

A movie poster for 'Alpha Tactical Ops: Rogue Mission' featuring Kendall Talbot. The background is a composite image with a green tint. In the foreground, a woman in military gear is shown from the chest up, holding a rifle. In the background, a helicopter is flying over a city street with a tall building. The sky is a mix of green and yellow, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall tone is action-oriented and tactical.

ALPHA

TACTICAL OPS

ROGUE

MISSION

KENDALL
TALBOT

Rogue Mission

ALPHA TACTICAL OPS

BOOK SIX

KENDALL TALBOT

Chapter One

HAWK



As bubbles released from my scuba gear and made their way to the surface, I held onto the outer doorway to Chui's sunken multi-million-dollar yacht and used my flashlight to search the luxury interior for sharks. Chui had given his final 'fuck you' when his yacht sank in a shark breeding ground with him trapped inside.

I wasn't scared of sharks. I'd seen enough of them while scuba diving to know they were more scared of me. But I'd rather not encounter a great white while I was trapped inside the sunken vessel either.

I checked my scuba watch and tapped the arm of my dive partner, Jeff McMillan. "Okay, Jeff, I have fifty-five minutes of dive time. You?"

"Same." He gave me the okay signal and rubbed his gloved hands together. "This is gonna be fun."

After tweaking my buoyancy a fraction, I gave Jeff a thumbs up, and then swam ahead of him into the eerie silence. It was a miracle the vessel hadn't broken up as it sank, yet even at one hundred and fifty feet below the surface, Chui's yacht was still incredible.

Rich mahogany paneling lined the entrance, and we swam into a luxury viewing area with large leather seats positioned to look out floor-to-ceiling windows that stretched the entire length of the wall.

When the yacht had been afloat, the view from those windows would be over the water. From the yacht's final

resting place, settled on the sandy bottom at a forty-five-degree angle, sunlight pierced the shimmering surface above with beams that illuminated the dark depths, giving us a magnificent view into the world's biggest aquarium.

Jeff whistled. "Will ya look at this place."

He swam to one of the tanned leather seats and plucked out a beer bottle that had miraculously remained in a cup holder when the ship sank. Bubbles of laughter burst from his full-face mask as he adjusted his buoyancy to sit so he could pretend to drink from the bottle.

I liked Jeff. Unlike some of the bastards I worked with at the Australian Security Intelligence Organization, he didn't seem to mind a woman taking charge. I should be used to inequality like that, though. I'd encountered loads of gender discrimination in the army where narrow-minded men in senior positions clashed with my authority simply because they didn't believe women should wear military uniforms. My proven records, hands-on experience, and extensive qualifications were no match for ongoing deep-seated bias, and constantly having to prove myself was becoming exhausting.

Maybe I needed a holiday. I couldn't remember the last time I took some time out.

But I couldn't take a break. Not until I figured out who had been working with Chui. Each day since Chui's death had been another day where I'd come up with nothing, and I had a rotten feeling that the chances of finding his accomplices were slipping away from me. Chui hadn't worked alone, and I refused to let his collaborators get away with what happened to me and my team in Kyrgyzstan.

My drive for answers was why I was doing this illegal scuba dive. It was wrong, and my boss would kick my ass if I was caught. My precarious position at ASIO was always in danger of being yanked out from under me, so I never broke the rules. But I couldn't walk away from the opportunity to see Chui's watery grave for myself.

I just needed one piece of evidence to make my unsanctioned dive worth it.

As if it knew we were watching, a five-foot grey nurse shark cruised past the window, giving us a close-up view of its gills and the dozen companion fish feeding off its sleek body.

“I could sit here and watch this view all day.” Jeff lifted from the chair and swam toward me.

“Yeah, well, we don’t have time for that. Come on.” I swam over a broken glass coffee table, toppled champagne bottles, and shattered crystal flutes toward a doorway at the opposite end of the viewing lounge.

Since the yacht sank, the coast guard had an exclusion zone around the site and had been monitoring the area for boats. The good news about the yacht’s final resting place was that its depth ensured most divers didn’t have the qualifications to explore the luxury wreck. Although, if scavengers wanted a piece from inside Chui’s yacht, they would have found a way to get down here.

Especially as, in the aftermath of the yacht sinking, dozens of young women seeking their fifteen seconds of fame emerged with stories of wild parties amidst the gaudy opulence. Hardly any photos hit the news reports though, and none were taken from inside the vessel. We’d learned about Chui’s strict ‘no phones allowed onboard’ policy from Yasmin’s father when he’d told Yasmin about his connection to Chui. So, it made sense that there were no photos.

From the viewing lounge, I swam past a ten-seater movie theatre and into the main entertainment area. As I paused to take in the contrasting spectacle of a school of palm-sized black fish swimming over the immense white-leather sofa, Jeff aimed for the bar.

Many bottles had toppled over and smashed onto the floor, yet just as many had remained on the custom-built shelving which would have been designed to withstand rough ocean conditions.

Jeff plucked a bottle from the top shelf and held it like he was holding a hard-fought winner's trophy. "Holy hell, Aria, this collection of alcohol alone is worth a fortune."

Jeff was six foot six, built like a footballer, and he prided himself on being a man's man, yet his excited tone was like a giddy teenager in an ice cream shop.

"Take it," I said. "Nobody will notice."

His eyes bulged in his mask. "You serious?"

"Sure. If you can get it to your gear on the patrol boat without anyone seeing, it's all yours."

"You do know it's Glenfiddich Grand Cru forty-year-old scotch whisky, right?" He turned the label around to show me. "It's worth at least two grand."

"You want it or not?"

"Hell yeah." He whistled. "Thanks, Aria. You're my kinda boss."

Jeff unzipped his wetsuit and while wrestling with his disrupted buoyancy, he shoved the bottle next to his stomach.

I chuckled at his enthusiasm. Some men were so easily pleased.

Others not so much. Like my father. He raised me alone after my mother abandoned us when I was eleven. Nothing I did was ever enough for him. His disappointment always simmered in his eyes, and I'd run out of ideas on how to turn that around.

Even my promotion to executive assistant at ASIO didn't impress him. If anything, it seemed to piss him off more. When our disastrous mission in Kyrgyzstan resulted in all my teammates being discharged from the army, Dad had saved my career. Since then, it didn't matter how much I worked my ass off to prove I was worthy of my security status; I would forever be discriminated against because of Dad's help.

And that pissed me off as much as my failure to arrest Chui before the bastard drowned.

I swam to a mahogany bookshelf built into a corner of a large room with plush lounges and glass-topped side-tables that had all smashed. Nearly everything that had been on the shelving had toppled onto the floor. I doubted that any books on these shelves held private information on Chui, yet I couldn't resist checking anyway.

I pulled out a book with a hard green cover that looked like it was covered in mold. It wouldn't be. Not yet anyway. The book was titled *Dubliners*, by James Joyce. I turned over the hardcover to the title page where the handwriting was just beginning to blur from the water. It was signed, *'With the writer's compliments James Joyce Trieste 23 June 1914'*. The book was probably a first edition, and priceless. Not any more though. I returned it to the shelf.

Everything on this yacht was likely purchased with funds from illegal transactions. If it wasn't sitting on the bottom of the ocean, and destined to remain that way for an eternity, the insurance company would have recovered the vessel and sold anything they could salvage. But by the time the investigation into the yacht's demise and Chui's extensive criminal activities were completed, the luxury yacht and all its plush furnishings would probably have coral growing on every surface.

Except for the expensive liquor bottles. I huffed. Unlike the ruined book, after surviving a shipwreck, the alcohol could possibly fetch more than its retail value now.

I checked that no handwritten journals were amongst the collection on the floor before I gave up on the shelving and swam back to Jeff who had finally wrestled his zipper over the bottle.

Winking, he tapped his stomach. "Nobody will even notice."

I laughed. "I hope you don't find a Ming Dynasty Vase."

Jeff's eyes lit up. "Really? You think we could find something like that down here?"

I nodded. "I wouldn't be surprised."

“Huh.” Jeff swept his flashlight beam across the massive area like he expected to find treasure in every corner. All he found was broken crystal glasses, and a blood stain on the white carpet that I assumed was from Chui’s crew member who’d been shot in the back—most likely by Chui. It was strange that Chui had killed his own staff. Although it was possibly because the dead guy had demanded more money off Chui to fight that final battle against my team.

The yacht’s captain, Genji, a woman who was as mysterious as she was crazy, had been so loyal to Chui that even when she was outnumbered, she’d put up a fight, rather than put up her hands. She’d died after launching at Wasp, *screaming like a fucking nutter*, according to both him and Ghost.

As I fished through the drawers on a highly-polished black coffee table which contained remote controls and marble drink coasters, Jeff examined trinkets scattered across the floor. He followed his flashlight beam toward a black and gold vase that was in pieces on the floor.

“Jeff. This way.” I waved at him to follow me.

My mission wasn’t to find treasure; it was to find proof.

After shooing away an eel, I shone my flashlight into a passageway across the other side of the entertainment area. As I swam toward the entrance, other than the bubbles slowly releasing with my controlled breathing, the silence was surreal. My light beam cast ethereal patterns on the fancy carpet and expensive furnishings, and it was hard to comprehend how much these decorations cost.

I had yet to fully establish the extent of Chui’s wealth, but I was certain the value of this yacht was just a small percentage of his massive asset register. If I ever found such a journal.

My colleagues at ASIO and I have been working on Chui’s profile ever since he was connected to a cache of illicit drugs found in Risky Shores a few years ago. That bust was Australia’s biggest drug seizure ever. Blade and his team should be thanked for that, and it was damn embarrassing that

my name had been connected to that victory. I hadn't even been with them when they'd discovered the drugs.

But it was just like Blade to shy away from attention.

According to Blade's detailed report on the yacht sinking, at the end of this passage was Chui's stateroom. And inside that room was the bullet-proof chamber where Chui's body had been found floating against the ceiling a week after the yacht sank.

Specialized deep-sea divers had to use an underwater Oxy-Arc torch to break into the secret room, and even then, it had taken them over an hour to cut through to the hidden space to recover Chui's body. Stupid bastard probably wouldn't be dead if he hadn't locked himself in there.

If I'd had my way, Chui would have been dead before he'd escaped from the roof of Arrow Dynamics in the chopper. Then we may not have had the massacre of so many innocent people in Antarctica, or the gunfight on the freighter which resulted in twenty-six dead guys that we were still trying to identify.

I swam along the passage and through the last doorway into Chui's massive stateroom. The floor was covered in all sorts of crap: clothing, shoes, and chunks of ceiling plaster that would have dislodged from the explosions.

"Jesus. This bedroom is bigger than my apartment," Jeff said.

"Mine, too." My two-bedroom apartment in Bondi, Sydney cost a fortune considering how small it was. But I'd bought it for my unencumbered view of the ocean. Every single night, when I came home from work, after changing out of my business suit and high heels, I sat on my tiny veranda, breathed in the fresh ocean air, and wondered why the hell I wasn't happy.

"Look at the size of that bed." Jeff swam toward the centerpiece that could comfortably sleep at least six people. "This is way bigger than a king-sized bed."

He moved in slow motion as he attempted to smack the soggy mattress.

Unlike the rest of the yacht which seemed to have avoided too much disruption during the sinking, debris was everywhere in this room: broken shelving, trinkets, socks, bags, and stuff that was no longer recognizable.

“What would they call this mattress? Overlord size?” Jeff sat on the bed and flopped back.

I chuckled. “Pretentious asshole size.”

“It’s a bit damp.” He laughed.

I swam past him, and as I reached the massive walk-in closet, a juvenile tiger shark shot out of a rack of clothes and aimed right at me. I raised my hands, ready to give it a shove if it got too close. Two feet from me, it flicked its tail and darted away.

The shark swam past Jeff and out the bedroom door as if it knew where it was going. Maybe it did.

“Looks like the yacht still has sharks onboard.” Jeff laughed.

“Yep. At least these ones don’t kill people,” I said.

The room had become a sanctuary for other marine creatures too. A school of tiny blue fish with yellow tails had made one of the shelving hutches their home. A crab was wedged into a highly polished black shoe with silver tips. Two long, yellow trumpet fish were hovering amongst a row of hanging belts as if the fashion accessories made ideal camouflage.

I panned my light around the room and my beam found the massive hole that had to be explosion central.

Jeez! Viper made a mess of this detonation.

No wonder the yacht sank so fast.

When I’d descended down to the yacht, I’d searched for the giant hole that Blade and his team had reported after Viper’s C4 detonation, but I hadn’t been able to see it.

I could see it now.

I aimed my beam into the blast zone, and a stingray popped up out of the sand below and darted away. Shaking my head, I backed away from the edge.

As shocking as the crater was, at least the scene matched the accounts Blade and the others had given me. Not that I'd had any reason to disbelieve them. Unlike my father. Trying to convince Dad that the Alpha Tactical Ops team were the good guys wasn't easy. Especially when they seemed to attract trouble like magnets to metal.

Then again, Dad's dislike of Blade stemmed from our Kyrgyzstan mission. As team leader, Blade's decisions could have killed us all, and Dad had nearly lost his daughter, his only living relative. Nothing I said to support Blade's leadership could sway Dad's opinion. But Dad didn't know Blade and the rest of the Alpha Ops Team like I did, and we had to agree to disagree on their capabilities ... all the fucking time.

Swimming over a jumble of shoes that probably cost more than my yearly salary, I aimed for the large rectangle carved into the wall which would be where Chui's body had been removed.

I swam through the hole into the secret room Yasmin's father had built for Chui. The ceiling had partially collapsed, littering every surface with debris, and gliding slowly, so I didn't disturb the silt, I swam over three cracked monitors and a rifle on the floor, to a custom-built desk below a wall of dead monitors. All but two of the monitors were shattered. One of them had a bullet hole in the middle of it.

I frowned. Blade had told me they couldn't access this room.

Had Chui shot that rifle in the middle of the floor?

His autopsy listed a bullet wound to his hip. Had he tried to kill himself?

“So, this is where they found him, huh?” Jeff glided into my vision and toggled a small joystick on the control panel.

“Yeah. Hiding like a coward.”

“It would have been fucking scary being stuck in here when the ship went down.”

“Good.”

Jeff cocked his head at me. “You didn’t like this guy much, did ya?”

I pulled open a drawer. “You could say that.”

The contents of the drawer were a study in anal retentiveness. Everything had its own designer space including four USB sticks slotted into custom pockets.

“Let’s hope these have some salvageable info on them.” I plucked the USBs out and put them into a bag attached to my hip.

“Was he really as bad as the news has been making out?” Jeff pulled open a drawer at the other end of the desk.

I removed a black, leather-bound journal from the second drawer. “He’s worse than what they’re reporting.”

“Really? I heard you were the one who found his drug compound in Risky Shores.”

The urge to open the journal was huge, but I didn’t want to risk destroying the wet pages, so I guided the book into my bag and kept looking through the drawers. “Not me. I just had the job of cleaning up that mess.”

Jeff pulled open another drawer. “So, was that how Chui made his millions? Drugs?”

Jeff sure was chatty for a bloke.

“Drugs and weapons for starters. We’re still trying to piece together his activities. That’s why we’re here, so keep looking.”

He pulled out another drawer. “Do you really think we’ll find anything?”

“Don’t know. Just check for any paperwork or diary. A little black book listing names, dates, and illegal transactions

would be nice.” I huffed. That would be nice. But Chui had made all information about him difficult to extract. This would be no different. But I had to check anyway. “We’re looking for anything that will help us figure out who Chui was working with.”

“So, he had accomplices, huh? Any idea who?”

“Yes to accomplices, but no idea who yet. But I’ll get them.”

Chui was connected to some rotten bastards in very high places. The mysterious submarine that attacked our team when we were on that freighter proved it. Dad took some convincing that the black submarine even existed, and if I hadn’t seen it myself, I doubt he would have believed Blade and the others.

Some of my ASIO colleagues didn’t believe me though. Especially Kyle. He made it his mission to undermine everything I did and said. I still cringed whenever I saw that creep, and I hated myself for having slept with him. That foolish mistake was over a year ago, and yet Kyle reminded me of our one-night stand every chance he got.

After pulling out the last drawer and transferring a couple of sodden notepads that were probably useless into my bag, I lowered down, and careful not to stir up the sediment, I checked beneath the counter to see if anything had spilled under there when the yacht tilted.

I shone my flashlight into the dark space and my breath hitched at the glow from the corner.

Forcing myself to continue breathing, I reached for a gold bar wedged against the back wall. The gold was damn heavy, and my knees dipped into the silt on the floor, stirring it up as I pulled the bar free.

“Holy shit! Is that gold?” The whites of Jeff’s eyes flared.

“Yes. Yes, it is.” I turned over the gold to reveal the lion emblem that I knew would be there.

“Well, you don’t see that every day. Can I hold it?”

“Sure. It’s heavy.” I handed him the gold bar.

He bobbed it up and down as if assessing the weight. “Wow. I’ve never seen gold like this, let alone held a bar. Where was it?”

“Under the desk.” I peered into the space again and shook my head. “It’s the only one.”

“Weird that it wasn’t locked in a safe or something. Don’t you think?”

“Maybe Chui was holding it when he died, and when he floated up, the gold hit the bottom.”

“You don’t seem surprised you found it.”

I didn’t elaborate. The gold bar was identical to the one that had been found with Aaron Dixon’s body in the ice cave in Antarctica, giving further proof that Chui was involved in the massacre at Station Eleven.

As Jeff ran his hand over the gold, I checked my air. We only had twenty minutes left on our dive clock. “Pass it over. I’ll hang onto it.”

“Don’t trust me, huh?” He met my gaze.

I rolled my eyes. “It’s not about trust, Jeff. People have been killed over gold just like this bar. And I do trust you. Actually, I trust you so much, I was going to ask you a favor.”

“Oh, yeah? What’s that?”

“I need you to keep this discovery to yourself. Just knowing about this gold bar could get you killed.”

“Shit. It’s all yours.” He passed the gold bar over like it was a live grenade. “But let’s make a deal.”

Here we go. “What deal?”

“I’ll keep that gold a secret if you keep my liquid gold a secret.” He tapped his wetsuit where he’d concealed the whisky bottle.

Chuckling, I shook his hand. “Deal.” I fed the gold into my bag and adjusted my buoyancy to counter the weight. “But I’m serious, Jeff. Don’t tell anyone. Not even your wife.”

Bubbles spewed from his mask as he laughed. “That’s easy. I have to keep more secrets from my wife than the prime minister keeps from his. Sally doesn’t even ask me about my day anymore.”

I knew what he meant. We were both in jobs that required secrets to be contained for national security.

I was lucky, though. I didn’t have anyone who was even remotely interested in what I did each day.

For some reason, that thought actually hurt. I’d been flying solo for so long, I couldn’t even remember what it was like to share a conversation with someone that didn’t require careful consideration over every word I said.

I sighed. I really was ready for a holiday.

With the gold secured in the bag on my hip, I turned my attention to the rest of the room, concentrating my search on the floor. It was lucky the divers who had recovered Chui’s body hadn’t found that bar. A discovery like that would have been difficult to contain.

Aiming my flashlight at the ceiling where Chui’s body had apparently been floating, I studied another bullet hole. Unable to piece together how those shots had happened, I lowered the beam to a small rectangular panel against the back wall and swam to it.

The device on the wall was a retina scanner. We had exactly the same model in use at ASIO.

Jeff swam up to my shoulder. “What’s that?”

“A retina scanner.”

“For what?”

“Good question.” I panned my light along the wall.

“Does it open the exit?” he asked.

Turning to the wall behind me that we’d come through, I shone my light on the large green button next to the exit panel. “I assume that’s what the green button is for.”

“Right. So, what’s the retina scanner for?”

I pushed back so I could get a better look and my light found a dark stain smeared along the wall.

“Is that blood?” Jeff asked.

“That’s my guess. Chui had a bullet wound in his hip.”

“Jesus, he went through hell.”

“He fucking deserved it.”

Jeff gave me a ‘what the fuck’ look.

I shrugged. “He should have rotted in jail for the rest of his life.”

He nodded, yet his expression suggested that he wanted to ask me a load more questions. Thankfully, he didn’t.

He shone his light onto the retina scanner. “This room was well hidden, so maybe there’s a safe concealed in here somewhere, and that’s what the retina scanner is for.”

I was thinking the same thing. There could be more gold bars inside that safe, and more importantly, documents or intel that could help my investigation. But the less Jeff knew about the gold, the better it was for him.

A lot of people had already died because of Chui and now that he was gone, I hoped that killing spree was over.

But even with that asshole’s death, I had a rotten feeling that the murders were going to keep on coming.

Chapter Two

RAZOR



I gave my horse a nudge in her flank, and Shadow galloped up the last grassy hill in the far corner of my parents' property. After I'd rescued Shadow from the asshole who'd been mistreating her, it had taken me several weeks before I was able to climb into a saddle on her back. She was a feisty one, which was why her previous owner couldn't handle her. But I understood the black beauty. She just wanted to be free and when I let her reins out, her gait was fast and smooth.

At the top of the rise, I halted Shadow to a stop next to the dried-out stump of a toppled gum tree that had been taken out by lightning three years ago. Since then, I'd used the branches for firewood when I'd camped out this way, but there were still plenty of dried-out branches to get through.

Clouds boiled on the horizon. It was a promising sign. We haven't had decent rain in nine weeks. But by the look of that sky, we were in for one hell of a storm. The weather had changed so much in recent years that the seasons were no longer distinct. Even the cattle breeding cycles were in chaos.

My father moaned non-stop about the climate going to shit, and that something had to be done about it. But when Dad wasn't moaning about the weather, he moaned about something else. Usually our finances, which were also on the decline since Australia's beef export trade to China collapsed.

I searched the vast tree-studded paddock below for the herd of brumbies I'd rounded up a few weeks ago. Three of the nine horses were in foal, and although it was difficult to

tell when they would drop, by the size of the belly on the brandy-colored filly, my guess was she only had days to go.

My blue heeler trotted ahead and sniffed the jagged, dried-out tree stump, then jumped back barking.

“What is it, fella?”

Bluey pounced forward, baring his teeth and growling at whatever was in the tree stump. Probably a snake. I’d seen at least a dozen Eastern brown snakes in the last fortnight alone. It was a wonder Bluey was still with me.

“Don’t get yourself bitten.” *Stupid dog.*

Bluey was four months old, and he wasn’t the brightest pup in the litter. He was taking more training than his four siblings had, and I’d already sold those four. Bluey, though, may end up being mine forever.

I didn’t mind. I already had five working dogs; another one wouldn’t be a burden.

Bluey raced around the tree like he was herding the stump, and the deep growl coming up his throat would put the fear into any intruder.

I whistled, and he snapped upright with one front leg raised and his gaze directly at me.

“Heel,” I said.

He flicked his gaze from the stump, and back to me ... thinking too much.

“Bluey! Heel.”

With his ears folded back, he raced to me and slotted in next to Shadow’s flank.

“Good boy.”

I tossed him a piece of my homemade beef jerky from my pocket, and as he snatched it mid-air, I pulled my binoculars from my saddle bag and scanned the land below. “There you are.”

The mottled gray stallion stood alone, looking right at me. Maybe he'd heard Bluey's barking.

The rest of the herd wouldn't be far away, probably amongst the eucalyptus trees in the valley. A stream ran through that valley, and fortunately, it was sufficient to keep the herd watered. Last thing I needed was to be carting water out here, not when Dad was already bitching about me bringing brumbies onto his ten-thousand-acre ranch.

But if my goals went to plan, the brumbies will more than pay for themselves.

The roar of an engine carved through the silence, and I glanced over my shoulder.

Dust kicking up behind the motorbike confirmed it was coming in at one hell of a click.

I nudged Shadow's flank, spun her on a dime, and bolted toward the oncoming motorbike. Mom's long gray hair flew out behind her, meaning she hadn't had time to pull it back before she'd jumped on the motorbike. The grimace on her face added to her sense of urgency.

When she saw me galloping toward her, she turned the bike around, ready to take off again.

I skidded Shadow to a stop beside the motorbike. "What's wrong?"

"Got a call on the two-way," she said. "You're needed for an emergency airlift to hospital. Suspected appendicitis."

I nodded. "Okay. And ...?"

"Xander, it's Roxie."

"Shit!" I kicked Shadow's flank and leaned into her neck to yell in her ear, "Ha!"

She took off, galloping at full speed.

Mom caught up and then overtook me. Bluey wouldn't catch us, but he knew the way home.

Roxie was my best mate's sister. She was twenty-one, had four older brothers, and she was tough. But her pain must be

serious if they'd called for an emergency airlift.

At the top of a rise, Bunyip Station came into view. The property belonged to my parents, and they lived in the homestead that took center stage to the seven large sheds dotted around it. My home was a ten-minute horse ride away, just the way I liked it. Dad and I clashed all the time, and I didn't need to share a dinner table with him. Didn't stop Mom from begging me to join them for dinner every single night though.

But I would rather eat alone than listen to Dad's non-stop pessimism.

I felt sorry for Mom. She was born three hundred miles away, on a property just like this one, and she was likely to die on this property. She'd never even been to our nearest capital city of Brisbane. Unlike Dad, though, Mom never complained, and her constant smile showed how much she loved her life here.

I was still unsure if this was the life for me.

I'd joined the army to get away from Dad and the farm, and I never expected to come back to Bunyip Station. To him.

But when my military career imploded, I'd returned, and Dad had cried *I told you so* until I wanted to knock out his remaining teeth.

Yet he was right. And I fucking hated that.

I steered Shadow toward the remote landing strip, where my Cessna was positioned ready for take-off. When I'd returned to the cattle ranch, I'd needed something else to focus on, so I'd learned how to fly, and my plane and I worked for the Royal Flying Doctor Service. But the work was sporadic, and on-call only. The income was as unreliable as the weather.

At the edge of the runway, I jumped off Shadow. "Go home, girl."

I smacked her rump, and she galloped away, heading in the direction Mom had ridden.

I climbed into the pilot seat, and as I started the engine, I studied the clouds again. “Damn.”

That storm was coming in fast.

As the engines warmed up, and the quad propellers on either wing kicked into motion, I snatched up the two-way. “Skyhawk to base, getting ready for take-off. Do you read? Over.”

“Read you loud and clear. Doctor Jaxson is ready for collection at Hancroft Airstrip.”

“Roger that. I’m on my way.”

When I released the brake, the plane increased speed, racing along the dirt runway that I’d paid for with my own money. Dad didn’t approve of my ‘hobby’ as he called it. He thought my time should be devoted to the land.

Nothing I did impressed him.

Once airborne, I turned the plane ninety degrees and flew over my house, which I’d also paid for with my own money and I’d built most of it myself. The construction had been both a necessity, to get me out of Dad’s space, and my therapy after the messy end to my military career nearly did me in.

I was twenty-three when my best mate, Cooper Apollo, convinced me to join the army. Like me, Cooper grew up on a cattle ranch in the middle of nowhere. We were homeschooled via School of the Air, and we communicated only by HF radio.

The first time I met him in person was at our army induction course, and we did our first tour together in Afghanistan. My life as a soldier got even better when I met Blade and the rest of his team. Blade had taken us under his wing and given us our code names: Razor for me, and Jet for Cooper. Blade had looked out for me, taught me shit that I didn’t think I was capable of, and for the first time in my life, I’d felt like I truly belonged somewhere.

Blade and his team had been the brothers and sisters I’d never had. Mom had lost five babies before I was born. I was the ‘miracle baby’. So I didn’t know what it was like to share until I’d joined Blade’s team. It wasn’t just things we’d shared.

We'd shared our emotions, back-stories, hopes and dreams, and everything in between. And we had gone through bullshit that no human should endure. My sanity wouldn't be intact if it wasn't for them. We had been friends. Teammates. Soldiers. I would have died for any one of them.

Our bond had been unbreakable.

Until our careers were snuffed out following the fucking mess in Kyrgyzstan.

I'd thought we would be forever bonded together. I hated that I had been wrong.

My military career had lasted just five years. I'd thought I would be in the army until I received a military pension. And I fucking hated that I had been wrong about that too.

Slapping the bullshit from my mind, I studied the clouds on the horizon that were as gray as a nasty bruise.

I'd had some scary landings in this plane. It came with the territory of being a Royal Flying Doctor Service pilot in outback Australia. Many of my landings had been in paddocks, or on unsurfaced roads where I'd had to pray the kangaroos or emus got out of the way before they got splattered by my propellers.

Despite the dodgy landings, I'd been lucky to have avoided flying in an electrical storm so far. And we got some cracking storms out this way. But by the look of that swirling black cloud, I had a feeling my luck was about to change.

I relayed my whereabouts to Jaxson, the doctor I was on my way to collect. Once he was onboard, I would fly to Roxie, where we would pick her up and transport her to the hospital before her appendix burst.

At least that was the plan.

Thunder rumbled around me, and a streak of lightning lit up the billowing cloud like it had been hit with a Taser.

"Hold your horses, you bitch," I hissed at the storm. "I have a patient to evac."

The remote runway on Hancroft Station appeared as a red stripe in the middle of a fawn-colored paddock. Most of the large cattle stations in this region of Queensland, and the rest of Australia for that matter, had their own runways. Between all of us, we shared our landing strips.

The Royal Flying Doctor Service was the only medical facility in a five-hundred-mile radius and without those runways, it would make my job a hell of a lot trickier.

My phone rang in the bracket I'd clipped it into, and I frowned at the number on the screen. It was Blade. He'd called me several times since we'd been ejected from the military. I never answered. His calls were like clockwork, usually three months apart – like he had 'call Xander' in his calendar on repeat.

However, this was his third call in twenty-four hours. Whatever was up, it was obvious he was not going to leave me alone until I answered.

Maybe it had something to do with Scorpion Industries. He'd made a promise to me that he'd keep me informed about all the bullshit involving that organization.

I'd taken a long time to get over that mission cock-up, and I sure as shit did not need that crap descending on me again. Rejecting the call, I aimed the plane for the dirt runway ahead.

The swirling turbulence intensified as I came in for landing, and the plane's wings swayed. When I adjusted the controls to counter the powerful wind gusts, the wheels touched down and hit a massive pothole. My teeth clanged together. But out here, that was considered a textbook landing.

Behind the plane, a massive red dust cloud signaled my arrival.

The instant I pulled the plane to a halt, Jaxson climbed in, sealed the door shut, and slotted into the seat behind me.

"Hey Doc, how you doing?" I put the plane into gear, ready to take off again.

"Well, I was enjoying that footy match I'd been watching. Broncos were winning. Were you watching it too?"

“Nah, I haven’t caught a game in weeks. Too much going on to watch footy.”

“Mate, there’s always time to watch football.” Jaxson flashed a smile that was ridiculous. The doc had it all going on: good looks, a great career, and if the gossip circles—meaning my mother—were right, then he also had women hanging off him like handbags.

I hadn’t been with a woman in too fucking long. That was what I got for living miles away from anywhere and keeping to myself. I even struggled to make it into town when the rodeo rolled through. That shit was not for me. I preferred my own company ... and that of my animals. At least they didn’t judge me.

Sports had never interested me either, and I had many mates who thought that was weird. Especially Cooper. He constantly nagged me to come watch him play rugby, but it wasn’t that easy when he lived in Townsville, several hours’ flight away.

Maybe I should visit him. We hadn’t had a beer together since our army days, and I hadn’t had a break since I’d returned to Bunyip Station. Not that I’d be able to. Not when there was so much work to do. And not when Dad was in charge.

With the plane airborne, I headed for the storm cloud that had quadrupled in the space of minutes.

“Shit. That doesn’t look like fun,” Jaxson said through our comms.

I shook my head. “I hope you’re sitting on the black box.”

“We have a black box in this thing? Fancy.” His grin grew bigger.

No matter how hairy our take-offs or landings had been, the doc never showed fear. Then again, portraying calm came with his career choice. I’d seen him handle medical situations that had my heart rate jackhammering, yet he was as calm as if he was watching the life and death struggle play out on TV.

As Jaxson prepared the medical equipment in the plane's cabin for an emergency evacuation, I pushed the engines harder, hoping to get this landing in and Roxie out before the storm hit.

I turned the plane toward Roxie's address which was another eighty miles away. Her parents' station was twice the size of my family's ranch, and they ran both cattle and sheep. The last time I'd seen Roxie was six weeks ago, and it had been one of the most embarrassing moments of my life.

We had been at her older brother's wedding where Roxie was a bridesmaid, and I was a groomsman. After the ceremony, we'd been seated together at the bridal table at the head of the crowd and during her brother's speech, Roxie had grabbed my groin under the table. I'd just about shot through the roof, and every glass on the table had gone flying.

During our scramble to clean up the mess for the reception to continue, Roxie had whispered in my ear that we could sneak away behind the barn for a quick fuck.

While the idea of sex sounded damn appealing, I sure as shit was not having sex with Roxie. At twenty-one, she was nine years younger than me, and my mate's little sister.

Hell, *I* regarded her as a sister.

Roxie had handled my rejection by drinking herself into a mess and shooting dagger glances my way. At the end of the night, Roxie's mother had asked me to rescue Roxie from the dance floor, where her erratic and erotic movements had attracted everyone's attention.

I'd carried her from the dance floor, and she'd fought me all the way inside the house. She settled once she was away from the audience, though, and I'd wondered if her behavior had been all a show.

As I'd placed her in her bed, she'd told me that she hated her father and that she was slowly dying in that place. She'd begged me to take her away from her living hell.

I hadn't seen Roxie since I'd left her alone in her bedroom. Hopefully, she'd been so drunk that she didn't remember

anything that happened after we'd sat at that reception table.

Roxie was like me, born into a family that owned a remote station, and that came with an obligation to work long, hard days and never leave. At least she had four older brothers who helped share the workload.

As an only child, I was expected to one day take over the farm. Problem was, Dad was likely to live until he was a hundred-and-two and die on the back of a horse. By then, there may not be any farm left to hand over to me.

I would love to take over the reins of Bunyip Station now and make the ranch into what I envisaged was best for the land. But Dad was like a giant boot stomping on all my dreams. I wanted to make the ranch into a sustainable working property, but Dad was *old school* where raping the land by overcropping and overstocking the paddocks with livestock was the only way.

I had tried to explain that his systems were not sustainable, but according to him, I knew fucking nothing. He ran the property like his father, and his grandfather, and the generations right back to 1887 when his great, great grandfather turned the first patch of soil to build the homestead that my parents live in to this day.

Dad's stubborn outdated habits were why I hated people who did things because that was how they'd always been done. Change was the enemy, according to Dad. Even though he was running Bunyip Station into the ground, he refused to believe me. Yet year on year, our income reduced because our land couldn't sustain the number of cattle he demanded live off it.

"How much longer?"

Jaxson's question jerked me from my tumbling thoughts.

"About six minutes."

He settled into the chair behind me again. "I hope that appendix of hers doesn't give us any grief."

"You and me both." I glanced in the mirror at him. "Have you ever removed an appendix before?"

“Nope. Don’t want to do this one either. I’m counting on you to get her to the hospital before I break out the scalpel.”

“I’m working on it.”

A doctor with the Royal Flying Doctor Service didn’t have the luxury of picking and choosing which medical procedures they would perform. I’d transported doctors to accidents where a rolled tractor required a patient’s legs to be amputated, and deadly snake bites that required anti-venom. Once, I’d been flying a woman in labor to the hospital when her baby boy was born mid-air by cesarean.

The doctors who worked in remote Australia were like Ghost on that hill in Kyrgyzstan—amazing. She’d tried her hardest to save Blade’s best mate, Kai, and his death hadn’t been swift. That would fucking suck, knowing you were bleeding out, but there wasn’t one thing anyone could do. I still couldn’t wrap my head around how we’d lost him on that mountain.

Blade never forgave himself for losing Kai.

Maybe he was calling because someone on the team was sick.

Jeez, I hope not.

Or maybe they’d found the asshole who’d fucked us over.

Maybe I should call him back.

I turned my attention to coming in for landing on the dirt runway, and as the tires touched down, fat raindrops hit my windshield.

It would take a miracle to beat that storm now. I pulled the plane to a stop and as Jaxson opened the door to the cabin, Robbo marched across the paddock, carrying his daughter in his arms.

Son of a bitch! The stupid bastard would have received strict instructions from our communications team not to move Roxie.

If that reckless action ruptures her appendix, I’ll fucking kill that arrogant bastard.

Chapter Three

HAWK



My dive watch beeped. I had fifteen minutes of air left in my scuba tank to get out of Chui's yacht and back to fresh air.

"Come on." I tapped Jeff's arm. "Time to surface."

We swam through the luxury wreck and exited the same way we came in. As we followed the anchor line to the Border Patrol boat on the surface, a school of foot-long Great Barracudas darted around us. Their bodies glistened in the sun like they were highly-polished daggers. Jeff tried to touch a couple of them, but they were too quick.

Holding onto the anchor line, Jeff and I waited out our compulsory decompression stop ten feet below the surface.

Jeff crossed his legs like he was sitting in an imaginary armchair and peered into the water below us. "Looks like the sharks are gonna enjoy that wreck."

I followed his gaze down to Chui's yacht and huffed. "A six-million-dollar shark playground."

Jeff's laughter resulted in a burst of bubbles from his mask.

I'd got lucky when I'd secured my position on the Border Force boat, and Jeff offered to be my dive buddy. He was chilled and much more fun to work with than the stiff suits in my office. And he didn't undermine everything I said.

I wish more men were like him.

I liked Ryder Westwood too, the captain who allowed me onto the Border Force patrol boat. He was a bit of a grumpy bugger, but without him, my unsanctioned and illegal dive onto Chui's sunken vessel would never have happened. After Chui's body had been recovered, an investigative dive team had scoured the sunken yacht for clues to Chui's life and had resurfaced with just a computer and a phone that were both damaged beyond repair. They didn't record finding anything noteworthy.

But I called 'bullshit' and had to see for myself.

After Chui had escaped from the rooftop of Arrow Dynamics, he'd gone underground for so long that I'd even contemplated that he may have actually died when Blade's team had shot at his escaping helicopter.

But since he'd resurfaced, the only permanent address I'd been able to trace back to him was this yacht. Finding the gold bar was a miracle, but not as priceless as a little black book would have been.

I'd been at Rosebud for weeks investigating the wharf employees, and the shipment of containers that Yasmin had told us about that supposedly contained washing machines filled with gold bars. But we'd found no washing machines or hidden gold. Most of the shipping containers on the decrepit freighter had been empty and I'd spent weeks interrogating wharf employees and come up with nothing.

Even after Chui's death, he was still fucking with me.

A giant turtle drifted past so close I could see him blink. Jeff reached out, trying to touch the shell, but the turtle scooped his barnacled fins and glided away.

Scuba diving took me to a different world that usually gave my mind a break from criminal masterminds and ruthless killers, and greedy bastards who would commit massacres to get their hands on a fortune.

Without any evidence of that gold being on the freighter, Yasmin's hearsay from Rory McMasters, the fat bastard who'd captained that freighter, was absolutely useless. We'd arrested

the only two crew members from that freighter, but they either didn't know about the gold or were too petrified to tell us what they knew.

My sneaky dive on Chui's yacht had been my idea, and justifying my actions was a double-edged sword. On one hand, this dive had been necessary to search for incriminating evidence of Chui's illicit dealings. On the other hand, it pushed me well out of my comfort zone. I always did absolutely everything by the book.

My father would never have permitted my dive and I hadn't intended to tell him. But with the discovery of the gold, I had no choice but to tell him. As head of ASIO, he needed to know about the bar and its identical match to the one that was found in Antarctica. I'd had no success in piecing together intel on the Russians who had attacked Station Eleven, but at least now I had proof they were connected to Chui.

Maybe the Russians were also the owners of that submarine which had surfaced alongside the freighter.

My watch beeped.

"That's time." We swam to the surface and aimed for the back of the Border Force boat where the young officer, Whisper, waited for us on the dive platform.

Clutching onto the handrail, I removed my fins and passed them up to her.

"Hey, guys. How was it?"

Whisper reminded me of Maya: gorgeous, efficient, and super confident.

"It was fucking amazing," Jeff said. "Hopefully you'll get to dive down there."

I peeled out of my integrated dive vest and rolled it and my air tank onto the dive platform. As Jeff did the same, I held onto the bag on my hip with one hand. The extra twenty-seven pounds seemed even heavier as I climbed the ladder.

As I stepped onto the dive platform, I peered across the sparkling ocean. A line of freighters and cruise boats dotted

the distant horizon, but thankfully nobody was within spying distance of us. The sky, too, didn't have any helicopters in view. I certainly didn't need nosy reporters snapping photos of me on this patrol boat.

"Can you please swap the tanks over, Whisper, so they're ready for our next dive?" I grabbed Jeff's fins from him.

"Yeah, sure. But you won't be able to use the full masks on the next dive, we didn't get time to fill up our additional integrated tanks." She hauled my dive tank upright like it barely weighed anything. It didn't; even empty those things were still heavy.

"That's fine, Jeff and I can interpret each other's hand signals. Right, Jeff?"

He gave the 'okay' signal as his reply.

"Hey, if you're hungry, Jeff's wife made us an orange and poppyseed cake," Whisper said. "Right Jeff?"

"Hell, yes she did." Jeff climbed the ladder. "I'm starving."

"Sound's great. Where's Ryder?" I squeezed water from my ponytail and flicked it over my shoulder.

"He'll be in the bridge."

I tapped her shoulder. "Thanks." Zipping my wetsuit down to my waist, I welcomed the cool breeze on my one-piece bathing suit. I clutched the bag to my side so the weight didn't bang against my thigh and headed for my pack that I'd secured in a locker.

In the restroom, I transferred the gold, USBs, and the notebooks from the bag on my hip, to my pack in the locker. I removed my phone, and after checking outside the door that nobody was coming, I called my father.

But of course, he didn't answer. He never did.

I sent a cryptic test message. 'Searched sunken yacht. Found 1 lion bar.'

Now he'll return my call.

He'd reacted like he'd won the lottery when he'd first held the gold bar that had been recovered in Antarctica. Anyone would think he'd found the gold himself after a long treasure hunt.

With another dive planned after our compulsory rest period, I didn't bother showering and changing out of my wetsuit and bathers. Instead, I removed my arms from the wetsuit and pulled it down to my waist, dried off with a towel, put on a lightweight jacket, and then headed for the kitchen. The offer of that cake was mighty enticing.

I pressed the button on the percolator to fill a coffee mug and wolfed down a slice of cake which was so good, I had to resist having another. Carrying my steaming coffee mug, I walked toward the bridge in search of the captain.

Captain Ryder Westwood had lost a nephew to an accidental drug overdose a few years ago, and when he learned I was the one who'd found that drug lab in Risky Shores, I didn't correct him by saying it was Blade and his team. His assumption had given me the green light to investigate Chui's yacht. In my line of work, sometimes a little deception opened big doors.

"Hey, captain," I said as I entered the bridge and scanned out the wrap-around windows that offered a panoramic view of the surrounding ocean.

"Aria. How was your dive? You find anything useful?" Ryder was an incredibly handsome man, with thick, sandy colored hair, flawless olive skin, and when he managed a smile, his teeth were as white as snow. He was in his late thirties, yet women of all ages ogled him, not that he seemed to notice, or be interested.

He caught my eye, but for a different reason. A couple of weeks ago, within a few hours of meeting him, I knew Ryder was one of the good guys. His desire to arrest any bastard bringing drugs into our country ran deep, and I knew with that angle in my inquiries he would help me however he could.

"The dive went well," I said. "I found a few notebooks and USB sticks, but whether or not there's anything helpful in

them is another story.”

Scowling, he peered through his binoculars, studying the vast ocean ahead of us.

My phone rang in my pocket. “Scuse me for a sec.”

As I marched from the bridge, I checked my phone screen and smiled. I knew Dad would call me back.

“Hi, Frank,” I said. Dad had insisted years ago, that when I was talking to him in a work capacity, I was not allowed to call him dad. It still felt weird though.

“Aria. What the fuck are you doing on that yacht?” It was just like him to get right into business.

“My job.” I strode out an exit, and resting my hip against a railing, I searched across the ocean of blue.

“You were told not to go near it.” He had his angry voice on.

“Calm down, nobody knows but you.”

A cough sounded in the background of his call, and I groaned. “Who’s with you?”

“Kyle. I called him into my office in case you needed him.”

Fuck. That bastard was always getting his nose where it didn’t belong. “I don’t need him. Now take me off speaker.”

“This is a fucking mess, Aria.” Dad’s booming voice confirmed two things: one, I was off speaker, and two, he was demonstrating to Kyle that being his daughter didn’t mean I was protected from his wrath.

“I had to see the yacht for myself, Frank. And thank God I did. I found that gold bar, didn’t I?”

He groaned. “And it’s the same?”

He didn’t elaborate, and I appreciated that he was withholding information from Kyle’s prying ears.

“Yes. The gold bar is exactly like the one from Antarctica.”

Frank whistled. “What else did you find?”

“I recovered four USB sticks and some notepads which are all probably useless. But did you know about the retina scanner?”

“What retina scanner?”

“There’s a retina scanner in the secret control room where Chui’s body had been found. I think it opens another concealed area.”

Frank went silent and I could imagine him clenching his squared-out jaw. He didn’t like surprises.

“I ran out of time to investigate it properly, but after my rest, I’m going back down.”

He still didn’t speak.

“If I’m right, Frank, it could contain information I’ve been ___”

“Who are you working with? Is it Blade and those—”

“No, it’s not Blade or any of the Alpha Ops team.”

“Then who?”

I chewed on my bottom lip. Frank had a way of finding out information that was akin to a witch looking into a crystal ball. Keeping details from him was always a bad idea, but I had to, for Ryder, Whisper, and Jeff’s sakes. “I can’t tell you.”

He sucked air through his teeth. “How do you know you can trust them, Aria?”

“I trust them more than that bastard in your office.” I shuddered at the thought of Kyle listening into this conversation and sucking up to Dad like he always did. Kyle’s motivation to sleep with me was equal parts to fuck me and fuck me over. He would do anything to get closer to my dad.

“Aria, I’m ordering you not to dive on that yacht again.” Dad’s tone was loaded with authority.

“But this is my only chance.”

“Abort this mission, Aria,” he yelled into the phone.

My jaw dropped at his fury.

“Aria, do not dive—”

“I’m sorry, I can’t hear you, Frank—you’re cracking up.”

“Aria!”

“I don’t know if you can hear me, Frank, but I’m going now. Talk soon.” Grinning, I ended the call.

Did I just trigger a major emergency in his office? Probably.

I set an automated ‘out of office’ text message before shoving the phone into my pocket.

If I was anybody else, I could lose my job over disobeying Frank’s order. As much as I hated using my perk, there were some benefits to being the only living relative of the head of ASIO.

Returning to the bridge, I walked in on laughter, and it was a nice contrast to the serious undercurrents that ran through ASIO headquarters. Whisper was in the bridge, along with Jeff and the captain.

“Hey, Aria.” Jeff waved a hand holding a slice of cake. “I was just telling them about the million-dollar shark playground.”

I smiled. “If it was in shallower waters, it would become a diving mecca.”

As I sipped my coffee and Ryder continued his surveillance through the binoculars, Jeff told them about our dive. True to his promise, he didn’t mention the gold, and I didn’t mention the bottle of liquor that was obviously no longer down his wetsuit.

“So, Whisper, is that your real name?” I asked, studying her closely. Her frame was petite, yet she’d already proven she was no fading flower. She was a woman who knew what she wanted.

Her dark eyes twinkled mischievously. “Nah, my real name is Jewel, but I’m guessing you noticed that I can be a bit

loud. Yes?”

I palmed my chest, faking confusion. “No, not at all.”

“Ha! Funny.” She reached for the last slice of cake. “When I was a kid, Mom was always telling me to whisper. *‘Whisper, sweetheart. Lower your voice. Please whisper. You’re too loud.’* Mom said it so much that for a while our neighbor thought it was my real name. So, after he revealed his mistake, and everyone had a good laugh, the name stuck. But you can call me Jewel if you prefer.”

“Whisper suits you better.”

“I know, right,” she yelled for emphasis before throwing her head back in a contagious laugh.

“Falcon to Viking.” A voice boomed from a speaker on the control panel. “Falcon to Viking. Do you read? Over.”

Falcon was a Border Force plane with two pilots whose sole responsibility was monitoring our extensive coastline and reporting any suspicious activity.

Ryder snatched the microphone off a hook attached to the ceiling. “Viking to Falcon, reading you loud and clear.”

“Is that you, Westwood?”

“Sure is, Harley.”

“I wasn’t expecting you on Viking,” Harley said.

“Just doing a couple of field tests with Jeff and Whisper.” Ryder studied me, stone-faced. “Have you got something for us?”

“There’s a suspect boat coming toward Rosebud that needs intercepting.”

“What’s suspect about it?” Ryder peered through the binoculars.

I studied the ocean too searching for, but failing to see, a boat that would be considered suspect. Was Rosebud cursed? Between Rosebud and Risky Shores, the two coastal towns had received more than their share of illegal attention.

“Ladybeetle noticed the suspect vessel up north yesterday and took a few snaps of it.”

Ladybeetle was another Border Patrol plane that flew out of Townsville. The female pilot, Tory, named the Cessna on her first flight, and the label had stuck ever since.

“We’ve just received a tip-off about that same boat,” Harley said, “and we can confirm it’s sitting much lower in the water than it was eighteen hours ago.”

Ryder nodded, understanding the implication behind that information. I did too. It was the exact same reason that had alerted our attention to the freighter after it had left Antarctica. Whatever the suspect boat had picked up, it was heavy enough to notice a shift in the boat’s waterline.

“What are the coordinates?” Ryder plucked a pen from his shirt pocket.

As Harley detailed the location of the suspect boat, Jeff hit a button to haul up our anchor and I inwardly groaned. This unexpected deviation from plan meant I probably wouldn’t get a second dive onto Chui’s yacht today. Or maybe ever.

I wanted to scream. Every time I got close to that fucking bastard, he slipped through my fingers.

Ryder ended the connection with Harley and after flicking a few switches, the engines roared to life.

“Do you know where the tip-off came from?” I asked.

Ryder frowned. “Don’t know, but it sounds like they could be right.”

“What do you think the vessel picked up?” I asked.

“Drugs,” Ryder said so confidently, I believed him.

That made me sit up. Maybe the assholes on that boat had connections to Chui?

“May I?” I indicated to the binoculars.

He nodded. “But it’s not within range yet.”

I peered into the horizon, seeing nothing but clear blue sky melting into dark blue ocean. I lowered the binoculars. “Do you get this kind of situation often?”

“Unfortunately. Our massive coastline makes it both difficult to monitor and a target for fucking drug runners.”

“Like that bastard Chui,” I said.

“Yep. Like him.” Ryder clenched his teeth.

Risky Shores had been the perfect location for Chui’s drug manufacturing business and with the shipping port being just thirty miles away, he’d gone under the radar with his drug shipments for longer than anyone was game to admit.

“What can I do?” I asked.

Ryder’s brows thumped together. “Hope that these bastards let us onboard without a fight.”

I cocked my head. “And if they don’t?”

“Hope nobody gets dead.”

“Unless it’s the bad guys, right?” Whisper grinned.

Ryder flashed a smile that took my breath away. “Yep. But you didn’t hear that from me.”

As I sipped my bitter coffee, I prayed for the opposite to Whisper and Ryder. I wanted to catch these guys alive because I intended to interrogate them before they were handed over to the authorities.

Ryder aimed the patrol boat to a location that was currently unmarked on the horizon, and Jeff and Whisper got to work checking monitors and gauges along the bridge’s extensive control panel.

Ryder picked up his binoculars for the umpteenth time. “Bingo. Got a visual on the suspect vessel. Note time in the logbook, Whisper.”

“Yes, sir.” Whisper strode to a station across the bridge.

“Son of a bitch!” The veins in Ryder’s neck bulged. “They’ve seen us. They’re offloading cargo. Mark our

location, Jeff.”

The radio crackled. “Falcon to Viking. Are you there, Westwood?”

Ryder snatched the microphone off the hook. “I’m here.”

“You getting this? They are tossing packages overboard.” Harley’s voice through the speaker was as Australian as they come.

“Yeah, we see them. I assume you’re getting it on video?”

“Affirmative. Stupid bastards just provided criminal evidence.”

Ryder handed the binoculars to me and peering through them, I adjusted the fit to my face. The boat in the distance was a forty-foot, wooden-hulled cabin cruiser that looked like it had been salvaged from a scrapyard.

“How many perps onboard?” Ryder asked.

“Four sighted but could be more.”

“You got any snapshots of their faces?” Ryder asked.

“Affirmative, though not sure if the quality is good enough to identify them.”

“Understood. They’re already onto us, so get in as close as you can.”

“Will do. Over and out.”

I lowered the binoculars. “What happens now?”

Ryder hung up the microphone. “We board that boat, arrest them, and search the vessel.”

“But can they still be charged if we don’t find those packages?” Even frowning, Whisper looked stunning.

“Falcon would have the coordinates of those drop-off points,” Ryder said. “We’ll fish the packages out.”

“But won’t they drift?” Whisper asked.

“The sneaky bastards usually weigh their contraband down for this very situation. If we don’t get the packages, some

other fucker will pluck them out of the water.” Looking through the binoculars, Ryder groaned. “These dipshits aren’t going to make this easy for us.”

The boat was close enough for me to see two men drag a black duffle bag across the deck. The men wrestled it over the side, and as the bag splashed into the water they ran back inside the cabin, and two more men appeared carrying another equally heavy looking bag that they dumped overboard as well.

Aiming for the suspect vessel, our boat mowed down the distance between us at full speed. If the other boat tried to get away, they would have no hope.

Through the binoculars, men shifted behind the windows of the cabin like ducks in a shooting gallery. They vanished from view and reappeared carrying two more bags which they tossed overboard.

Ryder guided our patrol boat so we cruised into a parallel position to the other vessel. When we were about twenty yards away, he pressed a button that changed the engine noise, and dropped the anchor.

Two men on the other boat sprinted through the cabin and dove over the back of their boat into the water.

“Shit! Ryder, two tangos jumped overboard,” I said.

“I see them. Jeff, Whisper, get your Kevlar and weapons, and ready the raft to fish those fucking idiots out of the water.”

“Yes, sir,” Whisper and Jeff said in unison. They raced out the door.

A third man tugged at the straps of a life vest as he faced toward us, then jumped off the side of the old boat.

“Another one’s jumped overboard,” I said.

“I see him,” Ryder said. “I’ll help my team. You keep watch for the last man, and if there are any more onboard.”

“Roger that.”

Ryder marched from the room, and I stepped on the runner deck that ran the length of the patrol boat. Squinting against the sunshine, I rested my hips against the railing, and shared my gaze between the man splashing in the water between the two boats, and the vessel he'd jumped from.

A rubber raft shot out from the rear of our patrol boat with Ryder and Jeff gripping on as Whisper steered toward the first two men who'd jumped overboard.

The man in the water between the two boats madly waved his hands at the raft as if we hadn't seen him. But he had a life jacket on; the other two had dived into the water without them.

They must have been damn desperate to do that.

Gripping the railing, I scoured the timber cruiser for the fourth man. "Where are you, you stupid bastard?"

The man in the water splashed like he was on the verge of drowning, yet Whisper maintained her direction toward the rear of the other vessel.

Black smoke spewed out of the decrepit boat's cabin window.

Shit. They've got a fire onboard.

An explosion boomed across the water.

"Christ! They're scuttling the vessel."

Bubbles burst from the side of the boat like it was in boiling water, and the ass end dipped below the surface.

"Shit. Shit!" I scoured the vessel windows, searching for the fourth man. "Come on. Where are you?"

The ship was going down. And damn quickly. Just like Blade had said Chui's yacht had sunk. The front of the boat tilted up, revealing the bow's barnacled hull.

And just like Chui's yacht, there was a person still inside.

He could be trapped by that explosion.

A massive burst of bubbles erupted around the boat, and as if an almighty monster had grabbed hold of it, the vessel

vanished. I scoured the water, searching for the last man.

“Come on, show yourself.”

Bits of crap bobbed to the surface. But not him. Or his body.

Fuck! I have to save him.

Yanking off my jacket, I zipped up my wetsuit as I raced along the side deck to get my dive gear.

Chapter Four

RAZOR



Robbo ran toward the plane, and Roxie seemed like a small child in his thick arms. Although I couldn't hear her screams, her mouth was wide open, and the pain was written all over her face. She was hurting, and we were a fucking long way from a hospital.

My mind jackknifed over a stack of worst-case scenarios. With panic surging through me, I scrambled out of the pilot seat.

“Took your bloody time!” Robbo yelled over the plane's diminishing engine noise. He climbed the steps and lowered Roxie onto the plane's custom-built emergency bed.

“You were told not to move her, Robbo.” Jaxson's stern voice bounced about the plane cabin.

“I thought she'd tried to overdose again.”

Overdose? Again? Roxie's face was pale, and her lips were tinged blue.

Jesus, I had no idea.

“We advised that it could be her appendix.” Jaxson checked her pulse, and his dire expression confirmed Roxie was not good.

“Yeah, well. You know what she's like.” Robbo eyeballed me, maybe seeking my support.

Fuck him. He paraded his misogynistic behavior as if it made him a hero. It fucking didn't. I'd seen heroes in action. Robbo was a narcissistic bastard.

He didn't deserve anyone's support.

"Get out." Glaring at him, I pointed at the exit.

Jaxson pressed his fingers to Roxie's abdomen and her shriek had the hairs on my neck bolting upright.

"Move." I muscled Robbo away, but he was as tough as a bull and had the rage of one too.

Clenching his fists, Robbo shuddered. "I couldn't just stand around and do nothing with her screaming like this, could I?"

"Have you been vomiting?" Jaxson asked Roxie. He shifted his fingers to a different spot on her lower abdomen.

She released a scream that would shatter glass.

"Yes, she's been vomiting," Robbo said. "Is that bad?"

Ignoring Robbo, Jaxson eyeballed me. "We need to get her to hospital."

Fear ripped up my spine. "Get out, Robbo. We need to go."

His yellowing eyes carved into me. "I'm coming with you."

"No, you're not." I shoved him backward. "We need to focus on Roxie. And we can't with you here."

Robbo clenched his jaw so hard his cheeks wobbled.

"This is best for Roxie." I pushed him again. It wasn't the first time I had an overbearing parent demand to fly with their child, and it wouldn't be the last. Our space was premium, and rejecting baggage, including family, was necessary.

"I know what's best for Roxanne." He folded his arms.

I wanted to punch the hypocrite. Roxie released an agonizing moan as Jaxson injected her with what was likely to be a potent painkiller.

Robbo jabbed a finger to my chest. "Don't fuck this up."

"Get out!" I adjusted my stance, ready to wrestle him from the plane.

He squinted at me and for one bracing moment, I thought he was going to hit me.

Robbo ogled around Jaxson to his daughter. “You hang in there, Roxanne.” He placed his hand on her head. “I’m sorry.”

“Get away from me.” Roxie’s emotion-choked reply was equal parts pain-induced and anger.

Robbo’s shoulders sagged and with his fists swinging at his sides, he stomped down the steps, marched across the red dirt, and disappeared into the bushes without glancing back.

As I wondered what his apology was about, I pulled up the stairs and sealed the door.

I tugged on my comms, then put the engine into gear. “Prepare for takeoff.”

The heavens opened, drumming rain into the plane like buckshot and drowning out Roxie’s moans. As the plane raced along the dirt airstrip, the raindrops hammered the windshield, giving the wipers a run for their money, and making visibility so negligible I couldn’t see the line of trees that signified the end of the runway.

My balls just about shriveled to walnuts as I waited until the last second for lift-off. We missed a massive gum tree by mere feet, and the plane shuddered as if protesting the near disaster.

A crack of lightning burst through the clouds and lit up the sky like a fucking disco.

“Son of a bitch!”

“Should I put on my life jacket?” Jaxson joked through our comms. We were about a thousand miles from the nearest ocean.

“Keep your skirt on. This is nothing.” I’d been in a chopper that had been taking heavy gunfire as we got airborne. The chances of being hit by lightning were minuscule in comparison. As I tilted the right-hand wing downward, turning ninety degrees, raindrops scurried left to right across the windshield.

“How you doing, captain?” Jaxson asked through our comms.

“It’s like riding a bronco, so just hang in there, Doc.”

“Yee haa,” he said, deadpan. “Just don’t get us bucked off.”

“Not on my watch.” Gripping the toggle, I straightened out again, but wild turbulence tossed us around like bullets in a soda can. I fought the controls, and as the plane jerked all over the place, visibility through the windshield was reduced to a blur.

I adjusted my rearview mirror, so I could see Roxie. She was a beautiful woman, who stood out in any crowd. Not now though. Her skin was pale, her lips were blue, and her cheeks were sunken. Had she really overdosed before? Was that intentional?

Oh, jeez. Was her erratic behavior at the wedding her cry for help?

And did my rejection instigate an overdose?

I fucking hoped not. My heart clenched for Roxie. I knew exactly what it was like to feel trapped by a family legacy.

Dragging my gaze to the wipers’ frantic attempts to combat the rain splattering my windshield, I contacted base and relayed our position.

“How is the patient?” Michelle asked over the comms.

“I believe her appendix may burst,” Jaxson said. “We’ll need emergency assistance when we land.”

“Thanks, Jaxson. We’ll be ready. How long to ETA?” Michelle asked.

“Eighteen minutes,” I said.

Hang in there, Roxie.

A patch of blue sky appeared out of nowhere, and golden sunshine glinted the drops on my windshield. Below, the panoramic view over endless paddocks was the best view in

town, and one of the reasons why I loved flying. The other reason was the freedom it brought.

Sometimes I was tempted to keep going and escape Dad's shackles.

If it wasn't for Mom's pleading, I would never have returned to Bunyip Station after I was booted out of the army.

Maybe I shouldn't have. It had been hard enough to break away from her the first time.

It would take one hell of an excuse to leave her a second time around.

Mom was one of the strongest and most capable women I knew, and yet when it came to my father, it was like she couldn't think straight around him. He would never hurt her—I would knock his fucking lights out if he did—but he didn't treat her right, either. He seemed to regard her as an employee, an underpaid, overworked one at that, rather than someone he loved.

The situation was bullshit, yet Mom put up with it. And I had to watch it every damn day.

As I adjusted the plane's course, my thoughts jolted to Aria Morgan. The woman who had broken my heart. When I'd joined the army, I'd expected grueling missions with mental stress and physical battles. What I hadn't expected was to find love.

Aria was the most incredible woman I'd ever met. She was intelligent and brave, and despite working in a male-dominated environment, she commanded attention. And she sure did get mine. We were opposites in so many ways, but somehow we clicked. For eight incredible months, we were together. It was amazing.

Until she dumped me.

I hadn't been with a woman since.

"Xander, how much longer?" The urgency in Jaxson's tone snapped me from my emotional landslide.

"Three minutes. How is she?"

He didn't answer, but his eyes said enough. My heart jammed in my throat, and I wished I could make the plane go faster.

Since I'd joined the Royal Flying Doctor Service eighteen months ago, I had lost two patients. A farmer with a severe crush injury had died before I'd even taken off. The other was a tourist with a snake bite. He'd been unconscious by the time we'd arrived and mid-flight he went into cardiac arrest and was pronounced dead before we landed.

Neither of those deaths were preventable, yet the stress of losing them still weighed heavily on me. Just like Kai's death in Kyrgyzstan. The *if onlys* often swirled through my mind. If only we'd fought harder. If only we'd taken a different direction. If only we'd noticed our faulty equipment sooner.

But just like the two patients who'd died on my watch, debating those options was pointless.

The runway came into view as did the flashing lights of the ambulance waiting on standby.

"Prepare for landing," I said into comms.

"We're about to land, Roxie." Jaxson's tone was professional yet soothing, although based on her zombie-like state, I doubted she heard him.

We touched down, and the ambulance raced to the plane's side. As I switched off the engines, Jaxson handed Roxie over to the paramedics. He relayed her prognosis and vital signs as he marched alongside the stretcher.

I raced after them and rested my hand on Roxie's arm. "You're in good hands now."

Her head tilted toward me, and a tear spilled down her cheek. "He didn't believe me. He never believes me."

My heart imploded at the utter sadness in her eyes. She was talking about her father. Robbo made it well known that his sons were his pride, and his daughter was his burden.

With Roxie looked after, Jaxson and I returned to the plane, and I took off again. As I turned the plane toward

Jaxson's place, we received confirmation that Roxie was admitted for appendix removal surgery and that we'd be advised once the procedure was over.

"Hey, Jaxson." I glanced at him in my mirror. "Did you know Roxie had an attempted overdose?"

"No, mate."

Shaking my head, I tried to force an image of Roxie unconscious from my mind. But I couldn't. Roxie projected herself as a strong, feisty woman. On the inside, though, she was broken.

I hoped my rejection of her hadn't added to her fragile state.

I knew exactly what it was like to be rejected. It fucking hurt.

The storm had swept into the distance and blue skies had returned. Life was supposed to be like that, sunshine after every storm.

But sometimes those storms took forever to roll on.

Mine was still brewing. I wasn't sure I would ever get over what Aria had done to me.

I set the plane down on Hancroft Station's mud-soaked runway, and Jaxson clapped my back.

"Until next time, buddy."

"I want to say I hope there isn't a next time," I joked.

"I hear you. We should grab a beer someday."

I nodded. "I'd like that. How about next Saturday?"

He shook his head. "I'm on call."

"Any day next week?"

"On call, buddy. The week after is good though. You free?"

"Nope. That's when I'm on call." I rolled my eyes.

“That’d be right.” He pulled out his phone and frowned at whatever was on the screen. “Damn, my sister’s invited me over for roast dinner.”

“You don’t like your sister?”

“I love my sister.” He scrunched his face. “I don’t like her roast. Want to join us?”

I chuckled. “Nope. You talked me out of that. I’ll text you some dates.”

He shook my hand. “Sounds like a plan. Fly safe.”

“Always.”

He shut the door.

I took off again and after angling the plane toward home, I rang Roxie’s older brother, Johnny.

“Xander, how you doing, mate?”

I frowned at his upbeat tone. “How am I doing? Don’t you want to ask about Roxie?”

“Roxie? What about Roxie?”

I groaned. “I’ve just flown her to hospital.”

“Jesus. What happened?”

As I told him everything, I tried to comprehend why Robbo wouldn’t have told the family. “Johnny, your dad said she’d tried to overdose before. Is that true?”

He released a sound like he’d been punched in the gut. “Yes. Dad made us swear we wouldn’t tell anyone.”

“When did she do it?” I asked.

He groaned. “Which time?”

“Bloody hell. She needs help, Johnny.”

“She needs to get away from this place, that’s what. I’ve offered her money, and given her ideas on where to go, and who to live with, but she needs to help herself too. Now that she’s twenty-one, she can leave anytime.”

“Why doesn’t she?”

He huffed. "I have no idea."

My parents' homestead came into view. I had a love-hate relationship with that place. Roxie must feel the same.

"Okay, Johnny. Can you check on her, please?"

"Of course. Poor thing, she's been through hell. I'll watch out for her, I promise." Johnny's concern bled through to his words.

We said our goodbyes, and as I aimed the plane for our dirt runway, a motorbike came tearing out from behind the homestead. Mom's steely grimace and speed confirmed something serious was going on.

I hadn't heard anything on comms, so it wasn't a Royal Flying Doctor emergency.

Maybe she'd been trying to call while I'd been on the phone to Johnny.

Oh, jeez, was it Roxie? Were there problems during the op?

I touched down and as I pulled to a stop and killed the engines, the motorbike roared to the plane.

I opened the door, and Mom skidded to a halt.

"What's wrong?" I jumped onto the dirt.

"Your father has gone out to the brumbies. One of them was having trouble with the birth." Mom slid off the motorbike. "Xander, he took his shotgun."

"Son of a bitch!" I took her seat on the motorbike and clenching my jaw, I accelerated so fast the back wheel fishtailed in the dirt.

I turned the throttle to full and aimed for the hills in the distance, praying I made it to the mare before Dad killed her and her foal. For the horse's sake, and my father's.

He would rather shoot an animal than pay for any vet expenses, and we fought about that often. On top of that, he'd made it brutally clear that he disagreed with me adding these

brumbies to our property head count. He would like any excuse to eliminate a few horses.

In my side mirror, Bluey and Red, one of my other dogs, tried to keep up, but they couldn't. They would find me though. They always did.

The downpour had created rivers of mud that flicked up behind my back wheel. I shot through a puddle that was deeper than I thought, just about losing my balance when the wheel skidded sideways.

I raced up the hill to the felled tree and shot over the top launching the bike airborne. Landing with a jolt that nearly snapped my elbows in two, I aimed for where I'd seen the gray stallion earlier and hoped the mare would be nearby.

At the bottom of the hill, I hit a ditch so hard it was a wonder the tire didn't explode. But I didn't slow down. In the valley, I dodged around trees and finally spotted the chocolate-colored mare. Aiming for her, I skidded around a massive wattle tree and found the herd.

The wild horses were spread out on the hillside, but they were all looking in the same direction with their ears back and tails up like the whole lot of them had been spooked.

Following where they were looking, I found Dad. At his feet, the mare was on her side, her big belly swollen and smooth. He stood over her with the shotgun in his arms.

"No!" I screamed so loud my throat hurt.

Chapter Five

HAWK



Picturing a man frantically clawing at the walls of the sinking cabin cruiser, I dragged my scuba gear that was set-up and ready for my next dive to the edge of the dive platform. I sat, clipped into my buoyancy vest and tank, and pulled on my mask. After testing that my air was working, I clutched my fins and rolled overboard.

I pulled on my fins and facing downward, I made smooth, rapid kicks, swimming toward the scuttled boat. Bits of timber peeled off the sides as the boat slipped towards the ocean floor. The boat plowed into the bottom, hitting rear first, and the rest of the vessel crumpled forward and was swallowed by a massive cloud of sand.

Pinching my nose, I equalized my ears, adjusting to the depth, and kept up my speed. With each foot I descended, the seconds ticked away, and it was hard to accept that the fool who had stayed onboard was still alive. If he didn't find a pocket of air, he was screwed.

As I fanned away the sand cloud, the shipwreck emerged through the debris, and I swam toward the open cabin door. I checked my dive watch. I'd been in the water for two minutes, making this dive the fastest descent I'd ever done.

Careful not to snag on jagged metal and loose wiring, I turned on my dive torch and glided through the confined space, aiming for the steps at the opposite end. Sand, scraps of paper, and plastic bits clouded the water, obscuring the murky depths around me. An eerie silence engulfed me as I clutched

a railing and glided down the narrow steps into a large open area that had been modified to carry cargo.

My light beam highlighted crates with plastic-wrapped cubes lined on both sides of the hull. Drugs. A massive quantity of drugs.

If they had planned on tossing everything into the ocean before they were caught, the assholes still had a lot more work to do. No wonder they scuttled the boat and jumped overboard. This was a serious drug haul and would secure lengthy prison terms for anyone involved. If they didn't die, that was.

Where is that last man?

Did he escape?

I headed toward a closed door at the opposite end of the cargo hold and pushing bits of plastic away, I pulled down the handle.

A man in a scuba mask lunged from the shadows with a knife.

Gasping, I tried to shove back, but my heavy tank made my movement clumsy and slow. Hampered by the water, I barely avoided being stabbed in the chest. I shoved his arm and clawed at the mask that obscured his face. But the water hindered my attack and I missed.

He lunged again, and his knife missed my cheek by inches.

I tried to punch his throat, but my sluggish thrust was only a fraction of the anger I drove at him.

He grabbed my wrist and yanked my arm up behind me. Bubbles cascaded around us as we wrestled each other in a turbulent fight. Using my flashlight, I rammed backward, aiming for his balls.

Bubbles burst from his mask as he howled and released my arm.

As I spun to face him, he grabbed my flashlight with one hand, and slashed my air pipe with his knife.

An explosion of bubbles spewed from my hose. Fuck!

He's cut my air. I can't breathe.

But I'd never make it to the surface with the air in my lungs. Fighting fear as I scrambled to grab my hose which was whipping all over the place like a cut snake and spewing precious air, I scoured for my attacker through millions of swirling bubbles.

I caught movement near my face. A fist slammed into my temple. Pain ripped across my brain as my mask twisted up to my forehead.

I can't see.

A clang echoed through murky water, and I spun to the noise with my hands out, expecting an attack from every angle.

My chest burned with the need to breathe and as I fought the pain behind my eyes my mind split three ways: *Stop the airflow. Fix my mask. Where the fuck is he?*

In the bubbling chaos, I hooked the hose under my arm and tried to pinch the air pipe closed, but it was too tough. Pressurized bubbles poured out of the rubber tube like blood from a femoral artery.

Shit. I have to save my air.

Aware that the most dangerous thing to do as a scuba diver was to hold my breath, I slowly released bubbles from my lungs as I unclipped my dive vest to remove it and my tank, and fighting my buoyancy, I turned the tank valve to shut off my airflow.

I wrapped my mouth around the severed pipe, opened my valve a fraction, and sucked in a mouthful of air. But the pressurized air was so forceful, I wasted precious bubbles as I tried to inhale just a mouthful. I closed the valve again.

After repositioning my mask over my eyes, I used my released bubbles to blow into my mask to replace the water with air so I could see.

Where the hell is he?

Time seemed to slow as I scoured the murky calm for the telltale sign of diver bubbles.

Stillness answered my question. He'd escaped.

As silence settled around me, terror crawled up my back.

I'm in serious trouble here.

At a depth of ninety feet, an attempt for the surface with my ruined scuba gear would be a death sentence.

The boat released a mournful groan as if sympathizing with my deadly situation.

After inhaling another lungful of air, I left my vest and tank on the floor, and using my flashlight, I swam around the cargo area searching for another scuba tank. There wasn't one.

I returned to my gear and took another breath.

Should I try to swim to the surface?

I would need to make a rapid ascent, and at this depth, it was extremely dangerous. I could get the bends. Or worse—I could die.

Jesus. I'm screwed.

A haunting silence settled across the cargo hold. Around me were a dozen crates, each one topped with hundreds of cubes of white powder. This massive drug haul would rival the one that was found at Chui's warehouse at Arrow Dynamics.

I am not dying here. No fucking way!

After inhaling another breath, I wrapped my arms around my dive gear, and kicking like crazy, I made a dash across the room, up the stairs and as I stopped to take in another breath, I scanned the area. The man was gone.

With my lungs full again, I swam out of the boat and peered up. But the surface was too far to see glistening sunshine, or our patrol boat, or anyone searching for me.

Oh, shit! Did they even see me jump into the ocean?

I swam back to my tank and as I inhaled another breath, a bubble about the size of my backpack glistened in the front

cabin corner. Leaving my gear, I pushed off the ground and swam toward it, and then tilted my head so I could press my lips into the bubble. With my lungs full, I lowered down again and while trying to calm my racing heartbeat, I scanned the chaos around me.

I couldn't swim to the surface, so there was nothing I could do but slow my breathing and wait for Ryder, Whisper, or Jeff to rescue me.

I dragged my vest and tank to the corner, and aiming the air hose, I turned on my valve, adding my air to the giant bubble. The bubble was the size of a small suitcase when my air stopped.

No! That can't be all.

I shook the tank.

Shit. Shit.

Thank God I didn't try for the surface – I would never have made it.

The pressure in my ears strangled my brain.

I'm such a fool. What was I thinking, diving down here on my own?

I waited until my lungs burned before I swam up to the bubble and inhaled a small mouthful of air.

I swam outside and used my flashlight to shine the light beam up through the murky depths. When my lungs burned beyond painful, I returned to my bubble.

Lowering to the floor, I studied my dive watch, timing the release of my bubbles and working on a breathing pattern that was my only hope of survival.

I crossed my legs like I was simply meditating in the scuttled wreck on the bottom of the ocean, and as the minutes ticked away, I tried to calm the turmoil surging through my mind.

Using my flashlight, I alternated between turning the beam on and off, and banging on my tank. As the metallic echo rang

about the cabin like a tolling church bell, a sense of urgency screamed through me.

I don't want to die. I do not want to die.

I flashed my light and banged my tank. Flashed and banged.

I pushed off from the bottom and sucked another mouthful of air from the bubble. As I lowered down, my watch beeped. It had been thirty minutes since I jumped overboard.

Come on, guys. I need you to rescue me.

Crossing my legs and staring out to the deep blue as I waited for rescue, I tried not to think of my life ending on the bottom of the ocean.

All alone. Just like how Chui died. I huffed, releasing precious bubbles.

Fucker!

I pushed off from the floor, inhaled from the shimmering bubble, and as I lowered to sit on the floor, my thoughts tumbled to the two goals that consumed me every single day:

Find the assholes who sabotaged our mission in Kyrgyzstan.

Find my mother and prove to her that I was a survivor, despite her abandoning me when I was just eleven.

Even with my extensive digital access across the globe, my mother had eluded my searches. There was a very real possibility that she was dead, and every time skeletal remains were found somewhere, I would be glued to the reports until the body was identified. Each time it wasn't Mom's body that had been found, a mix of relief and disappointment washed through me. I just wanted to find her. Dead or alive.

Every time I thought of her, a cyclone of emotions twisted through me. Anger and confusion led the pack.

When my heart rate thumped in my ears, I forced the images of my mother from my mind. I didn't need her shit

clouding my thoughts or elevating my pulse. And I sure as shit did not want her image to be the last thing I ever saw.

My mind drifted to Xander, the only man I'd ever given my heart to. Breaking up with him was the hardest thing I'd ever done. I'd missed him every single day since I'd walked away from the man who had made me feel like I was the only person in the room. Even in my dreams, I missed him. Tears clouded my vision, and angry at myself, I pushed off the floor and slammed my head into the roof.

Fucking hell. A sob caught in my throat, and rubbing the top of my head, I swallowed down my swirling emotion to suck in another mouthful of air.

I sank back down and crossed my legs. *Concentrate, Aria. And not on Xander.*

Each time I stole air from the bubble, it got smaller. It was like watching someone's life slip away. I'd seen that a few times. It wasn't always peaceful. Like when Kai had died on that mountain in Kyrgyzstan. His death had been bloody, brutal, and gut-wrenching, and so incredibly sad.

My watch beeped. Forty minutes since I'd entered the water.

Shit. My dive time was getting critical.

Where are you, guys? Come on. I need you!

My stupidity was like two bricks smashing into my temples.

Why did I dive alone?

Why didn't I ensure someone saw me before I sank below the surface?

Why did I try to save a drug runner?

I swam up to the bubble and as I sucked in another mouthful of air, a horrifying thought ripped through me.

What if Ryder, Whisper, and Jeff were all murdered?

Oh, Jesus. No. Don't let that be the case.

Banging harder on the tank, I stared at a broken mug with dark coffee stains around the rim.

Please don't let this be my final view.

I pushed up to the bubble. It was now the size of a cup. I only had a few mouthfuls left.

Tears stung my eyes, and as I blinked them away, I lowered down.

Movement shifted out the doorway and my heart launched to my throat. As I pushed off from the floor, Jeff came into view.

Tears spilled over my lower lashes as I swam to him. He opened his arms and I fell into his chest, gripping onto him as a knot the size of an orange wedged in my throat.

He removed his regulator from his mouth and shared his precious air with me.

Breathing through the knot in my throat was so hard my chest burned.

But I wasn't safe yet. It was still a bloody long way to the surface.

I handed back his regulator, and as he breathed, I showed him my dive watch.

Nodding, he gave me the okay signal and I forced myself to calm down and focus.

After my turn with the air, he gave me a thumbs-up signal and I repeated the move.

Hell, yes, I was okay—and ready to get the fuck out of here.

Sharing his regulator, we breathed from the same tank, following the anchor line toward the surface. To ensure the gases left my body safely, we had to rise gradually, and it seemed like hours before we halted our ascent for a full decompression stop below the surface. I had never been so grateful to see the surface glistening above me.

Finally, Jeff gave the thumbs-up, and we pushed through to fresh air.

Jeff spat his regulator out of his mouth. “Holy fuck, Aria. I thought I would be pulling your body from the water.”

“Yeah, me too. I’m sorry.”

He shook his head. “I can’t believe you survived.”

“You saved me just in time.”

We swam to the rear of the boat where Ryder stood with his arms folded. “Jesus H Christ, Aria. What the fuck were you thinking?”

“I thought I was saving someone.” Dragging my body up the ladder was like climbing through cement.

“You nearly gave me a fuck load of reports to fill out.” His fierce tone matched his deadly glare. “What happened down there?”

I told them about the man who attacked me and having to breathe from that trapped bubble.

“You sure are lucky.” Whisper hugged me to her chest just like Ghost would do.

“I know.” The adrenalin that had been keeping me upright petered away, and I gripped the railing.

“You okay?” Whisper clutched my wrist.

“I am now,” I said.

Jeff unzipped his wetsuit down to his waist. “You scared the stuffing out of me, Aria. I don’t ever want to do a dive like that again.”

“I know. Thank you for rescuing me. I owe you one.”

“You can say that again.” He rolled his eyes.

“I owe you more than one. If you’d taken even a couple more minutes, I would have been out of air.” I rubbed his arm. “So, yes, I truly thank you.”

He huffed. “Good. Now don’t try to stop me from telling my wife. She needs to know I can do some things right.”

I chuckled.

“You want me to tell her you’re a hero?” Whisper asked.

Jeff scrunched up his nose. “Yeah. Nah. Okay, go ahead.”

Whisper burst out laughing, and we all joined in.

It felt amazing.

“Did you catch the other three drug runners?” I asked.

“Yes.” Ryder glared at me like I was a criminal. “They’re handcuffed in my office.”

Across the water, bits of scrap from the sunken boat bobbed across the surface. “The guy who attacked me never showed up, huh?”

“Nope.” Ryder indicated for me to follow him inside. “We’re a bloody long way from land and once he runs out of air, he’ll have to surface. We’ll get him. One way or another.”

Ryder led us to the bridge, where he made me sit, then he unhooked the microphone and relayed the message that I’d been found alive. His information was received with a round of cheers, and a pile of questions that he answered while giving me the evil-eye.

His anger was obvious, and justified, but his glare was so intense, I had a feeling there was something else going on.

Ryder made several more calls and instructed me to detail the enormous cache of drugs in the vessel on the bottom of the ocean.

The next few hours were swallowed up with chaos.

Our continued search for the missing man was unsuccessful.

Jeff and Whisper alternated turns in asking me if I was okay.

Ryder maintained a potent glare at me as he contacted the Coast Guard, Water Police, and his head office, and made arrangements to deal with our three prisoners and for the drugs on the sunken boat to be recovered and destroyed.

Once I was permitted to stand, I went straight to our three prisoners who were tied up in Ryder's office. The three Indonesian men were scrawny, pimply, and terrified. And my attempt to interview them was useless. They refused to talk.

But it wasn't because they were scared of me ... they were scared of the person whose drugs they just lost.

Out on the rear dive deck, I sat in the streaming sunshine with my feet dangling in the water and made the phone call I was dreading—my dad.

“Jesus Christ, Aria. Do you have a fucking death wish?”

How the hell did he know what happened? I shook my head. I shouldn't be surprised. He had spies everywhere.

“Hello to you too, Frank.”

“That was the stupidest thing I've ever heard. What the hell were you thinking?”

“I was thinking that the idiot was going to die if I didn't save him.”

“You should've let him drown. That's what he gets for being a drug smuggler.”

Neither of us spoke for a few beats. There wasn't anything I could say anyway. He was right. What I did was completely foolish, and I was lucky to be alive.

Dad inhaled a sharp breath. “Are you okay?”

I touched the bullet wound scar on my left leg. The circle was about the size of a ten-cent piece. Although the scar was still red, it wasn't raised and ugly. It looked like a burn mark, rather than a wound that could have given me a permanent limp, or worse, required my leg to be amputated like Cobra. I'd got lucky. Just like my rescue from that sunken boat.

“Yes, Dad. I'm fine.”

“Good. It's time you got your ass back to Sydney, anyway. Rosebud is a lost cause.”

As much as I didn't want to concede he was right, he was. Despite weeks of investigating the wharf employees and

anyone else I could round up, I'd come up with nothing.

After Dad and I said our goodbyes, I stood, and leaning against the railing, I inhaled the crisp ocean air, searching for our missing man ... or his body floating in the water.

His chance of survival was minuscule, proving just how desperate he'd been to get away.

Just like Chui must have been when he'd locked himself in that secret room. That decision had cost him his life. I clamped my hands around the railing.

Goddammit. Leaving Rosebud and returning to Sydney meant I wouldn't dive down to Chui's yacht again. I wouldn't be the first person to find out what the hell that retina scanner opened.

I checked my watch. It was three o'clock in the afternoon, so it had been five hours since Jeff had rescued me. Long enough for me to dive again.

With a glimmer of hope, I squinted at the sun which was a massive fireball over the ocean. There was still plenty of daylight left to do another dive.

Although I doubted Ryder would allow me to dive down to Chui's sunken yacht, I was a firm believer in there never being any harm in asking.

I tucked my phone into the back pocket of my shorts and made my way to the bridge where calm had returned since the three captives had been handed over to the water police.

I waited until Whisper and Jeff left the bridge before I cleared my throat. "Hey, Ryder."

He turned to me with a glare that suggested he knew what I was about to say.

"I need to ask a favor."

"You've had enough favors, Aria."

"I know, and I truly appreciate everything you have done. But I'm going to ask anyway. Will you let me do one more dive on Chui's yacht?"

“Nope.” He shook his head.

But I continued. “It’ll just be a quick dive to see if we can work out what that retina scanner opens.”

“No.”

“But we could find a secret compartment containing serious evidence on who Chui was working with. Come on. You want to catch some more bad guys ... don’t you?” I shrugged, trying to look all cute. Sometimes using my femininity was necessary. “This could be the break we’ve been waiting for to arrest a bunch of criminal bastards.”

He looked at me like I was an imbecile. “You really think there’s another secret compartment?”

“Absolutely. Why else would he have a retina scanner?”

Ryder clenched his jaw, but the glimmer in his amber-colored eyes showed he was intrigued. He checked his watch. “If you can talk Jeff or Whisper into diving with you, then you can do one dive.”

I placed my hand on his chest. “You’re a good guy, Ryder. I won’t forget this. I promise.”

“Don’t make me regret it.”

“I won’t.” I raced out of the bridge before he changed his mind.

I found Jeff and Whisper in the kitchen eating cookies and chatting away as if the horrendous stress of the morning could be relieved with sugar and idle gossip.

I pressed my hands onto the kitchen table. “Hey, guys, I need to ask a favor. Ryder has given me permission to dive down to Chui’s yacht one more time, but I need one of you to come with me. Any takers?”

Simultaneously, Jeff said, “Hell no,” and Whisper said, “Hell, yes.”

As they laughed, a wave of relief washed through me.

It was another hour before Ryder had motored the patrol boat to above Chui’s yacht and released the anchor. Unlike the

dive I did with Jeff, Whisper and I didn't have full face masks that allowed us to talk to each other. Our communication would be purely by hand signals. Whisper seemed comfortable with that.

After Ryder gave us a strict lecture on sticking together and following dive protocols, Whisper and I took giant strides off the back of the dive deck into the twinkling ocean. Whisper was as elegant as a dolphin in the water. Scuba diving seemed like second nature to her.

Leading the way, I took her into the yacht via the same doorway Jeff and I had entered earlier that morning. I gave her a few moments to marvel at the viewing lounge as several sharks swam past the giant windows as if fully aware they were the stars in a show.

From there, we swam through the entertainment area but as I entered the passage that led to Chui's stateroom, the water clouded with sediment.

Shit. Something is wrong.

My heart thundered in my chest as I swam into Chui's bedroom and fanning away the particle fog, I aimed for the secret room.

I entered the opening that had been cut away to remove Chui's body and couldn't believe what I was seeing.

Someone had blasted a hole in the back wall of Chui's secret room.

Anger rose in me like a demon. I swam across the narrow room, fanning the swirling debris. My blood drained.

The room was empty. On the floor was splintered timber that looked like it had been some kind of display table.

Son of a bitch. I clenched my gloved fists.

If anything important had been in the second secret room, it was now gone.

Whoever had blasted their way into that vault had been quick.

My mind spun. How did they know about this additional room?

Did Jeff tell someone about the gold?

No, I didn't want to believe it was Jeff. I'd been with him nearly all day. I knew in my heart that he was a good guy.

Did Ryder tell someone about my suspicion about the secret room? Was that why he'd given me dagger eyes for hours. No. It can't be him. I trusted him. Besides, he wouldn't have permitted this dive if he knew Chui's yacht had been ransacked.

Maybe it was Kyle. He'd overheard my call to Dad.

Another option hit me like a tomahawk missile. Was my phone tapped?

Had someone been listening into all my conversations?

And if so, who are they? What else had they overheard?

And what the fuck did they have planned?

Chapter Six

RAZOR



“Don’t you dare!” I aimed the motorbike right at Dad, and he turned to face me with his feet locked in position, taking me on like a quarterback.

I skidded to a stop in front of him, killed the engine, and dropped the bike. “Put that gun away.”

Dad’s nostrils flared. “Or what?” A sick smirk crossed his cracked lips.

The momentary silence was replaced with the moans of the mare. Nearby, the gray stallion stomped its hooves. Raising my hands to calm the stallion, I inched toward the mare. Her belly was huge and behind her raised tail, a puddle confirmed the foal’s birth sack had broken.

I had to get that baby out right now.

“She’s gonna die anyway.” Dad spat onto the grass.

“Shut up. What would you know? You trigger-happy bastard.”

“Watch your mouth, boy.”

The stallion reared on its hind legs.

“Or what, Dad? You going to hit me?”

Growing up, Dad believed smacking was the only punishment that worked. After all, it was what his father had done and every generation before him.

His lips drew into a thin line. “Don’t tempt me.”

Ignoring him, I shuffled around to the mare's back so she couldn't kick me and kneeled at her flank. She reared her head and whinnied, and the stallion stomped his hooves and snorted.

Dad swung the shotgun toward the stallion.

"Dad! Put that fucking thing down."

Dad's eyes simmered with rage. "You're a fool." Bunching his lips together, he lowered the gun, but didn't put it down.

"It's okay, girl. I'm here to help." I ran my hand along her flank and her flesh shivered. This could be the first time a human had ever touched her. The fact that she let me showed just how exhausted she was.

I crawled along behind her. "It's okay. We can do this together."

The stallion reared up and released a demonic noise. Dad raised his shotgun.

"Dad," I spoke through clenched teeth. "Either help me or piss off."

"Damn fool," he muttered.

I squatted at the mare's rear. "Shit, the foal's nose is showing, but only one foot."

"Told ya. She's gonna die." Dad spat again. "And the foal."

"Shut the fuck up," I hissed.

Before I put too much thought into what I was about to do, I lifted her tail and pushed my hand inside the mare, feeling for the foal's other foot.

The mare barely moved, and Dad's words that she was gonna die screamed in my mind as I guided my hand along the foal's body. I found the other leg folded over at the knee.

I cupped its hoof into my hand and brought it up under the foal's neck and out with the first leg. The foal was now in the right position, and I gripped onto both the foal's hocks.

“Okay, girl,” I said. “You’re ready now.”

I pulled on the foal’s hooves.

The mare tried to lift her head a few times, but she was exhausted. I had to get the foal out now. I would lose my shit if Dad was right and they died.

I wriggled onto my knees, gripped the foal’s hooves, and pulled.

Releasing a moan, the mare pushed, and the foal’s head came out. “That’s it. Good girl.”

I swept the sack away from the foal’s nose. *Come on, breathe. Breathe.*

The foal’s tongue moved.

“Oh, thank God, he’s alive.”

The mare moaned again, so I pulled on the legs and the foal came out in a big gush and flopped onto the grass.

“It’s a boy,” I said, patting the mare’s rump. After checking that the foal was breathing, I stepped back. It was time for nature to take over.

I shifted into the shade of a gum tree and faced Dad. An angry red flush blazed his neck and cheeks, and his jaw was clamped so tight it was a wonder he could breathe. He hated to be proven wrong. Even worse was being proven wrong by his only son. In his generation, out here on the land, his word was God and anyone below him had no right to have an opinion. Including his wife and son.

“You want to say something?” I asked.

“You just cost us another mouth to feed.”

“You’ve focused on negative shit for so damn long, Dad, that you can’t see anything positive even when it’s right in front of you.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

I swept my hand toward the foal which was wriggling its legs and flicking his tail. “Look at him, Dad. He’s a pure black

beauty. He could be a fine breeder or a great racehorse. He looks like a champion to me.”

“What would you know, huh?” He flicked his hand as if dismissing me from his company. “Those nags are on my property, Xander. That makes them mine. If I want to slaughter them, I will. And I’m telling you, those feral nags are gonna be nothing but trouble.”

“Don’t you dare touch them.” Clenching my fists at my sides, I stepped toward him.

Dad stomped toward his horse, Buck, swept his leg over his saddle, and galloped away. The sound of thundering hooves gradually disappeared and was replaced with the sound of the mare licking her newborn foal.

I sat in the shade on the grass with my back against the trunk. Red and Bluey joined my side with their tongues dangling out of their mouths. The stallion remained nearby but no longer looked like he was ready to charge me. He bobbed his head a few times at the mare, and I took that as a sign that everything was going to be fine.

The mare was still on her side, but the foal was already trying to stand.

“Hello there, mister. Welcome to this crazy world.”

The foal curled its front legs in front of himself and pushed upward but flopped sideways onto the grass.

The mare gave her baby a sniff.

“That’s it, girl. You did good.”

The foal pushed up again, and after a few wobbly steps, he fell onto the grass again.

“Looks like you’re a fighter, huh?”

I shuddered with fury over my father’s intention to kill these two beautiful animals and my hatred for him ratcheted higher. He was like an abscessed tooth where every once in a while, the pain he caused was brutal enough to make me want to remove him from my life.

This was one of those moments.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, surprising me that I had a signal. I expected it to be Mom, checking that I'd survived Dad's wrath.

I frowned at Blade's name on the screen. It was the fourth time he'd called in twenty-four hours. With dread curling in my stomach, I answered.

"Hello, Blade."

"Xander. How are you doing, mate?"

His upbeat tone was both a relief and confusing. "I'm okay. What's the urgency? Is everyone okay?"

"Yes, the team is fine," Blade said. "In fact, we're better than fine. We're getting back together so we can return to Kyrgyzstan."

"What? Why the hell would you want to return there?" The mention of that hellhole was like pulling a pin on a memory grenade. My thoughts splintered into hundreds of pieces, each one flashing rotten images from those dark hours.

"I have so much to tell you. But trust me, you're gonna want to be in on this."

Of all the questions that galloped through my mind, only one skidded to a halt. "Is Aria going too?"

"Hawk? Of course," Blade said. "We can't return without her. We need her language skills. But we want the whole team. What do you think? You in?"

Blade's timing couldn't be any more perfect. It was the excuse I needed to get the hell away from here for a while. I would need to ensure Mom stopped Dad from touching my brumbies though.

"Yep. Count me in, Blade."

Blade released a massive breath. "That's good. Really good. I've been trying to get hold of Jet. Have you been in contact with him?"

“I spoke to him last month. I’ll call him. Don’t worry, he’ll join us.”

“Perfect.”

I stood and dusted off my jeans. “When are you leaving?”

“In a couple of days. We’re getting the details finalized now. Is your passport up to date?”

“Yes.” My passport was renewed just before I was booted out of the army, so I still had seven years left before it expired.

“Good,” Blade said. “Get ready to roll. I’ll let you know when we’re heading down to Brisbane. You can either meet us at Risky Shores or Brisbane Airport. Your choice. I’ll call you soon. And, Xander ... it’s good to hear your voice, mate. I’m glad you’re doing okay.”

“Thanks. You, too.”

Blade ended the call.

As the foal moved away from his mother on wobbly legs, Blade’s comment about doing okay rolled around my head. I was doing okay, and yet I was also damn unhappy.

I didn’t want to live the next twenty, or thirty, or hell, it could be forty more years in my father’s fucking shadow. Maybe it was time to get away from this place and find my own.

Mom wouldn’t like me heading off with Blade and the team again, though.

When I’d returned from Kyrgyzstan last time, I’d had anger in my veins and brutal nightmares from the hell I’d endured.

Mom hammered into me that life on the land was the future for me.

It wasn’t. At least not while my father was still here.

But if I couldn’t be on the ranch, and there wasn’t enough work for me as a Royal Flying Doctor pilot, and I couldn’t return to the military, then what the fuck was I going to do?

The other rusty cog in my fucked-up life was Aria AKA Hawk.

She had carved a hole in my heart that I'd worked damn hard to cement back together.

I did not want to see her again.

But it seems I had no choice.

Chapter Seven

HAWK



It was nearly eight o'clock before we stepped off the Border Patrol boat onto the Rosebud Marina. Whisper drove me to my hotel in her hotted-up Mazda RX7 sports car.

“Nice car,” I said as she took the corner much faster than was needed.

“Thanks. I grew up with four brothers. Buying old cars and doing them up to sell was our hobby. I did this one myself. You should’ve seen the state she was in when I first bought her.” She stroked the steering wheel like she was petting a kitten. “The engine was stuffed. Lucky I’m a good mechanic.”

She caught me staring and laughed. “I was a mechanic before I joined Border Force. Actually, I think that was a big plus on my resume. And that I’d already done a hundred scuba dives before my twentieth birthday.”

“Wow, your growing up was obviously very different to mine.”

While Whisper had been having fun scuba diving and enjoying the company of her brothers, I’d been an only child, trying to impress my regimented father with my excellent school grades and wondering why mother pissed-off without so much as a note saying goodbye.

I was twenty-nine, and yet I could count on one hand the number of times I’d actually gone out with friends for fun.

“Shall we swing by Lucky Chinaman and get some sweet and sour pork?” Whisper grinned at me, but her eyes

contradicted her offer.

“No thanks. I don’t know about you, but I’m exhausted. I’m going to shower and then hit the sack.”

Nodding, she sighed. “Me too.”

After a few beats of silence, I asked the question that I’d been debating over since we got in the car. “Hey Whisper, what’s Ryder’s story.”

“Story?” Her perfectly trimmed brows bounced up her forehead.

“Yeah, he seems like a really nice guy, but he’s also a grumpy ass.”

Huffing, she frowned at me. “Yeah. He’s been through some really messed up shit.”

“Oh really?”

“Hmmm. But listen, it’s personal, so it’s not up to me to tell you.” She scrunched her nose.

“That’s okay.” I respected her decision not to gossip. “As long as it not because of me.”

“Actually, what you did today, when you nearly died, wouldn’t have helped.”

Blinking at her, I hoped she’d elaborate, but she didn’t.

She turned into the parking lot of The Koala Inn Hotel and screeched to a halt.

“Thanks for the ride.”

“Hey, Aria?”

I paused with my hand on the door handle and turned toward her.

Whisper swept her black, bobbed hair around her ear to reveal three studs in her earlobe. “What you did down there when you were trapped in that boat, that was incredible.”

I shrugged. “I got lucky.”

She shook her head. “That was more than luck. Not many people would have had the smarts to do what you did. You taught me a lesson.”

“Never dive without a buddy?” I joked. That was rule number one.

“Yeah, that, and the importance of staying calm. You lived because you were able to problem solve in that lethal situation.”

I huffed. “I guess so.”

“I know so. When I grow up, I want to be just like you.” She laughed.

“Huh, careful what you wish for.”

A frown wobbled across her forehead, and I had the feeling she wanted me to elaborate. Eager to avoid a question I didn't want to answer, I pushed open the door.

“Are you hanging around Rosebud for much longer?” Whisper asked. “Maybe we can have a drink sometime and chat.”

“I'd love that, but I've been ordered back to Sydney. I have a feeling I'll be back here soon, though. And when I do, I'll take you up on that drink.”

She pointed at me. “Perfect. Hopefully it's not too long. Take care of you.”

I hopped out and shut the door. Standing on the pathway, I watched her drive away, and a pang of jealousy swept through me. As I strode to my hotel room, I tried to work out why. Was it because she was so young and beautiful? Or carefree? Or in control of her career? I had no idea.

Sometimes I felt like I was a giant wrecking ball rolling down a mountain and crashing through one disaster after another. It seemed that every time I progressed in front of that ball, chaos would break out, sending me in a direction I didn't want to go.

After a long hot shower, I raided the minibar. As I ate a packet of mixed nuts and drank a bottle of Heads of Noosa

lager, I sat on the bed and massaged the lump on the side of my head that I had no idea where it had come from. Maybe it was from that asshole who punched my temple.

I was lucky he didn't knock me out.

I was lucky I didn't drown.

I swigged the beer. I was fucking lucky to be alive.

My phone rang and thinking it was Dad, I groaned. I did not want another lecture from him. I contemplated letting it ring out, but Dad was the most dogmatic person I knew. If I didn't answer, he'd keep calling anyway.

I dragged myself off the bed and fished my phone out of my pack that was still on the floor. And that was when I remembered the gold bar.

So much had happened, I had forgotten I'd stuffed it into my pack.

Fear turned in my stomach like a viper. Whoever ripped that second hole in Chui's yacht probably also knew I had this gold bar.

And that put a massive target on my back.

My phone stopped ringing. Shit, I missed him.

I checked my screen and was surprised it had been Blade who'd called and not my father. Calls from Blade were usually as bad as calls from Dad, but for different reasons. I was getting sick of having to haul Blade and the rest of the Alpha Tactical Ops team out of shit too.

After double-checking the lock was on, I pulled the table over to wedge against the door. It was a pathetic excuse for a barricade, but it was all I had. I peeked through the curtain and after confirming there wasn't a swarm of assholes zeroing in on my room, I pulled my Glock from the pack, and carried it, and the backpack containing the gold, back to my bed.

Sitting with a pillow behind me, facing the door with the gun at my side, I returned Blade's call.

“Hey, Hawk, do I have some news for you!” The upbeat tone in his voice was a huge relief, but my mind nosedived to my earlier concern: was someone eavesdropping on my calls?

Choosing my words carefully, I said, “I could use some good news right now, but if it has something to do with that lion we’ve been trying to tame, then you should hear about the worm I just found.”

Blade’s silence confirmed he was processing my cryptic comment.

“You still down the road?” Blade asked. By down the road, he meant thirty miles away in Rosebud, the next town over from his place at Risky Shores.

“Yes.”

“Cool,” he said, although his tone confirmed he was anything but cool. “Maybe you need some help.”

“Yes, that would be great.”

“Good. Want me to bring friends?”

“The more the merrier.” I tried to sound chirpy, but my mind was careening all over the place.

“Great. See you soon.” He hung up the phone, and I imagined him punching the speed dial for Wasp or Ghost as he raced out the door.

I jumped off the bed and peered out the curtain to the vacant parking lot.

Was I being paranoid?

No. The second blast hole in Chui’s yacht confirmed I absolutely was not.

Using a hairpin, I popped the SIM card out of my phone and snapped the chip in half. Then I used the butt of my gun to smash my phone. Dad was going to have a coronary if he couldn’t get hold of me, but I would rather that than my whereabouts being tracked.

As I waited for Blade, I dressed in jeans, a T-shirt, and put on sneakers, then I packed the small number of clothes I’d

brought with me. I wrapped the gold bar in a pair of sweatpants, nestled it in the bottom of my backpack, and pulled the pack onto my shoulders.

I tried to comprehend how someone had the connections and the know-how to dive down to the depth of Chui's boat, blast through that connecting wall, haul out whatever had been in that room, and do it all in the timeframe of a few hours.

Whoever they were, they had to be based in Rosebud. And that meant my time here was far from over.

Tires screeched to a stop in the parking lot and as I peered past the curtain, both Blade and Wasp jumped out of the car, panning their guns left and right, confirming Blade had read my paranoia perfectly.

I pulled the table away from the door and tugging my suitcase behind me, I ran across the parking lot.

Blade and Wasp met me halfway, and as Blade took my case off my hands, Wasp covered my back.

When I was in the back seat, the men jumped back into the car. Ghost stomped the accelerator to the floor, careening us out of the parking lot like a rally racer.

I removed my pack and as I positioned it between Wasp and me, I heaved a massive sigh.

Ghost adjusted her mirror to see me. "You okay?"

I nodded. "I am now."

"What the fuck's going on, Hawk?" Blade shifted in the front passenger seat to look at me.

As Ghost drove through town and onto the main highway, I filled them in on diving down to Chui's boat. "You guys never got into that room where Chui died, but I found a retina scanner attached to a wall in there."

Blade's eyebrows bunched together. "Meaning ...?"

"Meaning he had a second secret room, and that retina scanner is probably what opened it."

“That’d be fucking right,” Wasp said. “So, what was in there?”

“I don’t know, but I also found a gold bar in the room where Chui died, so it’s possible there was more gold in that second room.”

“Holy shit,” Wasp blurted.

“Why didn’t the blokes who recovered Chui’s body take the gold bar?” Ghost asked.

I told them where I found the bar and detailed everything that happened after that. My phone call to my father with Kyle in the room. Chasing after the drug runners and them scuttling the boat, and my stupid attempt to rescue the bastard who attacked me.

“Christ, Hawk, you could’ve died,” Ghost said.

“Yeah, I know. It was stupid.” I shrugged.

And then I told them what I had discovered on the second dive to Chui’s yacht.

“What the hell? How the hell did they blast their way into that room so quickly?” Wasp asked.

I shook my head. “I have no idea.”

“And who was it?” Blade asked.

“I don’t know. But whoever they are, they’re very connected.”

The three of them went silent.

Blade swiveled to eyeball me. “They also know you have a gold bar. Where is it?”

I patted the backpack.

A weird expression crossed his face. “Then we’ll have to put it in our safe with the other four we have.”

I jerked back. “You what?”

“Yeah.” Blade ran his hand through his cropped hair. “I’ve been meaning to tell you about that, but there never seemed to be a good time.”

“Fucking hell, Blade. I thought I could trust you.”

The veins in his neck bulged. “You can. You can trust all of us. But as you just found out, it’s the assholes near you that we don’t trust. We need to keep this between us.”

I clenched my jaw so hard my teeth hurt.

“Hawk, I promise you, that’s the only thing I hadn’t told you.”

“Where did you get the gold?”

“I stole them from Chui’s office at Arrow Dynamics,” Wasp said. “Blade told me not to. But you know ... they were just sitting there on the shelf, next to a fuck-ton of cash.”

I blinked at Wasp, trying to work out if he was telling the truth. The story was so unbelievable it had to be true. Much like me finding a gold bar on Chui’s yacht. It was just dumb luck that I’d been the one to find that.

“Hawk, there’s more,” Blade said.

I tossed my hands out in frustration. “Of course there is.”

“Calm your farm,” Wasp said. “We only got this info today.”

“It’s true, Hawk,” Blade said. “It was why I called you. Remember? It was me who called you, and not the other way around.”

“So spit it out. What else do you know?”

“We think we know where the truckload of gold is in Kyrgyzstan. We’re getting the team together to go back there. We can’t do it without you.”

“Holy shit.” I wasn’t expecting that.

“It’ll be just like old times.” Ghost grinned at me through the mirror.

These three, and the rest of the team, were the only people I trusted.

I couldn’t even trust the people I worked with every day.

Blade made recovering the gold sound easy.

It wouldn't be.

Nothing about that gold, or Kyrgyzstan, was easy.

But nothing was going to stop me from going with them either. Including my father.

I just hoped we didn't come home with anyone in a body bag this time.

Chapter Eight

HAWK



Following behind Ghost and Wasp, I crossed the tarmac to the luxury jet that Ghost's partner Zac had generously funded for us. Without him, we would have needed to fly by traditional airline, and with the amount of weaponry and other specialized equipment we were packing, that would have raised a zillion questions that would have crossed my father's radar within hours.

Even harder to keep contained was my intended return to Kyrgyzstan.

I'd had to pull some serious strings with a couple of people I trusted in border protection to get us through the necessary security checks, and it was a miracle I'd reached this far without Dad catching me out. I told him I was staying in Rosebud to find out who'd blown a hole in Chui's second secret room and stolen whatever had been inside.

It wasn't like me to lie. Especially to my father. It would come back and bite me on the ass, so our mission had better produce results.

Lucky for me, Dad had his hands full trying to contain the discovery of that WWII submarine that was removed from Chui's freighter. The implications behind it being found on a vessel owned by an Australian citizen could do some serious damage, and Dad was working his ass off trying to establish who the assholes were who'd massacred dozens of people in Antarctica, and why that sub had triggered that disaster.

But even if Dad did find out where I was going, he couldn't stop me. I needed to figure out who had sabotaged our missions because the bastard seemed to be always one step in front of me.

As I entered the luxury jet and admired the quality fittings, Wasp and Ghost sat at the table and fiddled with a bunch of buttons on a side panel. I took a single seat at the back as the rest of the team shuffled into the jet.

They were as excited as a bunch of teenagers on a field trip, but I didn't share their joy. We were heading into deadly territory, and I doubted we would be welcomed with open arms. Keeping under the radar was paramount, but despite our lack of military uniform, just looking at us would trigger suspicion. Blade and Viper oozed both anger and authority. Wasp and Ghost stood out for their blond hair and stunning looks. The locals in Kyrgyzstan would likely never have seen a prosthetic leg like Cobra wore, and that left me. With my dark hair and olive skin, I was probably the only one who may not get ogled.

Viper chose a double seat and sat so nobody could sit beside him, and Blade chose another spot at the table.

"Hey, do we get a movie?" Wasp pointed at the giant television screen on the front wall that concealed the cockpit.

"Yeah. Con Air." Ghost giggled.

"I like that movie," Wasp said.

"Or US Marshalls." Ghost clicked her fingers. "Alive."

"Alive? Don't know it," Wasp said.

"You know the one." Ghost scrunched her nose at Wasp. "It's based on the true story where the plane crashed on the mountain with an entire soccer team, and they had to eat the bodies to stay alive. They started with their butts."

Cobra sat in a double seat. "Oh great, Ghost. Thanks for that visual."

Cobra's American accent came through a fraction, and I frowned. Maybe, now that Blood Angel was dead and buried,

he could finally relax. During our first meeting, where Cobra had revealed his ultimatum between jail or the army, I'd questioned his Aussie accent. He'd told me he'd learned his accent from listening to audiobooks with Australian narrators. Maybe Zac should do the same. His Aussie accent was still laughable.

"I ain't eating nobody's ass." Wasp shook his head. "A leg maybe ..."

Ghost burst into laughter. Her upbeat personality always amazed me. I wished I could chill out as much as she seemed to. I couldn't remember the last time I was able to switch off and genuinely enjoy the company of friends.

Then again, I never made time for friends. Work was my life.

As their banter continued, I settled into my seat. I wanted to get some sleep before our boots hit the ground again. This last week, as we'd prepared for this mission, had been a whirlwind. Ghost and Zac had insisted that I stay in their spare room and every minute I was there, the two of them were so cheery it bordered on bizarre. But I was very happy for her. She deserved to find love. All of them did.

Each night, we'd gone to Zena's Firefly Café for dinner, and it was great getting to know Zena, Zac, Billie, Harper, and Yasmin better. All five of my teammates had found partners since our spectacular fallout from the army, but I hadn't even had a date since I'd broken up with Razor, let alone got close to falling in love.

That shit wasn't for me, anyway. I couldn't imagine having to spend so much time with one person. I liked being alone to do what I wanted, when I wanted. Not that I had spare time anyway.

I peered through the small window at the man striding across the tarmac toward our jet and thought it was our pilot. But when he swept his hand over his trimmed beard and glanced up at the plane, my breath hitched.

Xander AKA Razor.

Even though Blade had told me Razor was joining us, I hadn't believed he would actually show up. Not with my inclusion on the team. The last time we'd spoken to each other, the weight of Razor's sorrow after what I'd done had unveiled a truth about me that I'd been evading for a long time ... I was not a very nice person.

His broad shoulders filled the doorway and as he paused there, maybe letting his eyes adjust to the change in light, I studied the man I'd fallen in love with.

It was a mistake I would never repeat.

"Razor." I jumped at Wasp's booming voice as he stood. "You made it."

They shook hands, and Wasp pulled Razor to his chest. "Man, it's good to see you."

"You too, Wasp." Razor's smile stole the last of my breath, and I hated that he still affected me that way.

As everyone took turns standing to greet Razor, I reluctantly joined them. I had to. We had been a couple for just eight months and managed to keep it a secret the entire time.

I intended to keep that secret buried forever.

Razor inched down the narrow aisle, shaking hands with each of them. When Ghost wrapped her arms around him, and his gaze finally met mine, all the oxygen was stolen from the cabin like the walls had imploded.

"Hello, Hawk." He used my code name in a tone that was as prickly as an echidna.

I swallowed. "Razor, good to see you."

He leaned toward me, and as we shook hands, I inhaled his scent. *Damn! He's still wearing the same cologne.*

He turned away, and my gaze fell on his butt. Razor always looked good in jeans. His ass was even better than I remembered.

What the hell? I snapped my gaze away.

Razor took the last seat at the table.

“Have you heard from Jet?” Blade asked.

Razor nodded. “He’ll be here.”

As if on cue, the final man in our team filled the doorway. Cooper Apollo—codename, Jet.

“Hey, look who dragged his ass out of bed.” Wasp stood to greet Jet, and the rounds of greetings were repeated.

When it was my turn, the frostiness in Jet’s hello confirmed that Razor had told Jet about our relationship. I shouldn’t be surprised; those two were best friends.

I just hoped nobody else found out.

Cobra moved over for Jet to sit beside him, and as the conversation flowed between the seven of them, my mind shunted back decades to my university years where I was always the nerd in the corner who didn’t get to hang out with the cool kids.

That never bothered me then. I hated that it bothered me now.

“So, Razor, what have you been up to, man?” Wasp asked.

“Still working on the ranch.” He scraped his fingers through his hair, and I noticed he still wore the chunky silver ring with tiny swords embossed into the metal. On his wrist was a leather strap with a silver hook threaded through an eyelet. The jewelry was sexy and manly and suited Razor so damn well.

As Razor told everyone about the property he lived and worked on, I was reminded of exactly why I broke off our relationship. Outside of our military careers, Razor and I lived completely different lives. He wanted to live in the country. I wanted to live in the city. He wanted a bunch of kids. I didn’t want any. He loved the quiet life. I embraced the chaos.

The only thing that truly worked between us was our sex. Holy smokes, he knew how to press my buttons.

Squirming in my seat, I forced my mind to other thoughts like that bastard Chui and who else could be fucking with me and my team.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the pilot said through the speaker.

“He’s not talking to you, Wasp.” Ghost giggled.

“I know that.” Wasp wobbled his head.

The pilot completed his safety briefing and as we buckled up, the plane’s engines kicked into gear. We had two flights in this jet to reach our destination. The first one to China was about nine hours, then after the pilot refueled, we had another five and a half hours to Kyrgyzstan.

I fished in my bag for my herbal sleeping tablets and popped two. “Anyone want a sleeping tablet?”

I held up the packet.

“Hell no,” Wasp said. “I want to milk this luxury for everything I can get.”

“I’ll have some of those.” Viper reached for the packet. “I can tell Wasp isn’t gonna shut up.”

“Do you reckon we’ll get drinks on this flight?” Wasp asked.

“Zac and I may have arranged some things.” Ghost tapped her nose and winked.

“I fucking love that man.” Wasp’s goofy grin somehow made him look even more handsome.

“And so you should. He bought you a chopper,” Ghost said.

“Who bought you a chopper?” Razor asked.

“And why?” Jet added.

“My partner, Zac, bought the helicopter,” Ghost said. “But why he bought the chopper is a bloody long story. You two guys have a ton of stuff to catch up on.” She nodded at Razor and Jet.

“Lucky it’s a long flight then.” Razor let out a laugh that was going to be the death of me. It was so genuine and lovely that I couldn’t take my eyes off him.

Viper groaned. “It’s gonna be a long fucking flight.”

The plane taxied onto the runway, and as we waited our turn to take off, Jet asked, “Did Razor tell you guys he’s a pilot for the Royal Flying Doctor Service?”

“Really? That must be interesting,” Ghost said.

We took off, and Razor told us about learning to fly, building his own runway on his cattle station, and juggling working the farm and his pilot duties.

I was pleased to hear how happy and successful he was, although I wasn’t surprised. Razor was always going to be successful.

Once the seatbelt sign went out, Ghost produced her surprise: individual meal parcels for each of us, all made by Zena and paid for by Zac. It was only eight o’clock in the morning, but she also revealed three bottles of champagne and a bottle of gin with a selection of mixers that Zac had also supplied.

As we ate our delicious meals, the team filled Razor and Jet in on the details of the gold. Jet’s eyes seemed to light up at the possible extent of the fortune. Razor, though, not so much. He was never interested in amassing material objects, and it had been one of the traits that attracted me to him. While Viper and Wasp were hell-bent on getting their hands on money, Razor enjoyed the simple life.

My thoughts skipped to one of our amazing nights together where we’d snuck away from our military base and made love by the light of the moon. It had been a dangerous move, and not just because we were in enemy territory, but also because we could have been found out. Yet Razor hadn’t rushed. Savoring every moment was his motto.

Savoring my body had been his specialty.

I finished off my champagne and held my glass forward for Ghost to top me up.

By the time we were an hour into our flight, the combination of the sleeping tablets and alcohol worked their magic, and I wriggled in my seat, readying to sleep. The conversations flitted from our past history to our recent

missions to just how much the gold was worth, that, according to Wasp, absolutely was in that truck in the lake.

It had been a miracle that Yasmin and Cobra had seen that rectangular shape in that lake in Kyrgyzstan on Google Maps. With a bit of luck, that rectangular shape was the truck that Chui's grandfather had used to transport the gold over eighty years ago. If it's not, then the people on this plane will be severely pissed off. Including me, I'd been banking on this discovery to be the breakthrough we'd all been looking for.

During our second flight, the team was much more somber. I swapped seats with Wasp so he could sleep, and I could discuss plans with Blade. Although I officially outranked him on this mission, given that he was not in the military anymore, I wanted him to know that he had the lead. I was quite happy to take a back seat, and let Blade do what he did best—command our team.

It was four in the morning, and pitch-black outside, when we landed in Kyrgyzstan.

Offloading our gear, which included weapons and specialized scuba gear, took both time and a diligent watch over the dodgy airport employees who seemed surprised that I spoke their language.

Transitioning from the plane to our next mode of transport, an old Russian troop carrier, took nearly as long as our flight from China, and both Viper and Wasp were ready to strangle someone by the time we finally got moving.

Blade and Viper took the seats in the truck's front cabin, and the rest of us climbed into the back with our gear. It was just my luck that Razor sat across from me. I would have a front-row seat to his stunning blue eyes for hours and hours. Maybe this was my torture for what I'd done to him.

The seats in the back of the truck were as hard as timber, and every bump on the pockmarked road reverberated up my spine. And we were still on bitumen. Once we left the sealed road, our seats were going to be the definition of hell.

We hit a bump that launched all of us airborne.

“Fucking hell.” Jet shook his head. “How long is this trip going to be?”

“Too long.” Ghost clutched onto a bar overhead, lifting her butt off the seat.

“I wonder if this was the road Chui’s grandfather traveled along all those years ago?” Cobra said.

“How certain are you that Chui’s grandfather stole the gold?” Jet asked.

“Hundred percent.” For Jet and Razor’s sakes, Cobra detailed Yasmin’s father’s connection to the gold, and what we’d learned from his journal.

Every time I looked at Razor, he snapped his gaze away as if just looking at me hurt. It probably did. What I’d done to him was cruel, but it had been necessary. If I could turn back the clock, I would never have put myself in that position in the first place.

The sooner this mission was over, the better.

“Will you look at this place, sheesh.” Wasp scowled.

Our view out the back of our truck was over dozens of ramshackle huts and narrow dirt streets that wove between them. Rusted roofs tilted at precarious angles, and the tin homes were so small they looked more like garden sheds. There were no trees or grass, and beyond the village, the mountains loomed like white-capped monsters about to stomp on the town.

“What did you expect?” I shook my head. “Kyrgyzstan is the second poorest county in central Asia. More than a quarter of the population live below the poverty line.”

“They do it tough, huh?” Ghost said.

“More than tough. Add in their extreme weather, and it’s a wonder anyone can live here,” I said. “Then again, they were born into this life, so they don’t know any different.”

Something crossed over Razor’s eyes, but it vanished in an instant.

“I wouldn’t live in this dump for nothing,” Jet said.

During my tours of duty, I’d met many people who lived in truly sad situations. Their governments were too corrupt to care about their poor conditions, and every day was a battle to survive. And yet, I’d met many wonderful locals who still offered the food off their own plates, and somehow, they still knew how to smile.

“I couldn’t stand the weather. I hate the cold.” Wasp shuddered like an icy breeze curled up his back.

“Me neither. And in these tin shacks, it’s a wonder they survive,” Ghost said.

“We can’t help where we were born,” Razor said.

“That’s right,” I said. “This region used to be part of the silk road and people have managed to survive here for over twelve hundred years.”

Wasp grunted. “Crazy bastards.”

The road changed from bitumen to dirt, and the potholes got bigger. Blade swerved all over the place, dodging around giant divots and scrawny dogs.

Eventually, the scenery changed to barren vast plains of jagged rocks with a snow-capped mountain backdrop.

It seemed like forever before Blade pulled to a stop.

“Are we here?” Wasp groaned as he stood.

“I doubt it,” I said.

The front doors banged shut and Blade appeared at the rear of the truck. “Quick pit-stop, guys. Stretch your legs. Take a piss. Get something to eat.”

Wasp jumped out first and offered his hand to help Ghost and me down. My back creaked as I stood upright, and I twisted side to side, trying to loosen stiff muscles.

The small building on the side of the road had a rusted corrugated iron roof, and a faded ‘Coca Cola’ sign painted on the timber siding.

As I held back, taking in the scenery, the men pushed through the cloth doorway and disappeared inside. Moments later, Wasp stepped back outside holding a dinner-plate-sized circular loaf of bread with golden scalloped edges.

“Check this out.” His eyes glowed as he bit into the crunchy crust. “Oh yeah, that’s fucking good.”

I chuckled. That was an example of why I would love to travel, and not just in a military capacity. Behind every door was an adventure.

All the men came out of the shop with the same treat, and as I headed inside, Ghost emerged from a doorway at the back.

“Toilet is decent,” she said.

“Cool, thanks.” I headed through the doorway, passing a wooden counter loaded with six high stacks of the circular loaves of bread that the men had bought.

“Hey, Hawk, can you ask her what those are?” Ghost pointed at the half-moon-shaped pastries on a thick clay plate atop a grill over an open fire at the back of the shop.

Smiling at the tiny woman on the other side of the counter, I asked the question. She smiled back, and as she told me what they were, her tongue poked between her missing front teeth. The wrinkles around her eyes and lips were plentiful and deep, and it would be easy to assume she was a hundred years old. But the harsh climate and poor health conditions of the region meant she could just as likely be fifty.

I thanked her and redescribed the treat for Ghost. “They are samsa. Like Indian samosas. These ones are stuffed with onion and potato.”

Ghost’s eyes lit up. “Yum. Can I have two, please?”

After I relayed the request, and ordered another three samsas for myself, I went to the restroom.

Ghost waited for me, and we exited the building together. The men were leaning against the truck, and Viper and Wasp had already finished their circular bread.

“Hey, what are those?” Wasp leaned in to sniff my food.

“Pastry stuffed with onion and potato.”

His jaw dropped. “Damn, I didn’t see them.”

“Here.” I gave him mine. “Anyone else want them?”

They all agreed, and I returned inside thinking the woman would be thrilled to sell all her food. She was talking with a man as I entered the shop, but he disappeared behind a patterned rug door the second he saw me. His reaction had my hackles rising.

But when the woman smiled at me, I told myself to relax and purchased all the warmed samsas.

Her beaming smile grew bigger as she transferred the nine steaming pastries onto a roughly cut strip of cardboard and handed them to me. I paid her with a generous tip, and she thanked me over and over as I exited out the door.

Wasp reached for a pastry.

“Careful, they’re hot,” I said.

Despite my warning, he bit into it, and gasping, he fanned his mouth.

Ghost slapped his arm. “You’re an impatient bastard.”

“That’s fucking good.” Wasp took another bite.

As I waited for mine to cool down, I studied the dirt road ahead. “How much longer before we get to the lake?”

Blade scrunched his nose. “At least a couple more hours.”

“Damn, it’s mighty uncomfortable back there.” Razor pressed his hand to his lower back and turned sideways.

“Thought you’d be used to riding rough, cowboy?” Ghost wriggled her delicate eyebrows.

“I’d take a wild brumby over the seats in the back of that thing any day.” Even Razor’s voice was sexy.

“Righty ho, you bunch of pussies, saddle up.” Blade thumped Razor’s shoulder.

We climbed back into the troop carrier and set off again. Just before the shop disappeared from view, I thought I saw a

man on a horse galloping away. I squinted into the dust cloud mushrooming behind us but couldn't confirm what I'd seen.

But what I could see was that the shop was in the middle of nowhere. And yet, she'd had enough food to feed many mouths, suggesting that this road was used frequently, although it had been a bloody long time since I'd last seen another vehicle.

Blade dropped the truck into a lower gear, and we lumbered up a steep incline. The five of us in the back had stopped chatting ages ago, probably because we were all clenching our jaws and fighting the constant jolts to our bodies. As the truck groaned its protest up the hill, the view of the mountains was equal parts rugged and beautiful.

"Fuck me." Wasp snarled. "This brings back memories I've been tryin' to forget."

I nodded, and as I studied the jagged mountains we'd once been forced to scramble over, my thoughts tumbled back three years to our mission in these ranges that went horribly wrong. We were sent here to rescue an American soldier and two DEA agents. Instead, someone leaked details about our retrieval mission to the enemy which resulted in a plan to have us sacrificed.

We were just lucky to have the best sniper in the world on our team ... Ghost. She'd shot down the enemy chopper, and inside we'd found a note with an intended speech announcing that our deaths were to be telecast live. The note proved that the bastards who'd been shooting at us knew who we were, and where to find us.

We never found out who leaked our intel or why they wanted us slaughtered.

And neither the American soldier, nor the two DEA agents had ever been found.

I would never stop chasing the bastard who had tried to kill me and my team, but those poor missing people ... their families must have given up hope of even finding their bodies.

The truck slammed through a massive pothole and as we all groaned, despite the low-pitched screech of the engine, Blade's apology reached us from the front cabin. Not that it helped. My butt was certain to have bruises come this time tomorrow. During our army days, treks like this were common. Maybe we'd gone soft.

Our descent down the other side of the hill was even worse than the trip up, and I braced my hands on the seat to lift my butt off the rock-hard cushion.

The steep descent leveled out, and Ghost pointed out the back. "Hey! Is that our lake?"

"I fuckin' hope so. I'm sick of this bullshit," Wasp said.

"And me." Ghost nodded. "I won't be able to sit for a week."

"I'll massage your butt for you." Jet wiggled his brows.

Ghost flashed the bird at him, and Razor scowled at his mate. "Don't go there, buddy."

Jet leveled his gaze at Razor and raised his eyebrows. Something crossed between them that I couldn't read, but they were like two gorillas beating their chests, showing each other who was boss.

I rolled my eyes at Ghost, and she mouthed, 'wanker'.

Stifling a giggle, I turned my attention to the lake and my heart sank. "Bloody hell. The lake is iced over."

"Son of a bitch," Wasp said.

"I wasn't expecting that." Cobra shook his head.

The road that ran parallel to the lake skirted so close to the water, that I imagined many vehicles had slipped off the road and vanished forever. And if the surrounding mountains had a massive snowmelt causing the water to rise by just one foot, the road would go under.

Blade slowed the truck to drive around a corner. Out the back, I studied an enormous boulder that the road curved around. The boulder was as big as a dump truck, and it would

have done some serious damage as it had rolled down the mountain.

As Blade continued along the narrow road, there didn't seem to be anywhere to pull over. If another vehicle came along, there was no way to get past our truck and one of the vehicles would have to reverse out.

The truck stopped, and we all jumped out and stood on the edge of the road.

Around the lake, mountains loomed. Each had a thick layer of snow at the top. In three- or four-weeks' time, this whole place could be covered in snow, and possibly inaccessible by vehicle.

Not for the first time, I wondered both why Chui's grandfather and his friends chose this route across Europe, and why they had stopped the truck here. But now that I was standing on the lake, I had another unanswerable question: why didn't they walk along the road to escape, rather than try and hike over the mountains?

Something major must have happened to trigger that perilous decision.

Wasp gripped Ghost's shoulder with his enormous hand. "Glad it's you going into that freezing water and not me."

She grinned at him. "You big pussy."

"Do you reckon this is the spot, Cobra?" Blade asked.

Cobra shrugged. "Google Maps only gives us a rough guide. And there's nothing that stands out in the images to help us pinpoint where the trucks submerged location is along this road." He studied the ice. "I certainly can't see a truck in there, can you?"

We all shook our heads.

"It could be ten feet away from us under that ice," Cobra said. "No wonder it hasn't been discovered in over eighty years."

He peered along the road that skirted the lake and stretched ahead of us like a giant anaconda. "I can't even see an obvious

place where someone would stop a truck.”

I pointed at the sharp incline behind us on the other side of the road. “Do you really think they climbed up that?”

Everyone turned to the mountain that rose up from the road, steep and as rugged as all hell. Tilting my head back to look up the mountain, I peered at the snow-capped peak. The vertical face was extreme and climbing that would be grueling. Was Chui’s grandfather and his friends dressed to climb a mountain? I doubted it, especially as two of them died trying. And they each attempted to carry over a hundred and sixty pounds of gold with them.

It didn’t make sense and I had a terrible feeling we were missing a critical point.

“It was the end of the war,” Cobra said. “Maybe they heard there were troops coming this way, so they had no choice but to dump the truck and climb up that. Who knows?”

“Maybe they ran out of petrol,” Ghost suggested.

“Damn. That would have sucked,” Wasp said.

“It would explain why they made such a dumb decision,” Ghost said.

“Look. We know two things.” Blade raised a finger. “One. Somewhere in this lake is a rectangular shape that we assume is the truck. And two, a gold bar was found in these mountains. So, Hawk and Ghost, are you ready to make like a popsicle?”

“Hell yeah.” Ghost rubbed her hands together and did an excited jig with her feet.

I turned toward the icy lake.

I’d done dozens of dives, but never in water that cold.

Yet for some inexplicable reason, I had a feeling that ice was the least of our worries.

Chapter Nine

HAWK



Cobra fired up his computer to pull up the Google Map of this lake again, and as Razor and Blade helped Ghost and me get our scuba gear from the back of the truck, Wasp, Viper, and Jet hacked at the ice with axes like a bunch of competing Neanderthals.

By the time we had our tanks connected to our vests and ready to put on, they'd cut a section of ice away that was big enough to drive my car into.

"How thick is the ice?" Cobra asked from the rock he'd claimed as a seat at the edge of the road.

"About two or three inches thick." Wasp tossed a slab of ice onto the frozen lake, and it skidded about three feet along the surface.

"Hmmm." Mumbling, Cobra typed something into the computer on his lap.

"What, Cobra?" I asked. "Spit it out."

"Well ..." He scrunched his nose. "According to this, two-inch thick ice is not thick enough to walk on."

"We're not walking on it, numbnuts. They're diving under it." Wasp pulled a face like Cobra was a complete fool.

"Okay, numbnuts." Cobra wagged his head at Wasp. "And when they find the gold, how do you propose we get it up from the bottom of the lake?"

Wasp clutched his temples and turned to the ice. "Ah, for fuck's sake. You can't be serious!"

“I’m deadly serious. We can’t walk out to the submerged truck location. If you put too much weight on that surface, you’ll be in that water freezing your balls off within seconds.” Cobra shrugged and turned his gaze to me. “Any thoughts?”

I zipped into my wetsuit. “Let’s see if we can find that truck first.”

Wasp tossed his ax aside. “Great plan. And while you’re down there, we’ll figure out how to get our fortune up here.”

“You guys are going to love me.” Grinning, Ghost tugged on her gloves. “I packed the airbags, remember? So at least we’ll be able to use them to raise the gold to the surface.”

“Fuck yeah!” Wasp high-fived Ghost.

I wanted to tell him to keep his damn noise down, but I had no idea why. We hadn’t seen anyone or any sign of civilization since that small shop on the side of the road several hours ago.

“We’ll dig them airbags out while you guys dive. ’Cause I just know we’re gonna need ’em.” Wasp smacked the side of the Russian troop carrier, and the metallic sound seemed to bounce off the ice and rocks around us.

With each piece of gear I pulled on, I couldn’t shake the feeling that trouble was on the way. It wasn’t like me to have unfounded negativity, but the thought was a stain on my mind, and I couldn’t erase it.

Unlike me, Ghost wasn’t showing any signs of trepidation. She was laughing and joking like us girls were prepping for a shopping spree, rather than a dive that could freeze our tits off.

Neither of us had dived in water with an icy top layer before. I just hoped our extra thick wetsuits, hoods, booties, and gloves were enough to maintain our body temperatures. Or we had no hope of finding that truck, let alone the gold that may or may not be inside.

Blade helped Ghost load on her heavy tank.

Razor reached for my gear. “Ready?”

“Hang on.” I tugged my ponytail into the back of my wetsuit and pulled the zipper up to my chin. Then I wriggled my hood into position. The thick neoprene was like an octopus strangling my brain. I nodded at Razor. “Ready.”

His eyes searched mine, maybe questioning if I really was ready to jump into an icy lake. It was like he was searching into my soul. I hoped not. I’d had a cocktail of confusion and desire swirling around my brain since Razor had stepped into my comfort zone.

When I leaned forward, bracing for the weight of the tank, Razor lifted it onto my back, and I fed my arms into the integrated buoyancy vest. He came to my front, and I tried not to breathe in the same space as him as he clipped my gear into position.

Damn, he smells good.

With my dive equipment in position, Razor stepped back. “You good?”

“Yep. You ready, Ghost?” I raised my gloved hand.

Ghost and I did a high-five.

“Let’s do this.” Ghost may have been tiny, but she was a machine. She clapped her gloved hands together. “Let’s go find us a fortune.”

“Hell, yes to that.” Wasp whooped.

Razor and Viper held my elbows as we shuffled backward to the edge of the lake where the men had chopped away the ice. Bracing for what I expected to be slippery mud beneath my fins, I stepped backward into the water. The ground dropped away steeply, and I flopped back, letting the weight of the tank splash into the water. I gasped as the freezing water attacked my face like thousands of needles.

As a shiver raced through my torso, I welcomed my body’s defense mechanism and tugged my mask onto my face. It took a couple of seconds to adjust to the cold and for my brain to kick into gear. Then, rolling onto my stomach, as crystal-clear water surrounded me, I peered into the lake beneath the ice.

“What do you see?” Wasp’s booming voice reached me, even through the water.

I popped my head up to glare at him. *Impatient bastard.*

Ghost looked at him too. “Holy wow! There’s a treasure chest right here.” She pointed at her feet and giggled.

“Very funny.” Wasp rolled his eyes.

“When we find something, you’ll be the first to know, okay?” I said.

“Well, stop fucking around and start searching.” Wasp let out a weak laugh.

After giving the *all-clear* to the men, Ghost and I sank beneath the surface. Sunlight danced through the frozen layer above us, casting muted beams that illuminated the underwater landscape. Delicate strands of algae clung to the ice above me and thousands of tiny bubbles in the ice shimmered like diamonds.

With my body silhouetted on the lake’s rocky bottom, exhilaration raced through my veins. I’d never been below ice before, and although my view was stunning, it was also a tad terrifying. Unlike my desk job at ASIO, this made me feel very much alive.

The surreal quiet was interrupted by my own breathing, Ghost’s bubbles, and the distant crackling of the blanket of ice. With the initial cold shock over, I focused on the bottom of the lake which was an entire field of rocks and nothing else. No plants. No fish. And no submerged truck.

As per our plan, Ghost and I swam in one direction beneath the ice as close to the surface as possible. After five minutes without any success, we took turns chopping away the ice with our dive knives to make a hole big enough for us to surface.

With the resistance of the water and our bulky gear, the ice was tougher to crack through than I anticipated. It was exhausting work and at this rate, we would be out of air before we’d even scoured a small section of the lake. We pulled away a chunk of ice big enough for both of us to squeeze through

and I popped above the surface first, spat out my regulator, and searched for land to orientate myself. The men stood on the edge of the lake about forty yards away.

Ghost joined me. “Jeez, that ice was hard to chop through.”

“Agreed. We’ll need to factor that into our dive time.”

“Have you found it?” Wasp’s question bounced to us across the ice.

“No,” Ghost yelled back to him.

“Let’s go that way.” I made a show of pointing to our right for the benefit of the men.

“Okey dokey.” She put her regulator back in and sank below the surface.

I joined her, and swimming side by side, we glided beneath the ice, scanning the lake, which, fortunately was both shallow and crystal clear.

A dark shadow emerged in the distance. I tapped Ghost’s arm and pointed.

She gave me a thumbs-up and as my heartbeat quickened with both amazement and excitement, we swam toward the anomaly. Like an act in a magic show, the truck materialized.

The truck was on its side with its wheels facing toward the upward angle of the slope. Every exposed surface was a mottled mix of rust and algae, and the color blended in perfectly with the rocks around it.

Ghost clapped her hands and as we neared, I checked my dive computer. The truck was at a depth of twenty-seven feet below the surface. If the water hadn’t been so clear, it may never have been seen by that satellite image.

I couldn’t believe our luck.

Then again, maybe somebody else had found it, and we were about to open an empty shell. We swam to the rear double doors and my breath hitched.

A giant padlock sealed the doors shut. *Holy shit. Does that mean the contents are still in there? Are we really about to find a fortune?*

Ghost tried to jiggle the padlock, but it was corroded in position and didn't budge.

We would need a big bolt cutter to get through that rusted metal.

We swam to the truck's cabin, and working together, we lifted open the door. Everything that had been inside had tumbled over to the passenger side when the truck toppled. A notebook with a rusted spiral at the top was in a teepee position against the opposite door.

I pointed at it.

As Ghost was smaller than me, she swam into the truck. But when she picked up the notebook, it disintegrated, leaving just the spiral spine.

Pity. I would have loved to have read what was on those ancient pages.

Swirling away the floating debris, Ghost reversed out of the cabin.

We shut the door and she pulled me in for a hug. I missed her hugs. Ghost and I became good friends during our military tours overseas, but it was my fault that we'd drifted apart. An unexpected wave of sadness washed through me.

I didn't think I needed friends, but maybe I did.

She released me and did a little jig with her hands. I copied her move, feeling both a little stupid and wildly happy.

Above us, the white carpet of ice stretched in every direction.

I indicated up, and at the surface, as Ghost hacked into the ice with her dive knife, I removed the safety sausage from my vest. Using the air from my regulator, I filled the long narrow balloon that expanded like an oversized lightsaber.

Once fully inflated, I rested the giant sausage against the icy surface and took over hacking into the ice. Between us, we had four turns before we could pull away a chunk of ice about the size of two garbage can lids. We pushed through the surface and tugged our masks to our necks.

“Woohoo!” Ghost cheered, and I waved the giant orange sausage balloon.

All the men standing on the side of the lake cheered and waved.

They were at least two hundred yards from our position, yet their beaming smiles were enormous as they ran along the road toward us.

“That padlock is a bloody good sign,” Ghost said. “With a bit of luck, the contents haven’t been ransacked.”

“Agreed. It’s hard to believe nobody else found this before us.”

“Yep. But it’s about time we had some luck, don’t you think?” Beaming, she waved at the men again and cheered.

“You’re not kidding,” I said, although I couldn’t shake the feeling this was all too easy, and I hated that my mind went straight to a negative thought.

“This is so exciting. I wish Zac was here with me.” Her eyes glistened.

A pang of jealousy washed through me as it hit home that I didn’t have someone special to share this with. Except these guys. I would do anything for them.

As Ghost wobbled the giant orange safety sausage, Blade drove the truck along the road and stopped parallel to where we were, about sixty yards away.

“Come on, let’s get over there and tell them what we found,” I said.

Leaving the safety sausage bobbing on the surface like a giant orange finger, we put in our breathers and ducked beneath the ice again.

As I swam toward the shoreline, the magnitude of this discovery had my mind bouncing all over the place, from Chui's grandfather and what he was thinking when they drove that truck into the lake, to Chui and what he was thinking when he died with the gold bar in his hands.

Had we really just found a fortune that people had been trying to locate for over eighty years?

The men had carved a hole in the ice for us near the edge and when the water was shallow enough, we removed our fins and stood.

"We found the truck," Ghost and I said together.

"Was the gold there?" Wasp's eyes just about popped out of his head.

"The truck is locked," I said as we tossed our fins to the men. We unclipped out of our heavy dive vests and tanks, and the men dragged them ashore.

"It's locked! Woohoo!" Wasp's cheer seemed to echo for miles.

Ghost stepped onto dry ground, and I followed her, walking in my rubber booties over the rocky surface.

"You know what that lock means?" Wasp picked up Ghost and twirled her around.

"The gold must still be inside," Wasp and Viper said at exactly the same time, and we all burst out laughing.

Blade clapped my back. "Good work."

"Thanks," I said with a smile.

Razor didn't stop staring at me and although I told myself to ignore him, my damn body was doing the opposite.

Ghost and I explained the position of the truck and how it looked.

"I hope you have big bolt cutters in our gear," I said, hoping that Ghost or I had the strength to cut through that thick metal.

“Nope, but I did bring a hacksaw.” Viper charged toward the back of our troop carrier.

It was interesting that none of the men could scuba dive, and it probably pissed off a couple of them that they couldn't help. Especially Jet. I'd been in his company for just forty-eight hours and yet I could already recall why he used to annoy me so much. He had real trouble accepting me as his superior back then. He still didn't like it now.

It wasn't the first time I'd had to deal with male chauvinistic views, and it wouldn't be my last.

As Viper rummaged through our bags in the back of the truck, Razor handed me a hot tea that he'd made using the small gas stove we'd brought with us. “Here, this will warm you up.”

“Thanks.” A question lingered in his eyes, and as I silently begged him not to ask, I wrapped my gloved hands around the tin cup.

Razor had matured in the last three years. Back when we'd been together, he had been a military man. Now he was ex-soldier, all cowboy, and somehow even sexier than he'd been three years ago.

Nobody else probably noticed the changes in him. But I did. I knew every inch of Xander Devlyn's six-foot-nine body.

He'd filled out across his chest and shoulders, brandishing a muscular physique that was honed by daily physical labor, not hours in a gym. His square jaw sported beard stubble that was sexy perfection. Long lashes surrounded his eyes that were the color of a spring morning sky. And his dusty-rose colored lips ... oh, man, the things he could do with those lips.

My insides tingled as I pictured him naked, and I swallowed boiling hot tea, scalding my throat. I winced at the pain, but it was the jolt I needed.

What the hell am I thinking?

A tiny smile curled across Razor's mouth as if he knew the exact images that were cruising across my mind.

A heatwave blazed through me, and I was a second from having to tear out of my wetsuit when Viper jumped from the back of the troop carrier.

“Found it.” He raised the hacksaw like it was a mighty sword.

“Great. Let’s do this.” I put my tin cup onto the rocks next to the gas burner, desperate to cool down in that ice.

Ghost and I pulled our fins back on, and after the men helped us into our gear, we shuffled backward into the water again. After orientating myself with the bright orange sausage sticking out of the ice a hundred yards ahead, I attached my mask, put the regulator in my mouth, and ducked below the ice.

Side by side, we swam to the submerged truck and at the back door, Ghost took charge of the hacksaw. But the gusto she started with quickly dissipated as the ancient bolt proved to be much harder than I’d expected.

Just when I was about to offer to take over, the blade finally cut through the metal and released with a loud snap. As she wriggled the lock away from the door latch, I had to remind myself to breathe. This was history in the making.

Damn. We should have filmed this.

Together, we shifted our position to pull open the door which thankfully was the one that would fall to the ground. She nodded at me, and we pulled upward on the latches.

But the damn thing wouldn’t budge. Decades of corrosion had sealed it shut.

Ghost shifted to brace her feet on the other door, and I copied her move. She nodded at me again and yelled through her breather, “One. Two. Pull!”

Releasing guttural groans and bubbles of air, we pulled. Just when I thought we would need another plan, the door popped free and in slow motion fell back onto the rocky bottom, triggering a massive sediment cloud.

Fanning the residue away, I shone my dive light inside the rear of the truck. With Ghost beside me, we swam inside.

Everything the truck had contained when it tipped over had fallen to the lower side and over the years, the cardboard boxes had disintegrated to mush. But at the very back of the cargo hold were six plastic crates.

We swam toward them, and Ghost's squeal of joy echoed about the truck.

My breath caught in my throat as I blinked at the tumbled stacks of gold bars.

She wrapped me in a bear hug, and attempting to jump up and down, we released streams of bubbles as we cheered.

Holy shit. We just found a fortune in gold.

Wasp was going to wet his pants. All the men were.

I picked up a gold bar and turned it over, revealing the lion emblem embossed in the side.

Ghost pointed at the lion, gave me a thumbs up, and did that little jig of hers.

My heart skipped as I did the same little dance.

Carrying just one bar each, we swam to the surface. Ghost released a squeal of joy as she raised the gold bar.

As the men jumped and cheered, Ghost pulled me in for another hug. "I can't believe it."

"Me neither. Those gold bars have been in this lake for over eighty years."

"I know. It's a miracle we found it."

"Now we have to get the bars over there." I pointed at the shoreline. "It's going to be a slow haul with just two of us diving."

"Yep." She ran her hand over the gold bar like she was rubbing a magic lantern. "Thank God I packed the airbags."

"Agreed," I said. "Come on, let's show them before Wasp has a coronary."

We ducked below the ice and as we swam toward the shore with the precious gold hugged to our chests, I tried to calculate in my head how much the treasure was worth.

After I'd found that gold bar in Chui's yacht, I'd investigated its value. According to Google, it was worth just over eight hundred thousand dollars.

So, if Chui's grandfather and his friends had initially stolen one hundred bars, and then before they'd ditched the truck, they'd removed six bars each, that meant there could be eighty-two bars at the bottom of this lake.

My breath hitched. The gold was worth approximately sixty-five million dollars.

A lot of people would kill for a treasure of that value.

Did this find put a massive bullseye on our backs?

Chapter Ten

RAZOR



When Blade and the others had planned this mission to Kyrgyzstan, they'd covered every contingency—except ice over the lake. They knew it would be cold, and the divers prepared for that with their thick wet suits, and quality headgear and gloves. But no one had considered that the lake would be frozen over. And that was proving to be a massive headache.

Logistics was my specialty, and the reason Blade had hand-picked me to join his military team all those years ago. I was good at it too. But even if I had been in charge of planning our gear for this mission, I would never have considered an icy layer over the lake.

Most of us lived in north Queensland, Australia; frozen lakes weren't a thing in our neck of the woods.

The icy obstacle meant everything took much longer, and as the women dove under the ice, the rest of us kept an eye along the road that stretched the length of the lake. It was only a matter of time before a vehicle would come barreling toward us. The eight of us and our truck stood out like a dog's balls, and we looked as suspicious as a man wearing a hoodie in the middle of summer.

We attracted attention. We were foreigners in a land ravaged by centuries of war.

Us being here was not good.

“Fuck me, it's getting cold.” Viper blew onto his bare hands.

“It’s going to get darker too.” I peered toward the mountain on the opposite side of the lake. Now that the sun had dipped below the mountain behind us, the shadows were growing longer. The breeze had picked up, too, and was skipping across the ice and blasting us with frigid air that could freeze eyeballs.

While finding the gold in the lake had happened much quicker than I’d thought possible, extracting the heavy bars from the submerged truck was a time-squeeze nightmare. The weight of the gold meant the airbags could only raise five bars each time. Thankfully, we had two airbags.

Hawk and Ghost packed five gold bars into two carry bags that were then hooked onto the two airbags that they filled from their tanks. With them guiding the balloons beneath the ice, us men hauled the fortune toward the shore using long ropes we’d attached to the airbags.

But while we were lucky to transport ten bars at a time, it was exhausting for the divers and taking precious time and air.

And we’d only brought six scuba tanks with us.

It had been four hours since the truck had been found and yet we’d only recovered forty-two bars so far.

With Hawk and Ghost submerged beneath the lake again, I pictured Hawk working as fast as she could to move the bars from the truck to the carry bags. Although she would never admit her exhaustion, I saw it in her eyes. She was getting to the end of her energy reserves. And that was dangerous.

I turned to Blade. His jaw was clamped, and his steely gaze was fixed on the rope in his hands that fed into the hole in the ice. His expression confirmed he was as worried as I was.

“Blade, we’re going to need a plan for the night,” I said. “We can’t stay here.”

“I’m not leaving here until we get it all.” Viper shot me a look that could start a bar fight, which I’d heard he was a fan of.

The rope in Blade's hands tugged, confirming the next load was ready.

"Here we go, boys," Wasp said. "Another serving of gold coming up." He hadn't stopped grinning since we'd found the submerged truck.

In pairs, we gathered the ropes that were tied to the lift bags beneath the ice.

"Ready?" Blade nodded at me.

"Ready." I gripped the rope in my gloved hands.

"Pull," Blade said.

Slow and steady, we hauled two hundred and seventy-four pounds of gold toward us. A burst of bubbles erupted from the water and Hawk appeared at the surface.

Wasp and Viper raced forward, unclipped one carry bag each, and dragged them onto dry land. Wasp yanked open the zipper on the dripping bag, grinning like he had no idea what would be inside.

Water glistened on Hawk's thick wetsuit hood as she undid the clips on her buoyancy vest and let it and the tank splash into the water.

I ran into the water to help her.

As she wiped her face, her blue-tinged lips quivered.

"Jesus, Aria. You're freezing." I grabbed her arm, holding her steady.

Ghost dumped her scuba gear too, confirming she also needed a break.

"Blade, give us a hand," I yelled, clutching Ghost's arm.

Blade, Cobra, and Jet all splashed into the water to help Ghost and grab the dive gear.

Hawk's teeth chattered as I helped her onto the road on unsteady legs.

As I fixed my gaze on her, she peeled off her wetsuit hood, swept a slip of hair behind her ear and met my gaze. Clenching

her jaw, she shook her head at me, maybe sensing what I was about to say.

I raised my chin. I was not backing down.

When Ghost removed her hood and shuddered with the cold breeze, I said, “We need to stop for the day.”

“What?” Wasp jerked back. “No way. There’s still—”

“Look at Hawk and Ghost.” I nodded at the women. “They’re freezing and can’t do any more dives.”

Wasp leveled his gaze at me, and I met him square on.

“I’m fine.” Hawk folded her arms over her chest, but she couldn’t stop her chin shivering, nor the blue tinge to her lips.

“No, you’re not.” I could practically see the war raging in her mind.

She rubbed her arms. “I’m okay.”

“Aria, your lips are blue. If your body temp drops too low —”

“We’ll have a quick rest,” she said. Rage simmered in her eyes.

“Let’s have a cup of tea and a bite to eat.” Ghost curled her hand over Hawk’s shoulder. “Then maybe we’ll be okay to dive again.”

She winked at me, and I nodded.

“We still have a few more hours of light.” Blade tapped Wasp’s back. “Maybe we can do one more load, but like it or not, we’re not going to finish today.”

Wasp groaned and squinted at the top of the mountain. “Son of a bitch. I was hoping to get out of this place. It’s giving me the fucking creeps.”

“Me too,” Cobra said. “I never thought I’d be back here.”

As Wasp and Viper loaded the latest haul of gold into our truck with the rest, and the women changed out of their wet gear and wrapped blankets around themselves, I made them cups of tea with the water I’d already boiled.

I handed a cup of warm tea to Hawk. “Are you okay?”

“Yep. I’m fine.” She clenched her jaw, but her blue lips confirmed she was anything but fine.

Hawk had always been stubborn. She’d been raised by a man who ran everything with military precision, and being weak was never in her equation. I’d been fortunate to see the softer side to her ... until she forced that side away and pretended it didn’t exist.

When Viper and Wasp joined us again, we stood in a circle with our breaths clouding from our lips and our hands wrapped around our tin cups.

“Fuck, it’s cold.” Wasp shuddered.

“Toughen up, princess.” Ghost jostled from one foot to the other. “You need to keep moving.”

As Wasp stamped his feet, Viper put his empty cup down and tucked his hands under his armpits.

Hawk glanced at me, and a lopsided smile crossed her lips. I had the feeling she wanted to say something but couldn’t. When we’d been together, I’d had that impression from her often and I always hated that she didn’t fully open up to me.

Her gaze darted over Blade’s head to something on the mountain, and she frowned.

I followed her gaze, studying the shadows.

“Shit,” Hawk said. “Keep your cool. We’ve got company.”

“How many?” Blade said without turning around to see what she was looking at.

“I see two. They’re crouching down, but—”

A bullet pinged into the dirt to the right of us.

“Fuck!” I grabbed Hawk’s shoulders as we all darted behind the truck.

“Mother fuckers!” Wasp banged his fist into the truck’s door. “If they’re trying to take my gold, I’ll—”

“Shut up, Wasp!” Blade shot him a fierce glare.

Wasp inched to the front of the truck to peer around. Viper and Jet did the same at the back of the truck.

“I don’t see anyone,” Wasp hissed.

“Halfway up the mountain, to the right a bit.” Hawk tugged the blanket tighter around her shoulders.

“You only saw two?” Blade asked her.

“Yes, but there could be more. They were hard to see with all those shadows.” She turned to Ghost. “We need you on your rifle.”

“Roger that. My weapon is in the back of the truck.”

Hawk yanked her wet hair back from her face, and I tried not to focus on the blue tinge to her flesh, or her quivering lip, but it was impossible. The cold breeze would be attacking her wet scalp like a thousand needles.

“You see them?” Hawk asked.

“No,” Viper and Wasp said at the same time.

A bullet punched through the truck’s front windshield and slammed into the driver’s seat.

Flinching, we all ducked.

“Son of a bitch!” Viper punched the side of the truck.

“Help me get my rifle.” Dropping her blanket, Ghost shuffled to the back of the truck and Viper followed her.

“You lift me in.” Ghost nodded at Viper. “Ready?”

“Go.” Viper cupped his hands.

Ghost sprinted at him, and like a gymnastic duo, Viper grabbed her foot, hoisted her into the truck, and followed her in.

I turned my gaze to Blade. “I knew this wasn’t going to be easy.”

Blade shook his head, but his expression confirmed he’d had the same feelings.

“What do we do?” I asked.

“Ghost will take those fucker’s out, then—”

A tire exploded on the other side of the truck.

“Fuck.” Blade stormed to the front of the truck, and I followed him.

Studying the mountain, I searched for movement.

“Tell me we have a spare tire,” I said.

“We do, but only one.” The vein along Blade’s temple bulged blue.

“Coming out,” Viper called. “Grab the rifle.”

I ran to the back of the truck. As I grabbed Ghost’s sniper rifle, another tire exploded.

“Fuck!” Ducking for cover, I raced around to the side.

Viper and Ghost followed me, and the eight of us huddled together behind the truck.

“Anyone seen him?” Hawk asked.

We all shook our heads.

Ghost pulled her long, wet hair into a ponytail and grabbed her rifle. “I’ll find them.”

A bullet punched into the other side of the truck, and the sound ricocheted around us.

“They’re very controlled,” Hawk said.

“Yeah, just like the bastards who’d chased us over these hills last time,” I said.

Blade clamped his jaw like he was struggling to hold back the same thoughts.

Ghost lay on her stomach toward the front of the truck and set up the tripod on her rifle. A rock exploded a foot away from her head.

“Son of a bitch,” she hissed.

Another bullet punched through the front windshield, and the glass imploded inward, showering the seats with a million shards of glass.

“Fucking hell. Get him, Ghost!” Wasp yelled.

“I can’t see him. Where is he?” She peered through her scope.

I searched across the hood of the truck, studying the mountain of black rocks.

“Come out, you bastard,” I whispered.

Movement shifted a third of the way up the mountain.

Ghost’s rifle boomed, and a man flew backward in a spray of blood.

Damn, she’s good.

A second man appeared as a flash of brown and vanished just as quickly.

“Where’d he go?” Ghost asked.

“I don’t know.” I squinted at the spot, waiting for him to show himself.

“One tango is down,” Ghost said. Her skills were extraordinary. Just like the rest of us. Elite soldiers at the top of our game. At least we *were* until it all went to shit.

I hoped like hell we weren’t about to have a repeat of that horror.

But I had a feeling we were.

There could be fifty men hiding amongst those rocks. Just like our battle all those years ago. The sneaky bastards had known the terrain better than we did, and every shot they’d fired seemed to come out of nowhere.

It was a couple of minutes before I turned to Blade and said, “I think he’s gone underground.”

“Or gone to get help,” Hawk said.

Blade thumped the side of the truck. “Fuck. You could be right.”

“We need to get out of here,” Hawk said.

“Like fuck we are.” Wasp clenched his fists. “I ain’t leaving the truck. Not with all that gold in there.”

“Calm the fuck down, Wasp.” Blade glared at him until Wasp shuddered like a snake had crawled up his ass.

Blade nodded at Hawk, then me. “We need to split up. Viper, Wasp, Cobra, and I will guard the truck. You four, get up there and see if you can flush out that other bastard.”

“Roger that. We need our gear.” Hawk dropped the blanket and marched to the rear of the truck.

“I’ll cover you,” Ghost said, peering through her rifle scope.

I squeezed Jet’s shoulder. “You remember how to shoot, right?”

Jet groaned. “I should’ve known this wasn’t going to be as easy as you said.”

“Stop your moaning.” I thumped his arm. “You love it.”

With Ghost covering us, we climbed into the back of the troop carrier. As the men tugged on tactical gear, Hawk pulled her wet hair into a ponytail. Tiny goosebumps covered her glorious olive flesh. I wanted to wrap my arms around her and share my warmth—and kick myself for being a fucking fool.

A bullet punched into the side of the truck.

We all dove for the ground.

“Fuck me.” Wasp’s eyes flared. That bullet had missed him by inches and light streamed in through the hole in the side.

“Get your gear and get out,” Blade said.

I grabbed Ghost’s other rifle, and we jumped out. Gathered behind the truck, we tugged on the rest of our gear and checked our weapons were locked and loaded.

“The radios are programmed and ready to go,” Cobra said, “I tested them when we landed here.”

His expression, though, showed his doubt.

I didn't blame him. Last time we were here, our comms were sabotaged.

Blade clutched my shoulder. "We'll cover you guys. Hawk has the lead. Watch your six and stick together."

"Roger that." I gripped my weapon and followed Hawk to the rear of the truck.

She peered around the corner toward the mountain that had even more shadows than it did ten minutes ago. "Clear. Let's go." She took off.

Sprinting behind her, we crossed the dirt road, aiming for a rock about the size of a small car. Ghost followed me, and Jet was at the rear.

Once we were together, I tightened the clip on my helmet and climbed up the rocks behind Hawk. Our boots crunched on the loose rocks, but other than that, an eerie silence fell over us like the snow covering the top of the mountain absorbed all sounds.

Every couple of minutes, I glanced upward, checking that I was heading toward where we'd seen the man Ghost had shot. We dodged around massive rocks and slipped on loose gravel between them, every step tested our balance and agility.

My heart rate elevated a few notches with the steep climb, reminding me that I wasn't as fit as I used to be. In my army days, I did a fierce workout nearly every day. Since leaving the army, working on the ranch was my exercise. Clearly, it wasn't enough.

Hawk was ahead of me and made the steep hike look easy. Back then, she could easily outrun me. Nothing had probably changed there. Her nicely toned arms proved she kept herself fit. Her ass still looked mighty fine too.

Does she still do boxing?

Hating that I was even curious, I snapped my gaze away from her butt.

Dark red splatter over jagged rock marked the location of the body, and as I adjusted my direction toward him, I

searched our surroundings.

“Where did the other guy go?” Hawk whispered over her shoulder to me.

I shook my head. “Don’t know.”

Pausing in a shallow gully, we leaned against a massive rock that still had some heat in it from the sun. A weird silence engulfed us. On the farm there was no silence. There was always birds, insect noises, or Mom’s constant nattering. This was absolutely nothing.

Hawk nodded at me, and whispered, “Let Blade know we’re making our final push.”

“Roger that.”

I conveyed her message.

“We’ve got you. Watch your six.” Blade’s response confirmed our comms were working just fine.

“Razor and I will take the lead.” Hawk’s use of my codename somehow made this shit even more real. “You two cover our backs.”

She indicated to Ghost and Jet, and they nodded.

“Keep your heads down. Let’s go.” Hawk scrambled up the shoal and climbed over the top of the rock. I stayed right on her tail.

A couple of yards ahead, a body was slumped over a boulder. I didn’t need to check his pulse to confirm he was dead; the wound to his forehead was a demonstration of Ghost’s expert marksmanship. Panning our weapons side to side, we searched for the second man as we approached the body.

“Jesus, he’s barely an adult.” Ghost shook her head.

The man was on his back, with his eyes open, staring at the darkening sky. He had smooth skin, devoid of wrinkles, and a scraggy chin stubble that was barely a beard at all. He couldn’t be any older than twenty.

Hawk rested her hand on Ghost's wrist. "He shot at us first, okay? It was self-defense."

"Was it though?" Clenching her jaw, Ghost tapped her rifle.

She was right about that. Nobody was a match for her marksmanship skills.

"Why did he shoot at us?" Ghost's expression grew dark. It wasn't like her. Normally, she was able to separate her emotions from her work. Then again, it had been a while since we'd been on a mission together. Maybe civilian life had changed her. It had certainly changed me, and I wasn't sure if it was for the better.

"Check his pockets," Hawk said to me.

As they scanned our surroundings, I fished into the guy's well-worn jeans, but they were empty.

"Holy hell." Hawk held up the attacker's weapon. She turned it over, showing me the symbol on the side of the rifle.

Fuck. My stomach sank. The logo was a scorpion inside a circle. The Scorpion Industries logo that had been on our sabotaged equipment we'd been supplied on our last mission here.

"Bloody hell." Ghost's eyes grew wide. "That can't be a coincidence."

"But how did they know we were here?" I met Hawk's gaze.

The fear in her molasses eyes convinced me that she already knew the answer.

And it wasn't good.

Chapter Eleven

HAWK



I clutched the dead attacker's rifle in my trembling fingers and as I stared at the scorpion logo, my blood boiled. This proved the attack wasn't a random sniper who'd stumbled upon us. They knew who we were, and where we would be. And that meant someone in our team had leaked the intel of this mission.

The fear in Ghost's eyes intensified the grip on my chest.

Is she thinking the same?

With my heart pounding, I met Razor's gaze.

"What?" He tilted his head and his expression darkened.

I couldn't voice my thoughts. Not yet. I trusted him. Hell, I trusted every single one of them. We'd been through too much together not to.

But if one of them had screwed us over, it was going to crush me. It would crush all of us.

"Did he have anything in his pockets?" I asked.

Razor shook his head. "Nothing."

"We need to find that other guy." Ghost swept her gaze over the rocks around us. "We need answers."

We shouldn't be here. We had barely escaped these mountains alive last time.

I pulled my radio from my vest. "Hawk to Blade. Do you read? Over."

“Go ahead, Hawk.” Blade’s voice crackled through the radio.

“We got a situation. This bastard has a rifle with a Scorpion Industries logo on it. Over.”

“What the fuck!” Blade boomed.

Razor’s steely gaze showed his rage, and he was usually the king of staying frosty.

“What do you want us to do, Blade? Over.” I slotted the Scorpion Industries rifle over my shoulder. We needed it for evidence, although I wasn’t sure what the evidence was for yet.

“Come back down,” Blade said. “We need another plan.”

“Roger that.” I put my radio away and turned to Razor.

As he grazed his hand over his neatly trimmed beard, he squinted down at the troop carrier.

I followed his gaze. The Russian truck looked about the size of a Lego brick. It was a bloody long way down. I hadn’t realized we’d climbed so high.

“Hey, over there!” Jett pointed in the distance behind me.

I spun around but didn’t see any movement. “Where?”

“Over there.” He pointed up the incline. “I saw him.”

I gripped my assault rifle. “Quick! Let’s get him.”

“Wait.” Razor grabbed my arm. “It could be a trap.”

I yanked my arm free. “We have to get him.”

“I know, but let’s not go in half-cocked.” His eyes flared.

“He’s getting away.” I glared at Razor. After I’d wrongly declared my love to him, he had always tried to protect me. Too much so. I didn’t need protection.

He pulled out his radio. “Blade, we have sight on the tango. Going in pursuit.”

“Roger that,” Blade said. “Watch your backs. And, Razor, take him alive.”

“Yes, sir. Over.” He put his radio away.

“I have the lead.” Jet charged ahead, reminding me of all the times he’d disregarded my authority.

Bastard.

“Jet, we need to stick together,” I called after him.

Razor chased after Jet, and Ghost and I ran behind them.

The terrain required me to use my hands as well as my legs to climb over rocks that ranged from shoebox size to trash can size. Gripping my rifle at the same time as climbing was impossible. The rocks were rough, some had sharp edges, and there was absolutely no path.

I can't believe this is happening again.

If my father knew I was here, he'd have a coronary.

In planning this, I’d thought of everything. I was always organized. Fastidious. Skills that helped me rise through the ranks of my career. I got things done. Like us being here on this stupid mountain. While Zac had provided the necessary funds, it had taken some serious planning to get our gear together and the travel arrangements.

But I hadn’t anticipated a mole in our team. We were in the middle of nowhere. Not a single building for miles. Yet somehow, assholes who wanted us dead, knew we were here. It wasn’t a coincidence. Whoever he was, he had connections with the bastards at Scorpion Industries.

That put the fear of hell into me.

With Jet in the lead, we traipsed higher and tracked toward the right. He better have been following that bastard, and not simply guessing where he was going.

The air was thin, and each breath was like inhaling ice. I tried to imagine how Chui’s grandfather had scrambled over this mountain. At least we had winter clothing. Had he been prepared for the cold? We may never have the answers, and the critical question of why they stopped the truck on this section of road still chewed at my curiosity.

The snow-capped range extended as far as I could see and above us, the mountain loomed like a monster. If a sniper as good as Ghost was set up anywhere above us, or in the distant ranges, we were fucked.

We could have all died in these fucking mountains last time.

And here we were again, back for another suicide mission.

But they hadn't tried to kill us on the way up the mountain last time, they'd herded us to a designated spot where they'd wanted to make headlining news with our executions.

At a dumpster-sized boulder, there was a long drop over the other side. Jet and Razor slid down, and Razor turned to help me.

"Out of the way," I said, and slipped down by myself. As I shifted aside for Ghost, I scanned the area ahead. A crude path seemed to weave between the rocks. "Hey, is this a track?"

Jet nodded. "That's what I thought. Now we'll catch up to him."

He sprinted ahead, and clenching my jaw, I bit down my fury over him assuming the lead.

Continuing our formation, we followed behind him.

Razor glanced at me over his shoulder. "Keep a look out. There could be more than one man."

"Wow, I hadn't thought of that." I scowled at him.

I'm not a fucking idiot. Jesus, what's with men?

Even though the path was barely wide enough for a goat, we were able to move much faster.

"Why would they have a path up here?" Ghost said behind me.

"This area used to be part of the silk road, remember?" I said. "There's probably tracks like this threading all over these mountains."

“Do you think Chui’s grandfather knew about these, and that’s why they abandoned the truck where they did?” she asked.

I shrugged. “Who knows. They must’ve had a damn good reason to—”

“Hey, keep it down,” Jet called out louder than we were talking.

Asshole.

The elevation of the path continued upward, and its direction looked like it was heading toward the dip where the two mountains joined.

Another giant boulder filled the path ahead, but this time the track split into two around it. Jet raised his fist, halting us, and using hand signals he told us to wait there as he sprinted onto the right-hand path and disappeared.

I wanted to strangle him, but I directed my energy into scanning our rugged surroundings, searching for movement. There wasn’t any. Even the scattering of clouds were stationary.

Jet reappeared, shaking his head, and sprinted around the boulder and disappeared on the other track.

Razor rolled his eyes at me, and I had a feeling he understood my frustration. I had always held a higher rank than Razor, but that had never seemed to bother him. Until he didn’t understand why my career was so important to me, that was. I hated that I’d let my guard down with him. So stupid.

Shoving the bullshit aside, I unhooked my water bottle from my hip and took a sip. As I clipped my water bottle back on, Jet returned.

“There are a ton of goat tracks, but I couldn’t see any human footprints, and nothing looked fresh.” Jet shook his head. “I can’t even tell if he came this way.”

“What do we do?” Ghost swept a loose hair behind her ear as she met my gaze.

I turned toward the divided tracks. From our position, it was impossible to see where the tracks went. The entire scenery was jumbles of rocks. Not a blade of grass, or animal, or rubbish scrap anywhere.

“There he is.” Jet pointed forward.

“Where?” I couldn’t see any movement.

“He was there, I swear. Ghost, you come with me. You two, go that way.” Jet took off.

“Hey, stop. Jet. Wait.” I clenched my fists.

He vanished from view.

“Fucking bastard.” I spun to Ghost. “Ghost, go after him and relay your situation in five minutes.”

“Roger that.” She sprinted away.

“He’s an asshole.” I shook my head at Razor.

“He just wants to catch that guy. That’s all.” He shrugged.

“He could get himself killed doing rogue shit like that. Let’s go.” Clutching my rifle, I sprinted along the opposite path to Jet and Ghost. Razor’s boots crunching on the gravel confirmed he was right behind me.

On my left was sheer cliff face that rose up like a giant monolith and at the top, the overhang of snow jutted out as if the mountain was wearing a peaked cap. On my right, the slope continued into a massive gorge that went so far down I couldn’t see the bottom. Our path became narrower, and the climb steeper.

Where am I going? This is nuts.

Surely people didn’t use this track. Maybe it *was* made by goats.

“Hawk, do you read? Over.” Ghost’s voice crackled from my radio.

Stopping with my back against the rocks, I pulled my radio from my vest and shivered as a cool breeze swept down from

the snow-capped mountain and teased the back of my neck. “I read you. Any luck?”

“Negative. How about you?”

“No. Nothing here.” I checked my watch. “Give it five more minutes then turn around.”

“Okey dokey,” Ghost said. “Out.”

I glanced at Razor, and my breath hitched at how handsome he was. I hated that I even noticed. I wanted to scrub the images of his naked body from my memory, but they were there forever, etched into my brain like an intricate tattoo. Other than Kyle, the complete asshole who I worked with, I hadn’t slept with anyone since I’d broken up with Razor. I wished Razor was the only man. I could have lived with that. I cleared my throat. “You ready?”

He nodded. “Lead the way.”

Soon the path became too narrow. To continue, we would have to go sideways with our backs against the rocks. One slip, and we would tumble hundreds of feet to our deaths.

“This is stupid. Let’s stop.” I halted with my back against the frigid rock wall.

“But we still have a few more minutes.” Razor tilted his head, revealing that tiny scar high on his cheekbone that he’d gotten when Ghost had shot down the attack helicopter on these mountains. The explosion had sent shrapnel darting all over the place, but Razor was the only one in our team hurt in that blast. We were damn lucky about that.

“This track is too narrow and too dangerous. I doubt humans use it.”

Frowning, he peered ahead, maybe contemplating whether or not to refute me. “Hey, what’s that?”

Following his gaze, I squinted into the shadowy distance.

“You see it? I think it’s a bridge.” He pointed over my shoulder.

I searched the gorge. “I can’t see it.”

“There.” His arm threaded over my shoulder as he aimed with his finger. “At your two o’clock.”

Unable to see a bridge, I swept my gaze from the narrow path all the way up to the overhanging snow. If anyone was on this mountainside, they were damn good at hiding. Or maybe that *was* a bridge and they’d crossed to the other side.

“Okay, we’ll go a bit farther and see what it is.” I continued my shuffle along the narrow track.

With each step, the bridge ... if it could be called that, became more visible. The bridge was a series of ropes that stretched across the giant gorge with one thick rope at the base to walk along.

“Jesus, look at that thing.” Razor huffed out a breath behind me.

I groaned. “It’s probably a hundred years old.”

I studied the area over the other side, searching for a path leading away from the bridge but couldn’t see one.

The sinking sun silhouetted the mountain opposite, making it even harder to see anything other than shadows on the other side of the gorge.

We reached the bridge and stood at the edge to peer across.

“This is proof the path we’re on is used by humans,” Razor said.

“True. But do you think this is still used?” I pressed the toe of my boot onto the thick rope at the bottom, and the rope creaked under my weight.

“Hard to tell.” Razor pushed on the side ropes, and the whole bridge bounced up and down.

I squinted into the darkness over the other side. With the area covered in shadows, it was too hard to see anything, but on a far ridge a rectangular shape caught my eye.

I pointed at it. “Do you see that?”

He leaned toward me, and despite the cool air around us, his warmth washed over me. “Is that a hut?”

I eased back from him before I was graced with his glorious scent. Razor had somehow mastered the aroma of man; hot, sexy man.

I wanted to slap myself. *Focus, Aria.*

I studied the block-like shadow in the distance. “I don’t know what it is, but it’s too square to be just rocks.”

“Agreed.” Easing back from me, he cocked his head. “What do we do, boss?”

I couldn’t decide if he was being a smartass or not.

Gripping the ropes on either side at elbow height, I placed my full weight onto the bottom rope.

“What’re you doing?” he said in a singsong manner.

“There’s only one way to find out if that’s a hut.”

“Jesus, Aria. Is it worth it?”

“It is if we catch that other guy. We need to find out where he got this gun from.” I tapped the Scorpion Industries rifle across my chest.

“We can come back tomorrow.”

“He’ll be gone by tomorrow.”

“You don’t know that.”

“No, you’re right—I don’t. But I can’t risk waiting until then. For all we know, this place could be crawling with more of those bastards tomorrow.”

“In that case, we really should get the fuck out of here.”

I took another step onto the bridge. “I’m going across. You don’t have to follow me.”

“You know I do, Aria.” His tone was stern with a whole lot of sex appeal.

I peered at him over my shoulder. “No, you don’t.”

“We stick together. That was Blade’s command.”

I rolled my eyes. “Jet didn’t get that memo.”

“Well, I did. You go across that bridge; I have to come with you.”

“Your choice.” Clutching the side ropes, I took another step forward, fully removing myself from solid land.

The bridge creaked and swayed. I took another step. Icy cold wind whistled down the mountain but other than that, the silence was absolute. And strange. In my life, there was no such thing as silence. My apartment was in a high-density area in Sydney. There was always traffic and planes and people.

The bottom of the gorge was a long way down. So far down that I couldn't see where it ended.

Halfway across the bridge, I paused and tried to stop the ropes swaying both left and right and back and forward.

“Are you okay?” His voice bounced around the gorge like he was on a loudspeaker.

“Just taking a rest.”

“Okay. You're doing great.”

My radio crackled, but Ghost's voice was muffled in my vest pocket.

“Don't answer that, Aria,” Razor said.

“I'm not.” I couldn't bring myself to let go of the rope even if I wanted to.

My knees trembled and the rope wobbling got worse.

Move, Aria. Now!

Staring straight ahead, I clenched my jaw and with my heart hammering in my throat, I charged across the bridge, jumped off the last two feet, and gasped with relief when my boots touched solid ground.

“Well done,” Razor called.

Unlike my side of the gorge, which was swallowed in shadows, enough light bathed his side of the mountain to see him perfectly. His broad shoulders. Jeans that fit like a glove, revealing his powerful thighs. Muscles in all the right places.

He stepped onto the rope, and bounced up and down, making the bridge ropes wave.

“What the hell are you doing?” I yelled across the gorge.

“Testing it.”

“Not a good idea, Razor.”

He took another step, paused for half a beat, then with his gaze trained on me, he walked across the thick rope with the confidence of a model on a catwalk.

I wanted to laugh. Razor was always ballsy.

A loud crack boomed about the gorge.

“Shit.” I ducked. “What was that?”

Razor froze, strangling the ropes, staring at me. The terror in his eyes yanked my heart out.

A burst of gunfire came out of nowhere.

“Run,” I yelled.

My heart strangled my chest as Razor raced across the bridge. He dove off the rope, somersaulted onto the rough gravel and grabbing my hand, we raced for the cover of rocks behind us.

The gunfire continued.

“Where’s it coming from?” I asked.

“No idea. But what the fuck is he shooting at?”

A massive crack boomed above us and the enormous overhang of snow on the opposite side of the ridge came away. Rumbling like thunder, tons of ice tumbled down the mountain.

Squeezing Razor’s hand, I watched in horror as the avalanche crashed onto the bridge.

The ancient ropes were no match for the mountain of ice, and they snapped out of their bracings like they were merely cotton twine.

“No. No. No. No. No!” I shrieked.

It seemed forever before the whiteout cleared and the roar of tumbling snow was replaced with a silence so loud it screamed in my ears.

I stared at the gorge, desperate to see the bridge.

But our lifeline to the rest of our team was gone.

Chapter Twelve

RAZOR



“Son of a bitch!” Hiding behind a large boulder with Hawk, I used the scope on my rifle to search the opposite side of the gorge, trying to find the fucker who’d created that avalanche.

“See him?” Hawk lowered her binoculars to look at me.

“Not yet.” I turned my attention to the far left of the mountain, which was the direction we’d come from.

She pulled her radio from her vest. “Hawk to Blade. Do you read? Over.”

Static crackled through our comms.

“Goddammit! Blade, this is Hawk. Do you read? Over.”

Across the gorge, a mountain of snow obliterated the narrow path we’d walked along, and the entire steep slope was covered in white. The only part of the bridge that remained was the hooks on our side that had been driven into the rocks.

“Blade, do you read? Over.” Hawk’s brittle tone was laced with dread.

I scanned our side of the mountain, but every rock and every shadow provided the perfect cover for a tango.

“This isn’t good, Xander.” Hawk stepped out from our cover, shuffled to the edge of the ravine, and looked down.

I joined her side. The gorge was so deep, the bottom was impossible to see. “Fucking hell. That’s a long way down.”

“Yeah. We won’t be able to cross anywhere along here.” She groaned.

“We’re running out of sunlight, anyway.”

“And it’s getting damn cold.” She rubbed her arms, and the urge to hug her was like a belladonna flower, enticing but deadly. I couldn’t risk my heart to her again.

I turned toward the square-shaped shadow that we’d questioned earlier. “Want to see if that’s a hut that we saw from the other side?”

Her dark eyes grew even darker, fear clouding her expression.

My hackles stood at attention. Hawk never showed fear.

“What aren’t you telling me?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Something’s going on.”

“Yeah, no shit. We’re stuck on a mountain. Our radios are fucked. And someone is taking potshots at us. Sound familiar?”

I blinked at her. “You think it’s the same assholes who tried to kill us last time?”

She pointed at the Scorpion Industries logo. “Yes, I do.”

Studying our surroundings, I tried to piece this information into something useful. “But why?”

“*Why* isn’t the question.”

“You’re talking cryptic, Hawk.”

“The real question is, how did they know we were here?”

Mulling over her question, I scanned the field of white covering the mountainside across the ravine. With the sinking sun, the shadow line was gradually rising. Darkness was going to swallow us very soon. And with each inch the sun sank into the horizon, the air grew colder. The wind had picked up too, sweeping down from the snow-capped ridge behind us with a chill factor of fucking cold.

“Maybe the killer just happened to see us somehow?” I said. “Or they’ve been following us since we landed at the airport.”

She nodded. “Both are possible.”

“But ...?”

She kicked a rock, and it shot over the edge and disappeared into the shadows below. Shaking her head, she raised her radio. “Blade. Do you read? Over.”

Peering through my scope, I searched the opposite side again. There had been no more gunshots since the avalanche. “Maybe the stupid bastard killed himself?”

“Who?” Hawk flared her eyes at me.

“The asshole who shot at us ... he’s stopped. Maybe the stupid fucker died in the avalanche.”

She huffed. “Doubt it. More likely, he’s gone after the rest of our team.”

I glared at her, running that scenario through my brain, then I shook my head. “If he’s working solo, then we don’t need to worry.”

“I’ll worry until I know everyone is safe, and we’re out of this fucking hellhole.”

I rolled my eyes. “I didn’t mean—”

“Forget it.” She slotted her radio into her vest, pulled her Glock from her hip holster, and strode away.

“Where are you going?”

She pointed forward. “To see that fucking hut.”

I peered across the ravine one last time. “I hope you died, asshole. If not, I’m going to kill you myself.”

Clutching my rifle, I turned toward Hawk. She was climbing over a large rock, her long legs making it look easy. I chased after her, pissed off that she wasn’t following the stick-together protocol. “Hawk, wait up.”

“Hurry up, this light is getting away from us.” Standing on the rock, she scanned ahead.

“Hey, get down from there,” I called out.

Scowling at me, she jumped down and marched ahead.

The non-existent path made it impossible to run on the jagged rocks, and the risk of spraining an ankle was real. Or worse, breaking one.

On our flight over, the team had told me about the shootout on Chui’s freighter and how Hawk had been shot in her left leg. The injury didn’t slow her down any.

She was always like that, though. Hawk had two speeds: like a bull at a gate, and fast asleep. It had been just one of the many differences between us. I liked to take things steady. One of my simple joys was to pause at the top of a hill and take in the scenery.

Even here, amidst a snow-capped mountain range, the scenery was breathtaking.

If someone wasn’t trying to kill us, that was.

I frowned. If that bastard had been trying to kill us, Hawk had just given him the perfect target while she stood on that rock. We were both sitting ducks when we were on the bridge too, yet he hadn’t started firing until I was halfway across. He’d even timed the avalanche so I could get out of its way.

Trying to slot that information into something that made sense, I waited for Hawk to climb between two giant boulders. Her strength was incredible. Watching her climb was both a blessing and a curse. Her ass was mighty fine to look at, but it reminded me of just how long it had been since I’d seen a woman naked. Especially her.

Too fucking long.

Jilly, the saleswoman I’d met at a cattle yard, hadn’t been a patch on Aria. She was way too needy. She wanted a husband and kids and a white picket fence, and she’d made that well known and we’d only been on three dates. That was enough.

Aria, on the other hand, was a closed book. I had no fucking idea what she wanted. Years ago, I'd thought she'd wanted me.

And then she didn't.

With the diminishing light, the hut seemed to be getting farther away rather than closer, and it was much higher than I had anticipated. Maybe it was a ski hut or hunting hut. Or a goat herder's house.

In the middle of winter, these mountains would be thick with snow and deadly to cross. Looking around, I understood why the men Chui's grandfather traveled with didn't make it. The trek would have been hell. At least we could see the rocks. Another six inches of snow and it would be impossible to know where to step.

Hawk crouched down behind a boulder, and I slotted beside her. We both peered over the top. About twenty yards ahead, the roof and the top third of the hut were visible. The small window in the side wall was dark, confirming there was no light inside.

"Looks vacant," I said.

"Agreed." She glanced at me. "But it could also be a trap."

"Only one way to find out." I switched from my rifle to my Glock and released the safety. "What's the plan?"

"Let's check it out. But if we do find anyone, I want them alive."

"Roger that."

"You take left. I'll go right."

"Okay."

"And be careful. I need you."

"Don't start being nice to me now, Hawk."

"What? I'm always nice." A tiny smile crawled across her lips.

Progress.

“Follow me.” Crouching over, she stepped out of our cover and navigating the rocks, we raced toward the dark hut.

I panned my weapon left and right, searching for movement, but our surroundings were as still as a new dawn.

The hut was a log cabin, like something out of the wild west. Patches of snow covered the log roof, and the rusted chimney pipe with a pointed cap on the top, wasn't releasing any smoke.

At the hut, we pressed our backs against the wall and listened. Nothing. The sun setting behind the mountain cast orange hues over the surrounding snow-capped ridges. I couldn't remember these mountains being this beautiful the last time we were here. Then again, we'd been dodging bullets and running for our lives.

Hawk nodded at me, and spinning on her heel, she raced toward the front of the cabin. Before I could get in front of her, she pushed down on the handle, kicked the door open, and ran inside.

I followed her, sweeping my gun around the tiny space.

“I'll check outside again,” Hawk marched out the door.

Inside the cabin, one rickety chair and a table barely big enough for two plates were positioned beneath the only window. At the opposite end was a small bed that was just big enough for a child. It didn't have a pillow, but a colorful crocheted blanket covered a thin mattress that looked like it was a hundred years old. Maybe it was.

Hawk's return was preceded by her boots squeaking in the snow. “All clear.” Standing in the doorway, she pulled her radio again. “Hawk to Blade. Do you read? Over.”

The silence from the radio added to the eerie quiet around us. Even the wind had stopped whistling.

Hawk shook her head, then held the mic to her mouth again. “Blade, I hope you can hear this. Razor and I are in a secure location. You have one known tango in your vicinity. We will return to you at first light. Over.”

She waited a few beats before she hooked her mic away and turned to me. “I guess we’re stuck here for the night.”

I holstered my weapon. “We’ve had worse, that’s for sure.”

She huffed. During our tours of Afghanistan, we’d slept in the open often, which was one of my favorite things to do back home. But when it was fucking freezing, and gunfire and mortar fire thundered all around, it was impossible and terrifying to sleep.

Our mountain hut was luxury in comparison.

Two shelves on the wall behind the bed had a selection of equipment: a lantern, a hunting knife, an ax, a couple of candles that had nearly burned down to nothing, matches, a tin plate, cup, knife, fork, pot, and kettle. There was no sink, running water, or electricity. And no toilet. But the cabin was tidy, put a roof over our heads, and would stop the breeze.

In the middle of the back wall was a fireplace, and lucky for us, wood was stacked up at the side. I hadn’t seen a tree all day, so the fuel for the fire must have been brought here.

I unhooked my rifle and placed it next to the fireplace. Returning to the back wall, I removed the lantern and shook the canister. Liquid sloshed around inside. “Want me to light it?”

She wiped her finger along the table, leaving a trail in the dust. “I guess so. Doesn’t look like anyone has been here for a while.”

“I agree. Maybe it’s been abandoned. But there is fuel for the lantern, and wood for the fire, so who knows.”

“Any fresh water?” She pulled her bottle from her hip and shook it, showing she had barely any water left.

“No, but we can melt some snow if we get this fire going.” I shrugged. A fire would be nice, but also attract attention.

“I’ll do another sweep around the building.” She clutched her rifle and stepped through the doorway.

Using my lighter, I ignited the lantern wick, and as a warm glow filled the cabin, Hawk paced past the window. She was

on her radio again, her jaw clamped.

Even angry, she was beautiful. And I hated that she took my breath away. Hawk had been the first woman I'd ever loved. The only woman. I'd lost my virginity to her. Our relationship had been intense and amazing, and I couldn't get enough of her. Sex with her had been mind-blowing.

But I'd been stupid enough to believe we would be together forever, and I'd never even contemplated that she thought otherwise. Until she dumped me.

At the doorway, Hawk stomped her boots on the floorboards, and rested her rifle against the wall near the only exit.

"I can't believe this." She huffed.

"That we found shelter on the mountain?"

She gave me a wise-ass glare. "No. I can't believe we got separated from our team, and can't relay our position, and we have no fucking way to get back across that gorge." She threw her arms out in frustration.

"Look, at first light, we'll do a full scout. There could be another bridge just out there." I pointed out the window where beyond the glass, stars dotted the darkening sky.

She rubbed her temple as if she had a thumping headache. "If anything happens to the others"

She didn't finish her sentence.

She didn't need to.

But speculating the deadly possibilities was pointless. We had to get through the night.

With her eyes closed, she tilted her head back, revealing the fine length of her neck. I'd kissed her tender flesh there. I would love to do that again ... kiss her neck, her soft lips, her divine breasts—

What the fuck am I doing?

She was stressing about our mission and our team, and all I could think about was her amazing body beneath her camo

gear. This was so messed up.

She lowered her gaze to me, and my heart just about stopped.

For one bracing second, I wondered if I'd said my desire out loud.

"I'll cover that window." She strode to the bed and slid the blanket onto the floor. Even though she was gentle, a cloud of dust filled the room. Coughing, she fanned the air. "Nobody has slept on this for a long time. The blanket's no good. It's full of holes."

She pulled the knife from her sheath and cut the fabric from the mattress. "This will do."

I sneezed at the dust a dozen times as we used gaffer tape to cover the window with the fabric.

"I'll check from outside." Clutching her Glock, she marched out the door.

I squatted at the firewood. It would be damn cold in here come midnight and the temptation to get the fire ready was huge. But I needed Hawk to make that decision. She was in charge, after all.

"That cover over the window is good enough." She stepped inside and slotted her gun into her thigh holster. Hot damn, that move was sexy.

"Good enough to get the fire going?" I snapped a couple of twigs across my knee.

"Nope."

I groaned. "It's going to get cold."

"I know. But we can't risk it."

"Okay. You're the boss."

"What does that mean?" She scowled at me.

I blinked at her. "It means, you're the boss."

Clenching her jaw, she stared out the door, but I didn't think she was admiring the view.

Her brows drilled together, and she turned to me. “Did you think the bastard that was shooting at us was on the other side of the ravine?”

I nodded. “That’s my assumption.”

“Then with that bridge gone, he’s cut himself off from this side.”

“Yep.”

“But why would he do that?” She unhooked the Scorpion Industries rifle from around her neck and studied the logo. “It’s just like all those years ago, Xander.”

“No, it’s not.”

Her dark eyes flared. “It is, and it’s fucked.”

I raised my hands in a peace gesture. “Back then, there was a whole bunch of bastards trying to kill us. We were outnumbered. Remember?”

“They weren’t trying to kill us. And I don’t think they were this time either. We’re a game to them. And again, someone is fucking with us, and I have no idea why.”

“Do you think it’s because of that gold?” I broke a thick stick across my knee and used it to scoop the old coals out of the base of the fire.

“The gold has to be part of it, but there’s something else.” Shaking her head, she reached for a couple of sticks and snapped them over her thigh.

“It has to be the gold. What else is in these hills that’s worth killing over?”

“Us, Xander.” Her eyes simmered with rage. “Someone wants us out of the way. I thought it was Chui, but even with him dead, it’s not over.”

I stacked a pile of twigs into a teepee at the base of the fire and added a few bigger sticks on top. It was pointless, given that we couldn’t light it, but it took my attention away from her.

“Wasp and Ghost told me about Chui and all the attacks they’ve had on them,” I said. “I had no idea all that was going on.”

She huffed. “Didn’t you see the Prime Minister’s attack on the news?”

“Sort off. But not really. I hate the news.” I adjusted a few sticks, imagining flames licked up between them. “Too much bullshit for me.”

“Just the simple life for Xander, huh?”

I leaned back on my haunches to look at her. “Meaning?”

Shrugging, she stepped back and undid the Velcro on her tactical vest to release it. “Nothing.”

I added bigger sticks to the unlit fire and settled a log on top. With nothing else to do, I stood and removed my tactical vest and as I tugged my shirt from my jeans, cool air swirled around my torso. A fire would be damn nice. But Hawk wouldn’t change her mind. She was stubborn like that.

She was not one to back down from an argument, either.

Even so, when our relationship had gone to shit all those years ago, for some reason, she’d found it damn hard to say what was really on her mind. That was what had crushed me, not knowing the true reason why she’d broken up with me. I’d always wondered what I’d done wrong. Not knowing hurt as much as her walking away.

She blew onto her hands and rubbed them together. “I don’t suppose you have any food?”

“Yes, actually.” I pulled two protein bars from the pockets of my vest and handed one to her.

“Thank you. You’re a lifesaver.”

I pulled a chair out from the table, sat, and devoured the bar in three bites. It barely touched the sides. I threw the scrunched wrapper into the unlit fire. “I could do with another dozen of those.”

“Yeah. Same.” As she nibbled through her snack, she blew onto her hands again.

“You know it’s going to get colder, right?”

“I know.”

“We can light the fire.”

“We can’t risk it.” She shoved her hands under her armpits.

An awkward silence fell over us. I wanted to ask a dozen questions but didn’t know where to start.

“So, I hear you’re a pilot now,” she said.

“Yeah, I started with the Royal Flying Doctor Service a few months ago.”

“I didn’t know you had your pilot license.”

“Well, how would you know? Unless you’re keeping tabs on me,” I joked.

A frown drilled across her forehead. “No, I’m not keeping tabs on you.”

“Just joking, calm down.”

She released a noise like she had a fur ball in her throat and strode to the bed. The frame creaked when she sat on the flimsy mattress, and her teeth were jammed so tight the muscles along her jaw bulged.

Meeting her gaze, I shook my head.

“What?” She blurted.

“Nothing.” I turned back to the stack of twigs in the fireplace.

“You wanted to say something. Go on,” she said.

“No, actually, I don’t,” I lied. I wanted to talk to her so much my chest hurt. When we’d been together, our conversations flowed so easily it was like we’d grown up as neighbors. And even though we were so different, we shared many of the same values.

I didn’t want to rehash why we broke up.

She'd made it very clear she didn't want me in her life last time.

She was adding to that conviction now.

And I had to do whatever it took to make sure I didn't have my fucking heart broken again.

Chapter Thirteen

HAWK



The air in the cabin was as cold as the shoulder Razor was giving me, but we couldn't risk lighting the fire. The smell of smoke could drift for miles, and despite the cover over the window, the glow from inside would still be visible.

Trying not to shake the blanket or mattress too much, I pulled them off the bed and dragged them across the floor, closer to the door. I sat at one end of the mattress, with my knees tucked up, giving Razor room to sit at the other end. After wrapping the blanket over my shoulders, I leaned back against the wall and glanced up at him. "I won't bite."

"Are you sure?" He remained standing.

Glaring at him, I said, "It's already going to be a long night, don't make it painful too."

"Me? You're the one who likes to shut down conversations."

"No, I don't."

"Yes, you do."

Rolling my head side to side, I attempted to unhinge the knot at the base of my neck, but it wouldn't budge. Groaning, I said, "Xander, sit. That's an order."

He lowered himself to the mattress and a silence stretched between us that was so fucking loud.

The flames on the lantern gave a warm glow to our space. It could actually be nice, if I wasn't here with the man who

twisted my heart into messy knots.

“So ...” He cleared his throat but didn’t say anything else.

“So, what?”

He shrugged. “This is nice.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, it is, actually. We could be stuck out there on those freezing rocks.”

He flicked at something on his jeans. “So, how have you been?”

“Fine.”

“Aria, I’m trying to make conversation.”

“I know. I’m talking to you, aren’t I?”

“No, you’re talking at me. I know you’re fine. I can see that.” His eyes glistened in the light.

I shrugged. “Okay, so what do you want to know?”

He reached for a stick and jabbed the twigs he’d stacked in the fireplace. “I don’t know. What you’ve been up to for the last couple of years. You married? Kids? Gay?”

I burst out laughing. “What’s that? You covering your bases?”

“Just making conversation.” He shrugged.

“No, none of the above. How about you?”

“Same.”

“Not even a girlfriend?”

He shook his head. “Nope. You?”

I grinned. “No. No girlfriend for me.”

He tilted his head and the air seemed to still.

“No boyfriend either,” I said.

“And have things been going well at ASIO?” he asked.

I shrugged. “Yes. And no. I’m still trying to prove myself.”

He snapped the twig, tossed it onto the stack, and grabbed another one. “How so?”

“Well, you know Dad helped me keep my job in the military, right?”

“Yep, I never did understand why you wanted to stay. After what they did to us and all.”

I picked at a broken fingernail. “Sometimes I wonder if it was a stupid idea. Some of the assholes I work with don’t believe I’m worthy of the position.”

He leveled his gaze at me. “Then they don’t know you like I do. You’re one of the best operators I’ve ever met.”

A delicious warmth cruised through me. Nobody said nice things about me. “Thank you. That means a lot.”

“I mean it. You deserve everything you get.”

I shifted on the mattress so I could see him better. “What about you? Are you happy?”

He scrubbed his beard with his fingers. “Like you ... yes and no.”

“Is your dad still running the farm?”

He huffed. “Running it into the ground ... yes.”

“Shit, Xander. I’m sorry. I know what that place means to you.”

“Nothing to be sorry about. It is what it is.”

The sadness in his eyes burned a hole in my heart.

We sat in silence and the air grew so cold our breaths fogged from our lips. What was it going to be like come early morning?

I pulled the cover tighter around my shoulders. “You want some blanket?” I opened the side for him to shuffle in.

“I’m good. You have it.”

After tucking the blanket around my torso, I fixed my gaze on the tiny flame in the lantern.

His breathing was steady. Mine was too.

I couldn't remember a time when I'd been so comfortable next to a man.

He released a sigh and when I turned to him, his gaze swept from my lips to my eyes. "I've missed you, Aria."

My chest squeezed.

"Xander." I shook my head. "Don't."

"Don't what? Tell you how I feel?"

I squeezed my eyes shut, determined not to look at his burning gaze.

"Aria." He shifted toward me.

I snapped my eyes open. "Please. I can't do this."

"This? As in me?"

"Yes, you. Us. We can't be together, and you know it."

"No, I don't know it. We have something. I know you feel it, yet you shove our feelings aside like they're nothing."

"It's not nothing, but ..."

"But what?" He bumped his shoulder to mine playfully, yet a haunting sadness clouded his expression.

"But we can't make it into something again."

He placed his hand over the back of mine. "Yes, we can."

"No, we can't. We live in different worlds. Too different. I could never live on a farm, and you'd die in the big city. We can't do this."

His hand slithered off mine and he shuffled away.

The silence that brewed between us was as thick as sludge. I hated that I hurt him, but it was better to cut him off now. I shouldn't have let my feelings for him get out of hand as much as I did last time. I'd been selfish. Greedy. His love for me was much deeper than mine could ever be, and it was cruel of me to let him think we had the potential to be together.

I didn't even believe in love, anyway.

Infatuation ... sure. Desire ... absolutely.

But love ... no. Love was a dream that was destined to plunge into a nightmare.

He scrubbed his hand over his beard stubble and turned to me. Fury simmered in his eyes, along with something else ... burning sadness.

Good. Better to hurt now and get it over with.

Tugging the blanket across my chest, I closed my eyes, but I couldn't get his sorrow out of my mind. How the hell did I get myself into this situation? There were eight of us in our team. How did Xander and I get separated together?

Fucking Jet. He did this. He made sure we were paired together.

That confirmed he knew about us.

Goddammit.

I'd asked Xander to keep our relationship a secret. I had been his superior. Our relationship could ruin my reputation as a stickler for the rules and put a blight on my career. It was hard enough being a woman in my profession.

I couldn't believe he'd broken that trust.

He was still looking at me, his expression a mixture of frustration and desire.

"Turn that thing off." I nodded at the lantern. "We don't need it anyway."

He studied me for a few beats before he blew out the flame, plunging us into darkness. But even with the complete blackout, his anger seemed to vibrate through the mattress.

Good. Keep that anger going, Xander.

I will too.

The smell from the snuffed wick stained the air, and with the darkness, the temperature seemed to plunge even more. I tugged my knees to my chest and wrapped the blanket around my legs. My ankles got cold, so I tugged up my socks. My

wrists got cold, so I tugged down my sleeves. Icy air attacked my neck, so I pulled my hair out of my ponytail and tucked it down the back of my shirt.

“You’re fidgeting.” His voice cracked the darkness.

“Sorry.”

“You still cold?”

I wanted to say no, but my teeth would start chattering soon. “Yeah. You know me ... Ice Queen.”

Damn, why did I say that?

I’d been trying to run from that cruel nickname since my mission in Afghanistan. I’d earned the name after taking down a subordinate who had grabbed my breasts in front of his teammates. Before he’d finished laughing, I’d kicked his balls and thrown him over my shoulder. I would never forget the anger in his eyes when he’d scrambled to his feet again. He’d called me the Ice Queen and said I’d probably crack in two if someone fucked me.

I’d kicked his balls again, and as he’d roared in pain, his mates had roared with laughter.

Since then, the Ice Queen name had stuck, and although some used it with a sense of admiration, I’d never liked the negative connotation.

Razor lit his lighter, and I squinted at the glare. “What are you doing?”

He stood. “Get up.”

“What are you doing?” I repeated.

“Aria, up. You’re gonna freeze your ass off.” He offered me his hand.

Ignoring his hand, I stood.

He ushered me out of the way, then shifted the mattress away from the door and perpendicular to the wall, with the narrow end against the timber. He moved the lantern to behind the door. If anyone came barging in, the lantern would go flying.

He sat on the mattress with his back to the wall, placed his gun on the floor beside him, and parted his legs. Looking up at me, he patted the mattress between his knees. “Sit.”

This was a bad idea, and yet it was also the right one. I was not going to make it through the night freezing the way I was.

I sat between his legs, positioning my gun within easy reach, and leaned back against him. As he draped his arms over my shoulders, I wrapped the blanket around us.

“Better?” His warm breath whispered across my ear.

“Yes. Thank you.” A sense of calm enveloped me. When we’d been together, Xander had always made me feel like that. And with my chaotic career choice, that had been huge.

“So, other than work, what else have you been up to?” he asked.

As much as I hated to admit it, I’d missed our conversations.

“Unfortunately, not much more than work.” I half laughed, half huffed. “Especially with Blade and the team. Man, they’ve dug themselves into some shit.”

He chuckled. “They told me about the freighter. What else has happened?”

“Oh, boy, where do I start?”

“Start at the beginning. We have all night.”

We have all night. Our secret relationship while we had been enlisted and doing tours of duty had meant that our times together had been fleeting. But when we had all night ... those were the special times where we’d explored each other’s bodies and minds. On those nights, we were so compatible, I’d thought my heart would burst, and yet, we weren’t. We couldn’t be any more opposite if we’d tried.

As much as I wanted to clam up and not say a single word, I couldn’t stop myself. In the three years since our breakup, nobody had replaced Xander as a confidant or shoulder to lean on. So, as my nose got colder, and the intense blackness around us seemed to grow even darker, I told him about the

turtles Zena had saved, and the barrels of waste in the cave beneath Chui's drug factory.

I detailed Station Eleven in Antarctica, and the submarine Billie had found beneath the ice, and how Ghost had to amputate the brilliant scientist's finger. I told him about Ghost rescuing her partner Zac on that abandoned island. Before I knew it, I'd revealed who Zac really was, a secret that I should have contained. Xander made me so relaxed, I dropped my guard.

And that was dangerous.

But I couldn't stop my story now. Releasing the information was like breaking a dam wall. It felt good.

I detailed our mission to protect the prime minister that went to shit when the deputy prime minister and his brothers tried to kill us all. And how we'd worked out the connection using the tattoos on their wrists.

I told him about Zac and how he used his millions to buy our headquarters building, our gear, helicopter, and fund this mission. And finally, I told him about the chase to find Chui and my dives down to the sunken yacht, and how someone had beaten me to the second secret room.

"You already know about Yasmin's father's journal, and the story behind the gold, and how we ended up back on this mountain," I said. "And now we're here and our missions are still going haywire."

I'd reached the end of my summary of the last three years, and his breathing became the only sound.

I blinked into the darkness.

Is he asleep?

"So, there you go," I said. "With all that going on, I've been busting my ass trying to save the team from jail and that's why I've done nothing else."

"Hmm." His voice thrummed in his throat.

I frowned. "Is that all you have to say?"

“I love the sound of your voice.”

Something warm draped around my heart, and it was so darn confusing.

I slapped his thigh. “That’s all you have to say, after all that?”

“Thank you for bringing me up to date.”

I grumbled under my breath, but I couldn’t stop the smile crawling across my lips. Grateful that we were in complete darkness, I rolled my head back against his chest.

He adjusted his arms around me, and for one perfect minute, I imagined we were somewhere comfortable and safe.

But we were far from safe.

Come tomorrow, if we didn’t find a way back to our team, we would have to trek into uncharted territory, where assholes with Scorpion Industry weapons tried to kill us, if the freezing mountains and our lack of food didn’t kill us first.

Please don’t let this be our last night on Earth.

Chapter Fourteen

RAZOR



During the night, the temperature dropped so low I thought my ears would snap off. I'd forgotten what it was like to be freezing. Occasionally, on my farm, it would get cold enough to produce frost, but it was nothing that a warm fire or thick socks couldn't fix. Here, though, the cold was like mercury leeching into my bones. Every part of my flesh that was exposed to the air hurt.

Aria's steady breathing confirmed she was fast asleep. Her body pressed against me was both welcome and warm, and fucking punishing.

I had to block out my feelings for her. I'd been there before. I couldn't risk losing my shit to her again.

Aria stirred and smacked her lips together. I wished I could see her. She was still the most gorgeous woman I'd ever shared company with. Her flawless skin. Her eyes that were so black I could fall into them forever.

Fuck. Stop it.

She groaned and I cleared my throat, letting her know I was awake.

She sat up, dragging the blanket with her, and the cold breeze swirled across my body.

"How did you sleep?" she asked.

I rolled my legs side to side, trying to work the stiffness out of them. "Okay," I lied. "How about you?"

“Like a log. It’s still dark.” She checked her watch; the tiny hands glowed in the dark. “Three o’clock. I wonder what time sunrise is?”

“No idea, but I need a piss.” I dragged my aching body upright, and feeling in the dark, I opened the door.

An icy blast slapped my face.

“Jesus, shut the door,” she said.

I closed the door behind me, and snow tumbled off the roof onto my head. “Shit.”

“What?” she called from inside the cabin.

“It’s snowing.” I moaned. “Explains why it’s so fucking cold.”

“Bloody hell.”

A fragile glow from the eastern horizon provided enough light to outline the mountain we’d been separated from. Crunching across the snow, I went around the back of the hut to piss, but it was so cold my dick refused to work. *Come on. Come on.* I was shivering by the time I zipped up again.

I returned to the front and paused at the door, scanning the serene setting. The silence was so complete and the air so still, it was like I was in a dream.

Four days ago, I was on my farm delivering a foal.

It was hard to believe I was here.

I opened the door and stepped into the warm glow of the lantern.

“Could we light the fire, boss?” I said.

“Don’t call me that,” she snapped.

I rolled my eyes. “Okay, what shall I call you?”

She captured me with a stern look and seemed to struggle with her answer. “Call me anything except *boss*.”

“Okay, babe.”

“Xander, don’t make me shoot you.”

I chuckled. “So, the fire? We can melt some snow for water.”

She nodded. “Sure, we’re awake now. I’ll get the snow.” She fetched the kettle off the shelving at the back.

“Avoid the yellow snow,” I said.

“Roger that.” Giggling, she stepped out the door.

I lit the fire, and the twigs we’d stacked last night ignited quickly. Within minutes, a fire brought both heat and light to our little cabin.

Aria stepped back inside and stomped her feet at the doorway. “Jesus, it’s bloody cold out there. We’re so lucky we found this place.”

As she set the kettle down next to the fire, I put the tin cup within reach, then shifted the mattress around so we could sit facing the flames.

She sat first, and I draped the blanket over her back.

“Thanks.” She tugged the tattered blanket across her shoulders. “You want to share?”

“I’m fine with the fire.” I held my hands toward the flames.

“Give it an hour or so and there should be enough light out there to get moving.”

“Roger that,” I said.

She gave me a ‘wise-ass’ look.

“What?” I frowned.

She shook her head. “Nothing.”

I had a dozen questions I wanted to ask, yet I had no idea where to start. And she was giving me all the signs that she did not want to talk. Pity.

It was damn hard sitting with her by the fire, and not chatting about all sorts of stuff. The conversations we’d had years ago were still some of the most real discussions I’d ever had in my life.

It made me realize how lonely I was on the farm. After a hard day's work, I went back to my place alone. Every night, I was alone. I wanted to say it didn't bother me, but now that I was with her, I realized what my life was missing—her.

She cleared her throat. "You're quiet."

"And you."

Nodding, she rolled her lips into her mouth as if desperate not to ask a question.

She was uncomfortable. Good. Two could play at her game.

"That water should be ready." I pulled on my glove to hold the metal handle and poured water into the cup. "Ladies first." I handed the cup to her.

We sipped the water in silence.

It was the longest sunrise of my life.

We boiled another kettle full of snow to fill our water bottles, packed up our gear, and returned the hut to how we found it, except for the cover over the window. Before the sun had crested the horizon, Aria declared time to move, and we shut the door behind us.

The eastern sky was only just tinted in gold, yet there was plenty of light to see the terrain.

"This way." As she pulled her hair into a ponytail, she marched ahead.

The overnight blanket of white added another layer of difficulty to our fucked-up situation. Now we couldn't see what was beneath the snow. Every step was a juggle in footing, and every rock moved beneath my feet.

Reaching the gorge again took forever, and the sky was blue by the time we stood on the edge and looked down.

"Bloody hell," Aria said. "There's no way to get across."

"Nope." I scanned along the edge that stretched for miles.

She pulled out her radio. “Blade, this is Hawk. Do you read? Over.”

Static was our only reply.

“Try your radio,” she said.

“Blade, this is Razor, do you hear me? Over.” When no one replied, I shook my head.

“It doesn’t make sense.” Shielding the sun with her hand, she peered to the mountain on the other side of the gorge.

“Are we too far away from them?”

A frown corrugated her forehead. “Stay here, let’s test these out.”

I shared my gaze between her sexy ass, the massive ravine to my right, and the snow-covered mountain on the other side. Aria’s disjointed strides over the uneven terrain were the only movement. There weren’t even clouds in the sky, or birds. Or mountain goats on the rocks. At least if there were tangos crawling over the snow, we would have a chance of spotting them.

Aria turned and raised her hand in the air. I raised mine, and expected her voice to come through my comms, but there was nothing.

I tried mine and the only response was static.

They’ve fucked with our signal.

I made my hands into a cross, tucked away my radio, and headed toward her.

My ankles were freezing from snow melting on my jeans and socks. We weren’t dressed for this shit.

When Blade had called me, he’d downplayed the mission. *It’ll be simple, he’d said. We’ll go in, grab the gold, and get out. All done within two days, three at the most.*

I was not prepared for hiking through snow. Aria wasn’t either.

Now that we were separated, we had no food, and no communication with our team.

We were officially fucked.

As I approached Aria, she peered through her binoculars across the ravine.

“Anything?” I asked when I was within earshot.

She turned to look along our side of the ravine. “Not a damn thing.” She put her binoculars away.

“What do we do?” I asked.

She squinted into the distance, looking mighty pissed. “Let’s go this way.” She marched in the opposite direction to the hut.

“So, our signal *has* been jammed,” I said.

“Yep.”

“That’s not good.”

“Nope.” She spat the word.

“Good chat then,” I joked.

She spun to me. “What do you want me to say, Razor? That we’re fucked. Okay, then. We’re fucked.”

“I know that. Doesn’t mean we can’t be civil to each other.”

The fury in her eyes could carve ice.

“Okay.” I threw my arms out in frustration. “I’ll shut up.”

“Good.” Clenching her fists, she stepped over a rock and kept walking.

As the sun inched higher in the sky, gradually smothering the cool dawn, we continued our trek along the gorge. But the scenery didn’t change.

My rumbling stomach got so loud I heard it, and I tried to remember the last time I’d eaten something substantial. It was at the roadside shop. “Hey, what about the people at that roadside shop?”

Hawk glared at me over her shoulder. “What about them?”

“Nothing.”

“What about them, Razor?” Her tone was edged with frustration.

“I don’t know. Maybe they’re Russian spies.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Their shop was in the middle of nowhere. Didn’t you think that was weird?”

She groaned. “Everything about this place is weird.”

“That’s true.”

We fell into silence, her leading the way, traipsing farther along the edge of the ravine. I followed behind her. As the sun inched into the sky, we alternated turns peering through our binoculars and testing our comms.

It seemed like forever before she finally stopped and slumped onto a gravel patch with her back against a rock. Her expression was a sad mix of fury and frustration.

I rested my rifle against a boulder and sat beside her.

“This is fucked,” she said.

“Yep.”

She ran her hands over her face, sweeping a few loose strands of hair around her ears. “We have no food, no comms, and no way to get back to the others. We’re in serious trouble, Xander.”

Nodding, I pulled my water bottle from my hip and drank. “At least we have water.”

She huffed. “Typical.”

I blinked at her. “What’s typical?”

“We could be in front of a firing squad, and you’d find a positive spin to it.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

She drank from her own bottle. “No, actually, it’s refreshing. But it still doesn’t help.”

“Well, we’re not dead yet. We have water, and we still have enough strength to keep walking. Those tangos had to have come from somewhere. Maybe there’s a village right over there.” I pointed to a dip between the mountains.

She swept her gaze from me to the snow-capped ranges around us, then shook her head. “Or a village could be over there.” She pointed in a different direction. “Or there.” She jabbed her finger another way.

“True. All we can do is keep going.”

“Yep. Let’s move.” She stood and adjusted the Scorpion rifle over her shoulder.

I grabbed her hand. “We’ll be okay, Aria.”

Her expression was so sad I wanted to wrap her in my arms.

“I know.” She slid her hand from my grasp.

I tucked my water bottle away, and, standing, grabbed my rifle. “Which way?”

She half-heartedly pointed in the direction we’d been going.

The sun was directly overhead when we stumbled onto a narrow track.

“This is more like it,” I said as we picked up our speed.

“Let’s hope it leads somewhere.” She tested her comms again.

I’d given up on mine, preferring to conserve my batteries instead.

Our sliver of hope faded as the track went on forever. And every time we came to a fork in the path, we had to choose. There was no obvious way to go.

The sun began its slide behind the mountain, and with each inch it lowered, the temperature plummeted too.

Then snow began falling from the sky.

“Fucking hell! I’ve had enough of this shit.” I pulled the collar up on my shirt and tugged down my sleeves.

We reached another fork in the path. Aria clenched her fists and screamed so loud the tendons in her neck bulged.

When she stopped, I eyeballed her. “You okay?”

“No, I’m not fucking okay. We’re lost.” Her chin quivered.

“Come here.” I brushed snow off a large boulder then grabbed her hand. “Sit.”

“I don’t want to sit.”

“Just sit.” I forced her to sit and handed her my water bottle. “Drink.”

As she drank, I peered through my binoculars, desperate to see signs of civilization. But there wasn’t one fucking thing.

We truly were lost.

And alone. And starving.

If we don’t find shelter, there’s a very real chance we won’t make it through the night.

Chapter Fifteen

HAWK



I hated that I'd had a meltdown. Especially in front of Xander. I didn't need him thinking I was losing it. Even though I was.

Our situation was hopeless.

After our short stop, we kept walking, but it was futile. Every step was a step to nowhere and the snow was getting heavier. Soon, the entire area would be a blanket of white, and the tracks that we'd been trying to follow would be obliterated.

As the darkness of night seeped into the sky, the real horror of our situation took hold. We could die out here.

I turned to Xander, and he halted behind me. I couldn't make any words release from my throat, but when I shook my head, he tugged me to his chest.

I wrapped my arms around him, and as I sucked in wobbled breaths, I said, "This is fucked."

He cruised his hand over my hair and hugged me tighter. "We'll get through this."

The knot in my throat was so big I could barely breathe. "I don't know. It's not looking good."

A snowflake landed on my nose, and as I eased away from his chest to wipe it off, I peered up at him. My breath caught at the genuine concern in his eyes. "Any ideas?"

Shaking his head, he scanned our surroundings. "We need to build a shelter out of these rocks. Come on." He marched forward.

I chased after him. His stride convinced me that he had a plan, and relief washed through me. It wasn't like me to want to relinquish control, but it was different with Xander. It was like we were working together, rather than either of us taking charge.

But as he kept on walking and scanning up and down the mountain and walking some more, my frustration hit tipping point. "Xander. What are you looking for?"

"I want two big boulders that are fairly close together, but not too close."

"Okay. What about them?" I pointed to two giant rocks that were taller than me about thirty feet below our position.

"They'll do."

We climbed down to the rocks, and the gap between them was big enough for us to stand inside.

"Right, we need to put a cover over here." He clipped out of his utility vest.

As the sunlight diminished and the snow intensified, we made a crude covering over the rocks using his vest, and a pile of strategically placed rocks to hold the vest in position.

The gap wasn't big enough to sit side by side.

"Okay, in you go." He indicated for me to slot between the two rocks.

"No, you first," I said.

"Aria, you're in first, so I can protect you."

I cocked my head. "That's what we built the cover for."

"No, not from the snow. From someone turning up."

I huffed. "Nobody is turning up. Now get your ass in there. That's an order."

After a sturdy glare, he cracked his neck side to side, then shuffled into the space. Once he was settled, I sat between his legs again just like we'd done last night. Only this time we didn't have the comfort of a mattress, blanket, or four walls to

protect us from the breeze that swirled into our space like frigid demons.

I pulled my knees up, trying to make myself as small as possible.

“You okay?” Xander asked.

“Yep, I’m peachy.”

He groaned. “You don’t have to do that, you know.”

“Oh, so I’m not allowed to put positive spins on things like you do.”

“Not if it’s a lie.”

If I wasn’t freezing, I would have stormed out of our little rock camp.

My feet were bloody cold, and I tried not to imagine my toes turning black.

“It’s kind of ironic, don’t you think?” he said.

“Freezing to death on a mountain?”

“That this is what Chui’s grandfather went through. What did Cobra say? That he took days to cross these mountains, and his two mates died doing it.”

“He murdered one of them.”

“Oh, I didn’t know that.”

“Yeah. Apparently, they fought over what to do with the gold.”

“Huh.” I felt him nod behind me. “So, what is our plan with the gold?”

I huffed. “You know ... we haven’t actually talked about that. We’ve been so obsessed with locating the gold, that we haven’t discussed what we’d do with it if we ever recovered it.”

“It’s kinda amazing that we found it.”

“I agree.”

“Surely there are laws over what to do with recovered Nazi war treasure,” he said.

I folded my arms tighter over my chest and tucked my hands into my armpits. “If it was a painting that could be identified as belonging to a family, then yes, but with melted down gold treasure?” I shook my head. “On top of that, our best guess is that it was originally Jewish gold that was melted down by a German bastard, that was then stolen by a greedy Chinese fool and found eighty years later in Kyrgyzstan by a bunch of Australian ex-soldiers. It’s likely to be tied up in an ownership bitchfight for years.”

“Sheesh.” His hot breath blew across my cheek. “That’s a minefield.”

“Yep. It’s not about the money.” I heaved a sigh. “Not for me, anyway.”

“Really? You don’t want the money from the sale of that gold?”

I shook my head. “Hell no. Those gold bars have left a trail of hurt. Besides, what would I do with that kind of money?”

“I think Wasp and Viper are thinking about the money.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, they have one-track minds. We’ll need to get a plan.”

“If you did get millions from it, you could retire,” he said.

“Retire? What would I do then?”

He stiffened. “Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

I clamped my jaw, determined not to go any further with that line of conversation. When we’d broken up three years ago, he’d asked me why my career was so important that I would choose my work over him. He didn’t understand then. He wouldn’t understand now.

A shiver rolled through me and Xander must have felt it because he draped his arms over my shoulders. His embrace was warm, and so lovely that I was tempted to snuggle into him. But I couldn’t risk giving him the wrong signal. It was what got me into trouble last time.

He cleared his throat, and I braced for a question that I doubted I would want to answer. “Are you still looking for your mom?”

Shit! I squeezed my eyes shut. I hated that I’d told him about Mom running off and abandoning me when I was eleven. I didn’t need him to feel sorry for me. Not now. Not ever.

“I get it,” he said. “You don’t want to talk about her.”

“No, actually, I don’t.”

“Righty ho. What do you want to talk about then?”

I groaned. “Can’t we just sit here and not talk?”

He released a noise like he had a bellyache. “Yep. Got it.”

Damn it.

He removed his arms from my shoulders and crossed them over his chest, behind my back.

A cool breeze swirled into the gap between us and down my neck. I deserved to be uncomfortable. I was the one who led him on last time, even though I knew our relationship could never work. I was a bitch, and I deserved any punishment he sent my way. Even if it had shivers rolling through me.

As my breath fogged from my lips, I tried to comprehend how we’d landed ourselves in this damn mess.

The snow stopped falling, and yet it was like a frigid blast was blowing directly from a glacier to our little rock shelter. Stars appeared in the sky, confirming the clouds had parted and although the moon wasn’t visible, the stars provided enough light to make out shapes around me.

But the lack of cloud cover lowered the temperature even more, and my teeth began to chatter.

“It’s so cold.” Shuddering, I jammed my hands deeper under my armpits and clamped my jaw.

“Uh-huh.”

The cold seeped into my ankles and fingers. My nose burned and my back ached like icicles were piercing my bones. My shivers came in spasms that churned my stomach and made my body hurt even more. I couldn't stay like this all night.

As much as I didn't want to say I needed him, I did. I just hoped he didn't think I wanted anything more than his warmth. "I'm sorry, but ... could you wrap your arms around me again?"

"Is that an order?" His tone was laced with amusement.

"Yes. That's an order."

"Roger that." He opened his arms, and as I leaned back against his chest, he wrapped his arms around me.

"Thank you. Just don't get any wild ideas."

"Me? Never."

Another shudder rolled through me, and Xander tugged me tighter.

"Just think about a nice warm fire," he said. "Or hot chocolate or something."

Or us together in a nice warm bed.

Goddammit!

I'd been trying to shift Xander out of my mind for years. Yet ever since I'd laid eyes on him again, my body had been doing all sorts of delightful things that messed with my head. When this bullshit was over, I would have to start that journey to get over him all over again.

But stopping this before our emotions got away from us again wasn't about me. It was about Xander. He was a good man, and he deserved the world. Not just the world ... he deserved a woman who wanted the same kind of world he did. And that wasn't me.

The sooner we get off this damn mountain, the better.

Xander jerked behind me.

“What?” My mind snapped to attention.

“Do you see that?” He pointed over my shoulder into the darkness. “There’s a light.”

“Yes. I see it.” Groaning, I dragged my body upright and pulled my binoculars out of my vest. Peering into the dark valley below, I zoomed in on the light. “Two people are squatting by a campfire.”

Xander joined my side and stomped his feet.

I passed him my binoculars. “Is that what you see?”

He adjusted the binoculars. “Yes.”

“We need to get down there.”

“In the dark?” He handed the binoculars back to me.

A man in the distance added a log to the fire, and sparks danced into the air.

I estimated they were about two miles away. In prime conditions, we could hike that in under twenty minutes. With the rugged terrain and lack of light, we were likely to take all night. But we had to try.

“Looks like they plan to stay there for a while,” I said. “So, we need to go now while we can see those flames.” I adjusted the two rifles over my shoulder.

“Okay, you’re the boss. Help me get my vest.”

Not willing to risk turning on our flashlights, we worked together in the dim starlight to remove the rocks off his vest.

“You want me to lead?” He shook out his vest and tugged it around his body.

“No, I’ll lead.”

“Aria. Let me lead.” His forceful tone caught me by surprise. Yet it was a fight I didn’t want or need. I’d learned a long time ago to pick my battles well, especially with men. “Okay, but take it steady. We don’t need any broken ankles.”

“I will. You, on the other hand, don’t know how to take things easy.” His manly tone was so compelling, I just about

crumbled.

With him leading, we headed in an imaginary line between us and that campfire. Thankfully, millions of stars above gave enough visibility to see the outlines of the rocks beneath us. It was damn hard work climbing down the hill but moving again helped to fight the coldness. Every time we lost sight of the fire, we had to hope those people were still there and keep going.

Xander paused behind a rock as big as an SUV, and I joined his side.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Yeah. You?”

“I’m damn hungry. I hope they have food.”

I chuckled. “I hope they don’t shoot us.”

“Yeah, that too.”

We inched out from behind the rock, and squatting down, we peered through our binoculars.

“I still see only two people,” I said.

“Same. What are they doing all the way out here? I don’t see any goats.”

“Me neither. Maybe they’re lost, like us.”

He huffed. “Somehow, I don’t think so. What’s our plan?”

I loved that he asked for my instruction. “We’ll get as close as we can, and then crash their little party.”

“Sounds good to me.”

I tapped his shoulder. “Lead the way.”

Crouching over, we continued our scramble over and around snow-covered rocks, and gradually the slope became less steep. The terrain changed from thousands of jagged rocks to millions of smaller smooth ones, and I imagined we had stumbled onto an ancient riverbed.

In addition to goat tracks everywhere, these mountains were riddled with tunnels that had been made by centuries of

water flow. Old riverbeds crisscrossed the terrain too, and the nomads that lived off this land knew where to find water and how to extract it.

Xander and I crouched down again.

“Not much cover from here on,” he whispered.

The couple were clearly visible by the fire. They were seated on the ground, and I assumed they were both men, but it was hard to tell with the thick layers of clothing they wore, and with them silhouetted by the fire and their backs to us we couldn't see their faces.

If they were talking to each other, I couldn't hear them.

“Okay, let's go. And Xander, we want them alive,” I whispered.

“Roger that. As long as they don't shoot at us first.”

“Alive, Xander.”

He leaned into my ear, dousing me with his hot breath. “I'll do my best.”

Grumbling, I clutched my rifle, and we stood together. Matching our strides, we walked toward the two campers, trying to keep the sounds of our boots on the loose rocks minimal.

Twenty yards from them, one of the men made a comment about their meal in Russian, and I thanked my lucky stars that he spoke in a language I understood.

A man stood, and my heart thundered in my chest as he ran his hands down his thighs. Hanging loosely against his hip was a rifle.

Don't turn around. Don't turn around.

Repeating the mantra, I gripped my weapon as we took a few more strides.

The camper turned around. His head jerked back. He cried out and grabbed his rifle.

“Don't move!” I yelled in Russian.

He swung his rifle our way. Bullets pinged off the rocks in a line toward us.

As Xander and I dove apart, the second man jumped to his feet.

“Don’t shoot!” I cried in Russian.

Bullets blasted from both their weapons.

I aimed at the first man’s stomach and pulled the trigger. Screaming, he flew backward and collapsed onto the fire, hurling a flaming log and sparks into the air.

The second man took off, sprinting toward the darkness with his automatic weapon firing bullets in wild arcs.

I dove for the ground as sparks pinged off rocks all around us.

Xander took him down with one shot. The asshole catapulted forward and landed face-first on the rocks without even using his hands to halt his fall.

“Shit. Get that body out of the fire,” I said as we sprinted toward the carnage.

We grabbed our attacker’s feet and after dragging him free, we smacked the flames off his back with our gloved hands. The thick blanket-poncho the man wore must have been resistant to the flames as it was easy enough to put out.

“Goddammit! We wanted them alive.” I threw my hands out in frustration.

“They shot first.”

“I know. Why did they do that? Why?”

“Because they’re assholes.”

“But we could have been friendlies. They didn’t even want to find out.”

“I have a feeling they knew who we were.”

“Go check the other guy,” I said, though, by the way he fell, I was certain he was dead, too.

As Xander marched off, I fanned away the putrid smoke. Beyond the flames was nothing but blackness and the only sound was the crackling fire.

What the hell were they doing out here?

There wasn't a herd of goats nearby that needed looking after. And I couldn't see any buildings. Other than two small bags near the campfire, they didn't have packs of gear, or the right clothing for hiking the mountain. They didn't have a tent. They didn't even have sleeping bags or a place to sleep.

I rolled the man at my feet onto his back. "Why did you shoot at us?"

His skin was weathered like an old boot, and his scraggy beard was as rough-looking as a well-used toilet brush. His thin hair was long and streaked with gray, and he had two nasty scars on his neck and cheek. This man lived a tough life.

I squatted down to check his weapon and groaned. It had a Scorpion Industries logo.

Xander walked back to me shaking his head. "He's dead."

"Thought as much. Bloody hell. We could have used their intel." I heaved a sigh.

Xander squatted to fish through the dead guy's pockets. He found cigarettes, coins, and a lighter.

I opened one of the bags by the fire and removed a paper-wrapped bundle.

Inside were two samsas. Frowning, I sniffed them.

"Hey, that looks just like those pastries we had from that shop."

"Yes." I broke open one of them to reveal the potato and onion filling inside. "Exactly."

"Coincidence?" Xander reached for the other cold pastry and took a bite.

"Nope. This may explain how they knew we were here. They followed us when we drove away from that shop." I

recalled the reaction of the man when he'd seen me inside that store, and I pictured the man I'd seen racing away as we left.

Xander finished the pastry. "But I still don't get it. If they were going to kill us, why didn't they group together and attack when we were by the lake?"

I shook my head, trying to slot the confusing pieces together.

"You going to eat that?" He nodded at the samsa.

The stench of burned hair killed my appetite. I handed the samsa to him.

"Hawk, eat it."

"I'm not—"

"Eat!" He leveled his gaze at me. "We don't know where our next meal is coming from, and you must be starving."

I tilted my head at him.

"I'm going to have a scout around, and you're going to eat that thing."

"Bossy boots," I hissed under my breath.

"Just looking out for my leader." Clutching his rifle, he trotted away and vanished into the surrounding darkness.

As I devoured the pastry in four bites, I studied the second Scorpion Industries weapon. It looked exactly the same as the first one I had, and exactly the same as the weapons we'd been supplied the last time we were in Kyrgyzstan.

The damn things had been dodgy as all hell.

The sights were out, and they jammed all the time, and they had supposedly been brand new.

Xander sprinted back to me.

My hackles rose. "What's wrong?"

"There are three horses," he blurted.

"What?"

"Three horses. There must be another man."

“Shit!”

Clutching our weapons, we moved away from the fire and into the shadows.

“Where are the horses?” I asked.

He pointed in the direction the other dead man had been running toward. “Over there, tied to a dead tree.”

“Show me.”

With our rifles ready, we sprinted in that direction. The horses had their heads lowered like they were sad that their owners were dead.

“Did you find any saddles?” I asked.

“Nope. They must have ridden them bareback.”

“Then they can’t have come far.”

“Don’t be so sure,” he said. “These guys have probably never seen a saddle in their lives.”

“That’s true.” I stroked a horse’s neck, and it bobbed its head. “What the hell were those guys doing out here?”

Xander strolled to another horse and ran his hand down the horse’s nose. “I don’t know, but at least we have a ride out of here.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, right.”

“What? It’s better than walking.”

“I am not getting on a horse.”

“Huh,” he said.

I squinted at him through the dim light. “Huh, what?”

“I never pegged you as a scaredy cat.”

I rolled my eyes. “Not scared, just practical. If I fall off, I’ll probably break my arm or something.”

“You won’t—”

“Come on,” I cut him off. “Let’s do another scout around. There must be another man somewhere.”

Grinning at me, he gave the horse two pats on his neck. “Roger that ... scaredy cat.”

Groaning, I clutched my rifle as we stepped away from the horses and scanned the area. I searched the distance, looking for more signs of campfires, or any light to indicate a civilization was nearby. There was nothing.

“They were out here for a reason. Let’s figure that out, and we might find the extra man.” I strode away from both the horses and the fire, heading in the opposite direction from where we’d come.

Xander joined me, and we searched the area.

Shaking my head, I returned to the fire. “I don’t get it. There’s nothing here.”

“Maybe they just came out to enjoy the stars.” He tilted his head back to look skyward. “It’s a mighty fine view.”

“I would agree with you, if they didn’t have those rifles.”

“Maybe they carry them all the time.”

“Maybe.” I took a sip from my water bottle.

A bang cut through the silence, and we dove for the ground by the fire.

“What was that?” I whispered, searching the darkness, but it was impossible to see beyond the flames.

The sound of feet crunching over the loose stones reached us, and I searched for the source.

A figure appeared out of the darkness. The person was short and had a tiny frame. It looked like a woman. She carried a bucket, and her head was down, giving her a forlorn appearance.

I jumped to my feet, aiming my rifle, and in Russian I yelled, “Hands up!”

The woman’s head snapped up. Her eyes grew massive. Then she took off, sprinting into the darkness.

I chased after her. “Stop! Stop, or I’ll shoot.”

She dropped the bucket and with her arms pumping at her sides, she ran faster.

The ground was rough, making it impossible to hit full stride. “Stop, or I’ll shoot.”

She didn’t stop.

I raised my weapon, and peering through my sight, I fired off three rounds, hitting the rocks two feet in front of her.

Screaming, she tumbled sideways and crashed onto the ground.

Xander sprinted past me. As I chased after him, the woman scrambled to her feet and took off again, screaming like a feral child.

“We won’t hurt you,” I cried.

Xander launched at her, driving her to the ground, face-first. He grabbed her arms, and she shrieked as he yanked her wrists together behind her back.

“Don’t move,” he said.

I reached them and repeated, ‘Don’t move,’ in Russian.

Squatting at her side, I pulled her hair away from her face so she could see me.

“Please don’t kill me,” she said in Russian. A tear spilled from her eye and dribbled over her nose.

“We’re not going to hurt you,” I said. “We’re going to release your arms now. Do not run.”

I nodded at Xander, and he let go of her wrists and removed his knee from her back.

She rolled over, and trembling with sheer terror, she stared at me with her chest heaving ragged breaths.

“You’re okay. We’re not going to hurt you.” I reached for her arm, but she jerked away.

She turned toward the fire, searching for her friends. “Where is Ermik and Jyral?”

I shook my head.

“No. No. No. No.” Shrieking, she scrambled to her feet.

“Hey, stop. Don’t move,” I said in Russian.

She took off again, aiming for the bodies by the fire and we chased after her.

She fell on her knees by the man who’d crashed into the flames, and with her forehead on his chest, she sobbed.

“Give her a minute,” I said to Xander. “Go see what was in her bucket.”

He swept his gaze from the woman to me.

“I’ve got her,” I said, and he sprinted away.

The woman eased back from the body and kneeled with her bottom on her feet. She looked up at me with tears spilling from her bloodshot eyes and yet it wasn’t sadness on her face; it was resignation. Like she’d always expected her friend to die that way.

Trying to portray calm, I scooped my rifle strap off my shoulder and rested my gun on the ground.

I squatted down to her level. “What is your name?”

“Nazira.” As she swept a tear from her cheek, Xander returned.

I nodded at him. “What’s in the bucket?”

He plonked it down by the fire. “Empty water bottles and scraps of brown paper.”

Frowning, I turned back to Nazira. “What are you doing out here?”

She blinked at me, and a tangled expression crossed her face. Her gaze drifted to her dead friend, and she lowered her hands to her sides and clenched her fists. I had the impression she was trying to work out if it was safe to tell me.

“Nazira, we are Australians. We are not here to hurt you.” My statement was shallow given that we’d killed her friends.

She shuddered and another layer of fear slipped into her eyes. “I didn’t do anything.”

“What’d she say?” Xander stood on the other side of the fire, holding his hands over the flames.

“She said she didn’t do anything.”

“Yeah, right. Ask her what she was doing over there because I couldn’t figure it out.” He pointed in the direction she’d come from.

“We only do as told.” She placed her hand on the dead man’s chest.

I nodded. “That’s why we can protect you.”

“But you Australian. You lie.”

I frowned.

Xander stepped closer. “What did she say about Australia?”

I raised my hands to him. “Just give me a minute.” I indicated with my head for him to step back and he did.

“Nazira, we are different. We won’t hurt you.”

“You kill them.” Tears spilled down her cheeks.

I groaned.

“You come here to kill all of us.”

“No, we didn’t come here to kill you. I promise.” My promise sounded so hollow.

Her eyes darted from the body in front of her to the bucket.

“What’s the bucket for, Nazira?”

She pressed her hand to the dead man’s chest. “I told him this was bad idea.”

“Hey.” I shuffled toward her, and she slinked back, clutching her fists to her chest like a terrified child.

I raised my hands. “Nazira, what was a bad idea?”

“Ermik. Are you there, brother?” The Russian voice blurted from somewhere behind us, and we all jumped.

I clicked my fingers and pointed at the bag near the fire. Xander marched to the bag, unzipped an outside pocket, and removed a chunky radio. He turned it over and showed me the side. It had a Scorpion Industries logo on it.

“Jesus. What are we messed up in here?” I shook my head.

“Fucked if I know, but I got a bad feeling about this.” He snatched up the second bag and dumped out the contents.

“Ermik. Jyral.” The Russian voice cracked from the radio. “Wake up. You have Australian soldiers coming your way.”

I darted my gaze to Xander. “Shit. He said Australian soldiers are coming here.”

“Blade and the team?” He spun toward the way we’d come, searching the darkness. “It has to be.”

“Maybe he means us?”

Xander turned back to me, his expression twisted with confusion. “But how does he know?”

I shook my head, but my earlier thought about a mole being in our team sliced through my sanity again.

“We are coming to help you,” the voice said.

“Shit! We have company heading our way. We have to get out of here.”

“Fuck!” He snatched his rifle from the ground and checked his magazine clip.

Nazira’s eyes were so wide the whites were showing. I’d seen many people scared to death during the ravages of war. Nazira looked like that now.

“You must kill the prisoners, Ermik,” the voice said. “Do you hear me?”

Prisoners?

Icy terror gripped me.

“Nazira. What prisoners?”

Her entire body trembled as she shook her head.

I grabbed her arm. “Tell me. Who are they? How long have you had them?”

Her breath shot in and out. “They’re American. That’s all I know.”

American? My mind catapulted to our mission here three years ago. *Oh, Jesus.*

“How long have they been here?”

Her eyes bulged with fear. “It has been years, but it’s not my fault. They made me.”

“What’s going on, Hawk?” Xander glared at me.

“Fuck!” I jumped to my feet. My heart boomed like mortar rounds.

“I think they have the missing soldier and DEA agents here. They’re holding them prisoner!”

Chapter Sixteen

HAWK



I grabbed Nazira's arm, dragging her to her feet.

"Show me the prisoners," I said in Russian.

"Are they alive?" Xander asked.

I gripped Nazira's shoulders, making her look at me. "How many prisoners are there?"

"Two. A man and woman."

Two?

"Was there a third person?" I asked.

Her expression crumbled into utter terror. The answer was yes.

"Take us to them!" I shoved her forward. "Check those bags again, Xander. See if they have any ammo. We have to move." I hooked all three Scorpion Industries rifles over my shoulder.

"Nazira, who was that on the radio?" I waved the radio at her.

"That is Omar. He is our older brother." Her chin dimpled as she lowered her gaze to the body near the fire.

"Is he your brother?" I indicated to the dead guy.

A sob burst from her throat. "Yes, they are both my brothers."

"Oh, fuck. Xander, the dead guys are her brothers."

“Shit.” He tossed the second bag away. “It was self-defense, remember? They shot at us first.”

“Yeah, tell that to the guy on the radio. He’s her older brother and he’s on his way.”

“He’s going to be pissed, then.”

“Let’s go, Nazira. Take us to the prisoners.”

Her lips trembled. “I look after them. I promise.”

Hugging her arms, she shuffled forward.

“Move. Faster. And do not try to escape or we will shoot you in the leg. Nod if you understand.”

Nodding, she picked up her pace, aiming toward the mountain that had somehow become more visible. With the glow from the fire behind us, the stars became brighter.

With each step, the questions tumbling through my mind became more dire.

Should we have doused that fire?

Should we have hidden the men we’d killed?

Are the prisoners really the Americans we’d been sent to save all those years ago?

Who the hell was the mole on our team?

“Ask her how many men are coming,” Xander said.

I relayed the question to Nazira.

She shrugged. “I don’t know. Could be ten. Could be fifty.”

“Ten, or fifty,” I translated for Xander.

“Damn.” Xander huffed. “I was hoping to get some sleep in before sunrise.”

I checked my watch. It was nearly midnight. “Not likely.”

“Nazira, why are you keeping the prisoners?”

Trembling, she shook her head.

I prodded her back with my rifle. “Tell me.”

“I don’t know. We were told to kill them, but ... but ...”

“Who told you to kill them?”

“The Australian.”

“What’s she saying?” Xander asked.

“Who? Which Australian?” I asked.

“I don’t know. They don’t tell me anything.” Her voice quivered.

“Okay, I believe you.” I touched her shoulder and she flinched. “We’re not going to hurt you, Nazira. I promise.”

A haunting sadness washed across her expression. “We have many promises. They mean nothing.”

“Not from me you haven’t. I always keep my promises.”

As we stepped onto the thousands of smooth rocks that I’d thought earlier could be a riverbed, I relayed her comment to Xander.

“What does she know about the Aussie? Who could it be?”

“She said she doesn’t know.”

“Bullshit,” he hissed.

“I believe her.”

“Really? She’s keeping people prisoner. She’s not exactly an upstanding citizen.”

“She’s been feeding them. And giving them water. That’s what the bottles in that bucket were. She’s been keeping them alive.”

“Yeah, if she loves them so much, why didn’t she release them?”

I asked Nazira that exact question.

She led us onto a narrow track that started with a steep incline. “Omar, my brother. He said they were our insurance.”

“Insurance for what?”

“This way.” Nazira stepped around a massive boulder. “It is dark. Watch your head.”

Following her, Xander and I both turned on our flashlights and we entered a narrow tunnel. We had to crouch over so we didn't hit our heads. Nazira didn't have that problem though.

“How do we know she isn't leading us into a trap?” Xander asked.

Good point.

“Nazira, where are you taking us?”

She pointed ahead. “To the people.”

“Why do you keep them here?”

She glanced at me over her shoulder, and the beam from my flashlight showed the distress in her black eyes. “So nobody find them.”

She turned into a narrower tunnel that led off the first one. This new tunnel was wider than the first, but lower, yet she still didn't have to duck.

Xander groaned. “I don't like this, Aria.”

“Me neither. But we have to follow this through. What if they really are the Americans we were meant to save three years ago?”

“That would be great. Or she could be leading us to a tribe of headhunters.”

“Wow, you have a great imagination.”

“Just throwing it out there.”

Nazira took another turn, climbed up over a mound of rocks, and led us into another tunnel.

“How often do you come here?”

She seemed to shrink with that question.

“Nazira, answer me.”

“I try to come every three days, but sometimes my brothers won't help me.”

Jesus. Those poor people. With each step we progressed along the tunnel, I braced for what we were about to find. If the prisoners were our Americans from all those years ago, and they'd been living in these conditions, there was a chance they would be in dire condition.

“What’s she saying?” Xander asked.

I told him and added, “We’re going to need emergency medical evac.”

“We have to get them out of here first,” he said. “I hope you’re memorizing how to get us out of here.”

“So far, I am.” I aimed my flashlight ahead. The tunnel seemed to reach a dead end.

“What the fuck?” Xander must have seen it too.

“Nazira!” I grabbed her arm and spun her around to look at me.

She gasped.

“Where are you taking us?”

She pointed to the dead end. “There is a ladder. I’ll show you.”

I gripped her arm so hard she would likely have bruises there tomorrow. “Don’t lie to me.”

Her chin quivered. “I’m not. I promise.”

I cocked my head. She’d already told me she didn’t believe in promises.

Releasing my grip, I said, “How much farther?”

“Just up there.” She walked to the dead end and pointed up.

I shone my light into the remarkably circular shaft above us. Nazira pulled a cord, and a rope ladder tumbled down the side.

“See?” she said. “I don’t lie.”

Groaning, I turned to Xander.

“Let me go first.” He clamped his jaw.

I nodded and told Nazira to move aside.

Xander shifted his gun position and scrambled up the ladder. At the top, he peered down at us. “All clear, but we’re in another fucking tunnel.”

His voice boomed down the shaft, and Nazira jumped.

“Your turn.” I nodded at her.

She climbed up the rope ladder, and I followed her. At the top, I stepped into a chasm about the size of a double-decker bus that was thankfully big enough I could stand upright.

Xander jabbed his toe into a pile of items against the side of the cave wall. Using his rifle, he scooped up a camouflage shirt. “We have a US Army shirt here.”

When I met Nazira’s gaze, she shuddered. Maybe the soldier was the one who’d passed away.

“Which way?” I asked her.

She pointed to the side and led us to a timber hatch in the floor. “In there.”

“Stand back,” Xander said, shoving us both aside.

Bracing for an attack, I gripped my rifle and shone my light on the hatch.

Xander nodded at me and lifted the timber. It fell right open with a thud that echoed around the room.

Below the hatch was a black void and a foul stench wafted up from the space.

Keeping back from the edge, Xander peered into the hole. “Hello, is anyone there?”

Shuffling noises sounded below us.

“Hello.” The voice sounded like a four-year-old girl.

“Hello. We are Australians. We’re here to save you.”

“Oh, my god.” Her voice broke.

I leaned over the hole, trying not to shine my light in her face. “I’m Aria, and Xander is with me. What’s your name?”

“I’m Rose Higgins. Thank you.”

Rose Higgins. She is one of the DEA agents we were sent to save.

A massive wave of relief washed through me. But we hadn’t saved them yet.

The cave they were held prisoner in was about the size of a dump truck. A pile of tattered blankets lay to one side, where I assumed they slept. A bucket was on the other side, which I assumed they used for a toilet. There was no furniture and no windows. The melted-down remains of dozens of candles against one wall were their only light source.

My heart wrenched over their horrifying conditions.

The fact that we found them was a miracle. The fact that they were alive was because of Nazira. Yet I struggled to even look at her. These people had been living in absolute squalor and it had been completely unnecessary.

Nazira had said they kept them alive for insurance. Insurance for what?

“Stand back. I’m throwing a flashlight down.” Xander dropped the light into the dark hole, and it clanged onto the rocks below.

Rose picked up the light and held it away from her face, struggling with the glare.

“Are you alone?” I asked.

“No, Brody is with me. Brody Simmons.” Her voice was a brittle croak. “Brody, we’re saved.”

She turned the light to a wall where a body lay on the ground. He groaned and rolled over, covering his eyes with bony hands.

“How do we get down there?” I asked Nazira.

She shook her head. “I don’t go down there.”

“Shit. Xander, we need to figure out how to get them out of there.” Leaning into the hole, I peered at the rock walls keeping them prisoner. “Rose, do you have any doors or exits down there?”

Her sunken eyes swept up to me. “No. That’s the only way out.”

Were they thrown into this hole? They must have been.

It was a battle to hold back the fury raging through my brain.

“I’ll get that ladder.” Xander strode to the access tunnel we’d climbed up.

Rose slumped to the ground with the torch at her side and broke into a painful sob.

“It’s okay, Rose. We’re here now.”

Brody crawled to Rose, and they wrapped their arms around each other. Although the light shone away from them, there was enough glow to see how scraggy they were.

Rose and Brody were the DEA agents we were meant to save. It was our fault they were in this state.

I glared at Nazira. “Where is the soldier?”

She slinked back. Her bloodshot eyes blinked at me, and her hand went near her mouth like she was about to vomit.

“Where?”

“He died.”

“Did he starve to death?” I couldn’t tame the fire in my voice.

“No. I feed them food that should be for my children. I saved them.” She slapped her chest. “Me. Nobody else.”

“Move out of the way.” Xander stormed toward us, and I shoved Nazira backward.

He’d cut the rope ladder free and threaded it onto his rifle.

“Look out below,” he yelled into the hole.

Rose and Brody shuffled aside, and when they peered up at us, the pair of them looked like they were a hundred years old. Brody's foot-long beard was thick, yet scraggly, and his hair reached his shoulders. Rose's cheeks were gaunt, and her big eyes bulged with malnutrition.

Xander positioned his rifle on either side of the hole and released the rope ladder. It rolled out and the excess thumped into the ground below.

We leaned into the hole. "Can you climb up?"

Rose gripped the rope but shook her head. "I can, but Brody He's too weak."

I removed the rifles from around my neck. "I'm going down there."

"No." Xander gripped my arm. "I will."

"The rope won't carry both your weight and Brody's. It has to be me." I turned to Nazira. "Shit! Where did she go?"

"Fuck!" Xander jumped to his feet and raced across the cavern.

"Son of a bitch!" I ran to where we'd climbed up and shone my light into the shaft. She wasn't in there.

"I can't see her," Xander said as he checked the cavern.

"Fucking hell! That's not good."

"Hey, Aria." The dread in his tone scraped through me.

I turned to him. Xander squatted down. "I think I found the missing soldier's pack." He flicked open the top of a pack.

I shone my flashlight on a name scrawled in pen across the tan fabric. "Corporal Lance Duggan." A wave of sorrow washed through me. "He's probably dead. This is our fault."

"Hey." He placed his hand on my shoulder. "Don't do that."

I squeezed my eyes shut.

"Hey, come here." He pulled me to his chest and as much as I wanted to fight his embrace, I needed it too. An

overwhelming sense of uselessness washed through me. None of this should have happened. And it all happened under my command.

I needed to fix this.

“Sorry,” I pulled back, flicking a tear from my eyes, pissed off that he saw me crying.

“Don’t say sorry. This is fucked up.” He scooped loose hair around my ear, and it was so tender my heart wept. “We can’t save Corporal Duggan. But we can save them.”

“Yes, and we need to get the hell out of here before that bitch brings her brothers up here.”

We raced to the trap door, and I kneeled to peer into the hole. “Rose and Brody, I’m coming down so stand back.”

With their arms around each other, they shuffled away. As Xander gripped the rifle over the opening, I climbed onto the ladder.

I stepped onto the ground, and Rose wrapped her arms around me and wept. Hugging her and feeling her ribs in her back, I nodded at Brody. His eyes drooped so much that the red underside of his bottom eyelids showed.

“Thank you.” He attempted to smile but his lips just wobbled.

“We need to get out of here.”

Three years’ worth of sweat and grime wafted from Rose’s body as I directed her to the rope ladder.

“Where is everyone else?” Brody asked.

“It’s just us,” I said, trying not to think of just how inadequate that was.

“Where are the Americans?” Brody swallowed and it sounded so painful.

“Let’s just get you out of here.” I placed my hand on Rose’s back. “Can you climb up?”

“They abandoned us, didn’t they?” His expression was so sad, I expected him to cry.

“They’ve never stopped searching for you.” I didn’t want to get into that discussion now.

“We’ll answer your questions later.”

Rose gripped onto the rope.

“I’ll hold the ladder steady while you climb.”

Looking up, Rose wrapped her bony fingers around the wooden branches that had been woven into the rope to make a rung and took her first step to freedom.

Every movement seemed to be agony, and she was slow. Way too slow.

Nazira was going to lead her brother Omar and a barrage of armed soldiers right to us.

We didn’t have enough manpower.

Rose and Brody were so frail, I doubted they could run.

And how will we find our way out of this fucking mountain?

Chapter Seventeen

RAZOR



I helped Rose off the ladder and she flopped onto the ground beside me.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Rest for a second. You’re going to need all the energy you can muster in a minute.” I leaned back into the hole. “Come on. We need to get the hell out of here.”

Aria guided Brody to the ladder, and as he gripped on, he looked up at me. The failure in his eyes nearly ripped my heart out.

“Come on, buddy,” I said. “You’ve got this.”

He reached up and took a step higher.

Aria gripped either side of the rope ladder. “I’m right behind you.”

“Just hold it steady,” Brody said. “I’m climbing out of this fucking hole myself.”

I nodded. “Good on you, mate. You can do this.”

Determination blazed in Brody’s eyes. I just hoped he had a lot more of that to draw on. We were going to need it to escape this hellhole.

Rose crawled to the edge of the pit beside me. “Come on, Brody. We’re free. We’re finally free.”

Tears slid over her dirty cheeks, yet she smiled, flashing teeth as yellow as egg yolk.

My heart was like a jackhammer as I snapped my gaze between Brody inching up the ladder and the cavern around me.

Where the hell did Nazira go?

She was damn quick and as silent as a ghost. But she couldn't have gone down the tunnel we'd used to get in here; I had already removed the ladder. And the distance to the bottom was too far. She would have snapped her legs in two if she'd jumped down.

There must be another exit.

"That's it, Brody. Just two more steps." I reached down to tap his shoulder. "Nearly there, buddy."

His foul breath wafted over me as I wedged my hands under his arms and helped him up the last section. He slumped onto the floor beside me and as Rose crawled to him, I peered back into the cave.

"Come on, Aria, we've gotta roll."

Aria tucked my flashlight into her vest, scooped up a couple of blankets, tossed them over her shoulder, and scrambled up the ladder.

As she draped the blankets over Rose and Brody, I grabbed my torch off her and charged to the side of the cavern. While I searched for Nazira's escape route, I told Aria my theory on the second exit. I looked down the shaft that we'd climbed up. Without the ladder, it was impossible to get down.

How are we going to—

"Found it," Aria called from the opposite side of the cavern.

Hidden behind a natural alcove was another tunnel. Ducking my head to enter the narrow passage, I followed her and her light beam along the rock-lined tunnel. At the end, she shone her light into a shaft that went down at a steep angle, like a slippery slide.

It was too deep and dark to see the bottom.

“She must have gone this way,” I said.

“Jeez, Xander. How do we get Rose and Brody down there?”

“I’ll lower everyone down with the rope ladder.”

“Good idea.” She turned to sprint back to the chasm.

“I hope the ladder is long enough to reach the bottom.” I followed her.

“We’re about to find out.”

I helped Brody to stand, and Aria helped Rose. Crouching over, we hobbled back to the shaft, but each step was awkward. Every minute took forever. If Nazira and her asshole friends attacked now, we were fucked.

At the shaft, Aria lowered her body into the tube. Holding onto the ladder, I braced my feet on either side of the tunnel entrance and lowered her into the pit.

“I’m at the bottom of the ladder.” Aria’s voice echoed about the tube. “But I haven’t reached the bottom.”

Shit. “Can you see the bottom?”

“No,” she said. “I’m letting go of the ladder.”

“Jesus, Aria! Are you sure?” I stared into the darkness.

“No choice.”

The rope ladder went slack in my hands. *Shit!* My heart skidded to a halt as I waited for her voice. “Aria.” My voice echoed back to me. “Aria!”

“I’m here. Send Brody down.”

“Thank Christ. Brody, your turn, mate.” I pulled the ladder back up.

“There’s a four-foot drop at the bottom,” Aria called.

As Brody hung onto the ladder and shuffled into the tube entrance, every move was in slow motion. Like he hurt all over. He probably did. That four-foot drop at the bottom was going to be brutal.

“Ready?” I asked him.

“Hell, yes. Get me out of this place.” He gripped onto the ladder.

“Good man.” He sure did have some spunk. “Here comes Brody,” I yelled into the tube.

Working quickly, I lowered him down the tube until I ran out of length. The rope jerked in my hands and a howl of agony boomed about the rocks.

“He’s okay,” Aria yelled. “Just a shock, that’s all.”

“You’re up next.” I waved Rose forward.

Rose had her turn, and after the all-clear from Aria, I curled the ladder onto my chest and slipped my legs into the shaft. “Here I come.”

I shoved off the side. Rough rocks scraped across the Kevlar protecting my back as I slid down the tube. I shot out the bottom like a monster spitting a fur ball from its throat, landed on my feet, tumbled forward, and nearly face-planted next to the wall.

A skull was right in front of me.

Scrambling back, I shone my flashlight on the skeletal remains. “Fucking hell.”

The beam of Aria’s flashlight joined mine.

“Jesus. He must’ve died trying to escape.” She shifted her light to his lower body. “Look at his leg.”

His right leg was twisted at a hideous angle.

“Christ. What a fucked-up way to go.” My heart pinched as I pictured him dying here in the dark, all alone.

“Oh, no.” Tears flooded Rose’s eyes. “That’s Lance, isn’t it?”

Cringing, I reached into the collar of his shirt, searching for his dog tags. I pulled the chain free and read the name. “Corporal Lance Duggan. Poor bastard. They didn’t even bury him.”

“We helped him climb out of our cave.” Rose’s hand hovered over her mouth like she was about to vomit. “We never saw him again. Did we, Brody?” Rose turned to him.

Brody’s already sunken eyes seemed to shrivel more. “We thought he’d been killed by those bastards.” He lowered his gaze to the skeleton’s broken legs. “But we never thought of this.”

Rose and Brody looked like their hearts had been ripped out.

“Hey. None of this is your fault,” I said. “Or yours, Aria. Let’s go. We need to get out of here.”

I gave Aria Duggan’s dog tags, and she tucked them into her pants pocket.

“Come on, guys. There’s nothing we can do for him now. We need to keep moving.” With my arm around Brody’s waist, and Aria helping Rose, we shuffled along a tunnel that was so low all of us had to bend over.

We came to several forks, forcing us to choose a direction. But there was nothing to indicate which way led to an exit. The passages went on and on and the never-ending darkness was infuriating.

Fucked-up thoughts about dying in this hellhole slipped into my mind. I’d only thought about death once before, and that had been with Aria too. She’d been my drive to keep going. She was my drive now. And Rose and Brody. No way were any of them dying. Not here. Not while I was still breathing.

I tugged Brody closer to my side, holding more of his weight. “It’s okay, buddy. We’ll get out of this fucking place.”

“I hope so.” His voice cracked.

“I know so.” I clenched my jaw.

“I feel like we’ve been going around in circles.” He smacked his lips together like he was trying to produce moisture.

“We haven’t.” I knew that for a fact. The tunnels had all been slightly different. Some angled upward, some down. Some were so narrow we had to go single file, and some were so low we had to crawl.

As we were forced to stop often for Rose and Brody to rest, the hours slipped away.

Finally, we stepped into a massive chasm and my flashlight glistened off a mirror in the middle. Water. I aimed my light beam at a hole in the roof where melting snow and rain would drip through. The hole was too small to climb out, and too high to reach.

Kneeling at the small pool, I scooped out a handful and drank. It was as fresh as the streams back home. “It’s good. Grab a drink.”

Aria kneeled beside me, filled her water bottle, and offered it to Rose.

I did the same for Brody.

As we let Rose and Brody rest, Aria and I strolled to the edge of the cave.

“How you doing?” I asked.

Her shoulders rose with a heavy sigh. “I’m okay. Pissed off, but okay.”

“Yeah. I know what you mean. I can’t believe we’re still stuck in this mountain.”

She scooped her hair around her ear. “Me neither.”

The beam of my flashlight bounced off the rocks, giving her skin a golden glow that stole my breath. How was it that she’d become even more beautiful in the last three years? But it wasn’t just her beauty that captured me. Or her amazing body. It was her confidence and fortitude. Aria knew what she wanted, and she went for it.

Just my rotten luck that she didn’t want me.

I dragged my eyes from her before the ache in my heart grew bigger.

“Hey, Xander.” The way she said my name nearly crushed me. I’d always thought my name was harsh sounding, but she made Xander sound like the best ice cream flavor, or her favorite cocktail.

“Yeah.” I turned back to her.

Her shoulders slumped. “Do you think we’ll get through this?”

The urge to crush her to my chest nearly ruined me. I forced my feet to stay where they were. “I *know* we’ll get out of this.”

“But what if we don’t find an exit?”

“We will.”

“But what if Nazira’s men are waiting for us?”

“Then we’ll kill them.”

She rolled her eyes like I was being ridiculous.

It wasn’t like her to be so negative, and once again I pondered if she was holding something back from me. Given her position in ASIO, and her security rank, she would have many secrets she couldn’t tell me. But still ...

Narrowing my gaze at her, I said, “Aria, is there something else going on here?”

Her forehead twitched into a frown. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, is there something you haven’t told me, something integral to this area, or those Scorpion Industries weapons? Or them.” I indicated to Rose and Brody, who smiled at each other as they washed their hands, arms, feet, and faces in the water.

Aria released an awkward chuckle. “You think I knew they were alive?”

“I don’t know what to think. A lot of coincidences stacked together for us to find them.”

“Yeah, you’re right. But that’s exactly what they are. Coincidences.”

“What about the Scorpion Industries rifles? Were you surprised to find them?”

“Yes. Very surprised.” Her frown deepened. “But I also agree there’s something else going on.”

She pulled her ponytail over her shoulder.

It was a move she made when she was carefully planning her wording. I’d seen her do that many times during our tours together and it crushed me that she couldn’t talk freely with me.

But we weren’t in the army now, and she wasn’t technically my superior.

So what was I to her? A teammate? One with a lower pay grade than her?

“Forget it.” I swept the beam of my flashlight toward Rose and Brody and marched away.

“Xander. Wait. I was thinking.” Her boots crunched on rocks as she raced after me.

I turned to her, folded my arms, and waited for her to talk to me like I was a friend. Or more than a friend.

She stopped a foot away, and as her dark eyes drilled into mine, she huffed out a breath. “You’re not going to like what I have to say.”

I did a double-take. I wasn’t expecting that. “Okay ... hit me with it.”

She glanced over my shoulder to Rose and Brody, maybe checking that they weren’t listening.

I leaned closer to Aria.

She nibbled on her bottom lip.

I waited for her to let down her guard.

“I think someone on our team is a mole.”

I jerked back. “What? Why?”

“Shhh.” She glanced toward Rose and Brody again.

“What gives you that idea?”

“It’s the only way to explain how the men we heard on Nazira’s radio – her brother – knew that we were coming her way.”

“Not true. They could have seen us.”

“If they’d seen us, they would have been ready to shoot us. But they weren’t.”

I replayed that campfire situation in my mind. “No, they didn’t look gun-ready, that’s for sure. Who do you think is the mole?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know, and I hate that I even think it. But so much has happened over the last three years, and some of it can only be explained by there being an inside man who knew exactly what Blade and the team were up to.”

“Well, that cancels me out. I’ve barely spoken to Blade in that time.”

“Yeah, I know,” she said matter of fact.

“I don’t believe it. All of us were screwed over on that fucked-up mission in these mountains last time. There’s no way any of us wanted that to happen.”

“Maybe they didn’t realize it would go that far,” she said, “but once it did, they were already involved.”

I scratched my beard stubble. “Okay. So, let’s pretend there is a mole in our team. Who are they telling?”

She nodded. “Kyle. He’s one level below me at ASIO. He’s always undermining my position and sucking up to Frank ... Dad.”

The fire in her tone suggested that Kyle had done much more than she was letting on. “And what would be Kyle’s end game?”

“To get rid of me.”

“There are easier ways to do that.”

She rubbed her hands over her face. “I know. I just can’t pin this on anyone else.”

“When we get back home, we’ll break a few of Kyle’s fingers and make him confess.”

She chuckled. “Wouldn’t that be nice? The asshole deserves it.”

“I get the impression he’s done more than undermine you.”

“Yeah, you could say that.”

I clenched my fists. “Did he hurt you?”

“No.” She clutched her ponytail. “At least, not in a physical way.”

“Were you in a relationship? Is that it?”

“Pffft. Please. No.” She tilted her head and her molasses eyes pooled.

“Hey, what did he do to you?” I reached for her hand and our palms slotted together. “I’ll kill him.”

She chuckled and it surprised me that she didn’t pull her hand away from mine.

Studying her, I waited for her to open up.

She groaned and her discomfort at telling me drove a dagger into my heart.

I dropped her hand. “You don’t have to tell me.”

“It’s not that, Xander.”

“What then? A national secret you can’t tell me?”

“No. For fuck’s sake. It’s embarrassing. Okay?”

“Oh.” That was a surprise.

“We were drunk. We had a one-night stand and he’s been using it against me ever since.”

“Shit, Aria. That sucks.”

“Yeah. Worst mistake of my life.” She flicked her hair away.

Huh. My worst mistake was letting Aria walk away three years ago. I'd been numb ever since. Despite our crazy situation, spending time with her made me feel alive again.

But she didn't feel the same. I saw it in her eyes. I felt it in her cold indifference toward me.

If I didn't accept that she didn't want me mightily soon, I was going to say or do something that would tear my heart out all over again.

"Thanks for telling me about your mole idea, and Kyle, but we need to get out of here first."

Frowning, she nodded, and I sensed she wanted to say more.

But I couldn't be this close to her a moment longer. I strode away, smacking my hands together. "Okay, guys, we need to get moving."

I helped Rose to stand, and then lifted Brody to his feet.

He groaned as he stood. "How much further do you think?"

"I have no fucking idea."

His shoulders slumped and when a jagged grimace crossed his mouth, a dribble of blood spilled from a crack in his lip. Using his thumb, he wiped his chin, and added the blood to all the other stains on his shirt.

Feeling like a complete asshole, I hooked my arm around his waist. "Come on, let's roll."

"Xander ... how did you find us?" His foul breath wafted my way.

Forcing myself not to gag, I said, "It was a coincidence."

His body jerked next to me. "You weren't searching for us?"

I shook my head.

"You thought we were dead, didn't you?"

I groaned. "Sorry, but it has been three years."

“Three years? Really?”

Oh, jeez. “Yeah. How many did you think?”

“Felt like ten years.”

“I bet.”

“Do you know if—” Sorrow choked off his words.

Dreading what he was trying to ask, I said, “Watch your head,” and tugged him lower to avoid a rocky overhang.

“Do you know if my wife remarried?” he asked.

I sucked air through my teeth. “Jeez, mate. I don’t even know your wife’s name. Sorry.”

Frowning, he twisted to look at me. “But you know who we are right?”

“Yes, of course. We were in this region when you were kidnapped.”

Brody winced and when his knees buckled, I gripped him tighter to my side. “You were with our soldiers?”

“No. We were sent in to save you guys and the soldiers.”

He sighed. “Thank God. So, the others were all rescued. That’s such a relief. We have—”

Son of a bitch! This was a conversation I didn’t want to have. “No, Brody. I’m so sorry to tell you this. They all died.”

He pulled away from my side, and his jaw dropped. “Who died?”

I clenched my fists. “The six soldiers who were protecting you were killed. And the other two DEA agents didn’t make it either.”

He gasped. “Hal and Madonna? They’re dead?”

“What?” Rose’s eyes bulged.

I nodded. “Sorry.”

No words were enough to soften the blow of this news.

“All this time ... we’d thought they’d escaped.” Brody’s face twisted like he was about to crumble to pieces.

Aria ran her hand up Rose’s arm. “We’re so sorry. We thought you two and Corporal Duggan were also dead.”

“How did they die?” Rose asked.

“After you were separated from them, we got the call to help rescue you all. But they were ambushed, and you guys went missing.”

“Oh, Jesus.” Tears spilled down Rose’s dirty cheeks. Brody hobbled to her, and they wrapped their arms around each other.

But Brody’s eyes met mine. “All this time, I thought they were the lucky ones.”

“You weren’t to know.”

“And our families think we are dead too?” Rose pulled back from Brody, wiping her eyes.

I shook my head. “They never gave up hope.”

“That’s right,” Aria said. “They refused to believe you were dead until they saw your bodies.”

I was certain Aria didn’t know if that was true, but it was the right thing to say.

“Come on. The sooner we get you out of here, the sooner we can get you back to your families.” I hooked my hand around Brody’s waist again, and as we shuffled forward, Brody winced. The poor bastard had probably barely moved in all these years and his muscles would be as tight as barbed wire.

With each step, my mind jerked all over the place.

From the attack three years ago that went so wrong.

To our fucked-up situation.

To whether or not Brody’s wife did remarry.

To Kyle, the bastard who made Aria’s life hell. I hoped I was never in the same room as him, or he would wish he’d

never touched her.

Brody crumbled beside me, and I lowered him to the ground.

“I’m sorry.” He looked up at me with tears flooding his eyes.

“Hey.” I squatted beside him. “No need to say sorry.”

“I can’t go any further. My feet ... they hurt so much.”

I shifted the beam of my flashlight onto his bare feet, and he rolled them over to reveal the bloody soles.

“Jesus, mate, no wonder you’re in pain. Why didn’t you say something?”

He shook his head. “Sorry.”

I clutched his shoulder. “Don’t be.”

Aria lowered Rose down and they both winced at Brody’s feet.

“Aria, find something to wrap his feet up. I’m going to check ahead.” I aimed my light beam forward, highlighting yet another fork in the tunnel, and groaned.

Aria stood and the intensity in her gaze stopped me. “Be careful.”

“I will.”

I had a feeling she wanted to say something important, but she resisted. “Don’t get lost.”

“Not a chance.”

After going left at the fork, I continued along another tunnel. How the hell could we still be inside the mountain? Maybe we *were* going in fucking circles. No, that couldn’t be true or we would be back at the beginning by now.

I checked my watch. Two hours and twenty minutes had passed since we’d rescued Rose and Brody. Helping them required us to go slow, but surely we’d still walked for miles.

The tunnels were endless, yet they didn’t look man-made. There was no conformity to any of them.

When I crouched over to squeeze into a tight tunnel, a thick sense of claustrophobia attacked me. Usually, my days were spent out in the open where I could see for hundreds of miles. This closed-in bullshit was not for me. I could never work in a submarine or live in a high-density city with people everywhere. I needed my space.

A memory crashed into me like a wrecking ball. That was the exact excuse Aria had given me for why we could never be together. I could never live in the city.

She was right. That kind of life was not for me.

And yet, if we did get back together, I would make it work.

Fucking hell. I need to stop this bullshit. She's not interested in me.

I stepped into another cave, and the sense of openness caught me by surprise. I flicked off my flashlight and was plunged into blackness. Standing still, I waited for my eyes to adjust. Stars appeared in the distance.

An exit!

I strode over the rocky ground and sighed with relief.

“Thank Christ!”

A small glow appeared a long way in the distance. Was that the campfire we'd come from?

I pulled my binoculars from my vest and peered across the distance. The glow was the campfire and beside the flames was the man we'd shot. I panned the binoculars left. A figure crouched down with a woolen poncho draped over their shoulders. A woman.

Although I couldn't see her well enough, I knew it was Nazira.

But she wasn't trying to get away.

She was waiting for her brother and his asshole mates to arrive.

Shit! We have to get out of here!

Chapter Eighteen

HAWK



I rolled gaffer tape around the folded-up blanket that I'd cut to fit the soles of Brody's feet.

"That should do it," I said, tearing off the tape and patting it down.

"Thanks." Brody's bloodshot eyes looked so painful, yet his gaze filled with an expression of hope that had my heart soaring. Finally, something good had come from our missions in this godforsaken place. We just had to get these two to safety. But there was still a whole lot stacked against us.

Standing, I peered down the tunnel Xander had vanished into. He'd been gone a while. Much longer than I'd anticipated.

"Hey, Aria ..." Rose pulled her knees to her chest and hugged them.

I frowned at her troubled expression. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. It's just ..." She scrubbed her hands over the blanket draped across her legs. "If you guys weren't here to find us, what *were* you doing here?"

I inwardly groaned. It was so wrong that we had been searching for treasure, and not them.

Squatting at her side, I rested my hand on her knee. "When we tried to rescue you three years ago, we ran into some serious trouble. We lost a man, and a couple of us were injured. So many others were killed, and you were listed as missing and presumed to be dead." The weight of that disaster

sagged in my bones. “But there were other things that happened that didn’t add up, and we’ve been trying to piece it together ever since. We all came back to find answers.”

“There’s more of you?” Brody cocked his head. “Where’s everyone else?”

Shit. They’re guarding a fortune.

“We got separated when someone shot at us.”

“Who shot at you?” he asked.

“We’re not sure, but we think it’s the people working with Nazira.”

“Nazira?” Rose frowned. “Is that the woman who fed us?”

“Yes.”

“We tried to talk to her many times.” Rose tucked a wild curl behind her ear. “She always seemed so scared.”

I eased back so I could look at both of them. “She said she kept you alive for insurance. Do you know what she meant by that?”

A frown drilled across Brody’s forehead.

“When we were first kidnapped, she kept asking about some Australian guy.” He turned to Rose. “Do you remember the name?”

A tightness gripped my chest as I anticipated her response.

They both studied each other, and I could almost hear their minds working.

Rose shook her head. “It had something to do with weapons, and that they owed him. I’m sorry, it was so long ago.”

“Did he mention Scorpion Industries?” I asked.

“Yes.” Brody clicked his finger. “That’s right.”

I figured as much.

“We owe our lives to her.” Rose reached for Brody’s hand. “She apologized many times for the small quantity of food that

she brought us. But we always had enough water, and she gave us blankets and clothes, and she gave me some medicine stuff when Brody was sick that time. Remember?”

He nodded. “I didn’t think I’d make it.”

Rose squeezed his hand. “I thought he was going to die. If I’d been all alone, I would never have survived. But that woman, Nazira, she saved us. We’d like to thank her if—”

Xander appeared in the tunnel and the urgency in his stride shot a cannon through me.

I stood up. “What’s wrong?”

“I found an exit, but we have to get out of here. Quick.” He grabbed Brody’s hand and pulled him upright.

I helped Rose to her feet.

“Follow me.” Xander manhandled Brody ahead of us.

“What’s going on, Xander?” I said.

“Nazira is by the fire, but she seems to be waiting for something. Someone.”

I nodded, understanding exactly what he was trying not to say.

“What’s she waiting for?” Rose asked.

“Watch your head.” I placed my hand on her shoulder to lower her down.

“She’s not going to hurt us,” Rose said. “Not after all this time. She saved us.”

I wished I had her optimism.

The tunnel became so narrow we had to go in single file. Thankfully, Brody no longer winced with every step, but if we had to run, he would struggle for sure.

My muscles coiled with dread over the urgency in Xander’s stride.

We’re heading into trouble.

And we were so ill-prepared.

Xander halted us in a line. “Wait here. Turn out your light.”

I turned off my flashlight and a darkness settled over us that was so thick it was like I could feel it.

“No lights from now on. Hang onto the person in front. Let’s go.” Xander led us like a group of school kids on an excursion. Only this was not going to be fun.

I mentally prepared by registering what equipment I had. A Glock in my thigh holster. Over my shoulder was my assault rifle, and two Scorpion Industries weapons that were probably useless. I had two grenades in my utility vest, and a knife that was sharp enough to cut leather. Failing all that, I had my body. I was fit and agile, and I knew how to fight dirty.

The air cleared, and I welcomed the sense of space around me.

“This way,” Xander whispered and aimed left.

As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, dots appeared in the distance. *Stars*.

Within a couple of steps, I was able to make out the edge of the cave.

“Get down,” Xander said and as I squatted with him, Rose and Brody sat on the ground, huddled together.

Xander removed his binoculars and pointed across the distance. “Over there.”

I pulled my binoculars from my vest.

“I see her.” I nodded. “Nobody else though.”

“They haven’t arrived yet. Good.” He put his binoculars away.

“Maybe she’s waiting for daylight before she leaves.”

“Maybe. Or she’s waiting for her other brother and the rest of those bastards.”

I searched around Nazira. Other than the fire, there was nothing else man-made.

I sensed Xander watching me, and I lowered my binoculars. “We need to get out of here before her friends turn up.”

Rose and Brody’s silhouettes were barely visible in the dark. Their sharp breaths were loud and clear though.

“We won’t be able to move very fast,” I said to Xander.

“We can run,” Rose said as she stood. “Can’t we, Brody?”

“Sure can.” Moaning, Brody dragged his body upright.

“We’ve been exercising every day, so we were ready for our escape. Haven’t we Brody?” She rubbed his arm.

“Yeah. And because we didn’t have anything else to do.” Determination flared in his eyes as he clenched his fists and his jaw.

“Good. It’s dark out there, and the ground is rough, so we’ll go steady.” Xander clicked his fingers. “Hey, we forgot about the horses.”

“What about them?” Raising my binoculars, I searched for the horses and found three still tied to the tree.

“I’ll get them,” he said. “We’ll ride out of here.”

I jerked back. “But I can’t ride a horse.”

“You’ll have to.” Xander checked his rifle. “I’m getting those horses, and you three need to be at the bottom of this hill and ready to ride when I get back.”

Shit.

“Xander.” I gripped his wrist.

He clutched his hand over mine. “Get them down the hill, Aria.”

“I’ll come with you,” I said, but my half-hearted tone bared my reluctance.

“No.” He clutched my cheeks and planted a kiss on my forehead. “Be ready when I get back.”

He darted away, disappearing into the shadows below.

I grabbed my binoculars and found him hunched over, scrambling down the rocks toward the dried-out creek bed at the bottom of the mountain.

“Damn it.” I turned to Rose and Brody.

Rose shook her head. “I can’t ride a horse either.”

“It’ll be easy,” I said, even though I believed it would be anything but. “Come on, you heard him. We need to get down there.”

I reached for Brody. Out of the two of them, he was the weakest.

“Before we get moving, I need to do a piss.” Brody wriggled out of my grip and shuffled toward the rear of the cave.

I helped Rose adjust the blanket over her shoulders. “Are you warm enough?”

She nodded. “Yes. My head is spinning though. I never thought we would—” Her voice cracked.

“Hey.” I pulled her to my chest, and as we wrapped our arms around each other, I glided my hand over the bones in her back and shoulder blades. “You’re okay now.”

“I know. But we’d given up hope. We—”

Brody hobbled toward us, frantically waving his hands.

I jerked back from Rose. “What’s wrong?”

He put his finger over his lips and pointed to the back of the cave. “There’s a room back there.”

I pulled my gun and nudged him aside.

“Stay here,” I whispered.

With my Glock raised and ready, I retraced Brody’s steps toward the back wall. The cave was dark, but my eyes had adjusted enough to see shapes. Silence engulfed me as I inched forward, searching the floor for another trap door.

Behind an alcove in the wall hung a woolen blanket that was the same color as the rocks it was attached to.

Gripping my weapon, I pulled the blanket aside and peered into the pitch-black room beyond.

My heart hammered in my chest as I turned on my flashlight and swung my gun left and right, ready to shoot.

The room was vacant. Relief washed through me as I holstered my weapon.

“All clear,” I called to Brody and Rose.

Unlike all the tunnels and caves we’d been in so far, this square room was man-made. It had no windows and only one doorway. Along the side walls were shelves crammed with unlabeled boxes and silver tins, buckets, ropes and tools, and the oldest typewriter I’d ever seen.

Brody and Rose entered the room with me.

“What is this place?” Rose asked.

On the floor in front of the shelves were three Jerry cans. I picked one up and liquid sloshed inside. The back wall had six large wooden crates lined up.

Are they coffins?

I stepped closer, shining my light over them.

The insignia burned into the wooden side put a shiver through me: the Scorpion Industries logo.

Using my knife, I jimmied open one of the boxes, and Brody helped me pop the lid free. We shoved it aside.

“Oh, fuck.” I clenched my jaw.

The crate was stacked with rifles. I pulled one out and flipped it over to reveal the Scorpion Industries logo.

“Jesus.” Rose squeezed her head like her brain was going to explode.

“Looks like they’re preparing for a war,” Brody said.

I scowled. “Yes, it does.”

The rifle had two additional modifications to the ones we’d used all those years ago: an extended magazine release,

making it easier and quicker to reload, and the optics had been upgraded, improving the shooter's accuracy.

This discovery proved that someone had continued to supply Australian weaponry to this region. Why? The only war in this country was a recent conflict near the borders of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan that had concluded within weeks. And it certainly hadn't escalated to the level that required this degree of firepower.

Besides, these were unused.

I checked the magazine clip. It was empty. There must be ammo in these boxes too.

I jimmied open the next box and the next. They were also stocked with the same rifles.

The second-last box had ammunition and grenades.

I plucked out a couple of grenades. "Shove them in your pockets."

Rose's hands trembled as she took one off me, yet she didn't hesitate to slot it into the pocket of her pants. Maybe she understood the danger we were heading into.

After slotting two more grenades into my vest pockets, I pulled out a box of ammunition. "Do you guys know how to handle weapons?"

Rose nodded.

"Yes, but I'm a bit out of practice." Brody released a nervous chuckle.

"If we need you, just aim and shoot." I gave one rifle to each of them. "Any backup is good backup."

Their eyes were laced with fear as they each hooked a rifle over their shoulders.

"Do you have more room in your pockets?" I asked.

"I have another pocket," Brody said.

"Good. Take this." I gave him a box of ammunition.

I loaded the rest of my pockets with ammo, grabbed two more rifles, one for Xander and one more for me, and shoved two more grenades into my pockets.

Using my knife, I opened the last wooden box, and gasped. Sticks of dynamite were layered into the box.

“Oh, Jesus.” Rose slinked back.

Dynamite was serious shit.

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” I said.

As Rose and Brody scurried away, I grabbed another box of ammo, a bundle of dynamite, and one of the Jerry cans.

At the edge of the cave, I hooked the extra rifle over my shoulder, and it clanged against the three I already had. I searched for Xander through my binoculars.

By the fire, Nazira’s body was slumped on her side. A pang of guilt washed through me, but I also knew Xander wouldn’t have killed her if he didn’t need to. I swept my attention to the horses. They were gone.

“What’s that?” Brody pointed to the distance.

I studied the dark blemish on the horizon.

My heart launched to my throat. About twenty men on horses were racing down a hill in the distance.

“Oh, fuck!” I said, breathlessly. “They’re coming.”

Chapter Nineteen

RAZOR



Gripping with my thighs, I kicked my horse's flank. "Come on, fella. Let's go."

I yanked the ropes that I'd attached to the other two horses, and together we trotted away from the cover of the tree. I leaned into my horse's neck and clicked my tongue, urging the gelding to go faster.

It had been years since I'd ridden without a saddle and the horse's bony back was fucking painful. But he was the healthiest looking one of the three horses. He was also the only one with a blanket on his back.

The ground was rugged as all hell, and I couldn't afford to run the horse too fast, or I'd risk breaking his leg.

A rumbling sound echoed off the mountains and I searched the star-studded sky for cloud cover, but it was brilliantly clear. Squeezing my legs tighter, I pulled my binoculars from my vest and searched the shadows of the mountain where I'd left Aria and the others.

The thundering sound continued, and I turned my attention to the base of the foothills in the opposite direction.

"Son of a bitch!" I yanked the binoculars away, leaned into the gelding's neck, and kicked his flank.

My horse increased to a fast trot, and I bounced all over the fucking place. I kicked him harder, and he upped a gear to a canter. Adjusting to his rhythm, I eyeballed the men racing toward me. I couldn't see them properly without my

binoculars and I hoped like hell they hadn't seen me, or all of us were fucked.

Aiming for the bottom of the mountain, I cursed the faint glow behind it.

The sun was rising. That was the last thing we needed.

"Come on, boy." I urged the horse faster.

His hooves crashed over the rocks in a staccato that boomed so loud I cringed.

But those other horses would be louder.

The other point in my favor was the sun was rising on the opposite side of the mountain Aria was in, meaning we would be in its shadow for some time yet.

Gripping a tuft of the horse's mane, I tugged my binoculars free again and searched for her. Every rock looked the same.

Shit. Where are you, Aria?

The wild pack barreling down on me was a mile away. It wasn't enough. They were going to be here well before we got away.

Fuck.

I searched the mountain for Aria. *Come on. Come on.*

There. I found her higher up than I'd expected. Damn it. They were moving too slowly. I adjusted my horse's angle and aimed for them. As I neared, she turned toward me, and despite the distance, the distress in her expression confirmed she'd seen our new threat.

Good. At least now I wouldn't need to convince her to get onto a horse.

She waved her arms, and I waved back.

I glanced behind me. Son of a bitch. We were not going to make it.

When I skidded my horse to a stop in the ancient riverbed, the other two horses crashed into our side. I jumped off,

scooped the reins over his head, and secured the flimsy leather beneath a heavy rock.

I raced toward Aria. “You saw them, right?” I called as I neared her.

“Yes, help me out.”

I hooked my arm around Brody’s waist. “Come on, buddy, we can do this.”

Aria grabbed Rose’s hand and as they raced ahead of us, I saw the additional rifles around her neck. What the hell?

I peered toward the thundering pack. We’re too late!

“Aria. No! We’re not going to make it. We have to hide. This way.” I pointed to our right where the boulders were bigger.

Abandoning the horses where they were, we raced to a rock big enough to conceal the four of us and then some. Aria and Rose ducked behind it first, moved aside, and waved me forward.

Aria helped Brody sit on the ground, and my heart boomed in my ears as I peered through my binoculars.

Seventeen horses skidded to a halt at the campfire, and twenty-three men jumped off the horses.

Every one of the men handled rifles.

Every one of them looked fucking pissed-off.

“What’s happening?” Rose asked.

“Just stay there,” Aria said. She leaned over my back to peer through her binoculars. “They’re all armed.”

Her hot breath whispered across my ear.

“Yep.”

A man in a black beanie and blue striped jumper strode to Nazira and knelt at her side. He felt her neck then shook her shoulder.

I’d given her a good whack across the temple when I’d snuck up on her, but I hadn’t stopped to see if she was dead.

Maybe I should have.

“The guy in the beanie ... do you think it’s Omar, Nazira’s brother?” Aria asked.

“I’d say so.”

“He doesn’t look happy.” Her tone was upbeat.

“He should be. I could have killed her.”

“Oh, she’s not dead?” Aria seemed surprised.

I shook my head. “She has kids. It wasn’t necessary to kill her.”

Aria released a breath. “You’re a good man, Xander.”

I huffed. “I killed her brothers.”

“That was self-defense. They caused their own deaths.”

I glanced at her, but her dark eyes were impossible to read. “So what’s the plan?”

We both peered through our binoculars again.

The men wore tattered clothes and only half of them wore head gear. They looked like poor goat herders, rather than soldiers. They probably were.

But if they attacked us, many of them would die.

My gut clenched at that thought. This wasn’t a war. I doubted they even knew why they were defending this area. I sure as hell didn’t.

Nazira sat up, holding the side of her head. When she pointed toward the mountain, and nearly every one of them followed her direction with rage brandishing their features, my anger hit a whole new level.

“Damn,” Aria said. “She’s showing them where she took us.”

My hopes for them to give up vanished as the men raced to their horses and galloped toward us like a pack of ruthless Vikings. “Shit. We’re outnumbered here, Hawk.”

“Yes, but we have the element of surprise.” Easing back from me, she removed the rifles from her shoulder. “Load these up.”

She pulled a box of ammo from her vest and handed it to me with an empty magazine clip.

“Where’d you find these?” I pressed bullets into the clip.

“After you left us, we found a storage room with wooden crates filled with weapons. Mostly rifles, ammo, and grenades. There was also dynamite.”

“Fucking hell.”

“The storage crates had the Scorpion Industries logo on them.”

“What’s going on? They’re just poor farmers.” I placed the full magazine clip on the ground and grabbed another one to load.

“Yes. Farmers who’ve been given loaded weapons.”

“But why? What are they defending these mountains for?”

“Maybe that gold. It’s the only thing I can think of.” She pulled more ammo and grenades from her vest and placed them on the rocks within easy reach.

“That damn gold has killed a lot of fucking people.”

She peered over my shoulder. “Yep. And unfortunately, I don’t think the killing spree is over.”

I glanced at Rose and Brody. They were huddled together, scared out of their fucking minds.

Aria handed a loaded rifle to each of them and gave a flash lesson on how to point and shoot. She was so calm, it was like she was presenting a speech to a board of delegates, rather than rescued prisoners who looked ready to shit their pants.

Three years ago, these two DEA agents would have been in peak fighting condition and fully weapons trained. Now they could barely stand.

We were preparing for a war that made zero sense.

The sound of thundering hooves filled the air.

“Here they come,” I said, peering around the rock.

The men rode straight to our tethered horses and jumped off. Omar led the pack. He pointed up the mountain to where the cave was with the storeroom.

Crouching over, they scrambled up the rocks.

I raised my weapon, ready to pick them off one by one.

Aria tapped my shoulder. “Wait until they are all in that cave. I placed a Jerry can at the entrance. See it?”

I peered through my binoculars and spotted the can with two grenades and a bundle of sticks taped to the side of it. “Holy hell... is that dynamite?”

“Yep.” She shrugged.

I nodded. “Nice one.”

“It will be nice if we get all of them in that cave before we blow it,” she said.

“Roger that. Are you shooting the Jerry can or do you want me to?”

Her eyes shimmered with a determination that I’d always loved.

“Me.” She was calm. In control. Amazing.

“Listen up, guys. When I shoot that Jerry can, who knows what will happen. This is our only shelter.” Aria pointed at the giant rock we hid behind. “Get in nice and tight.”

She turned to me and nodded. “Let’s just hope the whole mountain doesn’t blow.”

I winked. “Where’s your sense of adventure?”

The men were near enough that I didn’t need the binoculars anymore, and the pre-dawn light allowed me to see how scrawny they were too. And young. And totally unorganized. They weren’t even studying the terrain, searching for us. They were like a pack of feral dogs following their leader.

And so many of them were about to die.

Why? What the fuck was going on here?

At the back of the pack was Nazira. Damn. I shook my head. I'd hoped she would get away.

The men gathered halfway up the mountainside, and Omar directed them to split up. Half went to the cave, and half vanished into the ground.

"Shit. Where'd they go?" Aria's hot breath gushed over my ear.

"Maybe that was the tunnel Nazira led us into?" I said.

"Maybe. Okay, you concentrate on that spot. I'll cover the rest."

"Roger that." I peered through the sight on my rifle but couldn't see the entrance to the tunnel.

"That's it, you dickheads," Aria said. "Get in that cave."

"Count them in for me."

"Four so far. Six. Seven. How many went in yours?"

I shook my head. "Didn't see. Nazira was with them."

"Yep. I saw her." Although her tone was neutral, she would be chewed up over Nazira's presence.

"Okay, that's eleven in the cave. Come on. Come on." She sucked air through her teeth. "Damn, four are holding sentry outside."

I pressed my finger to the side of my trigger.

"Shit. He's blocking my view of the Jerry can," she said.

My breath trapped in my throat.

The air crackled like melting ice.

"Move out of the way, you bastard." Stress laced her words.

A man suddenly appeared halfway down the mountain.

“A tango just emerged from the tunnel,” I said. “Tell me when.”

“Not yet. Wait. As soon as he moves ...”

A second man appeared. “I have another tango.”

“Brody, Rose, get in next to the rock. Quick,” Aria hissed.

The second man climbed over a couple of boulders so he was in a lower position to the first man. As he lit a cigarette, he turned to look the opposite way to us.

He turned our way. His attention stayed too long.

The cigarette fell from his mouth.

The man snapped his weapon toward us.

“Oh, fuck. We’ve been—”

His rifle boomed.

Chapter Twenty

HAWK



A bullet pinged off the boulder we hid behind, taking out a chunk of rock.

“Fuck!” Xander cried. “Hawk. Tell me when?”

Our luck had run out.

“Now!”

I shot the damn bastard who wouldn’t move away from the Jerry can, hitting his knee. He crumbled over screaming.

“One down,” Xander yelled, firing his weapon. “Two. Three.”

I aimed at the grenades I’d gaffer taped to the Jerry can and squeezed the trigger.

A massive explosion ripped through the air. Two bodies flew out of the cave and crashed onto the rocks like lumps of flesh.

The earth beneath our feet jolted. Xander and I dove behind the rock.

Rocks flew skyward.

Screams filled the air.

Another colossal explosion burst a massive hole out the side of the mountain and spewed rocks into the air like a volcano.

The rumbling didn’t stop.

I met Xander's wide eyes and the terror in his expression ripped my heart out. We both glanced up.

"Avalanche!" I grabbed Rose's hand, yanking her to her feet. "Get on the other side of the rock."

The roar of rocks and snow was louder than a freight train. Beneath our feet the ground jerked and shifted.

"Move. Move!" Xander yelled.

I pulled Rose in front of me and then pushed her shoulders as we scrambled over rocks to the other side of the giant boulder.

"Get in as close as you can and get down!" I shoved her forward and dove on top of her, scraping my cheek over the rock.

Xander shoved Brody beside me, and he dove on top of him.

As Rose turned her face toward the boulder and shrieked her terror, I stared into Xander's terrified eyes.

"We're gonna be okay." He reached for my hand, and I strangled his fingers in mine.

The tremendous roar boomed around us. Everything shook. The sky turned black.

"I'm sorry," I yelled. "I'm so sorry."

Xander leaned closer, trying to cover me. Rocks slammed into the giant boulder with such force it sounded like it had been rammed by a tank.

Rocks fell onto our legs and backs and faces.

Xander jerked and his face twisted with pain. His eyes rolled and his head slumped toward me.

"Xander! Xander!" I squeezed his hand.

He didn't move.

"No. No. Xander. Please, talk to me." Hot tears flooded my eyes and dripped over my nose as the avalanche continued to attack us.

Rocks and chunks of ice crashed onto our backs.

“Please. Xander. Don’t you leave me.” I shook his hand.

A chunk of ice landed on his cheek. I wanted to shove it away, but my arms were pinned.

My eyes burned as I stared at his eyelids begging for him to open them.

The dark cloud smothered us.

I couldn’t move.

Panic burned like acid in my stomach as I squeezed Xander’s hand. “Don’t die. Please. I need you.”

A weight so heavy crushed my heart as the rocks thumped into our feet and ankles.

“Xander!” I screamed his name until my throat burned.

He still didn’t move.

I was a fool. I’d fought so hard to push him away, but I wanted him. Needed him. Xander was the best thing to ever happen to me and I’d ruined it. For what? My fucking career.

Anger and sadness merged in my mind like snakes battling to the death.

The roaring avalanche petered out. Snow and ice settled onto us.

“Xander. Please, come back to me.”

A sob burst from my throat.

I sucked in the thick air saturated with dust and snow.

A stillness settled around me. I squeezed Xander’s hand, but he didn’t move.

Oh, my god. This can’t be happening.

“Rose. Brody, are you okay?”

“Help.” Beneath me, Rose’s voice sounded a million miles away.

“I’m here. Brody, are you with me?”

He groaned.

Letting go of Xander's fingers was like tearing out my heart. I released an almighty groan as I pulled my elbow up to knock rocks off my arm. I jerked side to side, shifting rocks and snow and ice off my back.

With a massive knot burning in my throat, I shoved chunks of ice and rocks off Xander's head. He was still facing down, and I touched his cheek. He was so cold. "Xander."

He didn't move. I pressed two trembling fingers to his neck, and squeezing my eyes shut, I blocked out everything around me.

He had a pulse.

"Thank Christ." I shook his shoulder and his head wobbled.

"Xander!" I slapped his cheek. "Please, wake up."

Groaning, his eyes flickered.

"Oh, Xander, thank God. Are you okay?"

He spat crap out of his mouth and moaned. "Did you just slap me?"

Chuckling, I wrapped my hand around his neck and pulled myself toward him. I pressed my lips to his cheek, and tears spilled from my eyes.

Pulling back, I shoved rocks from his shoulders, back, and ass. "Jesus. You scared the crap out of me."

"Did you just kiss me?" A terrific smile crawled across his mouth.

"No." Leaning forward, I kissed his lips. "Get up, you crazy man."

After wrestling the weight off our bodies, we helped Rose and Brody to sit. Other than more bruises to add to their already battered bodies, they were both okay.

Brody spat something off his tongue. "This is some rescue."

I burst out laughing. Everyone followed until all four of us were laughing like we'd eaten magic mushrooms.

I crawled to the other side of the giant boulder to look at the blast zone. A massive hole in the side of the mountain was three times the size the cave entrance had been.

"I can't believe that worked," Xander said.

I clapped his back. "I can. Come on, let's see if those weapons are buried forever." I draped my hand over Rose's bony shoulder. "Stay here. We'll be back in a minute."

She bobbed her head like she was ready to pass out.

The entire mountainside landscape had changed. Snow covered just about every surface and gingerly testing every step, we made our way up to the cave entrance.

A mangled leg stuck out of the rubble, and a bloody body, battered beyond recognition, was on top of the rocks like a ghastly display in an unfair war.

But that was the only body visible. The rest were gone forever, obliterated by nature's mighty wrath. *And detonating a cache of illegal weapons.*

The cave had imploded, and the weight of the mountain had filled it in, sealing the Scorpion Industry weapons forever.

Xander whistled. "Fuck me. We were lucky."

An overwhelming gush of emotion swept through me. My chin quivered, and before I could control them, tears swallowed my vision.

"Hey." Xander pulled me to his chest. "Come here."

I wrapped my arms around him and wept.

"It's okay. We're safe now." He glided his hand over my back.

"I thought I'd lost you."

"You can't get rid of me that easily."

Confusion carved through my mind because that was exactly what I'd done last time. I'd got rid of him. He was the

only man who truly believed in me, who loved me, and yet breaking up with him had been the right thing to do. Our relationship was destined to fail.

I did what I did to save him.

Wiping my eyes, I pulled back.

He swept my hair from my forehead, away from my temple. “You have a small cut on your cheek.”

I dabbed my cheekbone, feeling bruising beneath the cut. “If that’s all I have, I’m lucky.”

He cupped my jaw and glided his thumb over my chin. “You have another cut here.”

“I’m fine.” I draped my hand over his wrist.

“Why did you say sorry earlier?”

Frowning, I shook my head.

“Just before the avalanche, you said I’m sorry. Twice.” Hope and sadness mingled in his beautiful eyes.

My heart wept at the sincerity in his expression. “Oh. I don’t know.” I forced my gaze away from him, down the mountain. “Look, there’s the horses.” I pointed across the distance to a dozen horses that were turned toward us with their tails up, like they were ready to gallop away.

“Huh. Our luck continues.”

We clambered back to Rose and Brody and helped them down the rest of the landslide. After we settled them on a patch of dirt, Xander jogged off to catch four horses.

As Rose counted the bruises on her arms and legs, I climbed back up to the giant boulder that had saved us to see if I could salvage any equipment.

With frequent glances toward Xander in the distance, I shifted rocks away. But by the time he returned, riding bareback on a horse, with three more in tow, the only equipment I’d found was one Scorpion Industries rifle with a bent barrel.

The only working weapons we had left were the two handguns Xander and I had in our holsters. I silently prayed that those men and Nazira, who'd all died in that avalanche, were the last of the assholes trying to kill us.

Xander halted his horse, slipped off the side, and ran his hand over the horse's neck, speaking in soothing tones.

He turned to us, grinning. "Found us some transport."

"Found us another gun." I held up the bent rifle.

He chuckled and it took me back three years, to our secret rendezvous where we would talk all night and tease each other and laugh like giddy teenagers.

"What?" Xander leveled his gaze at me.

Damn. I must have been staring. "Nothing."

"Didn't look like nothing." A smirk crossed his lips, and it was both gorgeous and infuriating. Why did he have to be so darn sexy? And nice. And considerate and brave.

He was so perfect, he was like a wonderful dream.

Xander lifted the flap on a bag across his horse's neck. "Guess what, guys? I found us some food." He pulled out a pouch and held it toward Rose. "Eat."

Her eyes lit up. "Is that dried meat?"

"Dried something, that's for sure."

"Oh, yes, please." Brody reached into the bag and pulled out a strip of meat. "We haven't had meat in months."

He bit off a chunk, and chewing, he said, "Or maybe it was years."

I grabbed the smallest piece and as we chewed through the leather-like strips, Xander pulled a plate-sized loaf of bread from his horse's pack and broke off pieces.

"Bread." Rose shook her head. "I'm so sick of bread."

Xander twisted a cork out of a leather bladder and sniffed. "Ew, that smells nasty."

“It’s probably horse milk,” Brody said. “You get used to it.”

“It’s all yours, buddy.” Xander handed it forward.

Rose swigged the milk and without showing any distaste, offered it to Brody.

He drank then handed it toward me.

“You guys have it.” I waved the drink away. I’d had it before and didn’t need it now. I tapped my flask at my hip. “I still have my water. You guys need all the energy you can get. We still have a long way to go.”

Brody took another sip, then bumped his hip to Rose’s side. “What’s the first meal you want?”

Rose’s eyes rolled. “Fruit. Or a juicy steak. No, fish. Chocolate!”

Brody chuckled and blood oozed from his bottom lip as he bit into the bread. “I want a bottomless serve of fries and an icy cold beer.”

“What about cheese?” Rose’s eyes bulged.

“Or roast potatoes.” He gasped. “Caramel mud cake.”

“Stop it.” Grinning, Rose said, “Apple pie and custard. I know, pizza.”

“Yes. And tacos and burritos,” Brody said. “Covered in sour cream.”

As they rattled off all the food they’d missed over the years, the sun’s morning rays pierced over the top of the mountain and Rose squinted against the glare.

I fished into the top pocket of my vest and pulled out a pair of sunglasses. Thank goodness they were intact.

“Here.” I handed them to Rose.

“Thanks.” She put them on, and Xander fished out a pair of sunglasses for Brody.

As we chewed through the rest of the food, Xander checked the horses, talking to them and stroking them like

they were kittens.

“Eat up, guys,” I said. “We need to get moving.”

I pulled out my binoculars and scanned our surroundings. Snow-capped mountains loomed around us, and the area in between was a sea of rocks. I shifted my gaze to the mountain I’d blown up and my attention snagged on the body on the rocks. It was such a senseless death. All of them were. I’d had a rotten feeling that the killing spree linked to Chui would continue, but the deaths of these villagers were unnecessary and shocking.

Maybe we should do the right thing and bury him?

My mind tumbled to Corporal Lance Duggan, whose body was forever entombed under all that rubble. Lowering the binoculars, I reached into my pocket and twirled the chain on his dog tags around my finger. *Rest in peace.*

I vowed to return his dog tags to his family and ensure they knew just how brave he must have been.

“Are you okay?” Xander graced me with his stunning blue eyes.

“Yep.” I cleared the knot from my throat. “I’m fine.”

“It’s okay, you can talk to me.” He touched my arm.

I slinked back. “I’m fine, Xander.”

“Fine, then.” A bitter twinge marred his tone. He smacked his hands together. “Righty ho. Who knows how to ride a horse?”

The three of us shook our heads.

“It’s easy. Come on, Rose, get over here.” He waved her toward the shortest horse.

As Xander helped Rose and Brody onto their horses, I dreaded my turn. I couldn’t even ride a bike, let alone an animal with its own mind.

But the pair of them made it look easy, and thankfully the horses seemed to be docile.

“Okay, Aria, your turn. Which one do you want?” He indicated to the last two horses.

“The easier one.”

“Come here.” He led me to the front of the horse. “Touch her nose. Let her know you’re a friend.”

He guided my hand over the horse’s nose. “She’s soft.” I frowned.

He swept me into a gaze that took my breath away. “She’s beautiful,” he said. “Be nice to her, and she’ll be nice to you.”

After he showed me how to stroke her neck and pat her rump, he cupped his hand and as I clutched a handful of her mane, he boosted me onto the mare’s back. He threaded the leather reins through my fingers, showing me how to guide the horse.

With his hand resting on my leg, he grinned up at me, and a ridiculous wave of pride washed through me.

“So,” he said, “you need to give her a name. What shall it be?”

The horse shuddered and I gasped. “What was that? What’s she doing?”

He chuckled. “It’s okay. Just keep relaxed and she’ll do exactly what you want. If you get stressed, she’ll feel it, and you don’t want that?”

“Why? What will she do?”

“Aria.” He squeezed my ankle. “Calm rider. Calm horse. Now, what are you going to name her?” He ran his hand down her neck.

“Well ... given the miracle of our survival in that avalanche, how about Angel?”

“Perfect.” He winked at me. “You look good on her.”

He swept his leg up and over his horse’s back, and with him leading, we left the site where we all could have been buried forever.

Our survival was nothing short of incredible. We really were lucky.

With Xander's constant watch over us, we walked the horses in a line with him at the front and me at the back, heading into the vast unknown where there wasn't a single sign of civilization anywhere. As the hours slipped away, the sun did a slow arc overhead, aiming toward the mountain ranges on the western horizon.

My ass had gone from being numb to so sore I imagined I would have massive blisters covering both butt cheeks.

Morning ticked relentlessly to afternoon, yet our trek was far from over. I was not looking forward to another freezing night, especially if we didn't find any more food. And come tomorrow, if I had to get back onto Angel, I doubted I would be able to sit anyway.

Xander, however, seemed unperturbed about our miserable situation. He looked so comfortable riding his horse, it was like he was sitting in an armchair.

Since we set off hours ago, he'd taken charge, and every time he brought his horse alongside Angel to check how I was doing, his smile took my breath away, and I would forget about my stinging ass for a couple of seconds.

He was a true cowboy. A smoking hot cowboy.

And damn, he was good to look at.

Rose and Brody didn't seem to be struggling as much as I was. Maybe they were riding on a 'freedom' high. They were still talking over food choices.

"At the top of that rise, we'll take a break." Xander pointed to a hill that was covered in a field of sandstone-colored rocks. I hadn't seen a blade of grass all day and the only tree I'd seen was the one that had been at the campfire where we'd found Nazira.

All day, I'd been stewing over her death. She'd kept Rose and Brody alive all these years with food, water, and basic necessities. I hated that I didn't know what her motivation was

for doing that, or what she meant when she said they were holding Rose and Brody for insurance.

Insurance against what?

Was it related to the Scorpion Industries weapons? The gold?

Ziháo Fucking Chui?

Did Nazira and her family even know Chui? And if so, did they know he was dead?

Maybe they were fighting a war they didn't need to.

"I'll go on ahead and check what's on the other side of that hill." Xander clicked his tongue, and as he galloped away, he moved to the horse's rhythm.

It was like watching a scene in a romance movie. Even my skipping heart agreed.

I gave my horse a nudge with my heels and as I reached Brody's side, I said, "Are you okay?"

His cheeks seemed to have sunken even more as our day progressed. "Yes. I can't believe we are free."

"I agree." Rose glanced over her shoulder, and they shared a smile. "It's amazing."

They were forever bonded by what had happened to them in that cave. Just like our team. The eight of us would always have a special connection because of the hell we went through within these mountains. We were just lucky that we'd only lost one life. Kai. I would never stop fighting to find answers for him, and the rest of my team. We deserved a resolution.

Watching Xander charge up that hill, I prayed that we wouldn't have any casualties this time. We couldn't go through that again.

At the top, Xander spun his horse around and galloped back to us.

Dread raced down my spine.

"Brody. Rose. Stop here," I said.

As they pulled the reins on their horses, I kept going, wishing I had the confidence to gallop toward Xander.

“There are three huts on the other side of the hill,” he said when he reached me. He bolted around the back of my horse, so we faced the same way.

“Did you see anyone? Do they look friendly?”

“No, just three of those circular huts. I didn’t see anyone.”

“Yurts. Was there smoke coming from them?”

“Yes, one.” He cocked his head and the sun caught in his blue eyes, making them seem translucent.

“Okay, tell Rose and Brody to stay here,” I said. “We’ll check them out.”

He galloped away, and I nudged Angel with my heels. As Angel climbed up the steep hill, I leaned into her mane. Taking the friction away from my ass was a nice relief. Xander came to my side before I reached the crest of the hill.

I halted Angel near the top. “Let’s stop here.” Groaning, I swung my leg over Angel’s back and slipped to the ground.

“Are you okay?” Xander frowned.

“My ass is so sore.”

His grin got ridiculous.

“It’s not funny.”

“I can kiss it better later.”

Trying not to laugh, I forced a scowl. “You don’t want to kiss my ass. Trust me.”

“Can’t be all bad.” He made a show of looking at my butt.

“Will you concentrate, please? Here, do what you do to stop her running away.” I handed Angel’s reins to him. “Let’s go check out these huts.”

At the top of the hill, we lowered onto our stomachs and using our binoculars, we peered below. Three yurts stood at the base of a grassy valley and in the background, the snowy mountains added to the postcard-perfect setting.

“Doesn’t look too ominous,” Xander said.

“No.” I zoomed into the far yurt. “Hey, there’s a car. A Kombi. You see it?”

“Yep.”

“We need that car, Xander.”

“It doesn’t look in great shape.”

The front of the Kombi was crushed inward, and the roof was equal parts rust and pale green paint.

“Reckon you could hot-wire it?” I asked.

“As long as it goes, yes.”

“Hmmm. That would be our luck, right? Finding a car that doesn’t work.”

“We’ve had nothing but good luck so far,” he said.

“Except for getting shot at, separated from our team, and nearly dying in an avalanche, you mean?” I said.

“And yet, despite all that, we’re not dead. And we saved Rose and Brody.”

I panned my binoculars past the yurts to a herd of about fifty goats. “I don’t see a road, do you?”

“Nope.”

A kid ran out of the closest hut, and four kids raced after him. Behind the children, a woman emerged from the yurt carrying a basket loaded with clothes.

“I wonder if they’ll trade the Kombi for four horses?” I said.

“That’s not a fair trade.”

“I know, but the horses are all we have.”

“No, I mean that car. Look at that thing.”

Giggling, I slapped his arm. “Go tell Rose and Brody to rest here while we chat with the locals.”

Xander left my side, and I peered through my binoculars again. The kids kicking a soccer ball around the grass between the yurts looked to be between five and ten years old. They were dressed in brightly colored clothes. Unlike the men who'd attacked us, these people looked healthy. As the woman hung clothes on a rope stretched between two huts, a second woman joined her. Both were in their late twenties, or early thirties, and the one with her hair in braids was pregnant.

Two men emerged from another hut, carrying a bundle of sticks and a small chair each. They dropped the sticks and sat with their backs against the yurt wall. One had a pipe that curled down to his chin, and his eyelids drooped so much it was a wonder he could see.

A fluffy little dog emerged from another hut and ran to the kids.

Xander returned to my side. "Ready?"

Groaning, I dragged my body upright.

Xander bulged his eyes at me. "You okay?"

I huffed out a breath. "Nothing a good meal and sleep wouldn't fix."

"Hell yes to that."

We walked over the top of the hill.

"Do you think they'd have some of those potato pastry things they could share with us?" he asked.

"I hope so. I'm starving."

"Same. I'd even eat chokos."

"Chokos?" I frowned.

"Yeah, those vegetables that look like green bull's testicles."

Trying to hold back a laugh, I said, "I know what they are, but I thought you ate everything?"

"I do. Except chokos."

Walking side by side, we made our way down the hillside which was equal parts patches of grass and rocks. Goat tracks were all over the place.

“So, you remember that about me, huh?” Xander said. “What else do you remember?”

He captured me with an inquisitive gaze that melted my heart.

You make me laugh. I feel special when I'm in your arms. That thing you do with your tongue.

“You're smiling.”

Shit. “No, I'm not.”

“Aria, you were smiling. What did you remember?”

“Nothing.”

He nudged his shoulder to mine. “Come on, tell me.”

“Will you shush?” I clamped my jaw, trying to wipe the smile from my lips and eradicate the vision of us naked together from my mind. I needed to focus. We both did.

I pulled my Glock from my hip holster and put it into the back of my cargo pants, nestled against the small of my back.

Xander raised his eyebrows. “You're paranoid, Hawk.”

“Just being careful, Razor.”

At the base of the hill, we stepped onto lush green grass, and it was like walking into an oasis. Around the field of green, the snow capping the distant mountains glistened in the afternoon sun, and a breeze drifted through the valley bringing with it crisp mountain air that was fresh and somehow smelled like mint.

As we crossed the meadow, another woman emerged from the right-hand hut carrying a large silver pot. She glanced our way and stopped.

I waved and smiled.

The woman must have said something because the two men stood and turned our way.

I waved again, and Xander did, too. We kept walking toward them.

Nobody scurried inside. Nobody raised weapons.

So far, so good.

The dog ran toward us, barking, and the kids stopped kicking the ball to watch us.

“What do you think?” Xander asked.

“I think they’re wondering where the hell we came from.”

“Hello,” I called in Russian, hoping that was their language.

I waved again and a little girl waved back.

“We come in peace,” I said.

The old man with the pipe went inside his hut, but the other man stayed where he was.

“Shit, why’d he do that?” I said.

“Just keep cool, Aria. They look like friendlies to me.”

“So did Nazira.”

Beneath our feet, the soft grass was a nice change from the rough shoal we’d been crossing for what seemed like days and added to the welcoming vibe of the little yurt community. A sense of calm washed through me and yet I still couldn’t shake the feeling we were heading into more trouble.

The young man didn’t step toward us. Nobody did. As he squinted against the sun, we strolled close enough to notice his missing tooth.

“We’re a bit lost,” I said, shrugging. “Can you help us?”

“Where did you come from?” He swept the colorful knitted beanie back from his forehead.

Relieved that he spoke Russian, I pointed to the mountains behind us. “We got separated from our friends a couple of days ago. Can you help us, please?”

The kids skipped forward, and Xander and I smiled as they stopped a few feet from us.

“Hello,” I said. “What are your names?”

None of them answered.

Xander strode to the man and offered to shake his hand.

“Hello,” he said.

I followed Xander and standing next to him, I said in Russian, “Can you help us, please?”

“You want food? Water?” One of the women approached us.

“Yes, please,” I said.

“Come.” She waved us toward a yurt and opened the flap.

I searched for the elderly man but couldn’t see him. Why had he gone inside his hut?

“Come.” The woman indicated for us to step inside.

If this yurt was a traditional one, this entrance was the only way in and out. The yurt didn’t even have windows. If we went in there and it was a trap, then we were screwed. I paused at the door, and the kids raced in ahead of us.

Hoping that they wouldn’t start a gunfight with their children around, I ducked beneath the low entrance and entered the tent. Delicious aromas of a stew filled the circular room. Every wall was covered in brightly colored blankets, and six small beds and one bigger one were on the trampled grass.

The woman used a ladle from a big metal pot to fill two bowls of steaming hot stew and handed them to us.

“Thank you. This smells good.” My mouth salivated before I’d even taken a bite.

She gave us a spoon each. “Sit. Sit.”

The younger man entered the hut and nodded at us.

We sat on the grass and with the kids watching with massive grins, we devoured the meal. The goat meat was

tender, and the cloudy broth was tasty.

We ate in silence with all of them watching, and I had a feeling that they were keen to please. I just hoped that generosity extended to us trading for their Kombi because if not, we would have to come back after dark and steal it.

“That was delicious.” I handed the empty bowl to the woman and when she grinned, her eyes vanished amidst her chubby cheeks.

Remaining on the ground, I rubbed my hands together and turned toward the man. “We need your help, please. We have two more friends on the other side of that hill. They are very weak and need medical help. That car you have, does it go?”

He nodded but didn’t show any emotion.

“We have four horses that we can give you in exchange for your car.” I pointed to the side of the tent where the Kombi was parked.

He didn’t respond and nobody else said anything.

“Is that okay?” I asked. “I’ll give you four horses and you’ll give us your car.”

The man nodded, then he exited the tent.

“Is that a yes?” Xander asked.

I got to my feet. “I have no idea.”

We exited the yurt just as the man disappeared into the hut where the elderly man went.

Xander and I paused in the middle of the huts where a campfire was centered and as we waited for something to happen, the kids and women gathered around us. A little boy handed Xander the soccer ball. Smiling, Xander accepted it, shifted to the side, and gave the ball a gentle kick. Giggling, the boy chased after it.

The other kids joined in, and as Xander kicked the ball with them, I tried to make idle talk with the women, but that proved to be a lost cause. Yet they couldn’t take their eyes off me. I shared my gaze between the hut the men were in and the

Kombi. The car was a wreck, but the inflated tires gave me hope that it did actually go.

Xander picked up the boy, and with him on his shoulders, he kicked the ball around.

I'd never seen this side to Xander. My heart tangled at how happy he looked with those kids around him. During our brief relationship, we'd discussed having babies and it added to just how different we were. He wanted heaps of kids. I didn't want any. I was a career woman, not mother material.

The flap on the yurt swished open and the young man emerged. The elderly man followed with his arms folded.

"Show me the horses," the young man said.

"Xander, grab the horses," I called to him.

He sprinted back to me and lowered the boy to the ground. "They said yes?"

His face was flushed with energy.

"They want to see the horses. Bring Rose and Brody with you and tell them to look frail."

He huffed. "That won't be hard."

He sprinted away and the kids chased after him.

Smiling, I nodded at the man. "My friend will bring the horses. Thank you."

The kids came running back, kicking the ball between them, and the dog barked as it tried to bite the ball. It was all so wholesome and yet my warning meter was still buzzing.

Nothing unusual about that, though. I didn't have time, or even know how to relax anymore. The only time I let my guard down was when I was asleep, even then I couldn't remember when I'd had a night without crazy dreams.

The women watched their children and though they weren't smiling, love blossomed in their eyes. Their days were probably filled with endless chores, yet they seemed to be happy.

A pang of jealousy knocked at my thoughts.

What the hell am I doing wrong with my life?

I didn't have mouths to feed or a husband to please, and yet I couldn't remember the last time I could acknowledge that I was genuinely happy.

Was that normal? Did people actually stop and think if they were happy with their lives?

Xander appeared at the top of the hill on his horse, and even from this distance, the grin on his face was visible.

As he led Angel, and Rose and Brody on the other two horses, down the hill, the giggling kids ran to greet them.

Xander stopped at the yurts, and I helped Rose down from her horse. Gripping her waist, I said, "Hold onto me. I want them to see how frail you are."

Rose hugged my waist and as we shuffled toward the women, the men gathered at the horses.

"Could we have another bowl of food, please?" I asked the older of the two women.

"Yes, I'll bring you some." Both women went into the food yurt, and we waited outside.

"Are you okay?" I asked Rose.

"Yes. I hope they take our offer. I don't think I can ride a horse for much longer."

"I'm so with you on that."

The pregnant woman offered Rose a steaming bowl of food and a spoon and gave me a second bowl.

"Thank you," I said. "I will give this to my friend. Is that okay?"

The woman nodded.

I carried the bowl to Brody. "Here. Eat."

He grinned. "Thanks."

I turned to the elderly man. “Will you exchange the horses for the car?”

He ran his hand down Angel’s leg as if examining her fitness. “We need a car to carry our things.”

His comment simultaneously confirmed the Kombi worked and crushed my hope of acquiring it. “Please, I am begging you. Our friends need a doctor.”

“What else do you give me?” The elderly man’s eyes twinkled, and he nodded at my tactical vest.

“What’s he saying?” Xander asked.

“He wants more. What’ve you got?” I pulled items out of my vest. Gaffer tape. A utility knife. My binoculars.

The man frowned at my binoculars, and I held them to my eyes. “You look through them to see in the distance. Here, you try.”

His forehead bunched into deep wrinkles as he peered through his binoculars. He jerked back, lowering the binoculars. Blinking at the mountains in the distance, he peered through the binoculars again and a massive grin swept across his lips, revealing just three teeth. He swung the binoculars back toward me and jolting, he nearly dropped them.

Giggling, I said, “Do you like them?”

He peered through them again, nodded, then handed them to the younger man.

“I think we might have a deal,” I said, making a show of crossing my fingers.

I was wrong. The shrewd old man made the most of our desperation. After more bargaining, in which in addition to the horses, we gave away my water bottle, gaffer tape, both our binoculars, Xander’s gun and hip holster along with six bullets, and the two small gold loop earrings in my ears, we had a deal.

I thanked my lucky stars I had hidden my gun away or that too would be gone. And I’d managed to convince them that

our radios were useless, or we wouldn't have them either. Not that they were of any use at the moment.

The family wanted to celebrate our exchange with more food, and we wolfed down a quick bowl of stew each. After that as I thanked them, Xander gave the horses one last pat, and the boy another ride on his shoulders.

Walking to the Kombi with my arm around Rose, I cringed at the vehicle we'd just traded for. Both headlights were cracked, and rust had eaten a hole in the front that was the size of a suitcase. The VW symbol had slipped upside-down, and a hole was where the side mirror would have been. If this thing turned on, it would be a miracle.

As Xander claimed the driver's seat, I opened the side door to help Rose and Brody into the back. The rear section had been stripped of chairs, and animal poo was scattered all over the floor.

Rose didn't even bother sweeping the manure away before she sat cross-legged on the cold metal with her back against the driver's seat.

Brody groaned as he sat beside Rose.

"Sorry, guys." My apology was grossly underwhelming. "This will be over very soon." *I hope.*

Brody looked like he tried to smile, but he was far from it.

I pulled the side door shut and winced as I sat my sore ass into the passenger seat.

"Fingers crossed we didn't buy a lemon," Xander said as he turned the key.

With the engine emitting a nasty metallic screech, we set off with the families waving in our rear mirror.

"This is better," I said, leaning back on the cracked seat.

"Maybe." Xander scrunched his nose. "But horses don't need petrol."

"Ah, shit." My shoulders slumped. "Don't tell me—"

"We have a quarter of a tank."

It had better be enough to reach our team.

“Which way, boss?” Xander crunched into a higher gear.

Ahead of us, there was no road or track or any signs of where to go.

Damn it. I hadn't thought to ask for directions.

And with limited fuel, we couldn't afford to get lost.

Chapter Twenty-One

RAZOR



Using the sun as our guide, we drove east. We had about three hours of sunlight left before we would have to stop because the Kombi headlights didn't work. If we didn't run out of petrol beforehand, that was.

I didn't want to think about that scenario. One glance at Aria confirmed she had enough worry going on.

Aiming for the dip between the two mountains in the distance, we crossed over grass that was the greenest I'd ever seen. "Isn't this beautiful?"

"Huh?" Aria blinked at me like she'd been a million miles away.

"This scenery, it's beautiful, isn't it?"

She peered out the window as if seeing it for the first time. "Yeah. I guess so."

"You guess so?" I frowned at her. "Okay, so what would be beautiful scenery to you?"

"Oh, jeez, Xander, how about one that has a hot meal and a comfy bed?"

"I get it, but can't we enjoy the journey to get there?"

She rolled her eyes and turned her gaze out the window.

The car crashed through a giant divot that I hadn't seen and both Brody and Rose groaned.

"Shit. Sorry, guys," I called to the back.

Aria shifted on her seat and winced.

“Your bum still hurting, huh?”

“Yeah.”

I wanted to say that I’d look after her later, but she wouldn’t want that. She’d made it abundantly clear that she didn’t want me in her life.

I huffed out a breath. “So, what’s the plans once we get out of here?”

“Here? As in these mountains?”

“Yeah, once we get back to Australia?”

“For starters, I’m going to find out who our fucking mole is.”

Her twisted expression confirmed how much this was eating her up.

“You’re certain we have one?”

“It’s the only explanation that makes sense. Someone knew of our location and told the shooters who attacked us at the troop carrier.”

“Maybe they were just thieves, wanting to steal that truck?”

“Maybe. Except they had Scorpion Industries weapons. It doesn’t add up.”

“If they’d wanted to kill us, they would have sent more than two gunmen,” I said.

“Agreed. But that’s the thing, I don’t think they wanted to kill us. Just like last time we were here. We shouldn’t have survived last time.”

I groaned. “I don’t—”

“We could put our miraculous survival down to our expert skills,” she interrupted me. “But last time, they wanted us alive so they could broadcast our murders on live television. I’m not saying that’s what they wanted this time, but if they wanted us dead, and they knew where we were, then they could have

planned an ambush that we wouldn't have walked away from."

"So ... what does all that mean?"

"I think they wanted me separated from my team." Her lips drew into a thin line.

"You? Why you?"

"I'm certain Kyle is the mole."

"The guy you—"

"Yes. I think he wanted me out of the picture."

"But why?"

"Because he wants me and the gold."

"But—" A potent wave of dread blazed through my stomach. "Oh, fuck! You think he moved you to safety so the rest of us could be eliminated."

Her molasses eyes darkened even more.

"Jesus Christ, Aria. He'd have to be a psycho."

Clenching her jaw, she swept a tear from her cheek.

I stomped on the accelerator and the Kombi farted black smoke out the back. "I hope you're wrong."

"Me too. But I can't make sense of anything else."

Trying to piece this info together, I shook my head. "But so many coincidences had to slot together. Like how did he know you would leave the troop carrier?"

She shrugged.

"And what about separating from Ghost and Jet? How could he have known that would happen?"

"I don't know." She heaved a sigh. "I just hope the others are okay."

"Try your comms."

She pulled her radio from her vest. "Blade, this is Hawk. Do you read? Over."

Silence filled the airways. I wanted to believe we were too far away, but I wasn't sure.

Shaking her head, she rested the radio in her lap.

I ran my hand over her leg. "We'll get through this, okay? We've got this far, haven't we?"

Her gaze drifted to me, but I had a feeling she wasn't looking at me. I wished I could read her mind. Even when we'd had our brief time together, I'd always felt like she was holding back.

The mountain I drove toward seemed to grow bigger by the minute, and with each mile we crossed, I scoured the landscape for a way to pass between the range or a road that went over it.

As the sun slipped into the western mountains behind us, and Aria's repeated attempts to reach our team went unanswered, the hope I'd been riding all day became swamped with bouts of anger and frustration.

A pale, fawn-colored line appeared in the distance. Wishing I had my binoculars, I pointed toward it. "You see that."

Aria leaned forward, and I studied the shape of her neck as she peered through the windshield. "A road! Thank God. I was beginning to think we were on another planet."

Her smile lit up her face. It lit up my world.

I angled the Kombi toward the road. We hit several massive potholes and drove through a dry creek bed that had the tires spinning so hard I feared they would melt.

Finally, I turned the car onto the dirt road that we'd seen forty minutes before.

"Do you think this is the road we came in on?" I asked.

Aria nodded. "It has to be. It's the only road we've seen for days."

The road disappeared ahead, and as I drove up the hill, I tried to find something familiar but couldn't.

The Kombi was not a fan of the steep incline and even in the lowest gear, the old bomb went so slow we could have walked faster. Near the top, black smoke spewed out the rear of our vehicle, and the engine shrieked like a damn alien was being burned alive inside it.

I patted the steering wheel. “Just a little more. We’re nearly there.”

“There’s the lake.” Aria jolted forward. “We made it, guys.”

We all cheered, and Aria gave me a smile that was the real Aria. The one she saved for special moments like all those stolen nights we had together years ago.

I wanted to pull her into a hug and soak up her joy.

The moment vanished when she held her radio to her lips and slipped back into professional soldier ... Hawk. “Blade, this is Hawk. Do you read? Over.”

The radio crackled, and we both gasped.

She stared at her radio like she could see whoever was on the other end. “Blade, can you hear me? Over.”

“Hawk. This is Jet.”

“Jet! You fucking beauty,” I cheered. “Thank Christ. It’s good to hear your voice.”

“Where the fuck are you?” Jet asked.

Aria and I grinned at each other as she held the radio to her mouth. “We’re coming down the range. We can see the lake now, so we’ll reach the road that skirts the lake in about ten minutes. We’re in an old Kombi van.”

“Are you coming in the same way we did?” Jet asked.

“Yes,” she said.

I guided the Kombi around a hairpin turn and the car groaned in protest.

Aria spoke into the radio again. “Is everyone okay? Over.”

The radio was silent.

I navigated around another sharp turn and onto a section that was so steep, Aria pressed her hand against the roof to stop her butt sliding forward.

“Jet. Is everyone okay? Over.” Her tone escalated.

Again, he didn’t reply. Her eyes darkened and as she fiddled with the knob on the radio, a sick feeling settled in my stomach.

As she tried again, I drove the Kombi onto the road that ran the gauntlet between the frozen lake and sheer mountainside.

“Maybe the battery is flat?” I suggested.

Shaking her head, she pointed at the little green indicator light and then tried to call again.

Gripping the steering wheel, I pressed the accelerator, pushing the rust-bucket up to fifty miles an hour. The road was dead straight, yet still treacherous, and my heart thundered in my ears as the car shuddered around us. One flinch with the steering wheel, and we would either crash into a solid rock wall or plunge into a frozen lake.

The steering wheel vibrated like a bitch, but I couldn’t slow up. Fear and desperation drove me now. Across the ice, the dark shadow from the mountain loomed like a monster, giving me a feeling that we were about to be crushed by the giant beast.

Aria tried her radio again. Nothing.

Up ahead, was the giant bus-sized boulder, and the road vanished as it curved around the other side of it. I dropped the Kombi back to first gear, but still, took the corner faster than I should have, and in the back, Rose cried out like a terrified child. She and Brody were standing, no doubt because it was too bumpy to sit, but they hunched over, gripping onto the backs of our seats.

In my rear mirror, the fear on their faces matched the dread inching through me.

“There’s our troop carrier,” Aria shouted.

The truck was so far in the distance it looked about the size of a matchbox.

I cheered, letting up on the accelerator a fraction. “I told you we’d make it.”

“Thank God.” Resting her hand over mine, she rolled her head back and sighed.

A dust cloud mushroomed behind the truck as it raced toward us, growing bigger by the second.

“How will they get around us?” Rose asked.

“Hmmm, good point.” I slowed even more. The road was barely wide enough for the Kombi, let alone the truck. There definitely wasn’t room for both vehicles. “I’ll have to reverse back.”

I slowed down and stomped on the brake.

Ahead, the truck still steamed toward us, and the dust cloud kicking up behind it showed it was going at one hell of a speed. Only one person was visible in the front seat.

Frowning, I put my foot on the clutch and wrestled the Kombi into neutral. “I wonder why nobody is in the passenger seat?”

Aria leaned forward. “Good question. Who’s driving? Is it Blade? Viper?”

It was too hard to tell. The truck’s engine whined as if protesting against the speed.

He’s pushing that truck to the limit. Why?

I peered at the driver, trying to work out who it was. “Something’s wrong.”

“What?” Aria snapped her gaze to me. “Why?”

“Look at the speed he’s going.”

The roaring engine grew louder.

Fifty yards from us, I recognized Cooper in the driver’s seat. “It’s Jet driving. Look.”

Jet waved his arms, but it wasn't a friendly wave. The truck didn't slow down.

"What's he doing?" Aria pressed her hand to the roof.

"He's not slowing," Brody yelled.

"The truck's out of control!" Aria cried.

"Christ!" I jammed the Kombi into reverse.

"He's going to crash into us," Rose shrieked.

"Hang on!" I rammed the Kombi into reverse and gripping onto the shoulder of Aria's seat, turned to look out the back window as I stomped on the gas.

"Stop! You idiot!" Aria yelled.

I darted my gaze between the troop carrier and out the rear windows and back again. The truck was twenty yards away, but it was catching us damn fast.

The Kombi shuddered and slid all over the place as I tried to keep it straight.

I glared forward. "Cooper. Stop!" I yelled.

Shaking his head, he waved his arm, telling me to get out of the way. Jesus, he's not out of control, he's driving at us on purpose.

The Kombi jerked sideways and scraped along the rock wall. The sound was like a military attack. Sparks sprayed everywhere.

Rose and Brody screamed.

"He's going to ram us!" Aria pulled her gun.

"What are you doing?" I shot my gaze from her to the truck; just five yards away.

"Killing that asshole." She aimed out the window.

Rocks clawed at the Kombi again and all the windows on my side exploded inward.

Rose and Brody screamed.

“Fuck!” I yanked the steering down, jolting us away from the wall.

Aria fired her Glock.

Gritting my teeth, I glared at Jet, expecting his head to take a bullet.

She fired over and over, but Jet was like a robot, looming right above us.

A terrified scream tore from Aria’s throat.

“Hang on!” I yelled.

I strangled the steering wheel.

The truck rammed into us, and our front windshield exploded, showering us in glass. The truck’s front grill filled our vision, and I lost control of the steering.

Aria fired into the truck’s engine. Sparks pinged off the metal.

I stomped on the brake, but we didn’t stop.

Metal screeched.

The truck engine roared.

Driven backward, we were headed straight toward that giant boulder on the road.

“Do something!” Aria yelled.

“He’s going to kill us,” Brody yelled.

Stomping on the gas, I pulled down hard on the steering wheel. The side of the Kombi slammed into the rock wall.

The front jolted toward the lake and the truck rammed into my driver’s side corner. The Kombi spun sideways.

Someone screamed. My mind split three ways. The truck. The ice. Aria.

The truck rammed into our side. A tire exploded.

Rose shrieked.

Wedged up against the truck, the Kombi skidded sideways, jolting and screeching.

Another tire exploded.

“He’s going to kill us!” Aria’s fear tore out my heart.

The Kombi bucked, and the windows on Aria’s side imploded.

“Give me your gun!” I said.

She shoved her Glock into my hand. The truck’s front grill drove us sideways like a battering ram.

I leaned out my shattered window and as we jolted all over the place, broken glass sliced under my arm. Clenching my jaw against the pain, I aimed upward to shoot Cooper. Shit! The truck cabin was too high.

The tires! Glass shards sliced my flesh as I leaned out further. Thick guards protected the tires, and I couldn’t see them, let alone shoot them.

Screaming my fury, I aimed at the truck’s engine and fired. My bullets pinged off the toughened metal. The Glock was useless.

“Son of a bitch!” I tossed the gun back to Aria, strangled the steering wheel, and stomped on the gas, desperate to dislodge us. But we were stuck.

I looked past Aria, outside her window. Fuck! In twenty yards we were going to ram into that bus-sized boulder that the road went around.

“He’ll have to slow down to make it around the corner. That’ll be our chance.”

Fifteen yards.

Shit! He’s not slowing down.

“Xander! He’s going to ram us into that giant rock.” Aria’s eyes were enormous. My heart nearly ripped out of my chest at her terror. “We’re going to die.”

“No, we’re not,” I yelled over the screeching metal. “I’ll drive us into the lake.”

“Are you crazy?” she cried.

“We’re going into the lake,” I yelled to Rose and Brody.

Aria braced her hand on the roof.

“Get ready to hold your breath.” I strangled the steering wheel in one hand and clutched the gear stick in my other.

Aria raised her gun and emptied her magazine into the old Soviet motor.

The truck’s engine noise changed, and it slowed a fraction, but it was too late.

I counted the seconds until we reached that boulder. *Eight. Seven. Six.*

“Hang on!”

I rammed it into second gear and stomped onto the gas.

Nothing happened. We were still being railroaded toward the rock.

“We’re stuck!” I yelled.

I stomped on the brake. Nothing.

I shoved the gear into reverse. Nothing.

The truck shifted down another gear.

I rammed the Kombi into first gear and stomped on the gas. We shot forward. “Hang on!”

We all screamed as the truck rammed the back half of the Kombi. Spinning sideways, we shot off the road and plunged into the frozen lake.

Aria’s side smashed through the ice.

“Aria!” I dove across the front cabin, desperate to save her.

Freezing water poured through her shattered windows.

The Kombi sunk like a metal coffin.

Chapter Twenty-Two

HAWK



The back of my head slammed into the window frame.
Stars darted across my eyes.

“Aria!” A voice carved through the tremendous noise.

A black fog swirled across my mind.

“Aria. Babe. Come on.” A hand grabbed mine; fingers dug into my flesh.

Xander?

“Help!” a woman screamed.

“Help us!” a man shrieked.

Freezing water clawed at my body. A breath burst from my throat.

Clarity returned in a flash. “Oh, shit!”

Icy water poured through the windows.

“Take a breath!” Xander screamed, pulling me upward.

Gasping at the frigid temperature, I pushed up on the seat and with my face pressed into the vinyl roof, I sucked in a lungful of air.

“Aria! Aria! Are you okay?” Xander’s eyes blazed with fear.

“Yes.” My body spasmed against the frigid water like I’d been Tasered.

“Thank God.” His lips quivered. “Come on. We need to save the others. You help Rose. Follow me!”

He sucked in a breath and ducked below the water pouring into the vehicle.

I took one last breath, and clawing at the freezing water, followed Xander between the front seats into the back.

Icy tentacles stung like thousands of needles as I searched the chaos. Rose was halfway out the shattered window, but she was kicking her legs like crazy.

Shit! Her blanket had snagged on the glass. I grabbed her ankle, letting her know I was there, and tore the blanket free. I gave her a shove upward and released my hold on her. As Rose swam to the surface, I searched for Xander.

He was at the back. My heart lurched to my throat. Brody was unconscious. Or dead. Xander was trying to wrestle his lifeless body out a window.

Pushing off the side, I swam to him.

Xander shook his head at me. Fury raged in his eyes.

Ignoring him, I swam out a different window, careful not to get snagged, and reached into the next window, hooked my hands under Brody's armpits, and pulled. His limp body fed through the gap, and Xander followed.

Clawing at the water, we dragged Brody to the surface.

I shot through to fresh air and gasped for a breath.

"Brody!" Xander yelled. "Come on, buddy. Stay with us."

As we dragged his body to shore, Rose crawled out ahead of us.

My numb feet made kicking harder, and with one hand helping Brody, I could only use one hand to swim. I searched the road for the truck, but it was gone.

It seemed forever before we reached dry land. Xander climbed out, pulled Brody onto the rocks, then raced to help me.

"I'm fine." I shooed him away. "Help Brody."

My flesh burned as I crawled out of the icy water onto the rocks. My teeth clanged together so hard it was a wonder they didn't break.

Rose sobbed as she crawled to Brody.

Kneeling at Brody's side, Xander performed CPR, counting the repetitions with his shivering blue lips.

Gritting my teeth, I trudged to Xander and fell to my knees. Leaning over Brody's mouth, I listened for his breathing.

"Hold his hands," Xander said between counts.

Rose gripped Brody's hand. "Come on, Brody, don't you leave me. We have a story to tell, remember?"

Xander paused compressions. "Check his pulse."

I pressed my fingers to Brody's neck and shook my head.

"Come on, Brody. We need you." Xander started again.

Over and over, he counted the repetitions.

"Brody. Please!" Rose burst into tears and fell forward, sobbing into Brody's ear.

As Xander counted, I met his gaze. The fear in his eyes was as intense as when we'd nearly died in these mountains last time.

"No. No. No. No. No!" Xander yelled and pressed again.

Brody bucked forward, spewing water from his blue lips. Rose squealed.

Xander grabbed Brody and rolled him onto his side. "Thank Christ, buddy. You scared the shit out of us."

Brody's body jerked as he spat more water and released wracking coughs.

Xander patted his shoulder. "That's it, buddy. Get it all out."

Rose kissed Brody's cheek. "Thank you. I thought we'd lost you." She strangled his fingers in her hand so hard her knuckles bulged white.

Brody rolled onto his back and tears spilled from his eyes. “This is a fucking horrible rescue.”

Xander and I burst out laughing.

Both exhaustion and clashing emotions took over, and I couldn’t stop tears spilling down my cheeks.

Xander crawled to me, and on our knees, he wrapped me in a bear hug, and I cried.

He glided his hand down my back. “Thank God you’re okay.”

“And you. I can’t believe Jet did that.”

Xander stiffened and pulled back. “Me neither.” He looked like his heart had been cut out. “We’re best mates. Why would he do that?”

“Greed. That’s all it is.”

“But he’s not like that.” Xander clenched his teeth so hard his jaw muscles bulged.

“Money does strange things to people.”

“No, Aria. It has to be something else. Jet is—” He didn’t finish his sentence.

“He nearly killed us, Xander. We’re lucky to be alive.”

Xander glared at the skid marks on the dirt road, but I had a feeling his mind was elsewhere. “I’ve known him since high school.”

“People change. Trust me, I know.”

He blinked at me, maybe trying to work out who I was referring to. He was the only person in our team who knew what my mother had done and how much that had ruined me. I hated that I’d revealed that weakness to him.

Desperate to change the subject, I said, “I’m glad he didn’t kill you.”

“I’m glad he didn’t kill you either.” He cupped my cheek.

Smiling, I leaned into his palm, feeling his warmth.

Blood dripped from his arm onto his shirt.

“You’re bleeding.” I reached for his bicep.

He raised his arm. His shirtsleeves dangled in jagged strips, revealing nasty gashes to his flesh.

“Shit. You need stitches.” I patted my utility vest, searching for my first aid kit, but I’d given everything to the nomads.

I looked along the road skirting the edge of the lake.

“I’ll go get help.” I dragged my body upright.

He grabbed my hand. “No, you stay. I’ll go.”

“No, babe. I’m faster than you, and—” My breath caught.

His eyes widened. “Babe?” A cheeky smile teased his lips as he stood.

I stood, too. “That was a slip, that’s all.” I grabbed my ponytail and squeezed out water.

“A very nice slip.” He drove his fingers through his wet hair that somehow made him look even sexier.

How could he look so good after all we’d been through? Warm blood coursed through my veins and teased my insides in all the right places.

Closing my eyes to block him out, I shook my wet hair over my shoulders. But I couldn’t block out the swirl of butterflies dancing across my stomach. He stepped closer to me and placed his hands on my waist.

I opened my eyes to look up at him. “This is a bad idea, Xander.”

He pressed his hand to my cheek again, and my breath caught at the desire burning in his stunning irises. “If you stop fighting it, you may like where it takes us.”

My crazy heart dipped and soared, and I could barely think. Everything around me vanished into obscurity as I breathed him in.

“I ...” I couldn’t make the words escape my lips.

“What? Tell me.” He shifted his hand from my cheek to my neck.

I pressed my palm to his chest. “I can’t have my heart broken again.”

“I won’t break your heart. I love you.”

I huffed. “Love isn’t enough.”

“Love is everything.” He leaned closer, sweeping his gaze from my lips to my eyes.

Oh, God, he’s going to kiss me.

I shuffled back. “No, Xander, you’re wrong. You have these rose-colored glasses on that cloud reality. It’s sweet and amazing, but it’s not real. Life doesn’t revolve around love.”

“You were hurt by love. I know. But I want to show you how amazing it is. I want to help you.”

A painful knot swelled in my throat as I shook my head. “I don’t need help.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

I flicked tears from my eyes, angry that they were there.

He reached for my hand, but I jerked back. “No, Xander, don’t. We’ve been through this once. I can’t break up with you again.”

“So don’t.”

Wiping my nose with the back of my hand, I shook my head. “Look. We’ve been to hell and back. Our emotions are all over the place. None of this is real.”

“This is every bit real.” His shoulders sagged. “What do you want, Aria?”

I angled my gaze up to him, and my stupid chin quivered. “I want you to find love somewhere else.”

His mouth fell ajar. Sadness crumbled across his face.

My heart dissolved.

“I’m going to get help.” Spinning on my heel, I sprinted away with a knot in my throat that was so big I could barely breathe.

Tears pooled in my eyes, making it impossible to see.

I pumped my arms, driving my legs harder and faster, desperate to get away from him.

Every step tore another strip from my heart. I told myself that I’d done the right thing, but it fucking hurt.

Love wasn’t real. It was just a stupid, meaningless word.

My mother proved that to me on the day she vanished. Squeezing me to her chest, she’d whispered her last words to me. ‘Have a good day, sweetheart. Remember I love you. I’ll always love you.’

By the time I’d returned home from school, she’d packed her things and gone. No goodbye. No explanation. No secret note hidden under my pillow. Just gone. She didn’t love me. She’d just said that to make herself feel better.

Saying ‘I love you’ didn’t mean anything. Actions did. And sacrifices.

And I needed to sacrifice myself so Xander could find the love that he so desperately wanted.

I didn’t need love to live.

He did.

Movement ahead lurched me from my treacherous thoughts. Wiping my eyes, I sucked in ragged breaths, forcing down my swirling emotions. My socks squelched with every step and the blisters on my butt rubbed against my wet pants. Every muscle in my body ached, yet I pushed myself harder, running like a sniper bullseye was on my back.

Ghost saw me first, and she sprinted toward me with sheer terror in her expression.

“Aria. Oh, my god.”

We fell into each other’s arms, and I fought to suck in air.

“Are you okay? You’re wet. What happened?” As Ghost’s questions tumbled from her mouth, the men raced to our side.

“Christ almighty, Hawk. I thought you were gone.” Blade squeezed my shoulder. “Is Razor okay?”

Still trying to catch my breath, I tried to put my thoughts into place. “He’s fine.”

“Thank Christ,” Wasp said.

“Where the hell have you been?” Blade asked.

“Long story.” I huffed, bending over my knees.

“Why are you wet?” Ghost asked again.

Standing upright, I huffed a few massive breaths, trying to calm myself. “Jet ran us off the road into the lake.”

“That fucker stole our truck.” Viper grunted.

“And our gold.” Wasp kicked a rock, and it skipped off the dirt and onto the icy surface of the lake.

“He rammed our car with the truck and tried to kill us.” I met Blade’s gaze. “He must be the mole that sabotaged our first mission.”

“Yep. Fucking asshole.” Blade shook his head. “Where’s Razor?”

“He’s back that way.” I pointed along the road behind me.

“What took you so long to get back to us?” Ghost asked.

I heaved a deep breath. “It’s a bloody long story. But have a guess who we found in a mountain cave?”

“Jesus?” Cobra chuckled.

Everyone laughed.

“Come on,” I said. “Have a guess.”

Ghost gasped. “Don’t tell me ... the DEA agents and the missing soldier?”

“Yes. We found the DEA agents, Rose and Brody.”

“Holy hell. Where were they?” Blade asked.

“What about the soldier?” Viper asked.

“Are they okay?” Ghost asked.

I raised my hands, halting their barrage.

“Hold those questions,” Blade said. “Let’s grab our stuff and get moving. I want to reach Razor and those DEA agents before we run out of light.” Blade led the way back to a small quantity of gear beside the road.

“Is this all you have?” I asked.

“Yep.” Viper’s fierce glare could melt ice. “The rest was in the truck.”

“With our gold.” Ghost’s usually sparkling eyes clouded with frustration as she turned toward the lake. “All our hard work for nothing.”

I turned to the lake where the portions of ice we’d broken away had nearly frozen over again. Soon all evidence of our presence in the lake would be gone. “Not all the gold. There’s more in the lake.”

“Yes, but we can’t get it without our scuba gear,” Ghost said.

“And we don’t have enough supplies to stay here until we can get more gear either,” Blade said.

“Yeah, we’ve been fucked over again,” Wasp said.

“But we’re coming back, right?” Cobra’s brows drilled together.

“You bet your ass we are. And that gold had better be here when we return, or I’m gonna lose my shit.” Wasp squeezed his head like his brain hurt.

We each picked up something from our measly belongings and between us we had a bag with scuba gear – minus the tank—four sleeping bags, and three more bags, but I couldn’t remember what they contained. Ghost didn’t have her sniper rifle, and it looked like I was the only one who still had my tactical vest.

“You look like you’ve been through hell,” Ghost said.

“Thanks. I feel like it, too.”

“Let’s get moving. It’s gonna be dark before we know it,” Blade said.

“Hang on,” Cobra said. “Shouldn’t we mark this spot? So, we can find that gold easier next time?”

Blade clicked his fingers. “Good idea.”

As the men deliberated over how to stack a bunch of rocks, that only they would recognize, Ghost sidled next to me. “Are you okay?”

Exhaustion washed through me afresh as I contemplated a reply. “Yeah. I just need to sleep for a week.”

“You went through hell out there, didn’t you?” Ghost nodded like she fully understood how much I was trying to hold myself together.

“Yeah. We dodged a few bullets.”

She pulled me in for a hug. “I was so scared for you, Aria. I thought you guys were ...”

I wrapped my arms around her. “I know. We got lucky, that’s for sure.”

As we both heaved a sigh, I closed my eyes and vowed that I would never drift so far from Maya again. She was a true friend, and I couldn’t do this solo shit anymore. I needed a friend. I needed her. And all the guys; they meant the world to me.

We eased apart, and she slapped my arm. “Now don’t ever do that again.”

Grinning, I nodded. “Okay. I’ll try not to.”

Once the men were happy with their stack of rocks, we set off along the road walking in pairs. Blade and Wasp were positioned at the front, Viper and Cobra at the rear, and Ghost and me in the middle.

Without wheels, it was going to be a long, slow hike to civilization.

I tried to picture how Jet stole the truck. Especially with one of the best snipers in the world on our team.

“So, how did Jet get away from you? And why did he wait so long to do it?” I asked.

Blade groaned. “After you guys went AWOL, I sent Ghost and Cobra to search for you. And while they were gone, the rest of us emptied the truck to replace the tires.”

“That’s right. I forgot about the tires getting shot out.” So much had happened since then.

“We only had one spare, but the truck had four tires on the rear axles, so we switched them around. It wasn’t ideal, but it was all we had.”

“Took fucking forever.” Viper kicked a rock, and it skipped across the lake for a good fifty yards.

“We’d loaded the truck back up with the gold and most of our gear when we decided that we had to turn the truck around,” Blade said. “With Viper driving, and the rest of us directing, Viper had to do about a fifty-point turn to maneuver it to face the right way.”

“And then as we were loading up the last of our gear, the bastard stole the truck,” Wasp said.

I tried to picture Jet doing that. “So, was it just an opportunity?”

“Don’t know,” Blade said. “But it’s fucked.”

“It must have happened just after we made contact with you.”

Ghost raised her eyebrows. “You made contact? We’ve been trying to get you for days.”

“Yeah.” I checked my watch, but it was dead. I tapped the display. Nothing. “An hour or so ago, we finally made it into range and got a message through to Jet.”

“What did he say?” Ghost asked.

I shrugged. “Not much, actually.”

“He must’ve been in the truck when you made radio contact,” Cobra said.

“And he must’ve taken off just after that because he rammed into us on this road,” I said.

“Asshole,” Viper blurted.

“Maybe he wanted to get away before Xander and I returned.” I shook my head. “I can’t believe he’s done this.”

“He’s gonna fucking regret it.” Viper clenched his fists.

I nodded. The stupid bastard had just made himself a wanted man. He would be running for the rest of his life. Which wasn’t easy to do. Then again, my mother had been missing for eighteen years. Even with all the resources I had access to, the only trace I’d found was a flight to Bali, but that was where the trail went cold.

So maybe vanishing forever wasn’t that hard after all.

As the six of us hiked along the road and the sun tipped over the top of the mountain, casting us in shadows, I summarized the details of how Razor and I met Nazira and told them about finding the soldier’s skeleton, and Nazira keeping Rose and Brody alive for insurance.

Blade glanced at me over his shoulder. “Insurance for what?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know. She died before I got that information out of her. But during our rescue of Brody and Rose, we found a cave full of weapons.”

I told them about the cache of Scorpion Industries weapons in the wooden crates.

“What the fuck?” Blade spun to me, and Viper glared at me like I was the one screwing them over.

“So, some asshole is still supplying weapons to this region?” Blade clamped his jaw.

“It must be Jet,” Cobra said.

“I’m going to strangle that fucker.” Viper clenched his fists.

Blade leveled his gaze at me. “What do you think?”

“I agree that it’s Jet.” I nodded.

Blade tilted his head, clearly not satisfied with my answer. “But?”

I huffed. “But he didn’t do this alone. Somebody much higher up the chain is involved.”

“Who?” All five of them said at the same time.

I blew out my breath. I wanted to say Kyle’s name, but I needed to be one hundred percent certain first. Once I said it was him, these guys would be out for Kyle’s blood. And I knew exactly what it was like to be wrongly accused of something.

“Ah, for fuck’s sake. She knows who. Look at her.” Viper jabbed a finger at me. “Even after everything we’ve been through, you’re still keeping us in the dark?”

Viper stormed ahead.

My mind twisted into angry knots as everyone else peered at me with suspicion in their eyes. I wanted to say for certain that it was Kyle. But I couldn’t. I didn’t have concrete proof.

I didn’t have proof of anything.

And just like that, the people I trusted the most didn’t trust me.

I was all alone. All over again.

I turned to Ghost. “Did you and Jet catch that other shooter?”

She shook her head. “Nope. And like I told these guys ... I don’t think Jet was trying to.”

I blinked at her. “So Jet was pretending to chase those shooters when really he was working with them.”

Ghost shrugged and when she looked at me, turmoil flared in her eyes. Trying to comprehend that one of our team had screwed us over was eating her up. “He was acting strange, that’s for sure.”

“Yeah, and now we know why,” Blade said.

Viper was doing his best to put some distance between us and as the rest of us followed behind him, I told them about the rope bridge, and the shooter triggering the avalanche.

“You think Jet started an avalanche?” Cobra blinked at me like I’d lost my marbles.

“Now that I know this info about him,” I said, “yeah, I do.”

“So you think he wanted to separate you from us?” Ghost asked.

“I think so. He could have killed us while we were in the open on that bridge,” I said.

“Maybe he wanted to protect Xander. They *were* friends,” Ghost said.

Wasp huffed. “Some friend.”

I shook my head, trying to piece the mess together. “But now I don’t know because Jet just tried to kill both of us with the truck.”

“A truck full of gold.” Ghost met my gaze.

“Maybe now that he had what he wanted, he didn’t care whether you lived or died,” Blade said.

My stomach churned with fury. It was unbearable to comprehend that one of our teammates, a man who had suffered through hell with us, would endanger our lives because of greed. We were a team. But Jet had just severed our unbreakable bond.

Studying the blanket of ice over the water, I pictured the gold bars in the back of that sunken truck. It was impossible to know there was a fortune lying on the bottom of this lake.

Would those gold bars still be in the frozen lake when we returned?

I had thought we were the only ones who knew about the location of that treasure. But Jet’s betrayal confirmed his

involvement with the people in these mountains, so I was wrong.

Goering's gold had started with a trail of bodies, and the body count was still rising.

When would it end?

I swept my gaze over my team. The people I would die for.

We should walk away from this fortune before we all fall victim to the Goering gold.

Chapter Twenty-Three

RAZOR



I stood to greet Viper who charged toward me like an enraged stallion. “Boy, am I glad to see you.” I shook Viper’s hand and clapped his back. “Where’s everyone else?”

“They’re coming.” Fury darkened his expression.

“Are they okay? What happened?” I searched the road where Viper had arrived from, and in the distance I could just make out the rest of the team.

“Fucking Hawk,” he hissed, then strode to Brody and Rose.

My gut clenched. “What about her?”

“Giddyay, guys. Gotta say, I’d written you two off for dead. Thank Christ I was wrong.” He offered his hand to Brody. “I’m Viper. Sorry it took so fucking long to find you guys.”

Brody remained seated on the dirt as he shook Viper’s hand. Rose did the same.

The pair of them looked like they were ready to pass out. It was amazing that they could even sit upright.

Viper turned to me and nodded at my arm. “You know you’re bleeding?”

“Yeah. I’ll live. Viper, what did Hawk do?”

“It’s what she didn’t do. She won’t tell us what the hell is going on.”

I did a double-take. “What makes you think she knows?”

He scowled so hard it was a wonder his eyes weren't crushed. "She knows somethin'."

"No. You're wrong. Trust me, she's eaten up by this bullshit too."

"Yeah, right! Bitch." He kicked a stone along the dirt road.

"Hey. Watch your mouth."

Glaring at me, Viper folded his arms, showing off biceps that were bigger than ever. "Or what, Xander?"

"Or I'll make you."

He cocked one eyebrow. "Careful, buddy, I'm not sure she's the one you should be fighting for."

"You're wrong about Hawk. She's done nothing *but* fight for you guys." Clenching my jaw, I turned my attention toward the rest of the team who were still a distance away.

Years ago, Aria had told me how tough it was being a woman in a leadership role in the military. But it wasn't her gender that made her seem untrustworthy; it was her position at ASIO. Her job needed her to keep secrets. My heart squeezed for her. It must be lonely at the top.

Then again, I was lonely at the bottom.

I huffed. Maybe we were a good pair after all.

The team arrived with a whirlwind of cheers and conversation with both the DEA agents and me. As Ghost and Hawk turned their attention to checking if Rose and Brody were okay, the rest of us gathered with Blade.

"What do we do now?" I asked.

Blade looked to the sky. The sun had vanished behind the mountain, and its long, dark shadow nearly stretched right across the icy lake.

"Let's keep walking until we run out of sunlight, then we'll have to get ready for the night. It's going to be damn cold, now that we don't have the truck to hole up in."

“Fucking Jet. I’m going to kill him.” Viper’s deadly gaze settled on me. “He was your mate.”

I glared at him. “And? You got something to say, Viper? Say it.” I clenched my fists.

“Did you know about this?”

I charged at Viper shoulder first and dropped him on his back. As I punched his sides, he thumped my back and the rest of the guys yelled at us as they pulled me off him.

Blade held my hands behind my back as Viper got to his feet. Glaring at me, he dusted his hands on his jeans.

“I’m getting sick of your fucking accusations, Viper.” I tried to wrestle free of Blade, but he had me in a vise.

“Yeah, and I’m getting sick of being fucked over by people I trusted.” His gaze swept from me to Hawk.

“How did I fuck you over?” I yanked my arms from Blade’s grip.

Hawk stormed toward us. “I never did anything to you!”

“You two are working together. Admit it.” Viper clamped his jaw.

“What are you talking about? We haven’t spoken to each other since she dumped me after our last tour,” I blurted.

Aria’s jaw dropped and she lowered her gaze to the dirt.

Shit.

“See,” Viper said, his voice booming in the cold air. “This is the bullshit I’m talking about. Fucking lies.”

Aria looked set to crumble into a heap. She turned on her heel and stormed away.

“Ah, Jesus. Aria.” I chased after her.

“Go away.” She flicked her hand.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“Just go away.” She kept walking. “Leave me alone.”

“No. I’m not leaving you. You need me.” I reached for her arm, but she snapped it away.

“I don’t need you. I don’t need anyone.” Still storming ahead, she squeezed her temples.

“That’s not true, Aria. Viper thinks you’re somehow involved in this. I know you’re innocent.”

“Yeah. How?” She spun to me, and fury made her eyes as black as charcoal.

“Because I know you. You’re the most honest, hard-working, law-abiding person I know. You would never do anything to hurt us. I know you better than anyone.”

“None of that means anything.”

“It means everything. *You* mean everything to me, Aria. And I’ll do whatever it takes to help you.”

She closed her eyes, and her chin quivered.

I reached for her arm again. “Hey.”

She snapped her eyes open and stepped back. “You can’t help me, okay? And you’re only going to get hurt. Please, for your own sake, I need you to leave me alone.”

With her arms swinging at her sides, she marched back to our team.

I chased after her.

She strode to Viper and thumped his chest. “I have never done, nor will I ever do anything to jeopardize a mission or hurt any of my team. When are you going to get it through your thick fucking skull that I’m on your side?”

Viper folded his arms over his chest. “If you were on our side, you wouldn’t keep secrets.”

“You’re such a hypocrite. You have secrets. We all do. But I’m the only one who is forced to keep mine. And it’s fucking hard.”

We all surrounded her, and she ran her gaze from one person to the next.

“I promise you this: when I find out who sabotaged our mission here last time, and who is still fucking with us, I’ll take them down, no matter who they are or how high up they are. And I don’t *need* you to find out who that asshole is. But you need me.”

“Aria.” I stepped toward her.

“Don’t, Xander. I don’t need you to fight my battles.” She turned to Viper. “And even though it’s none of your fucking business, Xander and I were together for eight months. We haven’t seen each other for three years. And our relationship means nothing.”

Clenching her fists until her hands trembled, she stepped between me and Cobra. “Now get your shit together. We only have a couple more hours of daylight left.”

She helped Rose to her feet and guided her away.

“You’re an asshole.” I shook my head at Viper.

“Fuck off, Razor.” Viper marched toward our gear and picked up a pack.

The others all looked at me.

Shaking my head, I strode away.

Ghost chased after me and grabbed my wrist. “Let me take a look at your arm.”

“I’m fine.” I yanked my arm free.

“Xander, you’re not fine. Now come here.” She dragged me backward and forced me to sit on a rock.

The rest of the team grabbed the gear and helped Brody to stand, and then followed behind Aria and Rose.

“Get your shirt off,” Ghost said.

After a mental battle, where I conceded that Ghost wouldn’t relent, I removed my shirt.

She squatted down to look at the underneath of my arm. “Jesus, you’ve made a mess of yourself. You need stitches.”

“Just bandage me up.”

“Some of these wounds need stitches.”

“Not today they don’t. Just strap a bandage on. I’ll be fine.”

“Alrighty, but don’t say I didn’t warn you. How’d you do this anyway?”

“Trying to kill Jet.”

She whistled. “Pity you didn’t succeed.”

“Yeah. It would have avoided Viper’s bullshit.”

“Don’t worry about him. He’s just pissed that Jet stole the gold.”

“He could have said that, rather than making brutal accusations.”

She dabbed ointment on my wounds, and I winced.

“Sorry,” she said. “Listen, Jet has thrown us a curve ball, so we’re going to have some crap trying to deal with it.”

“Tell me about it. I thought he was my best mate.”

She applied gauze to my underarm. “Hold this.”

As I pressed the gauze onto my wounds, my thoughts drifted to the times I’d been with Jet. We were mates. The best kind. We’d hung out together, looked out for each other. Shared our secrets and worries. He was the only one who knew about Aria and me.

“I can’t believe Jet did this.” I searched Ghost’s eyes for assurance that she believed me.

“I know. The betrayal of a friend is the worst kind,” she said with such sincerity that I knew she was on my side.

At least that was a start.

“So ... you and Aria together, huh?” Ghost wriggled her brows.

“That was a long time ago, and it’s over.”

“I can tell she still likes you.” Her eyes twinkled at me as she bandaged my arm.

“You don’t need to lie to me. I know for a fact that she doesn’t.” Exhaling, I took in the scenery, trying to find the beauty amongst the frigid landscape.

Ghost tapped my cheek. “I never lie. You should know that. A girl can tell when another girl is interested in a man, and I’m telling you Aria still has feelings for you.”

I huffed. “She has a terrible way of showing it. Besides, she told me the opposite, so you can forget the matchmaking, okay?”

“I’m just saying you guys would be so good together.”

“Aria doesn’t think so. She says our lives are too different, and no matter how hard we tried, we’d be destined to fail.”

She scrunched up her nose. “What does she mean by different?”

“City chick, country bloke.” I shrugged, no more explaining needed.

“Huh. I had exactly the same discussions with Zac. There was no way I was going to live in Hollywood, and I doubted he could leave that glamorous lifestyle.”

I cocked my head at her. “And look at the drastic measures he had to take to make it work.”

Frowning, she wobbled her head. “I’m worth it.”

I chuckled. “Yes, you are. And so is Aria. I told her I’d move anywhere, but she’s not even willing to try.”

Ghost went silent. That worried me. She always had something to say.

She tied off the bandage. “You’re all done, but you need to get that checked as soon as we’re out of this mess.”

“Yep.” I tugged on my shirt.

Ghost grabbed my chin. “Xander. I mean it. Those cuts need stitching.”

“Okay. I promise to go straight to the doc when we get back.”

“Good. I’ll keep you to that promise.”

She pulled a packet of painkillers from her bag. “Here, you might need these.”

I tucked the pills into my pocket.

She put on her pack. “Come on, let’s catch up to them.”

She hooked her thumbs into her shoulder straps and sprinted away.

I groaned.

“Xander, get moving,” she yelled over her shoulder.

By the time we caught up to the rest of the team, they’d already stopped and dumped the gear.

Twilight had settled over the sky, and it would soon be too dark to do anything.

Cobra had the small burner going to boil water, and both Rose and Brody had unzipped sleeping bags wrapped around them.

Blade handed a protein bar to each of us.

“Don’t eat it all at once,” he said. “That’s the last of our food.”

I noticed he didn’t take one for himself, so I broke mine in half and handed the rest to him.

He nodded at me. “Cheers.”

The darkness of night produced a brilliant star-studded sky that seemed to go on forever. My last sleep was in that wooden cabin with Aria. It seemed like weeks ago, yet although I was beyond exhausted, a decent sleep eluded me.

We alternated turns keeping watch and trying to sleep in the additional two sleeping bags we had. When my turn in the sleeping bag finally arrived, I couldn’t switch off my mind and as my thoughts bounced between Jet and Aria, I begged for the sun to make its appearance.

The early hours brought a frigid breeze that swept off the lake and blasted our battered bodies even more. From the

moment the glow on the eastern horizon became decent enough for us to see, Blade had us up and moving again.

As we trudged along the road that stretched forever, Rose and Brody told us about their ordeal, and asked us questions about what had been happening in the world while they'd been imprisoned.

Our hike up the mountainside was grueling, and with our lack of food, everyone but Ghost was showing signs of fatigue. Blade forced us to rest at the top, where we had a spectacular 360-degree panoramic view of untouched mountain ranges.

“People pay a lot of money for a view like this,” I said.

“I'd rather a view of a stack of pancakes smothered in maple syrup and loads of bacon,” Wasp said. “I'm starving.”

Ghost thumped his arm. “You're getting soft, old man.”

“Hey, cut the old man bullshit.”

“Ah, so you admit you're getting soft.”

“No, I don't.” Wasp jerked back.

“Bacon,” Brody said. “We forgot about bacon, Rose.”

“Oh, yes, please.” Rose seemed to melt at the thought.

As everyone's banter continued, I studied Aria. Her cheeks were flushed, giving her a lovely glow. She tugged the band from her ponytail and drove her fingers through her long, dark hair. It wasn't very often she let her hair out, and the wave around her shoulders softened her appearance. She wasn't one for wearing makeup or fussing with her hair or nails. It was one aspect about her that I loved. Aria was naturally beautiful. And strong. And sexy.

Her gaze drifted to me. Maybe she'd sensed me watching her.

A sparkle shimmered in her lovely molasses eyes, and I had the feeling she wanted to say something that I would want to hear. But all too soon, she lowered her gaze and my hope died.

“Hey, can anyone hear that?” Ghost climbed to her feet.

I stood. “Sounds like a truck.”

Standing, we all peered in different directions. From our vantage point, the sound could be coming from anywhere.

“If it’s Jet, he’s gonna regret coming back this way.” Viper tugged up his sleeves.

“It won’t be Jet.” Hawk rolled her eyes.

“There. Look.” Ghost pointed down the winding road we’d climbed up.

Halfway down the hillside was a bus that was as old looking as it was colorful. The entire outside was painted in bright square patches and dotted with circles of copper. Two horn like contraptions protruded from above the front windshield with bells on them. The tinkling bells rang out a chaotic tune as the truck bounced over the pockmarked road.

“Looks like we found our ticket out of here,” Blade said.

“Right, you lot stand back. Let me do the talking.” Hawk pushed us back from the road. “Blade, I want you to carry Rose. Wasp, put your arm around Brody. Viper, smile ... you look like you’re planning to rip someone’s head off. Get out of the way. The vehicle will need to get over this elevation before it stops.”

The bus sounded like it was about to shatter to pieces as it made the final push to the top of the hill.

“Bloody hell, that thing looks a hundred years old,” Wasp said.

“Looks like fun to me,” Ghost said.

“As long as it’s a ride out of here, I’ll take anything,” Blade said.

The bus was at a crawling speed by the time Hawk stood in front of it. With a burst of black smoke out the side, it jolted to a stop. Hawk climbed on, and the rest of us waited outside.

She stepped off the bus, rolling her eyes, yet grinning. “Okay, they want payment. Hand over the sleeping bags.”

Clutching them in her arms, she stepped back onto the bus.

A small child pressed his face to the window and when I smiled at him, his face lit up. It always amazed me when people with so little could still smile.

Hawk stepped back off the bus.

“Okay, give me everything.” She indicated to all our packs. “Keep your ID if you have them, but hand over everything else.”

Ghost helped her carry our gear onto the bus. The driver nodded and Hawk pressed her hands together in a thank you.

She stepped off the bus followed by two young kids that couldn't be any older than fifteen. “Okay, Rose and Brody, you have their seats. The rest of us have to hang onto the outside.”

Blade set Rose down and she dragged herself onto the bus. Brody followed, and before the driver even confirmed we were ready, he started the engine.

A runner-board ran the length of the bus, making me wonder if it was there for the very purpose of passengers clinging to the outside. The seven of us climbed on, and the passengers inside opened the windows, so we had something to hang onto.

Just as the bus kicked into gear, two young kids jumped out of the door, raced to our side, and climbed onto the runner-board between Hawk and me.

They grinned like they were about to have the ride of their lives.

Aria spoke to them in Russian and their grins grew bigger.

She smiled at me, and as the wind blew in her hair, her beauty took my breath away.

As the young boys hanging onto the bus between us cheered with carefree excitement, I wondered if Aria would ever let go of the rigid pressure she put on herself and realize that life was meant to be lived.

She had everything going for her. Stunning looks. Incredible intelligence. A sense of humor that I had been fortunate to experience many times. Yet there was a sadness in her eyes that broke my heart.

I could tell she was hurting, and wished she would open up to me.

She wouldn't. She was too stubborn for that.

I couldn't hang my heart on her anymore.

As much as I would hate myself for letting her go, it was time to walk away from her for good.

Chapter Twenty-Four

HAWK



By the time we arrived at the airport, Viper and Wasp had made the decision that they were staying in Kyrgyzstan to camp by the lake and guard the treasure beneath the ice until we were able to put a recovery plan in place.

No amount of discussion from the rest of us could convince them otherwise, so Maya organized for Zac to transfer funds into Viper's visa card so they could at least purchase everything they needed to keep them safe, warm, fed and in communication with the rest of us. Fortunately, Kyrgyzstan had one mountaineering supply store that, according to Cobra, would have everything they needed, including a satellite phone.

After Brody and Rose were settled on our private jet, Viper and Wasp collected their personal packs that we'd all left on the plane before we went treasure hunting, and we gathered together to say goodbye on the tarmac.

Blade promised that we would return as soon as possible.

Xander promised to track down Jet.

Cobra promised to search the dark web for movement of the stolen gold.

And I promised to find out who else was fucking us over.

The promises all sounded so hollow.

"I want to hear from you every day." Blade shook Viper and Wasp's hands. "Watch your six, and don't get dead." He clapped their backs then marched to our waiting plane.

Xander shook their hands, and his troubled expression showed just how torn up he was over Jet's betrayal. "Be careful, guys. We'll be back as soon as we can."

Cobra clapped their backs and said goodbye.

Ghost hugged both of them and made them promise not to do anything stupid then she climbed the plane steps.

Last to leave, I nodded at Viper. I wanted to say one more time that I was on his side, but his evil glare proved that he'd made up his mind.

I pressed my hand to Wasp's chest. "Look out for each other. I'll keep you up to date with anything I find out."

He clutched my shoulder in his big hand. "If you find Jet, take that fucker down."

"Don't worry. I plan to."

"But find our gold first." Viper grunted.

His statement didn't warrant a reply. Finding Jet would be hard enough. Finding that gold again would be a miracle.

I marched onto the plane, took a seat at the back, and by the time I peered out the window, Viper and Wasp had already gone.

Once the plane took off, Blade handed around food that the pilot supplied, and we had a feed of ham and cheese sandwiches, bananas, and a cold pastry filled with stewed apples. The meal barely hit the sides, and my stomach was still grumbling as I took my turn to freshen up in the restroom.

My reflection in the mirror was ghastly.

I undressed and splashed warm water on my face, and dabbed damp toilet tissue to the small cuts on my cheek and chin to wipe away dried blood. My mind swept back to Xander pointing out my injuries after that avalanche. His tenderness had nearly been my undoing. Nobody made my heart melt like he did.

If our feelings for each other were the only measure, Xander and I would have an amazing future together. But it

wasn't.

After washing under my armpits, and the back of my neck, I felt slightly better. But my hair was full of dust and crap that no amount of brushing would fix, so I pulled it into a ponytail instead. I turned to examine my butt in the mirror and although it was too high to see all of my bum, what it did see was still very red. But at least I didn't have blisters.

Considering what we'd been through, having just a few cuts and bruises, and a sore ass was an amazing outcome. So much had happened since we'd found that gold, that I hadn't even had time to count my lucky stars that everyone had survived.

I dressed in the only change of clothes I'd brought with me—cargo pants and navy-colored T-shirt—and holding my shoes and socks, I exited the bathroom.

By the time we'd all had our turns in the restroom, Rose and Brody were both fast asleep. Blade asked us to sit at the table and we tossed around ideas over what Jet's next moves would be. But the possibilities were endless.

Kyrgyzstan was a landlocked country. From the lake, Jet could have driven the truck to any of the four surrounding countries: China, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, or north to Kazakhstan. None of those entry points had border crossing checks, and now that we knew he'd been working with locals like Nazira, his network of connections was likely to be extensive. Especially as it looked like he was bribing them with weapons.

We all agreed on three points.

The chances of finding Jet were minuscule.

We were unlikely to see the gold he stole from us ever again.

Jet had help from someone back in Australia and whoever they were, they were very connected.

During our discussions, Xander could barely look my way. As much as I told myself that was a good thing, my heart was a brick in my chest. I tried to convince myself that Xander was just a teammate, but it was a lie. He was so much more. He

was a man who I trusted, confided in, laughed with, and enjoyed great conversations with. He made my heart sing, my body hum, and my thoughts happy.

On top of all that, he also made me incredibly sad ... because we could never be together.

Why did life have to be so cruel?

After the five of us had exhausted our ideas of what Jet would do with the truck full of gold and possible ways to find him, we spread out in the plane again.

I moved to the back row, which I had to myself. Even though we had the luxury of our own private jet, the flights from Kyrgyzstan to Sydney were long and frustrating. Especially with my mind bouncing all over the place like a basketball.

Once everyone was asleep, I made several phone calls.

I contacted the American consulate in Sydney to advise of our miraculous rescue of the DEA Agents. After getting the runaround, and finally convincing them that I wasn't a prank caller, I was connected with Stephen Roth, America's Consul General for Australia.

Roth wanted us to take Rose and Brody directly to Los Angeles, but I put my foot down. We didn't have clearance for that detour, and I needed to return to Sydney ASAP.

Once that decision was accepted, and I advised what condition Rose and Brody were in, Roth confirmed they would be well looked after when we landed. Once they were given the all-clear medically, they would return to America.

I also instructed Roth to keep our arrival under wraps to protect my team from further media scrutiny that none of us needed.

Last thing I needed was Dad seeing me on headline news.

Once we landed, I planned on going straight to ASIO head office where I could take the reprimand Dad was certain to give me face to face. Then I intended to sink my claws into Kyle and take down that bastard, no matter what it took.

After the pilot announced we were one hour off landing in Sydney, Ghost slipped in beside me, and I braced for a series of questions about Xander.

“Hey, how’d you go with all those calls? Sounds like you’re going to have your hands full when we land.”

“Yeah, it’s going to be chaos, that’s for sure.”

We kept our voices low because everyone else was still asleep.

“Better you than me.” She puffed out her cheeks. “So, I’ve been thinking ...”

Here we go.

“I don’t get to Sydney very often. I don’t suppose you and I could hang together for a bit? Do some shopping? Check out a few funky bars?”

“Oh, jeez, Maya, that sounds great, but with everything that happened over there, I’m going to be tied up for days. Maybe weeks.”

She nodded, and with a stunning grin, she leaned into my ear. “I might be looking at wedding dresses.”

I gasped. “Really?”

She giggled. “Well, Zac’s been hinting, and you know, a girl can’t be too prepared.”

“That’s wonderful. I’m so happy for you guys. I’d love to shop with you but—”

“I know. You have your hands full. I get it. Maybe I can crash at your place for a few days, and when you come home, we can just hang out.”

My heart swelled. “I’d really like that. You are welcome to stay at my place, but I honestly don’t think I’ll be home much over the next few days.”

Maya tapped my leg. “That’s fine. Even if you crawl home at three a.m., wake me. There’s never a wrong time for a girly chat.”

I chuckled. "I'm not sure I'll be good company."

"Rubbish. You and I will always have something to talk about." She winked.

I groaned. "I won't be talking about you know who."

"I know." She rolled her eyes. "He's off-limits, right?"

"Yes. A long way off-limits."

"Pity." She glanced at Xander who had his chair reclined right back and was sleeping on his side with one hand under his cheek. "That's not what he told me."

I was a heartbeat off asking her to clarify when I stopped myself. Xander's love for me had never been in question. But that was the problem. I needed him to stop loving me, so he could find someone more suitable to him and the lifestyle he was destined to lead.

"You know ..." Maya tilted her head.

"Maya, don't."

"Don't what? I was just going to say that I told Zac we could never be together because our lives were way too different."

"It's not the same. Zac was willing *and* financially able to change his life. I would never ask Xander to do that. He loves living in the country."

"Maybe you would, too?"

I chuckled. "No, I won't. I get hives just looking at cows. And believe me, if I have to walk further than fifty yards to get my double shot chai latte in the morning, my day is all downhill from there. The last three days are proof of that."

She waved her hand like she was swatting my objections away. "I think a dose of country life is exactly what you need. I can't remember the last time I saw you smile."

I rolled my eyes. "It's hard to smile when bastards are shooting at us."

“That’s true. But I think it’s more than that, and I’m pretty sure you know it too.”

Her intuition could be infuriating.

“All our careers were ruined because of someone’s hidden agenda,” I said. “Until I find that bastard and make him pay, I can’t focus on anything else, Maya.”

She met my gaze for longer than I was comfortable, and then finally nodded. “I hope you find this bastard before Xander moves on forever.”

I groaned. “I want him to move on.”

“Be careful what you wish for sista, or before you know it, you’ll be all alone, crocheting doilies, and shooing a herd of cats off your sofa. Just sayin’.”

I chuckled. “I know what you’re saying. And for the record, I’m too impatient to crochet, and I love cats.”

Her eyes lit up. “Yay. Maybe you and Xander can have a cat farm together. Win win.”

“Bloody hell.”

Giggling, she scooted away and returned to her seat.

Grateful that she’d left me alone, I turned my gaze out the window in time to see The Sydney Opera House below. The harbor surrounding the Australian icon and the Sydney Harbour Bridge glistened a blue reflection from the sky. Beyond that, the city below was a dense metropolis of buildings and roads crisscrossing through them.

Dad’s military career meant we’d moved around a lot. During my early years, we lived in Brisbane, Melbourne, and Canberra. Dad and I moved to Sydney after Mom abandoned us, and we’d been here ever since.

I had lived in big cities all my life. I loved the opportunities and diversity that came with high-density living.

Maya was wrong. I would be bored out of my mind living on a farm.

The plane touched down and at the end of the runway, airport security escorted our jet to a designated area where we were flanked by a horde of flashing lights. Three ambulances, eight police cars, a row of black SUVs with the American flag attached to the hoods, and three more black cars without any markings waited for us.

I groaned. So much for keeping our arrival under wraps.

“Welcome to bedlam, guys,” Blade muttered.

“Jesus. Get me the hell back to Risky Shores.” Cobra groaned.

“And me,” Xander said.

“Oh, no you don’t, mister.” Ghost leaned over the back of her seat to eyeball Xander. “I’m taking you straight to hospital to have your wounds looked at.”

“I’ll do that when I get home,” Xander said.

“Not on my shift, you’re not. Besides, you promised.” She glanced at me. “I heard you don’t break promises.”

His gaze drifted to me, and I shook my head. I had no idea what she was referring to, but Ghost was a matchmaker’s nightmare.

The pilot opened our door, and five men and two women in power suits entered the plane.

A man with shoulders broader than a fridge flashed a badge.

“Stephen Roth, American Consular General.” He nodded at a few of our team, but he knew exactly who he was looking for and offered his hand to Brody. Although Brody’s massive, scraggy beard would also give it away. “It’s good to see you two.”

Nodding, Brody took his hand. “Thank you, it’s great to be here.”

Roth shook Rose’s hand, too, then he turned his gaze to the rest of us. “The president would like to send his personal

gratitude to you all. We can't thank you ladies and gentlemen, enough."

We were caught in a whirlwind of red tape and medical checks before finally we were allowed to leave the plane.

"Is your offer to stay at your place still okay?" Ghost asked me as we waited for our turn to climb down the stairs.

"Sure." I fished my keys from the side pocket of my pack. "I'll text you the address."

"Cool. I'll see you sometime tonight then." She wriggled her eyebrows.

"Yes. But just you, okay? I only have a two-bedroom apartment."

"We only need two bedrooms."

"Maya!"

She burst out laughing. "Don't panic. But just so you know, I really am making Xander stay here until he has his wounds dressed."

"Good. He's lucky to have you looking out for him."

We exited the plane and as we were ushered across the tarmac, dozens of flashes popped from the viewing windows overhead.

Reporters. Damn it.

My father would probably call me any second now, and he was going to be pissed.

Shielding my face with my hand, I raced through the security entrance. Saving Rose and Brody meant our plans to fly under the radar upon our return was obliterated and the next couple of hours were consumed with customs checks, airport security, and interviews with the Australian Federal Police. It was late in the afternoon before we could finally escape.

Blade gathered us together in the airport arrivals lounge with a scowl that could give kids nightmares. "Fucking hell."

Blade shook his head. “They made that bullshit take longer than it needed to.”

“You’re not kidding. I thought I’d be shopping by now.” Ghost rolled her eyes.

“Now we don’t have our jet to take us home.”

“Why not?” Cobra scrunched up his nose.

“It had another contracted job to get to,” Blade said. “So, we have to fly cattle class. Then we need to get cracking on plans to get us back to Kyrgyzstan. What are you doing, Hawk?”

“I’m going straight to ASIO. I need some questions answered,” I said.

“Good. Let us know if you find out anything,” Blade said.

“I will,” I said. “And likewise, if you do.”

He nodded. “Are you coming with us to Risky Shores, Xander?”

Xander’s gaze lingered on me before he turned to Blade shaking his head. “I’ll head home.”

“Oh, no you don’t, mister.” Ghost hooked her arm around his elbow. “I’m taking him to the nearest hospital to get his arm stitched up.”

Scowling at Ghost, Xander ran his hand over his beard and said, “After that, I’ll head home, but count me in when you return to Kyrgyzstan. And if anyone gets wind of Jet, I want to know.”

Blade and Cobra shook our hands, and made promises to keep in contact, then they headed toward the bookings counter, leaving me with Ghost and Xander.

“Don’t go anywhere.” Ghost slapped Xander’s chest. “I’m gonna pee.”

She scooted away like she was on rollerblades, leaving Xander and me alone.

Ghost was playing matchmaker again.

A charged silence settled between us before Xander heaved a sigh and said, “Are you going to be okay?”

His stunning, soulful eyes were filled with a sadness that broke me.

“Yes, I’ll be fine.”

He made a noise like he was struggling to breathe. “Of course you will.”

Frowning, I told myself to move, but my legs wouldn’t obey. “What does that mean?”

He shook his head. “Nothing.”

Just walk away, Aria. But I couldn’t. Pain gripped my heart like it was wrapped in barbed wire.

“It wasn’t nothing, Xander.”

“No, you’re right.” He cocked his head, capturing me with eyes that were filled with sorrow and so much longing my chest squeezed. “If there’s one thing I know about you, Aria, it’s that you’ll say everything is fine, even when it’s not.”

A knot burned in my throat, and I swallowed it down. “Okay, yes, you’re right. Of course everything isn’t fine. Not after what happened over there.”

“I’m not talking about that.” He leveled his gaze at me, looking right into my soul. “I’m talking about you.”

My knees nearly buckled, threatening to reduce me to a puddle on the floor. “Xander, please.”

He scraped his hand over his beard. “Please what?”

“Please ...” My heart clenched so hard I could barely speak. “Please, let me go.”

He captured me in a gaze that was so intense I thought I’d crack in two. Then he nodded once, turned, and walked away.

I wanted him to glance at me over his shoulder, and yet I also hoped he didn’t. The situation was so fucked up.

No, it was *me* who was fucked up.

Standing in the middle of the airport, surrounded by people on a mission to get somewhere, I felt so alone.

Every step Xander took away from me seemed to stomp on my heart. Never before had I thought I needed a man in my life, but I did. But not just a man; I wanted Xander.

A knot wedged in my throat that was so big it burned, and hot tears spilled down my cheeks. As I flicked them away, four men walked past in police uniform. Two of them had been in the security room during our questioning.

I needed a hot shower, a decent feed, and a long sleep, but most of all, I needed answers. Sucking in a few painful breaths, I strode to the officers and asked Constable Letcher if he could drive me into the city.

“Certainly. Follow me.” He nodded at his fellow officers. “Catch you guys at the station.”

In the passenger seat, as I directed him to ASIO head office and answered the barrage of questions Letcher fired at me about rescuing Rose and Brody, I attempted to pick the dirt out from under my chipped fingernails. It took forever to navigate the congested Sydney streets, but finally Letcher pulled into the curb.

“Thanks for the lift. You’re a lifesaver.” I shoved open the door.

“Actually, I think it’s you who’s the lifesaver.” He tilted his head and winked.

“Ha. Thanks.”

I dodged around the field of people walking on the path outside the lobby of the fifty-story glass-lined building. While national headquarters was well known in Canberra, the Sydney office, and all of ASIO’s other locations around Australia were top secret. Neither the outside of the building nor the lobby revealed that twelve floors of prime Sydney real estate were dedicated to Australia’s national security service.

A few years ago, when ASIO was relocated to Canberra, and into a custom-built building that cost Aussie taxpayers

billions of dollars, my father had chosen to stay in the Sydney office.

His main reason for not moving, which he'd said he'd told only me, was that the massive glass, custom-built, high-security building in Canberra had made itself a prime terrorist target by revealing the building's purpose.

"Last thing we need is for the entire counter-terrorist agency to be taken out by terrorists," he'd said. "It's asking for trouble putting all the brass in the one place together."

Maybe he'd watched too many Hollywood movies.

Then again, he did have a point. But it wasn't his only reason for remaining in the Sydney office. In this building, he could come and go as he pleased without passing through security measures that tracked his every movement. Besides, with technology as good as it was these days, Dad was just a video call away from those in Canberra. Or a one-hour flight.

I'd chosen to stay in Sydney because my apartment was here *and* because of Dad. He was the only family I had.

After using my access card to get through the lobby security, I went through an unmarked door, and then leaned into the retina scanner to open the next security door.

The retina scanner *was* the exact same model that I'd found in Chui's sunken yacht. It was an interesting coincidence that I slotted into my never-ending list of queries about Chui.

A second unmarked door slid open, and I stepped into the small, plain room that housed just two elevator doors. I pressed the button and the left elevator opened. I stepped in and scowled at my reflection in the back of the doors.

As I rode up to the twentieth floor, I scrubbed my hands down my clothes, trying to iron out the wrinkles, and licked my finger to remove a dirt smudge on my neck that I'd missed when I'd washed myself in the plane's bathroom. The cut on my cheekbone had swollen flesh around it that was already turning a nasty shade of blue.

At the twentieth floor, the doors opened, and I did another retina scan to open the unmarked door to the secure floor.

Melanie looked up from behind the large reception desk.

“Oh, hey, Miss Morgan, how are—Woah, are you okay?” She stood. “What happened?”

“Is Frank in?” I asked as I strode past her desk, heading into the hallway that led to the management offices.

“Yes, but ... should I get you coffee?”

“Yes.” *And a shot of whisky.* “Make it a double espresso.”

“Oh, okay. Will do.”

The frosted glass doors to the main area swept open, and I marched through. Eighty percent of the twentieth floor was populated with small cubicles, each housing a desk and a filing cabinet that was shielded by a chest-height partition. Twenty-four people worked behind those desks and just about every one of them ogled me with their mouths open as I strode toward Dad’s office at the opposite end of the large open-plan room.

It was like walking through the clowns at the penny arcade, and equally confronting.

Given that I’d made it my mission to always look professional when I entered these premises, I must look horrific. Scraping chairs and murmurs from the staff tracked my trek across the room to Dad’s massive corner office.

At his closed door, I didn’t bother knocking. I pushed the door open, and my fury skyrocketed. Kyle was in Dad’s office.

“Get out of—” Dad raised his eyes to me and did a double-take. “Aria!”

I shut the door behind me. “Hello, Frank.”

A red flush blazed up his neck. “What the hell were you doing in Kyrgyzstan?”

Chapter Twenty-Five

HAWK



Damn it. Dad knows where I've been.

I shouldn't be surprised. I glared at Kyle, then swept my gaze to my father. "I need to talk to you alone."

"Kyle is staying. So sit down." Dad jabbed his finger to his leather topped desk.

Clenching my fists, I stood my ground. "How do you know where I went?"

"I know everything." Dad swept his hand through his thinning hair.

His standard reply pissed me off more than usual.

"Tell me how you found out about my trip to Kyrgyzstan."

His gaze flicked to Kyle, then back to me.

Spinning to Kyle, I glared at him. "It's you! I knew it. You've been fucking us over ever since—"

Kyle stood and stepped back with a sick smirk across his lips.

I shoved his chest with both hands.

"Hey!" He jolted backward.

"Aria! Sit down." Dad's booming voice bounced around his wood-lined room.

"I'm sick of his bullshit." I pointed at the asshole who I should never have slept with. "Kyle's been—"

“Aria.” Dad shoved back on his chair and stood. “Sit down.” His calm voice was a loaded threat.

Dad glared at me. I glared at him. My teeth were clamped so tight my jaw trembled.

I folded my arms over my chest. “I’m not saying anything in front of him.”

Kyle straightened his shirt and tie and stood far enough away that I couldn’t punch him.

Dad gave Kyle a small nod and tilted his chin toward the door.

Frowning, Kyle shook his head.

“Just give us a minute, Kyle.” Dad’s tone was friendly and as frustrating as hell.

An evil snarl twisted Kyle’s face as he glared at me. “Daddy’s looking out for you again.”

I stepped toward Kyle, ready to rip his throat out.

The corner of his lip twitched. “You wouldn’t have this job without your father.”

“Get out!” I shoved his chest again.

Kyle chuckled. “Is that all you’ve got, sweetheart?”

I punched his nose. Kyle stumbled backward and swiped a row of glass-framed pictures off the wall as he collapsed onto the floor. Picture frames and broken glass shattered around him.

“Christ almighty!” Dad boomed. “Aria!”

“Fucking hell.” Kyle cupped his hand over his bloody nose. “You broke my nose.”

I leaned over Kyle. “Don’t call me sweetheart!”

“You’re going to pay for this,” he yelled and bloody spittle landed on his chin.

“Sue me,” I said through clenched teeth.

He scrambled to his feet. “I will. I’m going to fucking sue your ass.”

“Get out.” I pointed at the door.

Kyle wiped under his nose and gaped at his bloody fingers. “You’re going to regret touching me.”

“I’ve been regretting that for a year. Now get out of my face.”

His eyes bulged as he stared across the office. “Frank, you saw—”

“Get out. Get out!” I screamed.

Kyle stepped back with an expression that was equal parts fearful and dazed.

I strode to the chair across from Dad’s desk and sat, clenching my fists until my nails dug into my palms.

Kyle yanked open the door and Melanie jumped back. She gasped at his bloody face as he strode past her, heading toward the desks where every person seemed to be looking my way.

Melanie’s gaze swept to me, then she scurried forward. “Here’s your coffee.”

“Thanks, Melanie.” I gripped the hot cup. “Shut the door behind you.”

“Yes. Of course.” She left the room, and after she shut the door, my ears squealed with the ensuing silence.

I lifted my gaze to Dad. He stood behind his desk, silhouetted by the glare from the floor-to-ceiling windows behind him that provided spectacular panoramic views over central Sydney.

“I’m sensing things didn’t go well in Kyrgyzstan.” Dad sat and leaned back in his luxury office chair.

“You could say that.” I gulped the coffee, welcoming the bitter sting on my tongue.

“I assume you went there to find something. Did you get it?” he asked.

I flicked my ponytail over my shoulder. “I found proof that someone is still supplying Scorpion Industries weapons to the locals over there.”

He tilted his head in his signature move that had people shaking in their boots.

Not me. I was sick of being pushed around and kept in the dark. And treated like an underling who was not worthy of her position.

“And you’re basing that theory on the weapon you found on the sniper who shot at you?”

My heart boomed as I fought rage inching up my spine. “Who told you that?”

Dad raised his chin to level his gaze at me. “Kyle.”

“That bastard! I knew it. He sabotaged our missions, and I can prove it. I want to subpoena his phone records. I’ll be able to prove he’s the asshole that’s fucked my team over. We’ll find his connections with Chui too, then we’ll arrest him for —”

He raised his hand. “Aria—”

“Just hear me out, Frank.” Unable to sit still, I stood and clutched the back of the chair so I could look at him across the table.

He spread his arms wide and leaned back. “You have my attention.”

There was so much I needed to tell him, but I needed to know how much he’d heard first. The fact that he knew about that sniper proved Jet had told Kyle. But why would Kyle tell Dad?

He stood, strolled to the counter at the far end of his office, and raised a crystal decanter containing his favorite drink. “Whisky?” he asked.

Shaking my head, I tried to comprehend how he could be so calm.

He returned with an inch of golden liquid in a heavy glass and sat behind his desk again. “Aria, I’m listening.”

“I know ... it’s just, so much happened over there. Did you hear we found Rose and Brody, the DEA agents that went missing years ago?”

“Yes. I’m not impressed that you didn’t tell me first.”

I groaned. “I have a good reason for that.”

“I’m sure you do.” He clenched his jaw.

“We found Rose and Brody in those same mountains where our mission was sabotaged all those years ago.”

He sipped his whisky, taking my comment like a battle-hardened warrior. “And ...?”

“Someone knew we were going to be in that location, and they ambushed us. The weapons they used had the Scorpion Industries logo on them.”

He swept his hand over the table-top leather and shrugged. “Those weapons have been in that region for years.”

“Not these ones. These were new. Someone is still supplying weapons to that area.”

He squinted at me. “Who?”

“Kyle.”

Dad eased forward. “How do you know they were new weapons?”

“Near the cave where we rescued Brody and Rose, we found an enormous cache of brand-new weapons in wooden crates. They were all branded with the Scorpion Industries logo.”

His bushy eyebrows bunched together. “Okay, I’ll bite. Why would Kyle send weapons to some mountain nomads?”

Mountain nomads? Why did he assume they were nomads and not soldiers?

“Frank... Kyle was working with Chui.”

He sucked air through his teeth. Finally, he was listening. “Continue.”

“I think they were bribing the locals with weapons to search for the gold bars that were hidden in the mountains.”

“The gold bars Chui’s grandfather hid.”

I blinked at him. “You know about Chui’s grandfather? How?”

“I told you. I know everything.”

I thumped the table. “Don’t do that, Frank. Tell me.”

Bunching his eyebrows, he shook his head. “I don’t know where I heard it.”

I fought fury blazing through me by digging my nails into the chair’s leather. Dad didn’t forget sources like that.

Why the hell is he protecting Kyle?

He cleared his throat. “How many gold bars did you find in the lake?”

I blinked at him, and my mind catapulted to Wasp and Viper guarding the remaining sunken treasure. Were they in danger? “Did Kyle tell you about the truck in the lake, too?”

“How many?” Dad banged his fist on his desk.

I jumped. *What the hell?*

“No.” I folded my arms. “Tell me how you know about the lake first?”

I wanted him to name Kyle. I was getting fucking sick of him protecting that bastard.

“I have my sources, Aria, and I don’t need to reveal them.”

“That’s bullshit.” Clenching my jaw, I paced his plush carpet.

“You’re right, Aria. This is bullshit. You take off overseas without telling me. You dive down to Chui’s yacht without telling me. You never disobey my orders.”

“You never gave me an order not to return to Kyrgyzstan.”

“If I’d known you’d planned to do that, I fucking well would have. But I did tell you not to dive down to Chui’s yacht, yet you disobeyed that order.”

At the window, I spun around to face him. “Yes, but lucky I did make that dive, or I wouldn’t have found that gold bar and the retina scanner to the second room. But look what happened after I told you about that bar? Someone beat me to Chui’s second secret room.” I glared at him. “You know what that means, right? Someone bugged my phone. Or yours. Or these offices.”

I was rambling like a hysterical nutter, but I couldn’t stop myself. I paced across the office and crunched on broken glass from one of the picture frames.

“What the fuck’s going on, Aria? It’s not like you to get so unhinged.”

Shuddering with rage, I scowled at him.

Oozing calm, Dad looked at me like I was losing it.

I picked up one of the picture frames. It housed a photo of Frank with Cameron MacBride when he was Prime Minister. They were shaking hands and smiling at the camera. Behind them shimmered the glass façade of the new ASIO building in Canberra. I hung the photo back on the wall and turned to Dad.

He leaned back on his chair with his fingers steepled. “How many gold bars did you find in that lake?”

Trying to keep my cool, I picked up another photo of Frank with China’s ambassador to Australia, Mr. Xiao Qian. “It doesn’t matter how many gold bars we found because they were stolen from us.”

His eyebrows slammed together, and he jerked forward. “What?”

I hung the picture frame on the wall. “Cooper Apollo stole the truck from—”

“Son of a bitch.” Dad thumped the table. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

I did a double-take at him. “You said you knew everything.”

“Don’t get smart with me, young lady.”

Anger drove spikes into my backbone. “I’m not. That’s what you said.”

“Where’s Apollo?”

I shook my head. “We don’t know. He—”

Dad stood so fast his chair shot backward and slammed into the window behind him. He yanked open his drawer, pulled out a phone, and stormed out of his room.

What the hell?

With my hands on my hips, I watched him stride across the office and into the men’s restroom. Nearly everyone in the office watched his march, then they turned to me.

My gaze was on Kyle. He sat at his desk with a bloody cloth under his nose and a glare that confirmed he was going to make the most of my attack on him.

I slammed Dad’s door shut, and folding my arms, I marched toward the window. Who was Dad calling?

My thoughts careened all over the place, from Kyle to Jet to Dad to Xander.

To the gold bars and Scorpion Industries weapons.

To my butt that still stung like crazy.

A buzzing noise filled the room, and I glanced at Dad’s desk. The screen on his phone lit up with a message. I frowned. He’d taken a cell from his drawer.

Why does he have a second phone?

I shook my head. It was probably his direct line to the new prime minister.

I strode back across the room and crunched on another piece of glass. Bending down, I picked up another picture frame that was face down.

The wooden frame had buckled in the crash and when I turned it over, the glass slipped out and fell to the floor just missing my foot. In the photo, Dad held up a massive silver fish that he'd just caught and behind him were miles of blue ocean.

I had seen this photo hundreds of times. His smile was enormous, and I loved how happy he looked. It was rare to see him smile anymore. Dad was about twenty years old when this photo was taken, yet he hadn't changed too much. I popped the photo out of the broken frame.

My heart skidded to a stop.

A second man had been hidden behind the frame.

The man in the background was shirtless and had his back to the camera. He was much shorter than Dad, had black cropped hair, and held a fishing line over the side of the boat.

But on his left shoulder was a tattoo of the Scorpion Industries logo.

I wanted to vomit.

I wanted to cry.

Oh, fuck! Is Dad working with Chui?

Chapter Twenty-Six

HAWK



My fingers trembled as I stared at Dad's fishing photo that had hung on his office wall for years.

Every breath burned. My ears squealed.

I studied the man in the corner of the picture, wishing I could unsee that tattoo. But it was there, perfectly visible. Just like Dad's smile. This photo was at least thirty years old, so Dad would have been in his early twenties.

Is that Chui in the background?

Did Dad sabotage my missions?

Is Dad a monster?

The door burst open, and Dad charged into the room. The photo wobbled in my trembling fingers. He was halfway to his desk when he halted.

His gaze flicked from the photo to me. His jaw dropped.

"Who is—? What did—?" Words tangled in my throat.

"Fucking hell." He strode to his desk and thumped the leather top. "You don't stop, do you?"

My chin quivered. "Is that Ziháo Chui?"

"For fuck's sake." Dad yanked open his bottom drawer, pulled his wallet and keys out, and dropped them on his desk.

A chill snaked up my spine. "What have you done?"

"You stupid bitch. I've been trying to protect you." His eyes darkened, thick with rage as he pulled on his suit coat.

“Protect me! Bullshit! You’ve been fucking with me—and my team.” Marching to the desk, I wobbled the photo in his face. “Is it Chui? Were you working with him all this time?”

My eyes blurred with my anger.

He shoved his phones and wallet into his jacket and pants pockets, and popped open his briefcase.

“Answer me!” I slammed the photo onto the desk.

He reached for it, but I snatched it back.

He marched across the room to a large photo of him in full military dress uniform receiving a medal of honor from the Queen. He yanked the picture off the wall and tossed it aside so hard the glass shattered.

“What the hell, Frank! Talk to me!”

He opened a safe that had been hidden by the picture, pulled out a couple of items I couldn’t see, and shoved them into the inside pockets of his jacket. Then he removed the gold bar that had been recovered in Antarctica.

“Hey! What’re you doing with that?”

He strode to his desk and dropped the gold into his briefcase.

“That’s not yours, Frank. Put it back.”

He added his laptop to his briefcase, slammed it shut, and clutching the case, he grabbed his keys and marched around his desk.

“Answer me!” I stood in front of him.

“Get out of my way.” He shoved me sideways so hard I stumbled backward, hit the wall, and fell to the floor. A glass shard pierced my hand.

As I howled in pain and fury, he strode out the door.

Stunned, I gasped at the bloody spike through my left hand.

Move, Aria. Get up.

“Frank! Get back here!” My voice was a mangled croak as I dragged myself upright.

At the door, I yelled across the office space where everyone stood at their desks. “Come back, you bastard!”

As the sliding glass doors slid shut, Dad ran toward the elevators on the other side.

Shrieking my fury, I yanked the glass shard out of my hand. Blood oozed from the wound. I wrapped a cloth napkin from the bar around my palm, snatched Dad’s fishing photo off the floor, and clutching my bloody hand to my chest, I sprinted after him.

The staff stood glaring and gasping as I ran past their desks like a maniac.

As I folded the photo and shoved it into my pants pocket, every pace toward the frosted glass doors seemed to take forever. It was like running in slow motion.

The doors slid open, and as I sprinted toward Melanie’s desk, her wide eyes bounced to the bloody napkin around my hand. “What happened?”

Ignoring her, I raced around the corner to the elevators. Both doors were shut and above them, the floor indicators flashed declining numbers.

Shit. They’re both going down.

The bastard had pressed buttons on both elevators.

Spinning on my heel, I slammed through the stairwell door, and launched onto the concrete stairs. Bounding down the stairwell, I clenched my jaw, forcing my legs to move faster.

I counted the levels as I raced past them. *Eighteen. Seventeen. Sixteen.*

Gripping onto the railing, I hurled my body around each bend and forced the chaos in my mind to think. Where would Frank go?

What was his next move?

Thirteen. Twelve. Eleven.

He knew I was onto him. And he knew I wouldn't give in just because he was my father. That photo was evidence that he'd known Chui for decades.

Jesus! Had Dad been working with Chui all this time? It all made sense. He knew every move I made. He sabotaged everything I did to help Chui.

Shit! Dad would never go to jail.

He'll run.

My heart thundered in my chest as I raced past the exit doors to level seven.

He'd taken the gold. And his laptop. What had he pulled from the safe and the bottom drawer of his desk?

Gasping for breath, I reached the lobby and slammed open the door so hard it boomed like a cannon. At the elevators, I glanced up at the indicator lights.

"Fuck." He was in the basement.

I ran back into the stairwell. My legs were like rubber as I scrambled down more concrete steps.

I burst through the doorway into the basement car park. An engine revved in the distance. Gasping for breath, I sprinted down the ramp, heading toward Dad's designated parking space.

Tires squealed on the smooth concrete. Dad's black Mercedes SUV careened up the ramp on the opposite side of the parking garage.

Huffing ragged breaths, I stood in the middle of the ramp.

His car screeched around the corner. Dad glared at me with both his hands gripping the steering wheel.

My chest heaved as I gasped for air. Hot blood dribbled down my fingers.

His engine revved louder, thundering off the bare concrete as the tires squealed.

I didn't move. My heart pounded.

His mouth opened as he yelled at me.

He's not stopping!

Screaming, I dove out of the way, slamming hip-first onto the concrete.

The Mercedes swiped a concrete post as Dad floored the accelerator around the corner.

Dragging myself off the ground, I stumbled sideways into a shiny red bonnet. Pushing off, I sprinted after him. At the top of the ramp, Dad crashed through the boom gate. A woman screamed as his SUV careened out the exit and onto George Street.

“Fuck!” I stared at the sunlit exit.

I leaned over my knees, gasping for breath. The napkin had come away from my hand and drops of blood splattered the concrete.

I wrapped the white cloth around my palm, and as I sprinted to the elevator, I noticed the shiny red bonnet I'd stumbled into was Kyle's hotted-up Mazda MX-5.

I hope it goes as fast as it looks, 'cause I'm taking that car.

At the elevator, I scanned my security card over the panel and as I rode back up to the twentieth floor, I pulled out my phone and speed dialed Blade.

The phone rang.

“Come on, Blade. Answer the call.”

His voicemail picked up. “This is Blade. You know what to do.”

Shit! He was probably on the plane on his way to Risky Shores. “Blade, this is Hawk. Call me ASAP! I know who the mole is.”

Now that I knew Dad was the bastard who'd been fucking with us, I also knew Kyle wasn't involved. Dad would never join forces with someone beneath him. Besides, Kyle wasn't

smart enough for the depth of deception Dad had needed. Dad had used Kyle, and he had probably set Kyle up to be the fall guy.

The elevator doors pinged open, and I ended the call as I strode to the retina scanner. I took two attempts to scan my eyeball before the security door opened.

Clutching my throbbing hand to my chest, I sprinted past Melanie's vacant desk to the glass doors. When they slid open, everyone spun toward me.

"This whole place is in lockdown," I yelled across the room. "Nobody is to come in or exit without my say so."

Striding past everyone's terrified glares, I marched to Kyle.

"Give me your car keys."

"Like hell." He scooted back on his chair.

Grabbing his wrist, I leaned over him. "I'm sorry I thought you sabotaged our missions. I was wrong. It's Frank."

"What?" His bloodshot eyes grew enormous.

"Give me your car keys, Kyle. I need to stop him."

Shoving me back, his gaze bounced to my bloody hand. "I'm driving."

"Bloody hell! Fine. I hope you drive fast." I turned to Melanie. "Make sure nobody goes in there." I pointed at Frank's door. I wanted to do a thorough check through his office.

"Let's go, Kyle." Sprinting away, I didn't check to see if he was behind me. At Melanie's desk, I collected a sticky tape dispenser and ran to the elevators.

Kyle and I stepped in together, and I jabbed the button for the basement a dozen times as the doors took forever to close.

I handed him the sticky tape.

Frowning, he grabbed the tape. "How do you know it's Frank?"

“I just found proof.” I unwrapped the napkin from my throbbing hand, clenching my jaw to combat the pain. The adrenalin that had been coursing through me evaporated, and as I fought the urge to crumble into a heap, I turned over my palm. Fresh blood oozed from a flap of loose skin.

He winced.

“That must hurt.” His tone was soft, nurturing. Unexpected.

I quickly rewrapped the napkin over the wound.

“What proof, Aria?”

“I found a photo with Frank and Chui together.” I held my hand toward him. “Tape me up. Quick.”

He cocked his head. “What photo?”

As he wrapped the tape over the napkin several times, I pulled the evidence from my pocket. “This photo was taken about thirty years ago.”

I pointed at the man in the background. “That’s Chui.”

Kyle peered at the picture. “That doesn’t mean Frank’s—”

“Frank and Chui worked together. And now Frank’s running.”

“Jesus. What if you’re wrong?”

I met his fierce glare. “I’m not.”

“Christ!” Blood smudged beneath his nose and down his chin, and bruising was already swelling around his eyes.

“Sorry about punching you.”

He dabbed his nose, wincing, then lowered his gaze to the bloody napkin around my hand. “Am I taking you to hospital?”

“No. We’re going after Frank.”

He broke off the tape, and I pressed it around my hand.

“Where’s he gone?” he asked.

“I think he’s going home, and if we don’t catch him there, we’ll never catch him.”

The elevator doors opened, and we sprinted to his car and jumped in.

He keyed the engine, floored the accelerator, and we skidded around the corner, avoiding the same pole Frank had slammed into by just inches.

At the top of the ramp, we crashed over the broken boom gate, and the Mazda got airborne as we shot out the exit and skidded onto George Street. Horns blared and a taxi driver swerved out of the way as Kyle yanked on the steering wheel just in time to avoid a collision.

“Which way?” Kyle pushed his horn, forcing the car in front to pull over.

“Turn left up ahead.”

He dodged around a bus, barely missing the front corner, and the bus’s horn blared.

Kyle’s driving impressed the heck out of me.

“So you think Frank and Chui have known each other for decades?”

I pressed my hand to the ceiling, bracing to stay on my chair as he rounded the corner way too fast. “Yes.”

“But how did they meet?”

“I have no fucking idea, but I plan to find out.”

“Why would Frank work with him?”

“I don’t know.” *Money. Power. Greed.* Dad was never happy. Not with the fancy house in Mossman. Not with his expensive car. Not with his head position in ASIO. Not with me. He always wanted more. Once he was at the top, he couldn’t go any further. But it didn’t make sense. Frank and Chui were obviously very close. Something bonded them together.

He would never go to jail. He would rather die.

But what would he do to stop me?

A blaze of fear ripped up my spine. If Dad was willing to sabotage my missions, and risk my life overseas, then he wouldn't protect me now.

Dad had a collection of registered weapons in his home. Most were collectible antiques. But he'd shown me a couple that he had 'acquired' over the years for protection. I'd never questioned him over that. It was just Dad showing off, but it proved he had connections everywhere. Now I had proof of his corruption, Kyle and I could be heading into some serious trouble.

And I didn't have my gun. I'd had to hand mine over to the Australian Federal Police when we landed in Sydney.

"Do you have a gun?" I popped open his glove box, but it was mostly empty.

His jaw dropped and his eyes bulged. "Are you serious?"

"Yes." I shut the glove box.

Unlike me, Kyle didn't come from a military background. He'd probably never even held a weapon.

I needed my team. And Xander. When it had just been the two of us against all those hostiles in the mountain, we'd had a better chance than Kyle and I would have against my military-trained father. Xander made me feel safe.

His handsome face swept into my mind. I wished he was here, backing me up like he did on our missions. He always had my back.

Kyle stabbed me in the back.

And had probably never had to fight for his life. I was wrong to bring him with me. If Dad was as corrupt as I believed he was, then he wouldn't go down without a fight.

I gripped the roof as Kyle skidded around a corner to the sound of blaring horns of the neighboring cars. "Kyle, when we get there, I need you to stay in the car."

"No way. I'm coming with you."

“Frank is dangerous.”

“That’s why I’m staying with you.”

I groaned. “I don’t need protecting, and I don’t need you getting in my way.”

“Fuck you.” He took another corner too fast, and the back wheel bumped into the curb. “Shit.” He jerked the steering wheel back the other way and we fishtailed.

“Frank will be armed.”

“Then call the cops,” Kyle said. “Have Frank arrested.”

“No. If he’s arrested, they’ll never get a word out of him. I need answers.” I pulled my phone from my pocket and dialed Blade again. But he didn’t pick up.

Kyle stopped at a traffic light and glanced at me. “Are you okay?”

“Of course not.”

“I meant with your hand.”

The light turned green, and his tires squealed as he stomped on the gas.

“My hand is fine.”

“You don’t have to lie, Aria.”

“I’m not. I have more to worry about than my fucking hand.”

As I told him which way to go, and Kyle fired more questions at me that I had zero answers to, I tried to picture what Dad would do next. There was only one answer. He would try to disappear. And with his knowledge and that gold, he could do exactly that.

Especially if he’s as bent as I think he is.

Another thought hit me like a wrecking ball. If Dad was as crooked as I believed, then I would be dragged down with him.

My bones liquified. Everything I ever worked for was about to implode.

Anger and sadness blazed through me that was so overwhelming I could barely breathe.

Xander's tender embrace when we'd survived that avalanche crept into my thoughts.

As my heart thundered in my chest, I searched for his name in my phone and dialed his number.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

RAZOR



Ghost hooked her hand into my arm and gripped it like a safety buoy. “You’re coming with me, mister.”

She guided me out the airport exit.

I groaned. “You don’t have to do this. I promise to go straight to Rosebud hospital when we land.”

“Stop your whining.” She dragged me to the taxi rank and forced me into the first cab. “The nearest hospital, please,” she instructed the driver.

“Why can’t *you* stitch me up?” I asked.

“I would if I had my kit, but I don’t.” She smiled. “Besides, this way I get to spend more time with you.”

I rolled my eyes. “I knew you had an ulterior motive.”

“What are you talking about? I’m just looking out for my friend.”

“Yeah, and I’ve already told you, Aria wants me to leave her alone.”

She swept her hair over her shoulder and gazed out the window. “If you say so.”

Her smirk confirmed she wanted to say more.

I ran my hands down my jeans, dusting off dirt. “Aria told me so.”

“Yes, dummy, but she’s only saying that to save you.” Ghost slapped my thigh. “Don’t you get it? She thinks that you

two can never be together because you live such different lives, but it's not true. You have something special. I can see it. I told her that Zac and I lived in completely different worlds, too, and I'd pushed him away because I didn't think we could ever be together, but I'd been wrong."

Frowning, I adjusted on my seat to look at her. "What did Aria say to that?"

"Well, first she said that Zac and I—"

My phone rang, and after pulling it from my jeans pocket, I blinked at the screen. Aria was calling.

"Ooh, look at that." Ghost leaned toward me.

Shaking my head, I ended the call.

Ghost thumped my leg. "Playing hard to get, huh? I like it."

"No. Not hard to get." I clenched my jaw, fighting the confusion galloping through me. "Aria broke my heart, and I sure as shit don't need to go through that again."

"You won't need to. You guys will be amazing together."

"I gave her plenty of chances to give me a sign that she was interested in making a go of us. But she didn't." I shoved my phone away as the taxi pulled into the drop-off zone at the hospital.

Ghost hooked her hand into my arm and her grip was like she thought I would run. I wouldn't. Now that I was here, I might as well get this shit over with.

We headed into the waiting room where dozens of people slouched in chairs.

"Bloody hell." I halted.

"Sit here," Ghost said. "I'll be back in a sec."

My phone rang again, and I pulled it out. It was Mom. I showed Ghost the screen.

"Don't go anywhere," she said, then sashayed away.

I swiped my phone to answer. "Hi, Mom."

“Oh, Xander, it’s good to hear you. I saw you on the news. Are you okay? They’re saying you were attacked over there again.” She barely stopped for air. “They say you found those poor people who were kidnap—”

Damn, I hadn’t considered that Mom could have seen me on a news report.

“Mom,” I said, cutting her off. “I’m fine. Yes, we were attacked, but we are all okay. And yes, we did find Rose and Brody.”

“They’re saying you’re heroes. I’m so proud of you.”

I noted that she didn’t mention Dad.

“Thanks, Mom. We got lucky, that’s all.”

A man in the seat next to me broke into a hacking cough that sounded like his larynx wanted to eject from his body.

“Where are you?” Mom asked.

“I’m at the hospital.”

Shit, why did I say that?

“Why? Are you hurt? What happe—”

“Mom. It’s okay. Just a few scratches, and I need some stitches, that’s all.” I moved to a different chair.

“Stitches? Oh, goodness, how many?”

“I’m okay, Mom, really.” At the front of the waiting room, Ghost talked to a young man through a glass partition who looked like he was drooling over her. Desperate to divert Mom’s conversation away from me, I asked, “What’s been happening on the farm?”

“Oh, well, you know.” Her tone changed to something guarded.

I sat forward. “Is Dad okay?”

“Yes, yes, he’s fine.” Mom usually told me about the horses, or our goats, or dogs. Something was up.

Ghost turned to me and waved. I waved back, and she gave me the thumbs up and turned around to the man.

“Mom. Did something happen while I was away?”

She went silent.

“Mom, what happened?”

“Don’t be mad at him.”

“What did he do?” I stood, and with the phone jammed to my ear, strode toward the exit.

“He, um, he sold the brumbies.”

“Fucking hell! Put him on.”

The double glass doors slid open, and I squinted against the blazing sunshine.

“He’s with the buyer now.”

“Put Dad on the phone.” It took everything I had not to yell at her.

“They’re busy loading the horses and—”

“Mom!” I never raised my voice at her. “Put him on.”

“I can’t, then he’ll know I rang you.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“He told me not to. He said—” She cut herself off.

“What did he say!”

“Xander, don’t be mad.”

“Stop it, Mom! Just tell me what he said.”

She groaned. “He said that the horses were on his land, so he owned them, and could do whatever he wanted with them.”

A fierce groan burned up my throat. “Put Dad on the phone!”

“No, I—”

“Mom. Go to Dad right now, and tell him if he sells those horses, we’re done.”

“Done? What do you mean?”

“I mean, I’m leaving. I quit.”

“But you can’t leave me.”

I blinked at what looked like blood drip stains on the concrete path. “Yes, I can. And I will. I can’t do this anymore. I’m sick of his bullshit. He’s going to run that place into the ground. He already has.”

“Xander, I need you.”

“No, Mom. I can’t be the buffer between you and Dad anymore. He’s made it clear he doesn’t want me around.”

“That’s not true. He needs you, too.”

“He doesn’t need me. He hates me.”

“Rubbish,” she blurted. “He’s just old school.”

“Look, Mom. I explained to Dad how the brumbies would bring income to our farm. By selling them now, he proves that he doesn’t believe in me or my plans. So no, he doesn’t need me.”

She moaned. “But you can’t leave.”

“Yes, I can. I did it once. I’ll do it again.”

“But that was different. You were young and needed to explore the world. What will you do?”

“I’ll get my own farm.”

“This is your farm.”

“No, Mom, it’s not.”

My phone buzzed and I glanced at the screen. Aria was calling again. *Strange.*

“Xander, please.”

“I have to go. If Dad doesn’t call me before he sells those horses, then don’t bother.”

“Xander, I need you.” Mom broke into a sob.

Clenching my jaw until my teeth hurt, I ended the call and went to answer Aria, but I’d missed it.

“Oh, no you don’t, mister.” Ghost grabbed my arm. “I got us an express pass. Let’s go.”

She led me back inside, past all the waiting chairs, and the young man she'd been talking to held open the swinging doors. "Xander, this is Rhys. He saw us on the news."

"What you guys did was amazing." Rhys grinned at Ghost like a love-struck teenager as he led us along a wide corridor.

With anger swirling through my mind, I could barely comprehend what Rhys was saying. Ghost's concerned eyes drilled into me as I was instructed to remove my shirt and sit on a bed. Nurses undid my bandages and cleaned my wounds. A doctor swept into the room with a suture kit and as Ghost made idle chit-chat with him and studied me with protective glances, he stitched me up.

I couldn't get my mind off Mom's comment that she needed me. Mom and Dad had been together for thirty-five years. They were high-school sweethearts, but there was no love between them. They barely had any conversation.

Unlike Aria and I... we could talk for hours.

Aria! I missed her call.

I leaned over to pluck my phone from my pocket.

"Sit still, please." The doctor pressed his hand to my shoulder.

My phone indicated I had one voice message. I held it to my ear.

"Xander," Aria's tone hit me like a bullet. "Help. Please."

I bolted upright.

"Dad is the mole. He's the one who's been fucking us over. He's going to run, but I need to stop him. I need you. Please. I'll text you his address."

"Jesus Christ." I shoved the doctor back.

"Hey, what's wrong?" Ghost clutched my arm.

"Aria. She's in trouble." I swung my legs off the bed.

"Wait, I haven't finished." The doctor ogled me like I was a psycho.

“Aria’s father is the mole.” I grabbed my shirt off the chair.

“Jesus Christ.” Ghost snatched a kidney tray off the trolley the doctor had been using. “Sorry, we have to go.”

I marched through the hospital, pulling my shirt on.

Ghost sprinted to my side. “What else did she say?”

“She said Frank was going to run.”

“Oh, crap!” Ghost slipped a couple of bandages and other items into her pockets and tossed the tray onto a trolley as we ran past.

We sprinted through the waiting room and raced to a taxi that was dropping off someone.

We jumped in, and I gave the driver the address Aria had texted me. “And hurry.”

The driver peered at me through the mirror. “This is Sydney, mate. You don’t go anywhere in a hurry.”

“Just go!” I yelled.

His eyes bulged at me.

Ghost leaned forward. “Please, our friend needs us.” She flashed a sweet smile.

The taxi eased into traffic.

Ghost pulled the bandages from her pockets. “Take your shirt off. I’ll put on this dressing.”

Clenching my jaw, I replayed in my mind the pleading in Aria’s voice.

Ghost gripped the back of my hand. “She’ll be okay.”

I shook my head. “She asked for help, Maya. Aria never asks for help.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

HAWK



Kyle drove into Dad's street.

“Park here.” I indicated to a gap between two cars.
“We'll run from here.”

He pulled into the curb, and I jumped out of the car and hit the ground running. Dad's home was just eight kilometers from Sydney CBD and was in one of the most expensive neighborhoods. Million-dollar mansions were set back from the avenue of enormous trees, and most houses had massive brick fences and cast-iron gates. Including Dad's place.

Kyle's boots thudded to a frantic beat behind me as he caught up.

As we sprinted along a neighbor's brick fence, I prayed Dad's gate was open. His ten-foot-high wrought iron gates were designed to keep people out and they would be a bitch to climb.

I halted Kyle just before we reached Dad's fence line.
“Listen, you don't have to—”

“Aria, I'm coming with you.”

“Okay, just stay behind me.”

“I'm not fucking useless.” He sprinted ahead.

Idiot. I chased after him and gripped his arm until he looked at me. “Don't be a fool. My father is dangerous.”

“Okay.” He yanked his arm free.

I sprinted away, then paused before Dad's driveway. With my back against the bricks, I peered into the entrance. "Good. The gate's open."

At the end of the driveway, Dad had turned his SUV around, and his driver's door was open.

He's planning a quick getaway.

I ran through the open gates toward the trunk of one of the giant Phoenix date palms that lined the driveway. Dashing from one tree to the next, I aimed for the garage which was wide open. The highly polished concrete squeaked under my sneakers as I crossed the empty garage to the interconnecting door to the house which was also open.

Where would Dad be?

His house was an enormous federation home with six bedrooms, four bathrooms, and a pile of other rooms he never used. His bar, den, and study were next to each other on the ground floor, and his bedroom was up the marble stairs. I paused in the formal lounge area and as I leaned over the stair banister to listen, Kyle's ragged breathing rasped behind me. The rest of the house was silent.

I doubted Dad would have stopped to drink from his precious wine barrel in his bar. No, he would have gone to his den ... where he stored his weapons.

I dashed into the kitchen and pulled a knife from the block. Kyle bulged his eyes at me like I was nuts, then he, too, grabbed a knife.

Dragging Kyle into this is a bad idea.

But I couldn't wait for Xander. I didn't even know if he'd received my message.

The sound of a drawer slamming shut echoed down the hallway. Clutching the weapon, my heart thundered in my chest as I increased my pace along the tiles. I hoped like hell that I didn't run into Dad in this narrow space, or we were screwed.

Another thud confirmed he was in his study at the end of this hallway.

Spinning to Kyle, I raised my finger, indicating to him to stay put, and then concealing the knife by my thigh, I stepped through the entrance to the study. Dad stood behind his desk, bending over to reach into his drawer.

“Hello, Frank.”

He jerked upright. “Fucking hell, Aria. I told you to keep out of this.”

“Where are you going?”

“Don’t ask.”

“I *am* asking. What the hell’s going on?”

He pulled a leather folder from his drawer and threw it onto the table. “You don’t want to know.”

“Yes, I do.” I stepped forward. “You owe me that.”

“I don’t owe you anything. I fucking saved you and your career.”

“Yes, and why did you, when you’ve been sabotaging my missions all these years?”

He shuddered like rage was crawling through him. “You left me no choice.”

Clenching my fingers around the knife handle, I took another step closer. “I’m not letting you go, Frank.”

He pulled a gun from his inside jacket and placed it within reach on his desk.

Fear inched up my backbone. “Are you going to shoot me?”

He leveled his gaze at me. “If I need to.”

My bones liquified, but I was not backing down. I needed answers. “You’ve known Chui a long time, haven’t you?”

Ignoring my question, he lifted a leather duffle bag onto the desk and shoved the leather folder into it.

“Thirty years? Is that right? You were about twenty when this picture was taken.” I pulled the photo from my pocket.

He glared at me like I was the devil. “You think you know everything.”

“No, Frank, I don’t. Why did you work with Chui? Did he have something over you? Is that it?”

Dad zipped up the bag and gripped the handles together.

“All I ever wanted was to please you.” The words choked in my throat.

His top lip twitched. “And all I ever wanted was for you to fail.”

“What?” My soul wept. “Why?”

“Because I knew you’d never give up. Stupid bitch. I tried to protect you from all this.”

My mind careened over dozens of questions. “I’m not letting you go. The police are on the way.” I lied.

Clenching his teeth, he picked up his weapon.

“Put the gun down, Frank.” I raised the knife. It was futile against his gun, but the only weapon I had.

Clutching the bag, he strode around the desk.

I stood in front of him. “Frank! Put the gun down.”

“Get out of my way.”

Kyle charged into the room aiming a knife at Frank. “Stop right there!”

“For fuck’s sake,” Frank said. “What are you doing here?”

Dad raised his gun and fired.

Screaming, Kyle flew backward and fell on his back on the plush carpet. His wide eyes darted to me, then to the bloody bullet wound in his stomach.

“Jesus Christ!” I spun to Dad.

He dropped his bag and swung the gun toward me.

I threw the knife at him. As he swatted it away, I tackled him sideways.

The gun fired three times, punching into the ceiling and shattering a window in an explosion of glass.

I bit Dad's arm, clamping my teeth until I tasted blood. Dad pulled my hair, and I shrieked with both fury and agony. He yanked me back, and I kicked his hand, knocking the gun flying.

"Fucking bitch!" he roared.

I kicked between his legs, but he dodged away before I connected. Growling, he backhanded my cheek, and I spun around, half landing on his desk. He grabbed my hair, lifted my head, and slammed my face into the dark leather top.

Pain exploded in my nose. Stars danced across my eyes.

I reached for his golden fountain pen. Warm blood spilled from my nose.

He grabbed my hair harder and yanked my head back to smash my face into his desk again.

I clutched the fountain pen in my fist and stabbed his thigh.

Screaming, he pulled my hair harder. I stabbed him again. And again.

He punched my kidney and shrieking, I stumbled sideways, tripped over my feet, and fell to the carpet.

Kyle's ragged breathing reached me. His bloody hands crossed his stomach, and his wide eyes showed his terror.

Dad picked up his bag. I launched at him and drove the pen into the back of his knee. Howling, Dad staggered sideways. As he swiped over a lamp, he crashed onto the carpet, landing on his hip.

I lunged again and stabbed his ankle.

He kicked my shoulder. I flew backward, hitting the back of my head on the desk.

Dad turned toward the gun; it was between us and Kyle. He rolled onto his hands and knees and crawled toward it.

Clutching the fountain pen, I jumped to my feet, and using both hands, I rammed the sharp nib into his back.

Howling in agony, he reached around, fumbling for the pen.

I staggered backward, gasping for breath.

“You fucking bitch.” His breath was tortured as he yanked the pen from his back. Thick blood oozed from the puncture wound.

I grabbed the gun and aimed it at his head. “I stabbed your kidney. I hope it hurts.”

“Bitch.” Blood spilled from his lips as he clawed at the carpet, trying to push himself up.

I kicked my knife away, staggered to Kyle, and still aiming the gun at Dad, I kneeled at Kyle’s side. He blinked at me, his eyes crazy with fear.

An agonized groan rumbled from Dad’s throat as he rolled over and sat up with his back against his desk and his legs splayed out before him like a rag doll.

I put the gun down and pressing my hand over Kyle’s bloody fingers, I said, “Stay with me, Kyle.”

I pulled my phone from my pocket, dialed triple zero, and requested both ambulance and police.

After hanging up, I said, “The ambulance is on its way, Kyle. Just hang in there.”

His eyes rolled, and he seemed to struggle to keep them open. “Am I going to die?”

“Hell, no. You need to live to tell the story of how we took down the biggest asshole in history.”

Kyle puffed out his lips like he needed to vomit.

“Keep still, buddy.” I pressed harder on his wound.

Dad wheezed a wet breath and I glared at him.

“Was it worth it?” I snapped.

“Fuck you.” Bloody spit speckled his lips.

I matched his fierce gaze with my own. “You’re dying, Frank.”

“Yes. Finally ... you did something right.” As he released a deranged laugh, blood oozed down his chin.

Jesus! He wanted me to kill him.

“If that’s the only thing I did right, why the hell did you help me keep my military career?”

A sick grin formed on his lips, and I wanted to kick him in the face. “You know that saying, *keep your enemy close* and all that. It was the only way I could keep my eye on you. Until you started going fucking rogue on me.”

“You didn’t just keep an eye on me. You fucked with me.”

“I tried to help you.” He wiped his lips with the back of his hand and peering at the dark blood, he slumped further.

I need answers before he dies.

I shifted my position on the floor, and Kyle moaned. “Hey, Kyle, hang in there, buddy. The ambulance is nearly here.”

The fear in Kyle’s glossy eyes was as terrifying as the warm blood oozing through my fingers.

I dragged my gaze from him to my father. “Was I right? Is the man in that photo with you Zǐháo Chui?”

A smug look of defiance filled Frank’s eyes. “Yes, you’re right. I have known Chui for thirty years.”

Bloody hell! A dozen questions fought for attention in my mind, but Dad would want to tell this story. The cocky bastard would want to show how he’d fooled everyone.

He cleared his throat. “When I was eighteen, my brother and I broke into a surfboard factory with our friend, Aaron, to steal money.”

“You have a brother?”

He cocked his head with a wry smile. “Yes, I did. And you knew him. Mark Kincaid, or should I say, Mason Kingsman.”

“Mason Kingsman!” He was the deputy prime minister who had tried to kill us all in the assassination attempt on the prime minister. I gasped as an important piece of a giant puzzle slammed into place. “Oh, my god. Are you the fifth Kincaid brother?”

He nodded. “Fred Kincaid.” He reached for his sleeve and pulled up the cuff. “Those fuckers at Angelsong Orphanage tattooed all the kids. I had the tattoo removed.”

Jesus. My head was going to explode. “And your friend, Aaron. Was he Zena’s dad, Aaron Dixon?”

“Yes. The idiot who died in that ice cave in Antarctica.”

“Wait ... was the surfboard factory the one that had the fire in Risky Shores?” Another piece came together.

He blinked at me, apparently surprised. “Huh. How did you ...? Never mind. Yes, that’s the one.”

Was that fire the incident that bonded them all together? “What happened in the surfboard factory, Frank?”

He stared at the bloody fountain pen on the floor, but I doubted that was what he was seeing. “When we broke in, we didn’t realize the owner of the shop was there, Tony Weston, and Tao was also there ... Chui’s father, he worked in the surfboard factory.”

I clenched my jaw, forcing down the rage blazing through me so I could listen.

“Tony tried to attack me and during the scuffle, I knocked him out. But I thought I’d killed him.” His tone was aloof like he was talking about someone else.

“And Tao saw what happened?” I asked.

“Yes.” Blood dribbled down his chin. “But the fucker ran away. Aaron did too ... gutless bastard.”

Kyle’s eyes were open, and his head was tilted toward Frank. I just hoped he was listening because I needed his

backup when the police arrived.

“Go on,” I urged Dad.

“Our foster father was a cop, so last thing Mason and I needed was him finding out about us breaking into the factory and what happened to Tony.”

“So you burned down the factory to cover up evidence because you thought you’d killed Tony,” I said. “But Tony wasn’t dead, was he, Frank? He died from smoke inhalation from that fire.”

Dad clapped his hands. “Very good, Aria. Very fucking good.”

“Fuck you.” I had to resist kicking him in his kidneys and adding to his pain. But I wasn’t done with him yet. I needed answers. “You should have been convicted of that murder.”

“Probably.” He smacked his lips together. “But do you know who’s more scared than a couple of teenage arsonists who thought they’d murdered someone?”

“Who?”

“A cop who’s a foster parent of teenage arsonists who killed a man in a fire.” Dad coughed, then groaned like he was in pure agony.

Good. He deserved to suffer. “Then what happened, Frank?”

“My foster father framed Tao for Tony’s murder and the fire. It wasn’t hard. Tao worked at the surfboard factory, and several people had seen him running through the streets that night. And Aaron testified that he’d seen Tao running from the scene.”

“You framed that poor man for a murder you committed? You’re a monster.”

“Tao was no innocent.” Dad flicked his hand. “Neither was Chui. They were both fucking assholes.”

He emitted a brutal moan and reached for his duffle bag.

“What’re you doing?” Scrambling to my feet, I grabbed the gun and stepped away from Kyle, giving myself room to move.

“Oh, Aria.” My blood boiled at Dad’s condescending tone. “You really need to learn how to calm down.”

“Fuck you, Frank.” I gripped the gun, ready to shoot my own father.

Dad yanked the gold bar from his pack, and it thumped onto the carpet. He brushed his bloody hand over the bullion like he was patting a puppy.

I marched to him, and bending his fingers back, I snatched away the gold and hurled it across the room. The bar slammed into the copper-colored globe on his bookshelves, smashing his prized ornament to pieces.

“All those deaths because of that stolen gold!” I kicked his thigh. “You’re a fucking asshole.”

He howled and dark red blood spilled over his bottom lip and dripped off his chin. “There are hundreds of these gold bars. I’ve seen them with my own eyes.”

My heart thundered as I met his gaze. “You mean the gold bars that were in the submarine in the glacier in Antarctica?”

A tiny smile curled at the corner of his lips. “Clever girl.”

I wanted to vomit. And scream. And stab his other kidney.

“It’s not just gold.” His eyes brightened. “It’s a fortune. We could buy whole armies with that kind of money.”

“Armies?” Bile rose in my throat. “You’re a fucking monster.”

“The world needs men like me, Aria. I made tough decisions. I made sacrifices.”

“Fuck you!” All I ever wanted to do was please him.

I am such a fool. It took everything I had not to pick up the gun and put a bullet in his belly.

Unclenching my jaw, I forced out a question that needed an answer. “How did you find out about the gold?”

“Tao told us.”

“Why?” I demanded.

“Oh, he didn’t want to, I can assure you. But he was desperate because he knew he’d die in jail. A Chinese immigrant who murdered an Australian family man and then burned him to a crisp was never going to survive a prison term. So, Tao begged us not to frame him for Tony’s murder and in exchange he said he’d tell us about a treasure containing hundreds of gold bars that his father stole.”

I blinked at him. *Bloody hell! Dad has known about the gold for decades.*

“I see you’re surprised. I, too, thought Tao was talking bullshit until he showed us a photo of the gold bars he already had.” He shook his head. “But he hid those ones so well that I never found them.”

I frowned. “But I heard Tao went to jail for twelve years.”

“Of course. Somebody had to pay for Tony’s murder.”

Nausea burned my throat at how callous my own father was.

“If you hated Chui so much, why did you work with him?”

Dad half laughed and half coughed. Tears swam over his eyes as he released an agonized groan. “Tao was a sneaky fucker. Because of his knowledge about the gold, we had to make sure he was protected in jail. The only way I got information was the little pieces Chui learned from his father. Chui was always holding back info. So as much as I hated him, I needed that bastard.”

“Jesus Christ! You’ve been working with Chui and lying for decades. And you sabotaged our missions and deliberately damaged my career. People died because of you.”

“You don’t know half of it.” Dad curled forward and sucked in a wet breath.

“So, tell me. I know you want to.”

Kyle moaned and I kneeled at his side and rested my hand over his. His bloodshot eyes seemed to look right through me.

“Hey, Kyle,” I said, “the ambulance is nearly here. Stay with me.”

Dad released a sound like a rat was crawling up his throat.

Shit. I still need answers. “Frank, tell me about Scorpion Industries and those weapons.”

He groaned. “Fucking Henry.”

“Henry? You mean your other brother, Henry Kincaid?” He was the Kincaid brother who had attacked Viper and was still in a coma.

Dad nodded. “He’s as dumb as dogshit.”

“What’s Henry’s connection to Scorpion Industries?”

Dad’s eyes wobbled and when he closed them, I thought he would pass out.

I strode to him and kicked his foot. “Hey! Tell me about Scorpion Industries and Henry.”

He cleared his throat and shook his head like he was trying to shift a fog. “He went rogue ... like you and that fucker Apollo.”

“Cooper Apollo ... Jet? So, he is working with you?”

“We had to get you away from base to get those weapons off you without you questioning why. I figured Jet was the weakest man on your team. So, I made a deal with him to help us out. It was his idea to stage a kidnapping of the DEA agents and then send you and your team out to rescue them.”

I blinked, trying to slot that information into place. “Are you talking about years ago? Our first mission in Kyrgyzstan?”

“Yes. It got out of hand. Apollo planned the whole thing. You were meant to be captured so we could take the weapons

off you, then you'd be released." His eyes rolled. "He didn't count on you winning that battle though."

I clenched my fists. "We didn't win! We lost a man on that fucking mountain. And Cobra lost half his leg. And the soldier died, and those DEA agents were held prisoner for years." I'm going to kill Jet when I get my hands on him.

"Yeah, well, you can blame Apollo for all that. Fucking rogue asshole."

My stomach burned so bad I wanted to vomit, but I had to keep Dad talking. "What did you mean about Henry going rogue?"

"We had a contract with a Chinese manufacturer to make weapons for the Australian Military."

"What? That wouldn't have been sanctioned." I shook my head.

"Correct." The blue vein across his temple pulsed. "Except, my brother was Mason Kingsman, the deputy Prime Minister of Australia. Between us, we could make anything happen."

Fucking bastards. "What happened with these Chinese weapons?"

"Henry got greedy." Dad coughed a bloody globule and spat onto the carpet. "Instead of continuing with the contract we had, he found a cheaper Chinese manufacturer and pocketed the difference. But of course, the quality went to shit, and by the time I found out what Henry had done, the guns were already in circulation. We managed to recover most of them." He raised his eyes to me. "It was just dumb luck that they ended up in your hands."

Dumb luck! "Our teammate, Kai, died because of that dumb luck. You asshole!"

Dad slumped to the side and a bloody dribble spilled from his lip onto the carpet.

"Dad, why did you give the Scorpion Industry weapons to those soldiers in Kyrgyzstan?"

He shuddered, released a guttural groan, and slumped further. “They’re not soldiers. They’re dumb goat herders.”

“So why did you give them weapons?”

“That was Chui’s idea.” Dad smacked his lips together. “We supplied them with guns to fight their stupid wars, and in exchange they searched those fucking mountains for the gold.”

Anger plowed through my veins. “But why did they try to kill my team?”

A sick grin crossed his lips and I wanted to strangle the bastard.

“That was Chui’s idea, too. We’ve had people searching those mountains without success for decades. Last thing we needed was your team finding the gold. Goddamned Blade and the rest of those fuckers. They’re like cockroaches ... can’t kill them.”

Rage crashed through my head so hard I thought my skull would crack. “Was that all? You wanted us dead so we didn’t find your stupid gold?”

“Not just the gold. We needed to get those Scorpion Industry weapons back to protect Henry.”

Pain pierced my heart. “You chose to protect your brother and sacrifice me?”

“He’s my brother.” Dad sagged sideways. “He went through hell in Angelsong Orphanage. I had to protect him.”

“What about me? Why didn’t you protect me?” A tear dribbled down my cheek.

“When we were kids, I promised I’d look after Henry. What we went through.” Raw loathing darkened his eyes. “That cements a bond you will never know.”

His head tilted on the carpet, and he stared at the bookshelves.

“A bond that makes you murder innocent people? No, I don’t know that. But I know you’re about to die. I hope you rot in hell, you fucking bastard.”

A breath left his throat, and a heavy silence filled the room.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

RAZOR



Wailing sirens grew louder in the traffic behind our taxi.
Fuck! Those sirens are heading for Aria.

Ghost's terrified expression confirmed she was thinking the same as me.

"How much further?" I yelled at the driver.

"Two minutes." He glared at me in the mirror.

I clenched my fists. I wanted to fucking scream.

Ghost squeezed her hand over mine, but she didn't say everything would be okay.

If Aria's statement that her father was the man behind all our bullshit was correct, then she was in real danger. Knowing Aria, she would not wait for backup.

The taxi pulled over for two police cars and two ambulances to go screaming past.

"Jesus! We're too late, Ghost. Too fucking late."

Ghost shook her head. Her eyes welled with tears.

"Follow them," I yelled at the driver, pointing out the windshield.

Horns blared in our rear as he yanked the taxi out behind the ambulance and stomped on the gas.

The four emergency vehicles careened into a driveway with our taxi right on their asses.

The driveway was flanked by giant palm trees, and the large sandstone house in the distance boasted both wealth and fucking arrogance. It had to be Frank's house.

The taxi skidded to a stop next to a black SUV. I jumped out and sprinted after the police as they went through the open front doors and into a massive entrance area.

"Aria!" My shout echoed about the void that stretched three stories high.

"I'm in here! Down the hallway." Aria's cry bounced along the highly polished floor, and my legs nearly crumbled at the sound of her voice.

Sprinting behind the police, I raced into a large room with velvet curtains, an oversized desk, crammed bookshelves, and two bloody bodies on the floor.

And Aria was there, distraught, battered and bruised, but thankfully alive.

"Over here." Aria was on her knees, pressing one hand onto a man's stomach. Blood oozed through her fingers as the man's terrified eyes rolled toward us.

The paramedics strode to her, but Ghost held me back. "Let them do their thing."

As the medics asked Aria questions and took over from her, my heart clenched. Blood had spilled from Aria's nose down to her chin. Her left cheek was bright red, and she had a blood-soaked cloth around her left hand.

But she was alive. Relief washed through me like a dose of tequila.

As the police shuffled toward the second body, I wondered if they recognized who the dead guy was. Blood smeared Frank's face. He had a puncture wound in his ankle and several in his thigh, but it was the bloody stab wound to his back that I assumed had killed him. Based on the blood all over the fountain pen on the floor, I decided that was what Frank had been stabbed with.

Did Aria kill her father? Or was it the other guy?

One of the police officers marched to the side wall and picked up a gun using a pen.

The other cop, wearing gloves, held up two knives, but neither blade had blood on them.

The window behind the desk was shattered and copper pieces from some kind of ornament were scattered over the floor below the shelving at the other end.

Blood was smeared all over the caramel-colored carpet.

“Looks like she put up one hell of a fight,” Ghost whispered in my ear.

I should have been here.

I should have answered my fucking phone.

Aria eased back from the victim and swept her hair from her face, smearing blood over her cheek.

I strode to her. “Aria.”

“Xander, oh, thank God you came.” Her body seemed to melt.

I helped her to stand, and as she crumbled into my chest and wrapped her arms around me, I shuffled her away from the patient.

Squeezing her to my body, I glared at Frank’s lifeless eyes. *Fucking asshole.*

“Jesus, babe, are you okay?” Ghost rubbed Aria’s back.

A huff left Aria’s throat as she pulled back from me. “I’m fine. But ... but ...”

My heart crumbled as I pressed a kiss to her forehead.

A sob broke free as she turned her attention to the man on the floor.

“I told him Frank was dangerous,” she said. “If he dies, I’ll ... I—”

“He’s in good hands now.” I crushed her to my body, desperate to save her from this pain.

She wrapped her arms around me again, and as we held each other, another pair of paramedics pushed a trolley into the room. As I shuffled Aria backward, my feet crunched over broken glass. Releasing her, I bent over to pick up a toppled lamp.

“Don’t touch that.” The police officer aimed a finger at me.

I showed him my empty hands. “Sorry.”

The officer strode to us, but his attention was on Aria. “What’s your name, please?”

Aria swept her hair back from her face, smudging more blood across her red cheek. “I’m Aria Morgan. And that’s my father, Frank Morgan, head of ASIO, Australian Security Intelligence Organization.”

His expression morphed from confusion to shock as he spun toward Frank’s body.

“Ah, Christ almighty.” He raised his finger at us. “Don’t touch anything, and don’t move away from this room.”

“Yes, sir,” the three of us said in unison.

Groaning like he had half expected this call-out to be a disaster, he pulled his radio from his pocket, and speaking into it, he strode from the study.

Ghost left our side to talk to the paramedics.

“That’s Kyle,” Aria said, her bloodshot eyes watching the patient. “The man I told you about.”

The asshole? “Did he help you or was—”

“He helped me. I was wrong about him. I’m such an idiot. I’d been so convinced that Kyle was the asshole sabotaging our missions, that I hadn’t considered anyone else, let alone my own father.”

I cupped her chin, tilting her gaze my way. “Don’t blame yourself. There’s no way you could have known it was your father.”

A protectiveness carved through me that could ignite an inferno. She had no idea what I would do for her. And it crushed me that she wouldn't let me show her.

Her shoulders deflated. "I should have pieced it together. Dad confessed to knowing Chui for thirty years."

"Bloody hell." I studied Frank's lifeless body, trying to comprehend that connection.

Kyle cried out as he was lifted onto a trolley and as the paramedics rolled him out the door, Ghost came our way.

"Don't worry. He'll be just fine." She squeezed Aria's wrist.

"Are you sure?" Aria flicked tears from her cheeks.

"Positive. He's lost a lot of blood, and he'll need surgery, but he'll be back on his feet in no time."

Aria touched her nose and winced. "Thank God. I'm going to need him. He's my witness to what happened."

Ghost placed her hands over Aria's ears and gently tilted Aria's head from side to side. "It's obvious it was self-defense. Did your dad punch you?"

"No. He rammed my face into his desk."

"Jesus, babe. That's fucked up." A scowl crossed Ghost's face.

"Gutless bastard." I clenched my fists. "Lucky he's dead, or I'd kill him myself."

Using Frank's desk, the police officer placed the knives, gun, and bloody fountain pen into separate plastic bags.

"What's this?" The officer reached for a gold bar on the desk, and I just about swallowed my tongue.

"Oh, that's just Dad's stupid paperweight," Aria said to him. "He liked to pretend it was real gold or some bullshit."

Aria's mouth twinged as she flicked her gaze from me to the cop.

The police officer picked up the bar. "Jeez, it's heavy."

“Yeah, Dad said it was made of lead and dipped in gold paint.”

“Huh, it looks real.” The officer put it back down.

Aria chuckled. “Yeah, but if it was, he wouldn’t have it on his desk like that.”

Nodding, the officer went back to sealing the plastic bags with the weapons inside. All three of us sighed with relief.

Ghost lifted Aria’s hand with the bloody fabric around it. “What happened here?”

Aria blinked at her hand as if trying to recall how she was wounded. “Dad pushed me over in his office and I fell onto a broken picture frame. A piece of glass went through my hand. Kyle helped me wrap it up.”

“Sounds like you’ll need stitches. You two are quite the pair.” Ghost winked at me.

“Oh, that’s right. Your arm.” Aria’s expression flooded with concern as she touched my bicep. “Are you okay?”

“It’s nothing, especially compared to what’s happened to you.” I placed my hand over hers and squeezed. “I’m sorry I wasn’t here for you.”

“You’ve always been here for me.” A softness twinkled in her eyes.

Her divine expression was so enticing, arousal, swift and unexpected, tingled in my groin. Clearing my throat, I stepped back before I embarrassed the heck out of myself.

“You were lucky he didn’t shoot you, too.” Clearly, Ghost had missed the moment between Aria and me, or she would have jumped on the chance for a little matchmaking.

Aria huffed. “He aimed his gun at me.”

Ghost released a sharp breath. “No way.”

“Yeah, but he wanted me to kill him.”

I shook my head. “I doubt it. You were just better than him.”

“No. He said it was the only thing I ever did right.”

“Shit. That’s messed up, babe.” Ghost squeezed Aria’s arm.

“You could say that.” Aria looked at the copper-colored pieces on the carpet below the bookshelves as if debating something, then turned back to us, leaned forward, and whispered, “Wait until you hear what else he told me.”

As Ghost’s eyes lit up like a disco ball, a police officer strolled toward us.

“We need to take your official statement,” he said. “Would you like to go to the hospital first?”

“No, I’ll be fine.” Aria curled her hand into mine, and our palms squeezed together.

Ghost lifted Aria’s bandaged hand. “I think she needs stitches.”

Aria slipped her grip from Ghost. “I’m fine, Maya. I’ll go to the hospital later. This is more important.”

The other police officer returned to the room. “Sarge is on his way. Let’s move you guys out of here.”

As we walked from the crime scene to Frank’s enormous living room with overstuffed leather sofas and a fireplace that looked like it had never been used, more police officers and a forensics team arrived.

A man in a white business shirt with rolled-up cuffs approached us. “Miss Morgan, I’m Detective Trebilco. I’m sorry for your loss.”

“I’m not.” She jutted her chin at him like she was daring him to question her comment.

His eyes lingered on her for a fraction too long, maybe trying to read her mind. “I’ll be leading this investigation.”

“I hope your schedule is clear,” Aria said.

Huffing, he pulled a notepad from his pants pocket. “Mind if I ask you a few questions?”

“No. I’m all yours.” Aria nodded.

His *few questions* turned into dozens, and she answered them all honestly. She had nothing to hide, and it was time the truth about the real Frank was exposed.

“Okay,” Trebilco said, shoving his notebook away. “One final question. Frank’s safe ... I don’t suppose you know the combination?”

Aria shook her head. “No, sorry.”

“That’s okay. We’ll get the safe crackers in here.”

“Don’t bother with the one in his office. He emptied that safe before he left.”

A frown corrugated his forehead. “Do you know what he took from there?”

“No. I tried to see, but that’s when he shoved me over.” Aria raised her bandaged hand. “And I fell on glass.”

Trebilco shook his head. “Well, you know the drill. Don’t leave town. I’ll be in touch.”

“Of course. And detective ...?”

He cocked his head at her, maybe recognizing the concern in her voice.

“There will be some high-caliber people who will come under scrutiny in this investigation, so be careful.”

“Noted. Thank you.” He clamped his teeth so hard the muscles along his jaw bulged. He nodded once and walked back toward Frank’s study.

With every passing minute, the afternoon chaos became even more crazy. As a tribe of authorities traipsed through the massive house, removing boxes and boxes of stuff from Frank’s study and den, the three of us answered more questions.

Ghost and I stayed with Aria during everything and overheard the details of what happened several times. However, each time Aria relayed the events, I had a feeling she was holding back critical information.

Only this time, I didn't think she withheld because she was protecting her job at ASIO or national security.

This time, she was protecting us and the rest of the Alpha Tactical Ops team.

Chapter Thirty

RAZOR



I couldn't wait to get Aria out of her dad's house and find out what was going on.

Frank's body still hadn't been removed by the time a policeman escorted us to the hospital where we received an express pass to treatment. As Aria had her nose examined and her hand stitched, and the same doctor I'd had earlier continued stitching up my wounds, Ghost went to see if she could get answers on Kyle's condition.

Aria and I were in the recovery room when Ghost returned to us carrying two McDonald's drinks and grinning like a randy teenager. Maybe she'd been chatting with Zac.

"Good news," Ghost said. "Kyle is out of surgery. The bullet missed all his major organs and he'll make a full recovery."

She held forward both drinks. "Vanilla or chocolate milkshake?"

"Can I see him?" Aria reached for the chocolate milkshake, and I took the vanilla one.

"Nah. He's recovering. But he should be okay to see visitors tomorrow." She squatted down in front of Aria. "Is your nose broken?"

"No, thank goodness."

"Good." Ghost cupped Aria's hand. "How many stitches?"

"I don't know, a dozen or so."

“Ouch.” Ghost stood and wriggled her eyebrows. “So, shall we head back to your place?”

“Absolutely.” Aria stood, reaching for my hand, and our fingers slotted together like a work of art. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

By the time the taxi drove us through Sydney’s chaotic streets to Aria’s apartment, the afternoon sunset was coloring the western skyline orange and pink. Ghost and Aria chatted in the back seat like a couple of girlfriends after a fun day out, rather than a couple of incredible soldiers who had nearly died several times over the last few days.

Our arrival at Bondi was greeted with a view over the ocean and the taxi pulled into the curb. I stepped out into warm evening air laced with scents of garlic and grilled cheese that had my stomach rumbling.

Aria led us to a security door and up two flights of narrow stairs to her apartment. Inside her apartment, she led us up her hallway to her main room which had a living area, dining table, and kitchen all in one. Her apartment was small, tidy, and devoid of any trinkets. She didn’t even have photos on display.

Pausing at the kitchen table, she pulled something out of her underwear, and with a lopsided grin, she showed us a phone. “Dad had a second mobile. It was the only piece of evidence I could grab. I didn’t have enough time to ...”

Shaking her head, she let the sentence hang.

Aria would beat herself up forever over what she could have done. Or should have done. Or didn’t do. But what she did was incredible. She was half the size of her father, yet she’d fought him like the amazing soldier she was.

“You did great, babe.” Maya whistled. “I bet Cobra can get some juicy stuff off that phone, so don’t worry.”

“I hope so. Dad had another phone, the one he usually used, so the police shouldn’t come looking for this one.” She told us about Frank making a call right after she’d informed him that it was Jet who had stolen the gold with our truck.

I gasped. “Do you think he rang Cooper?”

Her shoulders sagged. “Yeah, I do.”

“That fucking bastard. I can’t believe this bullshit.” I clenched my fists, digging my nails into my flesh.

“Me neither.” Aria pushed the phone to the middle of her small dining table. “But let’s wait until Cobra cracks this phone. Maybe it was someone else.”

“It’ll be Cooper.” Fury seared through me, fierce and hot.

“I’ll give you a tour,” Aria said. As she showed us around the apartment, her comments about how small the rooms were, and how her place needed a good renovation, gave me the impression she was embarrassed by her home. She shouldn’t be. Her apartment was in the middle of prime Sydney real estate. It would be worth a fortune.

But when she stepped onto a small veranda, she swept her hand to the view and inhaled long and deep. Finally, a small smile crossed her lips. “This is why I bought this place.”

“Wow, look at that view.” Ghost leaned her hips against the railing and peered across the rooftops and trees to a magnificent view over Bondi Beach.

“It’s the only good thing about this place.” Aria shrugged.

“Not true,” Ghost said. “I spied several take-out restaurants downstairs. You don’t get that in Risky Shores.”

“She’s right. Let’s order food.” I rubbed my stomach. “I could eat the hind leg off a donkey.”

“Ewww.” Ghost slapped my chest. “That’s gross.”

“Just saying.” I shrugged.

“There’s a Chinese takeaway at the end of the block,” Aria said.

“Hell, yes to that.” Ghost’s eyes lit up. “I haven’t had Chinese in years.”

Aria had the restaurant’s number on speed dial, and she ordered without looking at a menu.

“Aria, you’ll take the first shower.” Ghost smacked her hands together. “Come on. Help me find a plastic bag so I can waterproof that bandage.”

Aria gave me a lopsided smile as Ghost guided her toward the bathroom and her lack of push-back proved just how exhausted she was.

I strolled to Aria’s fridge, which was even more sparse than mine. At least she had Vegemite and alcohol. I found a couple of beers on the bottom shelf, selected a James Squire 150 Lashes, and carried the beer out to the veranda. The sun had sunk below the buildings behind this one, blocking its rays from the beach, but there were still dozens of people walking along the sand. Out in the ocean, surfers sat on boards, waiting for their next wave.

Crazy bastards. You wouldn’t catch me dangling my legs in that dark water.

“Great view, huh?” Ghost stepped onto the veranda.

“Yeah. Is Aria okay?”

“She’ll be fine. Give her a few minutes to feel like herself again. Want me to wrap your arm in plastic, too?” She held up a roll of cling film.

“Sure.” I put the beer bottle down.

“Get your shirt off then.”

I removed my shirt, clenching my teeth against the pain.

“That hurts, huh?” She pulled out a section of plastic and wrapped it around my upper arm.

“I’ll live. Just a few more scars to show my grandkids.”

Ghost blinked at me like I was a lunatic. “You want kids and grandkids?”

I frowned. “Yeah. Doesn’t everyone?”

“No, but I’m glad to hear you do. You’ll make a great dad.”

I huffed. “Need to find a wife first.”

“You already have, numbnuts. There, that should do it.” She cut the plastic and patted it around my arm. With her hands on the railing, she peered out to the ocean and made a show of inhaling deeply. “I’m going for a run on the beach. Want to join me?”

“Are you kidding? Hell no.”

She grinned and wriggled her brows. “It’ll be good for you. Limber up those sore muscles for later.”

I rolled my eyes. “My muscles are just fine, thanks.”

“Okay, then.” She winked. “Aria might need her back washed.”

I glared at her.

“Righty ho. I’ll be back soon. If the food arrives before I get back, don’t eat all the dim sums.” She vanished out the front door.

As I swigged my beer, images of Aria showering flooded my mind and my cock pulsed.

It was totally messed up. She was bruised and battered, and all I could think about was seeing her naked and playing with her magnificent tits.

It had been too damn long since I’d had any sexual attention. I doubted I would get any tonight or any time soon. I would have loved nothing more than to bury myself inside Aria and take our sex life back to where we used to be. But we weren’t the same two people we were back then.

Yet I loved her even more.

Although today she’d given me signs that there was hope for us, I didn’t want just signs; I wanted a giant fucking billboard.

I’d finished my beer and was on my second when Aria stepped onto the veranda wearing gray sweatpants and an olive-colored T-shirt, rubbing her wet hair with a towel. “Where’s Maya?”

Her nipples bulged from her T-shirt like a couple of cherries on cupcakes.

Is she giving me a sign? I definitely think that's a sign.

“She went for a run.” I gulped my beer.

“What?” Aria draped the towel over her shoulder and tousled her hair. “She’s nuts.”

“You feel better?” I forced myself to look at her face and not her amazing tits.

“Much better. Your turn for the shower.”

“I smell that bad, huh?”

“You smell fine to me.”

I blinked at her. *That's another sign.*

She tilted her head, capturing me with her molasses eyes. “Come on. I’ll show you where the towels are.”

Holding hands as she led me to the bathroom, I inhaled the citrus and vanilla scents in her shampoo and soap, and glorious memories from all those years ago came swooping back.

In the tiny bathroom, she removed a towel from a cupboard and handed it to me. But she lingered, bathing me in her scent. Sharing her warmth. Daring me to make a move. But I couldn’t. It was time for Aria to leap first.

She looked up at me, and I drank her in as her gaze danced from my lips to my eyes. The air between us seemed to sizzle. My cock swelled in my jeans, and I urged the damn thing to settle down.

She rested her palm on my bare chest. “Thank you for coming to me today.”

Feeling like an awkward teenager, I cleared my throat. “I should have come sooner. I thought I’d lost you.”

“I’m glad you didn’t lose me.” She leaned closer and parted her mouth like she was begging me to kiss her.

My eyes fixed on her lips. My heart thundered like it was warning me to keep my cool, and my fucking cock just about

punched through my jeans. But I didn't make the first move.

She's so beautiful.

Her tongue glossed her lips.

Fuck! She's killing me.

Aria clutched my cheeks. "Kiss me, Xander."

She pulled me down and pressed her lips to mine.

Our breaths mingled and our tongues danced as I tasted her sweet, glorious warmth. I drove my fingers through her wet hair and as I crushed her body to mine, I drank in every drop of this moment.

Ghost burst through the front door. "Honey, I'm home."

Aria and I jumped apart.

"Oh, whoops. Sorry." Ghost giggled. "Not sorry."

As Aria licked her lips, she smiled the sweetest smile I'd ever seen.

Feeling like I could fly to the moon, I cleared my throat. "So, um, I'll have a shower."

Nodding, Aria sucked her lips into her mouth as if holding back something excruciatingly important.

"Don't be long, cowboy," Ghost called down the hallway. "Dinner will be here soon, and I need to shower."

Grinning, Aria swept her hair over her shoulders. "Yes, *cowboy*, go shower."

She turned and as she strolled away, I was pretty sure she wanted me to check out her ass. So I damn well did.

In the shower as I scrubbed my body and washed my hair, and as my cock reminded me that it needed attention, I replayed that kiss over and over. That wasn't a *thank you for helping me* kiss. That was an, *I want you Xander*, kiss.

Hot damn, it felt good.

Once I was done with the shower, I had to redress into the clothes I'd changed into on the jet home.

“Shower’s free,” I said as I stepped from the bathroom.

I aimed for the kitchen and as Ghost skipped past me, she made some kind of weird animal purring noise and smacked my butt.

Cracking a smile, I conceded that Ghost’s matchmaking skills may be the best there were.

Aria was busy setting the table, and as I made a beeline for her, the intercom buzzed.

“Foods’ here.” She strode to the panel on the wall.

“Start without me,” Ghost called. “I’ll be out in two shakes.”

As Aria dealt with the food delivery, I fetched another beer from the fridge. “What do you ladies want to drink?”

“Is there a bottle of wine in there?” A frown rippled her forehead.

I found a bottle of rose and two wine glasses, and after I poured their glasses, we worked together to open all the food containers. Aria had ordered enough food to feed the entire Alpha Ops Team.

“Yum, this smells good,” I said, reaching for a spring roll.

“Best Chinese food in Sydney.”

Ghost must have worked miracles in that bathroom because she emerged before I’d even finished the spring roll.

We loaded up our plates until they were nearly overflowing.

“Chopsticks?” Maya offered a pair to me.

“Nope. I’ll stick to a fork, thanks.” For effect, I rammed my fork into a dim sum and shoved it into my mouth whole. “Yum, that’s good.”

Aria used the chopsticks like she’d been born with them in her hand.

Ghost did too, and I couldn’t figure out how the hell they were doing it.

“Hey, Aria.” Ghost reached for her wine and leaned back. “Why didn’t you hide that gold bar?”

Aria put down her chopsticks. “I knew the police would do a thorough search of Dad’s house and take all his paperwork, so after I wiped off Dad’s bloody fingerprints, I put it on his desk. By putting the gold in plain sight, I hoped the police would assume it was a worthless trinket. Besides, I didn’t have time to think of a great place to hide it. Hopefully, my trick pays off, or the gold will be lost in evidence boxes forever.”

“Huh, that’s really clever,” I said.

“Only if it works.” Aria reached for the last dim sum. “With Dad and Chui dead, it’s possible our team are the only ones who know the full story about the gold.”

I burped. “Whoops, sorry.” I patted my stomach. “Eating too fast. We may be the only ones who know the full story about the gold, but there are plenty of people who know the gold exists.”

“Yeah, like all those bastards who murdered everyone at Station Eleven in Antarctica.” Shaking her head, Ghost nibbled on a spring roll. “I wonder if they were the same men who loaded the gold onto that freighter?”

“I have no idea.” Aria pushed her plate away. “But I’m not stopping until every one of them is caught.”

Her conviction was absolute.

“You’ll get them. I know you will,” I said.

“You bet she will,” Maya said. “I know I wouldn’t like you chasing me down.”

We demolished the food on our plates within minutes, and after I’d eaten more than my share, Ghost insisted that she clean up.

Aria and I sat on the sofa with our thighs touching. I turned my palm over on my leg, inviting her to hold my hand. Her black eyes twinkled as she rested her injured hand into the palm of mine, and I gently squeezed. Even with the red bruising to her nose, she was striking.

“Is your nose okay?” I asked.

She dabbed her nose and sucked in air. “A bit sore, that’s all.”

I draped my other arm over her shoulder and pulling her closer, I kissed her wet hair.

Ghost strolled toward the sofas, rubbing her hands on a dishcloth, and grinned at us like we were a couple of lovestruck teenagers. I expected Aria to pull away from me, but she didn’t. “What do we do now?”

“First up, I need to tell everyone what happened today.” Aria plucked her phone off the coffee table centered between twin two-seater sofas. “Hopefully Blade answers his phone.” She put the phone on speaker and lowered it to her lap.

“I’ll grab more wine.” Ghost raced away with more energy than a ten-year-old.

Blade answered on the first ring. “Blade here.”

“Blade, it’s Hawk. Where are you?”

“Still at HQ,” Blade said. “Have you got some news?”

“You could say that.” She rested her warm hand on my leg. “Who do you have with you?”

“Billie, Cobra, Yasmin, and Zac are here.”

“Good, put me on speaker.”

The phone thumped like Blade had dropped it onto a desk. “Okay, we’re all here. What have you got?” he asked.

“Hey, Zac, I’ve missed you, babe.” Giggling, Ghost topped up Aria’s glass with wine.

“You too, babe. Don’t tell me you’ve been up to mischief again?” Zac’s Aussie accent was weird.

“Not me this time,” Ghost said.

“I hope you have good news for us, Hawk,” Blade said.

“That’s debatable,” she said.

As Aria relayed everything that had happened, Ghost and I sipped our drinks, listening to the details once again.

“Jesus Christ, Hawk,” Blade said. “I can’t believe it was your father who fucked us over.”

“Me neither.” Her gaze drifted from me to Ghost, then she said. “There’s one more thing. Dad told me he’d seen hundreds of the gold bars.”

“Where?” we all blurted.

She shook her head. “He didn’t say.”

“Was it the ones from the submarine?” Billie asked.

“I asked him exactly that, but all he said was ‘clever girl,’” she said.

“It had to be,” Cobra said. “Where else would he have seen hundreds of bars of Goering gold?”

We stewed over that question before we conceded that it had to be the gold from Antarctica that disappeared after it reached Rosebud Wharf.

“Okay,” Blade said. “That’s the angle we’ll go with, not that it helps us locate the gold. In other news, thanks to Zac’s generosity, we have another private jet organized for Friday to take us back to Kyrgyzstan.”

Ghost whistled. “Go, Zac.”

“You can thank me later, babe,” Zac said, and Ghost giggled again.

Aria shook her head. “I’m not going to make it, Blade. I have one hell of a mess to clean up here.”

“I figured you’d say that,” Blade said.

“I’m staying with Aria,” I said.

She turned to me, and her bottom lip quivered. I draped my arm over her shoulder again and kissed her temple.

“What about you, Ghost?” Blade asked.

“Are you kidding? You blokes need me to save your asses. Of course I’m going with you.”

“And we need you to dive down and recover the last of that gold,” Blade said.

“Oh, shit, Ghost.” Aria sat forward. “You can’t dive in that lake alone. Not that I’d be able to with my nose all swollen like this.” She dabbed the end of her nose.

“I’ll be fine.” Ghost flicked her hand.

“I can dive.” Zac’s voice boomed down the line.

Ghost’s eyebrows bunched together. “You can scuba dive?”

“I’ve done it a few times,” Zac said.

“You never told me that,” Ghost said.

“You never asked.” Zac chuckled. “I’ll be a bit rusty, though.”

Ghost smiled like the world was made of chocolate. “I’ll hold your hand. See guys, once again Zac saves the day.”

“That settles it then,” Blade said. “Ghost, meet us at Sydney airport at midday on Friday.”

“Great, that gives me all day tomorrow to shop.” She rubbed her hands together.

“Shop?” Aria groaned. “I think I’ll sleep for a week.”

“Sleep is for pussies.” Ghost winked.

“I’m glad you’re okay, Hawk,” Blade said. “Let’s keep up the chatter as we gather info. If everything goes to plan, in a few days, we’ll have the remaining thirty bars of gold out of that lake and finally in our hands.”

“Hell, yes to that,” I said.

We said our goodbyes and ended the call.

Ghost topped up our drinks. “Are you sure you don’t want to come shopping with me tomorrow?” She wriggled her brows at Aria.

“I do, but I can’t.” She shook her head.

Ghost smiled at me. “How about you? Want to come shopping?”

“Nope.”

“It’ll be fun.” She giggled.

“Pass.” I shook my head.

Aria swiveled my way. “What will you do?”

“I could come with you,” I said. “Help you out where I can.”

She placed her hand on my knee. “That’s sweet, but you won’t have clearance to enter the building. Besides, it’ll be chaos.”

I glanced out the window, across the dark ocean. “Well, I can’t remember the last time I walked on a beach. Maybe I’ll check it out.”

Ghost cocked her head at me. “In your jeans and cowboy boots?”

“Yeah, why not.”

“Ha! I want to see that.”

I raised my left boot. “What’s wrong with my boots?”

Aria glanced at me and something hot swirled in her eyes. “Nothing.”

Ghost did a massive yawn that was very fake. “Okay, well, I’m bushed. I’m gonna hit the sack.” She stood. “See you in the morning.”

She scooted down the hallway and disappeared into Aria’s spare bedroom, then she poked her head out. “I’ll have my music on so don’t worry if you guys want to get loud.” She dangled a headset in her hand.

“Maya!” Aria shook her head.

“Just sayin’. Goodnight, you two lovebirds.” Ghost shut her door.

“She’s relentless.” Aria rolled her eyes.

I cleared my throat. “So, I guess I’ll sleep here on the sofa.”

Aria turned to me, but it wasn’t exhaustion stamped on her expression, it was a tangled mix of confusion and desire.

Lust blazed through me, hot and unrelenting. But I had to resist. If Aria wanted me, she needed to show it.

Her eyes swam with tears and my beautiful, brave woman seemed so vulnerable. “Can you please just hold me?”

“Always.” I opened my arms.

She crumbled against my chest, and her shoulders shook as tears spilled down her cheeks.

“Hey, it’s going to be okay.” I smoothed my hand down her back, and her tiny sniffles nearly cracked me in two.

As I held her to me, a fierce protectiveness drilled through me. I would change the world for her.

“It’s all too much,” she said between sobs.

“What’s all too much?” I curled my hand over her hair.

“Everything.” She wiped her nose, then winced.

“It’s okay. We’ll get through this.” I kissed the top of her head, wishing I could take away her pain.

She eased back and sucked in a wobbly breath. “Why are you so nice?”

I smiled. “You know why.”

Tears spilled from her eyes and a heaviness sunk into my bones at how completely helpless she looked.

I wiped a tear from her cheek with my thumb. “I love you, Aria.”

She leaned into my hand and closed her eyes. “I know.” She sucked in a shaky breath. “When I thought I was going to die, all I could think about was you, and how I messed things up.”

My heart squeezed. “You haven’t—”

“Yes, I have. I’ve messed everything up.”

I cupped her cheek, luring her eyes to mine. “Our timing wasn’t right last time. But things are different now.”

She nodded, blinking her wet lashes, and meeting my gaze, she parted her mouth like she wanted to say something but couldn’t get the words out.

I’d do anything to heal the sorrow swimming in her eyes.

She stood and reached for my hand, and my heart boomed in my ribcage as she led me to her bedroom. After shutting the door, she turned out the lights and a warm glow filtered in through the sides of the curtains. We stood facing each other and I wanted to feel her naked flesh. My cock, throbbing in my jeans like a jackhammer, wanted to be inside her.

I forced myself to wait.

Aria had to make the next move because once we started there would be no turning back for me.

She reached for my shirt and by undoing just one button, she’d told me everything I needed to know. I cupped her cheeks and pressed my lips to hers. Her mouth opened and as I pushed my tongue against hers, a tiny moan spilled from her throat as I tasted her sweetness and relished in her warmth.

She undid the last button and peeled my shirt off my shoulders. I pulled her T-shirt over her head, and she tugged the string on her sweatpants. When they fell to her feet, she kicked them away.

I squeezed her breast, massaging her glorious flesh in my fingers. Aria moaned, curling her hand around my neck, and pulled me down to kiss her. This wasn’t a sweet kiss; this was heated, desperate. Driving a need that we’ve both had for way too long.

She fumbled with my belt buckle, and I stepped back and stripped out of my clothes. She slipped out of her panties and as I stared at her naked body, she stared at mine.

My rock-hard cock throbbed to attention, aiming right at her.

This moment had been years in the making. I wanted to crush her body to mine. To lick her nipples and bury my cock deep inside her.

“Do you really think we could work?” Her chest heaved like she’d run a marathon.

I frowned. “Do you love me?”

She swallowed so loudly I heard it. “I love you so much it hurts.”

I strode to her, and she planted her lips on mine. Gripping her to my chest, I shuffled her to the bed, lowered her to the blankets and took a moment to admire my beautiful woman.

The warm light added a heavenly glow to her olive skin, and my cock throbbed to a painful beat.

She curled her body toward me. “Xander, make love to me.”

The way she said my name nearly did me in. I didn’t want to make love to her though. I wanted to fuck her like there was no tomorrow.

But I needed this to be special. To take my time and make her body sing like I knew she could.

Every nerve tingled as I shuffled to the end of the bed. She rolled onto her back and parted her legs, inviting me to bury myself inside her. I clutched her ankles and pulled her toward me, so her knees bent over the end of the bed.

I glided my hands up her inner thighs, caressing her silky skin, each time cruising higher to her pussy. She arched her back and her nipples were rock-hard pebbles as she planted her feet on the bed and raised her hips, giving me a view of heaven.

My cock begged me to fuck her, but I wanted to watch her own glorious release first. She licked her lips and swayed her knees, inviting me to touch her.

As I sucked her breast, I glided my hand up her inner thigh and drove a finger into her hot zone. A moan released from her

throat and as she lowered her butt to the covers, I added a second finger to the first and thrust my fingers in and out.

“Yes, oh yes.” She cupped her hands under her knees and opened herself more.

I rammed my fingers into her, watching her writhe beneath my thrusts. This was my Aria, free of worry or inhibitions, letting her body do what it did best. She cried out, and her pussy throbbed around my fingers, coating them with her hot juice. She snapped her knees shut, and as I twisted my fingers inside her, she clenched her jaw and clutched the covers as her whole body tremored.

Aria was so beautiful. And finally, so gloriously mine.

She raised her head to look at me, and my heart pounded at the burning desire in her eyes.

Sitting up, she grabbed my hand and pulled me onto the bed, onto my back.

She wrapped her hand around my cock, glided her fingers up my shaft, and kissed my throbbing head.

“Oh, Aria.” A hot breath burst from my throat.

She wrapped her mouth around my cock, taking my length into her silky warmth. Her hair fell forward tickling my groin. But I wanted to watch her take me. I reached forward to pull her hair back, and as she lowered her mouth down my shaft, her gaze met mine.

“Oh, sweet Jesus.”

“Hmmm.” Her mouth vibrated around my cock.

Hissing through my clenched teeth, I fought everything to contain myself.

She reached between my legs to cup my balls, and I drove my fingers through her hair.

“Careful, babe, it’s been too long.”

Gliding her lips up my shaft, she kissed the head of my cock, and I drank in this moment. The gloss in her eyes. Her hair spilling around her face.

My dick was ready to burst.

She crawled up my body, kissing my navel, my chest, and each of my nipples. As she planted her lips on mine, she reached between her legs and guided every inch of me into her. Her warmth wrapped around me like a glove, and when I couldn't penetrate her anymore, she sat up.

My cock swelled inside her and as I squeezed her breasts, she pressed her hands to my chest and eased forward and up to glide my dick inside her.

I thumbed her nipples and squeezed her breasts, riding a wave of pure ecstasy, years in the making.

She set a rhythm, sliding up and down my shaft, slow at first as if examining every inch of me. Her slick warmth was heaven. Her lips parted and her eyes closed.

The sight of her was almost my undoing, and I closed my eyes, letting her ride me. Her rhythm grew faster and squeezing her hips, I hissed out a breath, unable to hold on much longer.

Maybe she felt how close I was because she increased her pace, and bounced up and down, burying every inch of me deep inside her.

I opened my eyes, desperate to watch this magnificent show and as she cried out, her hot juices spilled around me.

Digging my fingers into her hips, I thrust inside her over and over until I had nothing more to give.

Aria fell forward onto my chest and as I wrapped my arms around her, our ragged breaths mingled together.

I glided my hand up her bare back, caressing her silky skin that was as perfect as I always remembered.

We remained as one until our breathing returned to normal. Aria eased up on my chest and planted her lips on mine. Her kiss was so tender and so real, my heart melted.

When she pulled back, I curled her hair around her ear.

She tilted her head toward my palm. "I love you."

“Oh, Aria, you don’t know how long I’ve waited to hear you say that.”

She pressed her hands to my chest, and a wave of vulnerability filled her expression.

My heart pounded and I clamped my jaw, refusing to say anything until she opened up.

“But do you think love is enough?” she asked.

I glided my hands over the curve of her waist. “Love is all that matters.”

“But what if it’s not? What if we can’t live together?”

I swept a loose hair away from her cheek. “Well, we won’t know if we don’t give it a try.”

She curled off my body and nestled into my side. I rolled onto my hip, and we pressed our bodies together, spooning each other. Easing back, I studied an elegant vine tattoo with tiny butterflies inked down her spine.

I ran my finger along it. “This is new.”

“Yeah.” She shrugged. “A moment of rebellion. Or boredom. Maybe both.”

“I like it. It’s you.” I placed my arm over her waist, found her hand, and when our fingers slotted into place, I pressed our palms together.

“I don’t think you understand, Xander. I honestly don’t think I could live in the country. And I don’t want you to pretend you could live in the city because we both know that could never be possible.”

My thoughts careened to my father. I could never forgive him for his actions today, and I couldn’t work for him any longer. “Maybe we could compromise.”

“Compromise how?”

I kissed the back of her shoulder. “I can’t return to the farm.”

“Don’t, Xander. Don’t say that. I couldn’t live with myself if—”

“Just hear me out.”

She softened against me. “Okay.”

With our bodies melded together and our hands intertwined, I told her about my brumbies and my new foal and what I wanted to do with those beautiful horses.

“I have visions for that farm, Aria, but Dad will never understand. I can’t live or work there anymore. It’s time for me to find my own place.” I swept her hair over her shoulders so I could see her cheek. “Our place, together. Somewhere that suits both of us.”

She rolled onto her back, and I fell into her glorious eyes. “Are you serious?”

“Hundred percent serious.”

“Oh, Xander, that sounds perfect,” she said, but her expression didn’t replicate her words.

“But ...?”

Her shoulders sagged. “My whole life has revolved around my career. Now that it’s over—”

“You don’t know that.”

She huffed. “I do. I can never recover from what Dad has done.”

“You are not him.”

“I know, but I will be forever tarnished by his actions. I already lived under his shadow. It will be ten times worse now. I have to resign.”

“Just wait until tomorrow. Take it one day at a time.”

She eased up on her elbow and kissed me. “One day at a time.”

I cupped her breast. “Today isn’t over yet.”

She giggled.

“I love hearing you laugh.”

A smile swept across her lips, and it was a truly genuine smile. She pushed me onto my back and climbed on top.

We made love again, slow and fucking awesome.

We were meant to be together. Always had been.

But how can I prove to her that no matter what happens, our love will get us through.

Chapter Thirty-One

HAWK



After a quick breakfast and a long goodbye, where both Maya and Xander behaved way too upbeat for the mess swirling through my mind, I caught a taxi to ASIO head office. As the taxi wove through the early morning traffic, I had both a glow in my heart from my night with Xander and dread in my bones over what I was about to face.

My mind bounced from my night and discussions with Xander, to what Dad had done, to my career, to Kyle.

As we entered the Sydney Harbour Tunnel, I checked my phone. I'd had eleven missed calls. Ten were from ASIO head office. One was from Kyle.

I rang him, but he didn't answer. "Kyle, it's Aria. I hope you're okay. I'm so sorry for what happened yesterday and for the way I treated you. But I promise I will make it up to you. I have a mountain of mess to sort out today, but I will come see you this afternoon. Get some rest."

My words were so inadequate. Nothing could make up for how horrible I'd been to him or for Dad trying to murder him.

Even though I'd witnessed Dad pulling that trigger, I still couldn't believe that had happened.

Or that Dad was the mastermind behind all these years of bullshit.

As I rode the elevator to the twentieth floor of ASIO head office, my stomach twisted into fierce knots. The elevators opened to silence, which I'd expected as most people didn't arrive until eight o'clock, but as I rounded the corner, I was

surprised to see Melanie at her desk. I strode toward her, and she stood.

Her jaw fell ajar, and she looked on the verge of tears. “You want coffee?”

“Yes, please. Make it a double shot.”

“Okay, I’ll bring it in to you. And good luck.”

I frowned. No amount of luck was going to save me today. My career was over. I’d accepted that. But I needed to set a few records straight first.

The glass doors slid open, and a murmur rippled through the office. It seemed everyone had arrived early today.

One by one, the staff stood to ogle me as I strode to Frank’s corner office.

Six men in suits turned to me as I entered, but only one captured my attention: ex-prime minister, Cameron MacBride, who was now the Minister of Defense.

“Mr. MacBride.” I stopped in the middle of the room.

He strode toward me with his hand out. “Aria, I wish I could say it was good to see you.”

I nodded. “I know, sir. It’s a mess.”

Frank’s office, once a sanctuary for national secrets, bore barely any scars from yesterday’s struggle. The broken glass and frames had been removed from the floor, but pictures that had hung on the walls for years were gone. Including the photo of Dad with Chui. That was in my safety and my first piece of evidence in what was likely to be a very long and extensive investigation into my father’s criminal activities.

Cameron turned to one of the suits. “Give us a few minutes, please guys.”

They all willingly left the office.

“Shut the door, Phil,” Cameron said as the last man left.

Just before Phil shut the door, Melanie delivered my coffee. Once Cameron and I were alone, he instructed me to

sit. But Cameron didn't take Frank's chair on the other side of the desk like I expected. Instead, he sat next to me.

He opened his hands and looked so damn relaxed, I wondered if he actually knew what happened yesterday. But he must, or he wouldn't be here.

"I only have an hour," he said, "so give me a summary."

As I sipped my coffee, I detailed the events that happened in this office and at Dad's house, and preparing to deliver another shocking detail, I heaved a sigh. "Frank was Mason Kingsman's brother."

Gasping, his eyes bulged. "What?"

I nodded. "Frank's real name is Fred Kincaid."

"Christ almighty. I knew this was a mess, but that's ..."

Cameron drove his hands through his hair. "I thought I knew Mason, but I was so damn wrong. They were brothers?"

"Yes, sir."

Cameron blinked at me, either lost for words or trying to figure out what to do next.

I decided to help him. "I know I need to hand in my resignation."

He cocked his head. "Why?"

I blinked at him. "I can't come back from this, sir. I already had trouble proving I was capable of this position with Frank as my dad. When everything comes out about Dad's prolonged and sustained involvement with Chui and God knows what other corruption he was involved in, my name will stick in the mud with them." I shook my head. "Unfortunately, my career is over."

Cameron's shoulders slumped.

"Now that I know Frank's involvement with Chui," I said, "I believe we'll be able to piece together thirty years of corruption mysteries. But at least I got answers to one mystery that's been killing me."

"What's that?"

I told him about our first mission to Kyrgyzstan and how we were supplied dodgy Scorpion Industries weapons.

“Jesus, Aria. I had no idea.”

“There’s more.” I told him about our recent mission and the cache of Scorpion Industries weapons we found in that cave. Then I dropped the bombshell about the Chinese-made weapons being supplied to the Australian Military.

Leaning back, he whistled. “Son of a ...”

“I know, sir. Those weapons are still being supplied to that region. Dad and Mason’s other brother Henry Kincaid was involved, as was Cooper Apollo, one of the men on my team.” My stomach clenched at that admission. How could I have missed his deception?

“Jesus. This is a mess.” Cameron rested his fists on his thighs and his knuckles bulged like he was trying to contain his anger.

“I know, sir. I’m also certain there are many more people who know about this corruption, and I won’t stop my investigations until I find out who.”

He nodded. “You have my full support. Anything you need, you just ask.”

“Thank you, sir. I believe Frank and Chui had help across Australia, and possibly the world. A lot of heads will roll, and sir, I think some of them will be just as shocking as Dad’s involvement and Mason Kingsman’s.”

He wiped his palms on his trousers. “I want every one of them taken down.”

“Me too, sir. And I promise to give you all the help you need to investigate Frank, Chui, Apollo, and anyone else involved.”

“It’s a minefield.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Are you sure I can’t talk you out of resigning?”

My heart swelled over his sincerity. “Thank you, sir. My career is over. I accept that. But may I recommend Kyle Henderson for consideration to replace Frank. He’s covered for Frank a few times when Frank was away, and he’s been Frank’s shadow for a few years anyway.”

He bunched his lips together. “Ask him to contact me.”

“I will. Thanks. He deserves it.”

“So, Aria Morgan, what will you do next?”

Heaving a sigh, I shook my head. “I have no idea. However, before I announce my resignation, there is one record I would like to set straight.”

“I’m listening.”

I summarized what I knew about the submarine from Antarctica, and what I wanted to do with that information. Relief washed through me when he agreed. At least that was one record that my father had suppressed that I could set straight.

Cameron stood and I did too. He shook my hand. “Aria, I have something in mind for you. Once you sort through this mess and take a short break, come see me.”

I shook my head. “Thank you, but you don’t need to do that.”

“Come see me. I think you’ll be surprised.” He rested his hand on my shoulder. “Australia needs you. As does your Alpha Tactical Ops team. I’ll see you soon.”

I chuckled. “You don’t give up, do you?”

He winked and left the room.

The five men in suits entered, and one of the men strode around to the other side of Frank’s desk. “Okay, Miss Morgan, we have a lot to get through. Do you need another coffee?”

“Yes. Yes, I do. But please, call me Aria.”

The five men had been tasked with investigating Frank Morgan’s actions yesterday, but it became clear that they had absolutely no idea that Frank’s meltdown was only the tip of

his iceberg of criminal activity. Their stern expressions and instant animosity toward me confirmed they had expected me to be protective of Frank.

They were so wrong. I wanted them to know everything about that bastard and what he'd done and had been doing for decades.

What had initially seemed like a daunting task, ended up being much more rewarding than I'd anticipated. The invisible nemesis I'd been fighting for years had finally been uncovered and hours were swallowed up as I detailed everything I knew about Frank and his dubious dealings, starting with his real name and his connections to the Kincaid family of corrupt brothers.

During a short break, I asked Melanie to arrange a public address at three o'clock in the media room we had on standby a couple of blocks away.

Half an hour before the media address time slot, I told the men I had to end the meeting, but I promised to answer all their questions either over the phone or in person. They handed me their business cards and as they each shook my hand, I wondered how long it would be before some of the sensational details I'd given them made it into the media spotlight.

The story was too huge, and between them and everyone who had either witnessed or had been involved in yesterday's attack, there was no chance of containing the situation.

The best I could do was keep in front of it.

After a quick refresh in the bathroom, where I resisted covering the cuts, bruises, and my red nose with makeup, I asked Melanie to walk with me to the media room.

"Are you okay, Miss Morgan?" she asked as we rode down in the elevator.

I turned to her. "Yes. I do believe I am."

A frown rippled her forehead. "What about us? The staff at ASIO? Are we okay?"

“Yes, of course. Within a week or so, this will settle down and everything will go back to normal.”

“With you? Everything will return to normal including you?”

“No, I won’t be returning after today.”

She tugged her lips into her mouth.

I frowned. “What?”

“You have always been so nice to me. Nicer than anyone else. I don’t want you to go.”

“Oh.” That was so sweet and unexpected, I was lost for words.

She wrapped her arms around me. “I will miss you.”

I gave her a hug. “Thank you. That means the world to me.”

She pulled back, wiping her eyes. “What will you do?”

“Have a holiday, for starters.”

“Good. You deserve it.”

We exited the building and strolled up the street to our media room. A hive of noise greeted us as we stepped from the elevator to the third floor and inhaling a deep breath, I prepared for the onslaught that was beyond the red door.

“Here we go,” I said.

I pushed through the door and dozens of cameras swung in my direction.

“Miss Morgan, did your father try to kill you?” a man called out.

“Why did Frank Morgan shoot Kyle Henderson?” another man yelled across the crowd.

The questions were fired like bullets from a semi-automatic weapon as I strode the gauntlet between the reporters to the low stage at the front.

Standing behind the podium, I waited for them to quiet down and take their seats. “Thank you. I have a lot to advise, so I request that you refrain from asking questions during my speech.”

“Will you answer questions at the end?” John Simmons from The Age blurted.

I glared at him, then without answering his question, I looked across the crowd of reporters. I had addressed crowds like this many times during my career at ASIO, and a pang of disappointment washed through me as I realized this would be my very last.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, I am Aria Morgan, Head of Intelligence Service Delivery at the Australian Security Intelligence Office.”

Over the next twenty minutes, I summarized the details I could share about Frank’s actions yesterday, including shooting Kyle, and that Frank had died.

“Investigations are underway regarding Frank’s involvement with Ziháo Chui,” I said.

A rumble went through the crowd. Chui’s name and his demise in the luxury yacht had been headlining news that sold papers. Frank’s connection to him, and their acts of corruption, were the juicy stories these guys lived for.

“But, due to the nature of the crimes, I am unable to reveal specifics in what will likely be an exhausting investigation,” I said.

Many of the reporters groaned and slumped in their seats.

“There is, however, one ongoing investigation that Frank had deliberately withheld from the public and it’s my duty to set a record straight.”

They sat up again. It was like being a puppet master and they were my marionettes.

“Many of you will recall the horrific massacre in Antarctica where twenty-two Australians were murdered at Station Eleven.”

Several reporters leaned forward, holding recording devices toward me.

“I can now confirm that Australian scientist, Miss Billie Everson, did indeed find a submarine several hundred feet deep in the Eubanks Glacier in Antarctica. Miss Everson lost her unblemished career at the University of Canberra and was wrongfully accused of many heinous and false allegations.”

“Miss Everson found a World War II submarine called the *Kashalet*. The L-class sub was reportedly sunk by German aircraft in Leningrad, January 1945. But the *Kashalet* briefly resurfaced in the Elbe River in Schleswig-Holstein, near Hamburg on the fourteenth of March, 1945. Then it vanished again—until Miss Everson found that submarine trapped in the ice in Antarctica.”

“Miss Everson should never have been accused of any involvement in the horror that happened in Antarctica, and I will fully support Miss Billie Everson in her quest for justice and compensation that she rightfully deserves.”

The people in the room were charged with energy and everyone’s attention was on me.

Good, because I had just one more thing to add.

“Finally, I have resigned from my position at ASIO, and this will be my last address to the nation. Thank you.”

I stepped down from the podium, and the crowd stood. As questions were fired at me by nearly every reporter, Melanie and I marched from the room.

We made it to the elevators without being accosted, and as we rode down, Melanie’s wet eyes nearly crushed me.

“You are amazing,” she said.

Frowning, I shook my head.

“No, Aria. I mean it. I have never met anyone like you. Your confidence is incredible. I wish you weren’t leaving, but also, I’m glad you are. You deserve so much better than how you’ve been treated.”

“Thanks, Melanie.”

“If ever you need a staff member, please think of me.” She wrapped her arms around me.

I’d had more hugs in the last twenty-four hours than I’d had in years. It felt really good.

“I will. I promise. But you may be waiting a while.”

“I’ll be ready.”

After saying goodbye, I took a taxi to the hospital where I was recognized by more people than I wished as I navigated my way to Kyle.

At Kyle’s room, a curtain was pulled across to conceal his bed.

“Kyle, are you decent?” I asked.

“Aria! Get in here.” He sounded much chirpier than I anticipated.

I tugged aside the curtain. Kyle was on his back with a sheet draped across his body, tubes sticking out of his arms, and a massive grin on his face.

“Wow, that was one hell of a media release,” he said. “Those reporters are probably scrambling over each other to break the headlines.”

“Yeah, well, they can have at it.” I strolled to his side. “Looks like you’re recovering just fine.”

“Yeah, I’m good. Just a few more holes than I had yesterday morning,” he joked. “Thank you for saving me.”

I rested my hand over the back of his. “I’m sorry I put you in that position.”

“You didn’t. You tried to stop me from going with you.”

“Actually, that is true, you stubborn bastard.” I pulled over a chair and sat beside his bed.

“That was one hell of a fight you put up.” He studied my face. “You were amazing.”

“Didn’t feel amazing.”

“Well, how could it when it’s your own father trying to kill you.”

His words were a bombshell. It was like I hadn’t let the truth sink in. Before it was just Frank who had tried to kill me, not my father, my own flesh and blood. My only relative. Dad’s hatred for me ran deep. His greed and power-hungry delusions ran even deeper.

I never knew him at all.

Glancing at the machine feeding liquid into Kyle’s arm, I shoved aside the emotions clawing at my sanity. “I’m glad you didn’t die.”

“Me too.” He picked at something invisible on the bedsheet. “I can’t believe you quit.”

“I had to. Dad has fucked up my career for good this time.”

His brows thumped together as he seemed to mull over that. “Why did he do it?”

Rolling my eyes, I stood. “It’s a long story.”

“Oh, no you don’t.” He reached for my hand and winced. “I’m stuck in here. You need to fill me in on everything.”

I groaned, dramatic and pathetic, yet knowing I wouldn’t get away that easily.

“Aria, it’s the least you can do.” His bloodshot eyes drilled into me, begging me to stay.

“Jeez.”

Seated again, I summarized what I could, and Kyle lapped it up like the investigators had earlier that morning.

He scraped his hand over his chin stubble. “I hope you told Mister MacBride and those other guys that I would help them too.”

“Well ...” I stood so I could see him better. “I did more than that.”

He cocked his head, his expression expectant. “What?”

“I recommended you for Frank’s position.”

His jaw dropped, and he blinked at me. “You did?”

“Sure did. Cameron MacBride asked that you give him a call.”

“Holy wow.” Somehow, Kyle’s bloodshot eyes sparkled. “That would be amazing. Aria, thank you.”

I rested my hand on his shoulder and squeezed. “Thank you for everything, and I am truly sorry.”

“Thank you for saving me, and Aria, honestly, you’re forgiven. It seems you and I were both fucked over by that asshole.”

Lowering my gaze, I said, “Yeah, unfortunately.” I huffed out a forceful breath. “Anyway, I really have to go. It’s been a huge day. I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Thanks for coming. Good luck. Don’t be a stranger.”

As I made my way toward the exit, I felt like I was in a hot air balloon. Each step got lighter, like bags of bullshit were being dropped over the side, soaring me higher.

And I knew exactly why.

Despite everything else in my world coming to a screaming halt, Xander was still there. He was my shining light who had somehow stuck with me, believed in me.

But while it was incredible to have Xander and the rest of the Alpha Ops team supporting me, there were still a huge number of bastards who worked with Frank who needed to be investigated and arrested.

Some of them will be petrified.

Some will do crazy things.

Like that man who attacked me in that sunken yacht. He has never been found. Nor his body.

Dad’s death may not be the end of this mess.

It may be just the beginning of another round of hell.

Chapter Thirty-Two

RAZOR



Sipping my beer on Aria's veranda, I peered over the buildings to Bondi Beach. Too much traffic noise made it impossible to hear the ocean, which was a pity. I'd enjoyed sitting on the sand today, listening to the waves as I watched hundreds of people walk by.

My phone rang and I strolled inside to pluck it off the table.

Mom. Again. I had deliberately avoided her calls. But conceding I couldn't avoid her for much longer, I swiped to answer and returned to my seat on the veranda.

"Hello, Mom." I swigged my beer.

"Oh, Xander, I've been so worried about you. You haven't answered your phone."

"That's right, Mom. I wasn't ready to talk to you."

"Oh." She released an awkward laugh. "Well, I'm glad you are now."

I took another sip of my beer, waiting for her to ask the inevitable question.

"When are you coming home?"

And there it is.

"I'm not returning to live there again, Mom."

"But you have to."

"No, Mom, I don't. Besides, it's not my home, it's Dad's."

“You built your home—”

“On Dad’s land ... as he constantly reminds me.”

“But ... you have to come home.”

Over the ocean, an eagle soared high in the sky, dipping and diving in the currents. It was a sign, telling me to enjoy my freedom.

“Xander, you *have* to come home,” she repeated.

“There’s nothing for me there.”

“I’m here.”

I sucked in a sharp breath. “You’ll be fine with Dad.”

“But you know what he’s like. I need you.”

The front door opened, and Aria strode along the hallway. She smiled when she saw me, and my heart swelled at how calm she looked. The apprehension I’d had for returning to her office evaporated in a flash.

She came out to the veranda, and I showed her mom’s name on the screen of my phone. Nodding, she draped her arm around my neck and kissed my cheek.

“But I need you, Xander.” Mom’s voice wobbled.

I gripped Aria to my side, and it felt so natural... like we’d been together for years. She kissed my head, gave me a small smile, and slipped back inside. Her sexy ass bulged and flexed beneath her slacks as she walked to the kitchen.

“Xander. Come home. Please.” Mom’s pleading was awful.

“Mom, I’m thirty-one years old. It’s time for me to make my own life.”

“No, Xander. Your life is here. With me.” Anger seeped into her tone.

Standing, I paced the small veranda. “I have no future there, Mom. Not anymore. I thought I did, but Dad proved me wrong.”

“Don’t worry about your father. He’ll come around.”

“No, he won’t. Dad has crushed every idea I had for that land, and I’m done.”

Mom went silent and her sharp breathing sounded like she’d been a lifetime smoker. She hadn’t. “I never pegged you for a quitter.” She snapped the words off her tongue like they were sour lemons.

I sucked air through my teeth. “You call it what you want, Mom. I’m going now.”

Despite the fresh breeze drifting off the ocean, a bitter taste filled my mouth as I ended the call, tossed the phone onto the table, and went inside.

Aria stood at the kitchen bench. “That sounded like fun.”

I walked behind her, slipped my arms around her waist, and kissed her neck. “I told Mom I’m not coming home.”

Aria twisted around to face me. “So I heard. And?”

“She didn’t take it well.”

Her eyes darkened as if she struggled to process that. “Oh no, that’s not good.”

“I’m never going to live there again.” I picked her up onto the kitchen bench.

She parted her knees and rested her palms on my chest. “You can’t say that.”

I glided my hands up her thighs. “My home is with you.” I kissed her cheek.

“But, babe ...” Her dark eyes swam with confusion.

“Hmmm.” I kissed her lips. “I love it when you call me babe.”

She draped her hands over my shoulders and a smile tickled her lips. “Babe.”

“You seem chirpy. You must’ve had a good day.”

She shrugged. “Turned out better than I thought.”

“I know how we can make it even better.” I wriggled my eyebrows. “Fancy a roll in the hay?”

She laughed. “Such a romantic.”

I scooped her into my arms, and she kissed my neck as I carried her to bed.

“We better be quick though,” she said, peeling out of her clothes. “Maya will be here any minute.”

“Roger that.” I stripped off my clothes like they were on fire and my erection was already hard enough to hammer nails.

Aria crawled onto the bed and when she flopped back onto the cover, her breasts jiggled, drawing my attention. Her cheeks were flushed with her arousal, and I wanted to soak in her beauty. But she waved me forward, parting her legs as I crawled on top of her.

Her breasts were small and perky, and I loved how her nipples grew rock-hard. I sucked her breast, drawing out a delicious trail of goosebumps around her perfect buds.

I snapped her nipple from my lips and turned my attention to her other breast. Clawing her fingers up my back, she curled her body toward me.

I fucking loved how she reacted to my touch.

“You better hang on for this, honey.” I kissed her neck. “I’ve been thinking of you all day.”

She parted her legs more and whimpered. “You say all the right things.”

Panting, she reached down between us and when she guided me into her, I pushed my cock inside her until my balls nudged her butt. I wanted to take my time, but I couldn’t. My body wanted her, and my dick demanded attention.

She raised her knees, and with an erotic fury that took over, I pounded her wet abyss hard and long.

A cry burst from her throat and as she clutched my shoulders, her hot juices spilled around my shaft, and I couldn’t hold back a moment more.

Everything around me vanished and it was just us. Together.

After we climaxed, I held myself above her, watching her transition from whatever glorious place I'd taken her, back to me. She released a huge sigh like the weight of the world that she'd been carrying for so long had been washed away. Her eyes fluttered open, and her face lit up in a smile.

I kissed her. "God, I love you."

Her eyes pooled. "I love you so much."

The conviction in her tone grabbed my heart and squeezed so hard my breath escaped me.

"I'm sorry I took so long to—"

I cupped her cheek. "Hey, stop. It wasn't perfect back then. It is now."

She kissed my palm. "You're wrong. Nothing is perfect. Except you. I'm so lucky you persisted."

Releasing an exaggerated sigh, I rolled my eyes. "You didn't make it easy."

She kissed me, just a quick peck that was casual, and fun, and perfect.

"Honey, I'm home." Maya's voice echoed down the hall.

"Shit." Aria jumped out of bed and dashed into the bathroom.

I pulled on my jeans, and shirtless, I strode toward the kitchen. "Hey, Maya."

"Well, hello there, cowboy." Giggling, she ran her gaze up my body.

"Did you have a good day?" I asked.

She indicated to the mound of shopping bags against the wall. "Wait till you see what I bought."

Aria stepped into the kitchen wearing jeans, a pink T-shirt, and no bra.

Fuck, she looked sexy. Then again, she could wear greasy overalls and my cock would still bounce just looking at her.

Maya tilted her head. “Well, look at you. I bought wine, thinking you’d be a mess after today.” She held up a bottle of rose.

“I’ll still take the wine.” Aria snatched the bottle. “But yeah, it’s weird. Today wasn’t as horrific as I expected it to be.”

Maya pulled Aria in for a hug.

“I’m so happy for you, babe.” Maya winked at me. “For both of you. I want to hear all about it, and how you went on the beach, cowboy.” She plucked three wine glasses from the dish drainer. “Shall we?”

Aria ordered Thai food from the local restaurant, and as we drank the wine and ate amazing Thai cuisine that I’d never had before, we each shared our days. My day was summed up in three sentences, but between Maya showing us her shopping haul and Aria sharing her last day at ASIO, we talked for hours.

“So, what are you two going to do now?” Maya sat cross-legged on the sofa opposite Aria and me. “You’re both unemployed.”

“Yes, we are.” Aria smiled at me, her eyes gleaming, and we both burst out laughing.

Hot damn, it felt good.

“I have no idea,” we both said simultaneously, and we laughed harder.

Maya grinned at us. “You could move up to Risky Shores and live near the rest of us. There’s plenty of land up there.”

Aria and I looked at each other, and she cocked her eyebrow.

“I’m open to any suggestions.” I gripped her hand in mine. “As long as I’m with you.”

“Awww, you guys.” Maya dove toward us and wrapped us in a group hug. “I’m so happy for you two.”

“Thanks. Took us long enough. No ... me. It took *me* long enough,” Aria said.

Maya eased back. “Better late than never, right? We need more wine.”

She skipped toward the kitchen.

I squeezed Aria’s hand. “How would you feel about moving away from here?”

“What? And leave all this?” She glanced around her apartment then swept me into her molasses eyes. “I’d feel fucking awesome.”

My heart swelled to bursting.

Maya returned with another wine bottle and topped up our glasses, then she sat cross-legged again in the seat opposite.

Aria settled back with our thighs touching and sipped her wine. “I have a heap of things to do first. I suppose I’ll need to arrange Dad’s funeral. I’ll have to sort out his will and do something with his stuff.”

“Sounds horrible,” Maya said. “You could come back to Kyrgyzstan with us tomorrow.”

Aria put her glass down. “No, I want to get all this shit behind me. Once that’s done, Xander and I can figure out the next stage of our lives.”

“Perfect.” Maya took a sip of wine. “We’ll also have to figure out what to do with all the gold bars we are going to come home with.”

“What *are* we going to do with them?” I asked.

Aria shook her head. “It’s an interesting question. It was Nazi gold that was made from melting down looted treasures, so it’s impossible to establish who the original gold belongs to.”

“Yes, as you said before ... it’s Jewish gold melted down by Germans, stolen by a Chinese man and his friends who hid it, and then the gold was relocated in Kyrgyzstan by a bunch of crazy Australians,” I said.

Maya giggled. “Crazy, right?”

“Let’s get those remaining gold bars back to Risky Shores first without anyone stealing them from us,” Aria said. “Then we’ll figure out what to do.”

“Viper’s still going to be pissed, you know.” Maya looked at me. “He’ll never forgive Jet.”

I shoved down a growl. “I’ll never forgive that bastard. I can’t believe he did that. We were friends.”

“He won’t be able to hide forever,” Maya said.

“I don’t know.” I shook my head. “With the amount of gold he stole from us, he could sell it for enough to live very well for the rest of his life. He’ll change his name, cover his tracks. He’s gone.”

Moaning, Aria slumped beside me.

“What is it?” I rested my hand on her knee.

“I was just thinking about Dad. He changed his name from Fred Kincaid to Frank Morgan and hid his crimes for decades.” Her frown deepened. “He told me how he and his brother Mason connected with Chui. But all of his brothers were up to their eyeballs in criminal activities. And all of the Kincaid brothers are now dead except Henry.”

Maya clicked her fingers. “I forgot about him. He was the one who attacked Viper at his house. Last time I checked, he was still in a coma.”

“He’s the link to Scorpion Industries,” Aria said.

“Didn’t he work at Meandu Coal Mine?” Maya frowned.

“Yes, but it was obviously a cover for selling illegal arms. We need Cobra to dig deeper into him. Dad liked to involve his family in all his criminal activities.” Pain radiated in Aria’s sad eyes. “Including me.”

I squeezed her knee but nothing I could say could eradicate her feeling of betrayal.

“Dad didn’t love me. He used me.” Aria shuddered like she was shaking off a devil. Maybe she was. “We need to turn

Dad's house upside down.”

“But you saw those police yesterday. They took boxes of stuff. There will be nothing left,” I said.

“What if some of those cops were working with Frank?” Maya's eyes flared.

“Jesus. I never thought of that.” Aria looked like she needed to vomit.

“If that's the case, then those cops are probably destroying evidence as we speak,” I said.

Maya clicked her fingers. “Or they're making a runner.”

“Or they could be trying to figure out how to take over Frank's criminal empire.” Aria groaned. “If that's the case, the corruption will never end.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

HAWK



After breakfast with Maya and Xander in a café overlooking Bondi Beach, we returned to my apartment, and I rang the police officer who was leading the investigation into Dad's death.

"Detective Trebilco," he answered on the first ring.

"Hello, detective. It's Aria Morgan. I was just wondering if I would be able to access Dad's home? I need to find his will."

"I found his will yesterday. You can collect it from me."

Damn. I need to get into his house.

"Oh. Okay, thank you. I'll collect it from you today. When can I have access to his house?"

Xander placed a steaming coffee mug on the dining table for me and sat at my side.

"We are still processing the crime scene." Trebilco's clipped voice suggested that I'd pissed him off.

"I understand that, but I will need to access his house at some point to gather some personal belongings." I tried to keep my tone calm.

"Until the investigation is over you won't be able to tamper with or remove anything."

"That could take months."

"Come see me today, and I'll give you his will." He ended the call.

I sighed and leaned back in my chair. “Detective Trebilco won’t let me into the house yet.”

Xander covered my hand with his. “We’ll figure it out.”

Maya bounded into the kitchen like she was on springs. “I’m going for a run. Want to join me?”

“Nope,” Xander said.

“No, thanks. We’ll head over to the police station to collect Dad’s will. See you when we get back?”

“Of course.” She jogged on her feet. “You’re missing out on all the gorgeous sun, sand, and surf though.”

I chuckled. “I know.”

I’d been missing it for years. I did all my workouts in the gym, which seemed bloody stupid when I had the perfect running track on my doorstep.

“Righty ho, catch you soon.” Maya raced down the hall and vanished out the door.

“I want whatever she’s having.” I rolled my eyes.

“I know. She’s like the energizer bunny.”

Grinning, I said, “Just like you.”

He wriggled his eyebrows. “I can show you my energizer bunny if you like.”

I burst out laughing. “God, I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed hearing you laugh.”

“Yeah, well, I haven’t done it much over the last couple of years.”

He turned his hand over. “Me, neither. It’s time to change that.”

“I agree. Speaking of changing, we need to get you some clothes. It seems like we’re going to be stuck here for a while.”

He groaned. “I hate shopping.”

“Me too.”

We finished our coffees, then I drove to the police station where my discussion with Detective Trebilco was nearly an exact replica of our last one. He handed over my father's will, sealed in a yellow envelope, and promised to call me when I could access my father's house.

After a quick shop where I had the glorious job of helping Xander choose a pair of jeans, along with a few other pieces of clothing, we returned to my apartment. Maya had already showered and was packed, ready to head to the airport.

"Look what I found." Maya pointed to a small white carton on the dining table. "You have the best bakery down the road." She lifted the lid to reveal six Portuguese tarts.

"Yum." I reached for one of the custard tarts. "I know. It's a bit dangerous. They make good coffee, too."

"What are they?" Xander scrunched his nose.

"Portuguese tarts. Try one. They're delish." Maya held the carton toward him.

As we ate the tarts with a round of hot coffees, I reached for the sealed envelope Detective Trebilco had given me.

"Is that your dad's will?" Maya's voice was edged with pain. She knew exactly what it was like to have a father who lied and cheated and killed people. At least her father was now rotting in jail for murdering her sister. My fucking father will never suffer for his horrendous crimes. His death was too easy. Too unfair.

I nodded with my eyes fixed on the envelope. My fingers trembled as I unfolded the legal document. Dad's erratic handwriting seemed to have been scribbled in a rush. Like the man who had made my life a living hell had fought with his decision over who should inherit his fortune.

Xander's hand draped over mine as I scanned the pages, searching for answers to my never-ending questions. But there was nothing. The weight of the clinical words on the page seemed to drag me down like an anchor plunging to the ocean floor. I had expected to see his brothers listed, or my mother, or some other relative I didn't know about. But I was wrong.

“He left everything to me,” I said. “His money, his properties, his ... fucking legacy.”

My croaky voice sounded hollow just like my heart.

We fell into a heavy silence as if the enormity of this was too big to handle.

“Goddammit.” Shoving the pages away, I stood and drove my hands through my hair. “For years and years, I’ve been trying to find answers, and he’s taken so many to his fucking grave. Son of a bitch!”

I stormed to the veranda.

Even the warm ocean air couldn’t eradicate my overwhelming sense of defeat.

Feeling the weight of Xander and Maya’s concern, I strolled back inside and slumped into my chair. “Fucking asshole.”

“I know how hard it is,” Maya said, breaking the silence.

I gave her a half-hearted smile. “Yeah, I know you do. Thanks.”

“What are you going to do with his assets?” she asked.

I shook my head, feeling lost and overwhelmed. “I don’t know. I don’t want anything from him. It’s all tainted by his evil.”

I sipped my coffee, then I met Xander’s troubled gaze.

“I’m never giving up until I burn every single person involved in my father’s corruption,” I said.

A fire so warm and welcoming glowed in his eyes. “Good.”

Maya reached across the table and squeezed my wrist. “We’ll all help you. We’re in this together. All of us.”

Nibbling on the inside of my cheek, I fought the tears burning my eyes. I was done crying. Inhaling deeply, I nodded. “I know. I’m doing this for all of us.”

Maya glanced at the clock. “Speaking of doing things for all of us, Zac and I need to go diving for gold.”

I huffed a small laugh.

“Yes, you do.” I stood and opened my arms to hug her. “You be careful down there. No hero stuff, okay?”

“Ha, I’ll be *with* my hero. We’ll be fine.”

“Exactly, Maya. Don’t do anything crazy.”

She winked. “I won’t. It’s Wasp and Viper you need to say that to.”

“Yeah, well, make sure you pull those two lugheads into line.”

“Lugheads.” She giggled. “I’m going to use that.”

“I want you to ring every day. No, twice a day.”

“Roger that.” She saluted, then pulled Xander in for a hug. “You look after her. She pretends to be tough, but really, she’s a big softie, like me.”

“I know. I’ll look after her. Don’t you worry about that.” Xander smiled at me, and my heart swelled so big I could hear it thumping.

After walking down to the taxi rank together, we said another goodbye and she blew us kisses through the cab’s rear window as it drove away.

I huffed a sigh. “What shall we do now?”

Xander curled his hand to my ass and squeezed. “I have a few fun ideas in mind.”

Giggling, I grinned at him. “Good, I could use some fun.”

“Perfect.” He picked me up and I squealed as he tossed me over his shoulder.

“Put me down, you lughead.” I thumped his back, laughing.

Xander didn’t put me down. He was like a caveman, taking his woman to his cave.

Inside my apartment, he kicked the door shut, lowered me to my feet, and pinning me against the door, he kissed me with lips as hungry as mine.

He roamed his hands to my breasts and my ass, squeezing them both as he pulled me closer.

I moaned into his mouth. I wanted this. Needed this.

Needed him.

He broke the kiss and scooped me up. His eyes smoldered with desire as he set me down on the sofa and tore off his clothes, giving me the best strip show on earth. A shiver of excitement ran through me as I pulled my T-shirt over my head, grateful that I hadn't worn a bra.

Xander's gaze bounced to my boobs, and I loved how his eyes lit up. He fell to his knees and traced his tongue around my nipple.

I arched my back, offering him more, and as he sucked my breast, he curled his hand between my legs.

He jerked back. "Get your shorts off, babe, before I fucking burst."

Desperate to obey, I shimmied out of my shorts and G-string.

Xander breathed heavily as his eyes glued to my pussy. "God, I missed you," he whispered.

His lips found mine in a fierce kiss and as his tongue darted into my mouth, he pushed two fingers inside me.

Gasping, I parted my knees wider. "Oh, babe."

He planted kisses down my neck to my breasts, taking his sweet time as his fingers glided into me with measured precision. "You taste so good."

As he trailed his lips down to my stomach, I swept my good hand through his hair. "There's more of me you can taste."

He flashed a dizzy smile. "I've been dying to lick you."

He shuffled around between my knees and my eyes rolled back as he lowered his head. The warmth of his breath and heat of his tongue teased my pussy, and a moan tumbled from my throat, deep and wild.

I eased up onto my elbows to watch him. “Oh God, Xander. I’ve missed your tongue.”

“Good.”

When he drove his fingers into me and licked my pussy, I cried out as glorious vibrations skittered through my core.

He eased back with lust fueling his eyes.

“Make love to me, babe,” I whispered.

“Not yet.” He kissed my inner thigh.

“Please,” I whimpered, arching my hips, and opening my legs in a sexy peep show.

Releasing a throaty growl, he repeated, “Not yet.”

It was the same tone he had used on me all those years ago. I shivered with desire. I loved it when he took charge, and he could make me do anything.

He crawled to my side again. “I want you to come for me, babe.”

“I just did.” My blood pumped with liquid lust.

“And you can do it again.”

Guiding his mouth to my breasts, his fingers thrust inside me ... hard, wild, and out of this world, and I exploded around his fingers in an orgasm that took me by surprise.

“There,” he said. “That’s more like it.”

Gasping, I tangled my fingers in his hair.

“You’re so beautiful,” he murmured, his eyes locking onto mine.

“Now will you make love to me?” I begged.

“As you wish.” He climbed on top of me and took my mouth in a searing kiss as he slid his cock inside me. He was

huge and heavenly and stole every thought from my mind.

With one hand on the sofa, he thrust into me, deep and hard.

“Oh, God,” I cried, increasing my pace to match his.

“So fucking beautiful,” he groaned, thrusting with a frantic intensity I remembered so well.

“Oh yes. Yes!” I raked my nails up his back as another orgasm built inside me.

“That’s it,” he said, voice strained. “Come for me, babe.”

As his cock swelled inside me, I let go again, triggering an orgasm of mammoth proportions.

He thrust again and again until finally he slumped onto my chest. “I’ve missed you so much, Aria.”

His hot breath tickled my neck.

My heart swelled until it was set to burst as I trailed my fingers over his back, tracing his muscles. “I’ve missed you, too.”

* * *

Over the next four days as Xander and I tried to catch up on years apart, we also explored Bondi together. I dragged him into funky boutiques filled with vintage clothes, vinyl records, and dusty furniture. I took him around the world in a culinary experience that was as delightful for me to watch him devour the cuisine as it seemed to be for him to eat. We also spent hours on the computer searching for properties near Risky Shores that could potentially be our first home together.

Every hour I spent with him proved we belonged together. Yet I couldn’t help but wonder if we were just clinging to something that was too good to be true. I also couldn’t shake the niggling feeling that our newfound utopia was about to come crashing down.

Twice a day, I rang Detective Trebilco, but each time he advised me that I still couldn't access Dad's house.

Finally, late on Monday, we had a call from Blade. He and the team had thirty bars of gold loaded on the private jet Zac had paid for, ready to bring the fortune to Australia.

"That's fantastic news, Blade," I said.

"Bloody oath it is. We'll land in Rosebud on Wednesday afternoon. Any chance you could join us?"

I moaned. "I don't know, Blade. I still have so much—"

"All good," he said. "Just making sure you know you're part of this team."

I smiled at his lovely comment. "I know. Thank you."

We said our goodbyes, and a warm sense of belonging washed through me. I'd always felt like an outsider no matter how hard I'd tried to fit in. And Viper had made it known many times that he couldn't trust me. That hurt more than he would ever know. Being part of Blade's team meant the world to me and it was wonderful to have it openly acknowledged by a man like him.

"You okay?" Concern drilled into Xander's eyes as he draped his arm over my shoulder and pulled me to him.

"Yes. It's such good news that they've secured that gold."

"Yeah. I wonder if that gold bar is still on Frank's desk."

I chuckled. "Wouldn't that be funny?"

"It would be brilliant." He huffed. "I wish we had a lead on Jet, though. That bastard is going to get away with all that gold."

"We'll get him."

He cocked his head. "You seem so sure."

"I am sure. Just like those three hundred bars that were in the submarine in Antarctica. It took a lot of planning to transport those bars and Frank needed a lot of help. He has to have left a trail of clues somewhere that will lead us to them."

Xander pulled me to his chest and wrapped his arms across my shoulders. "I have always loved how determined you are."

As I listened to the therapeutic beat of his heart, I realized how much I needed him. He was the balm to my soul.

My phone rang and grinning at the name on the screen, I swiped to answer. "Detective Trebilco. I hope this means you have good news for me."

"The house is all yours, Ms. Morgan."

Relief washed through me. "Thank you."

"Do you need the keys?" he asked.

"No, I have my own set. Thank you."

"You're welcome, and Aria ...?"

"Yes?" I frowned at the question in his tone.

"If you find anything that would help with taking down the bastards involved in Frank's criminal activities, I'd appreciate it if I was the first to know."

"Yes, sir. You have my word." I hung up the phone and grabbed Xander's hand. "Let's go find us some clues."

Xander and I chatted as I drove us across town to Frank's house. It always amazed me how easily our conversations flowed, and it wasn't all dark and gloomy. We talked about some of the properties we'd seen advertised for sale at Risky Shores and joked about what it would be like living together. He talked about cooking on the barbecue, and growing herbs and vegetables and transporting his horse, Shadow, to our new home. It was like we'd already bought a place and were about to move in.

And it felt so good.

At Frank's house, the gates were still wide open as I pulled into the tree-lined drive.

"That house is one hell of a statement," he said.

"Yeah, it says, I'm a pretentious bastard." I rolled my eyes. "It was probably paid for with criminal activities."

“And it’s all yours now.”

I shuddered. “I don’t want anything from him.”

“I feel the same way about my father.” Disgust stamped his face.

“We’re a good pair, aren’t we?” I parked my car in front of the garage.

“The perfect pair,” he said, and we grinned at each other like a couple of giddy lovers.

Frank’s SUV was miraculously still parked near the garage with the driver’s side door wide open and the keys in the ignition. I pulled out the keys and slammed the door shut.

“Frank loved that fucking car more than me. I’m going to sell it and donate the funds to charity.” I slipped the keys into my pocket.

“Sounds perfect.”

I led Xander to a side door of the garage and used my key to open it. On the opposite side of the garage, we ducked beneath police tape to enter the house. I went to key in the code to disarm the alarm, however it hadn’t been set.

I strode straight into the study and paused.

Two bloody stains blackened the carpet and the shattered window had been covered with plywood. The rest of the area looked like a tornado had blown through the room.

“You okay?” Xander touched my shoulder.

I pointed at the gold bar. “It’s still here.”

The gold had moved position, proving that at least one other person had examined it.

“I can’t believe that worked.” Xander walked to the gold bar and picked it up.

“Me neither. And now for another miracle Let’s see if we can find anything else they missed.” As I strode to the other side of the large desk, my shoes crunched on broken

glass from the shattered window. “I’ll check the drawers. You check those shelves.”

I pointed to the far wall that housed floor-to-ceiling custom shelving that was usually filled with Dad’s collection of books on military strategy, history, and politics. Many of the books had been removed.

The shelving also housed mementos that were designed to show the kind of man Frank pretended to be ... an awarded soldier who devoted his career to his country.

“What are we looking for?” At the shelving, Xander started on the far-left top shelf, and pulled out a thick book titled, ‘The Art of War,’ by Sun Tzu.

“We won’t know until we find it. But check everything.” I pulled open the top drawer to the desk but nothing but pens, paperclips, and post-it notes were inside. Feeling above the drawer, I checked if anything had been discreetly taped to the top. There wasn’t.

Xander shook the book, and when nothing fell out, he reached for the next one, Winston Churchill’s Memoir.

“Hello, Aria.” I spun to the woman’s voice.

The blood drained from my body.

A skinny woman dressed in a blue cotton dress that swam on her, stepped into the room.

“I’m your mother.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

HAWK



My jaw dropped as I stared at the woman who had haunted my thoughts ever since she'd abandoned me eighteen years ago. A weight of emotion threatened to overwhelm me as she paused inside the doorway.

I'd spent countless nights wondering why Mom left, grappling with feelings of abandonment and anger, longing for answers and wondering what I would say to her if she ever returned.

“What are you doing here?” My voice sounded foreign, and my heart raced with both disbelief and anger.

Mom's eyes drifted to the blood stains on the carpet, yet she showed zero emotion as she stepped closer. “I wanted to see you.”

I looked into eyes that were as black as mine, and my years of longing and twisted anger were crushed by her profound sadness and feeble stature.

She looked nothing like the young, vibrant, healthy woman who had lived in my memories; she looked ready to crumble.

In the corner of my eye, Xander stood frozen; as shocked as I was. He knew how much my mother's abandonment hurt me.

“Why now?” My voice choked with emotion.

She took another step closer on legs that were as skinny as my arms. “Because it's safe now that that bastard is dead.”

I clenched my fists, fighting the storm of emotions and resentment that surged through me. The wounds she'd left that had never fully healed were ripped open again as memories of my fractured childhood flooded my mind. "You abandoned me."

"I know." Mom twisted her fingers until her bony knuckles bulged. "And I'll never forgive myself for doing that."

"But how could you leave me? I was a child." Fighting my anger and hurt, I couldn't ignore her tragic expression. Confusion battled with my need for answers.

She met my gaze and a complex tornado of emotions swirled through me. "Frank was going to kill me. But I never thought he'd hurt you, Aria. You were his only child. He loved ___"

I jerked back. "He tried to kill me." My gaze swept to the bloodstain on the floor. "I just got lucky."

A tear spilled down her cheek. "I know. I can't believe he did that." A spark of fierce love glimmered in her eyes as she took another tentative step.

Xander shuffled toward the exit.

"No, Xander," I said. "Stay."

He nodded at Mom, then strolled to my side and clutched my hand. I squeezed his palm to mine as Mom stepped closer. Her thinning hair was gray and brittle, and with no makeup, her pale skin looked almost translucent, revealing tiny blue veins over her cheeks.

"Where have you been all these years?" The emotional storm that raged through me became clouded by the fragile vulnerability Mom portrayed. She had suffered.

Mom shrugged a bony shoulder. "Around."

"It's been eighteen years, Mom." Despite my anger, my words came out soft, forgiving.

"Eighteen years, three months, and four days. And I have missed you for every single one of them." Her chin quivered.

“Every time I saw you on the television, my heart swelled because I knew you were okay.”

As we stared at each other, time seemed to slow.

“I’m sorry, Aria. So, so sorry.” Her voice trembled, carrying the weight of a lifetime of guilt.

Regret and remorse swam in her eyes. But there was something else. Something that threatened to crack my heart in two ... her love for me.

Mom opened her arms and took another step. “I don’t want your forgiveness. I don’t deserve that, but please, can I have a hug?”

A sob burst from my throat and with an enormous knot making it impossible to breathe, I strode to her and wrapped my arms around her skeletal frame.

Xander crept out of the room as Mom and I sobbed in each other’s arms.

As I stood in that embrace, overwhelmed with a floodgate of emotions, a rush of memories flooded back—the sound of laughter as Mom tickled me on the bed, the gentle touch of her hand on my cheek as she told me how much she loved me, the smell of my hair after she’d washed it with her favorite shampoo.

The memories were new, proving that I’d blocked out the good times we’d had together. For years, Dad had filled me with lies about Mom and her callous abandonment. In that moment, I knew he had brainwashed me into hating my own mother.

She was as much a victim of my father’s evil as I was.

“I’m sorry, Aria.”

“I know, Mom. I know.”

Xander returned holding two steaming mugs. “I made coffee.”

Mom and I parted, and Xander handed a mug to each of us.

“Sorry,” he said to Mom. “I didn’t know how you liked your coffee.”

A tangled smile crossed her lips. “I’m not fussy, thank you.”

“Mom, this is my partner, Xander.”

Xander nodded. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“And you,” Mom said. “Thank you for looking after my daughter.”

Xander huffed. “Actually, she’s the one who looks out for me.”

Mom’s smile grew wider, showing a yellow tinge to her teeth. “Aria always did have a gentle soul.”

I led Mom into Frank’s living room and sat her in a leather chair that made her seem even smaller.

Xander and I sat opposite, and as I sipped my coffee, I struggled to put an order to the jumble of questions racing through my mind. “Mom, why did Dad want to kill you?”

She leaned back on the chair and cupped the mug in both her hands. “I found out who he was.”

“Fred Kincaid?”

Her eyes widened. “You knew?”

“He told me just before he died. But how did you find out?”

She lowered her coffee mug to her lap. “I began to suspect he wasn’t always truthful quite early into our marriage. Men would turn up that he wouldn’t introduce me to, and they’d have secret conversations that he never disclosed to me. He’d tell me it was related to work, or a national secret or some other bullshit.”

Her chest caved like a dagger had pierced her heart. “There were so many times when I wanted to press for more information, but because of his job, I believed that he really couldn’t tell me.”

I searched her eyes for validation of that statement. Now that I knew what Frank was capable of, I believed the pain radiating from the frail woman before me. My heart ached over the years we'd lost, yet I yearned to reconnect with the mother I remembered. The one who had loved me.

Mom stared into the mug like she was fighting to escape the nightmare playing across her mind. "Then I finally caught him in a lie. I'd been out shopping, and I saw him having lunch at a restaurant with a woman. I recognized her because she'd been to a party we'd attended. Stella MacBride."

Gasping, I said, "The prime minister's wife."

Mom nodded. "Well, he wasn't the prime minister back then. Anyway, at the party, she saw me with Frank, though she barely glanced my way. She was more interested in him. But she knew we were married. She was such a cold woman."

"That's her. We know her well," I said. "Unfortunately."

Mom frowned at me. "You do?"

"It's a long story." I shook my head. I didn't want to go into the crap we'd been through with Stella. "Did you confront Dad over the meeting with Stella?"

"Not directly. I asked him about his day, and if anything interesting had happened." She sighed. "He told me he'd been stuck in a strategy meeting all day and hadn't even had time to eat lunch."

A deep ache settled within me. My father had portrayed himself as a pillar of the community, a man with strong morals who upheld the truth. He was a fucking liar and criminal, and had been for decades.

And I'd fallen for the entire façade. Worse still, I'd wanted to please him. I wanted him to be proud of me. My whole life was a lie.

"After that, I became more wary," Mom said. "More observant. And the lies kept stacking up."

"Why didn't you leave?" Xander asked.

She looked at me with eyes flooded with turmoil. “He controlled our money, our bank accounts. I didn’t have a single asset in my name. And who would believe me? I was a nobody, and he was Frank Morgan, awarded soldier who fought for our country. His best friend became deputy prime minister.”

“He was his brother,” I said.

She frowned. “Who?”

“Mason Kingsman. He was Dad’s brother.”

Her eyes widened. “He was?”

“Yes. What do you know about Dad’s family?”

“I know his father was a cop.” She shuddered. “That man terrified me.”

“You met him?”

“Only once. That was enough.”

“He wasn’t his biological father, Mom, Dad was an orphan.”

Frowning, Mom shook her head.

“Dad was eight when his father died by accident while working on the Brisbane wharves. His mother became a prostitute to support her five sons, but she overdosed in 1978, and the brothers were sent to Angelsong Orphanage in Blackwater.”

“Wow. I didn’t know any of that.” She huffed. “I don’t know who that man was who came to the door then. He had the coldest eyes I’d ever seen. Like ice picks.”

“It could have been his foster father,” I said. “He was as crooked as Dad was. Mom, did Dad ever tell you anything about a fire at a surfboard factory?”

Frowning, she shook her head. “He didn’t tell me much of anything.”

“Do you remember that cop’s name?” I asked.

“No.” She sipped her coffee.

“Maybe Cobra can find a photo. That could help.” I slotted that suggestion into my memory. “Did you ever see a tattoo on Dad’s wrist?”

I indicated a line across the inside of my wrist.

“Yes. When we first started dating. I asked him about it a couple of times. It was a series of numbers, but he had it removed before we were married. What was it?”

“The kids who went to Angelsong Orphanage were all tattooed.”

Mom gasped. “Those poor kids.”

“Yeah. That was how we pieced together who Dad’s brothers were. Their tattoos were all three numbers, then .78. The 78 was for 1978, the year they were admitted to the orphanage.”

“I can’t believe he didn’t tell me about” Mom halted and shrugged. “He lied to me all the time, so I shouldn’t be surprised.”

I put my coffee mug on the table. “You still haven’t told me how you found out Dad’s real name?”

She placed her coffee mug down, too.

“I was forbidden to go into his study without him.” She pinched a wispy hair away from her cheek. “But that only made me more determined to go into his room. I used to poke around in there when he wasn’t home.”

She clasped her hands in her lap. “I’d been sneaking in there for years, dusting the shelving and trinkets he had. Lord knows how he thought it stayed so clean. Our housekeeper wasn’t allowed in there either.”

“One day, I was cleaning this ugly barrel thing he had.” Mom scrunched her nose. “And when I shifted it sideways, it separated.”

I sat forward.

“I was terrified because I wasn’t meant to be in that room. But as I was putting it back together, I realized that it had been

designed to be in two parts. You would never have known there was a secret compartment in the rear half of the barrel.”

“And ...?” Xander sat forward, too.

“And inside that secret compartment I found a stack of paperwork.” Her fingers trembled as she swept another loose hair around her ear. “There were photos, and receipts, and things that made no sense. But then I found an old driver’s license with Frank’s picture on the license, but the name was Fred Kincaid. I nearly died when I saw it.”

“I bet,” Xander said.

“I kept going through the paperwork. So many pages had Fred’s name. I finally had physical proof that he’d lied to me. To everyone.”

“And what did you do?”

“Do you remember your friend Katrina?” she asked me.

I had a vague recollection of a girl I had played with named Katrina, but I shook my head.

Mom nodded as if expecting that answer. “I asked Katrina’s mom if she could pick you up from school that day and take you to netball training that night. I told her I had a work shift that I couldn’t get out of. Anyway, when Frank got home from work, I confronted him.”

Her hand went to her throat, and I had a rotten feeling her story was about to get brutal.

“I had all the paperwork laid out so he couldn’t deny anything.” She lowered her gaze to the coffee table. “He didn’t deny any of it. He called me a stupid fool and said he’d been trying to protect me.”

My hand went to my mouth. Dad had said exactly the same to me.

“I said I was leaving and taking you with me, and that’s when he attacked me.” Mom squeezed her eyes shut and her eyes fluttered beneath her eyelids like she was reliving that horror. “Tried to strangle me, but I stabbed him in the neck with his letter opener.

“That scar on his neck ...” I indicated to the matching point on my neck, “... did you do that?”

Opening her eyes, she nodded. “There was so much blood. I thought he’d stop attacking me, but he didn’t. I only just managed to get away, and as I did, he said he’d hunt me down and kill me.”

“Jesus.” I witnessed Dad’s rage and physical strength, so I understood what she went through.

“As I ran out the door, he said if I ever returned, he’d kill you and make me watch.”

“Why didn’t you go to the police?” Xander asked.

“Nobody would believe me. He was an awarded soldier who had friends in high places. I was a nobody. And not just that, Frank’s father was a police officer. Frank could have got away with murder.”

“He has got away with murder,” I said.

The turmoil in Mom’s eyes grew darker. “I’m sorry I left you with him, Aria, but I was sure you were safe as long as I didn’t return.”

I shook my head.

“I never stopped loving you. And I followed you. Each time Frank moved states, I moved too. I got good at wearing disguises and whenever I could, I watched this house, and hid in the street waiting for glimpses of you.” She shrugged. “It’s how I knew you were here now.”

“I’m glad you came, Mom.”

A sob caught in her throat. “Thank you. I know I can never make it up to you, but if I can help you in any way, I will.”

I stood and leaned over to grip the back of her hand. “You already have, Mom. Just by explaining what really happened.”

Mom wiped her eyes. “What did Frank tell you about me?”

“He told me you ran off with another man and abandoned us.”

“I never—”

“I know.” I squeezed her hand. “I know.”

“Actually, you may know things about Frank that we’ll never find out, like what was on those documents you found,” Xander said.

“That’s true.” I sat on the coffee table facing her, holding her frail hands in mine. “That thing you found his papers in, you said it was a barrel?”

“A miniature wine barrel, yes. It had a tap on the front, and he always made a show of topping up that barrel with expensive red wine or pouring a glass from it.”

I gasped. “I know what you’re talking about.” I stood and marched away. “He still has it.”

I strode down the hallway to Dad’s den, slammed open the door, and marched to the bar that filled an entire back wall. In the mirror behind the bottle-lined shelves, I saw Xander behind me, and Mom behind him.

I went around the other side of the bar to the shelving. On the countertop stood the miniature wine barrel that was stamped with ‘aged to perfection’ and had a brass tap.

“Every time we moved, we hired removalists to box up and transport all our things—except for this.” I put my arms around the wine barrel and as I carried it to the bar top on the other side, liquid sloshed inside.

Xander pulled out a bar stool and helped Mom sit, then took a seat for himself. “Moment of truth.”

I studied the curved sides, searching for how the piece separated.

Mom leaned forward and pointed at the metal straps around the barrel. “There.” She indicated to a stud in the metal.

I pressed the stud and the rear of the barrel fell backward, revealing a secret compartment crammed full of paperwork. “Holy shit.”

As I pulled out handfuls of papers, Mom and Xander spread them across the bar counter.

“I think we just found the motherload.” Xander chuckled as he read a sheet of paper.

The paperwork contained photos and copies of emails dating back years and handwritten notes in Dad’s distinctive scrawl.

I zoned in on a yellow handwritten receipt. At the top in red ink was a Risky Shores address. My blood seemed to bubble in my veins.

“Jesus. There’s a huge amount of evidence here.” Xander’s eyes darkened. “We need to pack this up and get the hell out of here.”

I glared at the evidence in my hands. “We sure do. Quick, let’s go.”

We packed everything back into the barre.

As I drove out of Frank’s driveway, fear crawled up my spine.

Frank had a lot of friends who would kill to keep the evidence we’d just found buried forever.

Chapter Thirty-Five

RAZOR



After we locked up Frank's house, we took the emptied wine barrel that we'd re-stuffed with Frank's paperwork, the gold bar, and Aria's mother, Karen, back to Aria's apartment. Aria had driven with one eye on the mirror and traveled more streets than she needed to, all the time checking to see if we were being followed.

She didn't voice her fear on account of her mother being in the car with us, but I saw it in her eyes. People would kill for the items we'd taken from Frank's place, and we had no idea who his friends were.

By the time we'd crossed through Sydney's congested streets, Karen was asleep in the back of the car, and Aria's distress had shifted into a lower gear.

At Aria's apartment, we reheated Thai leftovers from the night before and Aria made sure her mother's plate was loaded up first. The poor woman looked like she hadn't eaten in a week. Maybe she hadn't.

"Where have you been living, Mom?" Aria asked.

"Here and there. Mostly homeless shelters, and I have a few friends who help me out."

Aria's jaw dropped. "You don't have a home?"

Karen lowered her gaze to her hands and twisted her fingers into knots. "I couldn't. Frank would find me."

"Then this is your home, Mom."

Karen's whole body trembled. She sucked in a shaky breath. "Are you sure?"

Aria draped her hand over the back of her mother's. "Yes, Mom. I'm sure."

Karen pressed her hand over her mouth and her eyes pooled.

"Besides, we have lots of catching up to do." Aria tried to smile, but it came out all wobbly.

"Yes. Yes, we do."

"And I'm sure you can help us," I said. "I bet you know stuff about Frank that we don't."

"I know he was a bastard."

Aria chuckled. "Oh, we know that, Mom."

"Good." Karen nodded. "As long as we agree on that."

We cleared off the dishes, and as Aria showed her mother to the bathroom for a shower, I spread out the documents from the wine barrel on the kitchen table.

Aria strolled into the kitchen, shaking her head. "I can't believe she's here."

"You're not kidding. Are you okay?"

"Yes, just shocked, that's all. Dad's lies were endless."

"That's an understatement. Hopefully some of this paperwork will help piece things together." I swept my hand to the dozens of sheets of paper spread out on the table.

My phone rang. I pulled it from my pocket and groaned. Aria cocked her head at me, and I showed her the screen. "Mom."

"Answer her," she said.

I reluctantly swiped to answer. "Hi, Mom."

"Oh, Xander, thank you for answering." Mom sounded frantic.

"Is everything okay?"

“No. Your father had a fall.”

“What kind of fall? Is he hurt?” I strode to the veranda.

“He fell off the quad bike, and ... and.”

“Mom. Is he hurt?”

“He hurt his ribs.”

“Where is he?” I stared across the ocean, squinting at the glistening sun bouncing off the waves.

“He’s hurt, Xander. You need to come home.”

“Mom, put Dad on the phone.”

“I ... I can’t.”

Dread speared through me. “Where is he? Is he in hospital?”

“No, he’s—”

“Mom, stop bullshitting me. Where is he?”

She huffed. “He’s ridden Buck out to the back paddock. But he did hurt himself. You know what he’s like. He probably broke a rib, and he’s—”

“Mom. Stop. If he’s riding his horse, he’s fine. And I’ve already told you, I’m not coming home.”

“You need to stop this silliness, Xander,” Mom hissed. “I need you to—”

“No, Mom. I need *you* to understand—I am not returning to live there. Ever.”

“For goodness’ sake. You’re being ridiculous.”

“And you’re being selfish.”

“I am not.”

“You are. You only want me there for your own reasons. What about me, Mom, and my own life? Don’t you want me to be happy?”

“Well ... yes, but you can have a good life here.”

“No, Mom. It’s never going to happen. Aria and I are already looking at—”

“Aria? That woman who broke your heart?”

“Yes. We’re back together, and we’re going to buy a house.”

“Now it makes sense. That woman is poisoning you with her lies again.”

“How dare you! I love Aria. I always have.”

“How can you love her after what she did to you?”

I hated that I’d told Mom about breaking up with Aria last time.

“Mom, this is my life. If you don’t accept that it’s time for me to move on, then you’re going to lose me completely. Have a think about that, and don’t call me again until you have.”

Shuddering with rage, I ended the call. I banged my clenched fists on the railing as I inhaled a few calming breaths.

Aria slipped her arms around me and rested her cheek against my back. “That didn’t sound good.”

I draped my arms over hers. “Nope.”

“You want to talk about it?”

“Nope.”

“Then come have a look at what I found.”

Holding my hand, she led me back inside, and showed me a page of a newspaper dated three years ago. Halfway down the page a red circle had been drawn around an article with the heading, *Two men die in mysterious murder suicide pact.*

I frowned. “You think Frank had something to do with the deaths of these guys?”

“Read on.” She nodded with a knowing smile. “Check out what they did for a living.”

I scanned the article. “Builders of underground doomsday bunkers.”

Frowning harder, I blinked at her. The smile on her face grew wider as she handed me another piece of paper.

“Land title?” I shook my head, not understanding..

“Yeah. Dad bought that land two weeks after Chui’s death. Check out the address.”

I skimmed the document. “Risky Shores. You think there’s a bunker on this land? And that’s where the gold is?”

Aria sucked her lips into her mouth, trying not to smile.

“We have to check it out.”

Grinning, she nodded. “We sure do. I think we can meet Blade and the others after all.”

A rush of excitement blazed through me. “Bloody hell, Aria. Could it be this easy?”

“I hope so.”

Aria laughed, and we wrapped our arms around each other.

“What’s going on?” Karen’s feeble voice was behind us.

Easing apart, we turned to her.

“Oh, Mom.” Aria reached for her mother’s hand and led her to the table. “We think we may have found a clue to something that we’ve been looking for, for a long time.”

Karen somehow smiled and frowned at the same time as she sat.

“But we won’t know until we go there.” Aria’s shoulders sagged as she sat beside her mom.

“So go.” Karen shrugged.

Aria blinked at Karen. “Will you be okay here for a while?”

Karen’s eyes grew wide. “You’ll let me stay.”

Aria tilted her head. “I told you, Mom—this is your home now.”

“Oh.” Karen’s gaze drifted around the apartment. “Then of course I’ll be okay.”

Aria glanced at me with a troubled frown. “We’ll grab some groceries so you have plenty to eat and leave you some money.”

Karen patted the back of Aria’s hand. “Just giving me a roof over my head is enough.”

“No, Mom, it’s not.” Aria leaned forward and kissed her mom’s cheek. “Just let me look after you for a while, okay?”

Karen frowned at the paperwork on the table. “Do you want me to do anything while you’re gone? I can vacuum and clean.”

“No. I’d rather you—”

It was clear that Karen wanted to help, so I stepped forward. “Actually, Karen, it would be great if you could go through all these documents.” I shrugged at Aria. “Maybe read them and put them into date order. Write down what you think is important on them.”

“That’s a great idea.” Aria’s molasses eyes twinkled. “It would be so helpful, Mom.”

Karen picked up one of the papers and the vagueness that she’d shown so far morphed into intense focus. “I can do that. I’d do anything to prove what a monster he was.”

Aria patted Karen’s hand. “Thank you.”

Karen nodded. “I’ll need a pen and paper.”

“Roger that.” I strode to the kitchen.

“In the second drawer,” Aria said.

I handed Karen the pen and notepad. “Anything that you think is important, write it down.”

“I will.”

As Aria raced up the road to do a quick grocery shop for her mother, I packed our things and booked flights to Rosebud.

When it was time to go, Aria hugged her mother tightly. “I’m sorry I have to leave you.”

“No need to be sorry.” Karen rested her hand on Aria’s cheek. “I am so blessed that you have let me back into your life. I’ll be here when you get back.”

“Get some rest. Eat whatever you like. And help yourself to my clothes. My neighbor is Bec Marshal. I’ve written her name here.” Aria pointed at a note she’d pinned to the fridge. “She’s right next door. If you need anything, she’ll help you, okay? She’s really lovely, Mom, and I’ve told her you’re here, so don’t be shy.”

“Okay, I will, I promise.”

“Love you, Mom.”

Karen released a noise like she couldn’t breathe. “I love you, too.”

“See you soon, Karen.” Unsure if she’d be comfortable with me hugging her, I simply nodded.

“Thank you. Look after each other.”

“We will.” Aria gripped my hand like she wanted me to save her, and I helped her walk away.

Halfway down the stairs, she said, “Do you think Mom will be okay?”

“I think she’ll be better than she’s been in eighteen years.”

She huffed. “Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

“I know I’m right. Now hurry up, or we’ll miss our flight.”

“Man, you’re bossy.”

We stepped onto the street, and I smacked her butt. “Hurry up.”

“Hey, watch it, mister.”

“Or what?” I wriggled my brows.

A taxi was waiting at the taxi rank. I threw her small suitcase containing our minimal supplies into the trunk and we climbed into the back seat. The ride through Sydney was bumper to bumper.

“Oh man, this traffic.” I moaned.

“See?” Aria nudged my thigh. “I told you you’d hate this.”

I shook my head. “I don’t know how you do it.”

“You get used to it,” she said.

“No, you don’t,” the taxi driver said.

Aria laughed.

I laughed, too. “No, I don’t think I would.”

The airport was even more chaotic than the drive there, and it took forever to pass through check-in and security. Finally, on the other side as we drank bitter coffee and ate muffins that were dry and tasteless, we sat in a sunny corner to wait our turn to board the plane.

“Hey, I don’t suppose we could check out that property while we’re up there?”

Opening her laptop, she frowned. “Which property?”

“The one with the airstrip? If we bought that one, I could bring my plane down and—”

“You have a plane?” She blinked at me.

“Yeah. I told you I’m a pilot.”

“Yes, but you didn’t say you owned the plane.”

I shrugged. “I own a plane. A King Air BG200. I bought it secondhand, but the Royal Flying Doctor Service paid for the fit-out.”

She gave me one of her stunning smiles. “That’s amazing.”

“I’ll show you amazing.”

She giggled. “So, you say there’s a property with an airstrip? I didn’t see that one.”

I reached for her laptop. “Let me see if I can find it.” I pulled up the real estate site I’d been looking through. “Here, this is the one.” I turned the laptop toward her.

“It’s four million dollars.” She bulged her eyes at me.

“Yeah, I have some decent money saved. And I could borrow the rest.”

Her frown deepened.

“What?”

“That’s a lot of money.”

“There’s not a lot to spend money on out at Bunyip Ranch. So I’ve saved almost everything I’ve earned. And I make decent money from the Flying Doctors, and if we buy that property, I can keep doing it.”

Nodding, she grew all serious. “I’d like you to keep working for them. Your eyes always light up when you talk about it.”

“It’s interesting work. *And* that property is big enough to have a few animals and grow vegetables.”

“Sounds like you have it all planned out.”

“Hey, I haven’t planned anything. It’s just an idea. From now on, we do everything together, Aria.” I waited until her gaze met mine. “We’re a team, you and I.”

“In that case, we go halves on the property. Whatever money you put in, I match it, and we borrow the rest.”

My breath knotted.

We’re really doing this.

I cleared my throat, trying to keep my cool.

“What?” She shrugged. “You think you’re the only one who’s been earning money and not spending?”

I cupped her cheeks and kissed her. “Let’s take a look at the property first. The house could be a dive.”

“Then we’ll renovate. Hey... maybe that’s what I could do? Renovate houses.”

“Now that I’d like to see.”

She put her hands on her hips and thrust her tits toward me. “You don’t think I can wield a hammer, huh?”

“Of course I do. And I’d love to see you in sexy shorts and work boots. I’m getting hard just picturing it.”

Gasping, she glanced around. “Stop it, you horny beast.”

“I’ll show you my horny beast later.”

“Xander!”

After we boarded the plane, we spent thirty minutes in a holding pattern on the runway waiting for our turn to take off. This waiting business was not for me. Aria, however, was fast asleep before we were airborne.

As the plane finally took off, I stole glances at her as she slept peacefully next to me. Her perky tits rose and fell gently with each breath and her long dark hair cascaded over her shoulders.

I couldn’t wait to make new memories with her, this time in a different country. Without bullets flying. Without the necessity to keep our relationship a secret. Without the stress of her work or my family.

It was going to be perfect.

I jolted awake.

“Hello, sleepyhead.” Aria grinned at me.

I sat up. “Are we here?”

“You missed the whole flight.”

I wiped my lips with the back of my hand. “Huh. Didn’t think I’d fall asleep.”

“Asleep? You were snoring loud enough to keep everyone awake.”

“Shit, was I?”

She chuckled. “Just kidding. You looked like you were having some nice dreams.”

“Oh yeah, checking me out, huh?”

“I might have been.” Her grin stole my breath away. *Hot damn!*

We shuffled off the plane and Aria led the way out of Rosebud Airport, obviously knowing exactly where she was going.

“Unfortunately, that delay at Sydney’s airport means we missed Blade, Maya, and the others after their return from Kyrgyzstan,” she said. “They landed an hour ago, and they’ll already be at Risky Shores.”

“Is that bad?” I asked as we stepped out of the airport and raced toward the taxi rank.

“Not really. It will give them enough time to get everyone else together before we reach them.”

Once we were in the taxi, she dialed Alpha Tactical Ops headquarters. “Hey, Zena.” She nodded to whatever Zena said, and then rolled her gaze to me. “Sounds like there’s a party going on.”

“I bet,” I said, picturing Viper and Wasp drooling over all those gold bars.

“Xander and I are on our way to HQ right now. Get everyone together. And I mean everyone.” She ended the call. “This is going to be good. I can just feel it.”

My breath hitched at the conviction in her tone. After all the disappointment she’d been through, I had a feeling that if this clue didn’t pan out, she would struggle to drag herself out of the pit that would follow.

Chapter Thirty-Six

HAWK



At Alpha Tactical Ops HQ, I keyed in the code at the top of the stairs to enter. As I led Xander along the corridor, the loud music and even louder voices confirmed the party was still going. I pushed through the door as another champagne bottle popped and a woman cheered.

“Hey, look who’s here!” Wasp hollered, striding toward us, and dragging Billie with him.

“Hi, Wasp. Hi, Billie.” Wasp smothered me in his massive arms, and Billie had the biggest smile I’d ever seen on her. Normally, she looked like she was about to crumble into a heap.

Wasp stepped back.

“I can’t thank you enough for what you did,” Billie said.

“Oh, right. It’s nothing.” I’d forgotten all about my announcement. “Your amazing discovery of that submarine in that glacier should have been revealed a long time ago. I’m sorry it wasn’t.”

“You don’t need to say sorry.” Billie hugged me. “Thank you.”

I squeezed my arms around her tiny frame and as she trembled, I could tell she was trying to keep her emotions contained. Billie was another innocent victim of my father’s malicious actions. I had a sickening feeling many more innocent people would come out of hiding.

We eased apart.

“Have you heard from your uni?” I asked.

A tiny smile teased her lips as she nodded. “I’ve had dozens of phone calls.”

“Yeah.” Wasp wrapped his arm over her shoulders. “They’re shaking in their boots ’cause Billie is gonna sue their fucking asses. Aren’t you, babe?”

“Maybe.” She tilted her gaze up to him and there was so much love in her expression my heart melted.

“Not maybe.” Wasp wobbled his head. “That fucking boss of yours needs his ass kicked.”

Billie giggled. “Yes, I’d be happy for him to suffer.”

Blade strode forward, and Zena followed carrying Charlie.

“Hey, Zena,” I said. As I rubbed Charlie’s soft fur, Blade shook Xander’s hand.

“I’m glad you two could make it. I made enough food to feed everyone for a week.” Zena grinned. Unlike me, cooking for Zena was a love, not a chore.

“I can see that. Although these guys aren’t complaining, I’m sure.”

“That’s true. They have bottomless pits for stomachs.”

Blade rested his hand on my shoulder. “Good to see you, Hawk.”

“You too, Blade. Congratulations. I’m guessing the party means everything went to plan?”

“Sure did. Thirty-five gold bars are now secure in our safe.” Blade rubbed his hands like he was dusting off dirt.

“You didn’t have any hassles in Kyrgyzstan?” I asked.

“We didn’t get shot at, if that’s what you mean?” Blade offered a wry smile.

“And that fucker Jet didn’t steal from us again.” Viper’s voice boomed louder than he needed.

“Hello to you too, Viper,” I said, keeping my cool.

Xander gave my hand a quick squeeze and strolled toward Viper and Yasmin, who stood near the table topped with platters of food.

Maya scooted out of the kitchen like she was on rollerblades, carrying two open bottles of champagne.

“Aria! Xander! ’Bout time you joined the party. Grab two more glasses, babe,” she yelled over her shoulder toward the kitchen.

She raced over to me and holding the bottles, opened her arms for a hug. “So glad you can be here. Now the whole gang is together.”

We eased apart. “I know. That’s what I asked for.”

“You did?” Her brief frown morphed into a huge smile. “You have news for us, don’t you?”

“I do. Let’s move into the Scorpion Room.”

Maya handed me a bottle, then did the loudest wolf whistle I’d ever heard. “Everyone, into the Scorpion Room. Chop, chop.”

I chuckled. “That’ll do it.”

“You gotta get loud with these boys.” She waved Zac forward. “Let’s fill up your champagne first.”

Zac handed a glass to me. “Hi, Hawk. Maya told me what happened with your dad. I don’t know whether to say sorry or congratulations.”

As Maya filled my glass to the brim, I shrugged. “Yeah, it’s a bit like that. But hopefully I’m about to swing that toward the congratulations side.”

“Oooh, exciting.” Zac wriggled his brows.

“Thanks for helping Maya in that frozen lake. I’m glad you didn’t run into any trouble.”

“It was amazing. I felt like Indiana Jones.”

Maya smacked his butt. “You’re way sexier than him.”

“Really?” He raised his eyebrows. “I’ll take that.”

“Hey, don’t go getting all coy on me, mister. I wouldn’t recognize you.” Maya spun on her heel and led the way toward the Scorpion Room. “Everyone, follow me.”

Charlie raced behind her, barking and flicking his tail.

“She’s bossy.” Zac did an exaggerated eye roll.

“You love it.” I followed Maya into the room and as everyone topped up their drinks and selected more food before they shuffled in behind me, I strolled to Cobra and Yasmin. “Hi, guys, how are you two going?”

“We’re good, thanks. Sorry to hear about your dad,” Yasmin said.

“Don’t be sorry. He deserved what he got.”

“I mean that he turned out to be an asshole.” Yasmin scrunched her nose.

I huffed. “Yeah, that’s an understatement. How’s your brother?”

She sighed. “Nothing’s changed, unfortunately. He’s still in a coma.”

Pain jabbed at my heart. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

She wove her fingers into Cobra’s hand. “We can only hope for a miracle now.”

Nodding, I turned toward Viper. His scowl was fierce enough to explode coconuts.

I walked toward him with my gaze on Harper. “Hi, Harper, I saw your father the other day.”

Her eyes lit up. “You did?”

“Yes. He flew down to ASIO in Sydney to see me after Dad—” *Died? Was killed? Murdered by me?* I wasn’t sure which term was the right one.

“Huh, Dad didn’t tell me that.” She curled her cropped hair behind her ear to reveal a massive diamond stud earring.

“He’ll be busy with the fallout from Frank’s mess,” I said.

“Probably. He was already busy since he accepted the role of Defense Minister.”

I reflected on Cameron’s comment about seeing him when the mess died down. “Is he enjoying his new role?”

“Loves it. Thank God. So much less stress than being Prime Minister.”

“I bet.” I knew exactly what it was like to be stressed to my eyeballs.

“*And* without Mom hounding him all the time.” She cracked a small smile.

Mom’s story about Stella swung into my thoughts. “Did you know your mom and my dad knew each other?”

Her brows shot up, then her shoulders sagged. “If there was criminal activity involved, then I shouldn’t be surprised.”

“Okay, we’re all here,” Maya called out. “What’s going on, Hawk? The suspense is killing us.”

Placing my glass down on the table, I turned to the crowd and Xander strolled to my side.

I blew out my breath, surprised at how nervous I was. Talking to crowds was one of my superpowers. But this wasn’t just a crowd; this was my team. My friends. The people who meant everything to me.

“Thank you, guys,” I said. “I’m so pleased you’re all here. I have a lot to tell you. I’m not sure what you know, and what you don’t—”

“Just tell us everything,” Viper blurted.

I glared at him.

“So, I’m going to tell you everything,” I finished my sentence.

Maya slapped Viper’s chest. “Take that, lughead.”

Viper shot Maya a death stare, and she burst out laughing and raised her glass at me. “Carry on, Aria.”

As they sipped their drinks, and Zena handed around platters of food, I told them everything that happened and everything Frank told me in the lead-up to his death.

“So, I now have the gold bar that Aaron,” I said, nodding at Zena, “your father, found in Antarctica.”

“He didn’t find it,” Zena said. “He stole it.”

I nodded. “That seems likely. And then my dad tried to steal it, too. Anyway, I have it hidden in my apartment.”

“Why didn’t you bring it here and put it in our safe?” Wasp asked.

“Because we flew by commercial airline,” Xander answered for me. “It would have been confiscated and never seen again.”

“Right. Good thinking.” Wasp nodded.

“So, in addition to saving that gold bar from being tied up in evidence,” I said, removing Dad’s phone from my pocket, “I also discovered Dad had a second phone. I managed to take this without the police seeing.”

I handed the phone to Cobra. “Hopefully you can find some contacts or information on there that will help our investigation.”

Cobra took the phone, grinning like I’d handed him winning lottery numbers.

“I wonder if it was Frank that my father had been talking to,” Yasmin said. “Dad told me a man was helping him investigate the five hundred bars of gold that were divided into thirds and put onto a truck, a submarine, and a train.” She looked at me. “He said it was someone high up with access to military intelligence.”

I nodded. “It could have been Dad. Hopefully you can find out, Cobra.”

Cobra jabbed the screen on the phone. “This could be fun.”

“Speaking of fun ...” I told them about my mother turning up after eighteen years and helping us with the pile of Dad’s

hidden notes we found. “But before we delve into that paperwork, Xander and I may have found something that we want to investigate first.”

“What? What?” Maya did a little jig.

From his backpack, Xander removed the three-year-old newspaper clipping and as it was handed around, I detailed the unexplained apparent murder suicide of the men who built doomsday bunkers.

“And ...?” Viper folded his arms.

Xander gave me the land title. “And Dad bought a property in the Pioneer Mountain Range, two weeks after Chui died,” I said.

A loaded silence filled the room. Everyone blinked at me as if piecing these two pieces of information together.

“Holy shit!” Viper blurted. “Do you think that’s where the gold from that submarine is?”

I nodded.

“Then why the fuck didn’t you lead with that intel rather than—”

“Because I had to tell you *everything*, Viper, so you understood that I wasn’t keeping this information from you.”

He gave me a curt nod and I decided that was the best apology I would get from him.

“What the fuck are we waiting for?” Viper actually smiled. “We need to get up there and check that land out.”

“Hell, yes to that!” Wasp whooped.

“Saddle up, boys. We’ve got a mountain to explore.” Ghost smacked Zac’s butt.

The men strode from the room, and I looked at Zena, Yasmin, and Billie. “You’re coming with us. We wouldn’t have found these clues to the gold if it wasn’t for every one of us, so it’s only fitting that we find it together.”

“Really?” Zena’s eyes glowed as she smoothed her hand over Charlie’s ears.

“Absolutely. I want all twelve of us there when we find and explore that bunker.”

“Holy shit!” Zena squealed. “This is going to be fun. Blade, wait for me.”

Yasmin followed Zena out the door, but Billie held back.

“Come on, Billie. You’re part of this team. In fact, if I’m right, this gold will be the portion you found that had been concealed in that submarine in the ice in Antarctica.”

She curled her lip through her teeth. “Do you really think we’ll find it?”

I nodded. “I do.”

Her smile grew bigger.

“Come on.” I indicated with my head.

She walked beside me to where everyone else seemed to be talking at once, gathered around the weapons safe. They already had their tactical vests on and were checking their assault rifles.

“Woah. Guys.” I raised my hands. “This is Australia. We can’t go around with those weapons.”

Wasp’s jaw dropped. “But ... what if that bunker is guarded?”

“No rifles,” I said, aiming my gaze at Blade.

“You heard Hawk. Take handguns and whatever else you can conceal on your person,” Blade said.

Viper grumbled as he put his rifle back in the rack.

“Hey, Viper. I’m guessing there will be a door we’ll need to penetrate,” I said.

“Ha. You mean I might be able to blow up some shit.”

Grinning, I nodded. “That’s exactly what I mean.”

A lethal grin crossed his lips. “Now, we’re talking.”

“Unless ... I might be able to unlock the code.” Cobra plucked a miniature computer from the safe with cables wrapped around it. “There hasn’t been a door yet that’s beaten me.”

“Fuck that.” Viper cracked his knuckles.

I raised my hands. “Let’s make sure we have what we need to cover all contingencies.”

“Saddle up, boys,” Blade said. “We roll out in five minutes.”

Ghost bounded to me. “You and Xander can come with Zac and me. That way we get to lead.” She winked at me.

After we secured Charlie in the kitchen with a few special treats, we locked up HQ, and set the alarms and security cameras. Our safe contained twenty-seven million dollars’ worth of gold. And if everything went to plan, in an hour or so, we were going to have another two hundred and forty million dollars’ worth of treasure to add to the haul.

It was too much.

Way too much to have stored in our building at Risky Shores. We needed a plan.

But I was pretty sure whatever we decided, Viper and Wasp wouldn’t be happy.

We separated into three cars and Maya, Zac, Xander, and I climbed into Maya’s Rav 4.

Maya wound down the window, and sticking her arm out, pointed forward like she was heading into battle. “Yeehaw,” she yelled as she shot out of the HQ parking lot like a maniac.

Her driving reminded me of Whisper, the Border Force officer I had scuba-dived down to Chui’s yacht with. It already seemed like years ago since I had made those dives. That was another thing I needed to add to my long list of jobs... I had to find out how those bastards found out about the secret room in Chui’s yacht. I hoped like hell it wasn’t Jeff, Whisper or Ryder who had told them.

Ryder had given me strange looks though, so maybe he was trying to hide something. Whisper had said he'd gone through some messed up shit, but she hadn't wanted to elaborate. Maybe he *was* worth investigating. It seemed I was going to take Whisper up on her offer of catching up for a drink after all.

Maya drove the car around the corner like a rally car driver and her crazy grin showed how much she loved the adrenaline rush. Her driving was just like Whisper's had been. Maya and Whisper were cut from the same cloth: fun, fierce, fit, and parading a whole lot of spunk.

I should introduce them to each other one day.

"Which road are we taking up the range, Aria?" Maya asked as she careened onto Oak Avenue. "The old one? Or the new one?"

I checked the map on my phone. "The old road."

"Oh, goodie. I know that one like the back of my hand."

"How is your business going?" Xander asked. "You still doing the white-water rafting tours?"

She shot a glance at Zac, maybe wondering how much Xander knew about Zac's backstory.

"I sure do," Maya said. "You should come white-water rafting with us one day. It's fun."

"No, thanks." Xander scraped his hand over his freshly trimmed beard. "I'll stick to riding horses."

As Maya sped around a corner and onto the road that zig-zagged up and over the mountain range, Zac turned to face me. "Do you think Frank killed those two guys who made the doomsday bunker? Rather than it be a murder suicide?"

"Yeah, or someone working for Frank. My guess is they didn't want those men talking about what they built up on this land."

Maya adjusted her mirror to see me. "Then you should have the cop who called those deaths a murder suicide investigated."

“Hmm.” I frowned. “You’re right.” That was another potential target to add to my ever-growing list.

The car bounced through a pothole the size of a garbage can, and both Xander and Zac hit their heads on the ceiling.

“Sorry.” Maya’s grin suggested she was anything but sorry. Her gaze met mine. “I mean, if it looks like a duck, and quacks like a duck, then it’s probably a crooked bastard.” She giggled.

“You know that’s not a saying, right?” Zac grinned at her like a teenage jock.

“It is. It’s a Maya saying.” She looked at me in the mirror. “You did say that murder suicide was mysterious, right?”

“The newspaper article called it mysterious. Both the men had wives and kids and seemed happy. There was no motive to their deaths.” I glanced at Xander. He’d read the newspaper report. “What do you think?”

“I think the poor bastards chose the wrong job if it was Frank or Chui who hired them.”

“The trail of deaths behind this gold ...” I shook my head. The body count would be astounding.

“Am I turning into this road up on the left?” Maya asked.

“Yes, that’s the one.” I glanced out the rear window. Blade was behind us and Cobra behind him. “Don’t lose them.”

“I won’t.” Maya dropped the Rav 4 into a lower gear. “This thing has no grunt anyway.”

I directed her onto a road wide enough for only one car.

“Jeez, this road looks like it’s a hundred years old,” Zac said.

“It could be.” Maya nodded as she dropped down a gear. “There are some old military posts dotted over this mountain that were built in 1943.”

“Oh yeah?” I frowned at her. “I didn’t know that.”

“Sure are. During World War II, the Japanese forces moved south through the Pacific islands, and it was feared that

the invasion would reach this far down.”

“And did they?” Xander asked.

“Nah.” Maya took the Rav around a hairpin turn at about twice the speed I would. “They built the forts and armed them with defense weapons, but fortunately the invasion didn’t reach this far south, so our little town never ended up as a war zone.”

“How come you know this?” Xander asked.

Maya shrugged. “I found a fort when I was bushwalking up here one day and did the research.”

“I wonder if it’s an old fort that the preppers converted?” I asked.

Maya clicked her fingers. “That would make sense. The one I found was in excellent condition considering it was eighty years old.”

I glanced at the map on my phone. “Okay, Maya, slow down. We’re coming up to the land, on the right.”

We all peered out the right-side windows as Maya slowed to a crawl. I searched for a driveway or letterbox, something to indicate we’d reached the right block of land. There was nothing. This area didn’t even have fences dividing the land.

We reached a dead end.

“Shit! We must have missed it,” I said. Google Maps didn’t drill down to the exact location. The area was too remote, and there were zero houses around. “It should have been there.”

Maya turned the car around, and as she came alongside Blade’s car, she leaned her elbow out her window. “The property is supposed to be along here somewhere.”

“Pull over and we’ll move out on foot,” Blade said.

“Roger that.” Maya pulled the car off the road, and we all climbed out.

With Blade leading, the twelve of us strolled along the road. The blazing afternoon sun burned the back of my neck,

and the stifling air, thick with the scent of eucalyptus, was like an oven. Not even a whisper of breeze penetrated the dense bush around us.

Towering gum trees that were about four hundred and fifty feet high dotted the landscape, and between the trees was virgin bush that was going to be hell to walk through. On top of that, the angle of the land went up at a steep incline from the road.

“Hey, guys. I think this is a tire track?” Billie pointed at a divot in the dirt that all the men had walked past.

The men jogged back.

“Fuck, yeah.” Wasp curled his arm around Billie’s neck and crushed her to his side. “You always have a great eye for detail.”

“Here’s the other one.” Viper stomped his boot into another track.

In two lines, with Blade and Viper in the lead, we traipsed along tire tracks that were barely visible.

“Fuck me.” Viper shoved aside a small shrub covered in wattle flowers. “There’s no way a fully loaded truck came through here.”

I had to agree with him. The low shrubs clawed at our arms and legs, and the angle was extremely steep. A truck would have had one hell of an effort to get up here.

“Maybe they choppered it in and dropped the load?” Wasp said. “That’s what I would’ve done.”

Xander and Blade nodded.

“That makes sense to me,” Maya said.

A foul odor permeated the dense air and with each step, a miserable ache swept through me.

Blade raised his fist and when he crouched down, we all did. “You smell that?”

“Smells like death,” Viper said.

“Maybe it’s a dead kangaroo,” Zena said.

“I hope you’re right.” Blade pulled his weapon from the back of his jeans and nodded at me.

As I pulled out my weapon, I prayed that the entire Alpha Tactical Ops team and our partners weren’t about to step into another one of Dad’s death traps.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

HAWK



With my heart hammering and my grip firm on my loaded weapon, I scanned the bushes around us. Everything was still. Even the leaves on the trees didn't move as if nature was holding its breath as it waited for us to walk into another disaster zone.

“Watch your six, guys, and stick together.” Crouching over, Blade led our march farther up the hill.

“Should we stay here?” Zena asked.

Blade shook his head. “I am not splitting us up.”

I agreed with that decision. If those of us who weren't military trained had to stay back, one or two of us who were trained would need to stay with them. Splitting up was not an option.

With each step, the pungent stench became more potent. It wasn't a dead kangaroo. I'd smelled rotting corpses too many times in Afghanistan to ever forget that hideous stench.

Although it was disgusting, the overpowering stink did give me reason to doubt that the area we were heading toward was being watched. There was no way a person could endure that smell for long periods of time.

At the edge of a clearing, Blade squatted down, and we all copied him.

Crouching next to Xander, I peered over an area about the size of a basketball court that had been cleared of trees and shrubs. Across the other side was a concrete structure built

into the slope of the hill. The only entrance was shaped like a triangle with its top point cut off and beyond that was a dark void. It was like something from a movie, where one could step through a portal into another world.

“Looks like we found one of your forts, Maya,” I said.

“Yep.” Her jaw was tight as she swept her gaze right to left.

“Anyone see anything?” Blade asked.

“All clear,” I said.

“I got nothing,” Viper added.

“I think whoever was here is what’s making that stink,” Wasp said.

Clamping his jaw, Blade nodded.

The construction was so well hidden, it was a miracle we found it. To anyone above the bunker, that doorway wouldn’t be seen.

Blade swept his gaze across all of us. “Okay, let’s move. Wasp, Viper, you’re with me. Stick together and stay frosty.”

“Roger that,” Ghost, Xander, Cobra, and I said in unison.

With Blade, Viper, and Wasp walking three abreast, and the rest of us behind them, we charged toward the concrete bunker. The men strode inside, and as they swept their weapons left and right, the rest of us marched into the bunker behind them.

Beyond the doorway was a tunnel big enough to drive Maya’s Rav 4 through, and pausing at the entrance, Blade raised his hand, and we stopped to listen. Other than Billie’s ragged breathing, the place was silent.

The rotten smell vanished and was replaced with musty air that was thick with odors of rusted metal and dust.

Blade turned on his flashlight and aimed it down the tunnel, but the end wasn’t visible. He raised two fingers, and Viper and Xander stepped forward.

I was surprised Wasp hadn't taken the lead.

Blade nodded at them, and with their weapons ready, and flashlights on, Xander and Viper led us along the tunnel with Blade and I guarding the rear.

The flickering beams on the rugged walls revealed remnants of the 1940s fort construction.

As we ventured deeper into the silence, Billie gripped Wasp's arm. The poor woman was probably terrified out of her mind. And that stench of death outside would have brought back memories of her friends who'd died in Antarctica.

I shouldn't have brought her here.

We reached a small empty chamber, and Viper and Xander's light beams zeroed in on a steel door across the other side. We marched to it, and Viper banged on the door. It sounded like solid metal.

Viper turned to us, rubbing his hands together, his eyes manic with expectation. *Crazy bastard is itching to blow up something.*

Cobra stepped to the keypad at the right-hand side of the door and shrugged in a silent question. He didn't want to be the one to override Viper. I didn't blame him.

"Cobra, you have five minutes to get us in there," Blade said. "Then it's Viper's turn."

"Yes, sir." Cobra lowered the pack off his shoulder and pulled out the small computer.

"Don't go ruining my fun, Cobra." Viper scowled at him.

"Let him think." Yasmin glared at Viper, and I had to stifle a chuckle.

"Yeah, ya big bully." Maya laughed.

Xander came to my side, and I slipped my hand into his.

Are we about to find a haul of stolen Nazi treasure?

I squeezed our palms together. "Moment of truth."

The group stood in couples, and the anticipation between us was so thick I could almost feel it.

Maya was like a jumping bean. Viper was like a brick. And poor Cobra had everyone watching him as he applied wires and jabbed at the keys on the computer.

A pop sounded, and Cobra turned to us grinning. “Told ya!”

Nobody moved.

“It’s open,” Cobra said for clarification.

Viper charged forward, grabbed the handle, and as he dragged the heavy door open, Blade, Xander, and I marched in, sweeping our weapons around the room.

“Clear,” we all called.

A breath left my throat as our lights highlighted rows and rows of crates. And just like the ones I’d found in that cave in Kyrgyzstan, these were branded with the Scorpion Industries logo.

Viper and Wasp were like teenage thugs as they smashed through the top of the crates. I knew they would be full of rifles, so I panned my light to the side where three crates were stacked on top of each other and set back from the wall.

I strode to the space behind them, and gasped. “Hey, guys!”

They didn’t hear me over the din of Viper and Wasp’s attack on the crates.

“Guys!” I yelled, holding up a heavy bar. “The gold is here!”

I stepped back as everyone raced toward me.

“Holy shit. We found it!” Wasp scooped Billie into his arms and twirled her around.

Viper picked up two bars. “We’re rich. We’re fucking rich.”

He handed one to Harper.

The room seemed to glow as our flashlights bounced off the hundreds of gold bars.

As they cheered and whooped and grabbed bars of gold, a mixture of emotions washed through me.

While it was incredible to finally have a win over my father, and a true sense of accomplishment for our amazing team, we still had a major dilemma.

Xander strolled to me carrying a gold bar. His expression was somehow a concoction of excitement and worry. “You okay?”

Attempting to smile, I traced my finger over the lion emblem embossed in the gold bar. “Of course. This is amazing.”

“But ...?” He leveled his gaze at me.

I knew he wouldn’t let this go, but I still said, “Nothing. It’s okay.”

“Aria.” His shoulders sagged.

Blade strode to me. “This is unbelievable, Hawk. Fucking unbelievable.”

Swallowing down my worry, I planted a smile. “I know.”

“We couldn’t have done this without you.”

I shook my head. “Blade, every one of us had a part in uncovering this gold.”

He swept his gaze over all of us. “You’re right. What a team, huh?”

Zac and Maya emerged from the group carrying two gold bars each.

“Now do I look like Indiana Jones?” Zac curled the bars into his arms and posed.

“You’re still sexier.” Giggling, Maya pushed two bars above her shoulders like they were a pair of dumbbells. “Man, these are heavy.”

As the guys brought out a few more bars and stacked them onto the crates, the gold seemed to glow brighter ... like it was celebrating its freedom.

The journey to recover these bars that had been put into the *Kashalet* submarine in Germany eighty years ago was over, but this discovery had also started a new chapter for the gold. What are we going to do with the tainted treasure?

Viper emerged from behind the crates carrying six gold bars and grinning like a hooligan.

“Hey, Xander, I’m going to check outside again,” I whispered in his ear.

“I’ll come with you.” He put the gold bars on top of the nearest crate.

“Hey, Blade,” I called to him. “We’ll do another scout around outside.”

“Want me to come with?” Blade said.

“No, we’re good,” I said.

Xander and I left the group and turned on our flashlights to trace our way back outside.

“You don’t seem as excited as everyone else.” Xander’s voice echoed off the walls as we walked along the wide tunnel.

“I am excited, and amazed that we actually found it. It’s just ... that gold has also caused decades of horror. So many people have died because of the money that gold represents. I’d hate to count how many people have lost lives because of it.”

“Yeah, I know. And I think we’re about to find a few more,” he said as we stepped outside to the foul stench again.

Guided by the strength of the smell, we walked right from the exit. About forty yards into the bush, we found four shipping containers, two of which had toppled onto their sides. The containers had been draped in camouflage netting that had been pegged into the ground.

“Looks like Wasp’s suggestion that the gold had been choppered here was right,” Xander said, stepping inside one of the empty containers.

“Yeah.” Pinching my nose to halt the stench, I reluctantly walked to a pale lump protruding from the ground and a wave of nausea blazed up my throat. “Xander!”

He ran to me, and I pointed at a shallow grave where a man’s hairy arm had been dug up and gnawed on by an animal, possibly a dingo.

“Jesus.” Xander covered his mouth. “They didn’t even try to bury him properly.”

“I wonder if he was the chopper pilot?” I shook my head. The dead guy was another body to add to the enormous death toll attached to the Goering gold legacy.

Stepping back, I scanned the area. We were surrounded by dense bush and the tree canopy above us was so thick that the sun struggled to penetrate the foliage. These containers may be visible from the air, but unless someone was looking for them, they could have gone undetected for years. Decades, even.

“I have a feeling there could be more bodies in this area.” I shuddered. “Let’s get back to the others.”

The cheering had died down by the time we returned.

“All good?” Blade frowned at me.

“Yes and no.” I told them what we found. “We’ll need to inform the police.”

“Not until we get our gold out of here,” Viper said.

“It’s not our gold, Viper. None of it is.”

“Like fuck it isn’t. We found it. It’s ours.” His eyes were like heat-seeking missiles.

“I agree.” Wasp stepped forward. “Billie went through hell because of this treasure.”

I stepped into the middle of the group and took one gold bar off Maya. “We all did, Wasp. Every one of us suffered some atrocity because of these.” Using both hands, I waved

the bar. “But what about the people who had the gold stolen from them during the war?”

“What about them?” Viper shook his head. “And how the hell are you going to work out who they are?”

“That is a problem, Viper, I agree. But it’s not just them, and us, who could lay claim to this gold. There are going to be several countries who will claim their stake on this fortune.” I handed the gold back to Maya.

“It’s our fortune. If you don’t want it, I’ll take your share.” Viper nodded at Harper, but her mild expression suggested that she didn’t share the same sentiment.

“What do you want the money for?” Zac asked.

Viper scrunched his face. “What?”

“Want do you need money for?” Zac repeated.

“None of your fucking business!” Viper’s gaze darted about the crowd, and I stepped back. I didn’t want him to think we were ganging up on him.

“Look.” I opened my arms, trying to keep the conversation civil. “We haven’t had a chance to discuss our options.”

“You deal with your own options, Hawk. I’m walking outta here with my option and cashing it in,” Viper said.

“Being rich isn’t all it’s cracked up to be,” Zac said.

“Says the billionaire. What would you know?”

Zac reached for Maya’s hand. “I know a lot, actually. My wealth meant I never knew who wanted to be my friend and who wanted my money. Everybody wanted a piece of me. Assholes wanted to kidnap and kill me for my money. I couldn’t walk down the street like I can now without being accosted. I’m telling you, cashing in this gold isn’t what’s important.”

“Well said, babe.” Maya’s eyes glowed as she grinned at him.

“Okay, genius, what is important?” Viper rolled his eyes to Wasp, maybe seeking support.

“Friends,” Zac said. “Love. Trust. And doing what’s morally right.”

“Fucking great. You don’t know what it’s like to even need money,” Viper snapped.

“So, tell me then. What do you need the money for?” Zac said.

“None of your—”

“Drake.” Harper strode to him and wrapped a hand over his wrist. “Tell them why you want the money.”

Viper’s jaw trembled as he studied Harper’s eyes. Finally, he put the gold bars down. “I want ... no, I *need* to buy my parents a house. I owe them—”

“Done,” Zac said, cutting off Viper.

Viper blinked at him like he was seeing a yeti. I did, too.

“What do you mean, done?” Viper asked.

Zac shrugged. “Find your parents a home, and I’ll buy it for them.”

Viper’s jaw fell ajar. “Are you serious?”

“Of course,” Zac said.

Viper’s Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed. “I want them to have an ocean view, so the place won’t be cheap.”

Zac flicked his hand. “Just find the house, and I’ll make it happen.”

Viper seemed to be frozen with shock. We all did.

Finally, Viper strode to Zac with his hand out. “You’re a good guy, Zac.”

Viper shook his hand.

Ghost playfully punched Viper’s bicep. “That’s what I’ve been telling you, numbnuts.”

“Anyone else want a house?” Zac asked.

“Yeah, actually, we do.” Wasp glanced at Billie with a goofy grin.

“What’s wrong with the apartment over my cafe?” Zena asked. “I thought you liked it up there?”

Wasp and Billie stared at each other, and an intensesness crossed between them sizzled like lightning. Finally, Billie gave Wasp the tiniest of nods.

Wasp’s grin grew to beyond ridiculous as he stood behind Billie and put his arms around her shoulders. “We do like it there, Zena. But in seven months’ time, there won’t be enough room for us *and* our baby.”

“What? Oh, my god. Congratulations?” Maya’s squeal bounced around the concrete as she bounded to them and wrapped them in a hug.

“We found out yesterday.” Billie rested her hand on her flat stomach. “We weren’t going to say anything but—”

We all rushed forward to congratulate them.

“Well, damn.” Blade shook Wasp’s hand and clapped his back. “Congratulations, you two.”

I hugged both of them. “This is wonderful news. I’m so happy for you.”

“Thanks, Aria.” Billie’s smile was spectacular. Now I knew why she’d been grinning so much.

Zac rested his hand on Wasp’s shoulder. “That’s great news, man. Congratulations.”

“Thanks,” Wasp said, beaming. “So, about that house ...”

“I meant it,” Zac said. “You find the perfect house for your family, and I’ll gift you the money to buy it.”

Billie covered her mouth, and tears welled in her eyes. “Thank you.”

“It’s my pleasure. What about you two?” Zac turned to Xander and me. “You must need a house, right?”

Xander chuckled. “We’re just fine, thanks.”

“Seriously. Maya has been banging on about how she’d love Aria to live closer, so if I can make my babe’s wishes

come true, I will.”

Xander and I looked at each other.

“Uh-huh! Looks like you have something in mind,” Zac said.

I shook my head. “We’re okay, thanks.”

“Just tell me.” Zac elbowed my side. “What’s the house like?”

“Well, we don’t know much about the house.” Xander gave me a coy shrug.

I rolled my eyes. “It’s the land with the airstrip behind Arrow Dynamics. It’s for sale and would be perfect for Xander to keep doing his Royal Flying Doctor job.”

“Done,” Zac said. “Do you need a plane too?”

“Jesus, will you just stop it.” I bulged my eyes at him.

“Stop what? I have more money than I can spend, and you guys ...” Zac released a massive sigh. “I have never met such kind, amazing people as you. You all deserve so much more than a house or two. And it’s the least I can do for saving me, and—”

“He’s going to get all mushy.” Maya wrapped her arms around him.

“Yeah, and I’m not even acting.” He draped his arm over her shoulder. “I’d rather spend my money on you guys than topless women riding unicorns, that’s for sure.”

“What?” Giggling, Maya stepped back to look at him.

Zac rolled his eyes. “At one of my parties in Hollywood, I had topless women riding unicorns.”

“You didn’t.” Maya’s jaw dropped.

“Well, they weren’t real unicorns.”

She eased back from him. “You dirty old man.”

Zac gasped in mock hurt. “Not me. My bastard manager, Marc. He’s the perv. He organized it.”

“Well, that’s okay then.” Maya slipped her arms around him again.

Zac’s gaze fixed on Viper, and Viper beamed a spectacular smile, proving that the big brute was truly handsome under all that anger. Maybe buying his parents a house would finally release him from his guilt.

I would forever feel guilty over my father sabotaging our mission that killed Blade’s best friend, Kai. Nothing could release me from that guilt.

“What about you, Cobra?” Zac asked. “What do you need?”

He looked at Yasmin and reached for her hand. “We don’t need anything, but Yasmin’s brother does. We’d like to move him to our place, but it’s expensive—”

“I would be honored to help you with your brother,” Zac said.

A sob tumbled from Yasmin’s throat. “Thank you.” She strode forward and wrapped her arms around Zac. “Thank you. This means the world to me. To us.”

Tears pooled in Maya’s eyes, and she swept her gaze to me. “Does this mean you’ll come and live in Risky Shores?”

Squeezing Xander’s hand, I turned to him, and the love burning in his eyes made my heart swirl into messy knots.

Butterflies in my stomach took flight and a glorious warmth swam through my veins as I said, “Yes. Yes, we will.”

Chapter Thirty-Eight

HAWK



Five months later.

I stepped onto the back veranda and took a moment to enjoy the view from the home Xander and I bought together four months ago. In the far distance, the land around the runway was still showing the scars of the heavy earthmoving equipment that had been required to resurface the airstrip last month. Thanks to Zac's generosity, we'd been able to bring forward repairing the giant potholes in the runway much sooner than we'd anticipated.

Sitting at the end of the runway was Xander's plane.

My heart clenched as I recalled the sadness in Xander's eyes when we'd flown away from Bunyip Station for the last time. While he'd declared that he would never miss that property or his father, his mother's actions had broken his heart. We'd planned to stay at Bunyip Station for a week to pack up his small quantity of belongings and arrange transport for his horse, Shadow, and two of his dogs, Bluey and Red.

But we were only at Bunyip Station for less than forty-eight hours.

My grand plans of mending the rift between Xander and his mother were obliterated when she would barely talk to us.

Xander glanced up at me from the barbecue he'd built in our fenced backyard. "You okay, babe?"

“Yes. Just admiring our view.”

He grinned a knowing smile. I did this a lot now ... admire our view. My life had changed completely since I'd quit my job at ASIO, and Xander and I had moved into our 1980s double-story house on sixty hectares of land behind Risky Shores.

His friend's sister, Roxie, emerged from the house grinning, and it was hard to imagine her as Xander had described at her brother's wedding and when he'd flown her to hospital before her appendix burst.

She carried a massive charcuterie board with a smorgasbord of meats, cheeses, fruits, and crackers that were carefully arranged in a way that only Zena could master.

“Would you like something, Aria?” She held the tray forward.

“Yes, please. Yum.” I selected a cracker and topped it with cheese and Zena's homemade roast capsicum and cashew dip. “I think Zena has made enough food to feed us all for a week.”

“It's great.” Roxie's eyes lit up with mischief. “I usually get the leftovers.”

I chuckled. “Oh, you might have a battle on your hands. Wasp has his eye on the leftovers.”

“Ah, but he doesn't know who he's messing with. Bring it on.” Roxie winked, then she strolled down the stairs.

When Xander and I had flown the plane from Bunyip Station to our new place, Roxie had transported Shadow and the dogs in our new horse trailer that we'd driven there. Four boxes were also filled with Xander's possessions. His saddles and woodworking tools filled the rest of the room and there hadn't been much space left.

Once Roxie had arrived in Risky Shores, though, she never returned to her parents' place. Instead, she moved into the apartment over Zena's café, and now worked at both Firefly Café, and helped Xander with his farm.

Zena emerged from the house with another smaller tray which she held toward me. “You should try these goat cheese and caramelized onion tarts. I used Xander’s goat cheese.”

I bit into the warm tart. “Yum. It’s delicious.”

“Best goat cheese I’ve ever tasted,” she said. “And believe me, I’ve tasted a lot.”

Xander made the cheese using milk from our small herd of goats that shared the same paddock as his dozen horses, including Shadow. He also had three very fat milking cows, Buttercup, Freeda, and Gertrude, who provided us with enough milk to make cheese, cream, butter, and yogurt.

“And look.” Zena pointed at the small pot of honey. “Xander’s honey. Try it with the blue cheese. Delish.”

In addition to Xander’s beehives down the far back paddock, he also had a dozen chickens, and a massive vegetable patch that provided enough food to feed us and supply Zena’s Firefly Café with produce.

“Can you hand this around for me?”

Before I could respond, Zena shoved the tray into my hands and strode down the steps to the barbecue.

At the fence line, Yasmin and Cobra were feeding Shadow a carrot. The other horses all stayed back from the fence. They were still skittish around people, but Xander was working on that.

“Hey, what are you doing?” Xander muscled Zena aside and snatched the tongs off her.

“Don’t burn the sausages.” Scowling, Zena pointed at a sausage in the middle of the barbecue.

“Have I ever burned them?” Xander made a chopping noise with the tongs.

“No, but you weren’t watching them.”

Leaving them to their tussle, I strolled toward Maya and Zac who were opening two more bottles of ridiculously expensive champagne.

“Eat,” I said, holding the tray forward. “Zena’s made a crazy amount of food.”

“No complaints here.” Zac ate a tart whole and grabbed another.

A helicopter flew overhead, and I glanced up.

“Wasp’s here,” I said as the chopper aimed for the runway. “Roxie, can you go get them?”

“Sure.” Roxie put the charcuterie board down on the long lunch table that her and Zena had been setting up all morning and walked toward my car.

Maya showed me the champagne bottle. “Top up?”

“Yes, please.”

“Are you ready to watch this documentary?” She wriggled her eyebrows.

“No, not really,” I said. “I wished they’d let us approve it before it went to air.”

“There’s no fun in that.” Maya giggled. Then her expression grew all serious. “How have you been doing?”

“I’m good.”

“No, really. Are you settling into this farm life?” She swept her hand toward the vast paddocks beyond our backyard.

I inhaled deeply. “It’s taken a bit to get used to the silence, but now I love it. Whenever I fly down to Sydney to see Mom, I can’t stand the traffic noise.”

“I bet. Makes you wonder how you ever put up with it.”

“I guess I didn’t know any different.”

“True. How is your mom?” Maya asked.

“She’s great. She’s having a quick nap, but I’m sure she’ll be out soon,” I said. “You can ask her yourself.”

“Okay, I will.” Maya scooted off toward Harper and Viper.

Mom lived permanently in my house at Bondi Beach. When I'd sold Dad's house, Mom was my inspiration behind who to donate the money to. A large portion went to the homeless shelters that had housed her on and off over the last eighteen years. We made donations to several charities that helped women in domestic abuse situations. Mom also gave money to all her wonderful friends who had helped her over the years.

Roxie drove the car back along the bitumen road we'd had laid between our house and the airstrip, and as Roxie parked next to the barn, I strolled forward to greet them.

"Hi, Billie, how was the ride?"

"It was okay. I'm not sure the baby liked takeoff or landing though." Billie's rosy cheeks glowed as she curled her hand over her pregnant belly.

Wasp grabbed Billie's hand. "I hope they haven't eaten all the food."

I chuckled. "You're kidding, aren't you? I think Zena's catered for fifty people. Besides, the barbecue is nearly ready."

"Awesome. Come on, babe, I'm starving."

"Me too," she said as Wasp snatched her away.

I turned my attention to Cameron MacBride and held my hand forward. "Good afternoon, sir."

"Please, Aria, you have to call me Cameron." He shook my hand.

"Sorry, habit. How was your flight?"

"The plane flight from Canberra to Rosebud was fine, but Wasp's helicopter flight was a little wild."

I laughed. "I know what you mean. I'm pretty sure he thinks he's still in the army."

Following the delicious barbecue aroma, we strolled toward the backyard of our house where all my team and their partners mingled together. Their chatter was constant and upbeat. Everyone I loved was here, chatting, having fun,

enjoying great food and a perfect summer evening. The setting was like a scene from a wholesome movie.

“So, Aria.” Cameron leaned into my ear. “I’d like a moment to talk to you in private if we could.”

Worry raced through me, and I frowned at him. “That sounds ominous.”

He swept his hand over his thick gray hair. “Not at all. Actually, I think you’ll like it.”

My frown deepened. “We’re about to eat dinner though. After that?”

“Sure.” His smokey gray eyes shimmered with his upbeat response, and that made me even more curious.

Harper strode to Cameron. “Hi, Dad, I’m so glad you could make it.”

He hugged his daughter. “Are you kidding? It’s great to see everyone without the bullets flying.” He laughed.

“Amen to that,” I said.

Xander tapped a fork to a beer bottle. “Food is ready.”

As I guided Cameron and Harper toward the table, Mom strolled onto our back deck. Ever since she had moved into my apartment in Bondi, she’d started to come back to life. She’d had her hair cut into a nice style that fell around her shoulders, she ate better, she went for daily walks along the beach. And she smiled nearly all the time.

I strolled to her.

Her face lit up. “Wow, this looks amazing.” She nodded at the beautifully decorated table setting with white tablecloths, and native Australian flowers scattered down the middle.

“Come on, Mom.”

She hooked her hand into the crook of my bent elbow, and I led her toward the table and sat her next to Cameron.

“Cameron, this is my mom, Karen. Mom, this is Cameron MacBride, ex-Prime Minister.”

“Oh, yes.” She smiled. “We have met before, Cameron. Many years ago.”

“Oh, really?” Frowning, he cocked his head, trying to place her.

I left them to chat and walked toward Xander. “How’s my handsome chef? Need any help?”

He kissed my cheek. “Your timing is perfect. If you take that tray of sausages to the table, I’ll take the steaks and lamb chops.”

After everyone was seated and food was dished out, the banter took over. We shared stories, we laughed, and we laughed some more. I couldn’t believe how much my life had changed in the last five months.

In addition to Xander and I purchasing this property, Billie and Wasp also had a new three-bedroom home on the same street as Maya’s house. And Viper’s parents had moved into their new home overlooking the ocean in Rosebud. Viper smiled a lot more and it turned out, he had a wicked sense of humor that he’d been hiding from us.

“Hey, Yasmin, can you pass the vegetables please?” I asked.

“Sure.” She shifted a tray with a selection of roast vegetables toward me.

“How is your brother?” I asked.

“Unfortunately, still the same. But at least now he’s living with us and he’s getting the best treatment possible, thanks to Zac.” She smiled at Zac, and he winked. “And we don’t need to make the trip to Rosebud Hospital every second day, so that’s nice too.”

“That’s good,” I said.

“But it’s still up to Jayden to pull himself out of the coma.”

“Sorry to hear that,” I said. No words were sufficient to convey how sad that was. To be so young and trapped in your own body was just cruel.

“At least that asshole police officer who crashed into Yasmin’s Dad’s car has been caught,” Cobra said.

“And he’s been charged for murdering my mom.” Yasmin reached for Cobra’s hand.

The Rosebud police officer who’d been charged was just twenty-seven years old and he’d had a wife and two kids. It was impossible to fathom why he had become involved with Chui and was willing to kill for him. Apparently, he had gambling debts that he couldn’t repay or hide from anymore, so Chui had helped him out. Detective Trebilco told me that every criminal case Constable Ahern had been involved in was now under review.

“What about the undertaker?” Viper shook his head. “Fucking bastard!”

The notes we’d taken from Dad’s house provided information that led to the arrest of Bradley Dunn, the undertaker at the Rosebud Crematorium who was also a member of Viper’s Tornado Motorcycle Club. So far, four victims had been officially identified after being illegally cremated at the Rosebud Crematorium. Everyone knew that body count was destined to rise.

“Did you know they identified another victim who had been cremated illegally?” Blade said.

“No, I didn’t,” I said. “Who?”

“He was a police officer who vanished a couple of years ago.”

“Oh.” I shook my head. “Any idea what happened to him?”

“No,” Blade said. “He went missing on a trip between Rosebud and Risky Shores. His car still hasn’t turned up.”

“Risky Shores police are going over every unexplained disappearance going back thirty years,” I said.

“Yeah, that’s how those bodies on that land where we found the gold were identified,” Cobra said.

Six bodies had so far been unearthed around that old World War II fort. Every one of them had done work for Chui or Frank. It was still debatable whether they knew exactly who they were getting involved with.

“Maybe our little town is cursed.” Blade reached for a lamb chop with his fingers and bit into it.

“It used to be. But now that Chui and Frank are dead, all that is behind us.” I raised my glass. “What shall we toast to?”

“Smooth sailing,” Yasmin said.

“Hell, yes to that,” Wasp said. “And clear skies.”

“And healthy babies.” Billie wagged her head at Wasp.

“Yes, of course.” He winked at Billie.

“To healthy babies,” Blade said.

“To all of that and more,” Xander said.

We raised our glasses. “Cheers.”

After Dad’s and Chui’s deaths, the fallout from their extensive corruption was massive. Dozens of people were under investigation and so far, eighteen men had been arrested and charged with crimes ranging from corruption to murder. The arrests included three politicians, three police officers, the undertaker at the Rosebud Crematorium, and the two men who worked at the car wrecking yard at Rosebud who were convicted for their involvement in the murder of Yasmin’s mother.

The rest were seemingly innocent men who had somehow become swept up in Frank’s and Chui’s webs. It pissed me off that nobody at Rosebud wharf had been arrested. But I knew somebody or more than one somebody had to be involved, and I was going to get them, no matter what it took.

“What about Henry Kincaid?” Viper asked. “Has he woken up yet?”

“Unfortunately not. When he does, though, he’ll be arrested for a string of offenses including his illegal arms dealings with those Scorpion Industries weapons.”

The crates of weapons we'd found in the World War II fort had shipment documents on them that led us straight to the Meandu Mine. And that was the concrete evidence the police needed to arrest Henry Kincaid. And at least seven more men were now under investigation for their involvement in the manufacture and distribution of illegal weapons. Unfortunately, as Henry was unlikely to ever emerge from his coma with his mind intact, he would probably never pay for his crimes.

"Eat up, you guys," Maya said. "The show is about to start."

We finished our meals and quickly cleaned up. With drink glasses topped up, everyone shuffled into our living room and sat facing the massive television that Zac insisted *he had to buy for this momentous occasion*.

Billie and Wasp sat on one of our sofas, and Xander and I sat side by side on the other. Cameron and Mom sat in a single sofa seat each, and everyone else sat on cushions or bean bags that Maya and Zac had bought a couple of days ago for this very occasion.

Maya whistled. "Everyone shush."

Xander aimed the remote at the TV to turn up the volume.

The face of Jeremy Anderson, the anchorman for the documentary, filled the massive television. "Tonight, on Major Attention, I'm bringing you a story that plays out like a Hollywood movie. It starts with an enormous cache of gold bars that were stolen during World War II and ends with a major corruption scandal that has brought Australia to its knees."

"Dramatic." Zac rolled his eyes.

Giggling, Maya gripped his hand. "Shush."

"We have interviewed several incredible men and women who—"

Wasp whistled. "I hope they got my good side." Wasp turned his face side to side and with a cute smirk, Billie shifted her hand from her pregnant belly to his leg.

As the screen changed to black-and-white footage of war-torn homes being raided by Nazi soldiers, Jeremy detailed Goering's connection to Hitler and his role in the plundering of the gold and having it melted down into bars.

An animated picture showed the gold bars being separated into three portions that were loaded onto a submarine, train, and truck.

"The truck was stolen by a mechanic named Xi Hàorán Chaoxing and his two friends, butcher Zhenghe Taichu, and farmer, Shiyuan Xi Wufeng."

"How'd he get that information?" Cobra asked.

"I have no idea, but I hope he isn't making it up." I shook my head.

"For the next eighty years, the gold was missing," Jeremy said. "Until a team of elite soldiers from Australia risked their lives to uncover the gold *and* the truth behind the murders and corruption centered around the gold."

"Ex-soldiers." Blade scowled.

"These soldiers were paid for their interviews. However, they asked for their payment to be donated to a small village in Kyrgyzstan that has suffered for decades because of the actions of a few greedy men. After the break, we'll explain how these incredible Australian men and women followed the gold from Germany to a submarine buried deep in a glacier in Antarctica to a frozen lake in Kyrgyzstan, to a hidden cave in their local town. Don't go away."

Maya jumped to her feet. "Don't go away." She giggled. "Anyone need anything?"

Blade held up his beer bottle. "Another beer."

Xander slid forward. "Or, we have whisky, rum, gin. You name it."

"In that case, I'll have a whisky on the rocks," Blade said.

As Maya, Xander, and Roxie filled the drink orders. I leaned toward Billie. "Any more news on your ex-boss?"

She glided her hand over her stomach and seemed to struggle with the smile creeping across her lips. “He’s been sacked from the university and four women have sued him for sexual misconduct. We’re still talking to our lawyer, though.”

“Jeez, Billie. He’s an asshole.”

“Yeah. I always knew that. Our lawyer says there’s no doubt we’ll win, but we’re still working through all the documents Cobra recovered from my laptop.” She rolled her eyes. “It could go on for years.”

“It doesn’t matter how long it takes, babe,” Wasp said. “As long as he pays for everything he did to you and your career.”

“It’s on,” Maya cried out as she somehow flopped into her beanbag without spilling her wine.

I turned my attention back to the television.

“This is just one of the documented five hundred gold bars that in March 1945 were shipped from Goering’s country residence, Carinhall in northeast Berlin, to the castle his wife, actress Emmy Sonnemann, owned in Hamburg.” An image of the gold with the lion emblem filled the television and Jeremy’s voiceover explained the significance of the lion drawing. Then the exact drawing of the lion emblem appeared on the screen, and the camera zoomed into Hitler’s autograph in the bottom right-hand corner.

“Dad was right,” Yasmin said, shaking her head. “I wish he could see this.”

My heart ached for her. She’d lost both her mother and father because of this stupid gold. Her brother, too, was a victim in this mess.

Over the next ninety minutes, Jeremy detailed how we had followed the gold all over the world from Risky Shores, to Antarctica, to a frozen lake in Kyrgyzstan, to a rusty freighter in the middle of the ocean, and finally to an abandoned fort in Risky Shores. Most of us had been interviewed and had agreed to have our faces and names put on the screen. Viper and Blade had agreed to be interviewed, however they insisted that

their identity be concealed. Each time one of us appeared on the screen, we all cheered.

“These courageous men and women discovered this Nazi gold,” Jeremy said, “and although it is undeniably a momentous event, this gold is also a reminder of the tragedies inflicted during World War II.”

On the screen, as the image filled with rows and rows of gold bars, lined up like million-dollar Tetras stacks, all of us seemed to catch our breath as we leaned forward. The bullion glowed from the inside out, and I imagined they’d manipulated the lighting for that exact effect.

“Three hundred and thirty-five bars of gold have been recovered by these incredible Australian soldiers—”

“Ex-soldiers,” Blade hissed, shaking his head.

“The bars are now secured in a top-secret, high-security location. Why are they there and not in a museum? I’m glad you asked.” Jeremy cocked his head and flashed a conceited grin. “This gold poses an enormous moral dilemma. Their very existence is a stark reminder of the atrocities committed during World War II. Yet they also give us an opportunity to learn from this history.”

“The discovery of this gold has triggered a series of legal, historical, and diplomatic debates. But they have also sparked a fierce discussion over the ownership of the treasure.”

“And, although this gold has been confirmed to have been looted during the war, the possibility of repatriation is extremely hampered by the reality that the gold was melted down into the bars, making it impossible to clearly identify who the original gold belongs to.”

“Kyrgyzstan, Australia, Germany, and several European countries are currently voicing their legal right to that gold. In addition, historians, researchers, and cultural institutions also want to get their hands on it. The discovery of this treasure, lost for over eighty years, will generate significant public interest and media attention. But the only thing we know for

certain is that the story behind this priceless treasure is captivating.

“However, in Australia, the incredible recovery of the gold isn’t where this story stops. After the break, I’ll share with you the depth of greed this gold created, and the corruption that has nearly brought Australian politics to its knees.”

The television screen went to an advert for home insurance and Xander muted the volume.

“Do you really think all that gold will stay locked up in some vault for years?” Yasmin asked to nobody in particular.

“What else can they do with it?” Cobra frowned.

“It should go on display in a museum,” Yasmin said. “I saw a display of gold that had been recovered from the SS Central America shipwreck which sank in 1850. It was very well done. With the story behind this gold, maybe something could be done like that.”

“I agree,” Cameron said. “And that’s probably what will happen. But only once everyone agrees that their greed isn’t getting them anywhere.”

Jeremy returned to the screen and over the next forty-five minutes, he detailed the crime and corruption committed by Chui, Frank, the Kincaid brothers, Mason Kingsman, the deceased deputy prime minister, and Stella MacBride, the ex-prime minister’s deceased wife.

In the final minutes of the documentary, Jeremy’s face appeared on the screen again. “There has been no trace of the one hundred gold bars that were apparently loaded onto a train in Hamburg at the end of March 1945. In addition, gold bars were stolen from our incredible Australian soldiers by one of their own men.”

Xander sucked air through his teeth.

“Mr. Cooper Apollo stole a truck containing fifty-two gold bars that had just been recovered from the frozen lake in Kyrgyzstan that I mentioned earlier in the show. Although his bullet-riddled Russian troop carrier was found, neither Cooper Apollo nor the stolen gold has been located.”

“What the fuck!” Blade jerked forward. “They found the truck! When?”

“Why didn’t we know that?” Viper said.

“Where was it?” I asked.

We all looked at each other. None of us had answers.

“Son of a bitch!” Xander scraped his hands through his hair.

“Maybe Cooper perished in those mountains just like Chui’s grandfather’s friends did?” Yasmin said.

We all went silent.

Then Viper chuckled. “That would be a fitting end to that fucker.”

Wasp burst out laughing. “Imagine that. He could be frozen to death on that mountain right now.”

“I don’t care if he is.” Billie squeezed Wasp’s leg. “You’re not going anywhere.”

“I know.” He blinked at her. “I’m never going back to that fucking place again.”

“Nor anywhere else.” Billie leveled her gaze at him.

Jeremy wrapped up the documentary by saying, “I guess it’s only a matter of time before Hollywood makes this incredible story into a movie. I’m Jeremy Anderson, and this is Major Attention. Goodnight.”

Maya jumped to her feet, clapping. “Woohoo! That was amazing.”

As everyone shifted off their chairs and strolled toward the kitchen, I nodded at Cameron. “You wanted to talk to me, sir?”

“Only if you call me Cameron.”

“Sorry. Yes.” I turned to Xander. “We’re heading into the office for a chat. We won’t be long.”

“Take as much time as you need.” Xander kissed my cheek. “Don’t let him off easy.” He winked, then strolled after the others.

“This way.” I led Cameron to the large room that had been a double garage that we’d converted to a study area.

Cameron and I sat facing each other on a couple of office chairs, and he placed his half-drunk glass of wine on the table.

“Okay, I’m listening,” I said. “What’s this idea you have?”

“Straight to the punch, huh?” His gaze was incredible like he was reaching into my brain and trying to manipulate my answer.

“You have me intrigued.”

“Good.” He leaned back and rubbed his hands together. “I want you to head up an organization that oversees several Australian agencies.”

“Which agencies?”

He counted off the numbers on his fingers. “Border Force. Dignitary Protection. Emergency Management. Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission.” He shifted on his seat. “And ASIO.”

I cocked my head. “I thought Kyle was running ASIO.”

He nodded. “But I want you overseeing that agency too, just to keep abreast of any issues.”

“What about Alpha Tactical Ops?” I asked.

“Oh, of course. They will be your team.”

“And they can still do covert operations?”

He nodded. “You would be able to utilize their skills in whatever means necessary.”

My mind swirled with ideas. “I want to continue searching for the remaining bars of Goering gold.”

“I wouldn’t stop you from doing that.”

“I want unimpeded access to everything I need to hunt down the killers in Antarctica and the men who attacked us on the freighter.”

“Of course.”

“I will continue to hunt down Cooper Apollo.”

“Agreed.” He tilted his head. “If he doesn’t turn up dead on that mountain.”

“If he does, I’ll hunt down the gold he took. Actually, I’ll do that anyway. And I need to find whoever broke into that second secret room in Chui’s yacht.”

“I assumed you would.”

Nodding, my thoughts drifted to Whisper, Jeff, and Ryder Westwood, the border force guys who had been with me when I had dived down to Chui’s yacht. I really liked them, including Ryder who was a grumpy ass. It would crush me if any of them were involved in Chui or Frank’s criminal webs. But I had to know.

Cameron leaned back on his chair and rested his hands on his slacks. “Now that you’ve proven that you’ll take down anyone, regardless of who they are, they should be shaking in their boots.”

“Yes.” I clenched my fists. “They should be.”

“Does that mean you accept my offer?”

I looked out the window to the men and women who had become my family. “No.” I heaved a contented sigh. “Sorry, Cameron, but I can’t return to Sydney to live.”

“Then don’t.”

I shot my gaze back to him. “Or Canberra,” I added.

“Your jurisdiction is the entire nation, so where you’re located is irrelevant. As long as I can reach you on the phone or by video hookup, you can be wherever you want.”

I blinked at him, hardly able to believe what he was saying.

“Aria, I learned a valuable lesson from my time spent trying to make my wife happy while I was stuck in a job that I didn’t want—true contentment creates loyal workers. And I can’t afford to lose you. Australia needs you.”

My heart swelled. “Thank you, sir. That means the world to me. Can I have time to think about it?”

He stood and held his hand forward. “I’ll give you twenty-four hours.”

Chuckling, I stood too, and shook his hand. “Thank you, sir ... Cameron. It would be an honor to work with you. However, I, too, have learned a lesson since I quit ASIO.”

“Oh, what’s that?”

“I’ve learned that my career didn’t make me happy. My partner, Xander, makes me happy. And my friends and the wonderful relationship I now have with my mom. If I take on your offer, it would only be if I could have your assurance that when I needed time out, you’d agree to that without any questions asked.”

He gripped my hand in his. “I wouldn’t have it any other way. I trust you, Aria. You have proven to the world that your integrity and moral compass is steadfast. Keeping you mentally happy is paramount to performing your duties well.”

I tugged my lips into my mouth, fighting the swirl of emotions racing through me. “Stop it.” I sniffed. “You’ll make me cry.”

“Crying is good and sometimes necessary. I’ve learned that, too.”

I sucked in a shaky breath and smiled a lopsided grin. “I will call you in the morning.”

“Good.” He nodded and indicated that we walk toward the door.

“Oh, and Cameron, what would be the name of this new agency?”

He scrunched his nose. “I’ll let you decide.”

“Oh.” A name jumped into my mind, but I needed permission to use it first. “Thank you.”

As Cameron said his goodbyes, Xander came to me and squeezed my hand. “You okay?”

“He’s offered me a job.” I couldn’t help the excitement swirling through me, but I wanted to hold it back until I spoke to him first. This decision affected both of us.

“And? Are you going to take it?”

I blinked at him. “Don’t you want to know the specifics?”

“Not really. I can see that you’re excited by the offer.”

“I am, but—”

“No buts, Aria. If it makes you happy, then I’m happy.”

“Oh, Xander, how did you get to be so nice?”

He kissed my cheek. “Because I love you. That’s all that matters, remember?”

Out the corner of my eye, Cameron pulled Harper in for a hug. “Am I still seeing you in the morning?” he asked his daughter.

“Yes, eight o’clock for breakfast at Firefly Café.” Harper kissed her dad’s cheek.

“Perfect. That will give me time for a run along the beach,” Cameron said.

“See you tomorrow, sir.” Viper offered his hand.

Cameron shook Viper’s hand. “I wish you guys would call me Cameron. We’ve been through enough together to be on a first-name basis. And, depending on Aria’s decision, we may be seeing more of each other too.”

He winked at me. “Anyway, I have to go.” He nodded at Roxie who was driving Cameron to his hotel on her way home.

“So ... what’s this decision?” Maya wiggled her eyebrows.

I grinned at her. There was no chance the team would let me keep my discussion with Cameron to myself, so I said, “Can you do that whistle of yours? I need everyone to hear this.”

She put her fingers in her mouth and released an ear-splitting whistle. “Gather around. Aria has an announcement.”

I strolled to the stairs and as I sat on the top step, Xander sat beside me.

He leaned into my ear. "I'll support you, no matter what decision you make."

"Thank you."

With the team and their partners standing on the grass at the base of the stairs, I told them Cameron's offer.

"That's fantastic," Blade said.

"Congratulations," Cobra said.

"That's great news." Wasp winked at me.

Maya pulled a sad face. "But I don't want you to leave."

"He said I can work from wherever I want."

Maya cheered.

"So really?" I asked my team. "You guys would be happy for me to take a role like this?"

"Of course," they all said.

"I'll be your boss, Blade."

"You always were, Hawk." He gave me a curt nod.

I smiled at him. "Good. In that case, I have an idea for the name of my agency. But I'd like your permission to use it, Blade."

A frown drilled across his forehead. "So, let's hear it."

"I'd like to use Kai's codename ... Wolf. I'm thinking Wolf Security."

"Oh." Blade swallowed hard, and his eyes welled.

"Ah, look at this big softie." Maya nudged her hip to Blade's thigh. "I think you have your answer, Aria."

"Yes, I do. Wolf Security is perfect, because we hunt in a pack, and we stop at nothing to take our target's down."

Their smiles confirmed their approval.

After everyone left, Xander and I sat on the swinging chair on the back veranda with his dogs resting near the steps. Millions of stars covered the sky, and the moon had just made its presence known on the eastern horizon, providing enough light to see Shadow's head over the timber fence.

"I think he wants more food," I said.

"He always does." Xander placed his hand on my thigh.

A cat jumped into my lap.

"Hello there, mister. Where have you been hiding all day?" I glided my hand over Garfield's soft fur. Our ginger cat was all skin and bones when we'd rescued him from the RSPCA. Now he was fat and free of fleas and had a massive property to call his home. But his favorite place seemed to be my lap, and I wouldn't change it for the world.

After Garfield made three circles and curled up on my legs, Xander squeezed my knee. "Are you going to say yes to Cameron?"

I nodded.

"I'm proud of you, babe."

I leaned into his shoulder. "Thank you. I love you."

Maybe Xander is right. Love is all we need.

If so, then we were destined to be together forever. But as we swung on our chair, I thought about this, and I decided that we needed more than love.

"Hey babe, you know how you say that love is all that matters?"

A curious expression crossed his face. "Yes."

"I think we also need purpose."

"Purpose?" His brows furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, love can only take you so far. It's incredible and makes everything better, but we need more than just love to make a life together. We need to have purpose, something that

we both believe in and are working toward. Something that gives us a reason to wake up every day and keep going.”

“Okay.” He nodded slowly. “I think I agree. But what do you think our purpose is?”

I smiled. “Our purpose is to make the world a better place, in whatever way we can. Your purpose is on this land, making a sustainable life where we can feed our family and friends, and rescue animals. My purpose is to make our country safer and a better place for our children and future generations.”

“And the people who live here now,” he said.

“Yes. In our own ways, both of us can make a difference. I think that’s why we were brought together.”

Xander scooped Garfield off my legs and the cat meowed his protest. “Did you just say *our* children?”

I couldn’t help the smile tickling my lips. “I might have.”

“Well that’s super nice to hear. How many kids should we have? Four? Six?”

I giggled. “Don’t push it mister.”

He leaned over and planted a kiss on my lips, then pulled me onto his lap so I sat facing him. “You know there’s another ingredient to our love that you’re forgetting.”

I curled my hands around his neck, and as I looked into his stunning eyes, I couldn’t stop grinning because I knew exactly what he was going to say. “Do tell ...”

“Our amazing sex.”

“I love you.” My heart swelled to bursting as I kissed the man of my dreams.

With his hands gripping my ass, he stood. “I love you too, and now I need to do something that I’ve been wanting to do all day.”

“Hmm?” I kissed his neck.

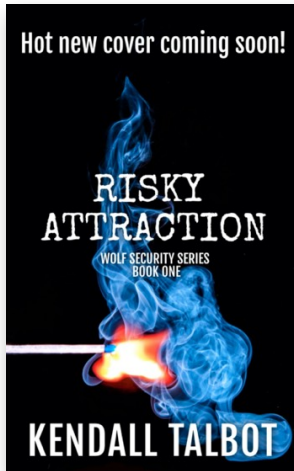
“Make love to you.”

THE END

This is the end of the Alpha Tactical Ops Series, however it's not the end for the men and women you have come to love in this series. My new book [RISKY ATTRACTION](#) - book one in the exciting new WOLF SECURITY SERIES brings you thrilling adventures with more incredible characters to fall in love with AND you will continue to follow Blade, Wasp, Ghost, Viper, Cobra and Hawk and their amazing partners as they continue their search for the missing gold, and for the justice they deserve.

Risky Attraction

Two grieving strangers are thrust into a deadly chase where both their hearts and lives are at risk.



Ryder Westwood is still reeling after discovering the love of his life was lying to him before she died, and all he wants is to be alone. But when the grumpy Border Force Captain rushes to rescue a yacht that's sinking after colliding with a mysterious object, his pain and anger are rekindled by Piper Harrison, the yacht's feisty skipper.

Piper, a single mom and grieving widow, was sailing the world with her rebellious daughter. But as their yacht slips beneath the waves, they make a gruesome discovery that catapults them into the crosshairs of a shocking underworld.

When Piper's daughter is kidnapped, Piper and Ryder are drawn into a whirlwind of desire and danger. Bullets fly and as the body count rises, they enlist the help of the Alpha Tactical Ops heroes to save Piper's daughter from a ruthless enemy.

Will they save all that Piper has left?

Or are their broken hearts destined to be shattered forever?

RISKY ATTRACTION is a standalone, grumpy/sunshine, fight for justice, romantic thriller featuring a tortured alpha hero who doesn't believe in love, and a feisty single mom who doesn't think she needs saving. This race against time, ex-military romantic suspense will have you turning the pages all night long.

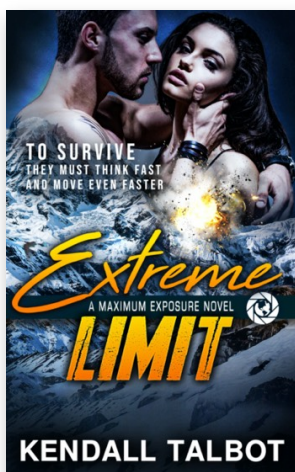
Risky Attraction is Book 1 in WOLF SECURITY - a series of thrilling stand alone romance books with exciting new characters to fall in love with. This is a spin off series to the Alpha Tactical Ops Series so you can enjoy following Blade, Wasp, Ghost, Viper, Cobra and Hawk and their amazing

partners as they continue their search for the missing gold, and for the justice they deserve.

Extreme Limit

Natures deadly beauty isn't the only danger on Whiskey Mountain.

There's also a killer who'll risk everything to stop Holly and Oliver.



When the helicopter crashed and I fell into an icy crevasse, I expected to die.

I didn't expect to find two bodies frozen in the ice.

I lost my fiancé in that accident, and I spent months in a coma as the doctors put my broken body back together. Even worse though, nobody believed me about the frozen couple trapped in the ice.

But a killer will do anything to keep his murders as cold cases, so I have to find out the truth about those bodies.

Battling my scars and my pathetic endurance abilities, I enlisted the help of a rock-climbing expert with rippling abs and a killer sense of humor who takes me on as his pet project.

With his hands-on guidance, we hiked up the treacherous mountain where I nearly died.

I expected it to be damn hard. I expected to have a killer on our heels.

I never expected to fall in love.

And now I'm risking his life in my deadly quest for answers.

***Opposites attract *Buried Secrets *Friends to Lovers *
Fiesty scarred heroine *Rugged, mischievous hero *
Deadly quest for answers * Race against time**

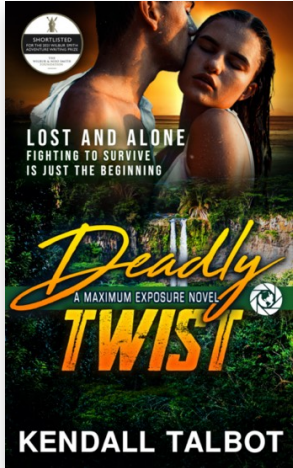
EXTREME LIMIT is a friends to lovers, quest for answers, stand-alone romance, set high in the Canadian

rockies where secrets are buried very deep, featuring a feisty heroine who doesn't know when to quit, and the rugged-yet-mischievous hero who steals her heart. Get ready for the adventure of a lifetime, with a happily ever after guaranteed.

Deadly Twist

Two complete strangers are lost in the jungle.

Both their hearts and their bodies are tested to the limits.



When her father suddenly dies, Lily uncovers a hidden journal that reveals his secret past. Determined to get answers for her grieving family, she heads to Mexico refusing to believe she's out of her depth.

She reluctantly teams up with Carter, an older, grumpy photographer with secrets of his own.

Traipsing into the Yucatan jungle with their overweight guide and his prized pet rooster, Lily expects to encounter wild animals, brutal humidity and a grueling hike.

But she didn't expect Carter to be a pain in the butt, and she certainly didn't expect their guide to die. Lost and alone, they stumble across something they should never had seen.

With armed bandits hot on their heels, her quest for answers becomes a desperate race for their lives.

Lily expects to be gunned down, or lost in the jungle forever.

But she never anticipated falling in love.

As opposites in so many ways, she fights her unlikely attraction to him, and wonders if being trapped in the jungle together is heating up her emotions.

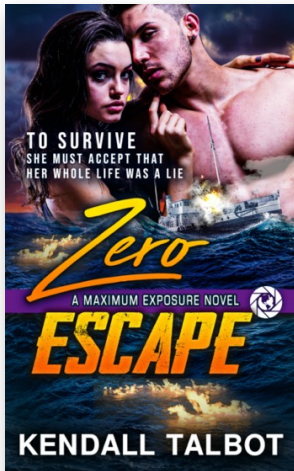
*** Enemies to lovers * Stranded together * Fish out of water
* Opposites attract * Broken hero * Age Gap * Survival
Romance * Quest for answers**

DEADLY TWIST is a gripping romantic thriller, featuring a feisty heroine who's not afraid of anyone, a grumpy hero who doesn't know he's broken, and a plucky

rooster that's along for the ride. Find out why this book was a finalist in the Wilbur Smith Adventure Writing Prize.

Zero Escape

To survive, Charlene must accept that her whole life was a lie.



Fiercely independent, lifelong nomad, Charlene Bailey, thought witnessing a woman murder her dad was the worst moment of her life. Until the police dropped the bombshell that the man she'd known as her father wasn't related to her at all. Worse still, they believed she was a kidnap victim.

One minute Marshall Crow was a special warfare combatant, executing risky missions in treacherous environments. Next minute his body packed in, he was booted out of the navy, and he was taking useless tourists on fishing charters in Key West. And hating every minute.

Until Charlene, a mysterious beauty crippled with secrets, enlists him to smuggle her into Havana, Cuba. Marshall knows it's a bad idea, but he can't refuse the gorgeous, albeit stubborn wildcat.

When her reckless quest for answers results in her kidnapping, Marshall bulldozes every enemy to save her. But what he never expected was for Charlene to save him.

* Enemies to lovers * Stranded together * Dark secrets * Opposites attract * Broken alpha hero * Kick-ass heroine * Fake identity * Quest for answers

ZERO ESCAPE is action-packed romantic suspense full of danger, mystery and passion featuring a determined heroine and the rugged ex-navy man who steals her heart.

Lost In Kakadu

Two complete strangers survive a plane crash.

But the wild jungle isn't their only danger... their hearts are also at risk.



I survived the plane crash with just one other survivor. A stranger. A much younger man.

We clashed right from the start.

Days turn into weeks. Weeks turn into months.

I expected to be rescued. I expected to die.

I didn't expect to fall in love.

Then again... maybe being trapped with him in the jungle is messing with my mind.

Find out why this book won

Romantic Book of the Year.

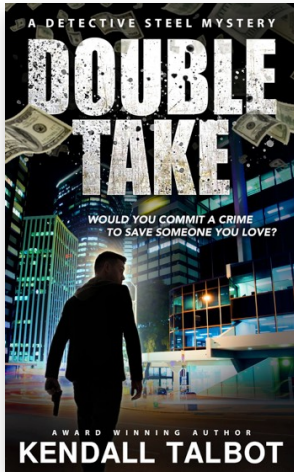
* Enemies to lovers * Stranded together * Fish out of water *
Opposites attract * Broken hero * Older woman/Younger man
* Survival Romance

LOST IN KAKADU is an extraordinary story of endurance, grief, survival and undying love, set deep in Australia's rugged Kakadu National Park. This full-length, stand-alone, enemies to lovers romance features a broken woman who needs to find herself, and an unlikely hero who steals her heart.

Double Take

Would you commit a felony to save someone you love?

Jack did, but does crime really pay?



Jackson Rich is at risk of losing the love of his life, and he'll do anything to save her. Even if it means robbing a bank. So it's time to call in a few favors from his old gang because they owe him. Big time.

Gemma's spent her entire life doing the right thing. Now doing the wrong thing could be the best decision she's ever made, if she's brave enough.

When Detective Steel gets a tip-off of a planned heist, he doesn't know where the robbery will be. Only that it's going to take place during the famous horse race that stops a nation—the Melbourne Cup. And when it goes down, he'll be ready.

For all three of them, their lives are about to change forever. But it's no longer about the money... it's about retribution.

*** Unexpected twists * Anti-hero * Female antagonist * Vigilante thriller * Double crosses * Bank robbery gone wrong**

Download [DOUBLE TAKE](#) today and get ready for a heist thriller featuring a desperate man, the burley cop hell-bent on bringing him down, and a crazy woman with a mission of her own.

Jagged Edge

A grieving detective with nothing to lose.

A dying town with everything to hide.



After witnessing a brutal murder, a grieving ex-cop unwittingly involves a feisty beauty into a deadly race for their lives.

But nobody in their small town can be trusted, and the corrupt politician, lethal sheriff and ruthless property developer will do anything to contain the crimes they buried decades ago.

The price of secrets in their small town runs six-feet deep.

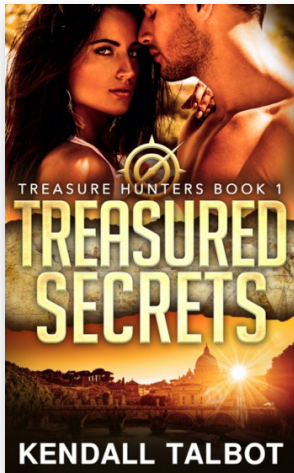
*** Vigilante Thriller * Deadly quest for answers * Buried Secrets * Grumpy hero * Kick-ass heroine * Race against time**

JAGGED EDGE is a full-length, stand-alone thriller featuring a kick-ass woman and a grumpy man who needs to find himself.

Treasured Secrets

A clue to an ancient lost treasure reveals a deadly mystery spanning centuries.

But will Rosalina and her ex-fiancé, Archer, live to salvage it?



I pushed her away. All because of my stupid nightmares.

But now I want her back. I can't live without her.

So when she calls me in the middle of the night with a clue to the treasure that ruined my childhood, I have to go to her. She wants us to find that treasure to solve the dark past that haunts me.

But now it's not about finding the treasure that my father died for, it's about proving to her that we're meant to be together.

Trouble is, my talent for finding treasure is as good as my talent for finding trouble.

So when she's kidnapped by a madman hellbent on revenge, I'll do anything to save the woman I love.

TREASURED SECRETS is a steamy, second chance romance, featuring a protective alpha hero who doesn't know he's broken and a kick-ass heroine with secrets of her own, and their deadly quest to unravel ancient riddles.

Treasured Secrets is book one in the complete six-book Treasure Hunters series, spanning exotic locations in Egypt, the Greek Islands, Brazil, the Caribbean, and Archer's luxury multi-million-dollar yacht.

Books by Kendall Talbot

Alpha Tactical Ops Series

[Escape Mission](#)

[Hostile Mission](#)

[Rescue Mission](#)

[Stealth Mission](#)

[Shadow Mission](#)

[Rogue Mission](#)

Wolf Security Series

[Risky Attraction](#)

Treasure Hunter Series:

[Treasured Secrets](#)

[Treasured Lies](#)

[Treasured Dreams](#)

[Treasured Whispers](#)

[Treasured Hopes](#)

[Treasured Tears](#)

Waves of Fate Series

[First Fate](#)

[Feral Fate](#)

[Final Fate](#)

Stand-Alone books:

[Lost in Kakadu](#)

(Winner: Romantic Book of the year 2014)

[Deadly Twist](#)

(Finalist: Wilbur Smith Adventure Writing Prize 2021)

[Extreme Limit](#)

[Zero Escape](#)

[Jagged Edge](#)

[Double Take](#)

If you sign up to my newsletter you can help with fun things like naming characters and giving characters quirky traits and interesting jobs. You'll also receive my book, Treasured Kisses which is exclusive to my newsletter followers only, for free.

Here's my newsletter signup link if you're interested:

<http://www.kendalltalbotbooks.com/#newslettersignuphtml>

About the Author

Romantic Book of the Year author, Kendall Talbot, writes action-packed romantic suspense loaded with sizzling heat and intriguing mysteries set in exotic locations. She thrives on exciting adventures with kick-ass heroines and heroes with rippling abs and broken hearts and she loves a good happily ever after.

Kendall has sought thrills in all 44 countries she's visited. She's rappelled down freezing waterfalls, catapulted out of a white-water raft, jumped off a mountain with a man who spoke little English, and got way too close to a sixteen-foot shark.

She lives in Brisbane, Australia with her very own hero and a fluffy little dog who specializes in hijacking her writing time. When she isn't writing or reading, she's enjoying wine and cheese with her crazy friends and planning her next international escape.

For a free book, subscribe to Kendall's newsletter and get ready for a thrilling escape. <http://www.kendalltalbot.com.au/newsletter.html>

Kendall loves to hear from her readers!

FIND HER BOOKS AND CHAT WITH HER VIA ANY OF
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Rogue Mission

Book Six in the Alpha Tactical Ops Series

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