somehow, I still found myself surprised by the vehemence with which he dedicated himself to radicalisation. He took me harder than he should've, bashed up against my limits with all the power and force of an ice hockey player getting shoved into the boards by his long-standing nemesis.

I'm weak for him. Last night proved that if nothing else. I let Jack push me around, let him shove me to my knees and choke me with his thick cock like that's what I was *there* for. It's like he was trying to punish me for making him want me, which was startling and somewhat familiar. I remember that feeling from being one of the few out teenagers in my school and dealing with shit from the closeted queer people who got jumpy and frightened and aggressive when I made them realise how much *like me* they were.

Coming out as bisexual as a teen was a nightmare, honestly. It confused people. People, if you're not aware, do not like being confused. It makes them afraid and frustrated, which in turn causes them to act like dickheads.

I spent a great deal of my teenage life annoyed or pissed off at the arseholes surrounding me. Got kicked out of one of my schools for fighting with *another out queer kid* when he loudly proclaimed to me that my sexuality was invalid because I got "caught" kissing a girl. Some people do not know what the words they use mean, and I'm getting pretty fucking sick of it, to be real with you.

Things still aren't that great now I'm an adult either. People remain confused, somehow, and not just the cis-straight lot either. The LGBTQI+ community needs to get their act together, maybe, because I've gotten just as much, if not more shit, from gay people. People either think I'm pretending to be gay or pretending to be straight because, you know, *bisexual people don't exist*, which is so obviously ridiculous I can't even deal with it most of the time.

Of course, it's not the same thing with Jack as it was with the closet cases I dealt with in school. He isn't afraid of people thinking he's queer. I don't think Jack has the capacity or social exposure to give a flying-fuck biscuit about something like that. He *is* scared, though. He's scared of how I make him feel, which is similar enough. It comes from the same place: being afraid of yourself, of your lack of control over your own body and emotions.

I recognised his desperation to push me away, to make me angry or hurt, to force me to shove back and hate him, like he seems determined everyone should.

My only viable recourse was to hold firm and show him I won't be so easily frightened off, to make it crystal clear to him that a bit of rough sex isn't going to do shit. I *liked* the sex. It was as explosive and intense as our first encounter. The sex itself wasn't the problem. Jack's reason for driving us to that edge was what I took issue with.

I'm willing to take a lot from Jack, both physically and emotionally; I've prepared myself for a struggle, for an uphill

battle that might never even out completely.

If he needs time to get his head around the fact I'm in this for the long haul, to fully compute he's important to me, and I won't be giving him up as my partner unless he flat out tells me he wants someone else, I'll give it to him. I would have to let go if he asked me to, though. It's not in me to ignore what he wants, not after all the personal agency he's had taken from him in his life. But I'd be doing it under very loud and expressive protest.

"Go on, then," Jack prompts, offering me a surprisingly tolerant look. "Regale me with the campfire horror story that I'm sure Director Snow coming to you for romantic advice is bound to be." He slumps in his seat a little and crosses his impressively muscled arms, his posture suggesting he's resigned himself to whatever nonsense is about to come down the line and smack him in the face at full speed.

"Right, well," I begin with enough enthusiasm to probably add fuel to the fire of Jack's belief that he's going to regret not jumping from the plane to escape this. "I was thirteen years old and—"

Jack makes a choked noise of horror. "Oh, my fuck, this just got worse; how is that *possible*—"

I go on, undaunted by Jack's apparent avid devotion to overreacting. "Anabelle fancied someone from the psych department."

Jack makes another sound like a wronged ostrich. "Jesus Christ, of *course*, she did."

“She was afraid to ask them out because she thought it might put the other person in an awkward position due to them technically working under her.”

I play the memory out inside my head, remembering how uncharacteristically off-balance Anabelle had seemed that day. I’d never seen her care so much about something personal.

Jack pinches the bridge of his nose and lets out a breath, like he’s bracing himself to be dunked underwater for a prolonged amount of time. “I mean, we all know Snow would be the top in any relationship—”

I didn’t want to know how his sentence was going to end, so I interrupt. This is *my* story, goddamn it. “So she asked me if I thought it was ethically acceptable to fire someone just so you could ask them out.”

Jack is shaking his head now, eyes a little wide and lost. He looks haunted. “I am fucking terrified right now; what the fuck, you and Snow are insane, I was raised in a *lab*, and even I know the answer to that question is—”

“I told her it might be okay if she asked the other person first, to see if they’d be willing to be fired so they could date her.” I’d been pretty excited about it at the time; the idea of my aunt being romantically involved with someone was fascinating. I wanted to see it happening out in the wild.

“I am riveted, Leo,” Jack tells me, voice so dry it practically cracks the compact air of the aeroplane. “*Riveted*. It’s official. How the *hell* does this story end?”

“Anabelle followed my advice,” I say proudly. It remains, to this day, one of my greatest accomplishments.

“Mistake number two has been identified,” Jacks scoffs, frowning to himself. “The first was asking a thirteen-year-old for advice about anything ever.” He gives me a cautious look, like he thinks there’s going to be a plot twist he won’t enjoy. “What happened?”

I shrug. “Anabelle and Green had a massive fight, and then I think they had sex in her office.” My aunt was a bit sketchy on the finer details. “They danced around each other for ages before getting together for real.”

“Oh, well, that didn’t go exactly how I ... hold on a minute!” Jack blinks at me in genuine shock. “Did you say ‘Green’? Director Snow and Agent *Green* are together?”

“They’re married,” I confirm, much to Jack’s growing dismay.

“Well,” he mutters faintly, looking up at the ceiling like he’ll get some help from up there, “now I hope this plane does crash, so I won’t have to figure out how to deal with the *terrifying* piece of information you just forced upon me.”

“Their wedding was on a Greek Island,” I tell him, smiling to myself. Their wedding is one of the few family-friendly memories I have. Anabelle actually laughed like three whole times. “Very *Mamma Mia*. Green made her own bouquet. It was pretty.”

Jack absorbs this like I'm telling him the details of a complicated mission strategy. "Did she get to throw it and hit someone in the face?" he asks like he's hopeful the answer is yes, like he thinks it would be a good thing. And not in an "I enjoy violence" kind of way, but genuinely, as if that would be the intended outcome of throwing a bouquet.

"Okay." I take a second to process the insanity Jack is forcing me to come to terms with. "That's not what the tradition of throwing the bouquet is for." I squint at him. "I'm worried because of how you said that, that you think it is."

"You're not meant to hit someone in the face?" Jack looks so sincerely perplexed it's almost too real to be funny.

"No," I exclaim, voice pitching a little shrill, "you actual maniac!"

Jack very clearly does not believe me about this, because his next question comes out as a challenge. "Then why would you do it?"

Unfortunately, it is a challenge I am ill-prepared to meet. "I will admit, right off the bat, I don't know the full history behind why people throw bouquets at weddings." I hold up my hands at Jack's victorious reaction to my admission. "But I'm certain it's not meant to be an act of violence."

Jack still seems dubious but appears willing to let it go for now. I think maybe we're done with this. I am very wrong.

"My brother killed someone with flowers once," Jack says, the fucking human roller coaster, throwing me for another

triple loop.

I stare at the lunatic sitting beside me, making it obvious from my expression how much I want this conversation to end here. Just in case he doesn't get it, I do as the cartoons taught me and *use my words*. "There's not a single part of me that either disbelieves or wants to know more about what you just said."

Jack flagrantly ignores his right to remain silent and ruins my day just a little bit more. "He used a bunch of sunflowers to knock someone off a motorcycle by whacking them in the face as they rode by."

"And you told me anyway." I give him the full might and magnitude of my dissatisfaction via intense pug face. "Great, thanks, I hate it."

"Don't feel bad for him." Jack wrinkles his nose in mirrored disdain. "He was a stupid motherfucker. Didn't wear a helmet. Wanted to protect his hair or something."

His hair? Blimey. Beauty is pain, and fabulousness is death via flora, I guess.

"Wow, there's an advert for road safety," I muse, putting on a mocking rendition of a safety advert voice-over. "Wear a helmet, bellends, or you'll get smashed in the face by a sunflower-wielding assassin and die."

"Hmm," Jack muses, pretending to consider the idea, his brows creasing together. His expression seems to darken, his

voice coming out acerbic and self-mocking when he says, “I could play my brother in the reenactment for it.”

I’m always surprised when Jack mentions his brother, especially when he does it so casually. That’s twice now in a short amount of time. He must be thinking of him. Then again, I have the sneaking suspicion Jack thinks about his brother on a near-constant basis. After only caring about one person for so many years, it’s hard to imagine that kind of relationship not becoming somewhat twisted and unhealthily co-dependent, with or without the dire circumstances Jack and Dan were forced into.

“Next stop Hollywood,” I needle in an attempt to banish the shadows battling for dominance on Jack’s face. “Mug like yours? You’d be a *star*.”

Jack humours me, as he often does. “I could do all my own stunts.”

I make a humming sound of agreement. “Change your name to Chris, and you might even get to be a fake superhero one day.”

Jack pulls the great grandfather of all scowls, his shoulders seeming to hunch instinctively at the “S” word. He’s got a real prejudice against supers, it turns out, which is at once hilarious and concerning to me. Jack gets growly every time anyone even mentions the vigilantes running around in the world, as if their very existence offends him. He’s the only person I’ve met who can read an article by the infamously anti-super journalist Diane Foxley and not only resist the urge to call her a bint but

also say things like, “*Well, she makes some good points. We are dangerous.*”

“If anyone tries to turn me into a real superhero,” Jack rumbles out furiously, “no shit, I’m gonna get worked up about it. Just letting you know, so you can run inference or something, ‘cause I know you like to do that. I don’t give a fuck, though. I ain’t got no sense of propriety, I’ll fuckin’ bite people. You know that about me.”

“Yeah,” I respond sardonically, “since I’m not a goldfish, I do remember the Agent Lane incident of two weeks ago.”

It would be hard to bloody forget after all the fuss that was made. Anabelle and North tore me a new one for not stopping Jack from actively engaging with the autonomy they gave him to stamp out Agent Lane.

“He was a real bitch about it for no reason,” Jack complains. He’s about two facial tics away from pouting.

“*No reason?*” I raise both my eyebrows at him, incredulous.

Jack gives me an obstinate look, one I’ve become very familiar with, and defends himself in the shoddiest way possible. “He was the one who challenged me to a fight in the gym.”

It wasn’t meant to be a fight, though. It was meant to be a sparring match. Neither of them adhered to the rules, however, and so it just ended up being a very one-sided brawl. I don’t know what Agent Lane expected, going up against a literal superhuman, let alone one like Jack, who’s spent his entire life

training to kill people with frightening proficiency. It was a PG massacre. Absolute carnage in the form of two idiots not knowing when to walk the hell away from a terrible idea.

“You didn’t need to *lead* with the biting,” I point out for about the hundredth time since it happened. “Could have tuned him up a little first, at least. Had a good time batting him around, maybe.”

Jack makes a face like he’s just sucked on a lemon, displeasure with the idea clear in his expression although not for the reason you might think.

“I only play fight with my friends,” he proclaims.

“So ... me?” I give him a wry smile, reluctantly amused.

Jack snorts, throwing me a quick look of derision. “Bold of you to assume we’re friends.”

I suck in a sharp breath and clutch at my chest, feigning hurt. “Many apologies; I didn’t mean to come on so strong.”

“Yeah, well.” Jack flickers a glance down at my lap and then back up to my face again. “You need to get your playboy tendencies under control. I didn’t sign up to be the PA to your dick.”

Hilarious, considering how up close and personal our cocks were only hours ago.

“You’d make a wonderful PA,” I insist. “Your organisational skills are an inspiration. It’d be a lucky dick who got you to answer its calls.”

As if on cue, a flight attendant comes around with her cart and offers us both a drink. The badge on her blazer proclaims her to be named “Annie.” She’s tall and blonde with long legs and a winning smile, which she utilises to its fullest potential, aiming it at both of us with the energy and fixed determination of a person who works a stressful, customer-facing job.

I offer her a similar standard of mouth gymnastics, matching her enthusiastic tooth display for enthusiastic tooth display.

“Thank God you’re here, Annie,” I say, keeping my voice light and droll. “I’ll take your plane’s finest teeny-tiny can of Coke. No need to give me a plastic cup; I’m the planet’s trusted ally.”

A new interest brightens Annie’s lovely brown eyes as she looks me over in open appraisal, her gaze trailing over my body, then back up to my face. She gets me out a red-and-white can, placing it in my open hand, lingering before she pulls back and offers me a more sincere smile. “Anything else I can get you, sir?” she asks, raising her eyebrows suggestively, and I can tell the cheesy line is mostly a joke from the mirth underlying her tone. But it’s also clear that if I tried a little, said the right things, and hiked up the charm, I could probably turn that joke into a freely given phone number.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch Jack giving me one of his exasperated scowls. It’s a good one. Very intimidating. To just about anyone but me.

I let my smile take on a more roguish tilt and lean partially over Jack to cone a hand next to my mouth and speak with Annie conspiratorially. Annie seems amused by the action and angles her body towards me as well. Jack's irritation is palpable, which just makes it even more worth doing.

“If you could get my moody partner a handful of chocolate bars, that would be great. It doesn't matter what kind. He inhales his food without chewing. You know, like only homeless children from Dickensian novels do.”

I've found over the last month that Jack has a very strong sweet tooth. He'd probably eat nothing but vending-machine crap if his mutated physiology allowed it. Unfortunately for him, Jack has to eat a huge amount of protein and food containing other necessary vitamins to keep his body functioning properly.

Annie's attention catches on the word “partner,” an incorrect realisation unfurling in her mind. She nods, shooting Jack a slightly apologetic smile as she makes a show of moving away from me. I don't fact-check her new summation of my relationship with Jack, both because the idea of him being my official person is oddly comforting, and because I'm afraid I'll laugh hysterically if I try to explain what our actual relationship status is.

“Of course, no problem,” Annie agrees, quick to try and make up for her perceived mistake, reaching into her cart to open a drawer filled with chocolate bars. She grabs a fistful and offers them to me.

I take the chocolate and drop them with a loud clatter onto Jack's tray, giving him my widest grin as if in triumph and leaning back in my seat. Jack looks at me with slightly narrowed eyes, not a single expression of gratitude in sight.

"Thank you very much," I say to Annie because I'm *polite*. "My partner is grateful too; he's just morally opposed to showing it."

Jack makes an annoyed huffing sound but doesn't try to contradict me, because he knows I'd be more than willing to die on that hill. I'm both British and upper class, which means I was brought up to view rudeness as a mortal sin that one would rather cut their own arm off than commit.

Jack's too busy opening up a chocolate bar and shoving the entire thing into his mouth like a beast to care much about my besmirchment of his grumpy character anyway.

"You gonna tell me he was raised in a barn?" Annie asks, looking mildly amused by the whole thing, which is sweet and slightly unwise of her.

"Nah." I give my new plane friend another brandishing of teeth, matching her wry tone. "It was an evil lab."

Annie lets out a short tinkle of laughter at what she thinks is a ridiculous response. She offers me one last genuine smile before moving away to serve someone else.

In a surprising show of tact, Jack lets Annie get far enough away that she won't hear him when he starts up with the

accusations, “What did I say about getting that dick under control?”

He’s four chocolate bars deep in his pile of treats already, the empty wrappers dropped carelessly into his lap. He still has quite a haul left on the tray. I won’t dare try and take one, though. Last time I attempted a small-time dairy-milk heist, he practically broke my wrist slapping my hand away.

“If I make a joke about snakes on a plane, will you still love me tomorrow?” I croon at Jack, blinking at him rapidly with the puppy eyes I know piss him off.

Jack appears severely unimpressed by this, lips flattened out into a harsh line and eyes filled with scorn. “Good chance you won’t get to see tomorrow if you keep batting your eyes at me like a demented camel and flirting with pretty flight attendants.”

I give him an arch look in return. “Okay, now you’re being dramatic. There’s only been one flight attendant, and she thinks we’re boyfriends now. I’m sure she’ll tell all the other flight attendants, so they’ll know not to offer me drinks or smile at me or do any other fiendish things deemed unacceptable by you.”

Jack glowers at the word “boyfriend,” which amuses me greatly. He seems more unsettled than annoyed, though, like he doesn’t mind being called my boyfriend, so much as he takes umbrage with being called a “boyfriend” at all.

It’s a sharp reminder that Jack has likely never been in any romantic relationship other than the fake ones OI would have

pushed him into playing the part for. He wouldn't have grown up thinking he could have a future with anyone he fell in love with. He wouldn't have grown up watching Disney films and romcoms filled with happily ever afters; he wouldn't have thought maybe, he could have some better, imperfect version of that one day.

I'm not exactly a fairy-tale prince myself, but at least I know what it feels like to be real with another person, to want more and secretly hope for everything we're all meant to think only happens in stories.

There's a chance Jack might not be interested in romantic relationships, might have never been, regardless of how he spent the first two decades of his life. I mean, aro people exist. It's also a thing to not want to be in long-term relationships for perfectly good, healthy reasons.

But somehow, with what I know about Jack now, I can't help but imagine having met him under different circumstances. If there were no OI or Liquid Onyx. If Jack were just a man with a bad attitude and lovely pale-green eyes and killer kissing skills. A man with hopes and wants that might match up with my own.

"You *flirted*," Jack insists, abruptly cutting my musings off at the pass.

"Yes." I gesture at his dragon pile of chocolate gold. "But only to procure *you* all the sugar your black little heart desires."

Jack makes a show out of looking shocked by my admission, widening his eyes and giving a little huff of dismay.

“You abused poor Annie’s good nature in my name?” He gives his head a slow, judgmental shake. “Wow, Snow. We might make a government shill out of you yet.”

“*Mean.*” I gasp sarcastically, pretending to fall back in my seat, elbow bumping up against the plane window and probably startling the people behind us. “You’re so *mean.*”

“You act like a manipulative little slag.” Jack shrugs uncaringly. “You get what you deserve.”

He uses such a prim tone of voice, it kicks a loud bark of laughter out of me. I have to press my lips together so I won’t further disrupt the people around us with peals of childish snickering.

“Can I have a chocolate bar, partner?” I ask, already reaching to take one.

I should know better than that by now.

Jack all but karate chops my grasping hand in rebuke. “Fuck off, no.” He growls at me like a grizzly bear protecting his hard-earned collection of fish. “Go swindle more out of your mile-high-club girlfriend.” He jerks his chin in Annie’s direction.

Supremely offended, holding my hand to my chest protectively, I make to get up to do just that. “Alright, Kitty, I will. Be back in a sec ... maybe.” I waggle my eyebrows at him, teasing.

Jack falls for it like I knew he would, reacting with his superhuman reflexes to grab hold of my jacket and yank me back down into my seat. Once I'm safely neutralised and half sprawled in my chair, he picks up a chocolate bar and slaps it into my chest.

“There. Leave Annie alone,” Jack bites out at me. “She doesn't get paid enough to deal with you.” He releases a contemptuous scoff. “Neither do I, quite frankly, but that can't be helped.”

I catch the chocolate bar before it falls into my lap and open it up with quick hands, unwilling to risk my good fortune. Jack does not like to share the few indulgences he seems to have developed over the years. It's understandable behaviour for him given everything he had to deal with when OI had him, but sometimes his vehemence towards such seemingly small things still catches me off guard.

I offered to give him a haircut the other day when he kept getting annoyed with his fringe and scrubbing it back in obvious irritation, thinking maybe he would prefer it short, like it was when we first met. But Jack practically snarled at me to piss off and not come near his hair with a blade unless I wanted that very same blade to be shoved up my arse. He wasn't joking either. True fury exploded across his face like fireworks, along with more than a few sparks of fear.

His viscerally hostile reaction made it clear he's sensitive about having his hair cut for whatever reason, and there have been loads of shit like that I've had to learn to be careful about

over the last month. When it comes to dealing with my temperamental, and undeniably traumatised, partner, there's so much going on beneath the surface that I don't know the origin of.

“You get *paid*?” I ask in mock scepticism. “With what? Freedom miles? Every mission earns you a day outside in the ... well, not the sun if we're home, but there's at least unfiltered oxygen and trees and shit.”

“Nope. Your aunt agreed to hand over virtual doubloons from the British-government vault,” Jack replies smugly whilst biting chunks out of a defenceless chocolate bar. “I've got a bank account and everything.”

I point at my face with one index finger and pull a suitably bland expression, letting sarcasm seep into my voice. “Shook.” Then I ask with renewed interest, “Does this mean you'll start paying for your own treats?”

Jack looks immediately irate at this. He picks up yet another chocolate bar and waves it in front of my face. “You didn't pay for these!”

“Yeah.” I make to grab at the chocolate bar, but Jack yanks it away at the last minute, narrowing his eyes at me like I just attempted to commit an indisputably heinous act. “But I did pay for all those packs of sweets and chocolate bars you consumed in the last month,” I remind him.

Jack huffs like he thinks I'm being purposefully difficult. “That's only because you wouldn't let me steal like I wanted to.”

“You can’t just pick the locks of vending machines,” I chastise him. “It’s unethical. Think of the poor Fortune 500 companies who would lose out on twenty pounds worth of confectionery. Do that enough times, and they’ll go bust. No more Milky Ways for the children’s lunch boxes.”

“Good,” Jack says, bluntly defiant. “Childhood obesity in England is at an all-time high. I’ll take my knighthood in the post for my service to our country.”

I snort out a laugh, eyeing Jack with amusement. “As a former fat kid,” I say drolly, pressing a hand to my heart, “how dare you.”

Jack latches on with more interest than I expected. “You were fat?” He looks me over thoughtfully, like he’s trying to imagine it.

I feel suddenly self-conscious, my body instinctively scrunching back in my seat and folding in on itself, an old habit I thought had vanished with age and the slow but steady restoration of my self-esteem. Back when I was a child, then a teenager, I would attempt to make myself seem smaller and therefore less visible. This is an impossible feat these days. With my height and muscle mass, no amount of physical contortion will make me look anything other than the large man I’ve grown into.

Jack notices my tactical retreat; he’d be hard-pressed to miss it with how unsubtle the knee-jerk reaction was, but he does me the favour of not commenting on it out loud.

“Yeah,” I answer belatedly, wincing at the inherent-sounding weakness of my voice. “Pretty much all through my adolescence.”

Jack contemplates that for a handful of seconds before he draws some kind of conclusion and hits me with another question. “Your mum a bitch to you about it?”

I blink at him, surprised although I probably shouldn’t be. He did get a front-row seat to what she can be like when she locked herself in Teddy’s bathroom, and he came with me to get her.

“What makes you ask that?”

Jack gives a half shrug. “She just seems like the type who would.”

“She was.” I try not to sound too bitter even though Jack is unlikely to care either way. “Made me feel kind of shitty about myself back then,” I admit, internally cringing at how stupid it must seem to Jack after everything he went through as a child.

“Back then?” Jack makes a low sound of incredulity, looking at me with startlingly angry green eyes. “Generous. She doesn’t exactly make you feel great now, does she?”

“Nah,” I concede, forcing a smile so I can pretend I’m not as uncomfortable as I am to be discussing this. “But I care less these days, so that’s something, I guess.”

Jack stares at me then, all blatant and calculating, like he’s trying to figure out the best way to approach something. I’m immediately nervous about what that something could be.

Knowing Jack, it will include violence or crime or violent crime.

“How attached are you to your mum exactly?”

Ding, ding, we have a winner.

I let out a tired sigh. “Don’t assassinate my mum, Jack.”

“Well, if you’re not going to go for the most obvious solution,” Jack grumbles, clearly irritated that his murder idea has not been well received by the focus group.

“Killing people isn’t ever a *solution*,” I reprimand him, exasperated. “It’s a last resort.”

Jack looks at me like he thinks I’m a very thick child and mutters, “You’re only saying that because you haven’t met enough evil bastards. We’re on our way to meet one right now. So many people would be better off with that fucker dead; you have no idea.”

He seems to genuinely mean that. Like he’s the one person who believes in global warming, and he’s trying to save the polar bears single-handed.

“Okay.” I try not to sound annoyed, but it’s difficult when he’s so clearly hiding things from me. “Can you just tell me what the deal is with you and him?”

“No. Stop asking.” Jack sounds more serious than usual, his tone holding a warning edge that threatens to slice in deep at the barest of touches.

There are a million arguments, good logical ones, waiting in the wings to twist my tongue. But I'm certain all that will lead to is another big fight and Jack becoming even more closed off than he is on the regular. I can't have that. We need to work together on this if we're going to have any chance of succeeding. I refuse to let this mission be compromised by our inability to function as a team. I'll just have to hope Jack will eventually trust me enough to share his fears about Bullet before it's too late, and we're about ten seconds away from death. I'd rather not die as a result of romcom-level miscommunication.

I hold both my hands up, signalling that I'm backing off and keeping my mouth firmly closed.

Jack eyes me suspiciously for a few more seconds, in obvious disbelief over my apparent choice to mind my own business, before he seems to accept my show of deference and settles back in his seat. His shoulders relax by a few minuscule notches.

We spend the rest of the flight in uneasy silence, neither of us quite willing to look the other in the eye.

Chapter Three

Jack

Stepping off the plane in Senjatas, we get hit by a blast of wet heat. My Liquid Onyx blood prevents me from feeling the effects of weather changes quite as dramatically as a normal person, but even so, the heat is oppressive and promises to make life unpleasant in a short amount of time.

Leo starts shifting around when we're waiting in the queue to pick up our bags and strips his black jacket off within fifteen minutes. There's already a patch of sweat soaking through his white T-shirt from his lower back, beads having formed along the pale skin of his neck as well. I give it another half an hour before his black hair is damp and curling up into little kinks like I've seen it do on multiple occasions during previous missions to obnoxiously hot places.

We get through security with less effort on this end, which isn't a surprise. Leo only has to flash his credentials once before they're practically waving us through with an air of impatience. One of the reasons Bullet set up his home base here is because the rules are laxer regarding weapons being brought in and out.

As promised, North is waiting for us outside the front entrance of the airport, leaning against a large black truck that looks more suited to traversing a jungle than speeding down an open road.

Once we spot each other, North doesn't wait to greet us, instead climbing into the driver's seat of the truck and waiting for us to take the obvious initiative of following his lead.

Leo gets into the front passenger seat whilst I jump into the back with our bags.

North barely waits for our respective doors to close before he sets off, taking us away from the small airport and out onto the main road. The road is very wide and appears freshly tarmacked, bracketed on either side by jungle and related fauna, like someone cut a path right through a monstrous habitat. It's more than likely someone did just that.

"Flight okay?" North asks when it seems like the quiet has stretched on too long. He doesn't sound like he gives half a shit, but politeness dictates pointless questions followed by equally pointless answers.

"Long," Leo answers with a heavy sigh, assuming the question was for him, which it probably was.

Not bothering with the same pleasantries, I lean forward to speak to North, cutting through the bullshit.

"When is the meet set for?"

North takes my blunt demand for information in stride, used to it by now. He doesn't bristle like an OI handler would have done, the show of disrespect rolling off North like rainwater. He looks at me in his rearview mirror, dark eyes watching me impassively.

"In a few hours," North answers. "Enough time for you to have something to eat or rest up a bit at our safe house, regroup, then head out to make the exchange at Bullet's home."

“You mean we’re meeting at his stronghold?” I sneer. “His fucking modern-day castle?”

North sighs. “Yes, unfortunately.”

“I’m guessing he shot down the idea of meeting on neutral ground, then?” I snort.

“Again, unfortunately, yes.” North sounds immensely agitated. “It’s his place or nothing.”

“Fuck me.”

“For once, Agent Roth, I share your sentiments entirely,” North admits. “I’ll be honest with you both. I don’t like this. I think we’re taking a huge risk. But the mission has been cleared, and we’re going to do everything we can to make sure it runs smoothly.”

His attempt at reassurance is pathetic and annoying to me. It’s not like it matters.

“North, I want you to hear me when I tell you I am very reassured right now,” I exclaim sardonically. “Knowing you’ll be there waiting in the wings, like our personal guardian angel, means the world to me. And when Bullet decides to fuck with us, and everyone winds up dead because of it, I don’t want you to feel bad about it. Seriously. Don’t blame yourself. Blame everyone else. That’s what I do when I make mistakes that get people dead. Accepting responsibility is for losers and superheroes.”

Guilt is for real people.

Dan's voice has been getting conspicuously louder as of late. I thought after a certain amount of time, it would begin to fade, and I'd eventually be left alone inside my mind just like I have been in every other way. But it seems the further from him and the life we shared I go, the more his memory reinforces itself. It's as if some part of me is trying desperately not to forget my brother by constantly replaying everything he ever said to me and everything we ever did together.

If so, it's a very stupid reaction on my brain's part, not to mention frustrating. I don't need to be bombarded by memories to remember my twin. He's all I can see whenever I catch sight of my reflection. I've taken to avoiding reflective surfaces in some vain attempt not to feel gut punched each time I'm forced to acknowledge that's the only way I'll ever see myself mirrored back at me again.

North, as is typical, doesn't respond to my verbal attack and keeps his attention on the road ahead.

Leo, however, turns in his seat to give me a speculative look. He doesn't seem annoyed by my unhelpful outburst. If anything, he's looking at me with genuine concern, which is something I've gotten used to seeing from him. I think he worries about me even more than he worries about Rohan, the very kidnapped and in-danger point of this mission. On the surface, that might seem ridiculous, but. He and I know the truth. Leo has every reason to worry about the cracked-out partner who's keeping mission-relevant secrets from him, the partner who got way too rough with him last night because of his high-key intimacy issues.

It's no big surprise to me I have a problem exchanging softness with another person. I haven't had anyone treat me with anything other than cold indifference or violence most of my life. Even with Dan, our interactions were fuelled by a desperation to hold onto something that belonged to us and not them. Our touches weren't gentle; they were grasping and frantic and painful in their own way. There was never enough of it, in any case. Neither of us knew how to treat a person we cared about, especially with any semblance of kindness. Kindness was weakness, and weakness was one thing we could not afford to display too openly or too often.

I can't even say for sure if I loved my brother how you're supposed to love someone. I don't know if I'll ever understand how to love anyone else in a different way. It seems impossible to me that such a strong and wild emotion could be born from anything other than shared pain and horror for something like me.

Leo doesn't say anything although the question his eyes are asking is astonishingly clear: *Are you alright?*

It takes quite a lot of will on my part not to outright laugh in his face in response.

I don't answer out loud, giving a non-verbal one instead by flipping him off and then pointedly turning away to look through my nearest window, committed to appearing extremely interested in the whole lot of nothing speeding by outside.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch the look of disappointment on Leo's face before he twists back around. A hot, sickly feeling twists in my stomach, my throat burning like I want to gag on words unspoken. It feels like another failure to add to the list, yet more proof I don't know how to treat a person who cares about me, a person who *matters*. I should be used to disappointing people; I let my brother down enough times both before and after his death.

No one speaks for the entire rest of the journey to the safe house, a sombre air of tension filling the car.

North takes us to a modest-sized house that sits alone at the end of a long dirt path. It looks to be mostly constructed from thick shoots of bamboo. It stands on even thicker posts of timber. The building is as nondescript as every other FISA safe house I've stayed in over the last month.

North parks outside the house, and we all get out. Leo comes round to grab his bag from the back seat, and both of us follow North up to the front door, which he unlocks with a set of large brass keys.

Once we're inside, North tells us to go take showers and whatever else whilst he makes us something quick to eat in the safe house's small kitchen. When I ask North about the security and camera set-up, he admits begrudgingly this safe house was set up *very* last minute and contains neither. Having left all our surveillance equipment in Ireland, there's nothing we can use to set anything up. We're quite out of the way here,

but Leo and I will need to be hyper vigilant about any potential incoming threats.

The house has only one floor, with the bedrooms and bathroom set at the back of the building, an open-plan entryway, living room, and kitchen making up the front end.

Leo takes his bag along to one of the minimalistic bedrooms and drops it on the simple double bed. It's nowhere near big enough for him. A man of Leo's height and broadness needs a queen-sized bed, at least, to fit comfortably.

I go to the room opposite Leo's and drop my bag off, contemplating the idea of taking a shower like North suggested.

Leo beats me to the shower by a handful of seconds, and I spend the time waiting for him to come out sorting through the weapons I brought with me. I gave my guns and knives a thorough cleaning yesterday, when I knew there was no chance of me falling asleep after what happened between me and Leo, so they should be ready to go. Still, it never hurts to check your weapons before a mission. I'm not quite as obsessed with them as my brother was, but a dirty weapon could get you killed, and I'm very much against that outcome, especially if it means leaving Leo behind to take on whatever Bullet is going to throw at us.

When we're both suitably showered, changed, and armoured up, Leo and I join North in the kitchen, where he sets down two bowls of steaming pasta in front of us. We eat at the

kitchen island, North sitting across from us, typing away at his tiny black laptop.

There's a moderately sized metal suitcase, which likely contains Bullet's bribe, sitting in the far corner of the room. The bullshit one he'll pretend to accept until the last minute, when he'll suddenly need some other kind of "incentive" to give us the information we've already paid for. I almost hope he betrays us, just so I have an excuse to blow his head off or cut him up with glass if I'm really lucky, and torture gets put on the cards.

I don't think FISA allows torture. They're British and old school; they've got to pretend to have respect for the Geneva Convention and all that poser shit. Another complaint for the bi-annual performance review with my supervisor.

Leo and I both eat fast and eagerly although Leo stops halfway through to scrape the rest of his meal into my bowl. I'm too hungry to protest his unsubtle attempt to feed me. We had a flyby breakfast this morning, a thing we only did because Leo insisted I eat something before we leave. He's like a particularly persistent and food-focused nanny, making sure I eat as much as I can whenever possible.

I've told him a thousand times I don't need him to flap around about it. OI taught me how to deal with near starvation as part of my training. A few hunger pains won't kill me.

But Leo just gets more het up when I say that type of crap about my past, so I mostly let him get away with it now. Refusing his attempts to be my keeper isn't worth the sad doe

eyes he gives me; conversely, it *is* worth the warmth-infused smile he has a habit of blindsiding me with whenever I do something like taking his food without complaint. As if I've done him some huge favour by eating half his meals.

I'm still very much of the opinion that Leo Snow is one of the strangest men alive, which is a hell of a thing for me to think considering the number of fucking-wackadoodle people I've met through working with OI.

Once we're done and the bowls have been deposited in the sink, we come back to the table to go through a hack-job briefing with North.

"What's the plan for extraction?" I ask. Nothing much else matters with this mission. If we need a way out, which we are almost certainly going to, I need to know how much of that I'm going to have to depend on myself for.

"Right," North says in response to our expectant stares across the kitchen island. "Bullet has insisted you and Agent Snow arrive alone, without backup."

Everything, then. That certainly makes me harken back to all the missions with OI that I went on solo, without even my brother there to help stem the tide of bullets and general bullshittery that always goes on during a mission that's this calibre of stupid and reckless.

North doesn't look happy about us going in without backup. After that last mission a month ago, when North sent Leo and me out to inspect the van we found Ryan dead in, I thought

maybe North would be the type to throw agents out into the cold with no promise of aid or the necessary information.

However, since observing the way he behaves whilst leading a mission from behind the lines, I've learnt two things. First, he's more than happy to cross that line and throw himself into the fray if required when one of his agents is in danger. Two, for all his countenance is giving me nothing but bland determination, it's been made clear on numerous occasions how opposed North is to sending agents into lethal situations with no way of assisting them back out again.

He isn't one to put agents at risk lightly, which only makes his exemplary record of successful missions more impressive. Aaron North didn't need to kill his own people to rise to the top; the bloodshed was reserved exclusively for his agency's enemies, a feat no OI agent, or many of his fellow FISA agents, I'd wager, could claim as true.

Leo asks North for confirmation of exactly how fucked we are. "So we're on our own once we cross the border of his property?"

North gives a short nod, his displeasure easy to see in the slant of his brows and the clench of his jaw.

Leo makes a face, nose crinkling like he's trying to emulate a pug. "*Great,*" he drawls sarcastically, darting an uneasy look at me.

"Will we be able to take our comm units?" I ask, already assuming the answer will be in the negative. Bullet wouldn't bother telling FISA we had to go in by ourselves if he was just

going to allow us a direct line to our agency in case of emergency. Bullet will want us isolated and on edge, cut off from any potential help to make it easier to manipulate and lie to us.

“No comms,” North says regrettably. “You go in clean on this one.”

Clean? That’s hilarious, considering we’re about to plunge into the depths of human sewage. People like Bullet thrive down in the dirt. He excels at creating sinkholes to trap other people and drag them into it with him, drowning them in mud until their lungs fill with thick sludge, and they choke on all the filth they’ve swallowed.

Those dark spaces. Those *bloody* dark spaces.

“How about our weapons?” Leo pushes, looking mildly disturbed by the idea we might not be able to bring any form of defence at all.

When North hesitates to answer, I’m more than disturbed, I’m apoplectic.

“No, fuck you,” I growl out at North obstinately, “we’re taking our weapons, or this shit is not happening.”

“You’ll have your superpowers,” Leo reminds me, like I could ever forget the existence of my stupid fucking freak powers. As if they haven’t ruined my life every day since I was shot up with a black chemical that Obsidian Inc. knew had a 70% chance of outright killing me.

I still can't decide if the children who died writhing in agony were the lucky ones, when all is said and done.

"You can take weapons," North says although he doesn't look any happier about it than he did anything else. "But that place is going to be packed with Bullet's personal soldiers, who will no doubt be outfitted with the best weapons on the black market. I'd heavily suggest not letting it come down to a gunfight if at all avoidable."

Yeah, he's right about that. If shit goes sideways, which is almost guaranteed, and Bullet doesn't get what he wants from us, we'll probably go down in a hail of ammunition before we can even blink twice.

But I don't think that will happen, not if we do what Bullet asks. That's what I'm worried about. Not the guns or his soldiers or even Bullet himself, particularly. I just know he's going to ask for something Leo won't want to agree to, something morally despicable, and I'll have to do it anyway to complete the mission and keep us alive. The fallout from that is what I'm really dreading.

I know Leo has seen what I'm capable of; FISA showed him, and he didn't turn away when he found out about Rohan's mum. He might be alright with my past in theory, with what I did for OI to survive, for the sake of keeping my brother by my side. But it's going to be different in real-time. When he realises I'm still the creature, the walking-talking weapon that OI reforged and sharpened me into. I imagine his

reaction, and all I can see is brutal judgement, or worse, mindless absolutism.

Ultimately, I'm afraid Leo will refuse to see the truth of me. I'm more afraid of that than of him thinking I'm a monster and retracting his easily offered friendship, the thing I've come to depend on most, out of disgust.

If Leo can't ever *see* me, he can't ever. He can't. He can't ever *care* about me. *Know* me. *Want* me. Not the real me. Not properly. Not like I've become increasingly aware I need him to.

I've spent too much of my life living with lies, surrounded by people with well-constructed masks where their faces are meant to be. I can't do that again, especially not with Leo.

"Alright then," Leo says before I can make some kind of sarcastic remark about doing our best not to get greedy and ending up with an extravagant number of extra holes. "If those are the parameters, we'll just have to make the best of it. Do we at least have an idea of how many soldiers Bullet has, or the layout of his compound?"

North is quick to nod, seeming glad to have information he can give us that will actually be useful. He taps away at his laptop, then turns it around to show us the basic floor plan of Bullet's base in the jungle. From the design outlines, it seems to be a large two-storey building with an open-plan bottom floor and five rooms in total upstairs. There are two main exits, a front and back door. There are no windows on the top

floor and only one on the bottom floor, which is likely fitted with bulletproof glass.

“Where did you get this?” I ask, instantly suspicious. Bullet isn’t the type to have secrets about his evil lair floating around for agencies like FISA to just snatch out of the air and use.

“Agent Nash. She dug through Bullet’s lawyer’s files and found the plans,” North explains, sounding rather proud of the fact. “Bullet had it built years ago as a retreat, but he was never directly involved. His lawyer was the one who organised it all, including the payments to the construction team and the local authorities to keep them quiet about it.”

“That fits.” I dip my head in acceptance, a sneer dragging one side of my mouth into a jagged slash. “Bullet keeps his hands crossed behind his back and lets other people get theirs bloody on his behalf. He’s meticulous about paper trails.”

“Yes,” North murmurs in agreement. “It’s part of what has made him so difficult to pin down despite the infamy of his name in the criminal underworld. There’s nothing physical tying him to his criminal activity.”

“That’s the payment he’s asked for, yeah?” Leo asks, jerking his head at the metal suitcase I noticed earlier.

“It is,” North confirms. He gets up from his stool at the kitchen island and walks over to the suitcase. He picks it up and brings it over, laying the suitcase down flat on the island and spinning it around so Leo and I can see the lock. There’s a keypad set above it. “The combination is 5624578.”

“You know this isn’t going to be all he wants from us,” I repeat uselessly, frowning at the suitcase with open contempt.

North’s dark eyes seem to harden as he meets my gaze head-on. “I know,” he says in a low, sober rumble. “I’ve spoken with Director Snow about your concerns, and she’s told me to give you full authorisation to do whatever is required to get the intel from Bullet.”

I press my lips together so I won’t start laughing hysterically. Of course. I expected nothing less from Snow. She knows exactly the sort of person we’re dealing with here. And the kind of things a man like Bullet would ask something like me to do for him in exchange for information he knows we desperately need. He wouldn’t have offered to tell us if he didn’t know we were desperate. Bullet prefers to deal from higher ground, always.

Leo looks from me to North, then back again with a worried expression on his face. His voice carries a wary undertone when he says, “Did she designate any limits at all? I mean, will we get burned later if we need to cross legal lines?”

We. Leo thinks this is going to be something we do together. That almost breaks me, from either shame or grief, I don’t know.

“No,” North answers with painful neutrality. “We’re trusting your judgement on this one, Agents.”

Leo shifts in his seat, discomfort easily read in his body language, the slight hunch of his shoulders, and the shaking of his leg. There’s an oncoming storm of turmoil brewing across

his face, the circles beneath his eyes seeming to deepen and darken, the angles of his features casting shadows.

It's clearly not the legal side of things that is making him feel so twisted up. Leo, the man who admitted early on he isn't comfortable with the more violent side of this job, will never be okay with the kind of mission this is likely to become. Black ops and blanket permission equals: no rules, no questions, and no consequences.

Someone like Leo needs consequences to make sense of things. To people like him, if we are without cost, we are without humanity.

Leo very pointedly does not let his eyes travel in my direction, like he thinks looking at me will jinx us and make the worst-case scenario come to pass.

"We'll get the job done," I promise North, keeping my face as impassive as I can manage. I don't want to react to Leo's trepidation with anything North could take note of and relay back to Snow. The last thing Leo and I need is Snow thinking there's discord between us. If nothing else, my freedom depends on our partnership. I'd rather not land my arse back in a cell because Snow decides we aren't a good fit after all.

North gives me a grim sort of nod in return. He understands, even if Leo does not, that *this* is the reason Snow gave me amnesty in the first place, why she showed mercy to an enemy combatant, an assassin created in the dark spaces. She did that so I could be what I am and do what I've been trained to do.

Whatever it takes.

Chapter Four

Leo

An hour later, Jack and I are driving down a trail that leads in from a dusty and forgotten side road. It cuts through the thick and wild fauna of the jungle and could only ever be traversed by truck or a particularly hardy jeep.

At the end of the death trap, something that some people, optimistic souls that they are, might call a path, sits Bullet's compound. It looks far bigger in person than I expected, built from solid grey stone and metal, reminding me of a prison more than a private base belonging to an infamous gun runner. It's hidden deep within the jungle, overhung by trees so tall and sprawling they block out all natural light. Darkness permeates the area, shadows pressing in from every angle, giving the entire place an oppressive quality. The cloying heat doesn't help, making the air feel heavier, like it's trying to suffocate gravity and untether us all from this earth.

In short, Bullet's compound is a symbol of exactly what this mission is: a bad idea. I can't imagine anyone looking at this and not thinking they made a grave mistake in coming here. A general sense of foreboding settles over me like a cloak, the muscles in my back and shoulders tightening reactively.

Jack picks up on my unease and gives me a measured look of doubt. It could be genuine concern, but his behaviour since we were given this mission suggests it's more likely he's worried I'm going to bottle it mid-mission and make everything ten times harder for him.

I'm determined to prove him wrong about that. If we can get through this mission with all our limbs intact and the intel we

need to find Rohan, it will be proof to both of us that this partnership can work in the long term.

I park up outside the compound alongside another black truck. There are four vehicles in total parked in front of the compound, three trucks and one large jeep, all lined up in a row.

Jack turns in his seat, the case full of money clutched on his lap. He fixes me with one of his less frightening scowls and speaks with more softness than I would have expected, muting his edges for me like he does when he thinks I won't notice how much effort it takes him.

“We can still turn back,” Jack tells me, pale-green gaze unflinching and fierce as always. “Fuck Titanus Bullet. Fuck FISA. Fuck all of it. We can just go. Tell them we'll find Rohan some other way.”

Jack doesn't like for me to know he's kind, because OI ingrained into him that kindness is weakness, and weakness is more than just unacceptable, it's a death sentence. You care, you die. You're cared *about*, *they* die. It's what his experiences have shown him, most prominently with his brother. Would Dan be dead if they didn't love each other? Maybe not. I know that's what Jack thinks. I know it's why he's so reluctant to let me get close to him.

Or it would be more accurate to say that's one of many reasons why he keeps me at a distance. To him, it's a *safe* distance, not one meant to cause pain. It does, though, that gulf of space between us. It hurts me more and more every day,

digging just that little bit deeper, chipping away at my emotional endurance.

I reach across the physical space separating us and put a hand over Jack's. He tenses up under the gentle touch, his eyes narrowing sharply on me, his fingers twitching like he wants to check that he can still reach for his weapon. He looks unsure of my intentions but doesn't try to pull back, choosing instead to watch me with wary expectation, waiting for my response.

“Fuck FISA.” I dip my head, a tiny smile ghosting my lips. “We're not doing this for them. We're doing it for Rohan. He needs us to get our shit together. Go in, deal with whatever bullshit Bullet is going to pull, and use the information we'll make him give us to rescue Rohan from his evil-overlord father. Because *fuck him* too. Ian Stone.” I sneer, dredging up all the hate I have in my heart for that monster, and there's a lot of it. “We're going to make sure he gets his. Burn his empire to the ground and steal back his heir and watch his bastard-fucking plans crumble to ash and dust.”

There's nothing quite as motivating as revenge when you're staring down multiple barrels of a lunatic death merchant's guns.

And it would be at least partially revenge. For what they did to Jack and his brother. For what they've done to all the other Liquid Onyx survivors. For what they've done to countless innocent people over the years.

We are going to destroy them. Getting Rohan back is just the first step.

Jack seems taken aback by my vehemence for a few beats until my words seem to crystallise inside his mind, and he realises I'm dead serious about this. No jokes or bits or expectations of mercy.

I should be less shocked than I am when Jack uses his free hand to fist a handful of my T-shirt and yank me towards him, his mouth hot and ferocious as it takes mine in a kiss that curls my toes and makes my stomach do a double backflip. He pushes his tongue inside me like a flag being thrust into a freshly conquered piece of earth.

It's over well before I'd like it to be, Jack releasing my mouth with one last nipping bite of goodbye to my bottom lip. A warning or an appeal for remembrance. His eyes are lust heavy and smug and just a little bit crazed, satisfied with the debauchery he's committed and having to purposefully hold himself back from taking more, from taking every-fucking thing I've got to give him.

If I were a little more unhinged and a lot more self-destructive, I'd dive back in, and we'd go at each other hard in the back seat of the truck, pretending we're teenagers parked at some secret lover's lane. But we're both still aware of where we are. The windows on our truck are blacked out, so no one would be able to see from the outside, but still. This is the very definition of wrong place, wrong time.

As if hearing the words roll through my mind, Jack rebels against them with no small amount of prejudice.

Jack still has my T-shirt fisted in his large, unnaturally strong hand. If he wanted to, he could rip the material from my body with one sharp yank. The look in his eyes says he knows it too, shouts he wants it, wants me. His gaze snaps to my lips, and he jerks me forward again with painful abruptness to press one last lingering kiss to my mouth.

When Jack pulls back this time, he rests his forehead lightly against mine and lets go of my T-shirt. He moves his hand up to my throat, squeezing it lightly, like it's a reminder of exactly who and what he is. Then he cups my face in a gentle grip as if to offset his previous roughness. His thumb brushes over my cheekbone, breath hot but not heaving like mine. My heart feels like it's hammering out a static rhythm inside my chest.

One of my hands is still covering his on top of the case of money, and I feel compelled to turn it around under his so I can thread our fingers together. Jack's eyes are open and glimmering like gemstones set in the path of direct sunlight. His focus on me is so intense I feel like a bottle full of freshly caught lightning, ready to fly apart and fill the truck with a spray of glass and plasma.

I need to calm the hell down.

“We're in this together, then? That what you're sayin', Leo?” Jack is looking at me with hope that borders on madness, like he wants so desperately for it to be true, to believe me, to believe *in* me. He strokes my cheek again, pressing in just a

little bit harder with his thumb. “Fuck everyone else, yeah? We get this thing done, whatever it takes.”

“Right,” I agree, pushing my forehead into his and bringing my free hand up to knock on his chest once, twice, then three times. It’s a gesture I learnt from my cousin Rex. A signal of trust, of connection. It’s meant to be between family, but I figure it can work for me and Jack too. He’s my partner. He’s more mine than he is anyone else’s although I’m not sure he’d appreciate me saying so.

Jack seems placated by my answer, even more so than I would have thought. He seems to understand the knocking gesture as something significant despite not knowing what it means.

“Okay, we’d better go before Bullet starts thinking we’re plotting against him or some shit,” Jack says, dragging himself away from me with obvious reluctance. I think it’s safe to say we’d both rather drive the hell away from here and make another terrible decision by having sex in another safe house. I’m not getting my kit off in the jungle; he can forget that. There are snakes and spiders and other random wildlife fuckery.

“Well, we kind of *are* plotting against him,” I point out whilst conceding to his actual point by disentangling us and moving to open my car door.

“Nah.” Jack snorts, his mouth pulling into a tight frown. “We’d be plotting against him if we planned to torture the

information out of him and put a bullet in his brain afterwards.”

“Not much of a plan,” I comment doubtfully. “It’s only got two steps.”

“I’m a simple man who just wants to shoot a motherfucker in the head.” Jack waves a hand at me. “You want to be all fancy with the strategy, you come up with that shit solo.”

Jack gets out of the car before I can respond, slamming the door behind him with more aggression than is probably warranted. Evidently, not all of the tension has been bled out of him with my reassurances that we’re a team in this, and that he doesn’t have to fight this fight on his own. Whatever’s going to come from this meeting with Bullet, I refuse to let Jack face the horrors of his past alone.

On our way up to the entrance of Bullet’s compound, I spot six cameras, both on the building itself and in the surrounding trees. They were able to watch us arriving from every possible angle.

Jack stays close to my side, the case of money clutched in one hand, his ingrained ability to scrutinise his surroundings with hawk-like precision working at full capacity as he takes it all in, scanning the area for possible threats and pre-planning exit strategies. From the look of things, there could be a countless number of the first and very few of the second.

Confirming my thoughts about being watched, the door to the compound is opened before we reach it.

A heavily armed man, dressed in black and wearing a classically stoic expression, stands in the doorway. The very large fuck-off gun strapped to him looks modified, which is a Bullet staple according to his file. One of the reasons he's been able to stay on top of the arms-dealing business is his penchant for selling heavily modified weapons, most of which are created by would-be and soon-to-be supervillains.

Jack stares down the heavily armed man, curling his lip at the modified weapon as if looking at it offends him in some way. The armed man stares back at Jack with impassive calculation, assessing him and his aggression level, possibly trying to decide how likely it is that Jack will pop off at some point and make his job of protecting Titanus Bullet more strenuous. There's recognition in the man's eyes, suggesting he's at least seen Jack before if not met him officially.

"Back again, psycho?" the armed man rumbles out in a dry voice, his pale, indifferent eyes boring into Jack. "Heard you'd gone traitor and defected to the British government." He sounds both mocking and contemptuous.

Jack makes a low sound of disgust, and I swear he'd be hocking a mouthful of spit at Bullet's man if I weren't there. I'm certain he's only keeping control of himself for my sake. It's both reassuring and a concern because I have no idea how far my presence will go to deter such volatile reactions from him.

"Good to see you too, Commander." Jack's mouth slashes up into something mean, his tone scathing. "Remind me again

why the military kicked you out on your defective arse? Was it the mass murder of civilians without orders or the rampant assault of sex workers on foreign soil?”

The armed man’s eyes flash with rage, his face reddening with such speed and severity I’m afraid his head might explode. His hands clench around his gun, like he might turn it on us just for that. Jesus Christ. There must be some truth to what Jack said for him to react so viscerally.

To cut off any unpleasantness before it can erupt, I step forward to speak. Jack tenses up even more at my side, a feat I didn’t think possible, but he doesn’t try to stop me.

“My name is Agent Leo Snow.” I tilt my head in Jack’s direction. “This is my partner, *Agent* Jack Roth. I believe your boss is expecting us to discuss an exchange.”

The armed man stares a little longer, the pause drawing out for a few uncomfortable seconds before he eventually responds, “Yes, come with me, and I’ll take you to him, *Agent* Snow.” Then he turns around and walks off without waiting to see if we’ll chase after him.

Jack makes a rough, growling sound of anger, shooting daggers at the man’s back. He allows me to nudge him into following Bullet’s guard into the compound and down a series of barren corridors until we reach what could pass as the living room of a Bond villain.

The inside of Bullet’s compound looks almost as much like a prison as the outside. Every wall is made of solid grey stone, and there are small, circular lights fixed into the walls and

ceilings, shining the way through it like a macabre yellow-brick road, or to be more melodramatic, the road to hell. There's a claustrophobic feel to the corridors, like they're slowly closing in and might crush you if you stay in the same place for too long.

At the end of the last corridor, the building opens up into a moderately large room containing an electric fireplace, two expensive-looking white sofas set on either side of a big glass coffee table, and multiple rugs, one a fluffy white and another the skin of a white tiger. Because billionaire arms-dealing Bond villains just *be like this*.

I figure the glass table was either an error on Bullet's part or meant as a direct provocation. If so, Bullet is a moron with a death wish. It's not smart to goad the superhuman assassin, no matter how much protection you have around you.

There's a small army of large, armed men standing at various points throughout the room. Much like the man who answered the door, they're all dressed in black and look equally intimidating in both size and in possessing an undeniable air of competence. If I had to guess, I'd peg most of them as ex-military of some kind. It would make sense for Bullet to hire men who the system spat out due to age, injury, or psychological incapacity. Displaced men with a very particular and non-transferable skillset, who need somewhere to go and a way to make money.

Near the fireplace stands a man I recognise from surveillance photos provided by FISA as Titanus Bullet.

Bullet is a large man in his own right and not as old as one might assume given the amount of time he's been running his business, barely in his late forties. He has thick brown hair threaded with silver at the temples and a deceptively attractive face, nose aquiline, jaw square and covered in stubble. His dark eyes are the only thing that show me who he really is. There's a certain coldness to them that immediately puts me on edge. They remind me of so many big-time gangsters and international criminals I've brought down in the past. They aren't cruel so much as they contain a stark level of hubris that only men like Bullet possess.

It's the arrogance of medieval kings and ancient emperors. Men who truly believe they are above reproach, who think they have the right to destroy the world they were born into as if it's theirs to do with as they please, like it was made just so they could choose when and how to break it.

Men like him are incapable of reform or regret because there won't be a single moment in all the horror they cause where they'll think their reasons aren't the only ones that matter.

Upon seeing Bullet, Jack goes rigid next to me, the tension that was rolling off him in steady, rippling waves since we arrived becoming an onslaught of tsunamis, one seemingly larger and more dangerous than the last. He's all but vibrating with furious energy. There's a hatred burning in his eyes that I haven't seen outside of his few mentions of Ian Stone.

I resist the urge to reach out to him. There's no way in hell I want to translate any weakness to Bullet or his people, mine or

Jack's. I should have anticipated this and planned for it. If Jack blows before we can even begin discussing the exchange of information for cash, this will likely end in an exchange of gunfire instead.

Bullet offers us both a disarmingly malevolent smile. There's a twist of smug satisfaction to it, which catches on every one of my edges and must feel like a slap in the face to Jack, as if the man has already gotten one over on him without having to say a word. He knows he has the power here, and doubtless, he will use that fact to try and get under our skin.

"Agent Jack!" Bullet exclaims brightly, his voice a low, charming drawl. It makes me want to hit him, just like I did every other smarmy prick I met during my days at private school. Bullet fixes those dark eyes on Jack with a more singular focus, looking him over as if he's a fascinating piece of technology he's considering spending quite a bit of money on. That makes me uneasy in a whole other way as well as reminding me yet again how OI treated Jack like a thing rather than a person and probably encouraged other people, whoever they needed to form connections with, to do the same.

"It's so good to see you again," Bullet continues with a faux pleasantness that grates and grinds like sand between his teeth. "Unexpected, of course. But I was glad to hear you managed to avoid obsolescence. Obsidian Inc. can be very ... *indelicate* with their commodities." He tilts his head, mouth forming a small moue as if Jack's previous situation was a matter of light inconvenience rather than the methodical and horrific destruction of everything he was or could ever be.

Bullet's use of the word "commodity" not only proves my thoughts correct about how he must have treated Jack in the past but also seems to have been a deliberate act of baiting. I can tell by the way Bullet watches for Jack's reaction, practically frothing at the mouth, waiting for Jack to explode in some spectacular fashion and try to go for him.

I hold my breath as Jack makes a valiant attempt not to snatch that bait from Bullet, shove it down his throat, and keep it there until he chokes to death on Jack's fist.

"Still a piece of shit, then." Jack looks at Bullet with brazen disgust, his voice holding a note of true loathing although it remains mostly conversational. "You and your toy soldiers, selling comic-book weapons to bullshit militias and wannabe terrorists. Selling even more bullshit intelligence to spies and government agencies to get your kicks." Jack snorts at the other man in disdain. "You don't change, Bullet."

I don't know what it is in all that, that hits Bullet where it hurts, but something pisses him off. I can see it in how his face tightens and becomes uglier, the mask he was wearing before having been slashed by Jack's invisible claws, leaving diagonal gouges across it, revealing what lies beneath with just enough clarity to renew my fear over the eventual breakdown of this whole mission.

There's only one thing I can do to try and contain the problem long enough to keep both myself and Jack alive.

I step forward, putting myself between Jack and Bullet without bothering to hide my purpose for doing so.

“If you two are done snarling at each other?” I keep my voice just about on the right side of sardonic. There’s no point attempting to placate either of them. They wouldn’t take it, and I’m not their fucking pre-school teacher anyway. I train my eyes on Bullet, ignoring how Jack starts vibrating at a higher frequency behind me. “We’re here to carry out a pre-agreed exchange between you and my agency. Do you have the information we need, or is this all just a game you thought you could play with us?”

There’s a distinct rise of animosity in the room then, not from Bullet himself, but from the men surrounding us, like what I said somehow amounts to a threat. None of them move to do anything about it, but there’s the general sense that all they would need from their boss is the slightest of nods as permission to turn volatile thoughts into violent actions.

Bullet doesn’t react for a beat or two, but then he throws back his head and releases a laugh that chills me right down to my blood and bones. I have never before heard someone come this close to doing the *mwah ha ha* thing unironically. He sounds like a cartoon villain. It’s disturbing to hear that much cartoonish glee from a man who regularly sells automatic weapons to terrorists, like watching an adult lion play in a cardboard box like a kitten.

I dart a glance at Jack, who has now materialised next to me again. If I expected him to look as grossly perturbed as I feel, I’m very much disappointed. Jack has the genuine audacity to *roll his eyes* in response to Bullet’s maniacal laughter. He looks bored, as if he’s already tired of all this bullshit even

though it's only been around ten minutes since we got here. Far from putting me at ease, which could be Jack's intention, his lackadaisical attitude towards the war-profiteering lunatic in front of us makes me surer than ever that I'm going to regret agreeing to this mission.

When Bullet finally stops upsetting my eardrums with his hardcore witchy cackling, he looks me up and down like he's trying to guess at a price, amusement still dancing in his eyes.

"You look young," he says to me, sounding oddly thoughtful. "Did they send you to me because they know I like a pretty face, or is this some form of test?"

Before I can think of how to answer Bullet's discomfiting question, he takes another few steps forward.

Jack all but elbows me behind him, which is a stupid move Bullet does not miss if the way his eyes dart first to me and then to Jack—only to narrow in interest—is anything to go by.

Bullet stops in his tracks, holding his hands up in mock surrender. He smiles like a delighted Cheshire cat and sits down on one of the massive white sofas. He gestures for us to take the sofa opposite him.

Jack seems ready to refuse, the tightening of his back and shoulders indicating an oncoming bout of his usual stubbornness. I cut off any such behaviour, as well as its inevitable consequences, by zipping around him and going to sit down across the glass coffee table. It has the intended effect of forcing Jack to choose whether to maintain his belligerent

stance or to give it up and come sit with me. He picks the latter option, much to my internal satisfaction.

Once we've settled, Bullet clasps his hands together and points two fingers at the case full of money Jack has put on the ground near his feet. He throws an assessing look at me. "That my money, Agent ...?" He trails off, waiting for me to supply my name.

Bullet seems almost tame, sitting on the sofa in his white button-down with the sleeves rolled up, and I'm sure, very expensive, stonewashed jeans. I expected him to wear a suit, but I suppose it's too hot for that. I can see how he would fool some people into thinking he's a harmless, attractive billionaire who could never be involved in anything so horrific as international arms dealing.

However, I'm no civilian. Bullet is far from the first of his type I've come into contact with, and if there's one thing life as an agent has taught me, it's that evil multiplies and spreads inside a person like cancer cells. Just because I can't see all the ugly Bullet has, doesn't mean it isn't there, roiling and hissing under the surface like an infested pit of demonic shadows.

"You don't need to know his name," Jack all but snarls at Bullet. I don't understand why since I already told one of his men my name, so all Bullet would need to do is ask. It's not like my name could or would remain a secret.

"Snow," I tell Bullet, throwing a discreet look of warning at Jack, who tosses me a far less discreet glare in return.

Bullet seems far too entertained by the discourse between me and my partner, which is the exact reaction I was trying to avoid. I don't want Bullet to take any more interest in us than he already would have due to having known Jack when he worked for OI.

“Agent Snow,” Bullet murmurs to himself, moving his mouth like he's tasting the words. He gives me a congenial smile and nods his head, ignoring Jack's angry scowl. “I made it clear to your agency that I would be willing to offer the location of their missing scientist, Rohan Sathe. This is not a claim I make lightly, as giving you this information would put me in the direct crosshairs of Obsidian Inc., who our mutual friend here can tell you is not an organisation you want to be on the wrong side of.”

Jack all but growls at the word *friend* being used to describe his relationship with Bullet, but I'm not paying enough attention to berate him for it.

There's something off about this, about how he said that as if he's expecting more from this than initially agreed upon. Jack's warnings ring in my ears.

“Then why are you willing to risk it?” I ask, unable to keep the suspicion out of my voice.

Bullet's eyes seem to become heated with something almost like excitement. It makes me want to back up, but I force myself not to. I can't let him know he's gotten to me that much, or he'll use it to his advantage, and he's already got so

much of the power in this situation. I can't give him more, no matter how uncomfortable he makes me feel.

Jack swoops in before Bullet can answer. "Because he needs us to do a little side job that makes it worth kicking the hornet's nest over." He's glaring at Bullet hatefully, not making any effort to hide his absolute loathing of the man sitting across from us. "So go on, then," he growls furiously, "tell us what you actually fucking want."

Bullet parts his hands and holds them up in a "you got me" kind of gesture. He puts on a forlorn expression, like he's as upset about this deception as we are. Although I wouldn't use the word "upset" to describe what either Jack or I are feeling right now.

It doesn't exactly surprise me that Jack called it right when he told us Bullet would want something extra in return for the intelligence about Rohan, but it's still a kick to the gut, especially with how resigned Jack sounds to doing whatever it is Bullet is going to ask of us.

Bullet seems genuinely delighted by Jack's abrasiveness, like it's something he's been looking forward to. I can only imagine he still thinks he's dealing with a past version of Jack, who had no choice but to keep his more lethal instincts at bay for the sake of his brother's life as well as his own. That is no longer the case. If Jack were to snap right here and now, kill Bullet and somehow get away from his bodyguards unscathed, there's no one who would pay for it with their life. Jack might get banged up if FISA decides he's too much of a loose

cannon, but I'm certain that offing Bullet wouldn't earn Jack an execution order.

Bullet either has no idea how easy it would be for Jack to murder him, or he believes my safety will be enough to temper him. As much as I'd like to think the same, I couldn't entirely blame Jack if that turned out not to be the case. There are nightmares that Jack lives with that I could never understand, some of which it seems Bullet might have caused.

"Agent Jack is correct," Bullet addresses me rather than Jack even though he was the one who spoke. "There is a small task I will need to be carried out before we can complete our transaction. It's something well within your partner's abilities, I assure you."

"What is it you want him to do?" I ask warily. There doesn't seem to be any point in arguing he shouldn't have lied to the agency about the parameters of this deal. Jack did tell us he would do this, and we still chose to come; now it's up to Jack and me to decide if we can let ourselves be involved in whatever Bullet asks for.

"I recently declined to sell a significant amount of cargo to a group called *Righteous Anarchy*. They're an extremist cell from some Slavic country." Bullet waves a hand as if it doesn't matter which country it is. I don't know if that's because he really doesn't care, or if he just doesn't want to give us any more information than he needs to.

"Let me guess," Jack says, tone acidic. "The extremists didn't take rejection real well and decided to steal the 'cargo.'"

He even makes air quotes; Jesus Christ. “And now you want us to get the guns back and annihilate the idiots who took them.”

First of all. Righteous Anarchy? Bloody hell, is this an extremist group or a punk band?

Second of all—

“He can’t kill anyone for you,” I tell Bullet adamantly, shooting Jack a fierce look of reproach. “He’s a British agent now, not an assassin for a cracked-up shady organisation. He can’t just go around mass murdering people, no matter who they are. Not without it being a sanctioned mission.”

It feels weird to say that mass murder could ever be an acceptable course of action, but it would be unhelpfully naive to ignore the reality. Jack might not be an OI agent anymore, but he’s still a professional killer. That is what my aunt hired him for, like it or not.

Bullet appears unimpressed and unconvinced by all this. He diverts his attention to Jack as if asking for confirmation.

Far from backing me up as I hoped he would, Jack meets Bullet’s questioning gaze and shrugs.

“You know where this group is keeping your stolen guns?” he asks as if it’s a foregone conclusion he’ll be doing what Bullet wants, like their location is the only thing standing in the way.

Bullet nods. “I can give you the exact coordinates of the camp where the goods are being kept. They haven’t left the

country with them yet.”

“Hold on.” I raise a hand. This is all happening way too fast. “Why can’t you just send a battalion of your men to deal with this group if you know where they are?”

Bullet gives me an indulgent look, as if the answer is obvious, and I’m a little bit thick for not getting it straightaway. “If word gets out I let anyone steal my cargo in the first place, it will mark me, put a dent in my reputation,” he explains patiently. “A reputation I spent decades building from the ground up. I send my men in after them, and everyone will know I didn’t sell those guns to Righteous Anarchy. But if a rogue agency assassin goes after them, I can say I sold them the guns, and they couldn’t handle the heat. No blowback on me this way.”

Nice. Repugnant as all hell, but it makes logical sense at least. That doesn’t mean I’m any more enthusiastic about the idea of complying with Bullet’s request. Doing what he wants will go against so many FISA protocols, as well as my own code of ethics, it’s not even funny.

“You give us the location, and we’ll get it done,” Jack says with a finality that makes my body feel like it’s on fire from the bolt of sheer panic it sends through me.

Bullet makes a satisfied sound and reaches into his pocket to produce a piece of folded paper. He hands it to Jack, who snatches it off him like one of those big jungle spiders that grab low-flying birds, and he stuffs it in his pocket without looking at the information.

“No, hold on,” I say, giving my head a sharp little shake like I’m trying to throw off rainwater. “We need time to discuss this,” I tell Bullet although I’m really talking to both him and my partner.

Jack makes an exasperated sound next to me but mercifully doesn’t argue out loud. I resist the very real urge to smack him upside the head anyway.

Bullet considers me for a very long moment, his eyes narrowing ever so slightly and then flickering between me and Jack. Weighing his options, I’d guess. Eventually, he nods, his expression showing no outward emotion that would allow me to gauge how badly he’s taken this semi-rejection.

“I’ll give you a day,” Bullet allows, dipping his head in my direction. “Let me know your decision tomorrow.” He holds up a hand as if to halt us from leaving just yet and shoots me a far more insidious look, the monster creeping out from behind the mask. His eyes are so dark, it’s like staring straight into a starless night sky. “Agent Snow, your partner is aware of this, but it seems you are not. I do not haggle. I do not negotiate. This is my final offer. You turn this down, and I will not come back to the table at a later date when you become more desperate. It’s now or never. Tell me you understand this before you leave today.”

I want to tell the vile prick exactly what he can do with his information, but that’s pure and unhelpful emotions talking, not the fully trained agent I am. I won’t go as far as to say I need to be professional with Bullet, because this isn’t an office

meeting, but getting irrational with him won't do any good and could actively harm the mission.

So instead of letting my mouth run honest and wild, I mirror Bullet's shallow nod of acknowledgement. "We'll be in touch with you by tomorrow," I agree, getting to my feet and nudging Jack to do the same.

Jack gives Bullet one last disdainful glare, which Bullet responds to with a wicked grin, like a man who's escaped death one too many times and now thinks that *means* something. Bullet might get to find out just how *not* special his existence is to the universe if Jack decides to show him how little control FISA has over him in comparison to OI.

To deflect this outcome, I grab hold of Jack's arm and hustle him towards the exit. He lets himself be pulled, which I choose to take as a good sign that all is not lost, and there's still time for us to get on the right page.

Chapter Five

Leo

Jack and I drive back to the safe house in relative silence, which is mostly fine. I'm busy ruminating over every single thing that was said in that meeting. Jack seems to be deep in thought too although it's coming across more as *seething*.

I figure Jack will explode as soon as he has enough space around him to blow up in, and I'm right. Practically the minute Jack and I step into the empty safe house, he turns on me like a ferociously enraged animal baited well past its breaking point. He flings aside the case of money meant for Bullet, so hard it crashes into the wall and forms a noticeable crack before dropping to the floor.

"You get there's no other way than to do what that bastard wants, right?" Jack throws at me like it's a live grenade I'm supposed to catch and disable before it goes off. "Tell me you get that."

It's too close to what Bullet said for comfort. The repetition of the patronising demand chafes, causing my hackles to rise instantly.

"Yeah, I heard him," I say, trying to keep a level head despite not really wanting to. "That doesn't mean we could just agree to it right there on the spot. We need time to come up with an alternative plan. You can't just go kill a load of random people and return weapons to an active arms dealer. I won't let you do that."

"You won't *let* me do it?" He snarls, incredulous. "You said we were in this together!"

“We *are!*” I all but yell back at him, my hands clenching at my sides.

“You agreed we’d do whatever it takes! Or was that bullshit?” Jack sounds so betrayed it almost makes me want to stop the entire argument and dig into why. There are a lot of triggers with Jack; he’s like a forest full of bear traps. He’s an island that ships are told to steer clear from because it’s supposed to be haunted.

“No!” I exclaim instead, feeling the time pressure on this mission like an ever-tightening band around my chest. “I just don’t think this is our only option.”

Jack levels a look of exasperation at me that holds all the weight and threat of a freshly lit cannon. He’s just waiting for an excuse to cause some damage, to blow a hole in whatever presents a large enough target, one that will allow him to create the maximum amount of debris.

“Go on then, Agent Snow; what exactly are our *other* options?” he demands. “Because we’ve had shit-all luck finding Sathe the long way ‘round. Do you want to double back and raid every single OI base we know of again, and if that doesn’t work, start breaking into random, shady-looking buildings until we accidentally stumble across him?” He’s getting angrier and angrier the more he goes on, like he’s building to something grand and immensely destructive.

“No, you arsehole,” I grit out, struggling to keep a lid on my temper. My nerves are shot after that meeting with Bullet. I could use some time to cool off and think through everything

properly, without any distractions, but I'm not going to get that. "I know we need the information from Bullet. I just meant we could get it another way."

"What? Like, kidnap and torture it out of him? Gonna let me shake what my OI mama gave me and rip out some fingernails?" Jack legit brightens at the prospect, and I can't deal with it. I can't. It's too much on top of everything else.

"Jack, don't joke about that shit." I rub a hand over my face, feeling like I want to scratch the skin raw just to give me something different to focus on.

Jack throws me another one of those odd looks, like he's annoyed but not surprised, like he's tired of me not getting it even though I have no clue what I'm supposed to be getting, which I guess is kind of the point. "I'm not joking," he says.

Alright, fuck this.

"Jesus Christ, I wasn't talking about torture or kidnapping!" I shout at him before I can stop myself. I barely manage to bring my voice back down to a more manageable level for the next bit. "Instead of killing the extremists like Bullet asked and returning his goods, we could talk to the local officials or law enforcement, get them to arrest the extremists and take the guns as evidence."

This time there's no attempt on Jack's part to conceal his incredulity at what I'm almost certain is my shocking lack of understanding about how the real world works.

“Leo, you don’t know this country like I do,” Jack says, proving me right in one fell swoop. “There’s a bloody *reason* why Bullet uses this as his base of operations. There’s a *reason* why a group of radicals from a Slavic country would come here to buy guns in the first place.” He makes a low sound of disgust. “The police are corrupt as fuck. The local government is corrupt as fuck. No one in this goddamn shithole is going to arrest a group of international extremists for stealing illegal weapons from an infamous arms dealer. What fucking fairy-tale land are you living in right now?”

Jack is very close to losing his shit with me. I can feel it like static electricity crackling around the particles in the air. He’s got animosity pouring from him by the bucketload, stance rock solid, back ramrod straight, shoulders braced like a bull in a fighting ring. His face is a mask of white-hot rage.

This isn’t completely new territory for us. I’ve both seen and heard Jack’s temper threatening to go nuclear. But on the other occasions when we’ve come to this point, I’ve had enough calm and perspective to either back down physically or to try to soothe Jack using non-combative language.

At this moment, however, I’m almost as pissed off as Jack, which means I’m unable to find the patience to filter what I’m saying. “You’re not working for Obsidian Inc. anymore, Jack. You don’t have the same excuses.”

Jack’s face shutters, and guilt pools in my gut, but I still can’t stop myself from carrying on, landing more blows meant to bruise and dent. “You can’t just kill whoever you want.

People will care now. *I'll* care. You need to stop acting like you don't care as well."

There's a moment where Jack doesn't respond, where he just stands across the room from me with his shoulders squared, like he's bracing for further impact and with a look on his face so blank it sends shivers down my spine for all the worst reasons.

Then cracks start to appear in his façade, like he really can't contain everything he's feeling, and it's spilling out, allowing me to catch just a sliver of the pain I've caused. I wince at the sight of it, knowing I've messed up and still too angry to feel compelled to fix it.

"I've never made any excuses for what I did when I was with OI," Jack says, voice deathly quiet and simmering with tension. "If you did, then that's on you. Get it through your thick head. This is who I am, Leo!" His eyes practically spit green fire at me. "I'm a remorseless killer, a fucking murder machine." He attempts to hide how badly saying this is hurting him, hanging his head and turning as if to hide his face, but none of it works. It's become too much for him to hold inside, caged and strapped down like he usually does. He's set it loose, signed off on its parole, and now he's paying the price.

Exhaustion hangs on him like a thick cloak. "The only thing pretending that isn't true does is set you up for disappointment and piss me the fuck off for making me feel like I've failed you, when I didn't promise anything different."

With that final strike, Jack turns around and slams out of the house in a static explosion of fury and pain, both of which I have to take some of the blame for inciting.

“Don’t walk away from this!” I shout at his back, taking a couple of unsteady steps after my wayward partner with no real intention of following, the more rational part of my brain finally stepping back in and telling me that he needs time to think.

We could both use a bit of breathing room, time to let rationality sink back in when all the volatile emotion has flooded out of our systems.

But when I hear the truck start, a bolt of panic travels through me, and I forget all about what’s healthy and best and right because the thought of Jack leaving makes me want to be violently ill. A powerful fear overtakes every other instinct, and I rush to stop him, guilt and desperation bursting inside me like fireworks.

I’m too late, though. By the time I’ve opened the door, Jack is already peeling away at a rate of noughts. Dust kicks up behind the truck, thick and dirty, blowing into my face and making my eyes sting.

“Jack!” I call after him, razor-sharp claws of panic tearing their way up my throat as my partner speeds away and disappears from view.

Chapter Six

Jack

There's a stretch of time where I pretend I'm just going to drive around for a while until I stop wanting to shatter every window in the truck and use the glass as missiles to cut the shit out of Bullet and his pet soldiers. I fake like I'm going to turn around at some point, drive back to the safe house, and let Leo do that thing where he talks me into making good, calm decisions instead of reckless, violent ones.

I allow myself a fantasy where I return to Leo and apologise for storming off like a crazed child, where he forgives me just like that, and convinces me we can get the intelligence from Bullet without going on his little murder side quest. I let myself think, for just a short amount of time, that I can be the sort of person who chooses the light path over the dark one without hesitation, secure in the knowledge my feet will know the way forward even when my eyes are firmly closed.

But eventually, I have to let the fantasy fall away and make the only choice possible for someone like me, by pressing forward with my eyes wide open, stepping back into the envelope of shadows I was trained my whole life to manoeuvre within.

I take out the piece of paper Bullet handed to me earlier and punch the coordinates scribbled on it into the truck's built-in satnav.

When we were sitting outside Bullet's stronghold and Leo said we would be in this together, vehemently promising to go in hard with his commitment to getting the job done, I thought maybe I could allow myself to believe him. He seemed

sincere, just like he does about almost everything he cares about. I wanted to think we could do this, the two of us making the tough calls no one else will. But I knew the second Bullet asked us to do an off-the-books mass assassination that Leo would never agree to it.

Leo has ironclad principles. He values human life to an extent I can't fathom. There's no way he could ever bloody his hands that thoroughly and live with it afterwards. He wasn't built to survive in the dark spaces.

Conversely, I was forged for exactly that purpose. To break every moral boundary in the name of completing *the mission*.

Leo might wind up hating me for this, both for doing it at all and for going into danger without him. But I know it's the only chance we have of getting the intelligence from Bullet and using it to find Rohan. That's the job I was given. Not saving the world. Not protecting some random gang of extremists. Not putting a stop to Bullet's arms-dealing business.

Get the intelligence. Find Rohan. Those are the only two objectives I need to care about. Everything else is just white noise for people like Snow and North to deal with in the background.

Leo will either learn to understand, or he won't. I can't worry about that. My mission also isn't to teach my partner how to be an effective agent.

It takes three hours of non-stop driving to reach the general area in which Righteous Anarchy is holed up with Bullet's

stolen weapons. According to the satnav's map, their camp is buried deep in the jungle.

I stash the truck around half a mile away, hiding it from view amongst large pieces of foliage. The hiding place wouldn't stand up to close scrutiny, but anyone passing by wouldn't notice it at first glance. Given this area is rife with small militias, there's a chance it could be stolen no matter how well hidden it is, but that's a low-level concern. If I have to find another ride out of here after the job is done, it won't be too difficult, and part of me would love to see the constipated look on North's face if I told him a militia nicked a FISA-issued truck.

Unlike my brother, who would have been content to go in guns blazing and take the extremists out at the very likely risk of getting shot himself, I do some basic recon of RA's camp. I have to be careful about getting too close, unaware as I am about their security measures. Bullet's stronghold was packed with cameras, with at least a dozen outside and just as many inside the building as well.

Although from what I know about groups like RA, they'll probably rely on human observation rather than tech due to monetary concerns and the transient nature of their current operation. They likely planned to steal the guns and get gone as soon as possible. The only thing keeping them here would be finding the best way to transport the weapons out of the country. Those guns will be considered hot, and despite what I said to Leo about the country's corrupt system, RA would be stupid not to take precautions.

Still, my window for taking them out is going to be small. There's a reason Bullet only gave Leo and me one day to decide if we would be willing to comply with his demands.

As I suspected, once I get close enough to where they're holing up, I find eleven men working as their surveillance system, scattered around the camp's exterior. All of them are dressed in the same green camo gear, with guns strapped to their sides, similar to the ones Bullet's men had. It seems they're already utilising their stolen gains.

That alone tells me how amateur level their group is. No one who's been in the game for more than two minutes would use the guns they stole from a man like Bullet out in the open whilst still in the same country. It would be asking for trouble, both from the nearby militias and Bullet's business rivals.

The jungle is dense enough that I'm able to keep myself concealed from the surveillance team's sight with minimal effort. They're spaced out too evenly rather than working together in packs of twos or threes as a more experienced group would. Perhaps they, quite naively, believe the possession of big fuck-off guns will be enough to keep them safe if they come under attack.

I'm almost annoyed Bullet thought he needed to strong-arm an agency like FISA into getting one of their agents to take out an extremist group so clearly in their infant stage. Bullet could have sent any outside team of mercenaries, men unattached to him in an official capacity, to take them out. Although I suppose then he wouldn't have the pleasure of forcing me to

work for him again, or muddying the reputation of FISA, even if he's the only one who knows about it.

Bullet enjoys things like that. Feeling special. Holding secrets over people's heads. He's a really sick bastard, one of them who enjoys psychological warfare more than the physical. If the man could sell weapons meant to fuck people up mentally, he would.

It made my power rage inside me to have Leo so close to that man. I hated allowing Bullet the satisfaction of seeing me squirm, but I hated how he looked at Leo even more. It was clear Bullet worked out within the first five minutes that Leo meant something to me. I know it was partially my fault for letting my protectiveness show, but I couldn't help it. When Bullet talked about Leo being attractive, insinuating that's why FISA sent him in, and looked at him like he wanted badly to reach out and touch him, to ruin Leo the way he has so many other people before, I saw red.

Bullet has a penchant for treating the people he sleeps with like toys he can break without consequence. It made me sick to imagine him getting his hands on Leo. There's a chance if we did as Leo said and went back to Bullet with a "no" over dealing with his extremist problem, he would make a counteroffer despite saying he wouldn't. There are no rules with Bullet. He just pretends there are. I wouldn't have put it past him to make Leo part of the deal instead. It's the kind of thing he'd do, especially if he thought it would hurt me.

Leo might have agreed to it as well, which is the scary thing. He's against killing people to get the right results, but he'd have far fewer problems putting himself in the line of fire. It's not atypical for agents to use sex as a way of getting information from targets. At least it wasn't for OI agents. FISA *might* draw cleaner lines than that, but I doubt it, not with how willing they were to give me free rein over this mission.

There's no way I could ever let that happen. I'd kill a thousand radicals to protect Leo from Bullet's sick games. So maybe me doing this isn't just about getting the information and completing the assignment, I'll admit that. Maybe it's about shielding Leo the only way I know how.

I get a bit closer to the camp, moving through the trees high above where any of the gun-toting members of RA would be able to see me, to check out how many more extremists I'll have to deal with once I get past their pitiful excuse for a surveillance team.

From my vantage point, I'm able to see into RA's camp. It has a very basic layout, with only one large tent and a cluster of tables covered in maps set out in the open. Sitting smack dab in the middle of the camp are Bullet's stolen goods, the crates of weapons peeking out from underneath a large green tarp.

I count ten more men within the camp, either hanging around near the vehicles, mostly jeeps and a few large trucks, likely

meant to transport the guns, or walking in and out of the single tent they've bothered to set up.

Out of thoroughness more than any genuine concern over my ability to handle RA, I spend some more time observing and noting their patterns. After one hour, they change out their surveillance team, but the set-up seems to be the same. None of them stick together, instead scattering like sand in the wind.

Once I'm fairly certain there won't be any surprises, I move back through the treetops, planning to deal with the men on watch first and then work my way in.

Alone as they are, it won't be difficult to pick them off one by one.

Since I didn't bring my silencer with me, using a gun is out unless I want to alert the whole camp and risk them making a run for it.

I go back to the truck, thankfully not yet stolen, and use my power to release the passenger-side window from its frame.

Taking the pane of glass with me, I return to the trees. Moving through the dense jungle is a bit trickier with a pane of glass in tow, but it only takes me a little longer to track down a lone member of RA, especially as he's making a very loud mess out of playing soldier.

Staying high enough the man won't notice the green glow, I crack the passenger-side window's glass into pieces I can use as projectiles. It was a decent-sized window, and the small weapons I've created should be more than enough to use on

the watchdogs patrolling around the camp like incompetent, dizzy snowflakes.

I worry for a moment the man heard the glass splinter into pieces and will get suspicious, but he barely even twitches, apparently assuming it's just more jungle noise.

I'm getting more and more offended over being sent after these idiots. Professional pride is a thing, even for assassins.

When I drop onto a lower branch, my target surprises me by quickly turning towards the sound rather than dismissing it as more jungle noise: praise be, silver fucking star. Unfortunately for him, I'm not giving out participation trophies today. He barely has time to raise his gun before I'm able to get a large chunk of glass lodged in his eye. I drive it in fast and hard, piercing the eyeball and brain in one power-driven thrust.

There's a crisp sound as the glass shard sinks deep enough into his brain matter to send his body spiralling and shutting down from the shock of significant trauma. The man drops to his knees, the fall slower than you'd expect from watching films. It's like he's stuck in slow motion as the world moves on at normal speed around him.

Eventually, he collapses to the jungle floor in an undignified heap, his large gun crushed uselessly beneath him.

I wait a few moments just to be certain the man is dead before pushing on in search of my next target, once again using the dense tree foliage as cover. Glass shards dance between my hands, green light pulsing around them in time with my steady heartbeat.

From my previous observation of their patterns, I learned the guards check in with each other every ten minutes via radio. This means I'll need to be quicker with the next few kills, to make sure they don't alert their comrades to my one-man insurgency of their camp.

Every other member of the patrol unit proves pathetically easy to find. I barely have to track them at all; the idiots practically stumble into my path like flies getting themselves caught in a web.

Of the ten men remaining, I get five of them the way I got the first, by stabbing shards of glass through their skulls. Three others take larger and blunter pieces to their jugulars. This mode of attack is slightly more difficult because it means having to yank the glass out again, so they'll bleed out quickly.

I don't flinch or falter when I'm reminded of my brother and what I did to him, instead pushing that shit down like I was trained to do. I wouldn't have survived this long if I wasn't able to still do my work whilst swimming through trauma flashbacks.

When only two remain, I take more time, allowing them to radio camp and declare the perimeter safe, devoid of any potential threats, before striking. I don't want the people back at camp to get suspicious of their human surveillance cameras going silent on them.

After doing a quick check around the perimeter to ascertain the true defencelessness of the camp and confirming I didn't

miss anyone, I make my way forward through the treetops again.

I consider corpse robbing one of the dead men's rifles but ultimately discard the idea. There's enough glass floating between my hands to use on the rest of RA, and I still have my Sig for back up if I need it.

Something in me rebels at the thought of using Bullet's weapons, however irrational that feeling may be. It's like not wanting to spend dirty money. Bullet's guns are filthy things, coated in the blood of people innocent and not. I'd rather put trust in the power I've grown to hate over the years than mix our grime. I have enough blood on my hands without scraping any more under my fingernails.

Getting the drop on the men in RA's camp will be more of a challenge than picking off the patrol team was, but not by much. They have no one watching the entrance road into their camp, and I doubt they have an exit plan if things go sideways, other than to shoot their way out of it.

There are a surprisingly limited number of situations you can legit shoot your way out of. I should know; my brother tried to utilise that method a hundred times in a hundred different scenarios. I've gotten shot more times than I care to remember thanks to his fight-or-flight switch getting jammed on fight, regardless of the odds or potential consequences.

Positioning myself as close to the camp's inner perimeter as I can without being spotted, I wait for the most opportune moment to unleash my attack.

My time comes sooner than I expected, when a man who appears to be one of RA's leaders stalks out of their one tent and starts shouting in Croatian for his men to gather around the tables covered in maps.

I hold fire until every single one of the remaining extremists has congregated around the tables, therefore putting themselves within my direct sightline. None of them are wearing body armour or even thick jackets to shield them from potential assault, likely due to the country's extreme heat. Their necks and faces are all well exposed.

Rolling my shoulders back and readying my stance on the thick tree branch I've decided to use as my perch, I gather my floating shards of glass and give them a forceful shove with my mind.

A swarm of glowing glass weapons fly through the air and hit their targets within seconds.

Chaos erupts in the camp, men screaming in pain and shock as glass cuts into them, drawing blood and ripping apart unprotected flesh.

Of the ten men in the camp, only seven go down in the initial blast. Most of them take glass to the throat and crumble to the jungle floor in varying states of death or dying.

There was no chance I could kill them all at the same time. Too much margin for error: the distance and wind resistance, as little of it as there is in this humidity, making it near impossible to land successfully lethal hits across the board.

Panic sets in for the RA members who are still alive and capable of movement. One is well enough to get up and run for the vehicles in an attempt to escape. The other two have their guns out and pointed up at the trees, eyes desperately searching for a tangible threat to shoot at.

If they were a little more experienced and a lot less terrified, they might catch sight of me within the greenery of the jungle trees. But their fear-fuelled shock, as well as their general incompetence, makes them sloppy and slow.

I climb down from the tree, depending both on my training and the myriad of ongoing jungle noises to camouflage the sound of my descent to the ground. As soon as my boots hit dirt, I quickly dart away through the trees. Once I'm at a safe distance, I pick up a large rock and throw it at the branches I was hiding in, causing them to rustle ostentatiously. The men fire their guns off in that direction like they're trying to set a world record for the number of bullets wasted in the span of five seconds.

Taking out my Sig and pushing away the sound of Leo's voice calling my gun "Siggy" like the loon he is, I shift between the trees, moving around the camp to attack the men from behind.

Once in position, I fire off two quick headshots, blowing out the skulls of the panicked men who were still shooting at the empty trees.

Turning away from the dead extremists, I set off to intercept the man who's trying to flee in one of the jeeps. He's already

behind the wheel and driving away down the only exit road, forcing me to chase after him at a sprint.

Liquid Onyx survivors are fast, faster than any ordinary human could be, and my years spent with OI testing my endurance by getting me to run until I dropped from exhaustion, I'm probably faster than most.

Since the runaway jeep is open topped, it's easy enough for me to grab hold of the folded back roof and vault myself onto the vehicle, bracing my knees so I don't lose my balance and go flying off it. The driver turns his head at the sound of me thumping down behind him. His eyes widen in fear, and he shouts something at me. I know enough Croatian to understand the word "please" although the expression on his face would have given it away regardless.

One of the things I hate about in-person assassinations, when I'm not able to do the job from afar as a sniper or with poison, is the pleading and negotiation bullshit from my target. When a person begs for their life, it usually happens in stages. They cycle through confusion, fear, panic, anger, and fake acceptance like waves hitting a rock during a storm, one after the other. Useless. Fucking pointless. Because I'm the rock, and I ain't moving for them.

I fire off a shot to the driver's head, blood, bone, and brain matter exploding like a bomb blowing up the side of a building.

When the jeep lurches to the side, I'm almost sent sprawling onto the dirt road. At the last moment, I'm able to regain

purchase by throwing my weight forward and crashing into the passenger seat. I grab hold of the limp corpse slumped beside me and heave it out of the jeep like an apple core, shifting into his vacated seat and thrusting my foot down to jam on the brakes.

I take a moment to breathe as clouds of dust, thick with dirt, puff up around me like infected mist. One of my hands clenches and unclenches on the steering wheel, my other still partially gripping the Sig as I force myself to work through the adrenaline and take back control of my mind and body. Breathing in deeply, a gust of humid air fills my lungs, making me feel like I'm inhaling steam, the back of my throat simmering with it like meat on a grill.

If I were normal, I'd be sweating profusely in this heat, but I'm not, so my body remains mostly dry. My Liquid Onyx blood protects me from the debilitating effects of extreme temperature changes, but that doesn't mean I'm unaware of them. If anything, the experiments OI did on my genetically modified body made me hyper-aware of those shifts. It's like when someone can feel the cold in a previously damaged limb. Or maybe it's more like trauma echoes. My body remembers the pain of being encased in a freezing or boiling metal coffin and lets me know, tremors of memory roving through me like a warning.

Looking over my shoulder, I see the broken, dead man grotesquely heaped on the road behind me like a forgotten piece of rubbish. Earlier, I didn't allow myself to catalogue any differences between the men, finding it easier to morph

them together as “targets” rather than to view them as separate people with names and thoughts of their own. But now the immediate danger has passed, I’m struck by how young the man in the road looks compared to the others. The rest were in their thirties or forties, whereas this one looks barely twenty-five. He might even be younger than me, for fuck’s sake. What the hell was he doing out here?

I’ve always hated it when groups like RA recruit kids. It seems like such a waste to twist a young person’s mind and turn them into cannon fodder, forcing things like me to snatch away the lives they barely got to experience.

This dead kid could have grown up to be anyone or anything. Now he’s nothing and no one, lying still and useless in the road.

I hope whatever cause RA was fighting for is worth it, worth all this mess and death at my hands.

Shaking my head to dismiss the unhelpful sentimentality my mind has just conjured up towards the man I killed, I look away from him and focus on the path ahead for a while. What’s done is done. This is almost over. That’s what I should be focusing on. All I need to do is finish the job, and then I’ll never have to think about it again.

I give myself one more deliberate inhale and exhale before getting out of the jeep and making my way over to the dead man to pick him up. A plan still formulating in my mind, I dump him in the passenger seat beside me and drive back to camp.

After parking the jeep haphazardly near the other vehicles, I go to check all the other bodies, keeping my gun out just in case anyone is still hanging on and looking to cause more trouble.

Once I've confirmed all the men in the camp are dead, I turn my attention to the mountain of crates containing Bullet's stolen weapons.

While circling it a few times and thinking about the damage these weapons have already done without even having been used yet, I come to the steady conclusion there is no fucking chance I'm giving them back to Bullet.

I know it was part of our deal, to kill the extremists and secure the guns, but Bullet enjoys some pushback from his playthings. I'm certain if I cause an epic amount of carnage here and then show up at his stronghold in a dramatic-enough fashion, he'll still give us the information, purely for his own sense of entertainment.

Luckily for me, there are half a dozen canisters of gasoline lying around the camp, presumably meant to top up the vehicles' tanks. It'll only take a couple of them to thoroughly drench the crates.

Knowing that I'll need to get going as soon as the crates are lit up and the rising smoke signals the camp's existence, I deal with the carnage aspect of my plan first.

Roving out into the jungle again, I hunt down the corpses of the patrol team and haul them back into camp. I create a messy

pile of all the dead men, thinking I'll let them burn too once I'm done.

Digging through RA's supplies, I find a stash of machetes, probably the weapons RA was depending on before they stole the guns. They aren't perfect, blunt as they are, but I can make them work.

My work as an OI agent occasionally required me to engage in the act of dismemberment, usually in cases where body disposal was necessary, either to conceal any involvement from OI or to allow for a mission to continue uninterrupted. It's grueling work, separating limbs or a head from the body of a fully grown adult. Lots of muscles and tendons to hack your way through. Even with a sharp-enough blade, it often takes a bit of sawing. Removing a head with one swipe isn't impossible, but you'd need the right weapon as well as a good amount of strength for that.

I don't cut off the head of every man, just enough of them to fill a large canvas bag. It takes a while, and I'm annoyed by the mess it makes of me, but I'm sure it'll be worth the extra effort. Bullet loves a chaotic bit of murder theatre.

Once I've scrounged up a box of matches, I douse the crates and the pile of corpses in igniter fluid, then watch as the stolen guns go up in literal flames.

Chapter Seven

Leo

I spend the first few hours that Jack is gone pacing in the living room of our safe house, like a captured animal with very limited cage space, worried out of my mind about where he is and what's going to happen if he doesn't come back.

In some ways, I've been waiting for something like this since Jack first became my partner. I'm more surprised that it didn't happen sooner.

If he's taken this opportunity to run, to book it and escape his indentured servitude to FISA, I'll support that decision in whatever way I can. Probably by lying my arse off to the agency. Covering for him. Telling them Bullet was full of shit, and Jack got himself killed by mouthing off at the wrong moment. I think I can get my aunt to believe that. I'm an adept liar if nothing else, after all those years spent lying about my mother's condition and pretending everything at home was fine to the few people whose job it was to give a fuckbiscuit about such things.

All I really want in those first few hours is to know Jack is okay, and that he hasn't landed himself in trouble he can't get out of. I hope against hope he hasn't gone after Bullet without me. It would be a disaster if he has. I'd find that far more difficult to explain to North and Anabelle. At best, I could convince them it was all my fault for letting him go off on his own, for not doing my job by being the one to keep him in line. Anabelle will likely think that regardless, but it might be another way of protecting Jack.

The worst that will happen to me is a reprimand and a red mark on my professional file. But it's different for Jack. He's perpetually on thin ice, has been since the word go. He could get thrown back into lockup, permanently this time. Heaven fucking forbid my aunt changes her mind about him being more help than liability and has him terminated. I'd never forgive her if she did, but she wouldn't care about that. At the end of the day, all my aunt cares about is what's best for the agency.

Once day turns into night, and reality starts to set in, I realise Jack might truly be gone for good, and I allow the expected flood of sadness and regret to filter in. They fill up the well inside my chest, the one I dug out especially in preparation for the time when those feelings would need somewhere to go.

It hurts to think our last conversation might have been a terrible fight. Whatever differences we have, Jack has become a friend I sincerely care about. I would have wanted him to leave knowing that, at least.

When morning comes and there's still no sign of my partner, I'm given no other choice than to finish this mission without him.

I very briefly consider contacting North, letting him know about the situation, and that I'll be going to meet Bullet again on my own. But there's no chance North will allow it. He'll pull me off the mission and possibly try sending in someone else. I can't let that happen. Bullet seemed willing to listen to me last time, so maybe he'll also be willing to strike some

other deal with me now that Jack's out of the picture entirely. If he *is* out of the picture and didn't decide to assassinate Bullet on his way to freedom. A distinct possibility, given how Jack feels about the man.

With a tentative plan in mind for how to convince Bullet to renegotiate despite having made it clear yesterday that he would do no such thing, I take a quick shower to wake myself up and head out early.

Getting to Bullet's stronghold on foot would take hours, hours I might not have, so I make a quick detour to the nearest village in search of a vehicle.

My luck must not be total shit, because I find a man willing to sell me his banged-up motorbike in return for an obscene sum of money. It's most of what North left us with just in case we needed it, sans the money we were meant to give to Bullet, which I hid in a wardrobe before I left the safe house. But it's not like I was about to haggle with someone over a bike I desperately need.

Still, I'm pretty sure the man who sold me the bike chuckles with glee as I drive away. I'm almost glad to have made someone happy today. God knows all I've been doing for the last month is pissing off and disappointing people.

As I ride my new rust bucket of a bike, which I have named "Wheezy" because of the horrible sound it makes when I push on the throttle to any significant degree, I spare a moment to think about my mum.

When I originally left to track down Rohan, I put Damon and Rex in charge of making sure Mum didn't accidentally kill herself via extreme vodka consumption, just like I've done on previous occasions when I knew I was going away for a while. I felt bad asking them to keep tabs on her again, especially as she is in no way their responsibility, but it always stresses me out to leave her for too long without supervision.

I don't expect them to babysit her, but if I come home and she's still in one piece, I'll consider it a unilateral win.

Both Damon and Rex told me it was fine and no big thing, which is blatantly untrue, but I appreciated them pretending the situation with my mum isn't as pitiful and unhealthy as I know it is.

Rex also agreed to take on King again until I get back, a task he was far more enthusiastic about. It makes me feel sad, and a bit guilty, that I miss my dog far more than I do my mum.

Even with my noble steed Wheezy, it still takes over an hour to get to Bullet's stronghold in the jungle. Travelling down the bumpy, uneven road I previously traversed with a big truck is no small feat either. It would probably have been easier to get off and walk at that point, but there was a stubbornness in me that wouldn't allow it. The last thing I want is to come off as vulnerable in front of Bullet. He seems the type to take full advantage of all perceived weaknesses in his opponents.

Although I might be deluding myself into thinking he would consider me a rival in any real capacity. Oh yes, me, the twenty-four-year-old junior agent with barely six years of

experience under my belt. I'm sure he's *quaking* in his snakeskin boots. I don't know if Bullet has snakeskin boots, but it wouldn't surprise me in the least if he did. He's just that sort of asshole. I haven't forgotten the tiger-skin rug.

Bullet's stronghold doesn't look any less intimidating the second time around. It's the kind of place I'd expect to see in a documentary made by the BBC, called something like *The World's Ten-Worst Correctional Facilities*.

Parking my bike beside a large black SUV, I take a moment to gather myself, all too aware of the cameras watching me from every conceivable angle. I allow my frazzled mind and tired body a few steadying inhales and exhales before getting off the bike and heading up to the entrance.

When the door opens before I reach the threshold, I'm unsurprised to find the same man I saw yesterday standing there. He has the same massive gun strapped to him as well.

I raise a hand and give him a mock salute, figuring that going in with some level of confidence and bravado, however false, will be my best bet for success.

“So, one question, G.I. Jeeves, is this whole butler thing a permanent gig, or did you just piss off the boss by being taller than him or something?” I gesture up and down the mercenary. He is fucking big, like a goddamn wall. “Is this a wrongful demotion I'm witnessing? Have you put in a complaint to HR? Will you need my witness statement for the tribunal?”

I get a perfectly respectable death glare for my troubles, and the mercenary turns around without responding, the fumes

practically blowing out his ears as he stalks away.

Seeing no alternative, I follow in the wake of his petulant strut.

As before, Bullet is there waiting in the same living-room-type space as yesterday although this time he's already sat down on one of his sofas. He has a tumbler of something light brown, and I'd guess outlandishly expensive, held in one hand. His other hand is occupied with swiping away at a tablet that rests on the leg he has bent and settled over the opposite knee.

He's dressed casually in green cargos and a white T-shirt, looking more military than he did yesterday. From scouring over Bullet's file, I'm aware he's former British special forces. He rose through the ranks of leadership quickly, and it seems he began gunrunning whilst still in uniform. It's likely how he made so many contacts all over the world in the first place.

Bullet looks up at me for a full minute after I enter the room, forcing me to wait. A nice little power play that I'm sure he uses frequently to discomfit the people he meets with. It might have worked on me if I weren't already wound as tight as it's possible to be without popping off like a cork from a champagne bottle.

"Good morning, Agent Snow," Bullet greets me with another of his disarmingly charismatic grins. He makes a pantomime out of searching the area surrounding me, presumably for Jack. "You're alone today?" he asks as if it isn't perfectly obvious I'm there on my own.

I go along with it in the name of keeping the peace. “Yes, it’s just me.” Maybe I shouldn’t admit to having no backup whatsoever, but Bullet would know if I lied about Jack waiting nearby, so I don’t see the point.

Bullet tilts his head as if he’s looking at me from a new angle now that my loner status has been confirmed. “Do I get to know the reason why Agent Jack is no longer joining us, or is it some kind of fun agency secret?” He seems delighted by the prospect, which is more than a little disturbing to witness.

“Agent *Roth*”—I put emphasis on Jack’s official title because the disrespect in Bullet’s tone grates me something fierce—“is not the topic I’d like to discuss with you. I want to restart our conversation from yesterday, about the agreed-upon exchange. You asked for more than money, and I have an answer on behalf of my agency.”

Bullet watches me for a few agonisingly long moments. I try very hard not to squirm under his scrutiny, keeping my posture casual rather than ramrod straight like instinct demands. I’ve been attempting to improve my poker face although it’s possible I’ll always work better when I use my emotions to mask things rather than an actual mask of indifference.

“You better sit down, then,” Bullet says, gesturing at the seat opposite him. He puts the tumbler on his glass coffee table and turns off his tablet, also putting it aside.

When I’m settled on the sofa, Bullet leans forward in his seat, bringing his hands together, arms resting on top of his knees. It’s suddenly apparent I have all of his attention, even

more so than I did yesterday. I can confirm it is not a pleasant experience. It reminds me of being in a club or bar and having some creep disregard my *not interested* signals, no matter how loud I dial them up.

“Okay, Agent Snow.” Bullet nods his head at me. “What is your agency’s response to my offer?”

His offer? That’s a strange way of putting it. More like holding us to ransom in an attempt to strong-arm British agents into murdering some random political group for stealing his *illegal* guns. I can’t tell if he’s taking the piss or genuinely delusional.

“To put it bluntly, FISA will not—”

Before I can finish my sentence, an earsplitting crashing noise erupts somewhere in the building, like the sound of a door being kicked in by a powerful force.

All Bullet’s men react immediately, raising their guns and aiming them at the corridor leading into the living room, apparently expecting some kind of raid or insurgency of enemy combatants.

A very familiar voice calls out into the ensuing tense silence, loud and thick with aggravation. “Bullet, you giant prick! Tell your toy soldiers not to fucking shoot me!”

Bullet only seems surprised for a handful of seconds before his composure returns, and he looks at me with raised eyebrows.

I can do nothing other than stare back at him cluelessly. I have no idea what's about to happen.

There's a tiny part of me that feels immense relief at hearing Jack's voice. I thought maybe I would never hear it again. I didn't realise until just this minute how much that possibility hurt.

Bullet raises one hand and calls for his men to hold fire.

My heart is thumping like a jackrabbit when Jack appears in the entryway. A spitfire of elation roars to life inside my gut, and everything else seems to fade into insignificance. I'm so ridiculously glad to see him, to see he's alive and not off somewhere on his own, it's like a head rush of euphoria knocks me sideways.

It takes me a couple of seconds to clock the gratuitous amount of blood covering Jack, flecks of red on his face and splattered across his arms, soaking his T-shirt. Most of it appears dried and hours old. He looks like someone out of a B-list horror film. There's thick blood in his *hair*, as if he repeatedly ran his bloodied fingers through it.

There's a wildness in his eyes, too, the pale green almost appearing to glow like jack-o'-lanterns lit up by green flames. It's something I rarely see in him unless he's fighting against overwhelming odds, when death laughs with jaws gaping wide beneath him, and survival burns like flash paper from above. In those moments, Jack seems to retreat inside himself so that another version of him can take the reins. He becomes a darker, more insidious man than I know him to be. A man with

no remorse or sense of mercy. It's the closest he ever gets to the monster OI tried to mould him into.

Looking at him now is like seeing a completely different person from the one who kissed me as if I was something precious, who worried so much about hurting me that he tried to sabotage our partnership and force me into protecting myself from him.

Except it isn't. This man *is* Jack. The same man he was yesterday and last week and months ago when we met.

I'm not too proud to admit it scares the hell out of me to acknowledge this is a part of who he is and likely always will be. It's been too easy for me to forget the truth: that just because the tiger lets you touch him without ripping your arm off, doesn't mean he isn't still a fucking *tiger* that *could* rip your arm off.

Bullet turns his questioning look on Jack, his interest clearly piqued. He seems strangely excited, like a child on Christmas Eve.

When Jack throws the canvas bag down onto the coffee table, I'm confused, thinking ludicrously for a moment it's the money we were meant to pay Bullet with. It's only when I lean in a little closer that I'm able to see a man's severed head peeking out from the unzipped bag. I have to clench my teeth to stop myself from outright gagging the moment my mind registers what I'm looking at.

There are more heads in the bag, the stench of them finally reaching my nose and causing me to recoil with further

disgust.

I turn back to my partner, who hasn't moved from the entryway, unable to help myself from staring at him in disbelief and horror.

Jack's expression is grim, his handsome face set in stone, marred by the blood and a slight edge of apathetic cruelty that I'm not shocked by but still hate.

Bullet doesn't seem in the least bit perturbed by the bag of heads Jack dumped on his table. He peers inside the bag with rapt fascination for a handful of seconds before looking at Jack again, a sick twist of satisfaction having overtaken his face.

"I assume this isn't all of them," he prods.

"Couldn't fit all of them in there. Did what I could. Burned the rest," Jack replies, like he's delivering his typical abbreviated report of a mission.

"Ah," Bullet says, nodding along as if he expected as much. "And the guns?"

At this, Jack heaves an uncaring shrug. "They put up a good fight. The guns were lost in the crossfire."

It's so clearly a lie, Jack isn't even trying to sound like he means it.

Bullet's eyes narrow, a brief spark of suppressed rage rising to the surface and exploding like a small firework across his face. He looks apoplectic for about three seconds before he tamps it down, drawing back his temper and schooling his features.

Then for reasons I don't understand, Bullet smiles widely at Jack, as if something very obvious has just occurred to him. He pulls his hands apart and claps them back together.

“Alright, Jack.” Bullet sighs, begrudgingly accepting. “I suppose you owed me some trouble after what happened with Veronica.”

Veronica? Who the hell is that, and what does she have to do with any of this?

Jack reacts to the name with a slight tic of his jaw, that green glow seeming to become more intense for a split second, like he's overcome by some unknown emotion at the mention of this person. I wrack my brain, trying to think if he's mentioned her before, but I draw a blank. Jack's told me some things about his past with OI, but I feel like I've barely scratched the surface.

“Honestly,” Bullet goes on, “I didn't think you had it in you. But well played. I'll take the hit and make us even, yeah?” He's giving Jack the same look of exasperated fondness, as if he's managed to impress him by doing something unexpectedly cunning.

Jack's lips curve into a snarl. “Alright, you melodramatic fuck, does that mean you'll give us the information you promised us before all this bullshit?”

It's somehow even more horrifying to me that he can talk so casually with Bullet when there's a literal bag of heads on the table. A bag of heads he brought with him and is, presumably, responsible for.

Also, it's a bit rich for Jack to call anyone else melodramatic, when once again, he's the one who brought *the bag of severed heads* to the meeting. I mean. Jesus *Christ*.

Bullet doesn't seem bothered by the accusation or the hypocrisy. "Yes, yes, don't upset yourself, Agent. I'll cough up my end of the bargain." He reaches into his cargo pocket and takes out a piece of paper, much like he did yesterday. No doubt the paper has another set of coordinates, this time of Rohan's location.

Bullet offers the paper to me. I'm just about able to gather myself enough to take it from him without my hand shaking.

"You're not getting the money either," Jack states, openly belligerent, like he just can't help himself from digging his teeth in a bit deeper, searching for bone to sharpen his canines on. "You have enough as it is."

"Ah, keeping me humble, Agent Jack?" Bullet croons. "Yes, indeed, it does no good to become greedy. You keep the money. Maybe use it to take your handsome friend somewhere nice if FISA ever deigns to give you vacation time."

Jack doesn't rise to the bait, which is one point in his favour. When we're finally alone, he's going to need all the points he can get his hands on. At this stage, I'm only somewhat certain I'll be able to resist the urge to throttle him.

When Jack finally deigns to make proper eye contact with me, I'm relieved to realise the feral sheen of his irises has dimmed somewhat. But ultimately, it doesn't really matter if he's calmed down now. Everything has already gone to hell,

and there's going to be no easy fix for what's been utterly destroyed by his actions.

I try to make it clear via telepathy how much trouble he's in with me. If people got sent down for emotional crimes, I'd be handing out a possible life sentence to my partner.

Jack seems to pick up on what I'm projecting because his resolute expression cracks just a little, enough to allow a small wince. There's pain in his eyes now. Pain but not regret. Not anything close to an apology.

Bullet distracts me from the mini-mental breakdown I'm having over Jack by saying, "It was good meeting you, Agent Snow. I hope we can do business together again."

Bullet is smiling at me with a sincerity that makes me want to shoot him in the face. I'm not being hyperbolic either. I really want to shoot him in the face. It's an extremely violent thought, one that surprises me with how visceral it is. But I can't bring myself to care too much, not when it feels like I'm drowning in quicksand, choking on wet dirt every time my eyes skitter across the bag of severed heads.

I clench my hand around the bit of paper Bullet gave me, so hard my nails cut into my palm.

Without a word to Bullet in response, I get up from the sofa and walk out of the house, striding past Jack, refusing to acknowledge him or wait to see if he'll follow me.

Jack does come rushing after me, but I'm already swinging a leg over my bike, shoving the paper note into my pocket, and

starting up Wheezy's engine.

“Leo!” Jack calls out to me, but much like he did to me yesterday, I leave him in the driveway with a cloud of brown dust billowing in my wake.

Chapter Eight

Jack

North is there waiting for us when we get back to the safe house.

Leo jumps off his death trap on wheels and storms into the house like he's on a mission to burn it down or something.

I park the truck next to North's and follow my partner at a slightly less manic pace. After the confrontation with Bullet, my rage levels have spiked too high, and I need to retain some measure of calm if I'm going to defuse things with Leo.

Leo's reaction to finding out what I'd done was not unexpected. I'd been under no delusion he would accept my actions. Despite that, his look of complete horror, followed by crushing devastation, was annoyingly difficult to stomach the sight of.

The only surprise was Leo's initial response when I came into the room. His inability to hide his emotions worked in my favour, allowing me to read the profound relief on his face before he clocked the blood and grime. It made me feel sick and twisted up to realise maybe he'd been worried about me all the time I was out there killing people. I refuse to think of it as a betrayal. I was only doing what needed to be done for the sake of our mission. But it wasn't my intention to hurt him.

When I get inside the house, Leo is waiting for me in the entryway, still radiating fury like heat off desert sand. It's the first time I've seen him appear so close to physical violence outside of when it was necessary during a mission.

North is sitting at the kitchen island with his laptop out in front of him. He doesn't seem in any great rush to engage with us, despite presumably coming here to find out how things went with Bullet. North might work at a million miles an hour, but I'll be fucked if I ever get to see the man do anything by anyone else's speed and trajectory than his own. He doesn't even look up when I come in, apparently happy to wait for me and Leo to approach him.

As soon as I'm within touching range, Leo grabs hold of my bicep and drags me roughly down the corridor, away from the kitchen and out of North's sight line. I let him manhandle me because I think denying Leo anything at this point could mean terminal status for our partnership.

Leo stops outside the bathroom and throws open the door, shoving me inside and turning on the shower. He whips back around to pin me with a downright ferocious look of determination.

He jerks his head at the shower. "Get in."

I'm not opposed to having a shower, covered in blood and dried dirt as I am, but surely giving our report to North takes precedence. "What, shouldn't we talk to North first? I doubt he'll give a flying fuck about some blood."

Leo makes an impatient sound, eyebrows scrunching together like he's in physical pain. He gestures at me emphatically. "First off, *some* blood? You look like a murder victim on one of those crappy CSI shows. Second, there's no

chance we can let him see you like this, because then North will want to know *why* you're coated in blood."

Not understanding the problem, I squint at Leo. "Yeah, and? He'll find out when we give our report."

Leo blinks at me for a second or two like he genuinely cannot believe those words just came tumbling from my mouth. "Jack, what the hell are you talking about? We can't tell North what you ..." He struggles to end the sentence, needing to swallow hard before trying again. "What you did to those people."

He says the word "people" strangely, like it's supposed to mean more than it does. I'm not sure what to make of it or the desperation in his eyes, not when he's so clearly in a state over everything that's happened in the last twenty-four hours.

"Why the fuck not?" I demand, feeling increasing discomfort with where this is going.

Leo keeps his voice low as if he's afraid of North overhearing despite the distance and the shower still going loudly in the background. "We can't tell North you killed a random group of civilians on the word of an international criminal, because you'll wind up thrown into isolation. Maybe permanently. If Snow finds out about this, she'll have no choice but to shut you down."

I'm unable to stop myself from staring at Leo with bare-faced incredulity. "You think FISA will care that I killed a load of extremists from Croatia?" I scoff. Even the idea is ludicrous to me.

Leo closes his eyes, hands clenching his hips. He hangs his head and mutters under his breath, “*God, I hope so.*”

I open my mouth to tell him how stupid that is. Snow wouldn't have given me carte blanche over how to complete the mission if she wasn't prepared for me to break the boundaries of what most people would consider acceptable. She's a smart woman and seems to have been in the agency business for a long time. She'll have known exactly what kind of thing I'd be asked to do by Bullet.

Leo might not like it. North might not like it. Hell. Snow herself probably doesn't like it. But the fact remains, getting Rohan back is the priority, and me doing what I did was a necessary step in securing that goal.

Leo starts talking again before I can offer up my objections to his fears, cutting in front of them impatiently.

“I'll give North our report whilst you shower all this off.” He wrinkles his nose at the blood peppered across my skin and clothes, revulsion clear on his face. “We'll figure the rest out when he's gone.”

I'm assuming by “figure out the rest” he means pointlessly arguing about things which have already happened and won't be changed by analysing it in the way I'm certain Leo will want to.

Recognising the resolve in Leo's voice, I know there's zero point in fighting with him about this. When he gets to this level of stubbornness, it's like trying to kick down a wall of

titanium. “What are you going to tell him?” I ask, more than a little curious.

“I’m going to lie my arse off!” Leo snarls at me, canines flashing like he’s going to do something with them if I don’t get with the program and stop questioning him. He waves a hand at the door. “I’ll say Bullet played around with us for a bit, but that eventually, he took the money as agreed.”

“You think he’ll believe that?” I ask doubtfully, regretting the question the second it leaves my mouth when Leo shoots me a venomous glare.

“It doesn’t matter if he believes it.” Leo shrugs aggressively. “He can’t prove otherwise, and as long as he has something plausible to write up in a report to Snow, I don’t think he’ll fight me on it.”

Leo’s probably right about that. I don’t think North would be surprised to learn what I did to get the information from Bullet, but I’m equally sure he’ll accept Leo’s version of events if there’s nothing to actively contradict it. Hence the reason why Leo strong-armed me into the bathroom and demanded I clean myself up before North could get a look at me. We could’ve explained away the blood, told him Bullet set his men on me for whatever reason, but it’ll be easier if we don’t have to tell any more lies than necessary.

“Alright.” I dip my head in a nod, fully aware Leo couldn’t give a toss right now whether I agree with his plan or not.

Leo glowers at me like I tried to argue with him rather than immediately capitulating. He lets out a torn-off noise of anger

and makes to storm out of the bathroom, pushing past me and throwing over his shoulder, “Make sure you scrub your nails. North will notice dried blood under them.”

I grab hold of Leo’s bicep, stopping him. He turns his head to meet my eyes when I tug him towards me, his arm bumping up against my chest as we stand together in the bathroom doorway.

He looks at me with suspicion but doesn’t speak. His eyes travel over my face, taking in the blood again and again, like he’s committing every red fleck to memory so he doesn’t forget them after they’re washed away by the shower.

“Thank you,” I tell him because I understand that his agreement to lie to our handler is entirely for my sake. “For still wanting to protect me.”

Leo’s expression doesn’t soften, not by a single inch, but he leans in closer to me, unafraid despite everything. He lets another pained sound rip from his throat. “I’ll always protect you, Jack. Because—” He stops, seemingly unable to find the right words to explain.

I get a sudden flash of memory from the night we met. When I was cuffed to the toilet, and Leo said he would protect me if I let him. I couldn’t understand why he would offer such a thing, not genuinely, not truly meaning it. I asked him why he would do that, and he said:

“If you can, you should,” I say, so quiet it’s barely audible.

Leo releases a long breath, almost a sigh but not as deep. He avoids my gaze and makes a valid attempt to hide his emotions from me. “Yeah,” he murmurs. “That too.”

My eyes are drawn to his mouth as they often are when he’s standing this close. His mouth, always so quick to smile, always so soft under mine. I remember how it twisted in disgust when he realised what I’d done to the extremists, how it flattened out into contempt when I used what I’d done to get Rohan’s location from Bullet.

It slices away at my insides to acknowledge I might never get to taste him again, might never be permitted to bask in the light of his happiness.

When Leo pulls away from me, I let him go. He walks out of the bathroom, leaving me behind with my dark thoughts and nihilistic predictions about our joint future.

I spend far too much time in the shower, scrubbing away any signs of blood. Hacking people apart is an inevitable disaster in terms of spray control. Blood can be like sand: it gets everywhere. It’s likely no matter how thorough I am, I’ll still find dried patches of red behind my ears a few days from now.

OI was brutal when hosing us down after a particularly vicious assignment, using a literal power hose. The first time they did that, I was ten, and the fucking thing almost took me off my feet with its shockingly strong blast. Dan got smacked into the tile wall behind us and screamed his head off, successfully managing to scare the hell out of the guards with the ferocity of it. I’m not sure if it was intentional on his part,

but the high-pitched, maniacal laugh he gave when he noticed their fear did not go unnoticed or unpunished.

Once I'm done in the shower, I get changed into clean clothes and join the others in the kitchen.

I find Leo and North sitting opposite each other at the kitchen island. They seem to have reached the companionable-silence portion of the debrief, indicating Leo is done filling our handler in on a very-modified version of the last day's events.

North looks up when I come into the room and watches me carefully as I make my way over to stand beside Leo.

“Agent Roth, your partner has given me the mission rundown. I don't suppose you'd like to offer the same?”

North doesn't seem like he had any trouble believing what Leo told him. I could read him asking for corroboration of Leo's story as suspicion over its validity, but North asks me for my report after every mission. He always gets the same response from me as well.

“If you want to hear the same thing told to you twice, I'd recommend investing in a recorder app,” I drawl out at him acerbically. “I'm not fucking here to indulge your petty bureaucratic whims, North.”

Our handler gives me the bland look I've come to expect from him during these moments. He releases a short sigh, mildly irritated by my typical lack of professionalism, but doesn't demand I give him my report. He's learnt where my limits are after a month of working together, and he doesn't

waste time anymore trying to chip away at my hatred for the administrative despotism that comes with working for the government.

Leo hasn't turned to look at me since I stopped at his side. He seems to be concentrating very hard on the sink, which sits somewhere to the left behind North. He's staring intently over our handler's shoulder at the ceramic bowl, like he's trying to win a standoff against it.

I'm not sure if he thinks he won't be able to hold out in front of North if he looks at me, or if the sink has genuinely offended him in some way. It would be nice if I weren't the only one in trouble.

"Well, if that's everything, I'll be heading out." North closes down the laptop he still has sitting in front of him and gets up from his stool. "I've sent the coordinates over to Agent Nash. Once they've been validated by her, and we've done some basic recon, I'll recommend you two are sent in to hopefully retrieve the asset."

I can't help but wonder what Rohan would think about being referred to as "the asset." He was the only Liquid Onyx survivor under Ian Stone's control who got to live a somewhat-ordinary life as his father's heir rather than a perpetually loaded weapon. He left that all behind to work for an agency that thinks of him in similar terms to how OI thought of me and my brother. Rohan has to be aware of that fact, meaning he must think the downsides to working with FISA are worth it to be out from under his father's control.

“Are we going with you?” Leo asks, surprising me with the level tone of his voice. I can’t read anything in it, which is unusual. “Back to Danger, I mean.”

“No,” North answers dismissively. “You might as well stay here until we know where to send you. Agent Nash shouldn’t take long in confirming Rohan’s location. Once we’re sure about it, we’ll fly you out immediately. Until then, take a night off and enjoy the downtime, Agents.”

Leo looks mollified by the answer if a little disappointed. At first, I think it’s because he doesn’t want to have the confrontation we’re both due, but then I remember how long it’s been since he saw his mother. He’s probably worried about her. I’m aware he left his cousin and Damon in charge of corralling Alicia, but he likely won’t be satisfied until he can see for himself she’s not dead in a bush somewhere.

I can’t help thinking Leo would be better off if she did turn up that way, which is not a thought Leo would ever react to in any fashion other than negatively. He seems to love her despite everything. I try to be more understanding about it, for his sake, by imagining if it were Dan. If he were alive but an addict who caused me nothing but misery. I can’t imagine turning my back on him no matter what he did to me. I’d take anything if it meant he got to live this life alongside me again.

“We’ll wait to hear from you then, sir.” Leo tips his head respectfully at our handler.

North returns it, darting one last glance between us before striding out of the safe house and driving off in his FISA-

issued SUV.

I walk around the kitchen island to face Leo, putting my hands down flat on the wooden surface and waiting patiently for him to decide it's time to go.

Leo waits until North has disappeared entirely from view before he lets his gaze track sideways to collide with mine. When he does, it's flame meeting oil; he ignites like a car exploding, raptured by fire and scolding metal.

“Do you remember the first time we went off base together to go shopping, and you thought FISA wouldn't let you off the base, and I said it'd be fine as long as you didn't go on any random murder rampages? Yeah, that right there was a *joke*. As in, I thought it was too absurd an idea to take seriously.”

His voice might be full of fire, but his eyes are ice cold, like two pieces chipped off a glacier.

I react to his snarling vitriol with instinctive defensiveness. “Fuck off, Leo. This wasn't random. The people I killed weren't civilians I just happened to come across in the street. They were extremists who stole guns from *Titanus Bullet*.”

Leo slams a closed fist down on the kitchen island in a show of reckless aggression. “Just because they stole some guns doesn't mean they deserved—”

I cut him off, realising suddenly that he still doesn't understand. “I don't care about the stolen guns.” My own voice is coated in exasperation. I'm so sick of Leo not *getting it*. “I don't care what they were going to use them for either. It

doesn't matter. This isn't about what anyone deserves." I make a low, angry sound in my throat. "Who the hell should get to decide that shit anyway?"

Leo shifts out of his seat and moves away from the kitchen island. He turns his back to me, raising both hands to scrub them through his dark hair. He tugs on the strands so hard it looks like he might wind up pulling clumps out if he's not careful.

I wait whilst Leo processes what I've said. For a moment, I allow myself to think he might finally be hearing me, that he might be able to untwist the knot he's created in his mind by making assumptions about what he believes matters to me, should matter to me, just because it matters to him.

Leo turns on me with fierce indignation, throwing out an arm in my direction. "You told my aunt you didn't want to kill people without knowing why you were doing it!"

It comes out like an accusation. I didn't know he was aware of the exact terms of my deal with Snow. It pisses me off to realise they've been discussing my shit without me there. I knew it was a possibility, but that doesn't make the confirmation any easier to swallow. Not when I'm already het up from what I had to do for the mission and Leo being so openly disgusted with me because of it.

I move back around the kitchen island, taking steps to close the distance between my furious partner and me. Leo watches me like I'm a jungle cat, creeping slowly towards him in the wild. It makes me want to snap at him to *stop it*, to stop acting

like I scare him. He's never done that before. I used to think his severe lack of concern about being so close to me was absurd and vaguely disturbing. But now I can't stand for him to look at me like the other FISA agents do.

It takes a lot of willpower on my part not to shout at him. "Yeah, and I did know why I was doing it, didn't I? For the information. For Rohan." I add somewhat desperately, "Whatever Righteous Anarchy's deal was, it's irrelevant."

Leo's freezing-blue eyes narrow, piercing into me like sharpened blades of crystallised ice. It makes my heart sting inside my chest.

"Is this how you really feel about it?" he asks, sounding lost, as if he's been set adrift on the ocean. "You're okay with any means as long as you understand what the end result will be?" He's afraid of the answer; I can see it on his face.

But I can't lie. I don't even want to.

"If I agree with those ends, then fuck, yes." I take another few steps towards Leo, practically begging for him to understand. "Is saving Rohan worth killing those people? I can't tell you that, Leo, I'm not one of those morally superior vigilantes who thinks they know what's best for everyone." I'm unable to keep the contempt out of my voice when talking about the Liquid Onyx survivors who call themselves heroes.

"But I do think Rohan is *worth saving*, and *that* is our mission." I scowl at Leo, heaving out an aggressively loud breath. "What I don't get is why you keep trying to do shit that isn't the mission."

Leo releases an incredulous laugh. It sounds awful, like he's dragging a noise out from somewhere scrubbed raw and bleeding, like it's a rescue that's come too late.

“Do shit that isn't the mission.” He chews through the words, teeth gnashing with impending threat. “That's what you call attempting to avoid the mass murder of people we know nothing about?”

“Yes!” I exclaim in frustration, my voice rising without my permission. “Why is this so complicated for you? We're not supposed to be saving the world or people in general; we're meant to be saving *one man*, and what I did got us one step closer to doing that.”

“You were the one who got pissed at me just the other day for making it all about the mission when I asked you what your issue was with Bullet,” Leo argues, missing the point entirely. “You can't turn around now and say my problem is that I don't care about it enough.” He sounds just as exhausted by this argument as I feel, which means we should probably table it for another time, when things aren't so fresh.

But I've never been any good at making sensible choices when it comes to Leo. If I were, I would have refused to work with him from the moment I realised he was so softhearted. I certainly wouldn't have fucked him. I wouldn't have allowed us to form a bond capable of hurting either one of us if damaged.

“I'm not saying you don't care enough,” I explain, scraping up the last dredges of my typically non-existent patience. “I'm

saying you care too much about the consequences of actions that are well within the mission parameters.”

This time when I take a step towards Leo, he very purposefully backs away and gives me the look I’ve been dreading, the one that says he’s seeing what everyone else seems to all the time, the mix of outright fear and revulsion at what I’m capable of.

His automatic reaction triggers something scalding hot and cruel inside me, the need to cause pain to match my own. I sneer at Leo, top lip curling as scorn rips free from mouth. “But then I can’t be surprised by that, can I? You spend your entire life trying to save everyone, all because of the one person who you’ve never been able to save from herself.”

My words seem to hang between us for a brief span of time, like they need to be absorbed into the atmosphere and echoed back before Leo can believe he heard them correctly.

His response is fired off like a warning shot, the vocalised equivalent of a bullet whizzing past my ear. “Fuck you, Jack.”

I should stop now, put the shovel down and refuse to dig any deeper, but I can’t seem to stop myself from throwing grenades into the middle of this argument. “Nah,” I scoff at him. “Been there, done that, not interested in fucking someone who lies to themselves about basic shit. Like the fact that your whole life is wrapped up in being an agent for FISA. Like how you’ve made it so nothing else is allowed to matter.”

Leo flinches away from my conclusions, chin cutting to the side as he avoids looking directly at me. “You don’t know

what you're talking about." His jaw locks up, as if he's trying to hold in something worse.

For all the ways Leo is brave when it comes to facing the dangers presented by other people, he's shockingly terrible at confronting all the ways he's a danger to himself.

"You think I haven't been paying attention?" I demand, my anger building and spreading, rapid as a forest fire. "All your friends are agency. Your aunt is the fucking buttons master. You keep getting into relationships with bad people who won't treat you well, because you want them to fail."

Then because I've already thrown myself into the abyss like I'm ready to be swallowed whole by it, I fire off a shot meant to extinguish any remnant of light that exists between us. "It's why you've suddenly decided you want *me*: because you know it'll only end in disaster."

My bullet hits centre mass, the impact shuddering through Leo like a small earthquake. His eyes are wide and wet as he stares at me in disbelief.

I make another scornful sound in the back of my throat, driving the point home with a sharp implement stabbed into the fresh wound I made in Leo's chest. "Admit it. I'm just another excuse not to live your life for real."

Leo doesn't take nearly as long to respond this time.

"Oh, right, okay," he growls back at me, voice so hard it feels like he's chewing on rocks and spitting out the pieces.

“And you think I don’t know the only reason you want me is because of Dan?”

What the fuck does that mean?

I inhale sharply, confused by the acidic feeling that begins fizzing in my stomach at the mention of my brother in this context.

Wary of Leo’s meaning and afraid of how out of control my emotions have become, fury and anguish ravaging my insides like rats, I give him a warning I can only hope he takes seriously. “Watch your step, Snow.”

Leo snatches up my warning and breaks it over his knee with a definitive crack. “Like *hell* I will,” he barks, stalking forward and planting himself right in front of me, his earlier need for distance forgotten. “Your brother was everything to you. He was the one person who cared about you. He was your partner.” The ice in Leo’s eyes melts ever so slightly at this, his voice breaking a little.

It takes him a minute to gather his rage back up and bitch-slap me with it. “Then he died, and, like, what? A *week* afterward you met me. And barely three months after that, I became your partner.” His voice has lowered in both volume and tone, becoming a sad rumble as he seems to remember exactly who and what he’s talking about. Who he’s using as a weapon against me. He’s almost soft when he goes on. “It doesn’t take a psychologist to work out you’ve transferred some of your feelings about Dan onto me. It’s why you want to protect me so much: because you couldn’t protect him.”

It's worse than if he had yelled it in my face. It's worse than if he had told me I was a monster who deserves termination for all the things I've done. It's worse than him looking at me like I'm a rabid dog who needs to be put down for the good of everyone around me, for *my own* good.

"Leo, stop." I can barely get his name out with how dry my mouth feels. It's as if I've been gurgling mouthfuls of nails and sand.

Behind me, I hear the sound of glass cracking. There are three windows in the kitchen.

Leo looks devastated by his comprehension. I don't know how long he's been thinking this. How long he's been thinking that all I see when I look at him is some fucked-up replacement for Dan.

"Telling yourself you care about me," Leo murmurs, resigning himself to some miserable truth, "is just another way of avoiding grieving for your brother."

Hiding is for real people.

It's one step too far, and it's my fault because my warning was too weak, and I made the same mistake as Leo in thinking I was safe enough to let my emotions loose around him.

There are three windows in the kitchen. Every single one of them implodes inwards, spraying glass at my back and cutting into Leo. He instinctively tries to duck away from the blast, covering his face, but pieces of glass still slice at his bare arms.

It's like a fog of grey and black comes over my mind, everything around me disappearing as a lightning strike of rage and grief courses through me as if I'm a rod stuck out in the middle of a storm.

Between one blink and the next, my hand wraps around Leo's throat, and I slam him into the nearest wall, pinning him there. Leo's head hits the wall hard, jarring him badly, pain creasing his features. He closes his eyes and tries to suck in a breath. I tighten my hold on his throat, preventing him from inhaling much-needed air.

Leo's eyes are wide and blue and completely devoid of the fear I expected, *wanted*, which makes little to no sense. How could he look more afraid of me when we were arguing about my sense of morality in regards to hurting other people than now, when I'm cutting off his lifeline with my hand?

He looks at me with those pale-blue eyes, and there is only one thing I see in them. Empathy.

It makes me so fucking pissed I want to snap his neck right here and now.

I keep my hand firmly clasped around his throat and bring my face close enough to his that our noses brush. My free hand is fisted, forearm braced against the wall beside Leo's head.

“You could *never* replace him!” I snarl into his face.

Leo doesn't flinch. If anything, his expression saddens, eyes becoming almost wet with a sympathy I want to beat out of

him. It's weak. He's so fucking *weak*.

Pick it up, Jack.

I hate how vulnerable he allows himself to be for the sake of other people. I hate how much it scares me to know he would put himself in peril to protect someone less worthy than him. I want to show him the consequences of letting his kindness control his choices. He should understand how cruel the world really is, how much it will take from you if you let it.

Leo brings his hands up to touch my waist, one hand slipping under my T-shirt to touch burning skin. I feel flushed from anger, the heat of our argument lighting me up from the inside in a way the extreme weather is incapable of. My blood feels like tar in my veins, thick and scalding, eating away at my flesh and bone like acid through metal.

I don't know how it works, but Leo's hand gently stroking over my torso and back seems to ground me in the moment. His touch is oddly soothing, calmer than it should be given how violently I'm still holding him against the wall. He keeps it up, not stopping no matter how much I tighten my hand on his throat.

Rather than struggling for freedom when it becomes clear he's in dire need of oxygen, Leo takes his campaign of confusing softness one step further and leans forward just enough to press his lips to mine. It isn't a kiss so much as a reassuring touch, just like the touch of his hands.

I loosen my hold on Leo's throat enough to let him breathe and wait as he gasps in lungfuls of air, almost panting against

my face, hot, wet heat expelling from his mouth. When he's calmed down enough to breathe normally, he doesn't try to escape or put any distance between us at all, like I thought, *hoped*, he would. Instead, he moves both of his hands to my back and presses me in closer to him, melding us together until we're so tangled up in each other I can no longer tell where he begins, and I end. It's startlingly intimate and sets my heart pounding to a rhythm that feels too fast behind my ribs.

We breathe together for a while, our mouths brushing lightly whenever we shift position in any direction.

When Leo speaks, it's with a rasping tinge from having been choked. I'd be sorry for it, but in reality, I'm only sorry he doesn't seem to have learned anything from it. Leo never learns to be afraid of the right threats, to protect himself from things like me, to put a value on the life I would kill and die to protect, no matter what he thinks about how I've connected my feelings about him to my grief over the loss of my brother.

"No, I won't ever be able to replace Dan." Leo runs his fingers along the base of my spine, rubbing across it with the same soothing gentleness, banishing the ache and stab of emotion any mention of Dan usually evokes. "That's exactly my point." He leans his head back enough to meet my eyes again, and I allow it even though the distance feels all wrong, and I instantly want to eclipse it.

At my questioning look, Leo tries to explain, voice as soft and calming as the feel of his hands on my skin. "You said you're tired of feeling like a failure in this partnership? Well,

the same goes for me. You think I refuse to see the darkness in you. I think you're using me as a way to cope with losing Dan. If we're both right, then we need to stop closing our eyes to the truth; otherwise, we'll never be able to see each other clearly. We'll never be able to work together."

"Do you still want to work together?" I ask, then feel the instant kick of regret. I don't want to know if his honest answer is in the negative. He has every reason to say hell, no. I've given him every reason. But if he tells me what I deserve to hear, I'm not sure what it will do to me.

The thought of losing him in any capacity despite everything I've done to purposefully drive him away is terrifying.

Leo is probably right to say part of the reason I'm scared to lose him is because he's all I have, the same way Dan was all I had. The problem with only having one person you care about is that when you lose them, you don't just lose *them*, you lose *everything*. I know what that feels like now, and I'd genuinely rather let Snow terminate me than try to live through it again. There isn't a day that goes by when I don't curse Dan for not letting me take the fall that day in the grey room.

"Yes," Leo answers like it's an easy decision for him, which is yet more evidence he has a death wish. His expression flattens out into something more serious when he adds, "But we can't keep going as we have been. I need you to be real with me. You can't just run off like you did yesterday and do things without telling me. Seriously, Jack, do you have any idea what I thought when you were gone for so long?" When I

shake my head no, Leo releases a harsh breath and bumps his forehead against mine. “I thought you’d run off for good. Escaped, finally. I didn’t think you’d be coming back.”

That throws me off balance like a swift steel-toed boot to the cranium.

His assertion that I would leave the agency, leave *him*, just like that because of a stupid disagreement about a mission is genuinely bewildering to me. How could he think that? How does he not understand there’s absolutely nothing in this world that matters to me as much, let alone more, than being with him?

Since I’m too much of a coward to tell Leo how I’d rather fucking die than be without him, I tell him the other reason. “Leo, I’ve spent my entire life having my time dictated by an agency, living within a certain kind of structure. Without it, I don’t know how to ... *be*.”

“You could find out,” Leo pushes although he tightens his grip on me as he says it, like his mouth is saying one thing and his body another. “Learn how to do life, just like the rest of us.”

I expel a loud, annoyed sound and tighten my hold on his throat again in punishment or possibly for emphasis. “Stop trying to make me leave you,” I growl at him.

“It’s not about me!” Leo argues vehemently, always the master of his own demise. “You could have a *life*. A proper one, where no bloody agency would ask you to kill for them.”

I crack the underside of my fist against the wall in frustration. “You need to get it through your thick head, I don’t care about having to kill people. I’m an assassin, Leo. I know you don’t understand how I can be okay with that, but can you at least believe that I am?”

Leo gets another conflicted look on his face, like he’s trying so hard to shift his worldview to accommodate me and just can’t quite do it. “I don’t think ... alright, yeah, I’m sorry,” he eventually relents, sagging back against the wall despite there being no real space to do so.

“Okay, well.” I stroke my thumb over his throat and nudge his cheek with my nose. “If you want more ‘communication’ from me, then I’m going to need you to actually *listen when I talk*. I’ve told you a million times I have no interest in running off and starting some bullshit life as a civilian.” I pull back and lock gazes with him again. “When I tell you things about me and my life, I need you to believe me, or you’re right, this partnership won’t work.”

And it has to work if I’m going to be allowed to keep Leo.

“Yeah, okay, deal,” Leo breathes out in agreement. “You be straight up with me, and I promise I’ll listen from now on.”

Relief hits me like a runaway train, and I all but collapse into him, letting my hand slip from his throat and yanking him far enough away from the wall I’m able to bury my face in his neck. I wrap my arms around his waist and hold him to me with a strength I know must be hurting him, but Leo doesn’t protest and hugs me back with equal ferocity.

“You want to go lie down for a bit?” Leo asks me after a decent amount of time has passed with us clinging to each other pathetically.

“Hell, yes,” I agree eagerly, the exhaustion of the day starting to take its toll. “Feel like I’m gonna fold in like a fucking deck chair any minute.”

Leo laughs at that, the sound still a bit strained from the earlier choking. He leans back from our embrace and kisses me softly on the mouth. It sends shudders of excitement and warmth through me despite the tiredness of my mind and body.

“How about you find a bed to collapse on, and I’ll make you something to eat,” Leo offers. “You’ve probably not had anything since yesterday, and your weird metabolism is getting snarly about it.”

I hum in irritation but don’t protest Leo’s proposal of rest and food.

Leo pulls away from me entirely and skirts around the kitchen island. His feet crunch through the window glass. He shoots me a semi-amused look over his shoulder. “You’re going to catch so much shit from North for fucking up one of FISA’s safe houses with your glass-exploding powers. You know how he feels about Liquid Onyx survivors throwing tantrums and costing the agency money.”

Leo isn’t wrong about that. North has complained so many times about the Liquid Onyx survivors who are part of the Secret Superhero Service destroying public property and

causing the taxpayers more and more trouble. If Diane Foxley knew about him and his prejudice against supers, she'd want an interview. He's almost as anti-vigilante as I am, which is moderately hilarious.

I press a hand over my heart. "The sheer lack of fucks I give about the agency's shady property portfolio is truly profound, Leo. They could write sonnets about that shit."

Leo lets out another laugh, this one deeper and longer lasting. It ignites the sunshine on his face, lips spreading into the smile I've found myself becoming increasingly addicted to.

I wait until Leo turns away before I go take a much-needed timeout in the nearest bed.

Chapter Nine

Leo

I let Jack rest on his own for a few hours, using the time to clean up the glass from the kitchen and deal with the tiny cuts that Jack's flying glass made on my arms before making an absurd number of sandwiches for him to devour. Considering how hungry he must be, I expect him to unhinge his jaw like a snake and eat them all in one go.

Jack is awake when I go in and watches me as I drop down next to him on the bed with two plates stacked with bread and meat. He sits up to rest back against the headboard, giving me a look of thanks and picking up one of the thick sandwiches. He offers up a little smile when he bites into the sandwich and realises what I've put on it.

I've learnt Jack isn't a very picky eater, which would make sense considering how he was raised, but he is partial to honey in his sandwiches. He'd probably eat sugar and honey from a jar if I let him.

Having already eaten in the kitchen earlier, I lay down beside Jack, resting my head on the pillow and allowing my eyes to flutter closed. After all the awfulness and high emotion today, I feel drained enough to sleep for a week.

Jack cards his fingers through my hair, tentative with his gentleness like he's afraid of getting it wrong.

Once he's finished eating, Jack moves the empty plates to the nightstand and shifts down the bed until we're facing each other. The distance between us is a foot at most.

Still, Jack doesn't breach the divide to touch me, keeping one arm buried under the pillow and his free hand pressed to the white duvet. We gaze at each other from across the expanse that separates us, eyes locked on hard, like we're both waiting for something significant to happen.

I'm reminded of that day a month ago, right before we first slept together. I wonder if Jack will be as willing to be honest with me now as he was then.

"Will you tell me what he made you do that caused you to hate him so much?" I ask, knowing Jack will understand who I mean.

Jack is silent for a long time. So long, I think he won't answer at all. When he finally does, it's both a relief and a surprise.

"There was a girl who agreed to testify against him," Jack tells me, voice quiet and reserved, like he needs to distance himself just to remember it. "Young, not involved in the gunrunning business."

"Did she accidentally witness Bullet in the middle of a weapons transaction or something?" I ask, unsure how far to push this. The fact he trusts me enough to share awful things is the part that matters to me, not the actual content of his secrets.

"Nah." Jack releases a frustrated exhale. "Law enforcement knew they would never get Bullet on the arms dealing. His operation is too well-run. They did their usual thing of trying

to get the bastard on something else, something they could make stick.”

“She wasn’t a witness?” I feel dread prick at the inside of my chest.

Jack’s jaw locks, a familiar spike of anger wrenching across his face. “No,” he says more forcefully than I think he means to. “She was just a girl who went to the wrong house party. Bullet *hurt* her, and—” He stops abruptly, clearly needing a second or two of controlled breathing to reign in his temper. “She was willing to let them use it as an excuse to send him down.”

I put all my willpower into not flinching at the implications of both what Bullet did to the girl, and also what Jack was told he had to do. “He ordered you to kill her?”

Jack closes his eyes, like maybe he’s afraid of what he’ll see on my face in reaction to the truth. “Yes.”

I don’t want to ask, but it feels wrong not to, like I’m hiding from what’s real the way Jack has been accusing me of. If I want him to trust me, to properly trust me, I can’t pretend this part of Jack’s life never happened. “And did you?”

Jack lets out an unsteady exhalation of air, the sound juddering painfully out of him. He grasps hold of the duvet, fisting it. His hand tightens until his knuckles turn white. Whatever Jack might say about feeling no regrets over his past actions, it’s clear he feels immense shame about *this*.

“She was the mission.” He opens his eyes, and I’m shocked by the extreme level of emotion in them. “I didn’t want to do it. I really fucking didn’t want to.” His voice breaks in the middle of his sentence. “But OI said it was either the girl or Dan, and I—” He cuts himself off, turning his face into the pillow, body twisted so tight he’s like a coiled spring.

“What was her name?”

“Veronica,” Jack answers immediately, voice muffled by the pillow. He chokes out a barbed laugh, his self-disgust evident on his face when he looks at me again. “She thought I was just some lost kid,” he mutters harshly. I’m not sure if it’s to me or to himself.

A kid, though? If Veronica was young herself, he must have been even younger, for her to think he was a child.

“How old were you?”

Jack shrugs. “About nine or ten. Don’t remember. Time blurred together a lot back then.” He sounds just as flippant as he always does when he talks about his time as a child-assassin. He’s never seemed to grasp just how much of a headfuck it is for other people who didn’t grow up like he did to think about a nine-year-old killing at all, let alone professionally.

“Jesus *Christ*,” I murmur to myself, trying to imagine what that would have been like for Jack and utterly failing. He would have been so little and probably scared as hell of losing Dan, his only source of comfort and protection. How must it feel to Jack now that Dan is dead, after all the years he spent

committing horrific acts just to keep his brother alive and by his side? Does it feel like a waste? Does it make his regret over what happened with Veronica dig in twice as deeply?

“That isn’t an excuse,” Jack bites out at me. “I knew exactly what I was doing. I lured her away from her guards by pretending to be hurt and afraid. Told her I was searching for my parents.” Jack sounds like he’s offended that I’d give him any leeway for what he did, and I realise he must think I’m excusing his behaviour again, not listening to him, closing my eyes to the reality of who he is.

“I’m not excusing what you did,” I promise Jack, covering the hand he still has fisted in the duvet and squeezing it reassuringly. “I’m just not condemning you for it either. Same as when I found out about Rohan’s mother. You did what you did, and it’s not my place to withhold or offer forgiveness. Only you can do that for yourself, babe.”

Jack’s brows crease in consternation. He gives his head a small shake, dismissing the idea of forgiving himself for things he views as unforgivable or at least thinks himself unworthy of.

I don’t pressure him by insisting he is deserving of a second chance at living his own life, this time with the freedom to make his own choices. You can’t force that kind of acceptance on a person. All I can do is show him what he’s worth to me as a friend and partner.

As hurt as I was after the meeting with Bullet, I regret how I reacted to what Jack did to those extremists. He looked so hurt

and angry when I backed away from him. I'm certain that's what instigated him to come at me so violently.

I still wish he hadn't run off and committed *mass murder*, but he is right that we got the information from Bullet because of it, and at this point, we need to move forward with what we have.

Jack doesn't seem inclined to speak again, his emotions likely spent after revealing the truth about Veronica and his hatred for Bullet. I completely understand why Jack feels so strongly towards the man. The thought of him ordering child Jack to murder an innocent girl, who he assaulted, makes me want to find Bullet again and kick the shit out of him. If I ever get the chance to help put him behind bars, I'll snatch it up with both hands.

It feels like I should be offering something in return for Jack's honesty. I know that's not how it works with trusting people; it isn't a tit-for-tat kind of deal. So maybe it's more about wanting Jack to know me better and possibly realising I'm not as shiny and softhearted as he thinks I am. He already seems to have grasped some of the damage my mother and her alcoholism has done to me, but he doesn't know how much more there is to it.

I fill the silence with a topic less fraught with nightmare-inducing horror, but it's still a truth I haven't shared with him. One that, arguably, Jack has every right to know. I draw in a long breath to steady myself. "My dad worked for Obsidian Inc."

Jack blinks at me like a startled owl for a handful of seconds, his mouth opening and closing a couple of times, as if he's forgotten how talking works.

"Your dad ... was an OI agent?" he manages eventually. I can't get a good read on his tone. He sounds unsure but not entirely shocked by the information. I don't know if that's because he's hiding his reaction on purpose, or if he's preparing for worse news.

"Yeah. He joined up young," I tell him, like it's some kind of excuse. It couldn't possibly be to Jack. He doesn't think it matters that he was *nine* when he did unspeakable things for OI. "My uncle Alex did too. But Alex left and became a FISA scientist after my cousin Rex was born."

"But your dad stayed with OI?" Jack looks more curious than angry, peering at me like he's trying to place someone in his memory who resembles me. "What was his name?"

It feels strange to be talking about my father to someone. I haven't so much as spoken his name to anyone in years. The only time I hear it is when Mum is astoundingly drunk and curses him out. "Roux. Roux Nova."

Jack's eyes widen slightly with recognition. "I knew him." A small frown creases his brows as he nods to himself. "He was my handler for a while."

It's even worse than I imagined. The thought of my father mistreating Jack, condoning the imprisonment and torture of a child, and then coming home to me and my mum is profoundly disturbing. "I'm so sorry, Jack." I try to pull my

hand away from his, shame flooding through me in a tsunamic-level rush.

Jack snatches hold of my hand before I can retreat entirely and pins it down on the duvet between us like he just beat me in an arm-wrestling match. “Fuck off with your misplaced guilt, Leo,” Jack grumbles at me in annoyance. “Your dad was probably the best handler we ever had. But then he aborted a mission to save me and Dan from getting captured, and OI wouldn’t let him do it anymore. I guess they thought he was *sympathising* with us too much.”

Although his reveal that my father protected him and Dan does shock me, it doesn’t change the fundamental fact of what he did to them. “I think maybe he was the one who brought you in to be experimented on in the first place,” I admit to Jack, expelling it like bile clogged in my throat.

“He was,” Jack confirms with an ease I don’t understand. I expected the news to upset him. I expected a blast of fury to be aimed squarely in my direction. “He told me on our second mission together,” Jack explains when he notices the confusion on my face. “Said he was sorry, but he had to do it.”

“He *had* to?” I demand incredulously. “What the hell does that mean?”

“OI wanted to take Rex and *you* for the experiment.” Jack scowls fiercely and gives my trapped hand an extra-hard squeeze, like the idea of that bothers him as much as the reverse does me. “Your dad said he would get other children for them in exchange for excluding you and Rex. He was

protecting his family, and I could tell it killed him to do it. He hated himself.”

It’s beyond bizarre to lie here and listen to Jack defend my father, the man who played a significant role in destroying his life. “Then why the hell would he stay with OI after all that?” I don’t know if I’m asking Jack, so much as I’m wanting to demand an explanation from my father.

“You think OI would settle for one payment from your dad?” Jack scoffs, anger finally sparking to life in his eyes. “Nah. He was on the hook for life. Working for them was his way of keeping everyone he loved safe.” His voice softens, a rare occurrence from my perpetually blunt partner. “I’m not telling you how to feel about your own father, Leo. But honestly, I’m not pissed at him.”

He makes it sound so bloody simple when it isn’t. Can’t be. It certainly isn’t for me.

“Seriously? I don’t get it. Why wouldn’t you just kill him the second you found out?”

I’m not sure why I’m pushing this so hard. It’s not like I want Jack to resent me for what my father did, but it feels weird after I’ve spent so many years hating him for being such a terrible human being. As much as it hurt when he imploded my childhood and sent my mum into a downward spiral that she has never recovered from, the thought of all the innocent people he killed or damaged on OI’s orders is worse.

“Kill him?” Jack gets this perplexed expression on his face that would be comical in any other scenario. “What for?”

I have to resist the urge to reach over and flick my nightmare of a partner in the eye. “Oh, I don’t know, Jack, maybe because he kidnapped you so an evil organisation could *experiment* on you?”

“Yeah, and?” Jack appears completely bemused, like the concept of justified retribution is utterly foreign to him. “Killing your dad wouldn’t change that.”

“Hold on.” My head is starting to hurt with all the whiplash Jack’s bizarrely diplomatic responses are causing. “So you’re willing to kill a whole load of strangers but not someone who hurt you directly?”

“How many times do I need to explain this?” Jack growls at me in frustration. “That was the mission. It wasn’t about me, it was about Rohan. Killing your dad wouldn’t have been a mission, it would’ve been personal, and I don’t go in for all that revenge bullshit.”

“Why not?” I ask, more curious than anything else at this point. Jack is usually so vocal and physically demonstrative about his rage towards anyone he deems an enemy, which is a whole hell of a lot of people. It’s strange to hear him say he wouldn’t use violence to enact the one thing no one could blame him for wanting: vengeance for what was done to him and his brother.

“Because I’m not *John Wick*, am I?” Jack exclaims indignantly. “I’m not a dramatic bitch.”

“Bit bold of you”—I raise my eyebrows at him—“to call Mr. John Wick a dramatic bitch when I don’t remember him

throwing a bag full of severed heads onto the table of a cartoon-level evil arms dealer in any of his movies.”

Jack ignores my flippancy. “What’s done is done. I don’t see the point in killing someone for what they did in the past. It won’t help anyone.”

It won’t *help* anyone? Who is this person, and what did they do with my furious porcupine of a partner?

With Jack glaring back at me obstinately, it takes me a second or two to realise the obvious thing I’ve missed.

I remember when Jack told me about Dan taking back a piece of himself from OI by claiming his nickname as his true name. Then I remember Jack telling me about something his brother once said: “*Never give them anything they’ll fight to take.*”

“Wow.” I stare at Jack in awe, feeling a soft twist of pride in the other man’s resolve not to be completely distorted by OI’s will. “They tried really hard to ruin you, didn’t they? And you were like, fuck that noise, no. You don’t get everything.”

Jack puffs out a rush of air, his eyes shifting away like he doesn’t want me to see how right I am. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say he looks bashful.

His expression sinks abruptly into a glower, like something unpleasant just occurred to him. “You know I did just as much fucked-up shit as your dad did, don’t you?”

“Jack, don’t.” I knock that down immediately. “It’s not the same.”

Jack's glower deepens. "Why the hell not?" he demands.

I scowl right back at him, unwilling to bow under his apparent disapproval. "Because you were an abused child who was given zero choice, and my father was a grown man who could have chosen to walk away at any point."

Jack makes a face at the word "abused." I'm fully aware of how much he dislikes that term being applied to what happened to him and his brother. God help any agency psychiatrist who tries to label Jack a "victim." He once spent an hour viciously complaining about the time Green dared to suggest he was a "trauma survivor."

"You're wrong. They used Dan to control me, just like they used you to control him. You can keep on hating him if you want, but if you're saying you won't condemn me for my actions under OI, it's stupid to hold the same crap against your dad." Jack's voice softens. "Not when it hurts you so much to think he's an irredeemable monster."

It takes me aback to realise Jack has picked up on how difficult it is for me to reconcile the man who raised me with the OI agent who could do such terrible things to other people, when he was the one who taught me to live by the idea that if you can help, you should. It was a complete headfuck to find out my father was a hypocrite as well as a killer. In some ways, that was harder for me to deal with.

"Aren't you always the one telling me I shouldn't be so reckless when it comes to forgiving people?" I ask, mostly

teasing now, hoping to inject some lightness into this conversation before we both drown in our mutual angst.

Jack misses the neon sign I just erected in the name of toning down the intensity. He looks me dead in the eye and says in a low, begrudging rumble, “I think you’re the only person I’ve ever met who genuinely makes being kind look brave.”

My heart seizes in my chest at the sincerity with which Jack made that declaration. I don’t know how else to respond, other than to lean over and press a hard kiss to his mouth. Jack smiles under my lips and raises the hand he was using to pin mine to the bed to grasp the back of my neck. He kisses me with equal fervour, tongue stealing inside my mouth and lazily dominating, like the big, fuck-off jungle cat he is underneath that very human facade.

We kiss for a long time, trading breath and spit and noises of impatience or pleasure, grinding against each other without any real intention of getting off. We don’t go further than that, keeping our clothes on and remaining above the covers. It’s the kind of passionate mess of limbs and wet, open-mouthed nonsense I haven’t done since I was a teenager and really into someone for the first time.

When evening dawns, I leave the bed long enough to make us a spaghetti dinner. After we’ve eaten, we go back to bed and spend the rest of the dwindling light-time hours trading soft touches. At some point, Jack rests his head on my chest as I read to him from a fantasy book I brought with me. He took the piss out of me for bringing a book on a mission, but when I

asked if he wanted me to read to him, he couldn't say yes fast enough. Jack is surprisingly fond of dragons, it turns out.

Hours later, when we fall asleep tangled together on the bed, feeling too warm from both body heat and the general hotness of the country, my last thought is of how I'd give almost anything to keep Jack Roth.

Chapter Ten

Jack

North calls in the morning to tell us we need to head straight for the airport. We're being sent back home. According to the location that Bullet provided, Rohan has been practically under our noses this entire time, in the north of England. The facility he's being held in isn't one we were aware of and had previously raided, which means it isn't one I've been to before, because I gave up all the ones I knew about to Snow as part of our deal.

It doesn't surprise me that OI has facilities I don't know about. That organisation has a million secrets festering inside it, like maggots writhing within a corpse. If you peel back the skin, you'll find enough sickening things to give you nightmares for a lifetime. The Liquid Onyx survivors are hardly the first or last people OI experimented on and spent years fucking around with.

There's a weird energy between Leo and me this morning. I don't quite know how to describe it, but we feel more settled in our shared space than we did before, like we've brokered a silent peace treaty after decades of non-stop war.

When we woke up clinging to each other like desperate, possessive vines, a powerful sense of protectiveness came over me. I looked at Leo, with his disastrously messy hair and soft, kiss-swollen lips, and I wanted to dig my fingers into him and never let go. I wanted to bind him to me, fuse us together like two pieces of metal held under intense heat. It wasn't an unfamiliar desire when it came to Leo, but it was the first time

I'd felt it so strongly when we weren't in any kind of immediate danger.

A lot went on yesterday, and I've only just begun to unpack it all. I don't know how to feel about our fight in the kitchen, or our conversation on the bed, or the new level of intimacy we seem to have reached as a result of it all. I think we broke through some barrier we'd previously been smashing into every time we tried to understand our ingrained differences.

Time will tell how that plays out. As Snow said to me when we first met, trust doesn't come from words.

I'm lucky Leo wants anything more to do with me after how I treated him during our argument. He has bruises on his neck from where I choked him yesterday against the wall. I studied the angry red marks whilst he was still asleep in my arms, brushing at them with my fingers like they were ink splotches I could wipe away. I feel a stab of guilt every time I catch sight of the violence I inflicted on him.

Leo comes in after his shower and grabs up a pair of cargos. He notices me wincing when my eyes stray to the bruises one too many times. He abandons the rest of his clothes and makes his way over to me, shirtless, skin still damp.

I'm momentarily distracted by his impressive, semi-naked form. Leo has washboard abs and large pecs, paired with broad shoulders and arms thick with corded muscle. Everything about him is big and well honed. It cannot be denied that he is a stunningly attractive man.

Despite this, it's Leo's softness that attracts me the most. His blinding smiles and kind eyes blunt the sharply chiselled features of his face. His perpetual bedhead makes him look like he's always in the middle of a rushed morning. The depth to which he cares about people, even the ones who don't deserve it like his mother, is at once unfathomable and endlessly fascinating to me. He is so fucking lovely, inside and out, I don't understand why anyone who has ever been able to call him theirs would let go without one hell of a fight.

I'm reminded of what I said to him yesterday, about him purposefully choosing to engage with romantic relationships he knows will end badly. I can't feel remorse for saying it, because I still think I'm right, but throwing it in Leo's face was unnecessary. My only real hope is that the next time Leo gets into a relationship with someone shitty, he won't let me anywhere near them, because I wouldn't be able to stop myself from snapping the neck of any prick who dares hurt my partner.

Leo halts a couple of feet in front of me, his expression clear and easy to read, the emotion bared across his face like a slap of paint thrown on a blank canvas. With him half naked and me fully dressed, there's an erotic duality that amps up the tension between us.

I press the underside of a closed fist to Leo's sternum when he makes to step in closer, keeping him where he is. It's bad enough he's standing there with all that taut, shower-hot skin on full display, but when the smell of him hits my nose at full force, ocean-spray shampoo paired with wet male musk and

something else that's unique to Leo, I have to keep my self-control in serious check. Looking at him, so open and trusting, catching the scent I've come to recognise as his, makes me want to tackle him to the bed and take him apart under my hands and mouth.

If I let myself do everything that I want to Leo, we'll miss the plane that North demanded we be on come hell or high water. I doubt he'd accept an excuse of, "*Leo looked too fuckable this morning, and I had to destroy him with my cock for an hour; sorry not sorry.*"

Leo seems completely unaware of his effect on me, which is a frustratingly common bout of insanity on his part. How could he think I wouldn't want to fuck him when he gets that gentle half smile on his face and, like, I don't know, breathes in my general direction?

Yeah, I'm easy for him. It's a fact I've come to accept.

Leo looks down at where I'm touching him and grasps hold of my arm, fingers of one hand wrapping around my wrist and the other hand squeezing my bicep. There are a couple of small nicks on his arms from where glass hit him when I had my Rage Moment in the kitchen.

Leo pushes his thumb into the soft side of my wrist until I open my hand, fingers and palm flexing out and pressing to the expanse of skin between his pecs. He looks me directly in the eye as he moves my hand upward, urging my fingers to wrap around his throat. He holds me in place, his grip firm and sure.

Confused, I watch Leo carefully and wait for an explanation. This nonverbal bullshit is unlike him. He's usually such a chatty bastard, I have to dare him to shut the hell up most of the time. It'll be a chilly afternoon in hell before I admit to enjoying his incessant babble.

But I'd take his happy, incessant rambling over the unnervingly serious gaze he's levelling at me now. His eyes are softer than they were yesterday during our fight, but there's something frozen solid about the determination in them.

"I'm not afraid of you, Jack," Leo tells me, his voice trailing off with a rough little rasp. Hearing him sound like that sets off a confusing signal inside my brain. Under different circumstances, it would get me hard in two seconds flat.

"I hurt you." As if he needs reminding, when the evidence is right there in the marks on his neck. Then again, this is Leo. He could probably get shot in the head by someone and still try to be their new best friend, the absolute nightmare that he is.

"Barely," Leo scoffs, so dismissive of the danger he's in just by being near my unstable, fucked-up brain, it makes me grit my teeth. He shrugs, squinting at me in annoyance, like I'm the one being difficult here. "Some bruises and cuts. Don't even pretend you were using your full strength. You could have crushed my throat, easy, if you wanted to."

I have to seriously resist the urge to take hold of his shoulders and shake him until either common sense finally kicks in, or his neck breaks.

Blowing out a frustrated breath, like a bull who has just about had it with this red-cape waving fuckery, I try not to shout in his face. “Could you, for two seconds, at least *pretend* to have some self-preservation rolling around inside that whip of candy floss you call a brain?”

Leo doesn't seem in the least bit swayed, his expression hardening into a stubborn mask. “You're being melodramatic about this. It's not like you strangled me or anything. I've had worse from one-night stands.”

A shock of white-hot rage surges up inside me at the idea of someone putting their hands on him with any form of violence. Letting random strangers take advantage of Leo's inexperience, pushing his limits and pressing bruises into his skin, taking him apart without knowing what the hell they have in their temporary possession, people who have no fucking clue how to put him back together afterwards. Leo's trust is not something anyone should take lightly. It's not something to be abused by motherfuckers who probably don't deserve to share breathing space with Leo, let alone access to his body in such an intimate way.

It takes every inch of the very little willpower I possess, as well as all the calming techniques Green drilled into me during our sessions together, to stop myself from screaming in the face of my partner's negligence towards his safety.

“Don't gaslight me, you fuck,” I growl at him in warning, having reached my limit for this shit. “I choked you, and you

just let me do it like the lunatic with a death wish you clearly are.”

Leo has the genuine audacity to look exasperated with me. “Oh, come on—”

I move my hand to the back of his neck and drag him forward in one vicious yank, wrapping my free arm around his waist to press him up against me and hold him still, cutting off whatever nonsensical crap he was about to eject from his too tempting motormouth with a few harsh words of my own. “I’d kill anyone who touched you like I did yesterday, Leo.” My voice is a deep growl I make no effort to reform into something more civilised, letting him see the animal thrashing just below the surface, constantly tearing at me to be let loose. “I’d fucking kill someone for even thinking about hurting you like that.”

Leo’s breath shudders out of him in an unsteady exhalation of air. It sounds more like a groan than outrage or fear at my proclamation I would kill for him. There’s enough space between us, unacceptable as it is, for me to see how wide and blue his eyes have gotten. It’s like lying on your back and staring into the sky on a clear day. It feels fathomless, like it could go on forever, like you could drown in mid-air, lost in all that pale blue.

“You can’t kill people for their thoughts,” Leo murmurs, his face creasing, unsure how to take my new line of attack in this debate.

“Fucking watch me.” I give him an unkind smile, barbed and malicious. “I’m a freelance dictator. No trials in my world, bitch. Not when it comes to you.”

Leo shakes his head in denial but belies the action by leaning into me further, bumping his forehead against mine. “Jack,” he pleads in a strained whisper, hope and despair competing like he can’t decide which to feel most about me.

He needs to know I mean it. “I’ve killed for far worse reasons and on behalf of far worse people. Putting a bullet in anyone who hurts you would be easy.”

It’s as close to being a vigilante as I’ll ever get, which is still, thankfully, very fucking far away.

Leo pulls back far enough to eye me with heavy scepticism. “Thought you didn’t do dramatic revenge bullshit?”

“For me, I don’t. For you ... well, I think I’d be willing to carve out a nice place in Hell for myself and all the pieces of shit I take with me,” I say dryly. “Sorry if you were hoping I’d turn out to be a white knight after all.” Or a good man. Or anyone other than an assassin with freak powers and the motherload of all psychological damage.

Leo doesn’t look let down by the consolation prize, which is further proof he doesn’t know what’s good for him. I’m sickeningly grateful for it even as I wish it wasn’t true.

“I’ve always had a preference for a solid anti-hero,” Leo admits, mouth curving into a tender smile. It hits me like a roundhouse kick to the jaw, all power and no mercy.

“Still think I’m capable of redemption?” I ask him, already knowing the answer but needing to hear it said out loud to make it real.

Leo leans forward again and presses the softest kiss you could imagine to my lips, lingering for a few agonising seconds before pulling back. He looks into my eyes, sincerity shining from his every pore. “Always, Jack.”

He says it like it’s as easy for him to believe as firing lethal shots off to protect him would be for me.

As soon as the promise leaves his mouth, the tenuous hold I have on my self-control cracks like bone under pressure. I tighten my grip on the back of his neck and yank him forward the last couple of inches, pressing my lips to his in a biting, possessive kiss, my tongue pushing into his mouth and taking over the space like I want to conquer it in the name of my nation.

Leo falls into the kiss as if he was impatiently waiting for it to come to this, kissing me back with equal ferocity. He grasps at me, hands eager, his usual enthusiasm breaking through any remaining tendrils of restraint I might have tried to grab onto, like a fast-moving storm as he gives himself over without reservation.

It’s yet another show of trust I have no idea what to do with.

I hook one hand around Leo’s thigh and hike it up, wrapping his leg around my waist. This unbalances him and allows me to take him off his feet entirely. He manages to keep his lips locked with mine as I upend him onto the bed. I follow him

down, not wanting to give up the connection we've forged via teeth and tongues and panted heat.

Leo opens up his legs to allow me to settle between them, giving into my want to drop down on top of him and use my weight to pin him to the bed. There's something about having Leo under me, held down and unable to escape, that settles a deep ache of fear and want inside my chest.

This is what I think about when I look at him and find myself wishing I could keep him forever. I think about all those people who go mad over wanting to have their lover tied to them in some way, either through more traditional means, with rings and signed certificates, or the less conventional, and more literal, options.

A thought occurs to me, and I can't make myself scrape it out, to dig at it with my fingernails until they bleed. Leo has driven himself into my brain like a sword into a stone. Unmovable. The stuff of legend. Like fucking magic. A dark, twisted power that claws and shreds and leaves traces of toxic chaos behind to infect and decimate.

Leo would look good tied up. Not with chains. I'd never use metal on anyone, couldn't without remembering all the times it was used on my brother and me. But maybe with rope. Or leather. A belt around his wrists. Around his *throat*.

I saw plenty of shit during my time as an OI agent. I got sent into sex clubs and the like from an early age. Earlier than I'll probably ever admit to Leo. Green knows because Green knows everything, and even she struggled to hold back a flinch

when I talked about my first experiences with anything sexual. I wouldn't want Leo to know, because I think the knowledge would hurt him more than the memories of it hurt me.

Leo distracts me from my less pleasant thoughts by wrapping his muscled legs around my waist to push himself up and somehow press us closer together even though I didn't leave any space for him to manoeuvre in.

I grind down against him, my cock hard and wanting.

Leo releases a loud moan against my mouth, the sound vibrating across my lips like a warning. His cock is a steel pipe in his cargos, making it easy for me to rub mine against his over and over again in an aggressive bout of rutting. Leo meets my thrusts, arms looped behind my back as he clings to me, taking advantage of any leverage he can find.

When I get close enough to come just from the dry humping and taking his mouth in a series of increasingly messy kisses, Leo jerks his head away, my last kiss landing on his jaw. I bite at the skin there, the bristle of black stubble rubbing roughly against my lips.

“Want to feel you,” Leo gasps up at me, out of breath, chest heaving, mouth red and wet from use. “Need you, babe, *please.*”

I don't hesitate to comply with Leo's helpless plea, rearing back and making quick work of stripping off Leo's cargos along with my own clothes, throwing them aside. I don't give a flying fuck about anything right now other than covering the man beneath me with bruises and cum. I want to mark him up,

make him mine. I want to rub my cum into his skin until he absorbs it, taking more of me inside him, making me a permanent part of him, contaminating his biology.

“What do you want?” I ask, bracing myself over Leo once we’re both completely naked, feeling so on edge I can barely stand it, my skin buzzing like the nerves underneath are live wires, ready to spark off the second they’re touched.

“Fuck me,” Leo answers immediately between lustful pants, like he’s afraid he’ll run out of air before he can finish. “I want your cock punishing my hole until it’s raw, babe. I want you to come in me, all over me, make me dirty for you. I want your hand back on my throat, so when I go off, I’ll already be flying high. Take my arse. Take my air. Take my heart—take everything.”

Take my heart.

I want to. It’s unbelievably selfish, but I want it so badly. I want to hold his heart in my hands, cage it between my fingers, and never let anyone bring harm to it again.

His eyes are so fucking blue and intense as he stares up at me with an emotion I don’t know how to interpret. It cuts deeper, whatever it is, hooks into me like curved metal spikes through flesh. It feels permanent, which seems so impossible given everything he knows about me, given how awful I am for him.

My cock twitches at his declarations, but as much as I want to give him exactly what he’s demanding from me, reality has to be acknowledged.

“Can’t fuck you, Leo,” I say regretfully. “We don’t have the time to get you ready for me.” When Leo glares at me and tries to argue, I wrap a hand around his throat and squeeze hard, forcing another loud moan out of him, which goes straight to my hard cock. “I won’t hurt you,” I tell him, dead-fucking serious. “Not like that.”

Leo looks up at me with contemplative eyes, and I can tell he’s trying to come up with an argument for either me taking him raw, which will absolutely not be happening, or purposefully missing our flight back to England, which I have to put a stop to because there’s a good chance I’ll jump on any excuse Leo offers up.

Lowering my hips, I spit on my hand and wrap it around our cocks. We’re both already leaking pre-cum, which makes it easier for me to thrust against him and create the right kind of friction. A rough gasp of pleasure tears its way out of me at the electric zing of sensation that shoots up my spine.

Leo’s hands fist the bedsheet as he lets me take care of us. His eyes stay locked on mine the entire time I slide our cocks together, my other hand remaining on his throat, pinning him to the bed with brutal satisfaction. I tighten my hand for a moment, cutting off his air supply more deliberately. Leo’s eyes widen, filling with a wilder desire than I’ve seen from him before, and a choked, broken sound bursts free from his mouth.

I grind my cock against Leo with increasing pressure and speed, holding us in a tight grip so the rhythm stays somewhat

on point whilst keeping a careful eye on Leo's face to make sure I don't push too far with my hand on his throat. I have decent control over my strength, but with how much I want this, and the recklessness with which I want to mark him, I could easily crush his windpipe.

When I loosen my hand, Leo gasps for air like he's trying to empty the room's supply of oxygen. His eyes are glazed and filled at the corners with tears, which slide down his face when he blinks too rapidly. His dark lashes clump together, messy and wet.

Seeing him cry triggers a fresh shot of craving to break free from where it was deeply buried inside my gut, like a hand bursting free from graveyard dirt. It feels wrong and wicked and overpowering in its intensity.

My hand is still holding him to the bed in an iron grip that he couldn't get out of if he tried, not with all his strength, no matter how hard he fought me. To reinforce the feeling of complete dominion over Leo's body, I let go of our cocks and move to grasp his hip, clenching my fingers, digging them into his skin around the bone there. I pin his lower body, so he's unable to even circle his hips and grind up against me. My thrusts become jerkier and less uncoordinated, but by the way Leo groans in approval, I think I've made the right choice.

There's something about being held in place that Leo seems to enjoy, and since it feels just as exhilarating to pin him like a butterfly in a display case, I'm more than happy to indulge him.

“How do you feel?” I ask, my voice scratchy as if I’ve just finished smoking an entire pack of cigarettes. “Tell me, Leo. I need to know.”

Leo’s voice is slick and hoarse, tear tracks staining his face. “Helpless. Weak. Trapped.”

A shudder of pleasure tremors through me, an earthquake inside my mind that reverberates outward. Still, there’s enough awareness in me to protest, feeling like I’ll lose it if he keeps saying things like that. “Leo—”

But Leo refuses to be protected from me or himself. “Please don’t stop,” he begs, staring up at me voraciously. “I swear I want it.”

“Tell me,” I demand again, sealing my demise with a frankly inexplicable amount of carelessness.

Leo snatches up the gauntlet I threw down and starts talking in a frenzied rush. “I want to feel like I’ve been caught by you. I want to be caged in. Snared in a trap. I *don’t* want to be able to escape this, or you. Not ever.” He starts crying again, and this time it’s from pure emotion, not me choking him. “Don’t let me run away from you, Jack. Please, make it so I *can’t*.”

With that, my orgasm collapses through me like a tidal wave, destroying everything in its path, leaving only devastation in its wake.

I keep thrusting through my orgasm, and Leo comes seconds later, cum spurting from his cock onto his stomach. Our cum

mixes together on our cocks, slicking them up even more as I jerk the last remnants of pleasure out of us.

When we're done, I drop down onto Leo, trapping him under me like we both wanted. I bury my face in his abused neck and kiss hot, damp kisses into his sweat-soaked skin.

Leo is boneless, his movements languid as he brings a hand up to dig his fingers into my hair and gently stroke them through the blond strands.

We stay like that for a while, Leo crushed beneath me and touching my hair and back with a softness I've never had from anyone else. It's a softness I wouldn't know how to ask for or even know *to* ask for. None of the other hookups I've had during missions, or fucking I've done *for* a mission, have been anything like this. It feels like an insult to compare them. To compare having Leo to being close to some stranger who didn't know me, would never know me, *could* never know me.

It still blows my mind that Leo wants to know me, wants me, period. There's something wrong with him. Genuinely. Thank fuck for emotionally messed-up rich boys, I guess. I'd thank his mum for damaging him enough that he's now willing to let something like me touch him if I didn't want to wring her neck for the very same shit.

When I raise myself off him again, I take a couple of seconds just to stare in appreciation at the man laid out on the bed. Long, gloriously muscled body, stretched and loose, hands now tucked behind his head, large biceps flexing from the strain. He's ridiculously, unfairly beautiful like this. Well

fucked and blissed out from taking whatever I chose to give him.

I might finally understand the American I killed, Zander, who wrecked himself with alcohol. If drinking felt as good to him as fucking Leo does to me, then I take back any negative thoughts I had about the man. I get it now. I get why he was willing to descend into intoxicated ruin for just one more hit of the best feeling in the world.

I go to the bathroom and get some stuff to clean us both off, moving back over to Leo to wipe him down with a wet towel. He lets me, lazing there like a tired dog snoozing in the afternoon sun.

Just when I think about leaning in to take his mouth in one last, firm kiss, an alarm goes off on Leo's phone, signalling the fact we're running late for the airport and need to get a shift on so North doesn't skin us for missing the flight he organised last-minute.

Leo throws me a slightly panicked look, and we disentangle ourselves and dive for our clothes, pulling them on haphazardly as I make myself busy packing the rest of our stuff so we're able to rush out the door.

We've already lost quite a bit of time this morning dealing with the money meant for Bullet.

After a brief argument, Leo and I agreed we should hide it until we can come up with a better plan to dispose of the money. I was all for yeeting it into the ocean, but Leo refused, saying we could find a way of using it to help people, like

filtering it into a charity or something. I reluctantly agreed to bury it despite feeling like a bloody pirate by doing so. When I pointed that fact out to Leo, he laughed and started singing the “Yo, ho” pirate shanty with far too much glee.

We’re just lucky the safe house had a couple of shovels, I presume to bury bodies created by past missions. Leo looked at me like I was insane when I suggested the idea. But I don’t know why else an agency safe house would have shovels when there’s no garden.

Leo makes a fuss out of cleaning the truck using the bloodstain-removing chemicals he found in the safe house’s cupboards.

I’m doubling down on my position that the house is stocked especially for dealing with mission corpses.

Once we’re all ready and packed, we head out. Leo is mildly heartbroken over leaving his new pet bike, “Wheezy,” behind. When he insists we take the bike back to the village where he got it, I put my foot down hard.

“We are not missing our flight just so you can take this piece of shit back to the lucky bastard who swindled you for it.” I gesture at the bike in disdain.

Leo gasps dramatically and starts stroking the bike like it’s his most precious possession rather than the rust bucket it really is.

“How dare you.” Leo glares at me. “Wheezy is an old soul; have some respect.”

I release a deep sigh and give the bike a solid kick. It falls over with a loud crash and all but falls apart on impact with the ground.

Leo yelps, turning to me with a comically stunned expression. He gestures at the bike as if to ask *Really?*

I look from the bike to Leo, then say with deliberate dryness, “Oh, no, it died. We will mourn the complete and utter lack of loss on the road; come on.” I grab hold of Leo’s arm and start dragging him towards our truck.

Leo allows himself to be towed away, still looking at me with dismayed eyes. “Why are you *like* this?” he mutters as I open the passenger side door and all but shove him inside.

“I wasn’t hugged enough as a kid,” I tell Leo sarcastically. Then I tilt my head as if reconsidering. “Well, it was either that or all the torture. Guess we’ll have to wait until Green publishes her final psych report to find out.” I slam the door on him before he can respond. It feels good. I’ll need to slam more things in his face in the future to get this kind of natural high again.

Leo gives me dodgy looks all the way to the airport, but by the time we’re on the plane, he’s back to chattering away at me about everything and nothing. I’m glad to have the white noise of his ramblings to drown out my feelings of unease about our next mission.

It seems too much to hope for that rescuing Rohan will go smoothly. In an ideal world, I’d get to storm the place, spray a truly self-indulgent number of bullets at anything that moves,

and drag Rohan out by his collar like a child who got lost at the mall.

But despite what the societal propaganda might suggest, not all blonds get to have the most fun.

Chapter Eleven

Leo

Back in England, North meets us at the airport again. We get into the car with him, and he drives us to another safe house near the location where Rohan is being held. Once we're inside, North gives us the rundown of what his agents have gathered so far about Rohan's temporary prison.

The location Bullet gave us is for an Obsidian Inc. base masquerading as a high-tech research facility. North shows us pictures and videos taken of the building to give us an idea of the scale. It's protected by electronic gates and a fence with barbed wire at the top. The building itself is large and modern in design, more like a military base than an office, like some of OI's more ad hoc places of operation.

"We were lucky on this one," North tells us, arms crossed as he leans against the table where all the computers and surveillance photos are laid out. "We snatched one of the guards yesterday, who closely resembles you in appearance. His name is Connor Lark."

North explains that Connor has a high enough clearance to allow him access to the containment cells within the facility, which is hopefully where Rohan is being held. Connor himself couldn't confirm, or outright refused to confirm at any rate, if Rohan was being kept at the facility. If we want to know for sure, we'll need to scope the place out, which means a bit of undercover work for me.

North nods at me. "You should be able to use his credentials to get into the base during his shift tonight and hopefully find out where Rohan is."

Knowing Rohan's exact position will be an enormous help in planning the storming of a base this size and level of security. It won't be like breaking into an office or derelict warehouse. This place seems properly defended. We won't be getting Rohan free without a fight.

Jack makes a noise of complaint, scowling at the picture North has just brought up on the computer of the man I'll be pretending to be. He does look quite a bit like me, with the same dark hair and blue eyes, his face angular and stubbled. I'm glad I didn't shave my face smooth this morning. The guard's outfit will help me blend in too, all in grey, including a cap I can use to conceal my identity further by keeping my face down and shadowed.

"I don't like this," Jack says, his scowl deepening with each word, as if he's getting more and more concerned the longer he thinks about it. "All it takes is one person who knows Connor to get a good look at Leo's face."

I turn to Jack, wanting to reassure him, but North beats me to it.

"I said we got lucky," he reminds us. "Connor Lark has only recently been hired by OI. He's barely met any of his colleagues. The chances of anyone realising the truth are very slim, especially if Agent Snow keeps his head down and works fast. He should be in and out within a few hours."

When Jack opens his mouth to argue again, North spears him with a harsh look of reprimand. "You need to trust your

partner, Agent Roth; he's done his fair share of short-term undercover missions."

He's right, I have. In comparison to some riskier situations I've been thrown into over the years, this should be a cakewalk.

Jack looks at me, catching my eye, an expression on his face I'm unable to decipher until he says, "I do trust him."

I have to press my lips together so I won't lose my cool and grin stupidly at my partner. I've been worried for a long time that Jack doesn't trust me, and our last mission seemed to confirm my fears. But it seems after everything that went down yesterday, things have shifted between us in a good way.

Apparently, the secret to healthy relationship dynamics is open communication. Who knew? Someone should write that down and make a TikTok about it. Then everyone will have this brand-new piece of information.

"Glad to hear it," North interrupts our Stare of Meaning. He claps his hands together and gestures at a bag of clothes, resting on a chair next to him. "Go change, Agent Snow; your shift starts in an hour. Once you're suited up, we can move out."

I snatch up the bag, presumably containing my lookalike's OI guard uniform, and find an empty room to use. In a matter of minutes, I'm decked out in the all-grey uniform. It's not much different than my FISA one, apart from the colour.

When I rejoin the others, there's a moment when Jack sees me, and his eyes fill with an instinctive dread and narrow defensively. He takes a step back, and his hackles rise so fast it looks painful. It's the OI gear kicking off that reaction. The terrible memories he must associate with it are likely innumerable.

I reach up a hand to fiddle with my grey cap, feeling suddenly awkward and uncomfortable, standing here in what is effectively the enemy's uniform. People who wore it by choice also chose to be active participants in Jack's lifetime of abuse and torture at OI's direction. It makes me vaguely sick to be wearing it, especially right in front of Jack.

North picks up on the tension instantly and makes to diffuse it with his usual brusque attitude. He steps up to me and holds out his hand, palm opened to reveal two small devices. One is a comm unit, and the other is a tiny camera.

I take both pieces of tech, attaching the camera to the left breast pocket of my OI jacket. The camera is shaped like a button and fits neatly over the pocket where the actual button has been removed. I put the comm unit into my left ear, pressing my fingers to it and turning it on.

"You'll have an open line to me and your partner," North reaffirms, nodding at me. "If shit hits the fan, I'll send in the storm team led by Agent Roth."

Over North's shoulder, Jack is busy trying to get his automatic response to the OI uniform under control. He's clearly struggling with it, which has to be more about

specifically seeing me in it, not just the uniform itself, as he didn't have a problem with it the previous times we've encountered real OI guards during our raids of different OI facilities.

“Thanks, sir.” I offer North an agreeable twitch of my lips, tipping my head respectfully.

With that, North backs off and returns to the numerous computers, tapping away at the keyboard of one, likely communicating with the rest of the storm team. They're probably somewhere nearby, waiting for the go-ahead.

I can only hope North picked some agents who he knows will work well with Jack. During our first storm of an OI base, several of the agents refused to take orders from Jack, either due to his age or his past as an OI agent. It was a complete disaster. Jack and I were forced to carry out the mission practically single-handed, which led to Jack getting shot multiple times and me dragging him, bloodied and swearing, away from the FISA agents who had disobeyed his instructions, leaving us in the lurch.

He was less pissed about getting shot than he was about the fact I took a ricochet bullet to the thigh. I thought he was going to tear the head off the lead agent, who outright said FISA was insane to trust a monster like Jack, and how I was just as much to blame for bringing him to FISA in the first and making him FISA's problem.

After that catastrophe of a mission, North sent us in alone whenever possible. If for no other reason than Jack had

become even more mistrustful of anyone other than me, and some FISA agents might have wound up dead if we'd had another situation like that one.

Jack assuages my fears without me having to verbalise them, possibly noticing my grimace at North's mention of the storm team. "Your mate, Damon, is part of the storm team. He'll take point."

Jack moves towards me with obvious wariness, still discreetly eyeing the OI uniform like he wants to rip it from my body. With his strength, he genuinely could without any effort whatsoever. Maybe when this mission is over, I'll encourage him to go ahead and do it. Then we could pour gasoline over the fucking thing and set it alight. Might be cathartic for him to watch yet another part of OI burn.

I'm relieved to hear Damon will be working with Jack when they raid the base. At least I can depend on him to treat Jack with a certain amount of professionalism as well as keeping the other members of his team in check. Woe betide anyone who acts like a dickhead in Damon's presence. He's just like my aunt in that he can stare people into submission with the sheer power of his disapproval.

Jack is fidgeting, which is something he so rarely does. His discomfort is practically a physical thing, a shadow come to life.

"Hey." I curl my little finger around his, shooting a discreet glance at North to make sure he doesn't notice. "We've got

this, yeah?" I keep my voice low, trying to reassure him without making him uncomfortable.

Jack sways as close to me as he dares, with North standing so close, and tightens the finger hooked around mine, tugging on it little, an agreement and a promise expressed without words.

It's like the nudge of a foot under the table or a bump of shoulders when walking side by side. Intimacy built piece by piece, with nondescript touches and looks that linger too long to be anything but purposeful.

We allow ourselves a brief handful of seconds to speak a language known only to us, in the brush of skin on skin and blue eyes on green, before breaking apart and taking some pointed steps away. Distance unwanted but very much needed if we're going to get into the right headspace for this mission.

North has me go through the usual checks with the camera and comm unit to make sure they're working correctly. He also shows me a video taken of the interrogation between Connor Lark and a couple of FISA agents, so I'm able to adjust my voice to closer match his. He has a Northern English accent, similar to that of Anabelle's deep brogue. It's a little less rough than my own Danger City accent. I'm no expert at accent emulation, but I can well enough imitate my aunt's.

Chances are, if someone recognises Connor's voice well enough to pick up on some very subtle difference, they'll also know him well enough to see I'm quite literally a different person. So I'm not going to worry about that until it becomes a

problem in real time since I'd be all but fucked at that point regardless.

From the video of Connor, I'm also able to ascertain he's the reserved sort, offering only terse and uncollaborative answers to all the FISA agents' questions. That could be due to his circumstances. But it's another stroke of luck if I'm able to get away with barely talking or interacting with people and having that viewed as regular behaviour.

When North dubs me ready to go, he gives me the keys to Connor's black Toyota, which he informed me that FISA picked up at the same time they hijacked the OI guard. It will help my case to show up in a recognisable vehicle, and it hopefully means I'll be waved through without much attention.

"Good luck, Agent." North slaps my shoulder encouragingly, his expression becoming suddenly sterner when he warns, "No Lone Ranger hero bullshit on this one, okay?"

"Got it, sir." I flash him another broad grin, standing to attention and putting my arms behind my back in mockery of a soldier at parade rest. "I'll make sure to keep the James Bond role-play restricted to my downtime activities only."

Jack lets out a loud snort from across the room, green eyes hooded and lips slit up at the corners with mirth. North shoots him an unimpressed look, which only seems to incite more unrepentant amusement in Jack.

"Don't know 'bout that," Jack muses in an acerbic drawl, looking me over consideringly. "OI guards are into some

kinky shit in my experience. Got real hard-ons for chains and humiliation.”

It’s probably not a good thing I’ve become so used to Jack casually referencing his abuse at the hands of OI guards that I don’t wince at his heavy-handed reminder. If I had to guess, Jack is purposefully laying it on thick and trying to make us uncomfortable because he reacted so strongly to seeing me in the OI uniform. It’s his way of proving how much he doesn’t care, how much none of it bothers him.

“Come out to the car with me, partner,” I coax, to get some time alone with Jack before I go. I’m not sure if he’ll accept comfort from me whether North is watching or not, but it can’t hurt to offer it just in case he’s in a more willing mood. It can be difficult to tell with Jack: if he’s in the right frame of mind to take a hand when offered instead of instantly biting it off just in case it’s about to slap him.

Jack quirks an eyebrow at me in suspicion. “Why, you need someone to open your door for you, Your Majesty?”

Okay, he’s definitely not in an amenable mood, then. Great.

“Yeah, maybe I do. Gonna make like a gentleman and fulfil one of my 1940s-era fantasies?” I challenge, moving towards the front door, sure Jack will follow if only to escape being left alone with North for any longer than necessary.

I dart a quick look at North to see if he’ll protest Jack coming outside with me, but our handler has already dismissed us. He’s shifted back over to his numerous computers and currently seems preoccupied with tapping away at a million

strokes per minute, intense expression illuminated by the computer screen.

Slipping out of the safe house together, Jack and I track down Connor's car, parked a little way down the street. I use the keys North gave me to unlock the Toyota and pull open the driver's side door, then turn back around to face Jack and lean against the doorframe.

Jack seems hesitant to step in closer despite the angle and openness of my body language, shouting a loud-and-clear invitation for him to cross the empty air between us. I'm unsure why until Jack's eyes dart pointedly to the camera attached to my jacket pocket, belatedly understanding his caution at the idea someone could be watching us from the other end of the disguised cam.

As frustrating as it is, he's right to be wary. Enough rumours are circulating about us and our "mysterious" relationship as it is; we hardly need to stoke the fire. FISA agents are like bored fishwives, especially the junior ones. They like to imagine salacious drama where there isn't any. Since Jack and I became partners, I've heard everything from *I was sent out as a honey trap to ensnare Jack into working for FISA* to *Jack is an undercover OI agent who's out to betray us all in a dastardly evil plan, using me as his in to the agency*. Either way, one of us is a seducible idiot. If any of them finds out we have slept together, the gossip mill will give itself a coronary from excitement.

I put a hand over the button-shaped camera and reach out with my other one to snag hold of Jack's arm, tugging him until he allows himself to be manoeuvred deeper into my space. We aren't quite pressed up against each other, but it wouldn't take much. Jack grasps my hips, fingers digging in hard, more for something to hold onto than to yank us closer, the way he might have done if we were truly alone.

There's no audio on the camera, so we're free to talk without fear of anyone hearing.

"North's right, you know." I move my hand up to squeeze Jack's thick bicep. "I've been on plenty of missions just like this one before. There's no need for you to silently panic yourself into a catatonic state until one of the underling agents pokes you with a stick, and you make Damon's job harder by punching them in the throat." He only gets like that when he's upset and worried, two feelings this mission could easily inspire.

Jack looks at me with a troubled expression, eyes fixed on mine with such intensity it's like he's trying to keep me here, within reach and under his fierce protection, using the power of his mind alone.

"It's Obsidian Inc.," Jack mutters darkly, mouth forming a snarl around the words, like the name of his old organisation is a curse and an insult rolled together. The green of his irises seem to grow bright with anger, his voice betraying his bitterness. "There's always a need to panic over that hell. You survive it. You don't escape it."

"*You* escaped it!" I remind him earnestly, squeezing his arm again and shaking him a little. "You got out, and you're never going back to them." I made Jack that promise when we met, and it's no joke to say, knowing what I do now about how life was for him with them, I'd rather take a bullet than let OI drag him back down into their cesspit of nightmares for a single bloody day.

"By chance." Jack scowls hard, dismissing my reassurance with the ease of a hand cutting through smoke. "Because you came across me by accident and helped me like no one else did in all the years I was with OI. Dan, and Rohan's mother, tried to get away, and OI had me kill them. Rohan got away, but they took him back. Your uncle left OI but only because your dad gave up his freedom in return."

There's conflict showing on his face now, sharpened by frustration I don't quite understand the origin of until he goes on in a more muted, perhaps even defeated, voice. "I can't help feeling like this isn't all there is. That I can't have gotten off this lightly. It doesn't seem right."

"You can't seriously think you haven't lost enough." I'm unable to keep the incredulity out of my voice. "Come on, Jack, what else could they possibly take that they haven't already?"

Jack releases a low noise of exasperation, his hands tightening on my hips enough to leave more bruises behind.

"Oh, I don't know, how about my idiot partner, who's about to walk right into one of their secret bases, armed only with

the bulletproof plan of *'fingers crossed that no one realises I'm not a completely different fucking person.'*” He puts on a very unjust impression of me. ““What else could they take, Jack?’” Then he makes an aggravated sound in his throat, clearly holding on to his patience by a very thin piece of string. “For fuck’s *sake.*”

“Oh ... *me,*” I murmur needlessly, feeling my cheeks get hot in embarrassment, both because I didn’t realise the obvious and due to the fact Jack has admitted once again to caring about me with such a bold disregard for self-consciousness.

Jack stares at me then with a look on his face that is both wry and unimpressed. “No, my *other* partner.” Sarcasm and scorn trip from his tongue like soothing endearments to my ears.

“Shut up.” I slap his arm in admonishment, then completely undermine it by pushing forward without warning and pressing a kiss to his jaw, nipping at his skin as I pull away.

Jack sucks in a loud breath of surprise. He furrows his blond brows at me, head tilting and eyes narrowing slightly in sudden calculation, like a predator trying to decide how best to attack its prey. Having come to some unknown conclusion, he shoves me harshly back against the car and takes my mouth in a more thorough kiss, intense sensations quaking all the way down to my bones.

Jack bullies in close, his groin grinding into mine, the feel of his growing hardness lighting a fire inside my gut, fierce heat curling into a tight ball of want. Part of me wishes we’d

fucked back at the safe house in Senjatas. I'd wanted to, desperately, and maybe if we had given into our urge to wreck each other there, neither of us would be so hard up for it now at the worst possible moment.

I'm so amped for Jack's cock, craving that innate roughness he seems so afraid of, but which I would now be willing to beg for, I almost make the mistake of removing my hand from blocking the camera. My near slip instigates a quick-flash reminder of why I have a camera on my jacket in the first place. It's like a swift kick to the head. There's a time limit for me to get to the OI base for the start of Connor's guard shift. I don't want to draw the kind of attention being late inevitably would.

Jack is reluctant to release me, but when I give his chest an insistent push with my free hand, he backs off, taking a few big steps back. His eyes are a very specific kind of wild, pupils dilated and the green irises glowing in the night like cats. I've only ever seen them get that way either during sex or in an extremely violent fight. It should maybe bother me those things seem so intrinsically linked for him, but I can't quite bring myself to care, especially not right now.

As much as it pains me, I force myself to be sensible. "I need to go, Jack." He watches my mouth as I talk, his body seeming to twitch all over, as if he's having to reign in the powerful desire to let go of his rational side and fuck me in the back seat of Connor's car, mission and FISA camera be damned.

I can't tell if it's because he genuinely wants me that much, or if he wants that badly for me not to go on this mission. It could be either or both. He might not even know the answer. Jack is anything but a simple person with easily understandable motivations. If our last mission taught me something rock solid about him, it's that.

“Go on, then. Piss off before I forget why I should respect your right to risk your own life.” Jack bites out the words like he's angry despite the fact nothing else about him suggests he is. The slope of his shoulders indicates a resigned antipathy, and his face is set in frustration more than the rage I've become used to seeing when he gets truly pissed off about stuff, which means he's upset more than anything else.

Not wanting to make this harder for either of us, I nod at him once, stiffly, and get into the car. There's nothing I can say that will reassure Jack. He's going to be fretting internally until this mission is done, and we have Rohan back in the safety of FISA's base.

I try not to feel like shit as I drive away from Jack, watching him as he gets smaller and smaller in my rearview mirror. I shake my head, refocusing my mind on what lies ahead rather than on whom I'm leaving behind.

Chapter Twelve

Leo

“ID, please,” demands a gruff-sounding man in an outfit identical to mine, holding out his hand from the window of a booth situated outside the OI facility’s main gate.

I dig into the pocket of Connor’s borrowed jacket and produce the ID North stuffed in there for me to use. Keeping my head tipped down and partially hidden by shadow, I thrust the ID at the OI guard, hoping he’ll be quick in scanning it.

Luck is with me tonight as the man barely glances at the ID before handing it back. He presses a button on a console inside the booth, and the large metal gate begins to slide open.

“Have a good shift, Lark,” the OI guard says with an apathetic sort of politeness, already having dismissed me from his attention.

I don’t bother to reply, since the guard isn’t even looking at me anymore, and drive through the opened gate into the facility’s large car park. There are plenty of empty spaces, possibly due to the late hour.

I’m grateful Connor had a night shift, otherwise, I’d be more apprehensive about walking around the OI base with potentially far more people there during the day.

According to Lark, his duties as an OI guard mostly consist of patrolling the inside of the facility. As I walk towards the entrance of the building, I see a handful of guards who are likely part of the team who patrol the perimeter and outside areas.

I was initially worried about having to clock in with a supervisor who might recognise the obvious fact I'm not Connor, but North reassured me that all I would need to do is sign in at the front desk to notify them I've arrived for my shift. After that, he said I should be able to manoeuvre around the base with relative ease as long as I don't try to go anywhere Connor would be restricted from entering.

Walking into the main lobby area of the building, which looks like every other scientific-research-facility lobby I've ever seen, with its shining marble floors and modern decor, I'm relieved to see there isn't anyone manning the desk. North was right. It's all digital. There's a touchpad, where I'm easily able to sign in with Connor's name and badge number. After that, all I need to do is use the same badge to enter through a security gate, which stands between the lobby and the rest of the base.

I keep my face downturned, trying to avoid being caught on any of the numerous cameras I've spotted so far, dotted all over the building.

There's a set of winding metal stairs alongside two large lifts, both of which lead up to the next floor. I decide to take the stairs, hoping there's less chance I'll bump into anyone on them than there would be if I rode the lift. The last thing I want is to be trapped in an enclosed space for any length of time with people who might have met Connor before. If that happens, I could potentially pretend to be a new guard who just started their first shift, but there's always a chance that

could blow up in my face if the same people ask to see my ID for whatever reason.

Despite not being very forthcoming about the inner layout of the OI facility, the FISA interrogation agents did manage to get Connor to admit that the containment cells are on the third floor.

I'm more than a little cautious about one hundred percent trusting any information taken from someone who works for OI, but since my only other choice is to wander around the base until I stumble upon the right place, I head for the third floor.

Thankfully, my instincts seem to be correct about the stairs as I don't meet anyone on them. I'm slow to push open the door that leads out onto the third level, scanning from side to side down the considerably wide corridor to check for any OI personnel walking past. When I'm certain there's no one, I turn left and stride with confident-enough steps towards the last door at the end of the corridor, which Connor told the FISA agents was the only entrance to the containment cells.

I'm about halfway there when a door opens behind me, and people step out into the corridor. It takes a lot of willpower not to turn around on instinct to check who it is. For a handful of seconds, there's the sound of multiple voices, talking in congenial murmurs, and steps that, to my relief, seem to be moving away rather than towards me.

I slow my pace enough to wait for the voices and sounds of feet to disappear around the corner at the opposite end of the

hallway. Once I'm certain I'm alone again, after throwing a discreet glance over my shoulder and keeping my head low just in case, I use Connor's access badge on a pad situated next to a windowless metal door.

Fingers mentally crossed, I hold my breath until there's a soft beeping noise, indicating the badge worked, and the door lock gives an equally quiet snick, allowing me to push down on the door handle with ease and move into the adjoining room.

There's a shorter corridor than the one I just came from, leading to another door. Once I'm through that one, I find myself faced with two rows of containment cells on either side of me. I can't see any other doors leading anywhere else, so it seems Connor was right about there being only one way in or out.

Each door of the containment cells is made of thick metal and has a small rectangular latch hinged to them, which will allow me to see inside. There are twenty cells in total, ten on each side, and I begin checking them one after the other, pulling up the latch to peer through the small window into the cramped, dingy compartment beyond. Like a prison, they have a small bunk and a toilet in every single one, but nothing else. There are no windows or lights inside the cells. Or at least no lights that are turned on.

The cells are empty of occupants until I come to the fifth one on the left. When I lift the latch and see a young man sitting up on the bed, his back to the wall, head hung down low, it takes

me a second or two to recognise Rohan. His hair is longer than when I last saw him, and he's grown out his facial hair. He also looks smaller than I remember. His body was always compact and on the slim side, but now it seems as if he hasn't been eating properly at all.

I don't know if that's because he's not been fed, or if he's refused to eat for whatever reason.

He's changed so much, but when he looks up at me and I catch sight of his eyes, he seems more familiar. Even in the dimness of the cell, they stand out. Black. Pure black, like a bird.

It takes Rohan a bit of prompting to recognise me as well, those dark eyes squinting in my direction at first, as if he's trying to stare directly into the sun. When I say his name, he jerks up like he's been slapped into full alertness. My name trips from his mouth with an odd sort of clumsiness that is wholly unlike him. His lips look dry and chapped. They would probably be cracked and bloody if he were normal and didn't have superhuman-healing abilities.

"Hey, mate," I call out to him in a low voice, which sounds far more intense than I meant it to, feeling a sudden overwrought sense of urgency now I have Rohan in my sights. "Time for the epic rescue, okay?"

I don't wait for Rohan's response before pressing two fingers to the comm unit in my ear. It's been silent on the other end of the line so far, but I know North and Jack are there waiting in the wings for my go-ahead to storm the base, the camera on

my jacket allowing them to see my progress and negating their need to ask for constant updates.

Well versed in communicating during undercover jobs, I use the same code that is beaten into the head of every junior agent. “Primary objective obtained, no cause for red flare.”

North’s deep voice comes through loud and clear over the comm line. “Report received, Agent. Beta team in position for operation storm 1365.”

“Ready for beta team to breach,” I respond quickly, feeling the seconds tick by too speedily, the risk growing with every one that passes. “Waiting for permission to move primary objective.”

North’s voice returns with a barked order of, “Stand by, Agent.” I can read the warning in his tone, telling me not to try and drag Rohan out of here without any reliable backup in place to cover me. I don’t answer him, unwilling to promise what I might not be able to deliver.

There’s another keypad next to the cell door that I’m semi-terrified to try using, just in case it sends off an alert to whoever’s manning the central security desk. It’s inevitable the other OI guards will be kicked into action and try to come after Rohan and me at some point, but I’d rather put that off for as long as possible. Preferably until the storm team are already swarming the base and on hand to assist.

Rohan gets off the bed and comes over to the door. I’m wary of whatever cameras there might be inside his cell, but Rohan doesn’t seem concerned. Although that could be due to his

clear exhaustion. As he comes closer to the light spilling in from the small window on the door, I can see the dark circles under his eyes and the unnerving gauntness of his face. He doesn't look dirty, his hair and skin clean if overgrown and dry respectively. His clothes, a plain grey jumper and some lighter-grey jogging bottoms, remind me of an English prison outfit.

Rohan doesn't waste any time on politeness or greeting, banging his hand against the door and giving me a weary frown. "You gonna open this thing and carry me out of this bullshit cell, hero, or do I have to wait for your partner to murder everyone in the building first?"

North would say I should wait for his go-ahead or better yet not move until I have a team of FISA agents in front of me to offer cover. But I have a different plan, one I think Rohan will be slightly happier with.

"I'll let you out after I hear the signal," I tell him.

Rohan tilts his head to one side, considering me with shrewd eyes. "What's the signal?"

As if on cue, there's a sudden series of bombastically loud noises from somewhere else in the facility, unmistakable as that of small explosions and gunfire. The storm team have certainly made their grand entrance.

I give Rohan a jaunty grin and answer darkly, "Carnage."

Despite his obvious fatigue, Rohan returns my grin with something sharp and toothy of his own. "Ready, set, go; your

heroic moment has arrived, Agent Snow. Try not to fuck it up and get us both killed. I'm already docking points for the month-long wait time on this rescue as it is," he exclaims, voice dry and unrepentantly mocking.

I'm starting to wonder if acerbic comments are a Liquid Onyx survivor thing; like the enhanced senses and strength, you get the ability to be casually rude to everyone within five feet of you.

Not bothering to respond, having built up a tolerance to being baited during my time as Jack's partner, I shift my attention to the keypad, silently praying it's going to work, and I won't need to find some other way of getting this door open if they've shut down security manually, or if Connor simply doesn't have the necessary access to remove a prisoner from one of the cells.

Taking a deep breath and bracing myself for potential disaster, I use Connor's badge to unlock the door to Rohan's cell. I release the same breath when the keypad beeps and allows me to push down the door handle and swing it open.

Rohan comes half staggering out of the cell the moment there's enough of a gap for him to fit through, his desperation to be free telegraphed with heartbreaking clarity.

I make a grab for him when it becomes obvious Rohan is going to struggle to walk around on his own, stumbling almost to his knees when he tries to take a few strides forward, making me even more convinced he's not been given the sustenance his genetically modified Liquid Onyx body needs.

It's far easier for them to become weakened when not fed regularly.

Rohan tries to pull away from me when I wrap his arm around my neck and encourage him to let me take half his weight, but I refuse to release him. "Come on, lean on me, you're too fucked up to do this one on your own; don't be a bitch about it."

The lack of food or water, or hell, maybe just the lack of sleep, has taken its toll on him, and now we're going to have to deal with the consequences.

"Heroes aren't meant to call their damsels a bitch," Rohan mumbles to me irately although he gives in and allows me to take on some of his weight in aid of keeping him semi-upright.

I snort, moving us slowly towards the exit. "Yeah, well, I'm no hero, and you're definitely no damsel."

"Mean," Rohan gasps sarcastically, pinching my side. "Not *blond* and *murder* enough for you, am I?"

"You're a beautiful fucking flower petal, Rohan," I huff, amused despite myself and the dire situation we're in. "I never meant to imply otherwise."

He pinches my side again but doesn't respond, which I think says more about his tiredness than anything else I've seen so far.

Rohan hangs onto me as I take him out into the level-three corridor, where an alarm suddenly blares to life, piercing my eardrums. Rohan sucks in a sharp breath of pain. He buries

one ear against my shoulder and uses a free hand to cover the other one. I wince in sympathy. Enhanced senses must be a nightmare sometimes.

It seems the alarm is part of an official evacuation protocol for the facility, as seconds after it goes off, doors all along the corridor open and people start spilling out. There are more than I originally thought given it's the middle of the night. None of them are OI guards, just scientists in white coats and some other people who might be technicians or clerical assistants and the like.

The storm team is probably taking up all the OI agents' attention down at the front of the building. Hopefully, it will take them some time to work their way up here, and I can use the staircase to go up to the top floor and then out onto the roof. I noted there's a fire escape accessible from the roof, which goes down the side and then winds around the back of the facility. Using that should make it easier to avoid the fight between the OI guards and FISA agents and keep us hidden until either FISA has taken over the facility, or we find some means of getting out, maybe through the back fence. I'll have to wait and see how things pan out as we go.

Still, I'm hardly in a position to defend myself and Rohan if we're overrun. I reach behind me and take out the gun North provided me with that I had stuffed into my waistband.

A few of the OI workers catch sight of me and Rohan almost immediately, their eyes widening in confusion. Many of them clock the gun and freeze, the typical civilian reaction upon

seeing a firearm. Some other workers who haven't seen us, further down the corridor, are making their way to the door that leads to the staircase. It's likely their evacuation procedure to leave the building via the stairs rather than the lifts.

I raise my gun and fire off a shot to get the attention of everyone in the corridor. The bullet hits the ceiling, and dust comes raining down on Rohan and me. I don't bother to look up and see the crack in the ceiling where the bullet has likely lodged itself.

Despite the loudness of the alarm, the gunshot still cuts through it with all the promised violence of a hunting knife plunging into a tree next to someone's face, and it has all the OI employees in the corridor swinging around to look in my direction.

Putting on my best *do not fuck with me* face, I bring the gun down and aim it at no one in particular, calling out the order, "Get back inside the rooms you came from and stay there!"

No one moves at first, and I sigh internally. Civilians and their deer-in-the-headlights reaction to lethal weapons is the bane of my existence. It isn't like in the films, where everyone screams and makes a mad dash for it once they can *see* the gun right in front of their faces. If there's one thing I like about missions in America, it's their numbness to guns. Those fuckers run in a no-shit zigzag formation, like birds flying south for the winter.

I change the angle of my gun so I'm aiming at a short, middle-aged man who's standing close to me in a white lab

coat. He does a reverse gasp at having my gun trained on him but doesn't back up, fear overtaking him and kicking his fight-or-flight instinct to death.

“Now!” I shout fiercely. “Move!”

When the man jumps into action and scrambles to comply, it seems to have a domino effect, everyone else rushing to follow his lead and returning to their respective workrooms or labs or whatever the fuck they've got up here.

I wait until the OI employees are safely hidden behind closed doors again before half dragging Rohan down the corridor towards the lifts. If all the OI employees are taking the stairs, then we should be safe to use the lift to get upstairs. The facility only has four floors, including the main lobby, and the fourth floor should hopefully have some way of getting to the roof.

“What's the plan here?” Rohan asks once we're inside the lift.

Like he was waiting for the perfect moment to chime back in, North's voice comes through the comm unit in a pissed-off rush. “I would also like to know what the hell it is you think you're doing, Agent Snow?”

I'm not sure if he was just too busy with the storm team to realise I'd disobeyed his orders and had left the containment cells with Rohan, or if he genuinely took that long to stop being angry enough that he could finally speak.

“Get to the roof,” I tell them both bluntly. “Then climb down the fire escape and hope no one shoots us in the meantime.”

“Great. Simple. Love it. Especially the not-getting-shot idea. That might be my favourite part,” Rohan drawls, head rising from my shoulder to give me a surprisingly intense look. “But first, we need to make a stop in a room on the fourth floor where the OI database files are kept.”

“What?” I ask, furrowing my brows, ignoring the furious ranting from North, telling us to stay where we are and not do anything insane. “Why?”

“We need to steal their backup drive,” Rohan explains quickly. “There’s information on it FISA needs about the blue drug that Roth told us about. Trust me, we don’t have time for me to explain everything now, but we *can’t* leave here without it.” Rohan looks adamant, ready to push away from me and go get it alone if he has to. Whatever he’s learned in his time here must be big if he’s willing to risk his freedom and possibly our lives for it.

In another situation, I might try to argue that the most important thing is getting Rohan out of here. That’s the mission, like Jack said. But Jack and I are not the same in that I do believe it’s possible to care about things outside the mission and still get the job done. Plus, if this is as important as Rohan is implying, I want to help him.

“Okay.” I nod in agreement. “We’ll stop off to grab the drive.”

North, having heard everything both I and Rohan said, doesn't bother to argue. He knows me well enough by now to understand when I've made up my mind about something. Instead, he offers begrudgingly, like it's some kind of threat all its own, "I'm sending Jack to the fourth floor. He's already on the stairs."

Relieved at the knowledge my partner is safe and on his way, I feel a renewed sense of purpose. With Jack watching my six, I'm far more confident of our chances. We should be able to take the drive and get the hell out of here without suffering any significant damage.

"Jack's going to meet up with us," I tell Rohan just as the lift door opens to reveal a barren-looking fourth floor. Hopefully, that means most people have evacuated downstairs, and we won't have to shoot anyone into compliance.

Rohan's entire body stiffens against me like a feral cat in response to my mention of Jack. I look down at him in confusion, noting the extreme reaction as odd, even with how much I'm aware of the issues that Jack and Rohan have with each other. The look on Rohan's face doesn't seem to be anger or dismay at the idea of Jack's impending arrival.

"Leo, there's something else you need to know as well." Rohan's voice holds such a depth of foreboding it makes me stop altogether. His use of my first name, as well as the roiling anguish on his face, the skin around his eyes tightening in an obvious sign of distress, also raises alarm bells in my mind.

Rohan releases another shaky breath and looks up at me with haunted eyes. “It’s about Jack.”

Chapter Thirteen

Jack

I 'm on the second-floor set of stairs when North tells me to go join Leo and Rohan on the fourth floor for some unknown, last-minute detour.

Dread curls up my throat like an overgrown vine, threatening to sprout flowers and choke me the moment North barks over comms that Leo is pulling his usual maverick bullshit mid-mission. I swear to God that fucker is *allergic* to following mission parameters. He always has to be doing something a little bit extra, taking risks he doesn't need to take.

I used to think he did it just to prove he can, the uncontrollable tornado of a man that he is, or to prove himself to me, as laughable as that idea seems, but now I'm certain, and horrified to realise, he's got the incorrigible spirit of a vigilante. Just like all of that lot, he feels the need to fix every single problem he comes across and save every lost cause he trips over. It's unacceptable, and I'm going to have to break him of both habits before he winds up being the first person to give a Liquid Onyx survivor a heart attack.

Storming the OI facility was more difficult than we expected, both due to the civilians and the OI guards swarming us the moment we set off the first grenade and blew up the front entrance. The civilians got in the way, forcing us to hold back our firepower and weave among them to take out the OI guards.

It was such a chaotic nightmare, I had to abandon my gun after a misplaced explosion caught me off guard and caused me to lose my extra clip of bullets. Once I was out, I was out,

and I had to resort to using my power to break through the throng, literally cutting my way into the facility and sending guard after guard down in a bloodied, screaming mess.

One good thing about a modern building is the sheer amount of easily accessible glass.

In a rush to go make sure my partner doesn't wind up dead, I stop playing quite so nice with the two OI guards currently trying to kill me on the stairs.

I snatch the gun from the closest OI agent, breaking his wrist in the process. He shouts when the bone in his wrist snaps, jerking away so violently that he loses his footing and falls. He goes down hard, sprawling like a toddler trying to do a backward roll. I raise his gun and fire, blasting away the back of his skull.

The second OI guard is further away and has enough time to raise his gun and fire off a shot. His aim is fucked, so he gets me in the chest rather than the face, hitting the impenetrable body armour I suited up with before the storm.

I'm knocked back by the impact but recover fast enough to send a flurry of the glass shards at him. The shards slice away at the hand he's using to hold his gun, causing him to falter and drop it with a yelp of pain.

I take a shot with my newly procured gun, but the fucking thing jams, and I throw it away in disgust. Honestly, though. You'd think OI could afford to give its people better weapons. Ones that won't misfire like a piece-of-shit eighteen hundreds pistol.

Springing forward with my inhuman speed, I grab the arm of the guard and outright throw him over the staircase railing, sending him on a quick flight to the ground floor. He hits another railing on the way down, the definitive sound of crunching bone a clear sign he's not going to be getting up anytime soon.

Two more OI guards come charging up the stairs, guns out and haphazardly pointed in my direction. When they deem themselves close enough, they line up to take their shots. I throw a wave of glass at both of them, cutting up their faces and blinding them when the spray of small shards sinks into their eyes like sand on a windy beach.

They both make sounds of shock and pain, one of them stumbling into the other and sending them flying backwards down the stairs when the other OI guard loses his balance. They hit the metal steps hard and tumble together until they stop at an awkward angle. One of them lost his gun over the railing during the fall, and the other is too busy crying out and scrabbling shaky hands to his torn-up eyes, red flooding down his face in tear-like rivulets.

I turn away from them and put my Liquid Onyx speed to good use, taking the stairs at a sprint. My glass shards stay floating around me like a pissed-off swarm of hornets. Sometimes it feels almost as if my powers are sentient, belonging to a separate part of my mind that Liquid Onyx carved out for itself when it invaded my body and executed its brutal takeover with merciless resolve.

In less than half a minute, I'm crashing through the door to the fourth floor and continuing with the same momentum down the barren corridor. Despite the size and expansiveness of the building and this corridor in particular, there aren't many rooms to check. I'm halfway down the hallway and coming up on my fourth door when I find Leo and Rohan in a room filled with database storage towers, red and green lights flickering across them, and the sound of whirring technology filling the space.

They're standing near one of the bleeping towers, Leo holding the door to it open as Rohan reaches inside and takes out a medium-sized black box. He starts pulling wires out of it with impatient movements, and I'm assuming it's the backup hard drive North said he was so insistent on getting.

My relief at seeing Leo alive and whole almost brings me to my knees right there in the doorway. I didn't realise just how afraid I'd been of finding Leo shot and bleeding or finding out that somehow, OI had taken him prisoner the same way they had Rohan. It's become my literal worst nightmare to lose Leo for any reason. Having OI be the ones to snatch him away from me would be more than a nightmare, it'd be something too real for me to live with. It's a horror I had to survive once before.

Leo looks up at me when I come striding into the room. He has his gun up and aimed at me before his eyes can clock who it is. The second he realises it's me, his eyes taking in my face and then the glowing shards surrounding me like a devoted entourage, he immediately lowers the gun although his

shoulders remain hiked up and filled with visible tension. There's a strange, tormented quality to his expression as well, like whatever has kick-started this extreme depth of emotion hurts him just to think about.

If I didn't see Rohan standing there looking, admittedly, like shit but alive and perfectly capable of being a sarcastic prick for yet another day, I'd think maybe Leo had found him half dead or something.

I resist the urge to wrap an arm around Leo and tuck him into my side, to ask him what the hell's upset him so much. Or better yet, to pick up him and get us both the fuck out of here as soon as possible. Instead, I give his shoulder a light shove and make my displeasure with his recent life choices clear via heavy-set sarcasm. "Just so you know, I am very glad you decided to throw your reckless arse into danger the first chance you could. I was starting to get bored with how easy this storm was going, so, thanks for keeping the magic alive."

Leo doesn't heave a sigh and tell me to piss off like he might have at any other time, which just makes me think something is wrong even more than I already did.

Rohan barely reacts to my sudden presence, sparing me an irritated grunt as if we've just run into each other at an awkward family event rather than mid-rescue from the supervillain organisation he's spent the last month incarcerated by. It's only when Leo nudges his arm that Rohan looks up from fiddling with the hard drive to give me a far more irritated scowl.

He opens his mouth, and I just know whatever is about to come out is going to make me want to throw him down the stairs like I did those OI guards.

“You took ages to come for me, psycho,” Rohan accuses, flicking his gaze from me to the glowing shards with mild hostility. “What, did you literally check every single fucking building in the world before this one?”

I flash him a shitty smile full of teeth and malice, shrugging with a truly bitchy amount of nonchalance. “Didn’t think we needed to rush. Figured maybe you’d want to spend some daddy-son time with Satan after so long apart.”

Rohan gives me a dry look straight out of the Sahara. “Good call, Roth, thanks. You know, it has to be said, you’re very considerate for a psychotic serial killer. I feel like people really don’t give you enough credit for your emotional competency.”

I make a low humming sound of agreement. “Hmm, yeah, at least Ian Stone raised one of us right.”

Leo huffs an exasperated, “Children, please.” His gaze flickers between us, that same tension-filled, unnerving energy buzzing around him and continuing to confuse the fuck out of me. When Leo meets Rohan’s eyes, they share a look that makes it clear they’re on the same page, so whatever it is, Rohan knows about it, might even be the cause of Leo’s profound unease.

Maybe it’s about what’s on the backup drive. It must be important if Rohan was willing to risk everything to stop and grab it. I jerk my chin at the now-wireless black box Rohan

has clutched to his chest. “That thing better have world-ending information on it, or I’m straight up going to punch you in the dick, Sathe.” I glower at him, making sure he knows this is no joke. If he put Leo’s life on the line for just more random OI fuckery, I’m going to lose my shit and finally get the rematch I’ve been hoping for ever since the night we fought on that road where Leo found us.

Rohan’s response is appropriately scathing, a challenge in his dead-sun eyes. “I dare you to finally give me the excuse I need to make you piss yourself from agony, Roth. I. Fucking. *Dare* you.” He raises a hand to flex his fingers in obvious threat.

I’m suddenly reminded of how it felt to be on the receiving end of Rohan’s bizarre touch-pain ability. When he grabbed my throat and let his power loose, it felt like every single one of the nerves under his hand was exploding again and again, like a dozen aneurysms setting off inside my head, the resulting sensation spreading out to attack my entire body. It was utterly paralyzing. I consider myself quite adept at absorbing pain after all the practice I’ve had, my threshold unnaturally high even for a Liquid Onyx survivor. But what Rohan did was on a whole other level.

Before I can respond to Rohan’s threat, Leo steps between us and asks, “Are we ready to go, then?”

“Go where?” I demand, keyed up from the storm and more than ready to put distance between us and anything OI related.

“Roof. We can go down the fire escape,” Leo answers, meeting my eyes. He reaches out a hand to grasp my clenched fist, ignoring the shards of glass and stepping further into my space. His thumb gently brushes over the inside of my wrist, the touch coaxing. He waits for me to loosen my fingers so he can take my hand in his. “Come on, babe, this is almost done.”

It feels like a lie. Worse, it feels like Leo *knows* it’s a lie. It’s strange. Leo doesn’t lie to me, not on purpose. He might lie to himself, and then me by proxy, but never deliberately.

There’s a rare guardedness to Leo’s face as well. He doesn’t usually hide from me either. Not about things like this. His positivity about our ability to survive any situation, although insane and erroneous, is faultlessly genuine.

Rohan stops me from asking Leo what’s going on by making a loud groaning sound. He steps out from behind Leo, showing the exhaustion of his body by how that one movement taxes him, and gives our joined hands a pointed look of antipathy. “Fuck me, I go away for a month, and now you two idiots are all touchy and shit. What the hell is this?” He shoots Leo a disbelieving frown. “*Please* tell me you’re secretly a maniacal slag using your sexual wiles to manipulate him into not killing everyone.”

“Go fuck yourself on a rusty screwdriver, Sathe,” I bark at Rohan, feeling the intense need to backhand him across the room.

Leo snorts and gives Rohan a bemused look. “My *sexual wiles*?”

“Well.” Rohan tilts his head to the side thoughtfully, his gaze darting up and down Leo’s impressive form. “You’re not ugly.” He rushes to add, “By traditional societal standards, I mean.”

“Thank you, mate,” Leo replies wryly. “Good to know I’m attractive by somebody’s metric if not yours.”

Rohan pretends not to hear the sarcasm and shifts around impatiently. “Come on, then, my saviours, it’s officially time to fuck right off.”

“Ok.” Leo moves to let Rohan lean on him, taking his weight with ease. Rohan has lost some serious weight. Still, he’s better off than he could have been, reinforcing my assumption that his father went easier on him than he would have on anyone else.

Leo lets go of my hand, for which I mourn, and switches his gun from the hand holding up Rohan to his now-free one. He jerks his chin forward and offers me an encouraging smile that doesn’t come within a ten-foot vicinity of his eyes. “Lead on, partner.”

There’s definitely something going on, something I’m missing; I can feel it like one of those creeping suspicions you get when there’s someone behind you. You know they’re there, but you can’t quite see who it is without turning around and confronting them.

But Leo is right, this isn’t the time to get into a serious discussion. Whatever the problem is, it can wait until we’re no longer under threat from OI.

We move in a swift, careful sweep out of the room and along the corridor to a fire exit. There's a metal staircase that leads up onto the roof. I have Rohan and Leo go up ahead of me until they reach the door at the top of the stairs. When I'm sure there is no immediate danger, I go up the stairs and open the door out onto the roof. It has a gravel floor and no ledge. Rohan and Leo stay behind on my order. After a quick check of the roof, I gesture for them to come out.

Leo was right; there's easy access to the fire escape from up here.

For the sake of conserving energy, I loosen the tight mental hold on my power and let the glowing shards of glass drop uselessly to the floor. It won't take any effort at all to pick them back up again if I need to.

I move to the edge of the roof and cautiously lowering myself to the floor as much as possible, not wanting to be spotted by anyone and wind up trapped.

Down on the ground, it's clear FISA has won the day. The storm went off alright, all things considered. Damon knows how to lead a team, I'll give him that. North basically got to sit back on his arse and do fuck all whilst Damon marched around issuing orders, looking and sounding exactly like his father in full-beast mode. None of the other agents gave me the usual side-eye I've come to expect, and they shot Damon fearful looks every time I went near them. It seems likely Damon gave them a good shouting at before meeting up with me, over how to play nicely with FISA's pet super assassin.

Regardless, the good news is, soon FISA should have the building locked down.

“*Report, Agent?*” North speaks through the comm unit, sounding hurried and impatient. He’s been suspiciously quiet since he ordered me to go after Leo and Rohan.

I press two fingers to my ear and respond with a flat, “All good. On the roof. Can you tell if it’s safe to take the fire escape down and reconvene?”

There’s a pause, and then North’s answer comes through as a brisk, “Wait for my signal, Agent Roth. There are some vans coming in behind us. Might be more hostiles flooding the field.”

Peeking out over the roof again, I can see what North means. A line of three nondescript black vans are driving in through the front gate of the facility. It’s more than likely one of the OI guards sent off a distress signal, and this is OI’s response, enough reinforcements to hopefully beat back the insurgency of the FISA agents.

“Got it, boss,” I reply absently, looking over my shoulder at Leo and Rohan, who have moved towards the fire escape, ready in case we need to make a quick run for it. I wave at them, cutting my hand across my throat in a stopping motion. Leo frowns but complies, leaving Rohan to lean against the fire escape so he can come over to me.

Leo stuffs his gun into his back waistband and kneels beside me, settling in so our biceps press together. It feels reassuring to have him so close again.

“What’s up?” he asks, brows still creased in inquiry.

I nod down at the scene below. “OI has sent in a second wave of pricks to reclaim their shit and kill us all.”

Leo’s eyes widen slightly, and he leans forward a bit to see what I’m talking about.

On the ground, two of the black vans have come to a stop and opened their doors, the expected flood of OI agents spilling out like wasps from a hive. Their guns are already locked and loaded, and I catch sight of Damon almost taking a bullet to the head. From Leo’s gasp beside me, he saw the same thing. But Damon manages to dodge the hit via supernatural senses or some fuckery, and he turns around to return the bullet with one of his own, this one landing a direct hit.

In all the commotion now going on between the newly arrived OI bastards and the remaining FISA agents, it takes me a second to realise I’ve lost one of the vans. The third black van continued past the others and stopped right outside the entrance of the blown-apart facility. FISA took out most of the front of the building with small explosive devices, but it’s still penetrable on foot, and the stairs inside remain intact enough to scale as I did.

Since I was distracted by Damon almost biting a bullet, I didn’t see who was in the third van. Whoever they are has already vacated it and run inside the building, which is worrisome, as it means the third team is looking to sweep the

facility and could very well make their way up to the roof sometime soon.

“You need to move to the fire escape,” I tell Leo, already standing and pulling him with me by the arm. “If they come up here, we’re fucked. Rohan won’t be able to run.”

Leo takes a second to consider it before nodding in assent, a frustrated look on his face. But he knows as well as I do, given what we’ve got to work with, there is no good option here. Whatever we do, it’ll be a risk. “Alright, come on, then.” He jerks his head at where Rohan is still waiting by the fire escape.

I curse inwardly, realising Leo has misunderstood.

“No. You and Rohan need to go down, wait somewhere, halfway if you can get away with it without being spotted by anyone on the ground. I’ll deal with the OI agents and then come after you.”

Leo immediately tries to negate that idea, cutting his hand through the air and scowling fiercely at me. “Fuck that. I won’t leave you up here to fight who knows how many OI agents on your own.”

“Got no choice.” I start shoving him towards the fire escape. “Rohan needs you to get him and that drive away from immediate danger. I can hold off a load of OI agents.”

“If you come with us they’ll never know we were up here,” Leo reasons.

I shake my head. “Nah, if they’re doing a full sweep, bet your arse they’ll check just to make sure. We can’t risk getting caught on the fire escape, and there’s too many OI agents running around for us to just slip away.”

Leo looks torn. He knows I’m right, but it goes against every one of his natural instincts to protect his own life and leave me behind to possibly get killed. I can tell he’s going to keep arguing with me, so I pull my trump card and pray it works like I need it to.

“You’re forgetting the mission again,” I tell him, flicking a glance over at Rohan, who has been watching the exchange between us with raised eyebrows, waiting with surprising patience for the verdict, not voicing an opinion of his own. I would have thought he’d jump at the chance to get away and abandon me to OI’s wrath.

Leo’s eyes follow mine to Rohan, and he winces, possibly from the truth in my statement or the memory of our last fight about this very thing.

A desolate expression overtakes his face as he turns back to me, saying gruffly, “I want the record to show, I don’t like this.”

I wince in sympathy, knowing I’d feel exactly the same if it were the other way around. It was bad enough sending Leo into this facility today without backup or any form of protection. I don’t like to even think about leaving him behind to face certain danger from people who would try their best to kill or capture him.

Leo must see some of my own conflicted emotions because he sighs regretfully and raises both hands to take hold of my face, seeking to offer comfort like he always does. He pulls me forward and presses a hard kiss to my mouth, firm and reassuring in its surety. It isn't a *goodbye* kiss; he pulls away too quickly, doesn't savour the moment enough. It's a *get the job done and come find me* kiss, an assumption we'll be able to continue this later when we're alone and able to take our time with each other.

When Leo ends the kiss, he keeps hold of my face and looks deeply into my eyes, like he's trying to convey something more profound than what human language will allow. He presses his forehead to mine briefly before stepping away entirely and letting go of me, fingers and fingernails dragging along my jaw as his hands drop to his sides.

"Alright, Jesus fucking Christ," Rohan finally pipes up, giving us both a look of supreme exasperation. "He's staying behind to beat down some OI lackeys, not shipping off to Normandy in 1944. Let's go." He makes a grab for Leo, tugging him onto the fire escape, and throws me a dry look. "See you in, like, ten minutes, Roth, yeah?"

Leo allows himself to be led away down the fire escape by Rohan, their footsteps clattering against the metal. He turns his head to look back at me one final time before he disappears down the stairs with our joint charge in tow.

I move to place myself behind the fire-exit door, ready for anyone who comes crashing through it. Seeing as they can't

know for sure anyone is up here, I'll be able to take out at least the first few agents with the use of surprise alone.

Keeping my back pressed to the brick wall, I count the seconds, one finger tapping against the brick as I strain my enhanced hearing to pick up on the sound of anyone marching up the stairs to the roof. I send a shudder of power through the glass shards still littering the ground, and they quake like someone picked up the building and shook it. I keep the strings that tie me to my power pulled tight, at the very edge of my conscious mind, so I'm able to call the shards into action when they're needed.

It takes longer than I thought it would for the OI agents to come, seconds stretching out into tension-filled minutes. I tally five pairs of feet on the stairs leading up from the fourth floor. One of them is far lighter than the others, suggesting either smallness in stature or a better calibre of training. I probably wouldn't be able to hear them at all if it weren't for my genetically mutated senses. The lighter one seems to be trailing behind the others as well, indicating some hesitation or unwillingness to be included within the group.

When the first OI agent comes striding out onto the roof, I let the door swing open and partially conceal me from view. It's only once OI numbers Two, Three, and Four enter my field of reach that I spring into action and take them unawares, grasping for the closest to me, Four, and grabbing him by the head, yanking to the side and twisting his neck until it gives a satisfying snap.

Without looking behind me, I kick the door, sending it flying backwards and slamming closed with a bang, preventing Lightfoot from joining the fight straightaway. If I'm right about his training being better than his fellow agents, then I'll want to put off our altercation for as long as possible even if it's just by a handful of seconds.

The remaining agents already on the roof turn to engage once they realise Four has been eliminated. They bring their guns up and fire, but I use Four's body as a shield, exploiting my strength to raise the man off his feet to cover my body and face. They shoot their first couple of rounds into their dead comrade's chest as I push forward, shoving Four hard into the next nearest agent, which is Three.

Three takes the full impact of Four's corpse, which is larger than average and packed with heavy muscle, and he loses his footing. He stumbles backwards and falls, sprawling to the floor with a pained yelp of surprise and outrage, temporarily trapped underneath the bulk and weight of Four.

Two and One must have used up their entire clips, uselessly trying to shoot me through Four's body, which is some nauseatingly amateur-hour-type shit. It isn't like the movies, where guns have endless ammo, and you never need to change out the clip. Some OI agents have clearly been playing too many shoot-'em games, spending not nearly enough time in the field or the shooting range to know better. OI doesn't bother training their people very well unless they see true value in dedicating their time to it. Seems this lot was viewed as future cannon fodder and not much else; either that or

they're relatively new recruits without any military or agency backgrounds.

With the use of Four's body as protection, I'm close enough now to snatch the gun away from Two and twist it around to shoot One before he can refill his gun's clip and get off another bullet of his own. My bullet catches him in the throat rather than the head due to the odd angle of having to shoot over Two's shoulder.

As One goes down, Two makes a valiant, if badly executed, effort to take his gun back from me. He launches himself at me and gets a bullet to the stomach for his troubles. It obviously doesn't kill him right away, but when I push him back, he goes to his knees. Blood bubbles up and spurts out of his mouth, spraying onto the stones in front of him. I fire off another shot to his head, and his body jerks violently to the side from the momentum of the bullet penetrating his skull at close range.

Turning back to Three, I'm just time to witness him free himself from Four's body. He heaves the other man off with some effort and points the gun he managed to hold onto at me. I fire off a shot before he can, the bullet piercing the middle of Three's forehead and causing his head to snap back and hit the ground with an audible crack.

From my peripheral vision, I see the door to the roof start to open, belatedly acknowledging how strange it is that it's taken whoever this is so long to come out. It took me less than twenty seconds to kill the first four OI agents, but that's still plenty of time for them to have rushed through the door and

joined the fray. It's like they were waiting for me to be done with the others, but that doesn't make much sense.

I bring my gun up and point it at the door, ready to shoot whoever comes through it. My senses are on hyper-alert, my tendons seeming to hum with barely restrained energy, my head pounding with adrenaline.

What comes next feels like it happens in slow motion, the entire planet coming to a near standstill as The Impossible steps out from behind the door. My heart pulses like it's going into shock, the delicate organ convulsing inside my rib cage. For a moment, all I can feel is that *beatbeatbeat* of static disbelief mixed with uncontrolled horror.

It takes far too long for reality to come crashing down on me again, but when it does, it's paired with a slam of pain to my chest. Truth comes into focus, rippling over my brain like wind on the surface of water.

My fingers loosen on my gun enough that the fucking thing drops straight from my hands. I don't watch it fall, my eyes fused to the sight before me like melted plastic when it dries, but I hear the gun clatter to the ground despite the rushing sound in my ears, which is more like screaming than anything else.

"Jack," The Impossible says, green eyes blazing with a fury I find both familiar and ominously foreign at the same time. He nods down at the dropped gun at my feet. His mouth slashes upwards on both sides, revealing teeth which seem sharper than they should be even though they're the same as they

always were, the smile more of a wicked snarl. “You better pick that up, brother.”

Another wave of pain hits me, and it’s like the first was a warning shock wave, and this next one is the real thing because hearing his voice, however distorted by malice, almost brings me to my knees with how much it hurts.

“Dan?” I rasp, like it’s a question. I don’t know why. There’s no doubt in my mind, it’s my brother I’m looking at. I spent over two decades working side by side with the man, watching and trying to emulate him, gazing at him with admiration and hope and what passed for love in my fucked-up head. I’d know him anywhere, anytime, with my eyes closed, and just feeling him with my hands. I’d know him.

Instead of responding to my non-question, Dan raises his gun and points it at me, firing off a shot and catching me in the shoulder. My body armour stops the bullet from piercing skin, but it still throws me off balance, and pain momentarily disables the arm on the side he hit.

If nothing else, the impact of the bullet finally knocks me out of my agonised stupor. When Dan fires off another shot, I drop to the ground, dodging the bullet this time, and with my working arm, snatch up the gun I dropped and bring it up in defence. Thanks to my training, my gun hand automatically aims the muzzle at Dan’s head. But my higher brain kicks in just in time to stop me from killing my brother for a second time. I change up the angle and wind up shooting at Dan’s gun-wielding hand instead.

Dan moves his hand slightly, so the bullet hits the gun instead of his hand, knocking it out of his grasp and sending it flying off to the left, smashing into the wall behind him. It bounces off the wall and lands far from his reach.

Without a weapon, I have a clean shot, another chance to end this with a bullet to the head or heart. But I hesitate, unable to do it, my hands wavering on the gun. Dan notices this and offers up another cruel smile, mouth opening, a laugh I remember all too well erupting from it. This is the first time I've ever heard it aimed at me, though. He usually reserved that laugh for when OI agents or guards were torturing him, or trying to humiliate him, or otherwise attempting to show the superpowered freak his place.

There's a frightening edge to him right now. More so than ever before, he seems strung out, eyes red rimmed and wild. He's twitchy, movements harsh and reckless, like he's barely holding onto his mental tether. He was always too much like the material we can manipulate, sharp and dangerous, easily able to cause harm when handled without care.

As if reading my thoughts, Dan's eyes dart to the ground and zero in on the glass I left there just in case I needed it against the OI agents. Dread punches me in the gut. I can't help but think about the last time we used our powers against each other and what that led to. Something tells me this time, Dan is less likely to give ground.

"Dan, fucking *stop!*" I mean it to be an order, but it comes out sounding more like a desperate plea, which it is. This is all

too much to take in at once, and I can feel my psychosis spiralling downwards into the abyss of my worst memories. Memories I've alternated between viciously kicking into my subconscious and replaying over and over again until I feel like I'm going to explode, fly apart like a thrown grenade.

Between one breath and the next, Dan has a flurry of glass shards rising from the ground and flying at my hands, slicing away at the backs of them, slashing open thin wounds that ooze black blood. The pain barely registers, and I pull the trigger, aiming my gun over Dan's shoulder as a warning. The bullet whizzes past his ear and lodges in the brick wall behind him with a definitive crack. They're reinforced rounds, so they won't ricochet unless they hit something with real staying power.

Firing a shot was meant to show him I'm not playing around, maybe even to get him to snap out of whatever mind fuckery OI must have put him through for him to look at me with so much bald-faced hatred. Because that's what it is, the emotion on his face, swamping through his eyes like hot sludge from the moors, a rage too acute to be anything other than genuine loathing. I had been forcing myself not to see it, to pretend it was just shock or Dan's craving for violence, momentarily overtaking him in the heat of the moment.

But when the bullet hits the brick and Dan's expression shifts into something mocking, bordering on amused disbelief before returning to that same furiously hewed mask of hate, I have to face up to reality. Dan's mouth becomes jagged all the

way along when he snarls, “Gonna make you regret that, brother. Should have taken your shot when you could.”

His use of the term “brother” confirms things for me. It’s not just that he isn’t seeing *me*, it’s more than that. I don’t know why, but when my brother looks at me, he must be seeing an enemy rather than the lifelong ally we’ve always been to each other.

However much it confounds and fucking destroys me, I have to accept what his behaviour is telling me. I also have to accept the fact that warning him won’t do shit. He’s not in a mental place right now to understand it, for whatever reason, and all that shooting the wall did was prove my weakness to him.

Now we both know I’m not going to shoot him anywhere lethal, and when Dan is in this kind of mood, nothing less than a lethal shot will stop him from coming at whatever his target is. I’ve seen Dan keep on fighting whilst riddled with bullet holes and leaving a trail of blood behind him like a truck leaking oil. He’s an unstoppable force that treats inevitable consequences like suggestions from the universe he has the freedom to accept or ignore, like he can bend reality to his will through sheer stubbornness alone.

Dan sends another whip of glowing glass shards at me, this time aiming for my face. I shift out of the way, missing the direct hit, the glass cutting shallowly into my neck instead. Dan uses my moment of distraction to sprint forward and kick

the gun out of my hands. It goes flying off sideways and skids across the ground to land too far away for me to easily reach.

I recover enough to block Dan's next attack, a fist aimed at my unprotected face. Dan doesn't pause, going in for another one straight after; this time, his fist was meant for my throat. I block that one too, and we spend the next however long trading blows, landing some but deflecting most.

Dan gets in a particularly hard punch to my face, breaking my nose with a volatile crush of bone. A few moves later, I get him back with a swipe to his mouth. His lip splits, and all he does is grin at me, dark and insane, as black blood trickles from the wound and over his chin.

It's familiar. Fighting with Dan. Not just because of the last time we fought this viciously, but because of all the times we've sparred together through the course of our time as OI agents. They tested us against each other relentlessly, which means I know every one of Dan's strengths and weaknesses in a one-on-one combat situation.

Of course, the same can be said the other way around. Dan knows me just as well, if not better.

Whilst Dan is distracted with trying to beat me physically, I pull on my power and will every bit of glass to rise from the ground. Pushing out with my mind, I throw the glass over the side of the roof, so neither of us can use it during this fight. Dan growls in response and redoubles his efforts to beat me down.

Dan makes the mistake of moving in too close at one point, tripped up by his temper, allowing me to grab his arm during his next attempted hit and using the momentum he put into the punch to flip him over my shoulder onto his back. He hits the ground hard enough to knock the wind out of him, and I quickly move forward, spinning around to face him once I'm a safe distance away so he won't be able to grab at my ankles or some playground shit like that.

Dan always liked a bit of playground bullshit. He was never one to think that biting or hair-pulling was too lowbrow for two professional assassins.

I watch my brother recover, panting from the exertion of fighting someone who is able to match me strength for strength and speed for speed.

Dan gets to his feet with alarming ease and throws himself at me again with a yell of fury that I recognise from so many fights in the past. He's getting frustrated, which in most people would make them more likely to make mistakes, but with Dan, it just makes him more fucking dangerous than ever.

We go back to trading blows, moving around the roof like acrobats doing a circus performance, getting fancy with our kicks and blocks.

When Dan catches me off guard enough to maybe put an end to this fight, it's with words rather than a well-placed hit.

“Did you think you could outrun me forever, Jack? Did you think I wouldn't come for you after what you did?”

Dan takes advantage of my distraction to jab me in the throat. I wheeze like a fifty-year-old smoker, with lungs caked in tar, suddenly unable to take in air, faltering in my defence and missing my chance to retaliate in time. Dan swipes out with his leg, upending me so I land hard on my back.

Dan drops down onto me, grabbing my shoulders and pulling me up only to slam me back down, my head cracking against the ground hard enough to knock something loose. It feels like my skull is breaking apart underneath my skin. He does it three more times, lifting me up only to slam me back down over and over before straddling my body, arms trapped by his knees, and going to work on my face.

He hits me again and again, his fist connecting with and breaking my cheekbone, then my jaw. Pain radiates through my face, pressure building under my eyes, the swelling already beginning around them from the power of the blows.

Between hits, he speaks in snarling demands, the very real anguish in his voice a harsher punishment than the physical beating.

“How could you do it? After everything we’ve survived together?”

Feeling like I might quake, quake, quake apart at any second.

I’m sorry, I’m sorry. Dan. Brother. I’m sorry.

I don’t think I’m talking out. Out loud.

There’s blood, wet and metallic, on my lips, in my mouth. It’s a taste as familiar as water and toothpaste. My teeth are

probably coated in it, turning them black, like I've gone old school with some charcoal.

“Why?” Dan demands. He's always demanding shit from me. Why? Why this? He already knows the answer.

Because OI made me. Because you made me.

“I'm sorry,” I get out brokenly. Or maybe I just mouth the words. I can't tell, my brain doesn't feel like it's working, gears grinding in opposite directions, sparks flying and catching the oil swishing around my head, setting fires.

Either way, Dan understands, and his response is as vicious as expected.

“Liar.” Then, “*You left me.*”

What?

Dan jerks away, his body snapping backwards before he can land the next blow. I'm confused, head fizzing too badly to focus properly, but when I turn my head to the side, I see Leo standing there with his gun pointed at Dan, a fierce look on his face. He must have run up the stairs when I took too long to come after him and Rohan.

I can't see Dan fully from this angle, but it seems likely Leo shot him. Knowing Leo, it'll be somewhere non-lethal.

Dan snarls at Leo and makes to go back to kicking the shit out of me. Leo fires off another shot, catching Dan in the shoulder this time, a place I can actually see the bullet enter.

“Back off, Dan!” Leo calls out to my brother, moving closer with his gun still trained on him.

Dan gets to his feet, ignoring the bullet wounds. Now I can see that the other bullet caught him on his side. I was right, the position of the entry point guarantees Leo didn't hit anything vital on its way through.

“Stand down!” Leo shouts when Dan starts prowling towards him.

Terror at the sight of my brother bearing down on Leo lights me up from the inside, but my head is still too fucked to let me be of any use in stopping him. I try to sit up and just barely manage to roll onto my side, my head feeling like it's going to split open.

As if waiting for a cue, Damon, followed by a large cadre of other FISA agents, spills out onto the roof, coming to box Dan in from behind. Damon has his gun out and aimed at my brother's back. He fires off a shot when he sees him going after Leo, the bullet biting into Dan's bicep.

Dan assesses the situation within a dozen heartbeats, looking between Leo and Damon's small army. He shoots one last glance down at me, and our eyes connect for a single painful moment. There seems to be a whole lifetime spoken in that one shared look. Then Dan tears his gaze away and runs, vaulting himself off the edge of the roof, disappearing from view as he hurtles towards the ground.

I try to call out “no,” but my voice won't work. Then Dan is gone, and the loss feels as fresh as it did the day I killed him. I

don't have the strength to chase after him even though every fibre of my being pulses with the need to get my eyes back on him, to catch him like a mouse in a trap and hold him still so I can try to understand.

No. Fuck it. I don't care about understanding. I don't care why. I just want. I just.

I want my brother.

Over the course of a few exhausted blinks, Leo appears at my side. He's kneeling down beside my battered form, a blurry look of panic on his face. Fear for me. He touches me, hands on my shoulder, my face. He keeps telling me I'll be alright, we'll fix this, we'll make it okay.

I wish I could tell him I don't give a flying fuck about anything other than the fact my brother is running away from me, and I need, I *need*, to get him back.

Leo's eyes are so blue. Everything else feels like it's blacking out at the edges. But the pale blue of Leo's eyes stands out in the dark.

When that darkness finally eclipses everything, Leo's eyes are the last sight to fade out of existence.

Chapter Fourteen

Leo

I spend the time it takes to get Jack from the OI facility to FISA's medical unit internally losing my shit. Scared of losing Jack to the extensive injuries his brother inflicted. Mindfucked over the reappearance of Dan Roth.

When Rohan told me about Dan back on the fourth floor, I wasn't sure what to believe. I didn't think Rohan would lie to me about something that insane, but at the same time, it seemed impossible to accept as the truth. Jack was so sure he'd killed his brother, so how could the man be alive?

That's the main reason I didn't tell Jack straightaway. I wanted to make sure Rohan was right about Dan before opening all kinds of wounds for Jack. What if I made Jack go through all that, and it turned out Rohan was somehow wrong? It would've killed Jack to be given hope about his brother and then have it snatched away.

I can't imagine how painful it must have been for Jack to see his brother like he did, though, and maybe I should have told him to lessen the shock. It was bad enough for me, and I never knew him.

Seeing him in the flesh was an experience all its own. I didn't get the chance to properly study him, too busy focusing on protecting Jack, but it was still surreal to me how much he looked like my partner. Of course, I'd known they were identical twins. Still, that knowledge couldn't have prepared me for looking into the eyes of the man I'd come to care so deeply for, looking back at me from another face.

What struck me most was the wildness in Dan's bright-green eyes. It perfectly matched what I've seen in Jack's when he's feeling particularly untethered and emotionally volatile.

I'm sure if I had gotten closer, I would have seen the differences between the two brothers, in personality if not appearance. But in that moment, Dan looked so much like Jack, I couldn't bring myself to be truly afraid of him. I definitely couldn't hurt him in any permanent way.

North would have told me to take the kill shot, I know it. I knew it then. But I couldn't. Not only because he is Jack's mirror image, but also because he's Jack's brother. I know only a little of how much Dan's death wrecked Jack with grief. I saw how it plagued his minimal sleep with nightmares so terrible he would wake up shouting, screaming his brother's name, with his eyes wide and wet in agony, his mind drenched in suffocating guilt.

How could I take away Jack's second chance to be with his brother? Answer: I couldn't. I refused to even if it meant trying to survive a fight with Dan on that roof.

Thankfully, depending on how you look at it, Damon arrived just in time to act as backup, forcing Dan to retreat and stage a truly theatrical escape.

When Jack gets brought into medical, a swarm of doctors gather around him, including my cousin Rex, who tells me to get the hell out of the way whilst simultaneously promising to look after Jack for me. Rex makes it sound like a sworn oath rather than passive reassurance. My cousin has an intensity

about him unlike anyone I've ever met. When he tells me he'll take good care of Jack, I believe him unreservedly.

I wait at the far side of the room, out of the way, whilst the medical team works on Jack.

Damon and North come in at certain points, attempting to steal me away, either for a debrief or just to wash Jack's blood off my hands. I refuse, turning them both away, unwilling to move too far from my injured partner.

Hours and a great deal of pacing later, Rex comes over to tell me Jack will be okay. They've put him under, and with his Liquid Onyx blood, he'll heal within a day. I'm so relieved it almost takes me to my knees. I have to lean back against the wall and resist the urge to slide down it until my arse hits the floor.

Rex sets me up in a chair at Jack's bedside, ignoring the dodgy looks from his co-workers. He goes away and comes back with a bowl of water and a flannel. I let him sit beside me in another chair he stole from somewhere and gently wipe at my hands, slowly removing the dried black blood from my skin.

Jack is laid on the medical bed, the bright lights overhead illuminating his lax form. He looks beaten and exhausted even in medically induced unconsciousness. His skin is paler than usual, and his face is swollen all over. They've washed away most of the blood, but his injuries still look awful. There are bandages around his head. Dan practically caved in his skull as well as pulverising his face.

For once I count every blessing there is that Jack was genetically modified as a child and is capable of surviving things that would kill most people.

There's an IV stuck in his arm, providing pain-relieving meds and saline to keep him hydrated.

I can't take my eyes off Jack, can't stop myself from cataloguing every split of skin, every fast-forming bruise, every mark his brother left behind. Soon these injuries will heal, and the marks will fade.

Part of me thinks Jack will be pissed by that. He'll hate the idea of his brother's presence, the marks of his return, disappearing as if they were never there. As if Dan were never there.

When Rex is done cleaning one hand, I use it to touch Jack's arm, relishing the reaffirming heat of his skin, running my fingers along it until I reach his wrist. I curl my fingers around it, keeping them pressed to his pulse and counting the beats to reassure myself of his well-being, the resolute sign of continued life.

"So, are you gonna tell me what's going on between you and the sexy mutant?" Rex asks, forcing me to split my attention between him and Jack.

Rex has a terrible brain-to-mouth filter. He just says whatever's in his head, regardless of how awkward it is. It's occasionally embarrassing but mostly hilarious to the people around him. I know for a fact, Damon enjoys it immensely.

“*The sexy mutant?*” I question, a bit incredulous, my voice scratchy from lack of use.

Rex, always the natural caretaker, hears the crack in my voice and immediately rushes off to grab me a cup of ice-cold water from a nearby cooler. I take the cup gratefully and sip from it slowly, afraid I’ll gag if I try to drink too fast. When I’m done, I put the empty cup down on the floor next to my seat.

“Yeah, you heard right,” Rex scoffs, his response rapid-fire. Where most people shoot out words like bullets from a Glock, Rex has a machine-gun mouth. “I didn’t even stutter. Used full words and everything. You got no excuse to be making me go through the effort of repeating myself. Don’t be a waster.”

Rex is giving me the full benefit of his unwaveringly intense gaze. It’s discomfiting how perceptive that gaze is, the intelligence most say he inherited from his dad clear to see. He has the staple sky-blue eyes and white-blond hair as well as the slim build and pretty, fae-like features of most Novas. I somehow bypassed most of those genes, taking more after my mother’s side. Rex, on the other hand, looks exactly like my uncle Alex, like my father.

“Me the waster? You’re the one who can’t even be bothered to repeat one fucking sentence in a time of great stress for your favourite cousin. Maybe I just want to hear your dulcet tones to soothe my fragile state of mind.”

“Okay, a number of things for all that shit.” Rex holds up three fingers and counts them off as he talks. “One, there is no

stress. Your sexy mutant will be fine. Benefits of being a mutant, *hello*. Two, you're my *only* cousin. Got no choice but to tolerate you, so check that ego, thanks. Three, my voice is melodic as fuck, thanks for acknowledging this truth; it's about time someone did." Then Rex gives me a more serious look, which is a scary thing to be on the other end of, and adds with stunning sincerity, "There's not a single fragile thing about you, you lying bitch. You're one of the strongest people I know. You're a goddamn Nova."

I have no clue what to do with any of that, so I revert our attention to the original issue at hand. "Sexy mutant, though?"

Rex glowers at me, unimpressed. "Stop trying to stall." He jerks his chin at Jack. "Tell me about your whatever-the-fuck-it-is with the blond meanie."

"Blond meanie?" Jesus, the names are getting worse. I have a sneaking suspicion that might be what all of medical has been calling Jack since his first visit. When medical gives you a name, however incorrect or ridiculous, it tends to stick. In six years, I haven't managed to convince them to stop calling me "hedgehog hair." I'm almost certain that's what they have on my medical chart rather than my actual name every time I come in.

"Leo!" Rex hits me as punishment for not complying with his wishes. It bloody hurts. Despite Rex's small size, he can pack one hell of a punch. His father, as well as Damon, made sure to train Rex up even before he decided to follow his family's footsteps and become an agent.

“Why do you think there’s anything to tell about Jack and me?” I ask weakly, averting my gaze and focusing on Jack so I won’t have to see Rex’s shrewd assessment.

“Novas know Novas,” Rex answers simply. It hits something funny inside my chest to hear that. That’s a phrase my dad used to say. I’ve heard my uncle Alex say it too.

Feeling oddly helpless, I let out a very pathetic whinging sound that may or may not form words. “I have no idea what to say.”

Rex doesn’t seem any more impressed by this than I expected him to be. “The truth would be good, probably.” He makes a face at me as if a thought has just occurred to him, and he needs to beat it to death. “It’s not like I’m going to judge you for having feelings or whatever for him. It doesn’t matter to me that you’re partners, or he’s a killer, or any of the other reasons you think I’d care about.”

I don’t doubt that. Rex isn’t the judgemental type, not really. He might talk a lot of shit, but he’s got a kind heart as much as he’d hate for me to point that out. Damon is always saying how alike we are on the inside, however different we look. He used to say that you might not see the family resemblance, but you’ll *feel* it if you get to know both of us. Rex and I proceeded to take the piss out of him for being so sappy without a warrant.

“What did you do when you accidentally caught feelings for Damon?” I ask, thinking it might help to know how my

prickly romance-allergic cousin let my best friend into his heart.

“Denied them a whole lot,” Rex answers with a shrug. “Pushed him away. Convinced myself he’d never understand me, and even if he did, that understanding would only drive him away in the end.”

I wince in sympathy. “Sounds painful and dramatic.”

“It was. I fought him hard.” Rex’s mouth splits into a begrudging smile. “But Damon is a stubborn bastard. He kept trying, put up with all my shit, proved to me every day that I was wrong, and he was right. You know how much he likes being right, so it wasn’t too much of a hardship for him.”

“He’s sick in love with you,” I tease, feeling a tired smile stretch across my face, thinking about how obsessed I know Damon is with his boyfriend. “It’s hilarious and disturbing.”

Rex, ignoring my declaration over Damon’s feelings for him because he’s still a little emotionally constipated, asks, “So what is this thing with Roth? Is it sex? Is it romantic? Both? More?”

I consider my answer, finding no easy way to describe what Jack means to me at this point. “I think what we are is the very definition of ‘it’s complicated.’”

“Then uncomplicate it,” Rex offers congenially, like it’s really that simple.

“This isn’t just about me and my shit self-esteem, though.” I huff frustratedly. “There are genuine reasons, good reasons,

why nothing between us will ever work. Especially now his brother is back. He's not going to be in a good place until we find Dan and help him."

It's probably stupid to be thinking about the status of my relationship with Jack when he has so much else to deal with right now. I can't expect him to care about slapping a label on what we are to each other. It doesn't matter, not in the grand scheme of things at least.

Rex doesn't seem to agree. He scowls at me like he can hear my internal monologue and thinks it's a load of bollocks. "Nah, nah, mate. You're overcomplicating it again. Just answer the three basic questions." He holds up three fingers and folds each of them down as he goes. "Do you want him more than anything or anyone else? Does *he* want you more than anything or anyone else? And the big one, are you willing to fight to keep each other, no matter what, even when it's hard, even with all the reasons why not?"

My insecurities flare up like a rash, itchy on the underside of my skin and impossible to ignore. "What if he doesn't want me like that? What if after the way he grew up, he's not *capable* of wanting a relationship like that?"

It feels strange to think of it that way, like I'm dehumanizing Jack. But the truth is, he grew up so differently from me, from anyone. The only romantic relationships he's had experience with have been faked for a mission where he had to pretend to be someone else. How can he know what he wants when he

hasn't had the freedom to believe that anything other than the life they gave him was even a possibility?

"Then you get over it and move on." Rex cuts through my thoughts with the verbal equivalent of a blade. "Straight up facts, Leo. You can't force what isn't there."

"What if we do try to make it work, and we fail big-time?" That thought scares me more than I can express without sounding like a lunatic. After having come so close to losing Jack physically, my nerves are frayed. It's difficult to be brave when the fear is so fresh.

"As long as neither of you ends up dead, you get over it, and you move on," Rex says, blunt as hell. "Next stupid question, please."

A spark of anger ignites in me. "Could you get over it and move on if things went bad between you and Damon?"

But Rex surprises me by answering with a sombre, "Yes. If I had no other choice, I'd have to. But luckily for me, Damon is a stubborn bastard, like I said, and there's no way he'd ever give up on me." He sounds so sure, I'm almost jealous of how easily he expresses belief in his and Damon's relationship. "It's just not in him to stop fighting for the things he thinks matter; you know that."

I do know that.

"I think I'm scared, Rex," I admit, the words like glass slicing away at my tongue. "I hate feeling like a coward about this, but I can't help it."

“Yeah, I get it. But I can’t tell you what the right choice is, Leo. This isn’t some movie where no mistake is big enough it can’t be fixed. You could hurt him. He could break you. That’s always gonna be a possibility. Start by answering the three questions. Go from there. That’s all I can tell you with absolute certainty.”

I feel a smile prick at one corner of my mouth at the evasiveness in his voice. “Are you avoiding having to say, ‘relationships are about taking a leap of faith’?”

Rex gives me a dry look although he sounds disgusted when he says, “With every fibre of my being, yes.”

“Good, because that would have sounded crap, and I would have laughed at you.”

“You look like you could use a laugh, mate. Or a nap.”

“Are you saying I look like shit?”

“I’m heavily implying it.”

Rex is protected from whatever my stellar comeback was about to be when another injured agent gets wheeled in, and he has to jump back into doctor mode. He leaves me with a slap to my shoulder, which is the most physical intimacy Rex usually doles out in public unless he’s treating someone medically. I must look worse than I think I do.

As much as I’d like to shower and get changed, the thought of leaving Jack behind is one every part of my mind rebels against. I can’t let him wake up here alone, not after what he’s been through. His head is going to be a mess already without

the added stress of waking up in medical without any familiar faces he can trust to tell him the truth about what's going on.

I settle back in my seat, mentally preparing for the long haul because unless someone physically removes me from this room, I'm staying.

Time drags on, and it's almost half a day later when Jack finally begins stirring in his medical bed, by which time I'm all but napping in the uncomfortable chair Rex gave me to aid in my sitting vigil.

I'm careful not to touch him as he wakes and blearily darts his gaze around the room, not wanting to accidentally trigger some physical defensive instincts. His entire body tightens with painful speed once consciousness fully takes hold of him. It isn't until Jack clocks me that he begins to calm down, uncoiling slowly.

Once I feel safe enough to reach for him, I take his hand in mine and thread our fingers together, scooting my chair closer to the bed so I'm able to rest both arms on the mattress and lean forward, allowing him to see me better.

Jack squeezes my hand reflexively. His grip is strong, which feels somehow reassuring to me.

"Hey, babe," I murmur, keeping my voice low and steady, hoping to further ground him and not incite any negative reactions that might cause Jack to accidentally hurt himself further.

Jack's eyes are startlingly clear, the drugs he was given having apparently cleared from his system in their entirety. He opens his mouth to speak, but the dryness of his throat prevents him from getting out any more than a croak of sound.

Having anticipated this, I reach for the cup of water I procured for him earlier and lift it to his lips. Jack takes a few gulps of the water, eyes still fixed on me as he does. When he's done, he waits for me to take the cup away and put it back down out of the way before making a second attempt at talking.

His first word doesn't surprise me at all.

“Dan?”

He frames his brother's name like it's a question. Also, not unexpected. It's a question I prepared myself to answer.

“Gone.”

It's a simple response but the only accurate one I can offer. Damon has been coming in every few hours to give me updates about what's been happening, and according to the intel we have, Dan landed on the ground without injury and managed to escape the facility grounds. All we know for sure is that when he left, he went alone, not with OI. But even that is conjecture. Dan could have been running back to them as well as running away from us.

Jack closes his eyes and releases a slow, shuddering breath. I can *feel* him reining in his more extreme emotions and trying not to explode, his chest hitching as he attempts to work

through his initial reaction to the news his brother is MIA. His hand tightens on mine to the point of pain, and I let it fly, making no sound or objection. If he needs someone to hold onto until the world stops spinning, I can be that.

Bringing his hand up to my mouth, I press a soft kiss to his knuckle. At the touch of my lips, his eyelids flicker open again. There's a bright sheen to his eyes, dark lashes wet with unshed tears. When he blinks at me, it allows a couple of them to fall. His anguish is so stark it makes my chest clench in empathy, not fully understanding the scope of his grief but feeling the echoes of it all the same.

There's nothing I can say to make this alright, so I don't try. Any words of sympathy are likely to set Jack off. Apologies and reassurances aren't what he needs right now.

I wipe away the wetness from Jack's face, then close my other hand over the one I already have linked with mine, trapping it there like a freshly caught firefly. Jack doesn't try to pull away, so I press his hand to my cheek, gently stroking the underside of his wrist with one of my thumbs, hoping to soothe him in any way I can, in any way he'll accept.

Jack keeps his gaze locked on mine, looking more lost and desolate than I've seen him since we first met.

We don't talk again for a long time.

Chapter Fifteen

Jack

I spend another day in the medical unit before discharging myself against the doctors' recommendations, and by that I mean I attempted to leave like a normal person with free will, and they all but body slammed me back into bed. They acted like I was trying to evade a military draft call-up or some shit.

It was Leo's cousin, Rex, who threw himself into the fray and convinced the other doctors to release me from my apparent medical incarceration. Despite being the youngest doctor there, he seemed to be the one in charge, which was low-key hilarious considering what the man looks like.

Rex is like a meaner, tinier, more vicious version of Leo. He declared me a "tragic twatclock unworthy of the effort" and insisted on having Leo come retrieve me so I wouldn't decide to get all "melodramatic" and launch my own search-and-rescue operation for Dan.

After finally convincing Leo to go clean up properly and get something to eat, he'd only been gone a few hours when I attempted to stage my failed great escape. He came back looking better than he had when he left, freshly showered and gorgeous as always if still tired around the eyes.

I'd say I feel bad about causing him so much distress, but in truth, the fact he stayed with me in medical until I woke up, and was there to watch me have my pathetic breakdown, means kind of everything. There's no doubt in my mind that I wouldn't have handled it even half as well without Leo there by my bedside. He stopped me from completely losing it and gave me something solid to hold onto whilst I silently fell

apart. He was there for me in a way no one else ever has been, holding my hand and not making me talk. I don't know how he understood what I needed most, but it's renewed my conviction that Leo deserves more from me than he's been getting.

In the time I spent healing, Dru apparently combed through the data on the backup drive Rohan was adamant we take from the OI facility.

Whatever is on it must really be something special because I'm barely out of medical for half a day before they call us in for a meeting to discuss what Dru has found.

Leo tries to convince me to stay behind in my room on the FISA base, saying it's too much too soon after everything that went down at the facility with Dan. He's not wrong to be worried. My mind is so fucked up over Dan's sudden re-emergence, I'm barely able to function.

But if Obsidian Inc. is up to even shadier shit than they usually are, I want to know about it. Moreover, Rohan will be there, and he might be able to answer some of my questions about Dan. The how's and the why's of it all keep swirling around inside my head like thick tendrils of smoke.

I can't get the things Dan said to me to make sense.

You left me.

What did he mean by that? I thought when he was shouting about being pissed at me, he meant the fact I'd killed him the last time we saw each other. I thought OI had twisted it and

somehow made Dan think I killed him because I wanted to or some other sick bullshit. But maybe they've convinced him of something worse, a falsehood I don't understand and that could be potentially more complicated to unravel.

More than anything, I need to find my brother. If I can get to him, I can make him see the truth. I can undo what OI has done, whatever the fuck that is. But first I'll need to find him, and to do that, I'll need FISA's permission if not their help. I don't expect them to put everything on hold to find my brother; I've never been under any illusions about my worth to them, let alone his. But there's a chance I can make a case for turning it into a mission only I will be responsible for.

Snow might allow it. If not, I'll need to do the one thing I told Leo I wouldn't. I'll need to fucking run.

For the first time since I joined the unit, Snow sits in on our team meeting, further convincing me this shit is serious.

We're gathered together in War Room 26. I'm next to Leo, with Dru and Rohan sitting opposite. Snow has stolen the top spot at the head of the table. North is acting as her right hand.

Rohan looks better than the last time I saw him, fed and watered. He still appears run-down and haggard from his recent experience, but anyone would. A couple of days won't make up for a month of fun times in OI's company.

Both Dru and Rohan have matching grave expressions on their faces. North is giving his typical gruff, unimpressed frown at all of us although there's a tightness to his eyes that indicates more stress over the situation than usual. Snow has

no expression at all, but that doesn't mean anything when it comes to her. I think the world could be attacked by aliens, and Snow would have the same look of impassive expectation on her face.

“So, go on then, what insane fuckery has Obsidian Inc. come up with this time?” I ask when the silence in the room becomes annoyingly oppressive.

Snow doesn't react to my outburst, but it seems to have broken through the tension enough to allow her to actually kick-start the meeting. She brings her hands together on top of the table and leans forward slightly, her eyes travelling around the room, jumping to each face before she speaks.

“Agent Nash and Agent Sathe”—she tips her head at Dru and Rohan—“have confirmed a theory I've had for some time regarding Obsidian Inc.'s most recent activities. Within the retrieved backup drive, there are details of a plan that OI seem ready to enact, one that could devastate this country as well as potentially the wider world if it is successful.”

Snow lets that sink in for a handful of seconds before continuing.

“OI has created two drugs, one blue in colour and the other green. The first drug you will be familiar with, Agent Roth.” She shifts her attention, addressing me directly. “Agent Nash and Agent Sathe have explained the science of the drug to me, and the information in the drive confirms this as sound.”

When Snow gives Dru another nod of acknowledgement, she takes over the explanation, also looking at Leo and me.

“It’s intended use is to impact a person’s cognitive function in a specific way,” she tells us in a grim, perfunctory tone. “It causes the conscious mind to shut down and push the recipient into a deep hypnotic state. Whilst in this state, the individual’s inhibitions will be severely depleted, and they will become unnaturally susceptible to another person’s will.”

Rohan swoops in to cut it down to layman’s terms for Leo and me, seeming as annoyed as I feel about Dru’s overlong description of the drug. “It’s mind control, kids. OI wants to turn us all into biddable zombies who’ll suck their collective dicks for free.”

Dru shoots Rohan an irritated glower, which he promptly ignores. He gestures for her to continue. She does, but not without giving him one last set of daggers. I get the feeling this is an argument they’ve been having since Dru finished analysing the data from the drive. It’s never good when the scientists get all worked up. That’s how the world gets ended by accident.

“The second drug, the green one, acts as both a counteractive drug to the blue one and as a way of imposing mental control over someone injected with the blue drug. Once injected with the green drug, a person’s body would emit a sort of molecular pulse that allows them biological dominance over the molecules in the blue drug.”

Again, Rohan chips in with a more basic explanation. “Someone who has the green drug in their system can give orders to someone who has the blue drug in their system. It

also seems that a person injected with the green drug is made immune to the effects of the blue drug.”

Mind manipulation at its most extreme. It's no shock that OI would create something like this. Taking away other's choices is very much within their wheelhouse. Mind control is just them reaching another level to replace force and blackmail.

“Are the affects from either drug permanent?” Leo asks, his eyes darting to me, a troubled twinge in his voice.

“Yes and no,” Rohan answers, his own gaze landing on me. There's no reassurance to be found on his face, but he does seem oddly conflicted, like he would want to offer it if he could. “The version of the drug Roth was given isn't the same as the one they have now. If you were injected with the current blue drug, the effects wouldn't fade like they did for Roth. We think the green drug would be permanent and work like a flu inoculation against the blue drug if taken beforehand.”

My first thought is of Dan. If they used the old blue drug on me, then it's no great leap to think they'd use the new version of it on him. The idea makes me feel like I could vibrate out of my chair with rage.

Leo must pick up on my internal explosion of anger because he discreetly nudges my leg with his boot. I shift in my seat, enabling him to hook his ankle around mine, locking us together. It shouldn't work to calm me as well as it does. I'm becoming increasingly aware how much power I've allowed Leo to have over me. I don't know exactly when trusting him

not to fuck me over became straight up trusting him with everything, but it's happened.

It's absolutely mad how much he matters to me. But he does matter. I don't know how I'm going to handle it if I have to leave FISA to go after my brother. The idea of being without Leo makes me feel immediate panic, which is a concern for multiple reasons. I mean, we've only known each other for a handful of months, and I'm a paranoid freak by design, so how is it possible I've become so dependent on him? How has he burrowed in under my skin and carved out a permanent place for himself there without me noticing until it was too late? How has he become the one thing in my life I feel certain about?

Snow brings me out of my musings and redirects my attention to arguably more important things. More important for the world, not for me.

"The intel gathered from the backup drive indicates they plan to turn the blue drug into a gas," Snow imparts with a cool detachment that is frankly stunning, "and use a machine they've built to shoot it into the atmosphere, allowing it to disperse over the world, therefore infecting the oxygen supply and taking control of everyone who inhales it."

Snow's info drop of OI's new dastardly and irritating plot proves my assumption correct. No big surprise. Obsidian Inc. loves their *mwah ha ha* takeover attempts.

I'll never understand why they're so hard for taking over the world. The world is shit, and all they want to do is make it

even more shit. Utterly fucking pointless endeavour, world domination for an evil organisation if you ask me. We're already ruining everything. They could just sit back and watch Rome burn, then rule over the ashes.

“Why are you telling us this shit?” I demand, narrowing my eyes at Snow, suspicious as hell.

If OI is planning world domination again, that's going to be a big-name vigilante problem, and once more for the people in the back, I'm an assassin, not a fucking hero. Assassins kill people, we *don't* save the world. It's not in my job description and for good reason.

People don't want things like me playing hero. They want nice, clean supers without blood soaked into their skin, heroes who have no doubt in their hearts over humanity's worthiness to be saved.

I have doubts. A whole chest cavity's worth.

Seriously. Fuck humanity and fuck the world.

My goals are simple. Retain freedom. Find brother. Keep Leo. End of list. Everything else is just an obstacle to those goals or background noise for other people to dance to.

I tell Snow, my voice as dead serious as I can make it, “I will not be shanghaied into doing cape-work.”

Will. Not.

Snow looks at me with slightly raised eyebrows, like she doesn't appreciate my theatrics, but to her credit, she doesn't pretend not to know what I'm talking about.

“I understand your reservations, Agent Roth,” she says, tone as crisp as a winter morning in Antarctica. “But I believe this situation, considering the scope of OI’s plans as well as the accelerated timeline we may be looking at if these details on the drive are correct, is an all-hands-on-deck problem that I will expect every agent to commit themselves to.”

I open my mouth to argue in the form of two words that rhyme with “tuck toff,” but Leo diverts my exclamation of refusal by stepping in and speaking first.

“I’m assuming the backup drive’s intel didn’t include the location of the machine they’re going to use to disperse the blue drug?” Leo’s brows are pulled together in a deep scowl, a calculating shine to his eyes that reminds me of his aunt.

“It did not,” Snow confirms, a displeased crease to her mouth. “But we do know the machine is close to being fully operational.” Hence the timeline issue. OI could go ahead with their plan any day with both a working drug and a machine to put it in.

North finally pitches in, leaning his arms on the table and looking around at all of us. “This is why our next step is finding the machine and dismantling it. We can worry about destroying any trace of the drugs once the immediate threat is neutralised.”

Leo nods along with this in agreement, as do Dru and Snow. The only person who doesn’t is Rohan.

From across the table, we lock eyes. I can see some of the same discontent on his face as I know must be on mine.

“Are you included in this government draft of Liquid Onyx survivors, then?” I ask Rohan acerbically. “You going to be suiting up alongside Barricade and Midnight?”

Rohan’s mouth slashes into a sharp grin. He crosses his arms over his chest and leans back in his seat. “Why? You want to go *family* style and wear matching outfits?”

There’s something in the black pit of his eyes that feels like more than casual goading. The way he said “family” was like a stab from a sword, meant to cause unseen injury to the organ pulsing behind a cage of bone. What I can’t tell is if the weapon was meant to pierce my heart or his.

It’s bizarre, and I don’t understand what he’s trying to get at. From the roiling darkness burning intensely out at me from his eyes, I get the feeling I don’t *want* to understand.

I find myself copying Rohan’s body language, shoving back in my chair and crossing my arms in an open show of defensiveness.

“Is this the part where you show me the little doodles you’ve done in your sketchbook of you and me? I hope they’re tasteful.” I wrinkle my nose at him, putting on an expression of dismay. “‘Cause I’ve seen some pretty explicit fanart of the other supers online.”

Rohan’s mouth purses, and he gives his head a slow shake, exaggerated judgement on his face. “Yeah, see, but you gotta Google that shit to find it, Roth. Is this why it took so long for you to rescue me?” he demands in sarcastic outrage. “Too

busy trolling through the ancient bowels of Tumblr and getting off to artistic renderings of Barricade's big dick?"

"Well, now we know what your search history would look like. Does Barricade know you want a go?" I shoot Rohan a mean smile. "Do you want me to pass him a note?"

Rohan, far from getting annoyed like most people would, looks more amused than anything, ready to engage with the extreme mental sport of arseholery. For all his faults, mostly being the son of the man I want to douse in tar and light up with a flamethrower, his one redeeming feature is the fact he's a right prick. That lot don't feel shame; they simply do not deal in that shit, which I can appreciate. It makes me wonder if the shame was gouged out of him with a knife wielded by the same hand that worked on ripping out mine.

Snow cuts in before Rohan can respond to my jibe, which is low-key disappointing. I was looking forward to finding out what his next barb was going to be.

"As invigorating as this little exchange of juvenility is"—Snow gives both Rohan and me a subtly admonishing glare, cold pinpricks rippling along my skin in reaction to it—"can we perhaps return to a more productive line of discussion?"

"What else is there to say?" I challenge her, willing to take my life into my own hands by doing so. "You want to find OI's next big shitstorm and stuff it back in the bottle, fine, fair enough. But I've got other priorities now, and you know that."

Snow is far from stupid. She must be fully aware that my reluctance to get involved with this world-saving mission is

about more than just not wanting to make like a super.

Snow lets her cold, contemplative gaze hang on me for long enough it becomes very uncomfortable, which I'd guess is intentional. She's never one to miss the opportunity to throw her adversaries off course with her power of manipulating the combination of social convention and human behavioural cues.

"I'm aware things shifted for you upon the discovery of your brother's survival," Snow says with deliberate carefulness, like she's trying to defuse a bomb with words. "This is not something I expect you to ignore. I would, however, remind you that your first responsibility is to FISA. This is what you agreed to in exchange for the freedoms you have been allowed by our government."

Snow leans towards me as if to create an intimacy connecting us despite the space still between us and the other people in the room. Her expression is unwavering; her resolve to remind me of my place is iron tight. "Agent Roth, if you choose to put your own wants above the needs of this agency, I will rescind the protection you have been afforded thus far. This is the only warning you will receive from me."

Leo is out of his seat beside me before I can even begin to formulate a response. "Anabelle!" he exclaims furiously, slamming his hands down on the table and giving his aunt the most impressive glare I've seen on him to date. It's stunningly ferocious and must pack at least some punch because Snow seems genuinely taken aback by it for a solid half a second.

She collects herself with admirable speed, but the fact she slipped at all is enough to wound and wrong-foot her. “Agent Snow, control yourself,” she orders, voice crisp enough to give your eardrums frostbite.

Leo doesn’t appear as intimidated as he should be. Or at all. His glare does not budge an inch as he reprimands his aunt in a low voice, “Don’t threaten my partner.”

Snow loses further ground when she stops using his official title. “Leo, you need to calm down and—”

“Like hell I will.” He speaks in the same deep rumble, shoulders locked up like a bolted door, chest heaving with anger. “You have no right to make him choose between his brother and us. Jack has done nothing but comply with what FISA has demanded of him since he got here. When he made that deal with you, he thought Dan was dead. You know damn well he wouldn’t have agreed to being an agent in the first place if he thought he could go back to his brother. His history with other agencies proves that.”

I’m staring up at Leo in outright awe at this point, and he’s still not done with this insane rant at his aunt.

“Even if Dan wasn’t Jack’s brother, finding and saving him from OI’s control should be a priority,” Leo insists fiercely, his eyes narrowing on Snow ever so slightly in condemnation. “Our agency has a responsibility to the Liquid Onyx survivors. *You* were the one who told me as much when I first joined FISA.”

Snow and Leo proceed to have an epic stare off, the likes of which are unseen outside of a school playground full of competitive overachievers.

Taking a second to glance around the room, I clock the reaction of every other member of our team.

North looks mildly exasperated but seems intent on absolving himself from this messy battle of the Snows by keeping quiet and simply waiting until it stops happening.

Dru is clutching her tablet like another person would their pearls, scandalised by the current proceedings.

Rohan appears as highly entertained as I would expect him to be, obsidian eyes shining with anticipation.

When Snow is the first one to back down, to the surprise of everyone, Rohan catches my eye and mouths, “*Ding, ding, round one.*” I have to keep my lips pressed tightly together so I won’t bark out a laugh. No need to make things any shittier than they already are.

Snow stands up, which is more a sign of defeat than anything she could say out loud. She releases a long breath and nods at Leo. “I’m going to leave you with Senior Agent North, who will give out your new assignments following the recent discovery of OI’s plan.” She holds up a hand when Leo goes to start arguing with her again. “I will consider what we’ve spoken about today.” She switches her attention to me again and adds, “We will discuss your brother’s future soon, Agent Roth. Please know it was not my intention to make his fate seem unimportant to the agency.”

North receives a look of acknowledgement as a go-ahead to take over the meeting. He tips his head at her. “Thank you, Director.”

Leo still doesn't seem happy, and when Snow strides out of the room without a backward glance at any of us, he makes as if to follow. Seeing this for the suicidal move it is, I grab hold of his arm and yank him down into his seat, hard enough there's a loud whumping sound, and the chair creaks in distress.

When Leo tries to pull away from me, I lean in close to whisper harshly in his ear, “Live to fight another day, Leo. Don't make me have to slay the ice dragon and rescue you. I've got enough peer pressure going on around the whole hero thing already.”

Leo stops struggling to be released and turns his head to look at me. I have to move back so we don't accidentally headbutt each other.

“No joke, I don't give a shit what she says,” Leo growls, all intense and obstinate. “We're going to save your brother, and the rest of the world can just fucking wait or go ahead and end without us.” He sounds so sure, so ready to throw everything to the wind in the name of helping a man who would have killed him a few nights ago if Damon hadn't shown up and forced Dan to run.

I get the sudden, overwhelming need to be alone with my partner. I don't think I've ever felt such a potent desire to touch him and be all around him, to be inside him, to seep my

essence into his skin with my spit and cum. I'd fuck Leo right here on this table if I didn't think the others would kick up a massive fuss about it.

North clears his throat pointedly to get our attention. When we look over at him, he's giving us a low-level glower of admonishment. "If you're done being a pain in my taint, Agents, we still have a lot of shit to go over. For a start"—he looks at Leo with open disapproval—"the debrief for your most recent mission and your apparent need to ignore direct orders."

Leo grimaces, seeming to push back in his seat like he's trying to put more distance between himself and our handler.

From there, the rest of the meeting is taken up by the debrief we've been avoiding for days and then the vague outline of our next mission.

North tells us we'll be shipping off tomorrow to check out a new underground workshop that FISA thinks might be the temporary storage location for the machine OI has built to disperse the blue drug. The intel is flimsy, based on information gathered from the incarcerated OI agents that FISA captured during the storm of the facility.

If nothing else, it's a place to start, and considering we're working with nothing, and the threat is imminent, FISA will have to take what they can get.

I let the information wash over me as North talks. There's no point arguing about any of it. I already know where Snow

stands, and whatever she said about thinking it over, her decision is unlikely to change.

The person I really need to discuss next steps with is Leo. If I decide to go after my brother on my own, he'll be the one most affected by it.

I didn't let myself think about the possibility of getting Leo to come *with* me. It seemed too selfish an idea to contemplate, let alone put into action.

But if Leo insists on being a selfless idiot, I don't know if I'll have the mental fortitude, the moral strength, the *heart* to tell him no.

If I were a hero. If I were a good man. I'd leave without him and never look back. I'd sacrifice everything we are or could be to save him. Leo deserves that. Leo deserves a good man who would let him go.

I am not a good man. Never pretended otherwise.

In stories, it's always the hero who gets the girl.

In reality, though, maybe it takes a villain to keep the boy.

Chapter Sixteen

Leo

As soon as North gives us permission to go, I grab Jack and all but hustle him out of the room and into the exit lift. Jack lets himself be manhandled, which is a relief because there's nothing I want more right now than to get the hell out of the FISA base and go home.

I haven't been back to the house since the end of our last mission, too worried about leaving Jack on his own to think going home was worth it.

We don't talk much on our way to the house, both of us likely too busy thinking over everything that was said at the team meeting.

I feel a bit guilty for how I blew up at Anabelle and somehow turned a conversation about saving Jack's brother into a bullshit power struggle between my aunt and me. It was just the way she talked to Jack, like he was another game piece for her to push around without care to how it might affect him, how she tried to dismiss the magnitude of Dan coming back into his life, like how she thought it was okay to tell Rohan he would need to suck it up and work with his mother's killer. I couldn't stop myself from pushing back on Jack's behalf, using the privilege all the other agents accuse me of having.

There have been times when I've stood up to Anabelle before, but those arguments usually took place in private, where no one else could see the strange battle of wills echoing between us. I might have waited until we were alone this time as well if Anabelle hadn't out and out threatened Jack with imprisonment or death if he went after Dan, which showed her

fundamental misunderstanding of him. If she thinks there's a single chance Jack would choose his own safety over his brother, she has badly misread the person Jack is. A strange thing for Anabelle since she's usually such a good judge of character.

I don't understand why she thought he would choose the security of the agency over the possibility of getting his brother back, but there was clearly something in her mind which made that seem like a viable outcome. If I thought she would ever explain her internal reasoning to me, I would ask why.

An immense pit of relief opens up inside me when Jack and I get home. Whenever I come back from a mission, I'm always a little bit surprised the house is still standing in the exact same condition as how I left it. I don't know why I expect to find it on fire or damaged beyond repair in some other way, but it gnaws at me when I'm gone, and there's a feeling of inevitability, like I know something is going to get destroyed one day, and I'm constantly waiting for that to happen.

Seconds after crossing the threshold, there's the sound of nails scrapping against hardwood flooring, and King scoots around the corner to come barrelling towards us so fast the momentum almost causes him to roll over like a car skidding across tarmac and flipping onto its side.

Damon told me he dropped King off at the house this morning so he would be here when I got back. I'll have to remember to thank him for that because having an armful of

fluffy corgi makes me feel better about almost everything. I always miss King more than I think I will and don't realise it until I see him again.

Jack, who came into the house behind me, kneels down to take his turn at being unsuccessfully mauled by an excited corgi. King just about shits himself with happiness at the return of his new friend. Jack seems about ten percent as happy, which is still more joy than I've ever seen him outwardly express. I have to keep my lips pressed together so I won't give into the sudden need to call him "adorable" and get a crack to the jaw for my troubles.

King allows himself to be fawned over in the entryway, yipping and licking like a mad thing, for a good few minutes before herding us into the living room so he can jump up onto the sofa I've repeatedly told him he's banned from sitting on and settling into his usual spot.

Jack sits down on the sofa next to King and grabs hold of my hand, yanking me down beside him, leaving zero space between us, our legs and arms pressed firmly together. I take his hand and lean sideways, resting my temple against his. King shifts forward slightly to rest his head on Jack's leg, and Jack raises his free hand to begin rhythmically petting him.

It feels exponentially good to be home.

I spare a stray thought for my mum, remembering that Damon told me the last time he checked in on her was yesterday. She doesn't seem to be home, but that probably just

means she's out with her mates working on whatever future headache she's going to give me.

We sit and bask in the quiet stillness of the house, neither of us willing to break the bubble of quiet, like we're both trying to catch our breath for a while.

Jack is thinking hard; I can feel it like a magnetic pulse coming off him in steady waves. Leaning back so I can turn to look at him, my thoughts are confirmed by the deep frown on his face. It makes him seem anxious despite the relaxed state of his body. Jack realises I'm watching him a few seconds too late, furthering my suspicion his mind is off somewhere else entirely.

There are no prizes for working out who and what he's thinking so intensely about.

"We're going to find him, Jack," I promise him, putting all the self-assured confidence I can into the statement. This is no time for doubts or worst-case scenarios. We can't allow ourselves to imagine anything other than a positive outcome to this. If for no other reason than I think it would kill Jack to lose his brother a second time, especially so soon after realising he's back. Or more accurately, never left.

All those months of grieving and wasted emotional turmoil. It must be tearing Jack up to think of his brother being alive all this time. I genuinely can't imagine how hard it must be to keep it together enough to function, to not break apart at the seams.

Jack doesn't respond right away, and I begin to worry that I've annoyed with my typical optimism, when he suddenly looks at me with raw confusion and anguish on his face, like he's been turning something over in his head and can't keep it to himself anymore.

“Dan was so bloody angry at me. I thought they'd twisted it. I thought he was pissed about what I did to him. But. He said”—Jack shakes his head like it makes so little sense he can barely articulate it—“he said I left him.”

I blink at Jack, not quite discerning what he means by that, letting the words tick over, repeating them to myself until I can make some sense out of them.

“Dan said you *left* him?” I ask for clarification. “Not that you *killed* him?”

Jack gives a shallow nod, brows drawing together in another frown. “Yeah, he said it like I'd abandoned him with OI on purpose.”

Jack sounds deeply wounded by that, like the implied accusation he would leave Dan by choice is a blow that still lies flayed open and bleeding.

“You think OI has messed with him?” I'm disturbed by the thought but unable to dismiss it as a possibility. God knows they're capable of that and worse. “Made him think you left him behind to turn him against you?”

Jack heaves a shrug, distress at the idea clearly prickling at his features. His hand tightens on mine without him seeming

to realise it, like he's subconsciously seeking comfort and reassurance. "Maybe they used the blue drug to manipulate his memories somehow."

"Maybe," I agree reluctantly. "We can ask Rohan more details about how the drug works."

Jack reacts to Rohan's name more viscerally than usual, a wince creasing one side of his face, almost a flinch, like he's been smacked by thoughts he doesn't want to deal with. It seems like more than his usual aversion to remembering past actions that he feels extreme regret over.

I'm about to ask Jack what's made him go all extra twitchy over Rohan when he beats me to it with a distractingly random question.

"Do you remember when I told your mum my name was Liam?" The thoughtful expression is back on his face.

It takes me a minute to recalibrate, searching through my memories until I find the one Jack is referring to and come up with an appropriate response. "Yeah, I figured you were giving her a fake name, so she'd leave you alone."

"Nah." Jack turns his head to look at me. "Liam *is* my real name. I don't quite know who changed it or why, but in the few blurry memories I have of my mum, I vividly remember her calling me *Liam*. I didn't start going by Jack until after Obsidian Inc. got hold of me."

I give myself some time to absorb the information, always eager to know more about Jack but also hesitant because I

don't quite understand why he's telling me this right now. It's intriguing and weird, for sure, but I don't get its relevance to anything we're talking about.

"How about your dad?" I ask, realising Jack didn't mention him. "Did he call you Liam?"

"I don't remember my dad." Jack doesn't sound upset by the fact he has no memories of his father, but he does seem irritated by his inability to answer my question. "No idea what he called me, or if he was even around when I was a kid."

"But isn't your name Jack Roth, like, legally?" I push, thinking it over a little more and coming up twice as confused. "I mean, my aunt didn't tell me you were called anything else on the official records they have for you. Or does she not know?"

"Your aunt knows everything." Jack snorts, reasoning, "She might be keeping the truth to herself to be revealed in a suitably dramatic fashion at some point in the future. She might think I don't remember."

"That sounds depressingly possible," I allow, making a face at the thought of my aunt keeping very personal secrets from Jack just to retain some invisible control over him. I peer at Jack contemplatively and ask, "Why are you telling me this now?"

Jack heaves a shrug and releases a long, frustrated sigh. "I'm just ... trying to think why Ian Stone let Dan live. He was supposed to die as punishment for both of us trying to escape

OI. Stone isn't a merciful man. He isn't the type to go back on his decisions either."

I follow his line of thinking. "So what would make him change his mind about not only letting Dan live but actively saving his life?"

From what I know about how the original fight went down between Jack and Dan, they would have had to swoop in pretty fast to stop Dan from bleeding out from the neck wound Jack gave him. They must have been ready to save him even before Jack stabbed him with the glass they'd provided them with to fight to the death.

"Exactly." Jack huffs irately, glowering into the distance like he can see something there he wants to beat into the ground. "I have no fucking idea, and it's bugging the shit out of me."

There's really nothing I can say to that. I don't have any more idea than Jack. I don't know Ian Stone like Jack does, or Rohan for that matter. The best person to ask *would be* Rohan, but I don't want to suggest it and make Jack go all weird again by mentioning the name of his frenemy.

Instead, I offer the only thing I can. My allegiance. We'll find answers to the questions Jack has about his brother together.

"It's not just because he's your brother," I tell Jack earnestly, needing him to know that I'm in this thing with him, that I truly care about the outcome. "I meant what I said to Anabelle. I'd want to help Dan no matter what."

Jack gives me a shockingly soft look, one I haven't seen on his face before, all fragile emotion and freshly born hope, still stumbling around on its unused, infant legs.

"I know." Jack leans in closer to me, eyes flickering to my mouth and then back up again to keep our gazes locked. "That's why I trust you to do this with me."

I eclipse the last bit of space between us and catch his lips in a hard kiss. Jack doesn't hesitate to kiss me back, hand coming up to palm my jaw and tip my face to a better angle so he's able to deepen the kiss, making it something overwhelming and feverish rather than gentle and coaxing.

Jack bites down on my bottom lip, eliciting a low moan, tugging it out like it was something buried inside a deep cavernous space. The sound vibrates through both of us, and Jack gives an answering rumble of approval. He moves his hand into the hair at the back of my head and gives a vicious yank on it, jerking my head back and baring my throat for him to mouth at and do a random pattern of little nipping bites.

"Want to go upstairs?" I ask him on a breathless gasp when he puts his free hand on my upper thigh, fingers so close to my groin, and squeezes it with clear intent.

Jack doesn't even bother to answer with words. He just gets up from the sofa, taking me with him easily, proving once again his strength is so much more immense than he sometimes acknowledges.

King gets excited about the proceedings, looking like he might jump down and follow after us. I point a warning finger

at him. “No, King, you stay here, okay, buddy?”

King pants happily up at me, head tilting to the side like he’s listening. But when Jack and I go to leave, he gets up to chase after us.

Jack shunts me toward the door and turns back to King. He looks down at him with a serious expression on his face and commands, “King, stay.”

I scowl at both of them when King settles back down immediately on the sofa. He peeks up at us but makes no move to follow when Jack starts hustling us out of the living room.

“What was that?” I demand as we make our way up the stairs together.

Jack shoots me a discerning look. “You don’t ask dogs questions,” he explains. “It confuses them. You gotta be direct and clear, so they get it.”

“Oh, okay, apologies, Alpha Jack,” I scoff, bumping him with my shoulder. “I didn’t realise you were *the dog whisperer*.”

Jack gives me a light shove back, and I know it’s light because it still hurts, but I don’t actually go flying. “This is basic shit, Leo,” he says, clearly judging me and my dog-owning skills. “You can’t let him get away with bad behaviour. He’ll rule you.”

“Well, alright, how about from now on you take over disciplining our dog, and I’ll play good cop and dish out the treats?”

“He’s our dog now, is he?” Jack asks, raising a sceptical eyebrow. “I didn’t realise I’d signed adoption papers whilst looped out on drugs in medical.”

“That’s why they tell you to Say No to Drugs.” I tut at him. “Drugs are for mugs. Shoulda stayed in school, we had multiple super-fun and informative assemblies about it; then you wouldn’t have wound up coerced into dog parenthood.”

“I never went to school,” Jack reminds me offhandedly, then he seems rethink it and corrects himself. “The schools I went to for undercover missions never had drug talks. I did go to one where they had a sex talk, though. The teachers handed out condoms, and the kids blew them up into balloons.”

“Yeah.” I laugh. “Think I skipped that one.”

“Did you bunk off school a lot as a kid?” Jack asks, sounding more curious this time.

I shrug lightly. “Some. When I started going to state school. No one gave a shit as long as I did all my coursework.”

Jack makes a thoughtful humming noise. He doesn’t sound pleased by the idea for some reason. I can’t imagine it’s the skipping school he cares about, so it must be something else.

I take Jack’s hand at the top of the stairs and lead him to my room, pulling him inside and over to the bed. Jack lets me push him down to sit on the bed, and I climb onto his lap. I’m usually too tall to do this with people, but Jack is more than a match for me in terms of size as well as outdoing me in strength, able to take my weight easily.

Jack tilts his head back to meet my eyes and brings his hands up to press them into my back. I cup his face and bend down the last few inches to kiss him. Jack allows me to take control of the kiss for once. I push my tongue past the seam of his lips and do a thorough exploration of his mouth whilst Jack holds onto me in an unyielding grip.

A little while later, when I let both of us come up for some much-needed oxygen, Jack moves his hands to my arse and flips us over in one smooth motion and moves me up the bed, so I'm laid down in the middle of it with him on top of me.

Jack raises one hand to wrap around my throat. He presses down a little, just enough to make a point, the point being he has me right where he wants me, caught beneath him and unable to get away. I put up a token struggle to see what he does, and in response, Jack tightens his hand on my throat, pushing down a bit harder, almost but not quite cutting off my airway.

“Behave.” Jack growls at me, voice rough and soaked with that same dark lust I've heard from him before. I can feel the pulsing hot hardness of his cock digging into me like a pipe that has scalding water passing through it.

I stop pretending to fight him then and look up into his eyes. The startlingly serious expression on his face snags my attention, and I wait for him to say whatever it is he's clearly working up to saying to me.

It takes quite a bit of Jack staring down at me like he's trying to communicate via telepathy before he finds the right words

and puts them in the correct order, then expels them in a frustrated rush. “People should care about you.”

I’m not sure what I was expecting, but it definitely wasn’t that. I almost make a joke, but the sincerity with which he spoke stops me from giving into my instinctual need to downplay emotionally solemn things.

“Do you care about me?” I ask, feeling vulnerable about the answer and low-key hating it. There’s a reason I usually make jokes and avoid these sorts of conversations with people. Because they make me feel like this. Jittery and weak. Scared of rejection and equally afraid of an acceptance I know can’t last.

It seems to take about three million years for Jack to respond, and when he finally does, it’s less of a relief than it is a firework going off inside my head. It triggers more potentially damaging emotions to flood in and lay waste to the doubts I’d been carefully cultivating as a defence against the sheer magnitude of what I’ve begun to feel for my partner.

“More than I know how to handle, Leo,” Jack admits like it’s a flaw, like he’s retroactively apologising for not knowing how to deal with how much he cares about me.

“For the record,” I tell him, trying to keep my voice level, “I care a whole fuckload about you too.”

Jack must not have expected my reciprocation, because his eyes widen like I’ve just handed him a surprise gift. Once he gets over the initial shock, his eyes change shape, narrowing slightly in apparent consternation.

“Don’t know if I like it,” he confesses brazenly. “This whole *thing* we’ve got going on, turning all important to me and shit.”

I can’t stop the snort of laughter that comes out in response to the genuine dismay in Jack’s voice. I give his torso a consoling pat. “It’s been a real inconvenience to me too, to be honest, babe.”

That, for whatever reason, seems to ease Jack’s uncertainty about our feelings for each other rather than elevating it.

“So we’re still in agreement, then?” Jack asks. “This is a bad idea.”

I think back to the first time we had sex in this bed, well over a month ago. We both said it was a mistake. Our conversation about it was short but honest. I’m assuming that’s what Jack is alluding to.

Part of me, a big part, wants to play it off, make a joke like *Might be the worst one either of us has ever had, which is really saying something*, then kiss Jack as if anything is settled and fall into the same patterns we’ve been relying on since the beginning of this whateveritis between us: acknowledgement of problem, make light of it, proceed to have sex without any real resolution.

But with mine and Rex’s conversation still fresh in my mind, the idea of pushing away the seriousness of what we’ve begun to feel for each other seems like the cowardly move. There are a lot of things I can be accused of, but I hope that lacking grit isn’t one of them. I can’t bottle it now, after all the shit we’ve

been through, after almost losing him only days ago. Jack deserves more than that, braver than that.

If I can't tell him the truth, if we can't have a frank conversation about it, then we also can't keep on doing this. We'll just wind up hurting each other, and fuck knows we've both had enough of that in our lives.

"That was different, though. A lot of things have changed since the first time we fucked," I point out, bracing myself for the honesty I'm going to be laying down.

"What do you mean?" Jack asks, somehow managing to sound both hesitant and demanding. He's become immediately wary, body stiffening as if he's read the intent in my eyes and is preparing himself to bolt.

I can't blame him for that. I'm changing up the game without a heads-up or a press conference or anything.

In the face of Jack's sudden guardedness, I fall back on my instinct to soothe via physical contact. I put my hand back on his torso and rub it slowly up and down. Jack doesn't relax entirely, but there's an unmistakable release of tension in his face, and his body language becomes less tight.

Once I'm relatively certain Jack won't disappear the moment I start digging into the hard stuff, I push on.

"Look, I get this isn't the best time to be sorting our emotional crap out. But I also think it's important to tell you how things are for me. How I, you know, *feel* about you."

Jack is quiet for a long time, and I allow it. This is going to be difficult for both of us, but maybe especially so for Jack. I've at least had experience with romantic entanglements before. Real ones, I mean. It would be unfair to expect Jack to be comfortable with this kind of crap. Expressing your feelings is painful enough for those of us who grew up in somewhat-normal households. Fuck knows how someone who was raised in Jack's brand of hell is supposed to handle it.

"Go on, then," Jack eventually prods, voice subdued, giving me nothing to work with or analyse, nothing to aid me in understanding how he's taking this. "How do you ... *feel* about me?" He makes a face at the word but otherwise manages to retain some neutrality.

This is it, then, isn't it? It's now or never.

A voice in my head screams *let it be never*, but I ignore it. Just.

"You're my partner and my friend. And I care about you as both those things." I swallow hard, my throat moving under Jack's hand. He doesn't loosen his grip to let me breathe any easier, which is oddly reassuring. Don't ask me why, because I wouldn't be able to tell you.

"But I think maybe—" I cut myself off, silently cursing my own inability to *commit*. If I'm going to do this, then I need to do it, no half measures. It'll just confuse things otherwise.

"No, fuck it, I know how I feel." My hand on Jack's torso fists his T-shirt, tugging on it lightly. "I'm falling for you, Jack. Really fucking hard. Like. Death-on-impact hard."

Jack seems to enjoy the word choice, mouth twitching upwards on one side. It undercuts the hand grenade of fear that explodes all over his face a second later. He struggles to contain his reaction of out-and-out horror. His body has locked up again, closing him off from me on multiple fronts.

“What does that mean?” he challenges, cagey about it and squinting at me like I’m a complex puzzle he isn’t sure he even wants to try and figure out. “What do you want from me?”

Pain slices its way through my chest, leaving a cold hollowness and a wrecked pair of lungs shivering in its wake. Finding it hard to breath all of a sudden, it takes me a minute to answer, “Nothing you don’t want to give.” It comes out sounding weak to my ears, broken up in the middle by a catch in my voice, the hitch in my chest feeling like a punishment.

Jack scowls at my answer, clearly unsatisfied by it.

“No, Leo.” He sighs frustratedly. “I’m serious: what do you want from me?” At my continued confusion, he sighs out an angry puff of air. “I need you to explain it. I’ve got no experience with this shit. Not outside of fuckery for OI. But that doesn’t count to me. It was all about lying. But this thing with us...it’s honest, right?”

“Right,” I answer immediately, finally beginning to understand. That horrible tightness in my chest eases a little, and the coldness begins to ebb.

“I need you to tell me what you *want*.” Jack presses, staring down at me intensely, waiting for a real answer he can do

something with.

This is a barrier I expected to deal with. I just underestimated how out of his element Jack would feel.

He needs specifics, a real directive rather than vague notions, which I can give him.

“I want to be with you. Romantically. Boyfriends. Lovers. Amorous accomplices. Whatever title you want to use; I don’t care.”

Jack absorbs my declaration with more confidence than he did my last one, which is a relief although his verbal response is less heartening, “Are you *sure*?”

I bark out a laugh, unable to stifle it in the face of Jack’s genuine incredulity.

“Yeah.” I tighten my grip on his T-shirt. “I am. Definitely.”

Jack gets a very tortured expression on his face, conflicting emotions waging battle like gladiators in a coliseum. “I don’t know how to do any of this,” Jack tells me as if it’s damning evidence that will cause me to take back everything I just said.

“That’s okay,” I assure him, a stupidly big smile spreading across my face.

Jack glowers down at me, looking extremely unhappy with my attempt to soothe his fears. “How is that okay?” He presses down on my throat, not too hard but enough to reveal just how frustrated he’s becoming. “Are you insane? In what world does it make sense for you to want to be with me like that? Do you seriously not have any idea how incredible you are?” He

glances off to the side, clearly anguished, hopelessness fused into every word. “You could have anyone, Leo.”

Alright, let’s get a grip and start laying down the rules of this new game we’re playing.

“Do you want me to be with someone else?” I ask, intent on provocation.

Jack’s head whips back around, and he pins me with a look bordering on ferocious, jealousy momentarily burning so brightly in his eyes it looks painful. His instantaneous snarl of possessiveness and the way his hand tightens on my throat, hard enough to choke, feels like enough of an answer.

When Jack calms himself, with some difficulty it seems, and release my throat enough so I can talk, I ask, “Do you want us to be two people who are friends and also fuck sometimes?”

Jack’s reaction is less extreme this time, but his glare of negation makes it clear he doesn’t like the sound of that either.

“Then I don’t know what else to tell you, Jack.” I sigh out tiredly. “Either you’re willing to accept the fact I think you’re worth loving”—and I’m proud of myself for not flinching on that last one—“or we have to stop pretending that us fucking around isn’t going to ruin everything just because we’ve said *out loud* we know it will ruin everything.”

Jack dips his head, lowering himself far enough to lightly brush his lips over mine. It isn’t a kiss, more something meant to convey intimacy, to re-establish our connection. He breathes

out slow and pulls back, an aggrieved look on his face. “We’ve been lampshading ourselves pretty hard,” he agrees.

“You know, I don’t want to come across as desperate right now,” I say, allowing some humour to leak into my voice since the brave part of this conversation is mostly over, “but if you wanted to expand on the whole ‘you’re incredible’ thing, I’d be game for that any time.”

I expect Jack to laugh, but he doesn’t. He fixes me with a contemplative stare instead as if weighing up potential responses. For a second, I think he might actually list all the reasons he likes me, which would make me extremely uncomfortable, just for the record. Accepting compliments, real ones, has never been something I’ve excelled at. I low-key hate it; makes me squirm like mad internally.

But Jack will likely never be one to wax poetic about anyone or anything, not even a person he has genuine feelings for. He proves me correct in the best way, by offering something better than a list of my supposed attributes.

Something honest.

“Okay, then, Leo,” Jack murmurs soberly. “You’ve been a nightmare since the second we met. Reckless with your own safety. Fucking suicidal in your apparent need to help people. Sometimes, you piss me off to the point I want to throw you out a moving train, just so I won’t have to deal with your lunatic tendencies and bloody, blinding sunshine smiles.”

He gets that exceedingly rare, soft look on his face. The one I’ve only ever seen him give to me. His voice lowers,

deepening into a profound tenor. “But then you do those things you do. Like breathe. Or exist. And Leo, for real? That shit really works for me.”

A thunderstorm of emotions hits me all at once; I almost want to laugh out loud in an attempt to expel this fizzing, uncontrollable sensation writhing around inside me from stomach to throat.

It’s just. It’s so unabashedly *Jack* to be unnervingly blunt with his admission of feelings for me.

With a sharp tug on his T-shirt, I grin up at him and demand, “Kiss me right now or forever hold your peace.”

Jack’s mouth cuts up into something that manages to be both achingly sweet and dangerously sharp. “Think this time it’s you, getting your wedding rules wrong,” he muses before swooping down to lay the kiss I wanted on my lips.

I go at Jack’s mouth like it’s the first and last time I’ll ever get to have him like this, which is ridiculous since this whole talking thing we just did should mean the exact opposite is true.

We share open-mouthed kisses and wet heat. We trade moans and grasping touches. Our straining, hard cocks grind together as we move against one another, choppy and frantic like we’re trying to make a point, do something official to seal the deal, like a promise or evidence of our resolve to be this thing, this thing we are that transcends every other relationship, platonic or otherwise, we’ve experienced before.

Jack finally releases my throat, only to start yanking at my clothes. Worked up as he is, he's less careful than usual when getting us skin to skin. He quite literally rips the fabric off my body like fucking tissue paper, I swear, Jesus Christ. I find his mad need to have me, to touch me without barriers, sexier than I probably should.

More than ever, I want those hands, those dangerous hands capable and guilty of so much violence and ruthlessness, on my body, scraping and squeezing across my skin, leaving bruises behind.

Jack is quick to remove his own clothes along with my help, and the second we're both naked, we're back on each other, returning to our fevered grabbing and stealing oxygen and drenched-up heat with a vengeance, as if in between someone or something tried to tear us apart.

My patience snaps faster than ever before, and I urge Jack to get the lube from the side drawer, which he does, dragging me with him along the bed, utterly unwilling to let go of me for even a second.

Jack flips the cap on the lube and coats his fingers, bullying me into the middle of the bed again so he can start working on opening me up. There's some initial resistance, considering how long it's been since we last fucked like this, but when Jack sees the slight crease of discomfort on my face, he slows down some, takes his time pushing his fingers into me and watching my reactions intently. He seems to enjoy eliciting gasps of sensation, a mix of both pleasure and pain colliding

together into one congealed feeling. I put my hand on my own cock, stroking it to increase the depth of sensation lighting up my belly and groin.

When we get to the point that Jack is confident enough to lube up his own thick erection, I make a decision. I sit up and put a hand on Jack's shoulder. He looks at me questioningly.

“Okay if I ride you this time, babe?” I ask, voice barely more than a husked-out whisper because I'm so turned on. I just want this man inside me as fast as possible, as deep as possible. With me on top, I get to control the trajectory of that.

Jack doesn't hesitate to nod his agreement with this change of plans, and he lets me push him onto his back.

I climb on top and take the lube from him. He lays back, hands going to my thighs and fingers digging in hard. I squirt out some more lube and stroke his cock, getting him ready so my hole is able to swallow it with ease.

Jack stares up at me, rapt with his attention, like in this moment, nothing else truly matters despite how false I know that to be. I can't help but stare right back at him, captivated by the sight he makes. He looks so fucking gorgeous, splayed out beneath me, his perfectly crafted muscles straining and flexing with desire. He's like an exposed nerve, pulsing with the need to drive up inside me.

Once we're both about to come out of our skin with need, I throw the lube aside and guide Jack's cock to my hole. We maintain eye contact as I lower myself down onto his cock. He splits me apart, pushing past all resistance and filling me

deeper than ever before. When he bottoms out, Jack releases a loud groan, an answering call to my own gasp.

Jack lets me get away with setting a slow pace for a while, lifting myself up and dropping back down onto his cock, drawing it out each time so I can feel every inch of him stretching me open. I raise my hands to play with my hard nipples, tugging and rubbing over them to give myself yet another layer of sensation to add into the mix. Jack's eyes flare at the sight, dragging another groan out of him, his fingers tightening on my thighs.

"Leo," Jack growls up at me, almost like a warning. "Don't." It is a warning, then.

"Why?" I ask, voice breathy and soaked in sex.

A dangerous edge enters Jack's eyes, and my chest hitches at the sight of it. He tilts his head to the side as if studying me, weighing up the impact of his potential responses.

"Because," he rasps, gritty and broken like he's grinding glass in his throat, "I'll break you."

Wet heat pools in my stomach; liquid fire is rushing through it and melting everything it touches.

I clench around Jack's cock and rock forward, feeling set alight by him and his volatile craving to both have and destroy. Jack's hips jerk, and another noise of pleasure seems to be ripped right out of his chest.

Keeping my eyes locked on his, I ask, "Promise?"

Something inside Jack explodes at that, a door erupting outwards, wall giving way to a flood, the detonation of his self-restraint. He moves his hands to my hips and wrestles back control of our fucking, using that Liquid Onyx strength to hold me up, to keep me in place as he fucks up into me.

Jack pistons his cock in and out of my willing hole, changing the angle so he's hitting my prostate on almost every single stroke. He's got such a grip on me I'm unable to do anything but take it, to take whatever he's willing to give, which turns out to be a whole hell of a lot. It's almost too much, and I have to give myself up to it just to survive the onslaught.

With the punishment my prostate is getting, I only have to jerk my cock twice to come, a wave of pleasure erupting like a volcano inside me.

I feel like I'm having a head rush, everything dizzy and blanketed by the overpowering strength of my orgasm. I fall forward onto Jack, his cock still planted firmly in my hole, too thick and full and perfect to be easily dislodged. I bury my face in the space between Jack's neck and his collarbone and hold onto him with hands and arms that feel boneless.

Jack has to brace himself with his feet to be able to keep pushing his cock in and out of me. I raise myself up far enough to look him in the face again, giving him a messy, dirty kiss that feels like we're trying to consume the heat we've created between us.

When I pull back from the kissing and press my forehead to his, my mouth opens without me telling it to, and filth pours

out whilst Jack fucks me hard enough to make the aftershocks crashing about inside me feel close to devastating. It hurts, and I don't care, because I love it too much, I need it, him, too much to care about anything but making him come, giving him a little of what he's given me.

“Don't stop. That's right, fuck me, babe. Fuck me. Want you to tear me apart. Want you to come inside me. Want you to ruin me forever. Never felt like this with anyone. Never *want* to feel like this for anyone but you. I swear I won't. Cross my heart. Fucking rip it out and give it to you, Jack. No one else gets to have it. No one but you. Not ever.”

My litany of pleading and promises makes Jack go crazy, his eyes so bright and wild they almost glow like the neon shine around his glass shards when he's using his power.

As if in reaction to my thoughts, there's a loud crack off to the side, and when I turn my head, I see that my bedroom window has a massive splinter running diagonally across it.

Jack comes with a roar and drives his cock so far into me it feels like I could choke on him if I wanted to. He fills me up with his cum, just like the first time except it's nothing like that, because this time it feels like a permanent marking of territory. A strange thought, maybe, but my head is buzzing with satisfaction from it anyway.

We stay clenched together for a little while, me catching my breath, and Jack running his hands all over me like he can't touch enough of my skin, like he has to map every inch of it and commit it to memory for later use.

When we pull apart, it's only just enough, Jack wrapping his arms around me as I settle down in his embrace, my body still half draped over his. He combs his fingers through my sweaty hair, untangling the kinks with a gentleness that belies so much of what came before, adding to the dichotomy that is Jack Roth.

I close my eyes and press my face into his neck again, breathing in the scent of him.

After a bit, maybe minutes, maybe longer, Jack makes a low, humming sound, vaguely amused, and says, "Sorry for fucking up your window."

A flurry of laughter makes its way up my throat and out my mouth.

"Worth it," I reassure him because it's true.

There's not a damn thing I want more than this, more than him.

As if he somehow heard my thoughts, Jack tightens his arms around me and murmurs, like it's a promise of his own, "You're worth it too."

Chapter Seventeen

Leo

Next time I open my eyes, it's the middle of the night. My mouth and throat feel unpleasantly dry, enough so I'm willing to leave the warmth and comfort of my bed to go find relief.

I blink away the sleeping lethargy, waiting until I feel aware enough to shift away from Jack. Being the eternal light sleeper, he wakes up the second I remove myself from his grasp. If I didn't know any better, I'd say he wasn't asleep five seconds ago, considering how alert he looks in the dark when he throws me a questioning frown, silently asking me where the hell I think I'm going.

"Don't panic," I reassure him teasingly. "I'm not going to climb down the drainpipe to get away from you or anything."

"Should think not," Jack mutters gruffly. "This is your house. All I'd have to do is wait until you miss your dog for you to come back."

I give a mock gasp and press a hand to my chest dramatically. "You'd keep my dog hostage as a means of luring me home?"

"You want a fair game"—Jack flashes me some teeth—"don't compete against professional rule breakers."

"Rule breaker?" I snort. "That what you are?"

"I kill people." Jack says like it's a defence of his point and an explanation in one. "That's against the law, and laws are just rules with a superiority complex."

I squint at him. "*Are they*, though?"

“Yeah,” Jack replies with a flippancy that is truly astounding. “Everyone knows that, Leo. It’s indisputable fact.”

I squint harder. “*Is it, though?*”

Jack ignores the non-question and prods at me again. “If you’re not disappearing into the night, where are you going?”

“Need some water.” I appraise him for second. “Want me to bring a glass back for you?”

Jack shrugs one shoulder carelessly. “Yeah, alright.”

“Cool, see you in a sec.” I make to leave the bed, but Jack catches my chin between his fingers before I can and draws me back down towards him. He angles my face so he can slot his lips against mine, giving me a shockingly gentle kiss that I’m incapable of not leaning into. His mouth is warm and soft under mine, his kiss lingering and tender. Almost sweet.

When Jack releases me, I feel a little dazed, blinking owlishly down at him for second before I get my bearings. Jack looks far too smug, and I have to flick him on the nose as punishment.

“I need to stop giving in to you,” I tell him, trying not to laugh at the splash of outrage on his face from being flicked. “You’re gonna get all egotistical and too big for your boots or whatever.”

Jack doesn’t seem worried about it. He lays back and raises both of his large arms above his head, flexing his impressive biceps as he stretches. With his messy blond hair and the relaxed smouldering he sends my way, he looks like one of

those magazine ads for men's cologne or underwear or whatever else they can sell using shirtless, sexy men laid down on a bed.

“But I like it when you give it up for me,” Jack says in a purposeful rasp, pale-green eyes glowing like a cat's in the dark and full of glittering amusement.

I snort in the face of his playful conceit, sexual arrogance built on top of an underlining threat of danger always present just below the surface. It shouldn't be so alluring, let alone attractive. I'm like one of those young girls that people online aggressively complain about, getting all swoony over the bad boy—the one who no sane person would look at and think they were a good idea. Someone worth taking a risk on. The fact I am taking that risk should be a warning sign of some kind, maybe.

This time, Jack lets me go when I move to get off the bed, grabbing a nearby pair of blue jogging bottoms to stick on. I can feel Jack's eyes on me as I leave the room, the naked skin of my bare back prickling with his attention. I consider it a win that I don't turn around to catch him watching me.

King isn't asleep in his bed in the kitchen, so I peer into the living room to check if he's there and find him asleep on the sofa where we left him, the sneaky little menace. I feel a prick of guilt for not taking him out again before going to sleep. Damon told me he had already taken him out once after he fed him in the morning, and I doubt King is going to starve after having stayed with Damon and Rex for so long. I trust Rex to

have restraint, but Damon probably gave him a treat every single time King made cow eyes at him. I resolve to take King on an extra-long walk tomorrow morning to make up for it.

Going into the kitchen, I grab a tall glass from the cupboard and fill it with cold tap water. I've drained half a glass when the front door opens, and mum comes half stumbling into the house. I know it's her just by the way she struggles to get the key in the lock. She makes her way into the kitchen and stops to stare at me for a minute when she realises I'm standing by the sink.

Mum looks surprisingly well put together, her makeup barely smudged, no sick or other fluids on her light-blue party dress. It's skintight and clings to her skinny frame in a way that worries me. She needs to eat more, but every time I try to make a thing out of it, she gets mean about my own eating habits, and I'd honestly rather not deal with that tonight.

"You're back, then," Mum says with a definite slur to the words although not as bad as I might have expected. "Alive," she adds, like it needs clarifying.

"Well, I'm not a ghost," I respond dryly. "Don't get excited."

Mum breathes out loudly through her nose and makes her way around the kitchen island to lean against the counter diagonally across from me. She crosses her bony arms and looks up at me with an inscrutable expression. There's a window behind us and a full moon in the sky that illuminates her face.

I eye her warily, debating the merits of making a mad dash for the stairs so I can escape whatever unmooring interaction this is about to turn into.

“You were gone a while this time,” she comments, and I can’t quite get a read on her tone. It might almost sound concerned if she were anyone else. But I’d be an idiot to trust such a thing from her. “They didn’t have phones where you were?” And here we go. She makes a derisive snorting sound. “Where did Anabelle send you? *Space?*”

“Damon told me you’ve been behaving,” I offer with equal neutrality. “No run-ins with the fuzz or druggie boyfriends trying to steal your jewellery for cocaine money. So. Thanks for that.”

Mum wrinkles her nose at me, her arms tightening around herself. “You’re a disrespectful little shit, you know that?” She huffs. “I bet you’re not like this with Anabelle. You think she’s so much better than me, with her fucking government job and headcase wife and the stick firmly shoved up her arse.”

Ah, so it’s going to be one of those conversations. I’ve heard some variation of this at least half a million times over the course of my life. Mum has got serious issues with Anabelle and her perceived notion she’s the fuckup when compared to her sister—and always has been.

For the sake of saving myself from a drunken rant I’ve heard far too many times, I rest back against the sink and give Mum something she’ll like to hear. “I shouted at her in a meeting today.”

Mum's eyes widen in surprise for a moment before her expression settles into something interested and pleased in equal measure. "What about?"

"My partner," I tell her, keeping it vague for obvious reasons.

I don't expect her to know who I'm talking about, but she surprises me again by prompting, "The scary blond one? Liam?"

Liam. It's strange to think she knows his "real" name. I should probably ask if he would rather I call him that, but he didn't seem bothered by it, so the question might be moot. Jack isn't the type of person to get caught up in that stuff, unlike his brother, who used his name to reclaim some identity back from OI. I wonder if Dan has another name, one his mother called him by, like Jack does.

Mum's eyes track over me, stopping on a couple of spots where I know there are bruises made by Jack's hands. She squints at me, and there's another question on her face that she won't ask aloud.

I mirror Mum's posture, crossing my arms, feeling suddenly defensive. "Yeah, him."

Mum makes a low humming sound. Her eyes flicker to the doorway, and I think maybe it's over, but then she says, "He here with you now?"

I think about lying because I have no idea where this is going, and I don't want to involve Jack if I can help it. He's

more than a match for Alicia, but he's made it clear how he feels about her, and I can't guarantee one of them won't wind up worse off from any altercation they get into. I don't think Jack would hurt her physically, not when he knows how I feel about it, but they could still say things to one another that I'd rather they didn't.

"Yes," I answer, telling the truth in the hope she won't do anything insane like go and try to talk to him. I could never lie to her anyway. She always seems to know. Damon says it's mum magic. He could never get away with anything either.

"Are you fucking him?" Mum asks, so blunt it makes me choke on my own spit; Jesus Christ, *why?*

"Piss off!" I snap out at her, my cheeks flushing with unwanted heat. I still have Jack's cum coating the inside of my hole. Fuck, that's so not something I want to think about with Mum standing right here in front of me.

Mum seems amused by the reaction, which only makes me feel more embarrassed and desperate to do a runner to escape this moment.

"Is he any good?" Mum asks, more to poke at me than anything. I can see it in her eyes.

"Piss. Off," I enunciate slowly.

Mum tips her head back and releases a long, boisterous laugh. Lines appear around her mouth and at the corners of her eyes. Laugh lines. It reminds me of her age. She seems timeless to me some days. Not young, exactly, but fixed.

Unchanged. Incapable of it. Mostly that's nothing but a pain in my arse. But there are the occasional moments when I'm almost glad for it. As much as she gets on my wick, as difficult as she can be, I can't imagine living my life without her in it. She is, for better or worse, mostly for worse, my mum, and I do love her despite everything.

"Is it serious, then?" Mum asks when she's finally stopped cackling at my expense. "This thing with your partner?"

I take a second to answer, rolling possible responses around inside my head, wondering how much information is too much to hand over. A rush of air leaves my mouth, a prelude to whatever words my jumbled brain will decide to fling out.

But I don't get that chance.

There's a second where everything feels like it comes to a dramatic pause, the air in the room stilling, and the quiet seeming to become an oppressive force. I've felt it before, this prequel to disaster, the calm before every storm.

It takes me far too long to realise Mum and I are not alone in the kitchen.

I don't know when he broke in, or how; if he came in through a window or the door that Mum probably forgot to lock behind her. It's a testament to how silent he's capable of being that I heard nothing of his approach.

But none of that matters, not right now, because when Dan steps out of the shadows, dressed all in black, he has a gun pointed unwaveringly at us. His hood is up, partially

concealing his face, but I couldn't mistake those eyes as belonging to anyone else other than the twin brother I know for a fact is still upstairs in my bed, waiting for me to come back with water.

There's a deep, swirling rage in those eyes, eyes so pale and so green, set to a fever pitch. He looks half out of his mind with it, which spells all kinds of trouble for whatever this is about to become.

Dan's on the other side of the kitchen island, near the door. Otherwise known as the only viable exit.

Mum doesn't notice Dan's presence until he speaks, voice strikingly familiar and gritty, like he's been chewing on wet sand, grinding them together, trying to make glass to spit at us.

"Leo Snow, agent of FISA." He tilts his head, eyeing me speculatively. "Son of ex-OI Agent Roux Nova and active socialite Alicia Snow." He doesn't look at Mum, but I twitch in her direction anyway. Mum lets out a small gasp, her eyes widening in fear and shock, and grabs hold of my arm like she's just seen a massive spider she wants me to get rid of.

Dan doesn't take those green, green eyes off me as he keeps on talking with the same gravelly undertone, a casual threat in every word. "Nephew of renowned scientist Dr. Alexander Nova and Director of FISA Anabelle Snow."

I don't know why he's saying all this. Maybe just to prove he knows exactly who I am, to scare me. If that's the case, it isn't working. I'm not afraid of him. It's entirely possible I'm blinded by my connection to Jack, but there's nothing in me

that sees Dan as anything other than a man in desperate need of help.

I meant what I said to Jack and Anabelle. I want to help Dan. He deserves it just as much as Jack did. Whatever OI has done to him, however much they've fucked him up with their new drug, we'll find a way to fix it, to make it right.

"Dan," I murmur, keeping my voice level and calm, not wanting to trigger any kind of violent reaction from him. "Your name is Dan Roth. Your brother's name is Jack. You were trained by Obsidian Inc., and they think you belong to them. But they're wrong. You don't. Whatever they've ordered you to do, you don't have to do it."

Dan doesn't move, not an inch, but something about his demeanour makes me grab hold of my mum and shove her behind me before she can protest.

"I'm not here because OI ordered me to come," Dan tells me, and there's an insidious implication to it I don't understand but feel the instinctual need to be wary of. "I'm here because I have some unfinished business with my brother that you are, unfortunately, going to bear the brunt of."

I open my mouth to ask what he means by that, but before I can get a word out, Dan is swinging around and pointing his gun at the doorway with alarming speed and agility. It happens so fast it takes my mind a second to pick up on the reason for Dan's sudden switch of attention.

"Come in, little brother," Dan coaxes, sounding somehow both calmer and more on edge than before, like even *he*

doesn't know how to feel, two parts of him coming to blows inside his mind.

A second later, Jack appears, moving steadily into the kitchen, wearing his black cargos and holding a gun. It's Siggy. He must have smuggled it out of the FISA base instead of turning it in to the artillery. I'm low-level glad about it although I'm not sure if adding another gun to this situation is going to make someone getting shot *less* likely.

Jack's face is set in stone, eyes fixed on his brother. He darts once quick glance at me, and a flash of emotion comes and goes so quickly I almost don't have time to read it. But after so much time spent in close proximity to Jack, I'm just about able to see the abject terror for what it is. He must think we're more in the shit than I do.

"Stand down!" Jack growls at Dan, aggression corded through the set of his shoulders.

Dan reaches up to pull back his hood, revealing his face and causing the parallels between him and Jack to become almost overwhelmingly eery. I know they're identical twins, and I saw them together on the roof of the facility, but there's just something so strange and unnerving about seeing them together like this.

Part of that could be the fact they're pointing guns at each other. Fuck's sake. I swear if Dan says something like, "*So, we meet again,*" I'm going to give myself an aneurism by rolling my eyes too hard.

“Or what, Jack?” Dan goads maliciously. “You’ll shoot me? You had your chance before, and you bottled it, you fucking coward. Seems like you need some motivation to follow through on that one.”

Jack sucks in a pained breath. His gun doesn’t waver, his hand doesn’t shake, but there’s clear reluctance in the slope of his shoulders and the grit of his teeth, obvious enough for Dan to see as evidently as I can.

This is so stupid.

“Hey, can both of you stop being ridiculous and put the guns down?” I ask, sighing in exasperation. I really do not want anyone to wind up bleeding out on my kitchen floor tonight.

“Leo!” Jack barks at me. “Not the time to play mediator, okay? Have some respect for your own goddamn life. For my sake.” He adds the last part like it’s a plea, that same fear leaking into his voice that I saw flicker across his face when he looked at me before.

Dan’s reaction is far less emotionally expressive but no less telling in my opinion. He narrows his eyes at Jack, his face going tight, every muscle seeming to lock up, that fury rushing to the surface and spoiling for a fight.

I’m not certain of the origin of his anger. It’s centred on Jack, though, and has somehow been linked to me.

Dan uses Jack’s distraction to his advantage by swinging his gun back around to point in my direction.

Mum is clinging to my back, making no noise, but the coil of her body evidences her nervous energy. She tenses up even tighter when the gun is aimed at me again. Her grasp becomes clawing, manicured nails digging into my bare skin. My naked upper body isn't helping me feel any less vulnerable in this situation.

“Don't!” Jack snarls at his brother. He inches forward, gun still trained on Dan. His finger moves to the trigger. Ready.

Dan ignores Jack and locks eyes with me. He jerks his head, motioning for me to move towards him. “Come on, Leo Snow,” Dan encourages when I don't immediately obey. “I won't bite.” He flashes a smile, which is all perfect white teeth, almost gnashing like a wolf from a fairy-tale story.

I'm still not afraid of him.

To prove it, I sigh heavily and give him one of my best unimpressed frowns. “I'm not worried about what you'll do to *me*, Dan, you actual nightmare. I just don't want you to get all excited whilst high on Obsidian Inc. drugs and shoot my mum.” I nod at Jack. “Or your brother.”

Dan's mouth twitches at one corner, almost like he's tenuously amused or could be if he wasn't so hyped up on some messy rage that could be real or could be medically induced. He regards me thoughtfully for half a second before tipping his head at the kitchen door.

“Your mum can leave,” he allows with unsettling casualness. “She's not part of this.”

There's a short pause where I try to decide if I heard him correctly.

“You serious?” I ask, not sure if I should trust it. But if I can get Mum out of here, then that will significantly improve the odds of no one I care about getting shot. “This isn't some melodramatic thing where she'll go to leave, and you'll shoot her in the back whilst cackling manically, is it? Because, mate, I am not in the mood to deal with that noise, okay?”

The thought of having to mourn my mum is an exhausting prospect, and I know that's a fucked-up thing to think, but it's true. Mum dying would probably force me to confront stuff about her and our relationship, and I was kind of hoping to put that shit off until I'd matured to the point of being able to handle it with any semblance of emotional competency.

Dan tips his head at the door again, impatient. “Offer expires in exactly ten seconds, Leo Snow. Get her out of here, now!”

I'm surprised by his vehemence. It seems genuine, which is just odd given the circumstances.

Jack's told me once or twice that during their joint missions together for OI, it was often Dan who insisted on being mindful of collateral damage. Seeing evidence of that is bizarre in this context but also heartening. It only strengthens my resolve to do whatever it takes to stop him from doing something he might not be able to come back from, such as killing his own twin brother in an OI-imposed revenge mission.

I shift around, tugging Mum off me like a limpet from a rock. When I have Mum looking directly up at me, I grasp her shoulders and say, “Go, Mum. I’ll come find you later.”

What I’m really hoping is that she’ll call Damon. He can alert FISA and get some backup down here.

Mum hesitates, staring at me with wide, wet eyes. After a moment, those eyes turn steely in a way I haven’t seen in years. But instead of saying anything to me, she looks around me to pin Dan with a fierce glare.

“Hurt my son, and I’ll cut off your cock and feed it to you,” she threatens him. She threatens the superhuman assassin. What the hell?

I shove her towards the door. “Piss off, Mum, now before the nice assassin decides to get less nice.”

Mum doesn’t need to be told three times, thankfully, and she scampers away like a mouse escaping a sinking ship.

Once she’s out the front door, I feel marginally more relaxed. Sort of.

Yeah, not really; this is all still fucked.

“I’m never nice,” Dan refutes out of nowhere, sounding almost offended, like it’s an accusation I’ve lobbied at him.

I shrug one shoulder, making a point to look unconvinced. “Really? Because Jack’s been telling me how you’re the good twin.” It’s not technically untrue. Jack seems to have a deep respect for his brother, bordering on hero worship, putting him on a pedestal. Like so many brothers do, especially the

younger ones, and that's the dynamic it seems they've had despite the fact there can only have been minutes between them at birth.

Dan snorts and speaks to his brother without looking away from me. "Does that make you the evil twin, Jack?"

Jack hums irritably. "Guess someone has to be."

"Why?" I ask, feeling the need to keep the levity going in the hopes it diffuses the entire situation enough we can get the gun away from Dan before anyone gets hurt. "You looking to do some *Parent Trap* shenanigans and swap places?"

Dan responds by repeating his earlier request, beckoning me over to him, dimming my hopes of an easy transition from DEFCON ten to all clear. I do as he says, unwilling to push too far, knowing I've probably reached the limits of what Dan will tolerate.

"You're funny," Dan proclaims when I'm standing on the other side of him, out of the way of the kitchen island, barely a few feet between us. He says it like it's an interesting fact in a wiki article about me. He darts a quick look at Jack. "Your boyfriend's funny, little brother."

Jack's expression darkens as if Dan just made a threat against me. "Yeah, he's fucking hilarious." He doesn't quite shoot me a glare, but I can tell he wants to just by the tic at the corner of his jaw.

"Sexy too," Dan comments, eyes flickering up and down my near nakedness with bold appreciation although I think it's

more to provoke Jack than anything. He looks me in the eyes again, a swell of spite in them. “So, Leo Snow, can I ask you something?”

I raise my eyebrows curiously. “Is this going to be a shovel talk?”

“Not quite.”

I gesture for him to continue.

Dan gives me a good long stare of appraisal. “Do you love my brother?”

I’m only just able to stop myself from choking in surprise. “Ah, so it *is* a shovel talk.”

Dan’s mouth quirks upwards on one side. “Answer the question.”

“Or what, you’ll *shoot* me? Now who’s the coward? Is it because I don’t have a weapon? Go on, give me a gun, or an appropriately lethal spork, and make this shit honourable.”

“You’ve got one hell of a mouth, you know that?” He sounds outrageously charmed by it.

“Yep. Grew it myself and everything,” I answer jauntily. “Impressed?”

Dan makes a theatrical growling noise. “Do. You. Love. Jack?”

I scowl at him. “None of your business, dickhead.”

“Leo!” Jack all but shrieks, shooting me an incredulous, wide-eyed look.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake!” I huff irately. “Yeah, alright? Maybe. Probably. It’s a bit early in our relationship, and these really aren’t the circumstances during which I would have wanted to say it for the first time. But okay. Gun to my head, ha, I do love him.” I glance over at Jack, repeating the words, the oh-so-important words, more sincerely to let him know this part, at least, isn’t a joke to me. “I love him.”

“Good.” Dan gives a firm nod. He seems genuinely glad. His eyes dart to Jack. “Your turn, brother. Do you *love* Leo Snow?”

“*Yes*,” Jack bites out before the question can completely leave Dan’s mouth, shocking the hell out of me. I gape at him, uncomprehending. He stares back at me, that fear and pain still there in his expression alongside another emotion. One I can’t name, because it’s too complex and profound, and I’m pretty sure we don’t have a word for it in the English language anyway.

Jack tears his gaze away from mine to plead with his brother. “Is that what this is about? You think I left you and shackled up with my new partner? You think I love him, and that means I don’t care about you or something?” He makes a sound, furiously dismissing that notion. “Whatever those fucks at OI told you, it’s bullshit, Dan. You hear me? It’s *bullshit*.”

“You love him. Good.” Dan nods approvingly, seeming to ignore most of what Jack said. “That’ll make this more exciting for all of us.” He stands there, pent-up and visibly

struggling with a mishmash of complicated thoughts and feelings.

What the—

Dan's finger presses down lightly on the trigger, his gun moving to point directly at my head. If he fires off a shot, there's no fixing it. Headshot. Bullet to the brain. Done. Gone. Game over. *Fuck.*

Jack's grip on his gun tightens, his own finger pressing a little on the trigger. Dan seems pleased by it, not afraid or even really concerned.

"Your choice, brother." He shrugs, uncaring about the turmoil he's causing his twin. "Either you shoot me right now, like you should have done on the roof, or I will fucking murder your boyfriend right here and now in front of you. And no trying to get out of it by shooting me somewhere non-lethal. You know if I'm alive, I'll be able to get off a shot in time to take him out." His sneer holds a bitter edge. "I was always faster than you."

Jack lets out a horrified growl of negation as if banishing the whole scene playing out between us, as if he can will it away with denial and anguish alone.

"Dan," Jack begs, eyes frantically moving between me and the gun pointing at my head. "Please. I can't let you hurt him. I can't. Please, please don't make me do this. Fucking hell, *please* don't make me."

There's terror now, real terror. I don't want to die. I don't want to get shot in the bloody head. But overall, what I'm most afraid of, however insane it may sound, is the idea of Jack shooting his brother for me, killing him. Again.

He won't survive it. Not mentally. It'll destroy him. I thought that before, when it was just in theory, but now it's a real possibility, I know I'm right. This can't be allowed to happen. I can't let it happen.

"You know I'll do it," Dan pronounces, dismissing all of Jack's pleas for mercy. He switches his attention to me again. "I'd say it's nothing personal, Leo, but that would be an outright lie." There's no apology in his voice, the hurt and anger eclipsing whatever else he might be capable of feeling.

I meet his eyes, sympathy curling in my gut for this man, still. He's been through so much. They both have. OI has done this. They've brutalised Dan Roth and made him turn against the only person in the world he's ever had to care about him, to love him.

"Dan, please! Stop this! Please!" Jack cries, and I can hear the that he's got tears in his eyes, but I don't look away from Dan.

"No," Dan answers, coldly adamant like this is something he has to do, has to get done, can't walk away from, not even if he wanted to.

Dan keeps eye contact with me, refusing to even glance in his brother's direction. I can see it in him, the training OI instilled, the same way it did with Jack.

Eyes on the target. Get the job done. Complete the mission. By any means fucking necessary.

I let out a slow breath, telling Dan something I hope he remembers when all this is over, “I forgive you.”

Dan falters for half a second, those familiar green eyes filling with confusion and uncertainty, but it’s too late.

It’s too late. Because.

It’s too late because Jack has already fired off a shot. I saw him pull the trigger out of the corner of my eye, just in time to do something stupid. Something reckless. Something *right*.

The world slows down again. Silence reigns. The air freezes like an invisible ice fog.

Jack’s bullet should hit Dan in the chest, pierce his skin, and detonate his heart.

Instead, it hits me when I throw myself in front of Dan.

Jack’s bullet rips into my flesh, slicing through my cartilage and burrowing in like a rat trying to escape the heated end of a bucket.

I feel myself collapse to the kitchen floor with a loud crash, but the impact doesn’t hurt because I’m too busy dealing with the pain from the bullet. It spreads through my body like my own personal heatwave. I gasp from the ferocity of it, so much more agony than you ever think one little bullet could cause.

I’ve been shot before, so this isn’t an entirely new experience. But it’s like your brain isn’t capable of

remembering just how much it *fucking hurts*. Jesus *Christ!*

“Leo!” Jack yells in a mad panic and rushes over me to, skidding to his knees by my side. “No, no, no! Fuck, no. Leo, God, no!” He sounds manic, that terror from before having somehow increased tenfold, eyes blown so wide they’re practically anime.

He grabs a nearby dishtowel and presses it against the wound in my chest, trying to stem the flow of red pouring out of it like I have an endless supply I can just give away.

“You’re going to be alright,” Jack tells me although he makes it sound more like a demand. “Are you listening, Leo? You better be listening because I am not doing this with you.” There’s wetness on his face now. He sounds choked up, like he’s trying to swallow whatever he’s feeling, but it’s too big and too heavy and too loud and too much, too much, too much.

I can relate.

Fear explodes across his face when my body spasms and blood erupts from my mouth.

“*Leo,*” Jack warns. He’s angry, so angry, and afraid. “You hear me? We are not doing this. You’re gonna be fine. Keep breathing. Just keep breathing, and we’ll sort this, okay? We’re partners. We’re partners, and you can’t leave me. You gave your heart to me, you said you did. It’s mine. You’re mine. You don’t get to just fucking *go!*”

From outside, there's the sound of sirens in the distance. Ambulance? Police? FISA?

Mum must have called someone, even if not Damon.

Jack must have heard the sirens coming before I did. Maybe that's why he thinks this is all going to be okay. Maybe. Maybe it will be. Maybe. Maybe.

Not.

The only thing worse than the pain is when it stops hurting and the numbness sets in. The bizarre coldness, the frostbite that seems to come from nowhere and eats through my nerves like termites gorging on wood.

It was North who taught me, during one of our random training sessions back in the early days of my FISA career, that when the numbness comes, you know you've probably had it.

Pain means life, he said.

Dan scrambles up off the floor from where I pushed him out of the way and looms over us. In his panic, Jack isn't quick enough to react.

Dan fires off two shots at Jack's chest, and he's knocked backwards by the impact, ripping him away from me.

I have a moment to cry out his name around the thick taste of copper in my mouth before the blood loss takes over, my eyes losing focus, everything seeming to move further away, the light dimming around the edges of my vision.

Dan kneels beside me and produces a syringe from somewhere. He jabs it into my neck and pushes the plunger, injecting me with the—not blue, not green—but *black* chemical.

The last thing I hear before Liquid Onyx lays siege to my chromosomes is Dan's voice, wicked sharp and hot, like a knife that's been held over an open flame.

“Just hold on, Leo Snow. I swear, you're not going to want to miss what comes next.”

The chilling numbness that was spreading through my body like a winter frost reverses itself and overcorrects. My blood turns to acid in my veins, setting fire to each and every nerve all at once.

I have one final thought—*Jack, please, be okay, be okay, please, I need you to be okay, Jack*—before my mouth opens and out comes an endless, insidious *scream*.

About the Author

BL Jones is a twentysomething British author who spends all her free time reading and writing and taming her three little brothers. She lives in Bristol with a temperamental bunny named Pepsi. She's been writing stories since she was five, rarely sharing them with anyone except her numerous stuffed animals. BL has had a difficult journey into discovering and accepting her own queerness, and therefore believes that positive, honest, and authentic stories about queer people are very important. She hopes to contribute her own stories for people to have fun with and enjoy.

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