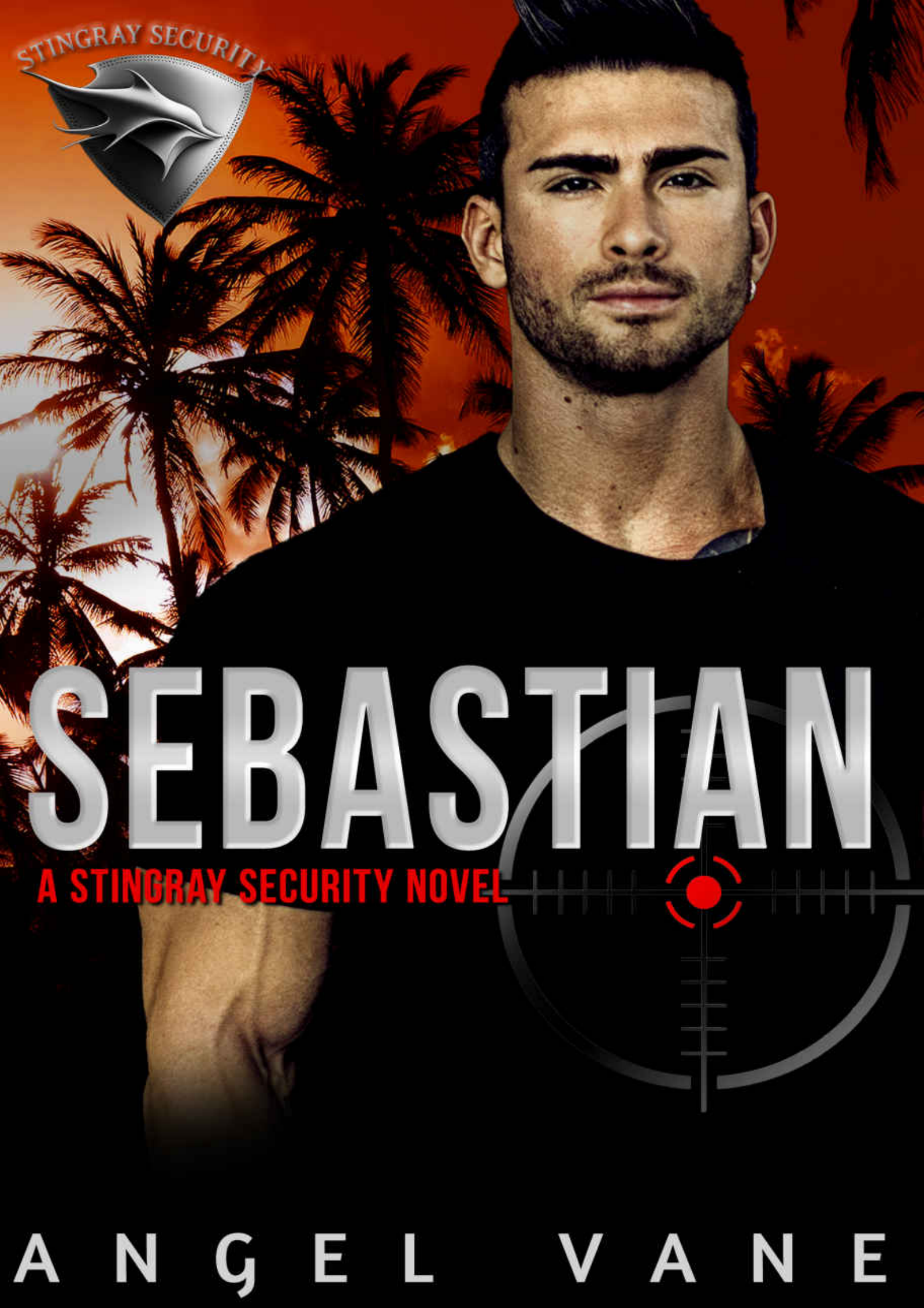
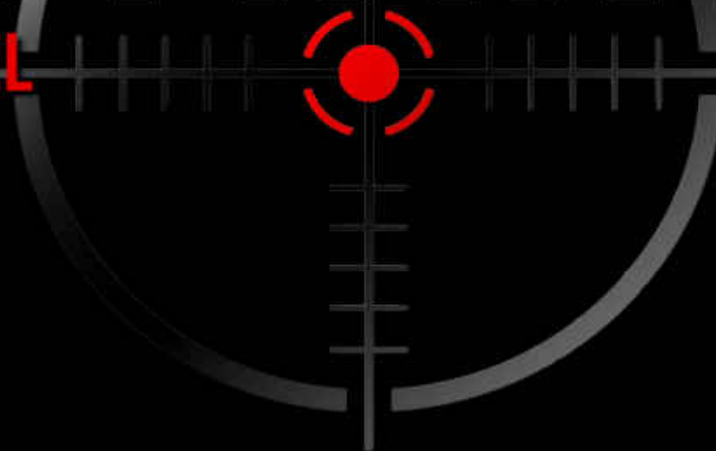


STINGRAY SECURITY



SEBASTIAN

A STINGRAY SECURITY NOVEL



ANGEL VANE

Sebastian

Stingray Security Series

Book 1

Angel Vane



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Chapter 1

“I’m a huge fan of yours. You are such an inspiration to me. To a lot of women.”

Gabrielle King looked up from her phone and stared at the woman, grabbing her bags with gusto from the leather couch in the private lounge. A smile was plastered on her face, brighter than the moon shining through the floor-to-ceiling windows. It was too damn early in the morning to stomach compliments. Especially ones she didn’t deserve.

“Thank you,” Gabrielle pushed the words from her mouth. Every time she was drawn into a conversation like this was more brutal than the last. As fucked up as she still was, how in the hell did so many women see her as an inspiration? It was something she didn’t think she would ever get used to.

“What’s your name?”

“Stacy Jackson,” she said, then looked away.

Gabrielle knew without her saying a word that Stacy shared the same demons, the same traumatic past, that she had. Maybe not in the same way, but enough to mark them as kindred spirits because of men who’d harassed, tormented, and tried to destroy them.

But they’d both survived.

She squeezed the woman’s hand. “Despite my claim to fame, I don’t try to arm-twist every woman into telling their story on my show.” She chuckled under her breath, which caused Stacy to smile.

“That would be an honor, but my story is nowhere near as heinous as what you went through,” Stacy said, tucking a duffel bag under her arm as she gripped the Louis Vuitton roller bag in her opposite hand.

Gabrielle swallowed hard as memories of his hands around her neck slammed into her mind. His grip tightened as he glared at her with conflicting emotions. Lust. Hatred. Calm. Sweet. Deranged. His words flooded her veins with pure panic as he yelled at her through gritted teeth. Saliva spewing from his mouth, he banged her head against the splintered wooden walls as he demanded to know ... How could you do this to me? How could you be with them and not me!

Stacy continued, “Countless women have suffered much more than me.”

Gabrielle brushed a wayward strand of hair from her face with a shaking hand. “But the pain is still real. The fight to get your life back is just as tough.”

Stacy nodded. “I bought your book and write every night in your Emerge Anew journals. It’s made a huge difference in helping me take my life back. All of that is because of you.”

“I don’t know about that,” Gabrielle said, rubbing her temple.

Somedays, she could conquer the world, and on others, like today, all she felt was lost. Dragging herself out of bed in the early morning hours to head to the airport had her on edge. The importance of what she needed to do weighed on her like a gorilla on her back.

“Truth is, I’ve learned so much from other women in similar situations,” Gabrielle explained. “I paid attention to how they persevered and got past it all. The book culminates all the processes I’ve witnessed in others, not just mine.”

“Look at you being so modest. I think that’s why we’re so drawn to you. It’s your openness and honesty.”

Open?

Honest?

A decade ago, those words would never have been used to describe her. Try spoiled, entitled, snobbish, and ... cruel. As a teenager, she was the epitome of the mean girl—the most popular and powerful person at her private school, ruling with an iron fist and no compassion.

But that had all changed when she was taken.

Kidnapped and held hostage for five days with no hope of ever being found.

She'd thought she'd die in that shed hidden within the trees of the Cabrito Mountains. But not until after he'd had his way with her. Taken the one thing he'd coveted most.

The fact that she survived him still amazed her.

The miracle that changed her life.

“You had no reason to share your story with the world.” Stacy insisted, her voice growing more passionate. “You don't need the money. Everything you did was to help women who found themselves victims of assholes. Sharing your pain helped me and so many other women join you on that healing journey. I'm so proud you have the courage to face the bastard who kidnapped you. I can't believe they're seriously thinking about giving him parole.”

“Neither can I,” Gabrielle admitted. Anger crawled along her skin at the thought of convincing the parole board that serving ten of the thirty years that Damian Hester had been convicted of was not nearly enough. She'd been shocked to learn about the groups who supported his release, casting her family in a negative light. The accusations that the considerable wealth and power of the King Family had resulted in Damian getting an excessive sentence. Far longer than he would've received if he'd held anyone else hostage. But since he'd taken the youngest daughter of one of the most influential families in the Palmchat Islands, he was unduly burdened with an unfair sentence.

It was bullshit.

Damian had put a metal collar around her neck and padlocked her to a chain in the corner of the room. She was

starved for five days, with only a few slices of bread and water to eat daily. She lived in filth, unable to use the bathroom or shower. And all the while, she fought the panic of wondering when he would make good on his promise to “make love” to her.

She hated herself, knowing the situation she found herself in was as much her fault as it was his.

It was the shame she lived with as she counted the days until he was released from prison. Damian would only be forty-eight years old when his sentence was over and fully capable of reigniting his obsession with her.

Now they wanted to let him out of Tiverton Maximum Security prison at the age of twenty-eight. No matter how much his lawyer claimed he’d changed, gotten counseling, been a model prisoner, and showed remorse, she would never believe it.

She had to stop them from making a horrible mistake.

“We’re all proud of you for doing this. I can’t imagine how hard it’s going to be. Just know that you have an army of women worldwide who have your back and will be cheering you on.” Stacy said, heading down the hallway toward the airplane hangar.

“Thanks. I appreciate the encouragement.” Gabrielle swiped her cell phone and journal from the coffee table, tossed them in her purse, and then stood next to Stacy.

The woman wasn’t wrong.

Returning to St. Felipe after she’d been banished to Lisbon a decade ago hadn’t been high on her priority list. Especially not after her family was rocked by the disappearance of her parents’ plane in Africa two years ago. The islands no longer felt like her home or a place she belonged.

Until she found out about the parole hearing.

The encouraging messages had poured in from the moment she’d posted her video online about the reasons she was going home. She wished the strength her supporters sent was enough, though. The courage she displayed in public was only

a facade. The possibility of Damian Hester being released scared the shit out of her.

But she wouldn't let fear control her anymore.

The mantra that had defined her self-healing from the tragedy of her past was rooted deep within her. The girl Damian kidnapped a decade ago didn't exist anymore. The woman she was now would fight like hell to make sure he knew he could never hurt her again. She would do whatever it took to keep that bastard in prison for his entire sentence. She had emerged anew with endless strength to fight him.

Gabrielle followed Stacy down the hallway to the front waiting area, then stopped as she headed toward the entrance door. A black limousine idled out front with lights shining through the glass. "Don't we go out through the hangar to get to the airplane?" Gabrielle pointed back toward the opposite door.

"Oh, I thought you'd already been told. The plane is delayed and won't arrive until later this afternoon. The pilot will need to get mandatory rest before taking off again, so you'll be flying out tomorrow morning instead. The car service is here to take you to the hotel," Stacy explained.

"No," Gabrielle said slowly, fighting her annoyance. "I didn't know I'd have to wait another day before going home." She reached for her cell phone and followed Stacy to the waiting car.

The delay gave her more time to think ... and worry about what she would say to the parole board to convince them not to release Damian Hester from prison.

There was only one person who could help calm her nerves. She glanced at her watch. The clubs were close to closing in Miami at this hour. It could be her best chance.

As she headed out the doors and approached the SUV, Gabrielle called her brother, Ike. She hoped he would answer this time.

Chapter 2

“Not like that.” Sebastian Luttrell shook his head as he pressed off the wall and joined the teenage boys in the center of the gym. The King Community Center was empty at this hour of the morning, with most of the kids using the facilities for after-school activities.

As the steady thumping beats of the latest Coco song, Sweetie Badness, bounced off the walls, Sebastian executed a quick top rock and hip twist, then transitioned into a windmill spin on the floor.

The boys erupted in awed yells as they clapped and pumped their fists. Sebastian slowed as he balanced on one arm, spinning his body around without touching the floor in a signature hand glide before stopping in a halo freeze. “The key to this move is how long you can hold the position with only the strength of your arm. You keep falling out of the move because you have weak ass abdominal muscles and no fucking arm strength. You gotta hit the weights if you have a chance in hell of doing this move.”

“Dude, I can’t believe you’re still in that position and talking to us at the same time!” One of the teenagers said, his mouth gaping open.

“That’s dope,” the other responded, shaking his head. “I’ll never be able to do that.”

Sebastian lowered out of the position and turned toward them. “Never say never.” He glanced down at his watch. “Lesson is over. Get out of here before you’re late for school.”

The boys moaned and complained as they shuffled toward a mound of backpacks piled in the corner of the gym. The doors swung open and then banged shut as the teens exited the building.

Sebastian stretched as he walked toward the stereo system and turned the music off. Leaning over the counter, he reached into the back pocket of his cargo shorts and pulled out the smooth card made of dark metal. Turning it over and over between his fingers, he gazed at the outline of the stingray. A heavy weight settled over him, replacing the exhilaration he felt from breakdancing.

“I still have my card, too.”

Sebastian jumped and turned around. “What the fuck, Kane! You damn near gave me a heart attack.”

Kane raised his hands, grinning. “I see the PISCO brainwashing hasn’t worn off. Can’t believe you were dancing with a Glock in your pocket. Put that thing down.”

Sebastian noticed the gun in his hand, pointed directly at Kane, and shook his head. After serving five years in the Palmchat Islands Air and Land Forces, he’d survived the grueling elite military training to become a renowned Palmchat Islands Special Command Operator. One of only a few hundred had been invited into the elusive brotherhood of the special operative team most of the world didn’t know existed. He’d walked away from that life, but once a PISCO, always a PISCO.

He lowered the gun back into his side pocket. Kane’s smile grew bigger, oozing with the boy-next-door charm and looks he used to deceive people. “Now I see how you rob people blind. They never hear you coming.”

“A useful skillset in my line of business, don’t you think?” Kane asked, then produced a dark metal card from his wallet and showed it to Sebastian. “Do you ever wonder what could’ve been? If we’d had a chance to work together.”

“Every fucking day. We all wanted this.” Sebastian tapped his card against Kane’s. “Hell, we needed it to make sense of

all the shitty things we witnessed in our lives. The fucked up things we'd done. Our way of doing what we do best on our terms."

"But we never got a chance to see it through. Damn shame," Kane agreed. "Stingray Security brought us back together."

"No, Ike did that."

Kane nodded. "Our fearless absent leader is why I'm here."

"To talk about Ike?" Sebastian raised an eyebrow. He had never known Kane to be the sentimental type, but they were all getting older and seeing life in a different light these days. It was one of the reasons he'd come to the community center to teach kids how to breakdance.

"I know he told us to fuck off after losing his parents, and we all agreed to do that, but I'm hearing some disturbing things coming out of Miami that have me worried."

Sebastian raked a hand through his hair. "How bad is it?"

"Word is he's drunk every night, fucking around with gold diggers and making risky investments. He's broke and owes Grigor Brazhensky twenty-two million dollars. You know what the Brazhensky's do to people who can't pay their debts."

"They make an example out of them." Sebastian leaned against the counter. Of all the mafias to get entangled with, Ike da Costa had definitely chosen the wrong one. The Brazhensky's were ruthless. South Florida was littered with dead bodies of people who got in too deep gambling with them and couldn't pay up. Not that the cops had ever been able to pin any of the brutal murders on the family. They were skilled at keeping their hands clean.

"But Ike's not the typical mark. If he feels the heat, he knows how to go dark. I'm not worried about him," Sebastian said, although he wasn't so sure. He'd known Ike for more than half his life. The man was like a big brother to him. His best friend. Yet he'd never seen Ike as broken as he was after

the plane flying his parents on a missionary trip to Africa had disappeared off the radar. It had been two years, and the plane and Ike's parents were still missing.

"I got a job in Miami to liberate a Picasso from its current owner," Kane said with a smirk. "I'm thinking about checking in on him."

"Don't," Sebastian warned, imagining the ass-kicking Ike would give Kane as soon as he realized his friend had shown up to rescue him from the Russian mafia.

"I figured it was a bad idea." Kane looked disappointed. "But I knew you'd talk some sense into me."

"If it makes you feel better, go to one of the clubs he's normally at and pretend to run into him. But don't push. He needs time to work through this even if we don't like his methods."

"Yeah, I'll do that." Kane took a few steps back toward the doors. "Any message you want me to give to Ike ... when I ... see him?" Kane's voice faltered.

Sebastian gazed past him to see what had caused the hesitation in his words. The answer was staring back at him with intense smoky brown eyes.

Serena King walked with purpose across the gym floor toward them. Her butterscotch skin, peppered with the faintest freckles, glowed under the golden rays of sun that poured in from the windows. Despite the subtle lines and shadows that had emerged around her eyes over the past two years, she was more than pretty.

"You can tell him there's no way I'm sending twenty-two million dollars to save him from those Russian thugs. He made his bed, and he has to lie in it." Serena brushed past Kane and stopped a couple of feet in front of Sebastian.

He detected a hint of worry in her gaze but knew it likely had nothing to do with Ike.

"I guess I'll leave the two of you alone." Kane gave him an "it sucks to be you" look as he turned on his heels. "I'll let you

know how things go in Miami,” Kane said as he pushed through the doors and left the gym.

“Can’t believe Ike asked you for help.” Sebastian crossed his arms over his chest.

“He didn’t. I got a call from your old friends at the PIIB suggesting that I might want to help my brother out of a bind. Of course, I declined,” Serena said, an edge of anger in her tone.

“So, is this run-in a coincidence, or were you looking for me?” Sebastian asked, in no mood to deal with the new CEO of Hullabaloo Enterprises. He wasn’t surprised Serena wouldn’t lift a finger to help her brother, yet anger still simmered through his veins.

“I need your help.” Her voice cracked as the words rushed from her mouth. Serena King rarely showed any signs of weakness or fear. He knew this was unfamiliar territory for her.

Sebastian stared back at her without saying a word.

As if sensing he wasn’t going to encourage her or agree to anything without hearing the details, Serena took a deep breath and then said, “My mother trusted you with her life. You were her personal bodyguard for five years—”

“Tell me something I don’t fucking know. It’s shitty of you to play that card, considering I wasn’t there to protect her when that plane went off the fucking radar,” Sebastian countered. Too many nights over the past two years he’d wondered if things would’ve turned out differently if Stingray Security had been operational when Bernadette and Peter took that flight. As high profile clients, the entire trip would’ve been subject to more rigor and a risk assessment as a standard protocol. Things Sebastian hadn’t considered doing. If he had, would he have identified any threat? A reason for the plane to go off course and disappear? Or was it only a fluke accident that couldn’t have been prevented?

“No one blames you for that. It was supposed to be a routine missionary trip. She insisted you go to Miami to look

in on my prodigal brother. It's my mother's fault you weren't there, not yours."

"And you're using my relationship with your mother to manipulate me for what purpose?" Sebastian asked.

"Gabrielle is coming back to St. Felipe, and I want you to be her bodyguard—"

"Fuck no," Sebastian blurted out. "There's no way in hell I'm going to provide security for your brat of a sister. Do you remember the hell she put me through when I got to the island?"

"That was a long time ago, and in her defense, she didn't ask those kids to bully you. They were trying to impress her."

"And she didn't do shit to stop them because she hated me."

"She was jealous of you."

"Same difference," Sebastian said, shaking his head. "I know she didn't agree to this. What makes you think she'd want me to be her bodyguard?"

"Because Damian Hester is up for parole."

"What? How is that possible. It's only been—"

"Ten years. They say he's shown remorse and been a model prisoner. Some advocacy groups believe he deserves a second chance at life."

"That's bullshit."

"I agree. This is the one thing that convinced my sister to come back home ... for good. I want her to feel safe in her first few weeks back. Once the parole hearing is over and if they deny parole like they should, there'll be no need for her to have a bodyguard."

"But you're worried they won't."

"It's no secret that I don't wield the same power that Bernadette King did. My mother could've squashed Damian's parole hearing with a simple phone call. I don't have that kind of influence. My sister has to come back and face the man who

tormented her to keep him in prison where he belongs. The least I can do is make sure she feels safe and protected while she's doing that."

Sebastian cringed as thoughts of Gabrielle flooded his mind. The last thing he wanted was to be stuck providing security for the girl who'd gone out of her way to be the biggest bitch to him for years. When Ike and his parents had rescued Sebastian from a homeless shelter in Los Angeles, he'd been a scrawny twelve-year-old blessed with a chance at a new life. But Gabrielle had thwarted him at every turn, going out of her way to remind him that he was an outsider in their world.

He doubted her feelings about him had changed.

His about her damn sure hadn't.

But he couldn't help but feel a tug to protect her for Bernadette's sake. Serena's request could've easily have come from her mother if Bernadette was still around.

And Sebastian would never have told the King Family matriarch no.

"Fine," Sebastian said. "But my rates just doubled."

Chapter 3

Eyes squeezed shut, Ike da Costa gulped air as a litany of blows turned him into a human piñata. Grigor Brazhensky wasn't kidding when he gave Ike one last chance to make good on the twenty-two million dollars Ike owed him.

Money Ike no longer had.

He damn sure wasn't going to beg his sister, the newly crowned head of Hullabaloo Enterprises, their family's coffee empire. Serena would more surely spit in his face than wire an eight-figure sum to his bank account. A gesture that would be much kinder than he deserved.

When the Russian henchmen burst through the door of his condo nestled in Miami's South Beach, Ike had resigned himself to his fate. The moon was full and stark white against the clear black sky, shining through the expansive window-wrapped living room walls. He rested on the leather couch, shirtless, wearing only a pair of basketball shorts, and sipped on the last remnants of Bishop's rum he'd nursed all day. A blustery ocean breeze wafted into the space from the open patio doors.

He was waiting for them.

The flames had come to burn the moth who'd gotten too close.

"Do you have the money?" The taller of the two brutes growled, crossing massive dark hairy arms across his broad chest.

Ike recognized the man.

A bodyguard assigned to Brazhensky's eldest child, Yana. She'd called him Aslan as she barked at him to close the door of the limo when the thug had found her on her knees with Ike's cock stuffed in her mouth. That dalliance had bought Ike another couple of weeks to pay off the debt to her father.

Ignoring the question, Ike finished his last meal, then stood slowly from the couch and turned to face the men.

With a sarcastic laugh, Ike said, "Your boss knows he's not going to see a dollar of that money. That's why you're here. He wouldn't have sent you if he thought I was going to pay up. So, go ahead. Do your worst."

The first blow had stunned him, a quick jab to his temple that knocked him down to one knee. The assault had intensified from there, sending Ike hurtling across the room, crashing into expensive furniture, breaking glass and vases, and leaving splatters of blood over the shades of beige decor.

The men focused on his chest, stomach, and back like good, trained thugs. No wasted energy on smaller targets like his face. Serena wouldn't care when his body was dragged from the morgue, but Gabrielle would appreciate that his handsome mug was untarnished for the open coffin.

Ike felt a twinge of guilt knowing how crushed Gabrielle would be when she arrived back in St. Felipe after a decade, only to bury a family member. He'd ignored all her calls and texts over the past few days. He couldn't bring himself to say goodbye to the little sister he loved. Didn't want to leave her with the guilt of wondering if she could've done something differently that would've saved his life. There was nothing Gabrielle could do to save him now. No one could. He hoped Serena would step up and be the rock his little sister needed to navigate her grief.

No denying this was what he wanted.

What he'd planned.

He'd almost battled his way back to life after the military had turned him into a monster he didn't recognize. He'd been

ready to redeem himself and earn the faith his father had never lost in him.

Then the plane carrying his parents to Africa disappeared.

That was the end for him.

He needed a way to make it happen that would make it easier for his family.

Too bad the Russians were failing.

He was a PISCO, after all.

Years of special ops training had equipped him with the instincts and skills to deflect and avoid suffering. To trick and deceive enemy threats. No matter how hard he tried to let them do their worst, his body rebelled, protecting him.

Surviving when all he wanted was to look death in the face and let go. It was what he deserved. He should be the one buried under the pile of burning ashes and scorched, twisted metal. His soul condemned to suffer through eternity for all the fucked up things he'd done.

A sharp, stinging blow connected with his chin, rattling his teeth as he stumbled backward with a loud crash through the window next to the open patio doors. His body slid along the smooth marble and stopped near the legs of the chaise lounge chair.

He had fond memories of that chair. He'd fucked many celebrities and social media wanna-be stars on that very spot. His body went through the motions while his mind fought the torrent of memories that haunted him at all hours. Mistakes he'd made and moments he'd give anything to do over.

Late-night orgies filled with booze, sex, and drugs had consumed him over the past six hundred ninety-seven days. The numbness dulled the pain that clawed at him every second he was sober.

“What do you think, Igor?” Aslan asked. The hatred in the hitman's dark eyes told him there was more to Yana's relationship with Aslan than employer and employee.

Igor shrugged. His ice-blue eyes were hard and cold. “Bullet too easy. He want to suffer. We make him suffer.”

Satisfied with that answer, Aslan stomped across the balcony toward Ike and yanked him up by the neck. His skin was scratched, sliced, and bruised from the beat-down.

The pain was intense, but Ike could still get the upper hand and eliminate them. That is, if he wanted to, which he most certainly did not.

“Time is up,” Igor taunted. “Thirty-eight floors is a long way to fall to your death.”

Inhaling a sharp breath, Ike stiffened as the two men descended upon him. Hands and arms wrapped tightly around his body like a vice. They hoisted him into the air and flipped him upside down on the opposite side of the glass banister. His body dangled above the road below.

Ike squirmed and twisted but couldn’t shake their grasp. He shouldn’t try to avoid this fate, but being a PISCO was hard to turn off. His mind raced with options to prevent death, all while his heart yearned for the peace he hoped it would bring. His head twisted in the wind as lights from cars clogging South Beach blurred his vision. Blood rushed to his head, hammering his skull with a vicious headache.

Maybe if everything his father had believed about the Almighty was true, Ike would see his parents again. He would beg them for forgiveness in heaven since the opportunity had been stolen from him on earth.

The rough hands of the Russians clamped around his ankles. Maniacal laughter erupted from their mouths as they shook him like a rag doll.

Aslan said, “Don’t worry, Ike. Your sisters won’t waste years wondering about your death, like your parents’ plane crash in Lesotho. They will have proof of your bloody, mangled body splattered on the road below. I will make sure of it.”

Ike craned his neck to look into the man’s face, marred by an evil sneer.

His words pierced through the veil of Ike's mind, triggering a revolt.

Plane crash in Lesotho.

The private plane should've been far away from the tiny nation surrounded by South Africa. His parents had gone to the border of Ethiopia and Sudan to provide much needed resources to Christian missionaries in the area.

The plane had vanished from air traffic radars. Despite exhaustive searches of the two countries, there was no confirmed crash. Even though his parents' bodies were never found, Ike knew they were gone.

But Aslan had said the plane had crashed twenty-five hundred miles south of where everyone believed his parents had been.

How the fuck did Aslan know that?

If the Brazhenskys had intel on his parents' plane that the authorities had yet to find, Ike needed to know. He needed to solve the mystery of what happened to his parents. His family deserved the truth, so they could move on from the tragic and unexpected loss. It would be a final gift to Serena and Gabrielle.

But only if he stayed alive.

Ike's arms swung out, grasping for the ledge, but he couldn't grab hold.

Three floors down, a corner condo with a wraparound balcony loomed in the trajectory of his fall. With the brisk wind blowing and the altitude, he might crash land there instead of bashing his brains out on the driveway below.

Igor released his grasp, sending Ike swaying in the wind.

Ike tensed in anticipation, eyes locking on Aslan's beefy hand clutched tightly around his left ankle. As Aslan uncurled his fingers from digging into Ike's flesh, Ike slipped from the man's grasp and hurtled through the air.

Balmy wind roared past Ike's ears. PISCO training kicked in. Ike maneuvered into the position of a HALO jump. The g-

force squeezed the air from his lungs. He fought the pressure to turn his head. The balcony was in view.

Seconds later, he crashed with a loud thud onto an oversized tufted ottoman, then bounced to the left and flipped onto his side as he slammed into the marble floor. He squeezed his eyes shut, writhing in agony.

The sweet bliss of pain told him he'd survived.

For now.

By his calculations, it would take nine minutes for Aslan and Igor to make their way down to this level and finish what they'd started.

Ike wouldn't be here waiting.

Opening his eyes, he tried to rise.

A patent leather, sapphire blue open-toed stiletto heel pressed against his bare chest and forced him back to the floor.

His eyes drifted from the toes, painted a shimmering silver, to the toned, deep brown muscular calf. Supple thighs that stretched for days emerged from a matching blue minidress that barely covered her round, peach of an ass. His cock stiffened as his body registered the sexy curves before his brain could comprehend. Voluptuous breasts teased him from the top of the dress, leading to a graceful neck and the most beautiful face he'd ever laid eyes upon. Stunning dark eyes, blacker than the darkest night, peered into his soul. A sweet smirk played at the edges of her full lips.

Shit.

Had he died and gone to heaven?

Or was this the devil taunting him before plunging him into the fiery pits of hell?

Straight black hair tossed over one shoulder dangled to her waist as she leaned closer to him. A single blue hibiscus flower, native to the Palmchat Islands—his home—was tucked behind her ear.

Blue hibiscus ...

“No, wait,” Ike gasped, fumbling with his words. “Don’t do this ...”

The woman’s smile grew brighter and damn near took his breath away.

But Ike knew what she planned to do next.

“I have to,” she said, her voice sultry and deep. “It’s the only way I can save you.”

With those fateful words, she opened her palm and blew a mist of fine dust into his face.

Ike knew he had ten seconds, fifteen tops, before he blacked out. As he sank into the abyss, the last thought lingering in his mind gave him peace.

She will save me.

Chapter 4

The chirps from her cell phone resounded in the air, one after the other, almost nonstop. Gabrielle scrolled quickly through the missed call log. Tension constricted her neck. Hannah Ellerby, her publicist and close friend, had made nearly half the calls. She didn't bother to check the texts or the social media feeds.

Tapping Hannah's name in her contacts, she pressed the phone against her ear as she glanced out the window of the Falcon private jet. Swaying palm trees dotted the runway as the plane parked at the gate. In the distance, a crowd was gathered at the St. Killian Airport in the Palmchat Islands, waving welcome home signs and cheering loudly.

For the first time, she realized how much she'd missed being home. A longing to caress the thick lawns that blanketed King Estate, wade through the mist-covered foliage of the Cabrito mountains, and run her fingers along the tiny buds of coffee beans growing on the stalks welled within her.

But basking in her homecoming would have to wait.

She knew something was terribly wrong.

"What took you so long to call me back? Don't you have Wi-Fi on that private plane?" Hannah barked on the line.

"What happened?"

"Did you check your email or your social media accounts?" Hannah asked.

"No," Gabrielle said, then took a deep breath. She didn't like surprises and didn't want to be blindsided by what

awaited her. She'd much rather Hannah tell her what was going on so she could prepare for what she might see and have to do next.

"It's bad," Hannah said, then exhaled loudly.

Gabrielle's heart dropped. Had something happened with Damian's parole hearing? Did they move up the date? Had she missed the chance to testify? Was he already a free man?

The thought seized her chest. She could barely breathe.

"Tell me, Hannah. Stop stalling," Gabrielle forced the words out.

"Some photos of you have surfaced online," Hannah said, then paused with dramatic flair. "Sexy photos. Not nudes, but definitely clickbait for the fellas. They're kind of going viral right now. I've never seen them before. I know it's not the kind of thing you'd release on your own, so maybe someone hacked your cell phone or stole them from your computer."

"Sexy photos? Of me? I don't have anything like that," Gabrielle shrieked. "Could they be photoshopped?"

"Doesn't look like it to me. You're younger in them. Maybe nineteen or twenty—"

"No, this can't be happening." Gabrielle put the cell phone on speaker, then accessed her emails to view the pictures. She scrolled through them one by one as the memories slammed into her head. Images of her bikini-clad body frolicking on beaches in St. Felipe. Others of her swimming in short shorts and a tank top. In nearly every picture, she was barely wearing clothes. The angles and aesthetic of each shot were purposely taken to present her in the most provocative way.

She hadn't seen these pictures in years.

Ten years to be exact when she'd found them on Damian Hester's computer. That was when she realized he'd been watching her for years, violating her privacy. Taking photos of her from afar. There were other photos. Ones that would be far more devastating to her career and brand, but they weren't released. At least not yet.

“That bastard!” Gabrielle screamed. “He knows I’m back home to stop him from getting out of prison. He released these photos to try to rattle me.” She stood and paced between the narrow aisle.

“Damian took these pictures of you? How the hell could he have flooded social media with them from prison?” Hannah asked.

“Obviously, he had help. Probably one of those criminal advocate groups he’s tricked into thinking he’s a changed man. I didn’t authorize these photos to be taken, and I damn sure didn’t approve their release.”

“That’s good news. I can get the attorneys working on takedown notices to all the sites. We’ll need to strategize on how to deal with this. Maybe some videos for the Emerge Anew site to address what’s going on. I can meet you at King Estate. How soon until you’re off the plane?”

“Damn, if I know. We’ve been sitting here for almost an hour already,” Gabrielle gripped the diamond-encrusted butterfly charm dangling from her necklace. She moved it back and forth quickly as she stared through the door of the sleeping quarters into the main sitting area of the plane. “Go to King Estate and start working on a game plan. I’ll call you when I’m on the way.”

Tossing the cell phone onto the sofa, she walked through the dining area and peered into the cockpit.

A man with a sexy Scottish lilt, who’d introduced himself as the best damn pilot on the planet, sat hunched over a clipboard. She couldn’t remember his name, only the hubris that coated his every word. Stacy sat next to him, nodding as he whispered something to her, pointing at the papers in her hand.

“What’s going on?” Gabrielle interrupted. “Why haven’t they cleared us to exit the plane?” She bristled at the rudeness in her tone, but there was no hiding her annoyance. She didn’t have time to be trapped here when Damian was trying to undermine all of her efforts to keep him in prison.

The pilot glanced her way with piercing cornflower blue eyes, ran a hand over his short cropped blonde hair, then whispered more instructions to Stacy before turning his back on her in the cockpit.

Gabrielle leaned inside and poked his shoulder. “Did you hear me? I need to know when I’m getting off this plane.”

He turned and flashed her a sexy smile that she was sure made panties drop from the ladies, but it wasn’t fazing her in the slightest. “Ms. King, have a seat. We’ll let you know when it’s time to disembark.”

“That doesn’t answer my question, Mister ...” Gabrielle faltered.

“Mister is my daddy. I told you to call me Lachlan, or did you forget?” He chuckled under his breath.

“I don’t have time for this. I’m dealing with a crisis right now that I can’t solve while I’m holed up here with the two of you.”

“I’m sure you are,” Lachlan said, then whistled under his breath.

Anger shot through her veins, and she froze. The pilot didn’t have to say the words for her to know he’d already seen the photos leaked of her online.

Lachlan continued, “That’s why you need to wait until we have everything ready for you to leave the plane.”

Stacy stood and blocked her view of the cockpit. “We’re waiting for your bodyguard to arrive.”

“My bodyguard? No one mentioned a bodyguard to me.”

“Your sister felt it was important for you to have one in your first few weeks back on the island. He’s late because of ... well, you know,” Stacy said, giving her a look of pity. “I’m sorry you’re going through this.”

“Serena didn’t mention this to me. I don’t need a bodyguard. I’m getting off this plane now—”

A deep voice with the barest hint of arrogance floated into the space, igniting a blaze of warmth across her skin. “Not so fast ...”

Chapter 5

Gabrielle sucked in a sharp breath, her mouth agape as she gazed at who she suspected was her bodyguard.

Handsome was too banal for this man.

Hot as fuck was too crude for his refinement.

Sexy worked since his bulging muscles refused to cower underneath the impeccably tailored Armani suit. Smooth tan skin graced his flawless face, perfectly symmetrical with a chiseled, square jaw. His thick dark black hair was meticulously styled as if he was showing up to walk the runways in Paris.

But there was something about the kindness in his smoldering brown eyes framed by lashes that stretched to the sky that made her knees buckle. She reached a hand toward the door frame of the cockpit to steady herself.

“I’ve had to modify your exit route from the airport due to the—”

“Modify my exit route? Wait, stop,” Gabrielle said, willing her fluttering heart to calm the fuck down. “I don’t need a special exit route, and I damn sure don’t need a bodyguard. I know this island like the back of my hand. If someone makes the mistake of trying to come at me, I know how to defend myself.”

“What’s waiting for you out there isn’t the same as contrived practices in a safe gym with friendly teachers. You think a few years of self-defense classes have prepared you to

defend yourself in the real world with real threats? Think again.”

She squared off in front of the sexy bodyguard and said, “You think belittling a woman who has worked for years to take down real threats without the help of a man makes you a hero? Think again.”

The bodyguard raised an eyebrow that blasted him past the top of the irresistible scale. A sarcastic chuckle escaped his lips.

“A few hundred fans do not constitute a threat to my safety,” Gabrielle insisted. “I have a real crisis that I need to resolve. I don’t have time to wait while you fabricate a reason to prove to my sister that your presence is necessary.”

“My presence is necessary because intermingled within that group of a few hundred people waiting out there,” the sexy bodyguard paused to point out the window, then continued, “are protesters who want to stop you from going to the parole hearing of a man they believe suffered excessively and unfairly because of ... you.”

“Protesters supporting Damian Hester?” Gabrielle balked. “They must be insane to think he deserves anything but to rot in his prison cell.”

“Possibly,” the bodyguard agreed. “Which is why you need me.”

“Even if I don’t want you.” The words felt like a lie the moment they escaped her mouth. Gabrielle flushed, fighting the lust blossoming within her for the infuriating man.

His demeanor shifted almost imperceptibly.

The blunt professionalism had been breached.

A hint of a smile played at the corners of his mouth as his eyes swirled with unrestrained desire. His gaze dropped to her lips and lingered there for a long moment before rising back to her eyes.

Battle lines were drawn between them.

Gabrielle feared she would be the first to wave the white flag as the most inappropriate thoughts crowded her mind. Like what it would feel like to have his full mouth pressed against hers. Or to have those strong arms wrapped around her body, caressing her and holding her close. And going dangerously further to imagine what kind of Greek god of a body was hidden underneath all those clothes. Her heart rate quickened as she shook the thoughts away.

“Serena gave me a job, and I will do it. Whether you like it or not.” His matter-of-fact tone irked her. Frustration reared its ugly head as she fought to maintain some semblance of calm.

“Job?” She scoffed and shook her head. “Fine. What’s your name?”

An expression she couldn’t read flashed across his face, but he recovered quickly and responded. “Sebastian.”

Gabrielle rolled her eyes. “There’s no way you’re Sebastian.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “Sebastian was a skinny homeless stray my brother brought back from L.A. decades ago. He looked like an Eminem wannabe with platinum blond hair and wore his pants sagging like some thug. But that didn’t stop my parents from setting him up with a host family and fawning over him as he got his life together and did everything normal kids do. But some way when he did them, he was special and a star. I got sick of hearing about how perfect Sebastian was, how well he was doing in school, and what a polite gentleman he was growing up to be. He made me look bad at every turn. There’s no way you’re the same guy ...”

Her words faltered as his eyes smoldered with anger.

“You forgot to mention how you had tantrums anytime I was invited to your house for a home-cooked meal. As a homeless kid, I never knew when I’d find food. I spent more nights lulled to sleep by my growling stomach because I refused to keep scrounging in trash cans for remnants of gnawed junk food left behind. When I came to the island, I wasn’t trying to ruin your life. I appreciated your family’s kindness in giving me a fresh start as a foreign exchange

student,” Sebastian said, then stepped closer toward her. His face had turned to stone, rigid with anger, as he stared daggers at her. “And let’s not forget how you stood on the sidelines while the college dicks who wanted to get in your panties roughed me up every weekend to impress you. But maybe in a cruel, twisted way, I owe you, Gabrielle. All of those experiences made me stronger and tougher. Made me the kind of man that your family trusts with your life. I wouldn’t be anywhere near you if it were up to me. But I owe the King Family a lot, which means I can put aside my personal feelings for you and make sure that no one harms a hair on your entitled little head.”

Gabrielle cringed. One of the tenets of her Emerge Anew platform was “own and speak your truth.” But sometimes, she should keep her mouth shut. Speaking her truth shouldn’t include tearing down the reality of another. She felt horrible.

There was no denying she resented Sebastian growing up. When her family returned from a trip to California blabbing about a kid they’d rescued from living on the streets of L.A., she’d lost any chance of ever being the focus of her parents’ attention. Every member of the King Family knew that Serena was her mother’s favorite and Ike was her father’s.

Gabrielle was the unexpected child her parents never intended to have. They made little effort to raise her, handing over those duties to other family members and a revolving door of nannies. Of course, she was pissed when they brought home another kid only a few years older than her, who inspired them to give all the love and attention she craved for herself.

But she wasn’t a kid anymore. She was too damn old to harbor resentment toward Sebastian Luttrell after all these years. It wasn’t his fault. Her parents had years to make up for their mistakes of ignoring her as a child, but they’d done nothing but double down on the distance between them by sending her away when she needed them the most. Now they were missing, and the likelihood that they’d fix the broken relationship was shrinking with each passing day.

It wasn’t fair of her to take any of this out on Sebastian.

It was pretty pathetic.

“Sebastian, I—”

“As I tried to explain to you earlier, I’ve devised a secure route to facilitate your exit from the airport and minimize the chance the protesters could get close enough to harm you. Unfortunately, this also means you won’t be able to stop and greet your fans,” Sebastian said. The strain that had flared between them had dissipated, at least for him. “You won’t be able to sign autographs. There will be no statements made to the press. I’ll be by your side the entire time and will step in if I detect a threat. Do not—I repeat—do not try to deviate from the plan. My sole focus is to ensure your safety.”

“So, you’re not going to let me apologize to you?” Gabrielle asked, gripping her butterfly pendant.

Sebastian stared at her fingers, holding the diamond charm for a long moment, then said, “You never need to apologize to me.”

His words arrested her as if he understood the flawed perspective of her childhood that had driven her to mistreat him years ago. Maybe he also understood how the chasm between her and her parents at the time of their disappearance could cause those old feelings to resurface within her.

She didn’t know how to respond and figured staying quiet was her best move. Hadn’t she already said enough?

Taking a tentative step toward him, she stared into his eyes, which had lost all the hard edges and transformed into smoldering warm pools full of empathy. The look on her face must have settled things for him since he launched into instructions on the exit plan.

“Stacy will bring your bags off the plane. When you get outside, follow the yellow-painted line across the runway to the private hangar. The limousine is waiting inside to take you to the marina, where we’ll catch the yacht to St. Felipe. Are you ready?” Sebastian extended a hand toward the plane’s cabin door, encouraging her to do what she’d been so eager to do only minutes earlier.

Inhaling a deep breath, Gabrielle nodded. She walked past him to grab her purse, then headed to the door. As she emerged through the opening, cheers greeted her, drowning out the few protest chants. The island sun warmed her face, and she inhaled the salty sea air. Lifting a hand, she waved to the crowd as they cheered louder, waving signs and beckoning for her to come closer.

A soft caress pressed against the small of her back. She glanced behind to see Sebastian donning dark sunglasses and a stony expression. Only inches separated them, which she found oddly comforting.

As she descended the last step, Gabrielle turned toward the private airport gate. Goosebumps peppered her skin despite the stifling humid air.

A foreboding engulfed her.

She glanced to the left.

A dark figure emerged from the crowd. He jumped over the barricades and ran directly toward her.

“No ...” Gabrielle whispered, stumbling backward. “Don’t come any closer!”

Chapter 6

Sebastian placed the sunglasses on his face.

Not because the sun was like a harsh laser beam scorching the air of the mid-morning, but because it gave him an excuse to gawk at Gabrielle without being noticed.

Ike's incredibly sexy and devastatingly gorgeous younger sister.

This was definitely not the teenage girl he remembered.

She was all woman now and making it damn hard for him to remember she was at the bottom of his least favorite people list.

He lowered his sunglasses to get a clear view of her. Her heart-shaped face was framed by loose dark curls that brushed against her bare shoulders. Her deep brown skin shimmered under the rays of the island sun. Those dazzling dark brown eyes captivated and lured him, intense and defiant, yet barely concealing a hurt simmering beneath the surface.

He didn't understand this swell within him to ease whatever pain she was dealing with, whether it was the bastard who'd stalked her a decade ago or someone else. When she'd been attacked and kidnapped as a senior in high school, he'd been in his final year at the Palmchat Islands Military University. The torment he'd endured at the hands of the punk college kids desperate to get her attention had faded as he focused on joining the Palmchat Islands Air and Land Force after graduation. He'd had sympathy for her and Ike, who was off the grid on his first official mission as a PISCO and unaware of what his sister was going through, but Sebastian

was in no position to help with the search. He was barely an adult and focused on establishing his own life without leaning on the generosity of his host family or the King Family.

Now, as he stared at Gabrielle, he saw a woman too beautiful to have any kind of sadness reflected in her eyes.

Fuck, he needed to focus on the job of protecting her.

Not trying to dissect the psyche of a woman who'd made it clear she thought he was unworthy of her and her family. Sure, she'd tried to apologize for insulting him, but he knew she didn't mean it. He didn't need a fucking apology. All he needed was to protect Bernadette's daughter. It was the least he could do for the woman who'd given him a new life and treated him like family, even if her daughter never would.

Sebastian leaned forward and placed his hand against the small of Gabrielle's back as she exited the plane and walked down the steps. His fingers tingled as he let his hand linger longer than necessary.

"Sebastian ... Sebastian ..." Stacy's shrill whisper interrupted his thoughts.

Pausing, he turned back toward the airplane door and glared at the woman through his shades.

"Gabrielle forgot her passport. It must've fallen out of her purse," Stacy explained. "Should I have it sent with the rest of her things? Or do you think she might want it with her?"

"Give it to me."

Stacy ducked back inside the plane, then re-emerged with the passport. He grabbed it and slipped it into his inner pocket, then turned toward the stairs.

The cheers from the crowd had turned into concerned howls.

A sudden movement caught his attention.

Adrenaline raced through his veins as his pulse jumped.

His eyes locked on the threat—male, over six feet tall, dressed in all black and racing toward ... Gabrielle.

His heart threatened to beat right out of his ribcage.

The distance between the man and Gabrielle was shrinking by the second. Sebastian caught the glint of the sun off the dark gray of the weapon—a Sig P365 9mm pistol. The man’s hand was within inches of grabbing it. A few of the advocate groups supporting Damian Hester’s release were radical and on the fringes of vigilantes, but he didn’t think they’d be stupid enough to attack her the minute she stepped foot on island soil.

He was fucking wrong.

Sebastian leaped down the stairs three at a time, then hurled forward to intercept the attack. Pain jolted through his body as he crashed down on the man, trapping him against the ground.

Gabrielle shrieked as they crashed mere inches from where she stood. She stumbled backward, then fell on the concrete, rolling a safe distance away from them.

Sebastian tore his focus from Gabrielle and back to the bastard who had tried to attack her. The man’s eyes bulged as he thrashed and twisted underneath him. There was no way he’d be able to wrestle his way free. Pressing one forearm against the man’s neck, he used his opposite hand to wrestle the gun away and toss it out of reach.

Gabrielle scrambled forward on her hands and knees toward them.

“Stay back,” Sebastian yelled, then peered over his shoulder. Lachlan raced toward him, gun trained on the man. “Lachlan, get Gabrielle back on the plane. Throw her over your shoulder if you have to!”

Lachlan was on her before she could protest, dragging her up the stairs and back into the plane. With Gabrielle secure, Sebastian turned his attention back to the man whose hands scratched at his arm desperately trying to get more air into his lungs.

“Looks like your day just went from bad to the worst of the fucking worst,” Sebastian said, his voice calm. He pressed

his knees harder against the man's thighs, eliciting a grunt of pain. "Who are you?"

Chapter 7

“You ... don’t ... understand,” the man wheezed. “Cop ... cop ... I’m ... police.”

Sebastian eased off the man’s trachea. “You’re a police officer?”

“Detective ... ”

Sebastian rifled through the man’s pocket and slipped the wallet out. Dumping it on the ground, it flopped open to a police badge.

Detective Brad Shannon, St. Xavier Police Department

The name didn’t ring any bells, but it looked authentic.

“Out of your jurisdiction, wouldn’t you say?” Sebastian asked, easing off the man. St. Xavier was one of the main islands in the Palmchat Island chain but the furthest away from St. Killian. The King Family lived in St. Felipe. If any police department was going to send officers for Gabrielle’s arrival, he would’ve expected SFPD, not SXPB. Sebastian brushed dust and dirt from his suit, not bothering to help the detective up.

“I could arrest you ... for assaulting ... a police officer,” Detective Shannon said, heaving deep ragged breaths.

“No island police should be here. Only airport security,” Sebastian said, noticing a slew of airport security guards racing toward them. Several of the fans who’d come to welcome Gabrielle home were pushing and shoving the protesters, likely thinking that they were behind the man who’d breached the barricades to rush at Gabrielle.

He saw no other credible threats in the crowd or on the runway. Satisfied that the guards could handle the conflict, he gazed back at the man. “So what are you doing here, Detective Shannon? And why the hell were you chasing after Gabrielle?”

The detective leaned forward, propping up on his elbows. His eyes were bloodshot and strained from fighting to breathe. But that didn’t stop him from looking at Sebastian like he wanted to cut his head off. “I have information she needs to know. It could be a matter of life and death—”

“Give me one reason I shouldn’t put a bullet between this fucker’s eyes,” Lachlan said, appearing beside Sebastian with his Glock leveled at the detective’s face.

Sebastian placed a hand on the weapon and pushed it down. He shook his head, then asked, “Is Gabrielle okay?”

“She’s shaken up. It was a bitch to get her to stay on the plane. That’s a feisty one,” Lachlan said, wiping sweat from his brow as he leaned down to pick up the detective’s wallet. “He’s five-oh?”

“That’s what he claims. Says he has information that could be a matter of life and death for Gabrielle,” Sebastian said, then looked down at the detective.

“SXPDP? I’ll give Adonis a call and see if I can verify this is authentic,” Lachlan said, sliding his cell phone from his back pocket.

Sebastian gave him a nod. It was a good move. Not only did their friend, Adonis Williams, live in St. Xavier, the man knew just about every person on the island.

If the badge was a fake and Shannon was really here to hurt Gabrielle, Adonis would let them know in minutes. It wouldn’t be long after that Sebastian would make Shannon regret ever coming to the airport to attack Gabrielle. He’d only taken his eyes off of her for a few seconds. But that was long enough for this man to get close to her. Too close. Close enough to scare her and that didn’t work for Sebastian. He wouldn’t make the same mistake again.

The detective took a step toward the plane. Sebastian stopped him with a firm push to his chest. “Where the hell do you think you’re going?”

“To talk to Gabrielle.”

“The fuck you are. I’m not letting you anywhere near her.”

“You will once you know who I have news about,” Detective Shannon said, a challenge in his gaze.

“I can’t think of one person who would make me change my mind.”

“Really?”

A tremor of unease snaked through Sebastian.

The detective’s expression grew more serious. “Not even ... Damian Hesper?”

Chapter 8

“Can you fucking confirm who he is or not?” Lachlan’s voice thundered through the plane, causing Gabrielle to jump. She turned toward him, peering closely as the pilot stalked toward the cockpit.

“Come on,” Stacy said. “Let’s get you back into the sleeping quarters where you can lie down.”

“I can’t. Not when Sebastian is still out there,” Gabrielle said, running a shaky hand through her tresses. Her stomach roiled and she felt like she’d vomit on the spot. A man had come for her, and she didn’t know why.

Stacy busied herself by closing down the shades of the airplane windows, restricting Gabrielle from seeing what Sebastian and the attacker were doing. She knew Stacy was only trying to give her privacy. The press was outside with their cameras, trying everything they could to get a glimpse of her inside the plane. To see how she was handling almost being attacked.

And how was she handling this?

She wasn’t.

“Trust me. Sebastian can take care of himself.” Stacy gently touched Gabrielle’s elbow and guided her to the back of the private jet. Gabrielle followed her reluctantly as she strained to hear what was happening outside. A soft thud told her Stacy had left her alone. Sitting down on the bed, Gabrielle bent over and forced her head between her knees. She took long, deep, controlled breaths, but they did nothing to calm her frazzled nerves.

What the hell had happened out there?

For all her years of self-defense training, she was ashamed to admit Sebastian had been right. As that man barreled toward her, intent on who knows what, she'd frozen. She couldn't move. Couldn't think of what position to take to attack, deflect, or protect herself. She would've been in deep trouble if it hadn't been for Sebastian. He'd come crashing down like a wickedly handsome superhero. His actions had been precise, swift, and crippling, body slamming her attacker and keeping the man pinned to the ground until Lachlan got her safely back onto the plane. All within fractions of an instant, Sebastian had swooped in and done what she'd needed most.

He'd saved her life.

Without a second thought, he'd put his own life at risk to make sure she wasn't hurt. This man who hated her for good reason had put her first. She gripped her butterfly necklace between her fingers as that truth settled within her. No matter what happened between them in the past, Sebastian hadn't let any of it stop him from making sure she was protected from that maniac running toward her.

She may have been a brat, but she wouldn't be one now.

Sebastian would hear how much she appreciated what he'd done for her, whether he liked it or not. Jumping off the bed, she hurried toward the sliding door to the sleeping quarters and flung it open.

Stepping into the aisle, she stopped and stared at the man standing before her. "Brad? What are you doing here?" Gabrielle asked as she rushed into his outstretched arms. His embrace was familiar and welcoming as he held her tightly. She relaxed and stepped back to get a good look at him. He carried a few extra pounds, and gray hairs had infiltrated his dark brown locks, but the piercing sapphire eyes were still bright and caring.

Before Sebastian's heroics today, Officer Brad Shannon was the last person she could remember who'd gone out of his way to show her she was worth saving. He'd found her when no one else could, rescuing her from the shithole where

Damian had locked her up. But he'd done more than rescue her from being raped and tortured. He'd convinced her crazed kidnapper to plead guilty to all charges. She didn't have to suffer through a trial as the sentence was accepted without protest—thirty years in maximum security at Tiverton prison.

“Gabrielle,” Brad beamed as he stared back at her. “Aren't you a sight for sore eyes?”

“It's so good to see you.” Gabrielle squeezed his hands, then stumbled as Sebastian pulled Brad away from her.

Before she could process what was happening, Sebastian maneuvered between her and Brad. He glared at the officer with suspicion in his eyes. His jaw clenched, and his luscious lips were pressed in a thin line. If looks could kill, Brad wouldn't stand a chance. The air was charged with tension as the two men faced off against each other. Sebastian was more than protective as he pressed a hand against her hip to keep her behind him. She felt like they'd crossed another battle line. One where protecting her as his job had melted away into something more ... personal. A subtle trace in his demeanor projected one strong emotion ... jealousy.

No, that couldn't be right.

Sebastian asked, “You know this guy?”

She pushed the thoughts away and answered him. “Of course, I know him. I owe him my life. He was the police officer who found me after I'd been kidnapped by Damian. I could never forget Officer Brad Shannon.”

“It's Detective Shannon now, right?” Lachlan said, exiting the cockpit. “You parlayed that rescue into a promotion and transfer to the St. X Police Department shortly after, didn't you? Not a bad reward for a job well done.”

The frown etched on Sebastian's forehead grew deeper.

“I was promoted because I passed the detective exam and had a stellar record as an officer,” Brad responded without taking his kind blue eyes off her. “How are you, Gabrielle?”

“Well, I was doing great until—”

“The good detective scared the shit out of you,” Sebastian said.

“What? I don’t understand.” Gabrielle glanced back at Brad, noticing his clothes were disheveled and covered with dust. A dark bruise marred his pale skin, stretching across his neck. “You were the one who tried to attack me?”

Brad exhaled an exasperated sigh. “I’m sorry for scaring you. You’ve been through enough for several lifetimes. I should’ve realized how rattled you’d be to see me rushing to get to you.”

“Why did you want to see me?”

“I didn’t want you to be blindsided.”

“Blindsided?”

“There were a lot of journalists out there itching to give you this news.”

“If it’s about the photos that were released online overnight, I already know—”

“That was horrible. I’m sorry you’re dealing with those private photos being released, but that’s not why I had to see you. I thought it might be better for you to hear what happened from me. Maybe I shouldn’t, but I feel very protective of you, Gabrielle. I’m so proud of the woman you’ve become. I promised myself that if there was anything I could do to help you now or in the future, I would do that. That’s why I’m here.”

“I’ll admit, I’m getting pretty nervous about what you’re going to say. If it’s something worse than those photos being released, what is it?” Gabrielle asked.

“I have news about Damian Hester.”

“What about him?” Gabrielle bolted from the seat and stood in the aisle. At times like these, she paced to calm her nerves, but the close confines of the private jet and the extra people on board made her feel like a trapped and caged animal.

She stepped backward and cradled her abdomen as she waited for Brad to drop whatever bombshell of information he had about the man who'd kidnapped, tortured, and almost killed her.

A softness swept over Sebastian's face as he stared at her. His eyes searched for something she couldn't give him. An assurance that she was okay when she absolutely was not.

He leaned toward her but didn't infringe the space she'd erected between herself and the rest of them. He seemed to know that she needed this distance to prepare herself for the bad news coming her way.

That simple display of understanding was more supportive than he realized.

Brad pressed his palms on the table and leveled her with a severe stare. "In the early hours of the morning, Damian Hester was released from Tiverton."

Chapter 9

“He was released! Oh my God! Why?” Gabrielle yelled, charging forward. Sebastian stepped in front of her and placed a hand softly against her waist, eliminating the distance between them. Like magnets, their bodies couldn’t resist touching. She instantly felt his strength and support flooding her as she leaned against him.

“I’m sorry, that’s not what I meant.” Brad raised his hands as he stood from the seat. “Please. Sit back down and let me explain.”

“She’s fine where she is,” Sebastian said. “Start talking.”

Brad said, “Damian became obsessed with watching your ‘coming home’ video on dozens of contraband cell phones found in his prison cell. When the guards caught him and questioned him about it, he insisted that you were coming back so the two of you could be together.”

“I guess he missed my rant about how important it was for me to speak to the parole board and convince them to keep him in prison for his full thirty-year term,” Gabrielle said, clutching Sebastian’s arms. “How could he think I want anything to do with him?”

“I don’t understand it either,” Brad said. “The guards laughed at him and tried to confiscate the phones. That’s when Damian went ballistic. He fought a few guards and seriously injured two of them with a shiv he had hidden in his clothes.”

“That sick asshole.” Her heart pounded in her chest like a jackhammer on steroids. “Why won’t he leave me alone? Forget about me?”

“You’re unforgettable,” Brad said, giving a slight shrug. “I suspected he’d do something once he found out you were coming home, but even this shocked me.”

“Tiverton is where all the worst criminals are sent. He just attacked a bunch of guards. Why would they release him? Where is he now?” Gabrielle almost shrieked.

A comforting hand rested against her back, moving in slow circles. She closed her eyes and allowed Sebastian to soothe her. She leaned into his hard muscular body as her legs threatened to turn to jelly. His quiet reassurance was the only thing stopping her from losing her mind.

“More guards were dispatched to his cell, and they were finally able to subdue Damian. However, in the process, there were prolonged periods where his airflow was restricted. He suffered multiple strokes and a heart attack before the guards realized what was happening. CPR was performed to get him breathing again, but he hasn’t regained consciousness. He was immediately transferred to the intensive care unit at the Rakestraw Blake Center on the Aerie Islands. It’s the most secure hospital in the Caribbean and the only place Tiverton would transfer a dangerous inmate like him.”

“They should let him die.” The words were out of Gabrielle’s mouth before she could stop them. She’d lived the past ten years with an ocean between her and Damian, but he was never far from her mind. Being kidnapped by him had changed her entire life and sent her on a path she’d never expected. She found a way to emerge anew from being his victim, but she still couldn’t forget him. Couldn’t get past what he’d done because the ticking clock of his release was always in the back of her mind. Knowing he was still obsessed with her ten years later proved she was right to be concerned. As long as he was alive, rotting in a prison cell, something still tethered her to him. They shared a past only the two of them knew. If he died, those memories and the truth would die with him. She’d get a freedom that could only be hers when he’d breathed his last breath.

“You okay?” Sebastian leaned down and whispered in her ear. His breath tickled her neck as the sultry scent of his

cologne washed over her.

“I don’t know.” It was the most honest response she could give.

Sebastian accepted her answer with a clipped nod, then turned his attention to Brad. “If you ask me, none of this is bad news. Definitely doesn’t warrant you tracking Gabrielle down. You could’ve called.”

“I’m concerned because of how Damian got three dozen cell phones smuggled into Tiverton. That’s not an easy feat. Only two ways for that to happen without getting caught.”

Lachlan stepped forward and said, “PC-5 or Quattro. Which gang recruited Damian?”

“Based on the men Damian had incidents with while in prison, he’s likely a member of Quattro, although he doesn’t have the tattoo to prove it,” Brad confirmed.

Reluctantly, Gabrielle eased out of Sebastian’s embrace. “So, he is a gang member and got some cell phones. Why does that matter?” She looked from Brad’s concerned face to Lachlan’s agitated face to Sebastian’s, which damn near stopped her heart.

“What do the three of you know that I’m missing here?” Gabrielle asked, but she only looked at Sebastian. He couldn’t hide how worried he was about this new information. “Am I still in danger? Do you think Quattro could come after me?”

“Quattro gang members are ruthless, reckless, and more importantly, they don’t act predictably. The decisions they make can just as easily be for sport as for strategic advantages or money,” Sebastian said, then gave a surreptitious glance in Lachlan’s direction. The pilot had grown pale.

“Damian did a few stints in solitary for killing inmates who’d become a liability to the gang. He was Quattro’s inside hatchet man and they owed him. If Damian Hester used his gang connections to get those cell phones, it’s also possible that he asked them to help him do something to you,” Brad said with a grave tone. “Like kidnapping you again. Damian being in the hospital may not stop whatever he put in motion.”

“I’m basically trading one psycho for a gang of psychos? This is just fucking great. Why did I think I could ever come home?” Tears sprung to her eyes, and she turned her back on the men. Dabbing her eyes furiously, Gabrielle fought back a wave of exhaustion and disappointment.

The warmth of Sebastian’s body enveloped her, but she didn’t turn around. She couldn’t. She didn’t want him to see her at her weakest moment, about to succumb to a spiral of discouragement and self-pity. The exact opposite of the platform she’d built that had inspired millions of women worldwide.

Sebastian spoke low where only she could hear. “You can come home because you have family and friends who love you and will support you through every obstacle, every challenge, and every threat. You won’t ever need to leave the Palmchat Islands again. This is your home, and I’ll take down anyone who makes you feel like you can’t be here. That’s a promise.”

She looked over her shoulder at this man who’d been the bane of her existence for years and was instantly consoled by the surety and confidence in his coffee-brown eyes. Nodding her head, she turned around, ready to face whatever came next.

“Okay, so what does all of this mean?” Gabrielle asked. “What are my options to protect myself from Quattro?”

“I want to provide round-the-clock police protection for you,” Brad said. “I’m in charge of a small contingent of officers who take down street-level gang members. This threat is credible enough to get clearance from my superiors. We’ll monitor chatter on the dark web from the gangs. We can be your eyes, ears, and protectors for the next couple of weeks or months until we’re sure there is no threat to your life.”

Gabrielle wasn’t surprised that Brad had a plan to help her. He’d proven what a good man he was a decade ago when he’d rescued her. She was glad he’d thought of a way to keep her safe from the gang. “That sounds like a good plan—”

“No fucking way,” Sebastian said, shaking his head. “The King Family has ten times the resources of the local island

police. We don't need help protecting Gabrielle from Quattro or anyone else."

Brad recoiled, then stood from his seat and pointed his finger in Sebastian's face. "You need to leave this to the professionals. Going rogue with some kind of vigilante security crew could put a bigger target on Gabrielle's back."

Sebastian tensed. His arms gripped her tighter, pulling her closer to him. The contours of his rock-hard muscles firmly pressed against her body. "By all means, reach out to Serena King. You'll be disappointed when her answer is the same as mine."

Lachlan clamped a hand on Brad's shoulder. "You can leave now, detective."

"Fine," Brad said, jerking from Lachlan's grip. "Gabrielle, if you change your mind and want more details of what I can do for you, you know how to reach me."

Gabrielle leaned back against Sebastian's chest. For some reason, this man who'd spent most of his life loathing her made her feel safe.

Safe enough to focus on Damian at the Rakestraw Blake Center.

She wanted to look him in the eye and tell him he was out of his fucking mind if he thought she wanted anything to do with him.

She was done letting him terrorize her life.

Chapter 10

Taking a deep breath, Gabrielle allowed the fresh ocean air to soothe her frazzled nerves. It had only taken thirty minutes to fly from St. Killian to St. Felipe—an illegal trip since the long-haul private jet was too large to land at the municipal inter-island airport. Sebastian had insisted it was safer to fly instead of taking the limousine to the yacht. Lachlan hadn't balked at the change in plans. Air traffic control and airport security hadn't been nearly as amenable, holding them on the plane for almost two hours as they negotiated penalty fees for failing to file a flight plan and executing an unauthorized landing.

She turned toward the three-story, seventy-room Caribbean colonial mansion that seemed to stretch for miles. The stucco walls were painted the signature coral pink of the Palmchat Islands, creating a majestic contrast to the palm tree-covered rolling hills that led down to the family's private beaches. In the distance, the clear turquoise waters of the Caribbean Sea stretched for as far as the eyes could see. From the hill, schools of fish and manta rays could be seen darting through the waters in search of food.

King Estate housed the corporate offices for the family's coffee empire, Hullabaloo Enterprises, and the private living quarters for any member of the King Family who wanted to live on the grounds. The place was a bustle of activity, with employees, hospitality staff, and family members going and coming. Today was no different.

Sebastian had exited the car first, jogging up the steep driveway to talk to the head of security for Hullabaloo Enterprises. Within minutes a contingent of corporate security

guards had joined them, huddled near the stone fountains. Water bubbled and cascaded in delicate arches, obscuring her view of the men. But she could clearly hear Sebastian's rapid-fire instructions to the security team. He gave orders about the additional security measures he wanted for her protection. The concern in his voice perplexed her.

Sebastian was worried about her safety, even though he hated her for how she treated him years ago.

"Ms. Gabrielle ..."

She flinched and turned back toward the house. Donna, her sister's assistant, strode toward her with purposeful steps. The woman had been employed by their family in various roles for decades. Her dull pale brown skin, razor-thin lips, and hair pulled back in a tight bun hadn't changed in all that time. The woman gave her a polite smile that didn't reach her eyes.

"Ms. Serena would like to see you in her office," Donna said. "Please follow me."

As she followed Donna up the steps to the open-air loggia, past the butler and the staff who busied themselves with the morning cleanings, she gazed at the decor and furnishings that hadn't changed since she was sent away. She ran a hand along the expensive brocade fabric of a couch as she passed through the spacious area. Regret clouded her thoughts as memories flooded her mind. The days she'd spent running up and down the familiar maze of hallways as the warm ocean breeze flowed through the archways, caressing her skin.

Every detail of the property was as she remembered.

The bittersweet sting of nostalgia forced her to face her own part in the distance that had grown between her and her parents. She'd wasted years being stubborn and refusing to come home, even after her mother had tried to extend an olive branch of sorts.

It hadn't been enough for Gabrielle.

She'd wanted them to admit they'd been wrong for sending her away after the kidnapping. Banished and hidden with distant relatives when all she'd wanted was the love and

support of her mom and dad. Fantasies of them groveling for her forgiveness and begging her to come home had stuck with her all this time. But her mom and dad had never come close to that. And now they were both gone. She wasn't sure she'd ever see them again.

Gabrielle fought back tears and followed Donna through the modern glass entrance to the executive suites. Serena's assistant stepped aside and allowed Gabrielle to enter the office alone.

Serena stood behind the mirrored glass desk, hands pressed against the surface as she said, "You have two weeks to get every last photo taken down. Do I make myself clear? Do whatever it takes to erase those photos of my sister from the internet."

Taking tentative steps forward, Gabrielle was struck by how perfect Serena looked in the space formerly dominated by Bernadette King. Serena was the new queen on the throne of Hullabaloo Enterprises, serving as interim CEO for two years since the plane transporting their parents to Africa disappeared.

At forty years old, her sister was stunning. Serena had the grace and beauty of the da Costa side of their family. Tall and lithe with butterscotch, sun-kissed skin, gorgeous faint freckles, and long dark brown tresses cascaded down her back in loose curls.

She, on the other hand, was every bit the West Indian version dominating the King side. Average in height, with hourglass curves, deep brown skin, and tightly coiled curls that took hours to straighten every weekend.

The differences between them extended well beyond their looks.

Gabrielle didn't have anything in common with her sister, who was thirteen years older. Given the age gap, Serena wasn't around for much of her childhood. Neither had made efforts to become closer since they'd become adults.

Serena looked up from her notepad with a huge smile. “My goodness, you are so beautiful.” Serena moved from behind the desk. She crossed the room and rested her hands on Gabrielle’s shoulders. “My baby sister is all grown up. I am so happy you’re back home.”

Gabrielle stiffened as Serena pulled her into a hug.

This was not the homecoming she expected, but she had to admit it was a pleasant surprise. Relaxing, Gabrielle leaned into the warm embrace. She pressed her head against Serena’s shoulder as she inhaled the signature fragrance that reminded her of their mother. Tears pricked her eyes, but she blinked them away.

Serena said, “I should have done much more to get you to come home years ago. But I’ll make up for it now. Please sit down.”

She followed her sister to a nook across from the desk arranged with two tufted couches facing each other. Sitting next to Serena, Gabrielle said, “You were talking to the lawyers about me. The photos that got released last night.”

“Hannah filled me in this morning. While your lawyer has dealt with this in the past, I thought having the full Hullabaloo legal team at your disposal would make it disappear quicker.”

Gabrielle nodded. “Two weeks seems ambitious.”

“They know not to let me down,” Serena said, squeezing her hand. “Sebastian briefed me on the news about Damian Hester and the potential threat from Quattro. We’re going to get additional security installed at the house. I promise you’ll be safe here. I had the staff prepare the ruby room for you. I thought you’d like that one the best. But if you prefer the opal or the jade room, we can make that switch.”

“I don’t know that I can stay here,” Gabrielle said, swiping a shaking finger across her eye to catch the tear before it fell down her cheek. “This has been the hardest day, and now I get to King Estate, and the memories of Mom and Dad are about to crush me. I never realized how much I missed this. How much time I missed out on being with them because—”

“They sent you away when you needed them most,” Serena said. “I still don’t understand how they could turn their back on you that way. Maybe I could’ve stopped them if I’d been here, but it’s too late now. Things will be different with me in charge. I will always take care of you, Gabrielle. No matter what.”

“I never knew you felt that way about what happened.”

“You know, Bernadette. She didn’t allow dissension or disagreement with any of her decisions. We all had to abide by them no matter what,” Serena said. “I miss her, too. But let’s be real. We didn’t have the best parents. A mother who was ambitious to a fault and thought money was a suitable substitute for love. A father who had his head in the clouds, thinking he could save the world from poverty and pain while neglecting his own children. Neither of them was equipped to raise kids, which is why we all have our personal demons to carry.”

“So I wasn’t the only one?” Gabrielle shook her head. “I was so jealous of you growing up, thinking you were getting all the love and attention I wasn’t.”

“I was born to be the heir of Hullabaloo Enterprises. Shipped off at the age of eight to private schools in London. Then Oxford. MBA from Harvard. My whole life was planned out for me so I would be ready for this moment.”

“I thought you wanted to run the family business.”

“Oh, I absolutely do. But I need our greedy aunts and uncles and their useless spawns to stay out of my way and let me take this company to the heights it’s destined to reach.”

“I guess I’m out of touch. What’s been going on with the company?” Gabrielle asked. She was dutiful in sending in her voting proxies whenever needed, ensuring she consistently voted for whatever position Serena supported.

Serena dragged a hand down her face. “I don’t want to burden you with this now.”

“No, tell me. I want to help if I can. In fact, the distraction might do me good,” Gabrielle said.

“You know the bylaws of the company. Every critical decision is now subject to a family vote. They don’t try to understand the vision I’m trying to implement. Most of them know nothing about growing coffee beans. Yet, they want to stand in the way of progress because they’re afraid of losing some of their net worth.”

“But your ideas are amazing, from what I’ve seen. The company has flourished since you took over. The expansion into Europe was a success and made everyone richer.”

“Doesn’t matter. The lawyers have advised me that we must have our parents declared legally deceased. That will trigger the wills to be probated.”

Realization settled within Gabrielle. “Which will make you the fifty-one percent owner of the company. The rest of us will have equal shares of the remaining forty-nine percent. You could make all the decisions for Hullabaloo without consulting anyone.”

Serena sighed. “Don’t make it sound so diabolical. There’s still a board of directors, and I’m happy to give you an appointment. I have no issue with knowledgeable members of our company weighing in on my decisions. But we need to get the paperwork filed.”

“What if they’re still out there.” An unease snaked through Gabrielle. “We don’t have any proof that Mom and Dad are ...” She couldn’t say the words. Serena must think she was silly for hoping their parents could still be alive. She could see it in her big sis’s eyes. Maybe she was delusional, but that hope kept her guilt and regret at bay. “They could be trying to come home to us.”

“I hope they are ... still ... out there. Alive,” Serena said, her words slow, delicate, and unconvincing to Gabrielle’s ears.

Her sister had been around to hear all the speculation from experts on the fate of their parents. The dire outcomes all led to one view—Bernadette King and Peter da Costa had died when their plane crashed into the side of a mountain in a desolate and uninhabited part of the African continent. Gabrielle couldn’t blame her for giving up hope.

“If we find them, of course, the legal death certificates would be overturned, and everything would ... go back to how it was before,” Serena continued.

“What does Ike think about all this?” Gabrielle wondered if her brother would believe Serena was being reasonable or making a power grab to suit her ambition.

Serena shrugged. “Ike and I haven’t spoken since the plane disappeared. We don’t need him to make this happen. The lawyers say only a majority is needed. Two of the three of us. Will you at least think about it?”

“Yes, I’ll think about it,” Gabrielle said.

“Good. Now, the only other options to move you into would be the villa near the peak of Cabrito mountain, which is out of the way, or the cottage on the private beach,” Serena said, rubbing her arm. “I’d prefer the beach cottage. It’s closer to the main house, and it’s been renovated. Nothing to trigger any memories. What do you say?”

“The beach cottage sounds perfect.”

Chapter 11

Her voice was the sweetest melody tickling Sebastian's ears—confident, poised, and strong. The beautiful face stared back at him from the video screen. She walked across a stage, enlightening an audience of corporate types on ways to emerge anew from unexpected circumstances. The passion in her eyes blazed through the camera, intense and with a purpose of improving lives.

That light and fire had gone out of her eyes yesterday.

He'd watched it happen as she received the shocking news about Damian Hester and the potential threat of kidnapping by Quattro.

That light had been replaced with thinly veiled fear.

The same look took over his mother's gaze when she realized what his father had been doing. He could never forget that look as long as he lived. To see it in another woman's eyes had rattled him to his soul.

Watching from the main house, he'd waited for Gabrielle to settle into the beach cottage before taking the path down. He'd thought it would only take a day to get the new security system in place, but they'd hit roadblocks trying to secure delivery of the complex equipment to the island. It would be another two or three days before the installation could be completed. Two or three days until Sebastian would feel comfortable leaving her alone on the property while he monitored the grounds from the comfort of his home in the Tango Lowlands.

Until then, he wouldn't let her out of sight.

That's why he'd spent the night under the stars in a hammock about twenty feet away from the beach house. Sleep had alluded him. What started as idle curiosity turned into an all-night obsession.

Gabrielle had built an impressive library of her talks and teachings on her Emerge Anew website. She coached and mentored people about how to bounce back from unexpected and, at times, tragic circumstances in dozens of video series.

Sebastian figured he'd damn near watched them all last night, mesmerized by Gabrielle. Her transformation had played out through the videos, changing from a broken and confused victim to an empowered, strong woman determined to help others succeed on the journey she'd already conquered. She had been transparent about her past and struggles, not shying away from the vulnerabilities that haunted her. He knew her better now. Her thoughts, fears, mannerisms, likes, and dislikes. Her videos had lured him into a parasocial relationship, building an intimacy and connection that he knew was only in his mind.

But that didn't stop it from feeling real.

He'd misjudged her.

Gabrielle wasn't the spoiled brat he'd suspected.

At least not anymore.

She was a strong woman who'd completed a journey of self-healing and was starting to ease her way into his heart.

He wondered if this was how it had been with his father. Watching his mother from afar, consumed with an increasing desire to see more of her.

He understood the drastic change in his views toward Ike's younger sister. But it made him uncomfortable and weary.

Like he was losing himself to a force out of his control.

Sebastian shifted on the hammock and maneuvered the cell phone closer to his face. He swiped the device with his fingertips, pausing the video until a still shot of Gabrielle was frozen on his screen.

She was so fucking beautiful, he almost forgot to breathe looking at her.

Against his better judgment, he took a screenshot and then forced himself to put the cell phone back in his pocket.

Turning, he glanced at the door to the beach cottage and stared right into the dark beauty's eyes as she stared back at him.

Fuck.

He'd wanted to hide his overnight surveillance from her and show up later, but she'd busted him.

A cute frown played on her face as she tied the belt around her satin robe in a floppy bow. The fabric barely covered her ass, giving a decadent view of her sexy legs as she walked barefoot across the sand.

"Please tell me you didn't sleep out here," Gabrielle said.

Sebastian scrambled out of the hammock and landed on the soft sand with a thud. A gusty breeze blew across the ocean, sending locks of her dark hair across her face. He watched her for a long moment, searing the memory into his brain, then said, "I didn't sleep out here."

It wasn't a lie.

He'd spent all night watching videos of her.

She shook her head. "I don't believe you. There are two guest bedrooms in the beach cottage. You could've slept in one of those if you wanted to guard me last night."

"I didn't want to intrude." Sebastian cleared his throat. He supposed he owed her some further explanation. "It's going to take a few more days before we can get the security systems set up. So, you'll have to put up with me being close by for a while longer."

Gabrielle smiled, and his knees weakened.

"I don't mind," she said.

"Don't you?" Sebastian challenged. "I know I'm not one of your favorite people."

“Oh, you are now,” Gabrielle said with a sheepish grin. “Everything you did for me yesterday went above and beyond. I don’t know how to thank you.”

“You don’t need—”

“I know,” Gabrielle raised her hands. “I get it. You’re only putting up with me because Serena hired you to do a job.”

“I didn’t say that,” Sebastian responded, unable to stop himself from swiping the wayward strands from covering her face. He tucked them behind her ears, then pulled back. She didn’t recoil from his touch but leaned closer toward him. “Why did you want to stay out here instead of the main house?”

Sadness flickered across her face. “Memories of my parents. It was overwhelming not knowing where they are now. Not knowing what happened to them. So, Serena suggested that I stay here instead. I thought it was a good compromise.”

The beach cottage complicated matters from a security perspective, but he couldn’t ignore the relief in Gabrielle from having this option. He’d manage the extra work if it brought her peace.

“It’s hard for me to be there, too,” Sebastian admitted. “Did you know I was your mom’s bodyguard?”

“No,” Gabrielle shook her head. “When was this?”

“After I left the PISCOs, I was lost,” Sebastian said, then paused. Why the fuck was he about to spill his guts to her? “Anyway, your mom hired me on to the Hullabaloo security team. A few months later, she asked me to be her personal bodyguard.”

“You spent a lot of time with her?”

“Enough to know how much she loved you. She regretted sending you away. The distance seemed to keep growing between the two of you. She just couldn’t figure out how to fix it,” Sebastian said, remembering the conversations he’d had with the King family matriarch over the years. If Bernadette’s children knew how much she loved them and considered them

in all her decisions, they would be more forgiving of her unique parenting style.

Gabrielle stared at him in disbelief. “If only she knew that it was as simple as an apology. That’s all I ever wanted, but my mom wasn’t the kind of person to admit she’d made a mistake. And don’t get me started about my dad.” She shook her head as if wanting to be rid of the memories.

“There’s still hope that you could get that apology.”

“Not sure it matters anymore,” Gabrielle said, shrugging as she hugged her arms tightly around her body.

Sebastian kicked himself for burdening her when she had more pressing matters to deal with, namely Damian Hester and Quattro. Changing the subject, he said, “I’ve had a friend monitoring the web for any more unauthorized photos of you. Looks like they are coming down, and we don’t see any other sites popping up with photos. That’s a good sign. Has anything unusual happened to you overnight? Cryptic texts? Phone calls? Posts on your social media page?”

“No, nothing,” Gabrielle confirmed. “Hannah and my lawyer are also tracking those, and so far, everything is getting back to normal. Well, as normal as it can be since I have a parole hearing to attend next week. What do you think will happen to Damian? Shouldn’t his fight with the prison guards cancel any chance he has of getting parole?”

“It should ...” Sebastian said, then paused.

“Let me guess. Quattro could have the parole board in their pocket and help him get released anyway.”

“They’ve done it for other prisoners. Especially if Damian claims the guards provoked and lured him into the fight. We won’t know until he gets out of ICU.”

“I need to see him,” Gabrielle said, stepping closer to Sebastian.

The scent of her jasmine perfume mesmerized him as he stared at her.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Gabrielle insisted. “I’m not crazy. I think it’s important for me to tell Damian directly that I will do everything in my power to ensure he stays in prison. I want him to know I’m no longer afraid of him.”

“He’s in a fucking coma.”

Gabrielle exhaled. “They say coma patients can hear when you talk to them.”

Sebastian frowned.

She threw her hands in the air. “I don’t expect you to understand why I need to do this. Why I need to face him even if he can’t hear me. But I do.”

“Gabrielle, you can’t stroll up to the hospital, sign the visitor log and see a maximum security prison inmate. Especially not the one who kidnapped you. Even if the warden allowed you to see Damian, it would still need to be cleared with his family,” Sebastian said.

“No way they’ll let me see him.”

“And I don’t think you should. It might not be as satisfying as you think it will be.”

“It’s not about getting satisfaction out of telling him off. He’s trying to play games with me. Sending me a message by releasing those photographs—”

“Wait, Damian did that? How do you know?”

“Because he took the photos without me realizing it. They were on his computer. I saw them when he kidnapped me. He’s the only one who had those photos, and he put them out there to try to rattle me. To show me he could still wreck my life,” Gabrielle said. “I haven’t been in the same room with Damian since Brad found us in the shed behind his house. There was no trial. No way for me to get the closure of saying all the things I wanted to say to him. It doesn’t matter if he’s in a coma or not. I need to be in the same room with him and tell him that his plans didn’t work. I’m ready for him and will fight him to the end. I have to do this for me. Not for him.”

A swell of pride rose within Sebastian at her strength. With a call to Adonis and a few hours to give him time to make arrangements, Sebastian knew he could get Gabrielle in to see Damian Hester at the Rakestraw Blake Center. He shouldn't help her, but he couldn't stop himself.

"I can help you get in to see Damian."

"You would do that for me?" Her face lit up.

He didn't understand why he was going against his better judgment to help her, but when she looked at him with those gorgeous brown eyes full of courage and determination, he couldn't resist.

"It won't be strictly legal, and there's some risk to it."

"Would you get in trouble? I don't want to do anything that would get you in trouble. You've helped me so much already."

Sebastian laughed under his breath. The idea of him getting in trouble was ludicrous. He was ex-PISCO, highly trained to cover his tracks.

"No, not like that. But there will be a condition."

"What's the condition?" Gabrielle asked.

"I'm going with you."

Chapter 12

“Damian is unconscious. What difference is it going to make if I tell him all the things I ever wanted to say to him but he can’t hear me? What am I doing?” Gabrielle rambled as she paced back and forth in front of Sebastian.

The hospital was nearly empty at this time of night. In fact, they were the only two people in the hallway outside of the intensive care unit at the Rakestraw Blake Center. An eerie quiet settled in the air as the low hum of equipment beeping and chirping drifted from Damian’s room.

From the moment Sebastian offered her a way to confront Damian, she’d been on pins and needles. It had taken longer than she’d expected to work out the details. Suffering through two straight days of meetings with the Hullabaloo lawyers to discuss the continued efforts to take down the photos leaked of her online, followed by marathon sessions of planning out the next series of Emerge Anew videos with Hannah, should have been enough to distract her.

But it wasn’t.

All the while, Sebastian had always been close.

She couldn’t help but notice he was taking his job as her bodyguard seriously.

Extremely seriously, as if there was nothing more important to him than making sure she wasn’t harmed. There were moments where she sensed he ... cared.

But then she remembered that Serena was paying him to keep her safe.

He kept an appropriate distance, allowing her to keep sight of him but refusing to share any meals with her or the family. He ate alone on the beach and slept on the hammock for two more nights.

Sebastian didn't look at her, consumed by something on his cell phone.

"I should go home." Gabrielle sighed. "I don't know what I was thinking. You told me this wasn't a good idea. But I didn't listen. I insisted on coming anyway, and now I see what you meant. This isn't satisfying at all. It's not necessary. I was so stupid for wanting to do this."

"No, you're not stupid for wanting to put Damian on notice," Sebastian said, looking up at her. The kindness in his sultry brown eyes washed over her, stopping her from pacing. "I did some research and you were right. A lot of doctors believe unconscious people can hear when others talk to them. He might be able to hear you. He might not. But you told me that you need to do this for yourself, not for Damian. That hasn't changed." Sebastian's cell phone beeped. "Guard shift changes in three minutes. The next guard coming on shift is Adonis's friend. He's going to let us into Damian's hospital room."

"Who is Adonis?" Gabrielle frowned, wondering how many people Sebastian had let in on their plan.

"A good friend of mine and Ike's," Sebastian said. "He's well connected and instrumental in situations like these."

Gabrielle relaxed, knowing that Ike's friends would move heaven and earth to help him and, by extension, would do the same for her. She was convinced that was why Sebastian had put aside his disdain and helped her over the past few days. Money wasn't enough to drive this level of attentiveness, but being Ike's sister was. Whatever the reason, she knew she couldn't do any of this without him by her side. What he was doing for her tonight went above and beyond normal bodyguard duties. He didn't have to help her. He'd listened to her and supported her, even as he disagreed with her plans.

She was touched by his actions and they meant more than she thought it would.

“Sebastian,” Gabrielle said, then swallowed hard to calm the nerves racing through her body.

“Yeah,” he said, then reached for her. She placed her hands in his and relaxed as he squeezed them tight.

“Seeking forgiveness for past wrongs, when you’re truly sorry, is one of the things that has become important in my life,” Gabrielle said, her voice shaking. She hated the emotion clogging her throat, but she had to say this before she went in to see Damian. “My apology to you is long overdue. I’m so sorry for all the bullying and fights you endured because of me. I was young and immature and so jealous of you. It felt justified, but it wasn’t. I can’t believe you’ve been able to put that behind you and help keep me safe without any resentment. I hope you can forgive me.”

Sebastian bit his lower lip, then flashed her a sexy smile. “I’d be a dick if I held a grudge against you for the shit you did as a teenager, Gabrielle. It’s in the past. Let’s leave it there.”

“So, is that a yes, Gabrielle, I forgive you for being a mean bitch to me all those years ago?” Gabrielle asked, jerking his arms playfully.

“Why does it matter?” Sebastian tugged her back toward him.

She resisted the urge to wrap her arms around him. “Because you’ve shown me more kindness and support in the past few days than anyone has ever shown me. I spent the last ten years dealing with everything, with no one to help me. Not my parents. Not Serena. Not Ike. But I get back here, and you’re there every time I needed you. You’ve been my rock. If I could erase everything that happened all those years ago—”

“Alright, alright, stop it with all this mushy shit,” Sebastian said, then he did the one thing she longed for. His arms wrapped around her and pulled her close. Resting her

head against his chest, she clung to him as the rapid beating of his heart resounded in her ear.

“I forgive you, Gabrielle,” Sebastian said. “Now, can we move on from this?”

“Thank you,” she whispered. She blinked to stop the tears from falling.

Sebastian pulled back, and she instantly missed the warmth of his body.

“Adonis’s guy will be here any second. Are you ready for this? To see Damian again?” Sebastian caressed her arms.

Now that she was at the hospital, she wasn’t sure what she wanted. The rage and hate she felt for Damian was always simmering under the surface like a dormant volcano ready to erupt. She wasn’t sure how she’d react once she stepped inside his hospital room. Would she simply get everything she wanted to say off her chest? Or would she go ballistic, yanking out all the equipment, IVs, and medicine the doctors were pumping into him to keep him alive?

“You’re going in with me, aren’t you?” Panic gripped her at the thought of facing Damian alone.

“I’m not leaving your side,” Sebastian confirmed.

Gabrielle lifted a shaky hand to his cheek. The contours of his jaw fit perfectly within the palm of her hand. The coarse texture of the stubble tantalized her senses. This man was making it hard for her to think straight with his compassion and understanding. As much as her family loved her, none of them had ever made her feel as cared for, supported, and understood as Sebastian was doing at this moment.

As Sebastian covered her hand with his own, jolts of desire and need raced through her body.

Desire?

She couldn’t believe she was thinking about how attracted she was to this man at a time like this.

Gabrielle exhaled slowly. “If you’re there with me, I can face anything.”

Sebastian eased her hand from his face, laced his fingers with hers, and gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “The shift change is happening. We need to go.”

Chapter 13

The idea that Gabrielle needed his forgiveness after everything she'd been through was absurd. He'd watched her videos. He'd seen her pour her heart out as she grappled with the anxiety and stress of the aftermath of being kidnapped. She was abandoned by her family, shipped off to Lisbon, Portugal, and left to fend for herself.

And that had made her stronger.

She'd fought her way back and inspired millions of people. No wonder he was losing his shit over her.

Gabrielle clutched his hand like the lifeline she needed. He would be lying to himself if he said that didn't make him feel damn good. He wanted to be the one she leaned on when no one else stepped up to be there. He knew how that shit felt back when he was a kid trying to survive on the streets of L.A. He wouldn't wish that on his worst enemy, which Gabrielle had been in the past. Maybe that's why he didn't have a problem being the rock she wanted to support her through this storm.

Helping Gabrielle face the man who'd tormented her was the only thing that mattered. He glanced at her as they slowed in front of the guard standing watch outside the room. He was a hulking figure of a man whose girth placed considerable strain on his tight-fitting uniform.

"You must be Sebastian." The man looked at him, then leered at Gabrielle. His eyes lingered too long for Sebastian's liking.

Sebastian stepped in front of Gabrielle and gave the man a look that caused him to visibly wither. Reaching into his back pocket, he pulled out the envelope stuffed with money.

“Five thousand in big bills. Like you requested,” Sebastian said, then shoved the envelope against the man’s fat belly.

Gabrielle gripped his shoulder. “Wait. You didn’t tell me we had to bribe this guy to get in.”

“Nothing in life is free,” Sebastian said, then turned back to the guard. “We good?”

“Yeah, real good. Go on inside,” the guard pushed the envelope into his back pocket and waddled across the hall. “If you hear me knock on the wall two times, you better get out of there.”

“Got it.” Sebastian turned toward Gabrielle.

“I’ll pay you back,” She said.

“I know you’re good for it. We’ll settle up later. You ready to go inside?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” she said, giving him a sad smile. She looked down at the floor. Her stunning, long lashes cast a shadow across her face.

“You can do this,” Sebastian said, hoping to see that fire in her eyes again. He hated the impact Damian had on her. Hated the way that bastard crumbled her confidence and made her doubt her resolve.

She didn’t respond. She didn’t look at him. Just turned and pushed into the hospital room. Sebastian followed her, bumping into her as she abruptly stopped.

Across the room, Damian Hester rested on a bed with dozens of tubes going into and out of his body, tethered to machines that beeped and chirped incessantly. Damian’s eyes were closed. Dark bruises covered his face and neck. Bandages littered his arms, covering cuts and abrasions he’d suffered from the fight with the prison guards.

Gabrielle raised her hands to her mouth as she stood frozen near the door. Sebastian rested his hands on her waist. He

needed to get her out of there. It was too much for her.

“You fucking bitch.” The angry words were hurled from a corner of the room. Sebastian jerked his head toward the sound and frowned.

“Call her a bitch one more time, and it’s the last thing you’ll ever do,” Sebastian warned, his hand hovering close to the Glock tucked in the waistband of his pants. He took a few steps toward the man sitting in a recliner, obscured by the shadows. Sebastian did a double take, and glanced back at the unconscious man in the hospital bed. “Who the fuck are you?”

“Ask Gabrielle,” the man spat the words.

Gabrielle rested a shaking hand on his arm, tugging him back toward her. Her nails dug into Sebastian’s arm as dread flooded her face. Apprehension strangled her words as she responded, “That’s Marvin. Damian’s twin brother.”

Chapter 14

“He has a fucking identical twin brother,” Sebastian muttered under his breath. How had this information slipped past him? Marvin wore a white lab coat with St. Killian Hospital and logo etched on one side. Sebastian narrowed his eyes and read the information on the badge pinned to the pocket. Hester was a doctor in the Psychiatric Center.

Marvin rose from the recliner. “I shouldn’t be surprised that the prison guards are on the King Family payroll. Haven’t you caused my brother enough pain? Why would you come here and torture him?”

“Torture him!” Gabrielle shrieked, pushing past Sebastian. “That freak brother of yours released photos of me online this week. Photos he took without me knowing. Without my consent. All to stop me from testifying against him at the parole hearing. That’s real torture.”

Sebastian wrapped his arms around Gabrielle, twisting her away from the man whose face was identical to the one who’d kidnapped and tormented her a decade ago. Even in her rage, he could see how Marvin’s presence had rattled her. Sebastian positioned himself between Gabrielle and Damian’s identical twin.

“You couldn’t stay away. There was no way my brother was getting parole. I only asked for that hearing to show the world how much progress he’d been making,” Marvin said. A pained expression clouded the man’s face, a mixture of anger and defeat. “He was responding to therapy.”

“Therapy? You arranged for some shrink to try to fix him?”

“I’m the shrink, and yes, I was making headway helping my brother to work through his obsession and psychosis about you. But with one single video, you erased years of progress.” Marvin walked over to Damian’s bed. “Now look at him. We don’t know if he’ll survive the heart attack and the stroke.”

“Maybe he shouldn’t attack prison guards if he doesn’t want to get hurt,” Gabrielle retorted.

“And maybe I should alert the police that you bribed a guard to get in to see my brother. I wonder what your millions of followers would think about that? Show them the real Gabrielle and not the fake version you’ve been flaunting in all those ridiculous videos,” Marvin said.

“Go ahead. I came here for one reason: to tell your brother that he won’t ever hurt me again,” Gabrielle said. She glanced at Sebastian, and the spark was in her eyes. The fighter within her was back. “From the looks of things, I might get the last words between us. Damian doesn’t look like he’s going to survive. I won’t shed any tears if he dies. Good riddance.”

Marvin charged Gabrielle. “My brother is hanging on for his fucking life and you say, ‘good riddance.’ I hate you for what you did to him. He needed psychological help. Not a fucking prison cell. You bitch!”

Sebastian rushed at Marvin, stopped his forward momentum, and crashed him into the wall. His hand gripped the man’s neck as he thrashed and tried to break free. “Didn’t I tell you if you insulted Gabrielle again, it would be the last thing you do? I’m a man of my word.” Sebastian pushed harder into the man’s throat, cutting off his airway. Marvin gasped and groped for air, swinging wildly, trying to break free. Futile efforts that couldn’t stop Sebastian. He had no qualms with ending this fucker’s life right here and right now. Another call to Adonis and any evidence of the incident would be erased.

The sound of his name broke his intense focus. Gabrielle grabbed him, trying in vain to pull him back with no success.

“Don’t, Sebastian. Please, don’t do this. Not for me,” Gabrielle pleaded. “Let him go.”

He took a deep breath and then released his chokehold from Marvin. The man slid to the floor, glaring up at him. Thank goodness he knew better than to utter another word.

Gabrielle’s arm slid around his waist. “Come on. Let’s get out of here. This was a mistake.” She tugged him against her body.

He turned and looked down at her gorgeous face. “You sure?”

“Yes. He’s not worth it. I thought I needed this, but I don’t.”

Sebastian trailed a hand across her skin, stroking her chin. She leaned into his hand and closed her eyes. “Alright. Let’s go—”

Alarms blared in the room as white and blue lights flashed overhead. Gabrielle stumbled back against him as they turned to see Damian thrashing in the bed. His eyes were open wide and locked onto Gabrielle. A pen dangled in Damian’s hand on top of jagged letters drawn on a notepad resting on his lap.

Gabrielle screamed as Marvin scrambled from the floor and started CPR on his brother. In seconds, nurses and doctors crammed into the tight space, working to save that miserable bastard’s life.

Sebastian had a tight hold on Gabrielle as they retreated to the corner watching in awe. Seconds turned to minutes until the steady sound of the flatline pierced the air. Marvin stumbled away from the bed and glared at Gabrielle.

“That’s it,” one of the doctors said. “Official time of death is two forty-two a.m.”

“Come on, let me take you home,” Sebastian whispered in Gabrielle’s ear. She hadn’t taken her eyes off Damian the whole time. He had a feeling he was going to need to carry her from the spot. He wasn’t sure if she could hear him or process what was happening. She was in shock.

Marvin swiped at the tears streaming down his face and stopped in front of Gabrielle. Pain and grief marred his face as he shoved a paper into her hands. “I think he wrote this to you.”

“What?” Gabrielle asked, then opened the crumbled paper.

Sebastian looked over to see what was written on it and felt ice flood his veins. The jagged words read: You will always be mine.

Chapter 15

Waves crashed along the beach, washing over Gabrielle's legs, then receded back into the dark black abyss of the ocean. Each time, she imagined the water took away tiny bits of the frustration bubbling within her and calmed her soul. In the dark of night, it was impossible to tell where the ocean ended and the night sky began.

Her heart fluttered as she glanced at Sebastian. He sat a few feet away from her. Arms wrapped around his legs that were tucked against his muscular chest. He rested his chin on his knees and looked at her like she was the only woman in the world. Goosebumps peppered her skin from the intensity of his gaze.

"He won," Gabrielle said.

Those were her first words since they'd left the Rakestraw Blake Center. She'd been consumed by her thoughts, watching the rough waves as Sebastian navigated the speed boat from the Aerie Islands to St. Felipe. He hadn't pressured her to talk when they arrived. After securing the boat to the dock, he'd held her hand and guided her away from the car waiting to take them back to King Estate. Instead, they meandered along the three-mile stretch of beach toward the beach cottage. The beach had always been her refuge. She welcomed the long walk to process her thoughts, despite the early hour of morning.

"How can you say that?" Sebastian asked.

"Because he wanted to see me before he died. I know it. The way he looked at me. It was like he'd gotten what he

wished for. He'd gotten his last dying wish. The last words between us."

You will always be mine.

The jagged message scratched into the hospital notepad by Damian before he flatlined.

Even in death, he wanted to hold onto her.

Damian Hester's dying wish was that she would never be able to move on from what happened between them. They both knew she'd played a part in driving him to do the things he'd done. He never wanted her to forget that.

Sebastian stretched his legs out on the sand as another wave crashed over them. As the water receded, he rolled over to his side and said, "Sounds to me like you have the last word. You'll continue to have the last word every day you live. That's the one thing he can never take from you. He wanted to end your life. But you coming back home was the trigger for the end of his. To me, that's a W for you. Not him."

Gabrielle rolled over onto her stomach. Sebastian mimicked her move, erasing all distance between them. Like magnets, there was no force strong enough to pull them apart. She liked the idea of being connected to Sebastian. Even if it was only for this one night. His unconditional support had bolstered her and helped her to make it through all the challenges she'd faced from the moment she arrived home. She'd always be grateful to him for that.

"Maybe I'm being irrational," she said, turning her head to look at him. "I thought watching Damian die would be an epic, liberating moment. But when it happened, I didn't feel anything."

"Because you were already free. You'd freed yourself long ago, but you didn't realize it. Like you always say, you carry within you everything you need to face another day."

"You've watched my talks online?" Gabrielle asked.

Sebastian shrugged, a sheepish grin spreading on his handsome face. "A few. My point is Damian doesn't matter to you anymore. He stopped being important to your life a long

time ago. Sure, you were dreading the day he was released from prison. Who wouldn't? But he had no power over you. That desperate note he wrote you doesn't change a damn thing."

"Aren't you the wise one? Why didn't you say this to me before we went to the Rakestraw Blake Center?"

"I tried, and it didn't work. You insisted on going, and I tagged along to ensure you got what you wanted."

"Even though you knew it wasn't what I needed."

"I wasn't sure."

"I think you were. You seem to get me, which is weird considering—"

"You grew up hating me?"

"I don't hate you anymore."

"No?" Sebastian raised an eyebrow as the moon illuminated his face. His eyes turned darker, smoldering with a desire he didn't bother to hide. The intensity of his gaze was enough to push her barely contained lust for him over the edge.

She wanted to kiss him.

He seemed to want to kiss her more.

But they shouldn't cross that line.

She was an assignment to him.

Once they confirmed she wasn't in danger from Quattro, Sebastian would return to his life. They would have no reason to see each other again.

Maybe that was why she felt the need to cross the line.

"What would you do if I kissed you right now?" Gabrielle whispered, barely able to hear her own words over the pounding of her heart.

Sebastian frowned as if she'd posed some profound, existential question.

Silence stretched between them for seconds, then minutes.

Content to watch his thoughts playing across his sexy face, she stayed quiet and waited.

Just when she thought he wouldn't respond, he gave her an answer that made her swoon. "Well, I'd kiss you back."

Gabrielle smiled. "Because you're nice and sweet to comfort me after I've had the crappiest night. You are a great guy, Sebastian. I should've seen that a long time ago."

"That's not why."

"You're not a great guy?"

"Some days. Not always."

"Honest to a fault. That's a good quality, too. Tell me, what's the reason you'd kiss me back?" Gabrielle asked, teasing him.

"Because it's all I've thought about since I saw you on the plane."

"Wow."

"You're so beautiful and strong and brilliant."

"Sebastian—"

"But I can't kiss you." Sebastian pushed up from the ground.

He was several feet away, walking along the dunes toward the beach cottage before she realized what had happened.

Scrambling to her feet, she ran to catch up with him. She grabbed his arm and pulled him to a stop, which took a lot more effort than she'd expected.

"Why not? We're both adults here. It's obvious that we have a mutual attraction."

Sebastian turned to face her. He reached over and ran a fingertip along the side of her face, trailing from her temple down her jaw to the tip of her chin. "You've been on an emotional rollercoaster today. You need a release. You don't want me. And if I thought you wouldn't regret it later, I would

take advantage of you. I'd fuck you until you screamed my name, then begged me to do it again."

Her mouth fell open as a flurry of arousal overwhelmed her. She could barely stand as moisture pooled between her thighs. Her body ached for what he offered even as her brain recognized why he was putting on the brakes.

"But I respect you too much to do that, especially since there are things about me you don't know. Things you should know," Sebastian said.

His words were ominous, but the drive to feel him inside her made her throw caution to the wind.

"Tell me," Gabrielle said. "What should I know about you? Let's get it out into the open."

Sebastian shook his head. "Why?"

"So you can fuck me and make me scream your name with a clear conscience."

He erupted in laughter.

A pure and light sound that tickled her ear.

Joy flooded her, and she interlaced her fingers with his. "Come on. Tell me," she persisted.

"I'm taking you back up to the house so you can get some rest," Sebastian said, refusing to answer her. "When you wake up, you'll be glad we didn't act on this."

"I'm pretty sure when I wake up, I'll still want to kiss you, and I'll still want you to—"

Sebastian held up a hand as if her saying the words would obliterate his resolve. "If that's the case, we'll discuss it at that time."

"Why are you fighting this?"

"Because kissing you would be a distraction I can't afford if I'm going to keep you safe."

"That's a lame excuse," Gabrielle said, then yawned loudly.

“That’s it. You need rest.”

They walked in silence the five minutes up the sand dunes to the beach cottage. They’d gotten there too soon for her liking.

“Last chance,” she teased.

“Is it?” Sebastian challenged.

Gabrielle smiled. “Will you at least come inside? Sleep in the guest bedroom.”

Sebastian winced. “Not a good idea. But I’ll walk you to the door,” he said, then looped her arm in his.

They climbed the steps slowly until they were standing outside the door. Gabrielle turned to face Sebastian. He released her arm and took a step back, then another. His eyes darkened with unbridled lust. She had naughty thoughts of what he might be doing in the hammock after she retired to her bedroom. Knowing that he could be pleasuring himself thinking of her while she did the same thinking of him was exhilarating.

Sebastian licked his lips slowly and inhaled a sharp breath. “Good night, Gabrielle.”

“Good night, Sebastian.” She forced the words out before she did something they might both regret in the morning.

Turning the knob, she pushed the door open.

The scream came from the depths of her.

Her body shook violently as her eyes darted across the living room.

The chilling scene stretched before her.

Blood.

Everywhere, there was blood.

Splattered and pooled on the floor.

Splashed over the furniture.

Streaked on the walls.

Organs that resembled hearts scattered across the room.

And a single message written in blood on the wall.

You will always be mine.

Chapter 16

She was watching him.

Ike knew it.

The cameras were barely perceptible.

But he'd found seven of them in the bare room.

The walls were accordion-style panels constructed of heavy-gauge, extruded aluminum. The kind that protected homes in Florida from hurricanes and blocked strong winds and sunlight, making it damn impossible for him to see what was beyond the walls.

The ceiling was concrete, as was the floor, painted a dark gray to match the aluminum walls. Three small vents pumped air conditioning into the space. None big enough for him to stick more than an arm inside. That was only if he could get past the mesh metal grate, which had proven impenetrable.

Dim white lights hung from the center that never turned off, casting an eerie glow. The room was pristine and devoid of any dirt or dust. Newly constructed, he'd guessed.

The only furniture inside was a full-sized mattress resting on the floor in one corner. Stacks of non-perishable goods—canned beans and vegetables, tuna, crackers, peanut butter, granola bars, and bottles of water sat near the end of the mattress. Enough for a week. Maybe more. A functioning toilet sat in the opposite corner.

There was no door.

No way out.

He'd lost track of time.

Days and nights had passed, but he wasn't sure how many.

He couldn't guess how long he'd been trapped inside the room.

He reeked from not showering, clothed in the same pair of basketball shorts he'd worn when the Russians burst into his condo. There was nothing left for him to do but wait ... for her.

He'd spent all his time trapped in this room, recounting every minute he'd spent with her. The crash landing on the balcony of the condo three floors below his. Long, straight black hair tossed over one shoulder. Legs that stretched for days. Tits begging to be caressed, licked, and sucked. The face that was driving him wild, gorgeous, and sensual. He'd committed every part of her to memory. He'd jacked off dozens of times to the thought of her while he suffered through the endless time trapped in this place.

She said she would save him.

That must mean she would be coming to visit him soon.

And when she did, he would be ready for her.

Ready to make his escape.

Walking toward one of the walls, Ike pressed his palms against the accordion panels, moving his hands up and down and across, searching for a weakness. A way to pry past the fortress he was locked inside.

The only thing that brought him solace was knowing his disappearance wouldn't go unnoticed. It would trigger an onslaught of searches for him, all deep cover and all ruthless. Friends like brothers determined to find him and rescue him from this place.

Ike shifted to the adjacent wall. He had no doubt that Sebastian, Everett, and Lachlan were in hot pursuit. Bobby was likely monitoring the dark web for any clues of his whereabouts. Kane might be on the inside, pretending to steal for the Brazhenskys to get intel on him. And Adonis would be

somewhere in the background, covering their tracks, making sure none of them got caught for breaking the law to find him.

But the Brazhenskys weren't behind his abduction.

She was.

A mystery woman with no name.

Ike banged on the panel with his fist. The sound echoed through the space. The panel screeched and moaned from the strain, then opened. He stumbled backward in shock. How many times had he pounded on the walls to no avail? Now they opened.

The panels collapsed, sliding slowly toward one side, revealing a bare wall with a flat-screen, sixty-inch television mounted to it. The screen flickered to life. The view depicted a room appointed with expensive furnishings, typical of an executive suite in a five-star hotel. No signature decor pieces or elements that would help him figure out which hotel or where. The camera panned slowly to the right.

Ike moved forward, his eyes drawn to the mystery woman as she sat on a high-back, winged chair. Black tresses pulled into a ponytail, the thick braid resting over her shoulder. She stroked the ends of her hair as the sexiest pout settled on her cupid's bow lips. A shimmering gold halter top barely covered her amazing breasts.

But it was those sparkling dark brown eyes, intense and focused on something beyond the view of the camera's angle, that riveted him. She was full-blown gorgeous in every possible way. Flawless and perfect.

He stroked a finger along the screen, tracing the curves of her body as his cock stirred to life. The consistent and uncontrollable reaction he had to her. He had to find out who she was and why she'd taken him.

A man entered the frame, and Ike groaned.

Alexei Brazhensky, the eldest son of the Russian mafia leader, eased down onto the ottoman in front of the mystery woman and blatantly ogled her. Ike had partied side-by-side with Alexei, placing his bets on everything from football

games to cricket tournaments directly with him. What was Alexei doing with the mystery woman? And why was he being allowed to watch?

A crackling sound filled the air as the camera zoomed in to a close-up shot of the mystery woman across from Alexei.

“What is your connection with Ike da Costa?” Alexei asked. He wasn’t looking at her face. He stared at the dark brown curves of her breasts pushing against her top.

“Do you want your money? Or do you want to gossip?” She responded. Her voice coated Ike’s ears like honey. His heart rate quickened as she crossed one long leg slowly over the other.

No underwear.

No fucking underwear.

His cock turned to stone.

Alexei noticed, too. His wayward hand animatedly adjusted the bulge in his pants as he stared at the mystery woman for a reaction.

But her eyes weren’t focused on Alexei.

She was staring directly at the camera.

At Ike.

Jealousy raced through his veins. Fists clenched at his sides. He should be in that room with her. Not fucking Alexei Brazhensky.

“You are so sexy. So beautiful. Why waste time talking about Ike da Costa when I want you,” Alexei said, reaching a hand to rest on her thigh. “And you obviously want me.”

The mystery woman grabbed a pin from her hair and stabbed it through Alexei’s hand. He jerked back, howling in pain. Guards appeared in the frame. Three behind Alexei with AK-47s raised. Three behind the mystery woman with AR-15s raised.

A standoff.

Who was this badass beauty?

“I’m not available,” the mystery woman said with a sexy smile. “How much does Ike owe you?”

“Much more than you can afford, stupid bitch,” Alexei spat.

“Do you think your father would’ve approved this meeting if he wasn’t sure I could wipe Ike’s debt away? How disappointed he will be if you come back empty-handed?” She wagged a finger in front of his face. “Incompetent Alexei fucks up again.”

Alexei bared his teeth at her, ready to pounce. But he didn’t budge. Cradling his bleeding hand with the other, he said through gritted teeth, “Twenty-two million. Cash only. You have one hour.”

“I only need one minute,” she responded, then snapped her finger. A fourth man appeared on the screen with two suitcases.

“Twenty-five million,” she said, then stood. “Keep the change.”

She looked at the camera again and winked. Turning back to Alexei, she said, “The Brazhenskys business with Ike da Costa is over. If your family reneges on this deal, I will slit your throat. Understood?”

Alexei looked at the mystery woman with unbridled hatred. Her armed guards pressed past her and ushered Alexei and his men from the room. In seconds, she was alone.

A spike of adrenaline zipped through his veins. Desire overwhelmed him at the thought of being with the mystery woman again. She’d paid off his debt to the Brazhenskys. But was he trading one debt for another that would be at a much greater cost?

The mystery woman sauntered toward the camera and looked directly at him.

The sweetest smile graced her lips as she said, “Get ready, Ike. I’m taking you home.”

The television shut off.

Ike stared at the black screen.

He contemplated the myriad of meanings her statement could have. Was she taking him to her home? Or his? Could home be a code for some other place? And if it was, did Ike want to go there?

Did the answer to those questions matter?

He would do whatever it took to be with the mystery woman again, even if it could lead to his demise.

He had to know who she was.

Chapter 17

Sebastian leaned against the wall, arms crossed over his chest, as Gabrielle slept on a loveseat tucked in the rounded enclave outside the music room. Far away from the family quarters of the main house, the area had no windows and was bathed in dark shadows.

He shuddered, remembering Gabrielle's scream.

A pained and primal sound, filled with terror and pure fear.

It reverberated off the walls as she stood in the doorway, frozen.

He'd been at her side in an instant. His PISCO training kicked in, thoroughly assessing the scene in seconds. Bloody goat hearts scattered across the living room. Blood coating the floors and furniture. No sign of a struggle. No blood smears or bloodied footsteps. He'd had no doubt that the cottage was empty.

She'd fixated on the message scrawled in blood on the wall, unable to stop screaming. The threat intended only for her.

Wrapping his arms around her, Sebastian pulled her away from the disturbing scene and lifted her into his arms. She didn't fight him as tears flowed down her face. He carried her, racing the quarter mile across the beach and up the hill to the main house. Her arms clutched around his neck in a death grip as she trembled and shook in his embrace.

His heart broke for the pain she was in. Protectiveness surged through him. He resolved to make whoever had scared

her pay. He would hunt the fucker down and stuff a bloody goat heart in his mouth as he choked the life out of him. That was a promise he had made to her at that moment.

He wouldn't let anyone hurt her ever again.

At the main house, the staff and family were awakened.

Gabrielle had been hysterical, convinced she'd stumbled upon a murder scene in the cottage. Inconsolable from the idea that someone she loved or who worked for her family had lost their life because of her.

It had taken almost thirty minutes to convince her that no one had died. Every family member and all the staff were accounted for. Only then had she stumbled away from him and collapsed in the enclave across from the music room.

Serena immediately went into boss mode, alerting the police and ordering the on-site nurse to give Gabrielle a sedative. Normally, Sebastian would've balked at the suggestion, but these weren't typical circumstances. Gabrielle had come undone. The threat at the beach cottage had splintered her. She needed rest if she had any hope of getting past the trauma.

He yawned, then shifted his weight from one foot to the other. The cops had taken his statement first, then left in hoards to collect evidence at the beach cottage. A command center was erected in the downstairs reception area. No one was to leave the premises until further notice. Given his background, the officers had wanted him to go to the cottage and help navigate the crime scene, but he couldn't. That would mean leaving Gabrielle alone. There was no fucking way he would do that. Sebastian stayed behind, settling in this spot to watch over her as she slept.

She'd told him he'd been her rock since she returned to the Palmchat Islands. He was the one who'd understood her and supported her. It was a surprise to both of them, but it was a role he had no plans to vacate. When she woke up, he would be the first face she saw. He would comfort her, protect her and be the rock she needed.

“Sebastian.”

He looked over his shoulder to see a uniformed officer, fresh out of the police academy, staring back at him but didn't answer.

“Detective Shannon wants to talk to you. He's right across the hall in the music room,” the officer pointed in that direction.

What the fuck? Why was Detective Shannon involved in this investigation? How had the man convinced two police departments to allow him to lead an investigation out of his jurisdiction?

A memory stuck in Sebastian's mind.

Gabrielle's face lit up when Shannon stepped onto the plane. She raced down the aisle to wrap her arms around Shannon, who rescued her from Damian Hester a decade ago. Shannon told her that she was unforgettable.

Sebastian didn't trust the man. Was Shannon working some angle to be close to Gabrielle? One that had nothing to do with his law enforcement responsibilities?

Anger rippled along his aching muscles.

What the fuck was wrong with him?

He couldn't be jealous of the man. No way Gabrielle had any interest in Shannon. Not with the way she'd looked at Sebastian last night. The unbridled lust and desire for him clouded her eyes.

She'd wanted to kiss him.

He'd wanted to kiss her more.

An impulse he'd struggled to keep in check out of respect for everything she'd gone through that night, not knowing the worst was yet to come.

Sebastian beckoned for one of the maids walking down the hallway toward them. “Can you stay with Gabrielle? Come get me if she wakes up. I'll be right across the hall.”

The maid nodded as Sebastian crossed the hallway. The afternoon sun rays pierced the room with a blinding glow. The pale green brocade walls and Caribbean colonial sofas, arranged in a strategic half-circle, were bathed in the light. Serena sat on the middle of the five sofas, directly across from a grand piano. Detective Brad Shannon took up the couch to her right, cluttered with notepads, files, and papers.

Serena spoke first. “Why were you and my sister on the beach at four in the morning? What were you doing?” Her tone indicted him, even though he was the one who’d stopped what Serena thought he’d been up to with Gabrielle from happening. If Gabrielle had her way, he would have a more salacious answer.

Instead, he was faced with a more daunting prospect.

Telling the truth was worse.

“We were walking back from the dock after going to the Aerie Islands earlier in the evening,” Sebastian said.

The detective’s eyes narrowed as he looked up from his notepad. A tense silence filled the air. “Why did the two of you go to the Aerie Islands?” Shannon asked, an edge in his tone.

From the look he exchanged with Serena, Sebastian guessed they both knew about Damian Hester’s death last night. They didn’t know he and Gabrielle were there when it happened.

“To watch Damian Hester die,” Sebastian said, cutting to the chase. He didn’t have time to play cat-and-mouse games with the detective. He wanted to get the questions answered so he could go back and be with Gabrielle.

“Oh, my God!” Serena gasped. “You took my sister there? Why would you do that? She didn’t need to see that monster again.”

“She thought she did,” Sebastian said. “She wanted a chance to tell him to his face that she was no longer scared of him, but she didn’t get to do that. He flatlined while we were in the room with his brother, Marvin.”

Shannon dragged a hand down his face. “How did Gabrielle react to his death?”

Sebastian hated the intensity of concern in the man’s words. “How the fuck do you think? She was in shock. Stunned. Numb. It was a lot to process, so we took the long way back to the beach cottage.”

“And that’s when the two of you saw the threat written in blood inside,” Shannon confirmed.

“Right,” Sebastian said, deciding that sharing the intimate exchange between him and Gabrielle would stay a secret. “Any idea who could’ve done it?”

Shannon said, “All signs point to Quattro carrying out a threat on Damian’s request. We don’t know if Damian made deals with them to do more or if this will be the only incident.”

Sebastian’s mind wandered to the note Marvin had thrust into Gabrielle’s hands. The jagged written message from Damian had been the same one written in blood on the cottage wall. Damian could’ve had plans to rattle Gabrielle with that message and gotten Quattro to do his dirty work while in prison. The bastard had no way of knowing he’d get into a fight with the prison guards and suffer a stroke and a heart attack.

If Quattro was involved, it wouldn’t be too hard for him to wrangle the guys to use their resources to find out for sure. In fact, they’d get an answer quicker than the informants who worked for the cops.

“As I mentioned to you earlier,” Shannon said, turning toward Serena. “I’m the head of a gang task force. That puts me in a unique position to offer protection to Gabrielle that will keep her safe from Quattro. You mentioned plans to beef up security around here, but there’s more that I can do for you ___”

“I don’t need any help protecting Gabrielle,” Sebastian interrupted, rolling his eyes. “I won’t let anyone get close enough to hurt her.”

Serena agreed. “Sebastian won’t leave my sister’s side. I trust him to keep her safe, like he kept my mother safe for years.”

“No offense, but Bernadette King was never in this kind of danger.”

“And this kind of danger is child’s play compared to what I faced as a PISCO,” Sebastian said. “We have it under control, detective.”

“But if it makes you feel better, I have the staff moving all of Gabrielle’s things up to the main house. The additional security measures will be finished tomorrow. This place will be like a fortress with round-the-clock monitoring,” Serena said, then turned to Sebastian. “You don’t have a problem with moving into the family quarters, do you? I want you close to Gabrielle.”

“I don’t,” Sebastian said. “But she might.”

“I’m not staying in the main house.” Gabrielle’s voice caused them all to turn toward the door.

Sebastian rushed toward her, wrapping her in his arms. She leaned into his embrace as he stroked her hair.

“Sweetheart,” Serena pleaded, rising from the couch and walking toward them. “This is the safest place for you.”

“But it’s not the safest place for you, our family, or the staff. All of you could be in danger if I stay here. I would never forgive myself if something happened to you because of me.”

“The mountain villa is not an option. It’s too secluded up there and would take weeks to get it outfitted with proper security measures,” Serena said. “There’s no other place for you to go.”

“Yes, there is,” Gabrielle said, looking up at him with hope. “I’m going to move in with Sebastian.”

Chapter 18

“This is a bad idea.” The scowl on Sebastian’s face conveyed more than his words. He wasn’t happy about her unilateral decision-making, but Gabrielle was convinced this was the right move. Harsh, searing sunrays blazed against her skin as she walked past him to the trail that led to an old abandoned sugar mill next to the main house on King Estate. Rising like a cobblestone cone toward the sky, the deserted mill released a flood of memories within her. Overcome by the past, she remembered sneaking to the sugar mill as a teenager to bemoan her wretched life. Back then, she didn’t know how bad it would get. She had no way of knowing she’d eventually rise like a phoenix from the ashes.

Heavy footsteps pounded the gravel path as Sebastian followed her. Passing under the arched entryway, she welcomed the cool respite of the structure that blocked the sun.

“Gabrielle,” Sebastian said, his voice strained with anger. “There’s no fucking way you’re moving in with me.”

“Why not? It’s the perfect solution.” Gabrielle turned to face him. Her breath caught in her throat at his stony expression. The clenched jaws and intensity of his dark brown eyes. His biceps flexed as he stuffed his hands into the pockets of his pants. She allowed herself a long moment to linger over the sight of him in all his magnificent glory. How had he transformed from the boy she knew to ... this?

“You don’t know where I live. It’s a far cry from what you’re used to.” Sebastian ran a hand through his dark locks.

“As long as you’re there, I’ll be fine. I will cover the cost of whatever security updates you want to make to your property. And I promise not to laugh when you practice your breakdancing moves. You do still breakdance, right?”

Confusion graced his handsome face. “Yeah, I breakdance but at the community center. But that’s irrelevant. I don’t need your money. I have more than enough security at my place to ensure you’re safe.”

“Another reason for me to move in with you,”

“No, it’s not!” Sebastian threw his hands in the air. “After everything that happened last night, the best place for you is surrounded by family who loves you. I get that you’re worried. Serena has already arranged a chartered flight to bring in the rest of the security equipment. We can have it up and running by nightfall. Everyone at King Estate will be protected.”

“That’s not good enough. If I’m in that house and Quattro has some other demented plans for me, no security system is going to stop them. I don’t want my family to be collateral damage in Damian’s sick obsession with me,” Gabrielle insisted. She moved closer to him, hoping he would stop fighting her. “This place was already swarming with security guards last night. That didn’t stop Quattro from leaving that bloody message. I have to put distance between me and everyone living at King Estate, but I can’t do that alone. I need you.”

Sebastian’s resolve crumbled before her eyes. His features softened as he inhaled a deep breath.

Gabrielle closed the distance between them to mere inches. The sensual scent of his cologne wafted in the air, intoxicating her. “You are a highly trained special operative. Who better to keep me safe until the cops can figure out who threatened me? I don’t have to worry about you getting hurt. I know you’ll do your best to protect me. I trust you, Sebastian.”

She grabbed Sebastian’s hands in hers, pulling him closer. He resisted and took a step back, but she held on tighter. He was her only hope. His gaze locked onto her face, then trailed slowly down her body sending warmth flooding her.

She understood his reservations. The memories of their closeness before stumbling upon the bloody scene inside the beach cottage weren't far from her mind. The magnetic force of desire pulled them closer and closer to an inevitable connection. Fighting it was pointless, whether he agreed to help her or not. She wouldn't lie to herself. Her decision to stay with Sebastian wasn't made as much with her head as with her heart and her raging libido. The man had her entire senses ablaze with passion as she tried to keep her anxiety about this new threat at bay.

Sebastian erased the remaining distance between them, pressing his body against hers. She registered every ounce of his overpowering masculinity. The rock-hard chest, defined six-pack, solid thighs, and not to mention the distinct part of him twitching to life against her abdomen. His hands slid down her back, clutching her to him as if he owned every aspect of her—the physical, emotional, and spiritual.

She held her breath.

“Gabrielle,” his voice was low and husky against the top of her head. “If you come to live with me, I can't promise that I can keep this ... professional. You need to know I'm walking a tightrope and could fall off any minute. So, do not fucking push me.”

She swallowed hard at his raw and unbridled honesty. Reveled in his acknowledgment that the feelings between them were mutual. She wouldn't make him a promise she couldn't keep. She was on edge with him. Playing with fire. She hoped they survived being burned.

“Understood.” Gabrielle forced herself to step away and inhaled a deep breath of soothing ocean air.

Sebastian closed his eyes for a long moment. When he opened them, she noticed the shift in his demeanor. He'd morphed into the bodyguard who'd shown up on the private jet after she'd landed in St. Killian. The one who was all business.

A distance permeated between them that was disappointing but necessary.

“If this is going to work, we’ll need clear ground rules,” Sebastian said.

She wasn’t sure she liked the sound of that, but she kept quiet and let him continue.

“These rules are non-negotiable.”

“Okay. I can do rules.” Gabrielle saluted him and gave him her best smile. She delighted in his reaction. A complete and utter dismantling of his seriousness. He shook his head at her and gave her the sexiest grin.

“You’re so spoiled.”

“Yes. You’ve known this for a long time. I’m not as bad as I was before, though. That should help a teeny bit,” Gabrielle said, wiggling her fingers at him.

“This is serious, Gabrielle. We don’t know what Quattro could be planning next. Damian’s death doesn’t guarantee that they won’t still come after you. I’ll get Bobby and Everett to figure out what’s going on,” Sebastian said.

“Ike’s friends?” Gabrielle balked. “How could they possibly help?”

“Trust me. There aren’t two better people that you’d want on your side. Especially with what you’re dealing with,” Sebastian confirmed. “While they are figuring out what Quattro could be planning, I’ll need complete access to your itinerary, cell phone, electronic tablets, and laptops. Every login and password on anything you do online. Bobby will place tracers on them so we can monitor every email, call, and text in case Quattro tries to hack into your accounts or reach out to you. You don’t go anywhere without me by your side. I will be your fucking shadow. Your cell phone will be updated with a tracker in the rare instance that we get separated. As long as it’s with you, I’ll be able to find you. Don’t worry. The backup to the cell phone tracker will be a bracelet. It emits a signal that I can track as long as your close to a WI-FI signal. That’s my last resort to find you if you’re cell phone is confiscated or destroyed.”

“Wow, you’re not a rookie at this,” Gabrielle said, taken aback by how quickly he formulated a plan to protect her on the spot. “Seems intrusive.”

“Seems like a lifesaver.” Sebastian crossed his arms over his chest and glared at her.

She cowered under his rebuke. Now that she’d gotten her way, she couldn’t make light of the threat that could be lurking.

“One more thing. This one is the most important.”

Gabrielle raised an eyebrow. What could be more important than a complete and utter invasion of her privacy by the one man driving her crazy with lust? At least he hadn’t demanded full access to her writing journal. That would be one place she could work through all these feelings for him without him knowing it.

“When I tell you to do something, you do it. No questions asked. Keeping you safe is more of an art than a science. I may not be able to articulate clearly why I know you’re in danger, but that doesn’t mean my instincts are wrong. I won’t waste time convincing you why you must do as I ask. Think you can live with that?”

Gabrielle bristled as her tired mind went to the most salacious thoughts. She wouldn’t mind complying with his every command ... in the bedroom. She had no doubt it would bring her extreme pleasure and the sweetest satisfaction. Damn, she wanted this man so much right now.

She took a deep breath and said, “I can live with that.”

Chapter 19

Sebastian stared at Gabrielle standing on the wooden deck that extended from the back of his bungalow home. The location was perfectly isolated, as Sebastian had wanted. Nestled in the foothills of the Cabrito Mountains on a small tract of land gifted to him by the King Family, he had a breathtaking view of the lush trees and pristine black sand beach of the Tango Lowlands a hundred feet below. The area was known for being inhabited by a small population of recluses who shunned the outside world and lived without electricity, internet, and phone lines. They rarely left the gorge, choosing to live off what nature provided.

Sebastian hadn't gone completely off grid when he'd chosen this spot to build his modest home. He took full advantage of the King Family resources. His property was surrounded by the jungle and protected by a security system worthy of royalty. No one could come within 50 feet of his house without having their every move tracked by his motion-following cameras.

No matter how much he'd wanted to argue with Gabrielle, she'd been right to suggest moving in with him. It was the safest place for her, even if it wasn't the safest for his own fucking heart.

Elbows resting on the railing, she leaned over, staring down at the black sand beach below. She wore a turquoise Hullabaloo t-shirt tied at her waist, accentuating her perfect hourglass figure. The curves of her round ass stuffed into tight black leggings were on full display, causing his cock to twitch with anticipation.

This was going to be torture every damn minute of every damn day. A fight to keep his hands off this woman. To keep his cock from between those thick, irresistible thighs.

“This view is stunning,” Gabrielle said, turning to grace him with a gorgeous smile.

“Most definitely,” Sebastian said, delighting in the view of her boobs pressed against the tight t-shirt. She had to be a D cup. Maybe double D. Fuck.

“I understand why you picked this spot,” She rubbed at a few remnants of mud splattered on her face from the trek on his ATV to where he lived. He’d explained in too much detail why bringing a dozen suitcases transported in a Mercedes G-wagon wouldn’t work. The mountain roads were narrow and muddy. His house was made for one, and he rarely had visitors.

He’d talked her down to one hiking backpack stuffed with everything she considered “essential,” which still seemed like a lot to him. She’d surprised him by not balking at the rustic mode of transportation. Swinging her backpack over her shoulders, she jumped on the four-wheeler without hesitation. Her body had pressed against his, hands caressing his six-pack, soft thighs melded against him. He was surprised he hadn’t stopped the ATV and fucked her on the spot. But restraint prevailed because that wasn’t what she needed. Sex would be a temporary distraction.

He didn’t want to be a temporary anything for her.

One taste wouldn’t be enough, so he settled for none.

But he wasn’t sure how long he could resist Gabrielle. Finding Quattro and stopping them from making their next move against her was his top priority. Once he’d vanquished the threat, she would go back to her life. There would be distance between them. No reason for them to interact anymore. That was the best thing for him.

All his focus had to be on accomplishing that goal, not getting into her panties.

“The best sunrises and sunsets in St. Felipe can be seen here,” Sebastian said, pointing to a quaint table with two wooden chairs at the back of the deck.

“I can’t wait to see it.” Gabrielle sauntered toward him, tucking thick strands of her wavy hair behind her ears. A face he could never tire of seeing. “Guess I should unpack my clothes. Where’s the guest bedroom?”

“Didn’t I mention that earlier? There ... isn’t one.” Sebastian walked barefoot onto the deck and lifted her backpack from the ground. “Only one bedroom since I set up a gym and home office in the other room. The couch doesn’t pull out to a bed, either.” He pointed at the modest couch against one wall of his living room. The cushions were hard and had seen better days. It would be fucking uncomfortable to sleep on. He wasn’t looking forward to that.

Gabrielle frowned as she took in the meager furnishings. “I’m sure I’ll be okay. Maybe a sleeping bag will give it more cushion—”

“You’re sleeping in my bed.”

“Your bed,” Gabrielle repeated. A slight hint of a smile played at the corners of her lips as she crossed her arms over her chest. The move caused her breasts to lift higher, almost popping out of the low-cut V-neck of her t-shirt. Double fuck. “I’m already intruding on your life, Sebastian. You shouldn’t sleep on an uncomfortable couch because of me.”

“Don’t argue with me. Remember my rules.” Sebastian carried her backpack into the house before she could see the effect she was having on him. He tugged at his t-shirt to hide the erection building in his shorts. “There are some empty drawers in my dresser for you to put your things in. I can clear out space in the closet if you need it.”

Dropping her bag onto the bed, he crossed the room and slumped into the recliner in the corner. This might be the better option for his sleeping arrangements. Being in the same room with Gabrielle, watching her sleep was appealing.

He cringed, wondering if that made him like his old man.

Or Damian Hester?

The last thing he wanted was to make Gabrielle uncomfortable.

No, the last thing he wanted was to be driven insane by an obsession with her, even if that felt like the road he was trapped on.

Gabrielle unzipped the backpack. She looked past the small closet and opened one of the dresser drawers, then neatly arranged her clothes inside.

“You must be exhausted,” Sebastian said. By his calculation, she’d only gotten a few hours of sleep over the past thirty-six hours. The instinct to take care of her was overwhelming. He was so close to picking her up and forcing her into the bed.

Gabrielle nodded. “But every time I close my eyes, I see the beach cottage. I can’t get the sight of the blood and goat hearts out of my mind. It’s creepy that the message scrawled on the wall was identical to the message Damian wrote to me before he died.”

“I’m sure he planned it that way. He knew what he’d sent Quattro to do.”

“In his last dying moments, all he wanted was to terrorize me. I hate him.”

Sebastian stood and caressed her arm. “You don’t have to waste your time hating a dead man. Damian is gone now. He can’t hurt you anymore.”

“Can’t he? Isn’t he sending Quattro to carry out more attacks on me? Maybe kidnap me?” Gabrielle ranted. “How did they know I’d moved into the beach cottage?”

“Good question. One we’ll get the answer to,” Sebastian said, wondering if a mole was working for Quattro at the King Estate. Yet another reason why Gabrielle’s idea to move in with him made sense. “I don’t want you to worry about that. Between the cops and me and the guys, we’ll stop Quattro. I won’t let them hurt you.”

“You promise?” The pure vulnerability in her gaze tore at his heart.

“Yes, I promise,” Sebastian said, fighting the urge to pull her into his arms and hold her until all her fears dissipated.

Gabrielle looked away, then grabbed more clothes from her backpack. A lacy pink bra dangled from her fingertips. Sebastian shifted as his cock stiffened. He needed to put some distance between himself and the exquisite beauty.

“You hungry? I can grill some fish or goat,” Sebastian suggested, moving away from her. “Or we can have the cooks at King Estate bring whatever you want up here. It’s only twenty minutes away.”

“I’m not hungry. My mind is racing. I need to sit and watch the sunset. Maybe write in my journal,” Gabrielle waved a bound book at him. A stunning, graceful half-woman, half-butterfly was on the cover.

“Is that from your Emerge Anew line?” Sebastian asked, remembering the collection of books, workbooks, and journals she sold to her followers in her videos.

“I’m stunned that you seem to know so much about me.” Gabrielle smiled. “Maybe you didn’t hate me as much as you thought?”

The idea of hating Gabrielle seemed so foreign after everything they’d been through since she came home. Those old feelings had been erased to the point that he couldn’t fathom them.

“I wouldn’t be a good bodyguard if I didn’t do my research,” Sebastian said. “And I don’t hate you at all.”

“Not anymore,” Gabrielle qualified.

He didn’t respond.

She turned and zipped up the empty backpack. “Where should I put this?” Holding it out toward him. He glanced over at the open drawers filled with all of her clothes. Sexy lingerie, skimpy shorts and tank tops, and body-hugging leggings. Enough to drive him fucking insane thinking about her

wearing them. Thinking about peeling them off her voluptuous body.

“I’ll take that.” He reached for the backpack. Their hands touched, sending a jolt of electricity through him. He looked into her eyes and knew she’d felt it, too. “Why don’t you go on outside? Sun should be setting soon.”

“I don’t want to see it without you.”

“Thought you might be sick of me hovering.”

“Trust me, being stuck with a gorgeous man in the jungle for days or weeks is not something I’d ever get sick of,” Gabrielle said, giving him a wink.

“You’re dangerous, you know that, right?” Sebastian said, placing her backpack in the closet. He turned and followed her through the living room and back out on the deck. Gabrielle passed the dining table and sat on a series of oversized pillows clustered in the corner. She patted one next to her.

Against his better judgment, Sebastian sat down. A misty haze lifted from the trees, exposing a clear, pale blue sky and glowing orange sun in the distance. Gabrielle snuggled against his chest as she watched the horizon. Her journal rested on her lap.

He reached for it.

She slapped his hand. Hard.

“Ouch,” Sebastian said, laughing. “What kind of secrets are you hiding in there? Stories of all the hearts you’ve broken over the years?”

Gabrielle laughed, shaking against him. He dared to rest a hand against her thigh, which she didn’t move.

“Trust me, I never let anyone get close enough for long enough to break any hearts,” Gabrielle said, a hint of sadness in her tone.

“Why not? I can imagine you had men tripping all over themselves to be with you,” Sebastian said. He was on that tightrope again, delving for information he wasn’t sure he

could handle. The thought of any other man being with Gabrielle caused his chest to seize.

“I had my fair share, I suppose,” Gabrielle said with a cute smile. “But relationships are complicated and messy and difficult. It’s hard to know a person. Trust that they are who they say they are and won’t turn into someone you don’t recognize. That’s why it was better for me to do short flings, quick hook-ups but not let anything get deeper.”

“Is that all you wanted from me last night?” Sebastian asked, almost choking on the words. “A quick fuck, then you’d brush me aside.”

Gabrielle stiffened. “You’re different, Sebastian.”

He shifted closer to her. “Different, how?”

She swallowed hard. “You make me feel things that I haven’t before. To want things I used to run away from. But like you said last night, I’m going through a lot now. I don’t know if I can trust those feelings. I don’t want to do something that I’d regret later.”

He trailed a finger up her thigh, then wrapped his arm around her waist. “What if you wouldn’t have any regrets?” The sun slipped lower toward the sea. Dazzling hues of orange shimmered on the waters beyond the black sand beach.

“Weren’t you the one who told me you were walking a tightrope and not to push?” Gabrielle reminded him as she shifted against him. She felt right in his arms.

“I think I’m hanging on to the tightrope with one finger,” Sebastian admitted. “But I’ll never do anything to hurt you, Gabs.”

“Gabs? You’re giving me pet names now?” Gabrielle turned to him with a playful frown.

“Sorry, it slipped out.”

“I like it. What should I call you? Bas?”

Sebastian frowned and shook his head.

“Seby?” Gabrielle suggested.

The nickname his mother had used for him years ago.

“Seby is nice,” he said, pressing his lips against her neck.

“You know what else is nice, Seby?” Gabrielle asked.

He murmured against her neck in response. His kisses trailed slowly up toward her ear. “What’s that?”

“All the ways you could help me ... relax.”

And with those words, he let go of the tightrope.

Chapter 20

Sebastian's hand found its way to her face, stroking her skin and trailing across her cheek to her lips. His thumb grazed across her mouth.

She turned on the pillows to face him. Lust blazed through her body. She'd started something that she wasn't sure she could finish, even though every part of her was damn determined to see it through. She wanted this man more than she thought it was possible to want another person. She longed for his touch, his kiss, his cock ramming inside her. She was too horny to be embarrassed by the fantasies playing in her mind. Fantasies that crowded out all thoughts of Damian Hester dying and the bloody ominous message left in the beach cottage. Those memories were fleeting and fading as her mind was consumed with Sebastian Luttrell.

Sebastian licked his lips slowly, then leaned in to kiss her.

"Wait, Sebastian," Gabrielle pressed her hands against his chest. A look of confusion crossed his face. Heart pounding wildly, she wasn't trying to play games or jerk him around. "There's something you should know."

He paused and shut his eyes as if the hesitation was causing him physical pain. "What is it?" His voice was tender and low, full of care and concern ... for her.

"It's been a long time since I've been with anyone."

His eyes flung open and locked onto hers. "How long?"

She tried to move away, but he pressed a hand against her hip, rooting her firmly in place. She couldn't move even if she

wanted to. “Years.”

“How many, Gabrielle?”

She looked away. The cavalier discussion she’d had about her sex life made it sound like she was hooking up with men every week when that couldn’t be further from the truth. The reason she’d kept men at a distance had everything to do with Damian Hester. The secret of what happened between them. Her fear that someone would find out or that it could happen again. But Damian was dead now, and that fear felt irrational and misplaced. At least where Sebastian was concerned.

“Gabs,” he moved closer, brushing his lips against hers. “How long?”

“Two or maybe, three years. I can’t remember,” she admitted.

He pulled back, unable to hide his shock. Or was it suspicion?

Gabrielle fumbled over her words. “I know you heard the stories about me. How I slept around with every Tom, Dick, and Harry in high school. Desperate to feel loved by anyone.” She’d stopped being ashamed of her past long ago, but she had to address the reason he might have for doubting her. “But I’m not that same person ...”

Her words trailed off as his finger stroked her chin, lifting her face. She had no choice but to look at him. To lose herself in those perfect brown pools. She was surprised to find his eyebrow raised and a smug, satisfied expression in his eyes.

“You’re telling me no man has been inside your gorgeous body in three fucking years?”

“That’s right.”

“Can’t say I’m mad about that,” Sebastian admitted. His fingers stroked in circles below her navel, moving toward the waistband of her yoga pants. “You want me inside you?”

“Yes,” Gabrielle said, then paused. “I mean. I don’t know. I think. I’m not sure if I’m ready or not. This is so embarrassing.”

“You never need to be embarrassed in front of me, Gabs. I want all of you. The sophisticated, the messy, and everything in between,” Sebastian said. “Fuck, it’ll drive me insane, but I will stop if you’re not ready for this. We don’t have to do anything. You’re safe with me. Every part of you, including your heart.”

The words had barely left his mouth when she pressed her lips to his. A mind-blowing sensation ricocheted between them. The kiss was intense, hungry, and full of all the passion that had built within her for this man.

She slid her hands under his shirt, stroking the defined muscles of his chest, then pulled him on top of her. He took control, hovering to stop from crushing her with his weight, as he sucked along her neck, up her earlobe, and licked the sensitive spot behind her ears. She moaned in delight as pleasure shot from her head to her throbbing core.

She arched and rocked against his cock, thick and hard, as it fought to be free from his pants. Wrapping her legs around his hips, she rubbed against him, enthralled by the waves of pleasure the movement sent coursing through her. Her body melted into his embrace as if it had come home.

“Gabs,” he pulled away from her. “You sure you want this?”

She responded the only way she could—with a feeble nod as she couldn’t force words from her lips. He rocked back on his knees as he yanked her t-shirt over her head. He looked like a kid in a candy store as he stared down at her breasts in the thin lace bra. Slipping calloused fingers along her chest, he unhooked her bra and sent it flying across the deck.

Cupping one breast in each hand, he massaged and caressed them gently. Her nipples constricted into tight buds as his fingers stroked and squeezed her. She longed to feel his mouth on her, but he was taking his sweet time enjoying her body like a playground built for one.

His erection grew heavier in his pants. A massive length and thickness that intrigued and frightened her. She yearned to peek but stopped short of reaching for him.

“It’s a damn crime for you to be so fucking gorgeous,” Sebastian said through gritted teeth. He lowered his mouth to press soft kisses around her right breast, then the left. She pushed her chest against his face. He took the cue, replacing his kisses with long strokes of his tongue, flicking and teasing her hard nipples. She gasped and panted as jolts of pleasure zipped over her skin. She stroked her hands through his hair and held him close. When she thought the intense pleasure couldn’t get any better, he took her entire breast into his mouth, sucking hard and leaving his mark on her.

His focus intensified with her every moan, raising the stakes as her pleasure reached new heights. He alternated between breasts, ensuring that neither was neglected. Her body awakened to feelings she’d never felt before. An intense, blissful joyride that was long overdue.

Satisfied that his work was done, he abandoned her breasts, licked a warm trail along her abdomen, past her belly button, and lingered near the edge of the waistband of her leggings.

She clenched and throbbed from every touch.

He glanced up at her, demanding a response.

A sign of whether he should continue or do the unthinkable and tear himself away from her. She’d long ago lost all ability to think rationally and logically. Her every thought and action was consumed only by the primal need to be satiated by Sebastian’s touch. There was no stopping them now. She couldn’t deny herself this man who’d stepped right out of her fantasies and become the most real thing in her life.

She gave him a slight nod. “Please, don’t stop.”

His hands gripped the edges of her leggings and thong and slid both from her body with lightning quickness. He looked down at her, eyes blazing with a decadent lust that could not be denied. His gaze roamed over every inch of her. Leaning forward, he grazed a finger between her folds as a devilish smile spread across his face.

“You’re so fucking wet,” Sebastian said, biting his bottom lip.

“Tell me about it,” Gabrielle forced the words out through ragged breaths.

He applied more pressure, stroking her swollen clit. His name tumbled from her mouth as she pressed down on his hand, desperate for more. For him to take her over the edge of sensual bliss.

He added a second finger to the first, flicking over the sensitive nerves back and forth in a sensual rhythm, where she ached for him the most. He slid close to her opening, almost pressing inside, then hesitating.

“Don’t tease me like this,” Gabrielle said, her hand clamping on his wrist, trying to force him to relieve the pressure building within her.

“Not so fast, Gabs. My house. My rules, remember?” Sebastian said, then pushed down along her body until his face was nestled between her thighs. His hands gripped her hips as he moved closer to the heat radiating from her mound.

Opening her legs wider, she watched for his reaction.

“You are so fucking beautiful.” Sebastian slid his arms under her thighs, lifting her legs to rest on his shoulders. She trembled with excitement as he rubbed his face against her inner thigh. His lips once again tortured her with light kisses. She shivered with anticipation as he put his finger in his mouth to taste her.

“What are you fucking doing to me?” Sebastian growled. She knew he didn’t expect or need a response. He stared up at her. “You know there’s no going back from this. If we stop now, I can keep my distance from you. I can manage my feelings and not let them get out of control. But if you let me ...” He leaned forward between her thighs and inhaled deeply. “If you let me taste you ...”

“I want this. I want you,” Gabrielle said.

His eyes flicked up at her.

Her heart spoke to him freely. All the things she couldn't put into words were conveyed as their eyes locked. She knew in her heart that this man was her safe space. The one person who would be by her side no matter what. "I won't ever ask you to stop, Seby."

His hands gripped her ass, jerking her forward until his face was pressed firmly between her thighs. When his hungry lips pressed against her throbbing clit, a primal scream burst from her body. Pleasure inundated her, rocking through her in jerking waves. His tongue alternated between long slow strokes and quick flicks, overwhelming her senses. As his tongue dipped into her entrance, she thrashed like a wild woman as his tongue darted in and out while his fingers played her clit like a delicate instrument.

Gabrielle shook and shuddered, her body a live wire of lust as he brought her closer and closer to the brink with every lick and caress. She was approaching the edge of her climax, hurtling fast and out of control. She moaned and writhed as the intensity became too much for her.

"I'm so close."

He switched tactics and grazed her clit with his teeth, nibbling on the spot as his fingers found their way to her slit. Sliding one finger inside, then two, he began a tantalizing stroke that pressed deeper inside her. He responded by increasing the pressure on her clit and the speed of his fingers thrusting in and out. She clenched around him. Friction built from every pulsing move. His tongue lapped at her relentlessly.

Gabrielle reached for him, clutching and grabbing at his shoulders, his arms, anything to brace her for the explosive orgasm.

His fingers delved and explored until they found the jackpot. The sweet, sensitive bud of nerves that had her seeing stars. She never knew sex could be this damn good. Nothing could've prepared her for this. Sebastian catapulted her to the heights of pleasure she didn't know existed.

Her body arched and trembled as his mouth sucked hard on her clit at the same time as his fingers thrust faster and faster. It only took one thing to send her plunging over the edge of ecstasy.

“Come for me, Gabs.”

As if on his command, the massive orgasm ripped through her, tearing her apart. Her body trembled out of control as Sebastian’s hands held her in place, forcing her to feel every second of the climax rocking through her. Minutes later, she returned to earth, limp and quivering, as Sebastian lowered her legs from his shoulders and slid next to her.

His arms slipped around her, pulling her close. She rested her head on his chest and listened to the rapid beating of his heart. He kissed her forehead, then cradled her as he stood. She clung to him, amazed he was strong enough to carry her. She felt boneless and relaxed, and she yawned.

“Seby ...” Gabrielle said as he carried her across the living room threshold and into the bedroom. “You’ll stay with me?”

Sebastian kicked at the covers on the bed with his foot, then laid her down against the soft cotton sheets. Easing down behind her, he spooned her, pressing against her until she couldn’t tell where she ended, and he began.

“For as long as you want me,” Sebastian whispered in her ear as she drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 21

Gabrielle entered the bedroom from the outdoor shower, dripping puddles of water on the wooden floors, wrapped in nothing but a towel.

Sebastian couldn't take his eyes off her.

The taste of her persisted on his tongue. The scent of her intoxicated him. Memories of her shattering against his lips as she orgasmed. The sweet low hum of her breaths as she slept had been musical bliss as he held her all night long.

He wanted more, but he'd resisted, wondering if that was how it had started with his father. The incessant thoughts and the burning need to be close to the object of his affection. Was he heading down a road that would turn from happy and hopeful to dark and depraved?

Sebastian leaned over on the bed to get a better view of Gabrielle. Her hair was piled into a frizzy, curly ponytail on top of her head. Her face was stunning, devoid of all makeup, showing her natural beauty.

He should be dead on his feet, but being this close to Gabrielle had him wired. Especially since the first thing she did after waking was kiss him. A kiss that told him she had no regrets about what happened last night. No regrets about the strings forming between them. But he had reservations. Strong ones that propelled him to slow things down between them.

"I can feel you watching me," Gabrielle said, leaning over to open one of the bottom drawers. She grabbed a bra and thong, then let the towel slide to the floor.

Sebastian sucked in a sharp breath, clenching his thighs as his cock turned to stone. Her plump ass, tight waist, and voluptuous breasts were about to push him over the edge.

“Might as well give you something to look at,” Gabrielle teased. She stepped into the thong, then put on her bra too quickly for his liking. Before he could broker a protest, she’d covered up that delicious body with a sundress.

“That’s cruel,” Sebastian moaned. “Do you see what you do to me?” He pointed down at his cock, threatening to poke a hole in his jogging pants.

Gabrielle flushed as a big grin spread across her face. “I’ll make it up to you later tonight.” She crossed the room to grab her purse and rummaged inside. “I need you to take me to town to meet Serena at Sugarcane’s for brunch. She texted while I was in the shower. She wants to know how my first night away from King Estate was.”

“What are you going to tell her?” Sebastian raised an eyebrow and eased off the bed. He knew better than to get any closer to Gabrielle. What he needed was an ice-cold shower.

“I don’t kiss and tell. But I will say I have no regrets about my decision.” Gabrielle winked at him. “Plus, I think she may have some news on the police investigation at the beach cottage. If I tell her about us, that will take over the whole conversation. She won’t want to talk about anything else.”

“Us?” Sebastian stopped, then looked at her. The mere mention of the word from Gabrielle’s lips settled within him and took root like he’d never expected.

Gabrielle raised her hands in the air. “I’m not trying to tie you down, so don’t worry about me becoming clingy or anything like that.”

Clingy didn’t scare him. The last thing he’d fight was being tied down to Gabrielle. Still, he didn’t want to move too fast. He didn’t know what he’d turn into if he gave in to his feelings for her. He would protect Gabrielle from anything and anyone, including himself if it came to that.

“I told you I’m the queen of the short hook-ups,” Gabrielle insisted, but her words didn’t ring true. Her flippant tone didn’t match the look in her eyes.

Sebastian forced himself to smile as he walked backward toward the outdoor shower. “Then I guess I have nothing to worry about. Give me fifteen minutes, and we can go.”

An hour later, Sebastian sat at the opulent bar in the back of Sugarcanes, one of two upscale restaurants on the island and the only one in Kingtown. Peering past the glass waterfall, he performed a visual check of the entrances and exits, noting no threats since they’d arrived ten minutes ago. Gabrielle was seated a few tables away, directly in his line of sight. If anyone tried to approach her, he could be by her side, subduing the threat.

Sebastian felt a strong hand clamp on his shoulder. He turned to see Lachlan and Everett standing behind him.

“Have a seat, fellas,” Sebastian said, motioning to the barstools flanking his. “What’re you drinking?”

“Depends,” Lachlan said. “You buying?”

Everett groaned as he walked around Lachlan and sat on the barstool to Sebastian’s left. “You’re not broke, Lachlan. You work for the King Family, making money hand over fist. Buy your own fucking drink.” The former DEA agent turned private investigator looked past Sebastian to Lachlan, with weary gray eyes. Since Ike had left, Everett had stepped up as the unofficial big brother for Sebastian, warding off the others’ attempts to haze him as the youngest of their crew.

Lachlan scoffed. “Have you forgotten about Paloma? Raising that lass is far from cheap. You of all people should understand why. Doesn’t leave much left over to splurge on expensive drinks at the best restaurant on the island.”

Sebastian chuckled. “I wouldn’t ask you for help and not pick up the tab.” He leaned forward to get the bartender’s attention. “Double Famous Grouse whisky neat for my friend over here.” He jerked a thumb toward Lachlan. “And for this

guy.” Sebastian squeezed the back of Everett’s neck. “Let’s go with Bishop’s Reserve neat.”

The bartender nodded, reached for the bottles on the top shelf, and poured. He slid the glass tumblers in front of Everett and Lachlan.

“You still good with water?” The bartender asked.

Sebastian nodded, then gave him a look. The bartender took the hint and moved his activities to the opposite side of the bar, leaving the three men alone.

“Any news on our troubled friend?” Everett asked.

Sebastian sighed. “Bobby texted this morning. Chatter on Ike has gone silent. The Brazhensky’s had been flooding the dark web for months about going after him, and now there’s nothing.”

“That’s weird,” Lachlan said. “You don’t think they—”

“If Ike was dead, we’d know it. Alexei Brazhensky would parade his head on a platter. The message would’ve been clear. You don’t steal from the Russian mafia and get away with it. I don’t think they’ve gotten to him. I think Ike has gone underground,” Sebastian admitted.

“Without reaching out to any of us?” Lachlan asked. “He knows we’d help.”

“And he knows that would put a target on our backs too, which is not what he’d want,” Everett said. “I’m not surprised he’s doing this on his own.”

“And if he gets to the point where he does need us, he knows we’ll be there,” Sebastian said, twirling his glass of water and sending droplets onto the bar. “In the meantime, we have more pressing issues to deal with here.”

“The vandalism at the beach cottage,” Everett said, taking a sip of his rum.

Lachlan dropped his glass onto the bar. “How certain are you that Quattro is behind it?”

“Likely but not confirmed, which is why I wanted you to come,” Sebastian said. “I know you want to help, but you can’t be involved in any of this. Paloma’s safety comes first.”

The single father drained the rest of his whiskey. “How concerned are you about Quattro?” asked Lachlan.

“Concerned enough to suggest you and Paloma take a vacation off the islands for the next couple of weeks,” Sebastian said. “We can’t do anything that would put you on their radar. Chances are they’ll figure out we’re looking into them.”

“We might need to negotiate with them,” Everett said. “I’m with Sebastian on this one. Any interaction you have with Quattro increases the risk they could find out about Paloma. We can’t take that chance.”

Lachlan pushed up from the barstool, concern creasing his forehead. “Looks like I’m outnumbered. Paloma’s been begging me to take her to the Hershey amusement park in Pennsylvania. Guess my little girl is about to get her wish.”

“I’ll let you know when it’s safe to come back,” Sebastian said.

Lachlan shook their hands and then headed out of the restaurant.

As soon as he was gone, Everett turned to Sebastian. “I got a lead on the bloody goat hearts left in the cottage. Goats have a history of being associated with sexuality. Greek and Roman mythological gods were linked to goats, representing their lasciviousness and insatiable lust. The animal was chosen to send a message about a desire for Gabrielle.”

“If Damian wasn’t already dead, I’d kill his ass,” Sebastian said, pushing his glass of water away. He glanced past the bar. Gabrielle and Serena were engaged in lively banter, laughing and smiling at each other. The restaurant had cleared out, and there were only a few other tables with patrons.

Everett tapped a finger against the rim of his glass. “There were fifteen goat hearts left in the beach cottage. We have plenty of goat farms in the Palmchat Islands, but most grind

the organs to make goat paté. But one goat farm on the islands found a better way to make money from fresh goat hearts. They are a delicacy, packed on ice and shipped throughout the islands.”

“Have you reached out to the goat farm?”

“No,” Everett said, reaching for his empty glass. He waved at the bartender and requested another round.

“Why not?” Sebastian asked. “I need you to look into this while I keep Gabrielle safe.”

“The goat farm is Black Spade Ranch.” The bartender eagerly replenished the fifty-dollar drink. Everett raised the glass and downed the amber liquid in one long swallow.

“Still hiding from Remi?” asked Sebastian. Everett’s ex, Remington Spade, along with her father and brothers, owned and operated an iconic goat farm located in St. Basil. Palmchatters from all the islands flocked to the farm during the holidays to catch the traditional Christmas goat. He understood why Everett didn’t want to be anywhere near the ranch.

“I’m not hiding. I’m respecting that she’s a married woman,” Everett said, looking miserable. Remi’s marriage to Bobby, Everett’s long-time frenemy, had been an enormous blow, despite Everett’s insistence that there was no future for him and his former love.

“You’ll have to see her again at some point.”

“Yeah, but not now,” Everett said, closing the door on the subject.

“I’ll see if I can convince Gabrielle to take the yacht to St. Basil. Getting away might do her some good.”

“In the meantime, I’ll follow up with a few guys with connections to Quattro to see who they sent to King Estate to do the dirty work. If Hester made a deal with them, we could pressure that guy to talk.”

“What if there are more plans to harass Gabrielle?” Sebastian asked.

“Hester’s not around to up the ante by taking out their enemies in Tiverton, so we should be able to pay them off to cancel any future attacks.”

“And if they renege on the deal?” Sebastian asked.

“We eliminate enough of them to make it clear not to fuck with us,” Everett said with finality.

“Glad we’re on the same page.”

“Sebastian, when you get to the farm,” Everett slid off the barstool, then stopped, inhaled deeply. “If you see anything that makes it look like Bobby isn’t worshipping the ground Remi walks on, I need you to tell me. Okay?”

Sebastian froze, careful not to tip the man off. “Yeah, I’ll do that.”

Chapter 22

“Remember that time Ike tricked Tucker into getting on the ferry to St. Killian?” Serena asked, laughing. “He made sure the dog got off the boat then had our yacht take him back to St. Felipe.”

Gabrielle hugged her side as laughter shook her body. “And Tucker made it back to King Estate in time for dinner.”

“Ike was so pissed. He didn’t know how the dog kept finding him,” Serena said.

“I wonder if Tucker misses Ike? Have you seen him around?” Gabrielle thought about the white Labrador retriever who’d claimed her brother as his reluctant human.

“Not since Ike left for Miami,” Serena said, the smile fading from her face. “Have you thought any more about signing the papers?”

“No,” Gabrielle said, looking away. “With everything that happened at the beach cottage, I’ve been distracted.”

“Of course, I understand,” Serena said, then took a long sip of her sparkling water. “I’ve been fighting the family for the past two years to make progress with Hullabaloo. What’s a few more weeks ... or months.”

The disappointment in her sister’s voice was evident, but Gabrielle couldn’t wrap her mind around the finality of having their parents declared dead. She wished Ike was here to help her. He wouldn’t like the idea any more than she did. But her sister had strong points for making the move and less parental issues.

Being estranged from her parents for years, with only the obligatory calls on birthdays and holidays, left Gabrielle empty now that they were missing. She didn't like to think that she'd run out of time. That the chance to repair her relationship with her parents had been snatched away. It was the one thing holding her back from going along with Serena's wishes. Siding with her sister would be official confirmation that she'd squandered the time to build a bridge and reconnect with them.

Gabrielle gazed past her sister toward the bar a few tables away. Sebastian was sitting with a clear line-of-sight to her table and the rest of the restaurant.

"Who are you looking at?" Serena asked, turning to gaze back at the bar. "Lachlan and Everett in an intense discussion with Sebastian. There's only one topic the three of them could be discussing. That's you."

"What?" Gabrielle screeched. "Why would you say that?" Heart pounding in her chest, she couldn't imagine that Sebastian would be confiding in his friends about their hook-up last night. Did men gossip like that?

"Because of the cruel message left in blood for you at the beach cottage," Serena said, with a raised eyebrow. "What other reason could there be?"

Gabrielle flushed, heat prickling her face. She was grateful her deep brown skin hid her embarrassment. It made perfect sense that Sebastian would ask the guys to meet him here to discuss the case. He'd already told her he'd planned to get their help.

"Gabrielle," Serena said, her eyes squinted into thin slits. "Is there something else I should know about you and Sebastian?"

"No." Gabrielle's voice hit a higher octave. She rubbed the tense muscles in her aching neck. "Of course not." She glanced back at the bar and noticed Sebastian staring at her. A smoldering look in his eyes that did nothing to hide his attraction. She looked away, grabbed a bread roll and stuffed a piece in her mouth.

“What’s with that look?”

Gabrielle dropped the roll as she almost choked on the bread. “What look?” Totally busted.

“That dreamy one when you looked at Sebastian. Don’t think I haven’t noticed you looking at him. You haven’t been able to take your eyes off him for more than a few minutes at a time. At first, I thought it was because you were freaked out and felt safer knowing he was close by.” Serena leaned back in her chair, a mischievous grin on her face. “Now, I think something entirely different is going on.”

“You’re being ridiculous,” Gabrielle said, trying to dismiss her sister’s accurate intuition. Something marvelous was going on in the midst of the craziness that Damian tried to inflict in her life. Sebastian had taken her over the edge of ecstasy last night. She’d curled up in his arms and fallen into the best sleep she’d had in years. He made her feel safe. Physically safe for sure, but there was more. Safe to be herself. He didn’t judge her. He trusted her instincts and supported her. He knew what she needed, but didn’t push for more.

She hadn’t thought it was possible but she woke without any thoughts of Damian or bloody goat hearts or sick messages. The only thing on her mind had been Sebastian and how connected she felt to him. She wasn’t fooling herself. The past few days had been an emotional rollercoaster. It was possible that after the danger was over, her feelings might change. Even though she couldn’t imagine that happening, she didn’t want to push for anything more with him. What they had right now was good enough.

“I hope I’m being ridiculous for your sake,” Serena said, then beckoned for the waiter. “You want dessert? The make the best mango goat cheese cheesecake in the Caribbean.”

Gabrielle nodded. “And coffee. Do they have Hullabaloo?”

“It’s Conrad,” Serena said, referencing St. Felipe’s quaint and cozy town center. “Hullabaloo coffee is everywhere.”

The waiter approached the table and beamed with excitement as he rattled off the handful of types of Hullabaloo

coffee they served at the upscale establishment. Gabrielle was pleased to hear her favorite was on the list, Felipe Especial, made with roasted, rare liberica coffee beans. She ordered a cup, extra hot and black. Serena ordered their dessert to share and a latte, with extra cream and a handful of sugar cubes.

Once the waiter was gone, Gabrielle asked the question nagging at her. “Why do you hope you’re being ridiculous? Do you have something against Sebastian? I mean, you hired him to be my bodyguard. You must like him.”

Serena frowned. “Acknowledging his superior security and bodyguard skills to keep you safe is different from liking him as a person.”

“He’s one of Ike’s best friends.”

A dubious look crossed Serena’s face. “That’s not a check in the positive column for me.”

“You tolerate him because he’s an ex-PISCO, but don’t care for him? What has he done to you?”

Serena’s face softened as the waiter brought her latte and placed a steaming mug of black coffee in front of Gabrielle. She inhaled the delectable scent of the coffee, allowing it to soothe her irritation. Nothing like a cup of premier brew to bring her peace. Growing up in the coffee business, her nose was trained to detect the most subtle hints in flavors. She could correctly identify every variety of Hullabaloo coffee blindfolded by smell or taste. It was the one area she excelled over her older sister. Gabrielle raised her cup and took a sip to calm the rage building in her.

“I’m indifferent toward Sebastian,” Serena said with a shrug. “We’re not friends. We’re not enemies. Since I’ve been back, I’ve seen what a top-notch bodyguard he was to Mom. I’ve also seen how he seems to go through women like tissues. Excuse me if I’m not keen on watching my baby sister make googly eyes at him.”

“Googly eyes?” Gabrielle balked, making a mental note to hide her lust for Sebastian when they were in public.

“I’m not blind. Sebastian is an extremely handsome man and you’re in a situation where you need a hero. That’s a dangerous combination. It’s natural to be attracted to him. I don’t blame you for that at all, but also hope you don’t act on it. I think it could be a mistake.”

“I’m a grown woman, Serena. I can make my own decisions and my own mistakes. Pursuing a relationship with Sebastian wouldn’t necessarily end bad for me.”

“Is that what you want?” Serena dug her fork into the decadent cheesecake. “A relationship with Sebastian?”

“I didn’t say that,” Gabrielle sucked in a sharp breath.

“You had sex with him last night, didn’t you?”

“I didn’t say that, either,” Gabrielle pushed Serena’s hand away from the cheesecake and dug her fork in. She plunged the creamy dessert into her mouth to stop from saying anything else incriminating.

“You didn’t have to. It’s written all over your face,” Serena said, concern in her eyes. “We don’t have the kind of sister relationship where I can lecture you about these things.”

Gabrielle bit her bottom lip. “Not yet, anyway.” She liked having a big sister who took an interest in her life and spoke up because she cared, even though she didn’t like Serena’s opposition to Sebastian.

Serena smiled. “So, I’ll stop while I’m ahead. How about that?”

“That’s perfect—”

A hand slammed down on the table, causing the cups of coffee to spill over. Gabrielle stifled a shriek as she looked up into the angry eyes of the man who’d tormented her a decade ago. Terror gripped her as she trembled and reminded herself that this man was not Damian. Damian died. She was there when it happened. He was gone.

This was his twin, Marvin Hester.

Not that it mattered, considering the anger wafting from the doctor.

“You did this, didn’t you,” Marvin screamed, shoving a paper in Serena’s face. “It’s not enough for you that my brother is dead, but you made sure I wouldn’t be able to bury him in the place we grew up, our home, here in Conrad.”

Serena didn’t flinch. “I thought it would be more respectful to my sister if the man who kidnapped and tormented her wasn’t buried on the island that our family founded. I could’ve stopped you from burying him in the Palmchat Islands, but I wanted to show some sympathy for your loss. You are free to bury him in St. Killian, or St. Xavier or the Tiverton cemetery. Take your pick.”

“My fucking pick was to bury him in the cemetery in Conrad where the rest of the Hester family is buried,” Marvin said. “But the King Family always has to use their influence to get your way. To hell with what it might mean for others as long as you’re happy.”

Gabrielle spoke up, trying to defuse the situation. She would say or do whatever it took to get Marvin to leave them alone. “I didn’t ask her to do that. If you want to bury him here, I can help you make arrangements.” Gabrielle glanced back at the bar. Sebastian was gone. Where was he?

“Fuck you, Gabrielle. I don’t want or need your help. I’m going to bury my brother in Toronto where our parents live now.” Marvin glared at her with such hatred that she cowered in her chair. “I can’t wait for the day when the King name can’t buy you out of trouble. That you suffer the real consequences of your actions once and for all.”

“You should leave.” Sebastian’s voice pierced the air, low and menacing. “Now.”

Marvin flinched, then backed away. “Gladly.”

Sebastian’s hand rested against Gabrielle’s. “You okay?”

She looked up into his beautiful dark eyes. “I am now.”

Chapter 23

Not one fucking second.

He hadn't had one single second alone with Gabrielle since this morning.

From the moment Dr. Marvin Hester had his public outburst at Sugarcane, Sebastian had been relegated to the shadows to watch over Gabrielle. Hannah Ellerby, Gabrielle's publicist, had arrived in time to see the end of the confrontation and launched a full pitch for Gabrielle to record videos for her Emerge Anew platform. The series would address her homecoming back in St. Felipe and her reaction to Damian's death.

And the videos had to be filmed today.

The last thing he'd wanted was to spend the afternoon and entire evening surrounded by Gabrielle's camera guy, the lighting guy, the hair and makeup guy, the cue card girl, and the overbearing publicist, yet here he was with the entourage crammed into his home in the Tango Lowlands as they filmed the last of four videos.

Sebastian sat on a tree stump stool, his back propped against the wall of his bungalow, tucked away in a corner as he watched Gabrielle. Coolness tinged the night air. A light breeze rustled through the trees, blowing strands of hair across her face. She wore an emerald green sleeveless dress that hugged her curves in all the right places. The spotlights illuminated the tropical brush and towering trees behind her, setting her aglow like a Caribbean princess in a place where she'd always belonged.

But that wasn't why he was mesmerized and riveted by her.

Her voice floated in the air as she bared her soul to the camera, speaking candidly about the experience of watching the man who tormented her die in the ICU at the Rakestraw Blake Center. She was raw and unfiltered. Vulnerable and authentic. Her words soothed her weariness and healed herself as she spoke to the world.

"I always say Emerge Anew is a journey, not a destination. It's a daily process where you strive to be your best self while not allowing life's challenges and obstacles to hold you back from the life you want," Gabrielle said, a sad smile curving her lips. "I didn't realize how much of my life was still on hold until Damian died. Things I shied away from because I had this ticking clock in my head of when he'd be released from prison. Thirty years until he's released. Twenty-six years until he's released. Twenty-two years until he's released. It was always in my mind, limiting me, and I didn't know it."

Sebastian sucked in a deep breath as a pain he hadn't felt in years gripped him. Those words were familiar, infecting him with grief. Words he'd heard from his mother.

No, Seby, we can't go. Your father might see us.

Come back, Seby. Your father might find us.

Don't do that, Seby. Your father might come after us.

She'd realized too late what kind of love his old man had for her.

His relentless attention and incessant adoration had enamored her until she realized it masked a love hell-bent on dominance and destruction.

In the end, his mother hadn't survived his old man.

The old man's obsession had driven him to track them down and take the only person in the world who'd loved Sebastian out of his life.

But Gabrielle had survived Damian.

She was free to live beyond the shadow he cast over her. She could do the things her heart desired. Her liberation tempered his mourning. Quieted the thoughts raging in his mind that he would turn out like the old man. Gave him hope that he could move beyond his past and not succumb to the same crazed, obsessive love his father had for his mother, even though that was the only love he'd witnessed his entire life. Even though thoughts of Gabrielle dominated his days, he wanted more than anything to be good for her. Not a man she'd grow to fear and loathe.

Gabrielle said, "The fears that have shackled me have fallen away. I'm excited about exploring new things in my life." She took a few steps toward the camera. "Like coming home to St. Felipe and reuniting with my friends and family. Like giving myself a chance of finding true love."

Sebastian locked eyes with Gabrielle as she said those words. A smile spread across his face, which caused her to wink at him. How in the hell had this woman decided that he was worthy of her? After all the shit he'd done, this shouldn't be possible. Maybe it wasn't.

"Until next time, I'm Gabrielle King, and I challenge you to embrace each day and emerge anew."

The entourage erupted into applause. Hannah rushed over to Gabrielle and wrapped her in a big hug.

"That was amazing," Hannah gushed. "You gave me goosebumps. You will inspire so many people with that video, girl."

"I hope so," Gabrielle responded, but her eyes were still on Sebastian, speaking directly to his heart.

Hell, she'd inspired him, alright.

He had demons to face. But he wouldn't fight the burning need to be with her. He couldn't. Not anymore.

"Sebastian," Hannah said, power-walking toward him as the rest of the entourage lined up to hug and congratulate Gabrielle. "Can you help us pack up the equipment? I'm sure

Gabrielle is exhausted and wants us out of here as soon as possible.”

Not as much as he wanted them gone.

Sebastian agreed and joined the crew in dismantling and packing up their items. An hour later, with the help of the King Family staff, they'd secured all the equipment onto the extended golf carts that would take Gabrielle's team to a boat waiting for them at the bottom of the mountain.

He trudged up the winding path to his home. Gabrielle stood on the deck watching him. She'd changed out of her dress and stood barefoot on the deck, wearing a white tennis skirt that showed off her toned thighs and a fitted neon pink tank top with her logo stretched across her ample breasts.

“What did you think?” Gabrielle asked as he stepped onto the deck and stopped next to her. She nibbled on her lower lip as if it was possible he didn't see her exactly as the world saw her—a badass, amazingly strong, and inspiring woman. Her dark brown skin glowed under the soft lights surrounding the deck. He stroked a finger along the side of her face, then twisted a strand of her thick locks around his fingers.

“You're amazing,” he whispered. “Not many people have the courage to share deep personal struggles for all the world to see like you do. I'm proud of you for using your experiences to uplift and help others.”

“Stop it,” Gabrielle slapped a hand against his arm, then let it linger unmoving. The warmth of her touch radiated through him. “I was not fishing for a compliment. I promise.”

“Could have fooled me.” He rested his hands on her waist. “But I'm happy to shower you with compliments all night long if you want.”

“You'd do that for me?” She laughed. When her velvety, dark brown eyes settled on him, they were full of smoldering heat.

That was the tip of the iceberg of what he'd do for Gabrielle King.

Fuck if he wasn't falling for this woman.

“I’d do a lot more than that,” Sebastian said, closing the gap between them.

“This from the man who goes through women like tissues,” Gabrielle said, a challenge in her gaze.

“Watch it with those stones. You’re living in a glass house on that one,” Sebastian reminded her. She didn’t deny it, which caused a twinge in his gut.

Gabrielle tossed her head back and stared at the stars spread across the night sky for a long moment. He looked at the graceful beauty of her neck and resisted the urge to trail kisses there. When she spoke, it broke the trance she’d placed on him.

“What if I’ve found someone who makes me want to change my old ways?” Gabrielle slid her hands along his arms and around his neck. Her gaze trailed from his eyes and lingered on his mouth as a naughty smile played at the corners of her mouth.

“That depends.” He found a groove around her waist and held her close. He dipped lower toward her face until the sweetness of her breath caressed his skin.

“On what?” Gabrielle tilted her head toward him and threaded her hands within his hair.

Sebastian licked his tongue along her lips, then said, “Who the someone is.” The desire to taste her and devour her raged through him. But he wanted her to say it.

Gabrielle didn’t disappoint. “It’s you, Seby. I want to be with you.”

Chapter 24

Primal instincts took over as he lifted her into his arms and crushed her mouth with his. She parted her lips to welcome his tongue, sucking and nibbling on him as he pushed the kiss deeper. She tasted like the sweetest honey, melting in his mouth with every lick and caress. He couldn't get enough of Gabrielle King. She was all he wanted and more than he deserved.

With the grace of a dancer, she slid her legs up his thighs and wrapped them around his hips. He pressed against her, cock pulsating as he rubbed against the thin fabric of her thong. Even with clothes separating them, he could feel how wet she was for him. It was enough to drive him fucking insane.

Hands roaming over the delicious curves of her ass, he squeezed and kneaded her soft flesh until her moans intermingled with their kisses. He took uncoordinated steps through the living room and into the bedroom, refusing to break the kiss until his shins bumped against the footboard. Gabrielle slipped from his arms, and she squealed as he let her fall back onto the bed.

She leaned forward with a sexy grin and lifted her tank top over her head, tossing it aside. Her plump breasts rose and fell against her chest. Her dark nipples, already tight buds, begged to be sucked. If he'd known she wasn't wearing a bra, fuck if he wouldn't have started his seduction of her body there.

Gabrielle continued her strip tease, shimmying out of the tennis skirt and wiggling the thong down her legs until she lay naked on his bed. If this was a fucking dream, he didn't want

to wake up. He'd never wanted a woman as much as he wanted her.

A sexy smile spread across her face as she flicked her thong around her finger.

"It's so hot in here. Looks like you're wearing too many clothes," Gabrielle said, then tossed the thong at him.

Sebastian caught it in the air. The soaked fabric in his hand sent a clear message to his cock, now twitching in his pants. He mimicked her moves, yanking his shirt over his head and stepping out of his pants and boxer briefs until he stood naked before her.

Her lust-filled eyes trailed down his body, fascinated by his chest muscles and eight-pack abs. Never had he been happier that he kept up the rigorous military workout schedule long after walking away from being a PISCO. The way Gabrielle salivated over him made every minute worth it. Her mouth fell open as she stared at his erect shaft, hard and thick and demanding to be inside her.

Gabrielle scrambled forward and pressed her palms against his abdomen, caressing him slowly up his chest. Her dark brown hands were in contrast to his tan, olive skin. He loved the look of her skin against his as she placed lingering, passionate kisses against his abs and chest, marking him as hers with every touch. He exhaled a low moan as she trailed kisses toward his navel. Her hand wrapped around his full girth, stroking him in a steady motion.

"Not so fast," Sebastian said. "My house, my rules, remember?"

"That was last time," Gabrielle said, licking her lips. "It's my turn to taste you."

His erection grew harder if that was possible. Pre-cum dripped from the tip as he forced himself to pull away. Gabrielle licked the wetness from her hand, which almost caused him to abandon his plans. But he wasn't going to be denied. As much as her lips on his dick was a fantasy he

wanted to play out in real life, there was one thing he wanted more. And there was only one way for him to get it.

Sebastian said, “Not until after I make you scream my name.”

Her eyes were wide with need for him, almost obliterating his restraint. But he kept focused on the pleasure he wanted to unleash upon her. To show her how much he'd do anything to please her.

Taking control, he leaned forward, cupped her face in his hands, and thrust his tongue in her mouth. When she was panting and breathless, he broke the kiss and stared into her gorgeous eyes, dazed with desire.

“And not until after you beg me to do it again,” Sebastian pushed Gabrielle back onto the bed, then grabbed a condom from a box on the dresser. As he turned around to face her, her eyes locked on him rolling the latex on.

Crawling up the length of her body, he positioned himself to enter her. The head of his cock brushed her soft, wet entrance, and he paused.

“I want you inside me,” Gabrielle whispered.

Sebastian stared back at the dark beauty beneath him and knew nothing in his life would be the same. He wanted her body, her heart, her soul. He wanted to be the man she leaned on as her rock forever. The one she trusted and couldn't live without. The need for her had festered within him and was out of control. He didn't care if it led to bliss or destruction. She was worth the fucking risk. The words slipped from his mouth before he could stop them. “I want you, Gabs.”

“Take me, Seby,” Gabrielle urged. Her voice was low and trembling with need.

Driven by the intensity of his emotions, he slid into her body in one fluid motion. Gabrielle let out a long, drawn-out breath as she shifted beneath him, her essence stretching and yielding to accommodate his thickness. He slowly pushed deeper, delighting in the pleasure shooting through him as her tight center enclosed his length.

It strangled him to take it slow, fighting the urge to release, but he wanted to savor every second. He wanted to feel every inch of her around him, her walls clasp his shaft. He wanted to lose himself in her wet heat. His body buzzed with the need to pound into her, but he needed every fucking moment to sear into his memories. Forever.

“You feel like pure heaven,” he said. “So tight. So fucking wet.” He punctuated each word with a thrust.

A whimper escaped her lips as she arched her back and pushed her hips against his, demanding more of him. More that he was happy to give. The sensual synchronized movements of their bodies coming together and pulling apart in perfect rhythm took over. He rocked against her as she gyrated against him, sliding his cock in and out faster. Delicious friction built, cloaking him with pleasure as he penetrated deeper with each pass.

Her breaths came in gasps, then turned into moans, increasing in volume as her fingernails dug into his arms. She writhed against him. Her core tightened around him, trembling and quivering. She was on the verge of orgasm. Her wetness dripped down his thighs. But he wouldn't give her what she needed until she gave him what he wanted.

He increased the intensity of his thrusts, pounding into her. The headboard banged against the wall. The sound of their bodies slapping together battled with Gabrielle's moans. Sweat drenched their bodies. He smothered her mouth with deep kisses between her frantic cries. He pushed harder and faster until he reached her most sensitive spot.

“Sebastian! Oh God! Sebastian!” Gabrielle cried out as she shattered beneath him. Her body bucked and shook as the throes of her orgasm took her under. Stars flashed in his eyes as his release ripped through his body.

Collapsing on top of Gabrielle, he was careful not to press his total weight onto her. She shook with laughter beneath him. Sebastian smothered her face with light kisses, then asked, “What are you laughing at?”

She wrapped her arms tightly around his neck and stared into his eyes. “Just wondering if you’re really going to make me beg you for more?”

Chapter 25

“I don’t understand why it’s so important that we do this today when we could be spending the day in bed,” Gabrielle said, wrapping her arms around Sebastian’s waist as they walked across the near empty parking lot of Black Spade Ranch.

She’d awoken, twisted in the bed sheets to find Sebastian dressed, to her disappointment, and waiting for her to take a boat to St. Basil.

“You mean like we did yesterday and the day before that,” Sebastian chided. His kiss to her temple lingered and she inhaled his sexy scent. Desire swirled between her thighs and she was a half second from pulling Seby back to the G-wagon and jumping his bones.

“Why break our streak?” she asked, pulling the hoodie up on her windbreaker to cover her head. Light gray clouds stretched across the sky blocking the sun as fog and misty rain swirled in the mountain air. A common phenomena of the mountains, while the beaches and valleys basked in glorious sunlight miles below. “It’s a lot more fun than being at a goat farm.”

Gabrielle crossed in front of Sebastian, stopping them from moving. She glanced around to make sure they were alone, then slipped her hand beneath the waistband of his pants. She wrapped her fingers around his shaft and smiled as he thickened in her grasp.

“You are playing dirty,” Sebastian said, sucking in a deep breath. She tightened her grip, stroking down his shaft.

Sebastian shook his head as his eyes closed. “No, we’re not doing this.” He pulled her hand from around his cock.

“Seby, come on,” Gabrielle pleaded, biting her bottom lip. “A quickie, then I promise to be good for the rest of the trip.”

He gripped her hands in his and pulled her into him. “I know you think you’re safe because there’s been no other threats from Quattro. But I don’t know if that’s because you’ve been hiding out with me in the Tango Lowlands or if it’s because they don’t have any other plans for you. I need to be sure you’re safe. It’s important.”

Gabrielle slumped, sobered by the truth in Sebastian’s words. She’d hoped that all the craziness with Damian and Quattro was behind her. “Right. So, you think Remi can help lead us to who left the bloody message for me at the beach cottage?”

“It’s the best lead I have so far,” Sebastian said, then leaned down and kissed the tip of her nose.

“Fine. Let’s go check things out.” Gabrielle looped an arm in Sebastian’s as they walked along the path until an industrial warehouse came into view.

Shrill bleating filled the air as a group of men dressed in rubber overalls, heavy boots, gloves and goggles, ushered a herd of goats through a series of metal railings inside. The animals moved methodically, hooves beating loudly against the straw covered concrete floor, toward a series of hoses dangling from the ceiling. Another set of men worked feverishly to wash mud and grime from their coats with heavy streams of steaming hot water. The smell of excrement and blood caused her to gag.

“You okay?” Sebastian asked, rubbing a palm against her back. “You want to wait outside while I talk to Remi?”

“No. I’m fine.” Gabrielle insisted. The last thing she wanted was to leave Sebastian alone with Remi Spade. Remi was an old friend of Ike’s from when he was a teenager. The only girl allowed in his crew, probably because she was drop dead gorgeous.

Sebastian slipped his hand in hers and led her through the muck to a woman standing near the back of the warehouse. When she turned, Gabrielle cursed under her breath. A gust of wind blew through the warehouse, sending wispy strands of thick brown hair across Remi's face. Time had been very kind to her. It didn't matter that she was dressed in dusty denim overalls stained with mud and dirt, oversized rubber boots and a long-sleeved cotton shirt. She was more gorgeous now than she had been back then. Remi would look fabulous in a trash bag.

"Well, look at you, Gabrielle King. All grown up," Remi said, giving her a warm smile.

"Surprised you remember me." Gabrielle leaned into Sebastian. She gave Remi what she hoped was a sweet smile, even though jealousy pricked at her skin.

"Of course I remember you. Ike is so proud of you and everything you've accomplished with your Emerge Anew website." Remi leaned against an unmoving conveyor belt covered with shaved goat hair.

"Have you talked to my brother lately?" Gabrielle asked, remembering that he still hadn't returned her calls.

"No, not since the plane disappearance," Remi said. "But I try to check out your videos from time to time. You're pretty inspiring."

"Thanks," Gabrielle said, then noticed the wedding ring on Remi's finger. "You and Everett got married? Ike didn't tell me. Congratulations."

Sebastian groaned and gripped her tighter.

The smile left Remi's face.

"What?" Gabrielle asked, looking from Remi to Sebastian, then back to Remi.

"I'm married to Bobby," Remi said, then cleared her throat. "Well, I know the two of you didn't island hop to catch up on the past. What's going on?"

Sebastian spoke up. “A threatening message was left for Gabrielle after she moved back to the Palmchat Islands.”

“Are you serious?” Concern clouded Remi’s light brown eyes. She peeled her muddy gloves from her hands and tossed them onto the conveyor belt. “Is this different than the incident at the airport that was all over the news? The mix-up between the cops and airport security that spooked you. I didn’t remember them saying anything about threatening messages.”

“Completely unrelated to the airport thing,” Gabrielle confirmed, then said, “Serena convinced law enforcement that it was in everyone’s best interest to not let what happened get out to the press. The case is being investigated by a specialized task force out of the St. X police department. It was sickening. They used bloody goat hearts and smeared the message on the wall of our beach cottage.”

“But you know the guys and I have a much better shot of getting to the truth faster than the cops,” Sebastian said.

Remi raised an eyebrow. “The guys?”

Sebastian rubbed the back of his neck and looked uncomfortable. “Just Everett so far, but I might need Adonis and Bobby to pitch in at some point. Kane and Lachlan are out of town. Anyway, I’m trying to get a lead on who did it by tracking down the source of fresh goat hearts.”

“We’re the only goat farm on the islands that sell fresh goat hearts,” Remi confirmed.

“That’s what I thought,” Sebastian said. “Have you noticed any missing inventory? Anything unusual?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact.” Remi wore a serious expression as she glanced around the warehouse. She beckoned for them to step further into a corner, away from the workers. “We have one buyer of the fresh goat hearts, the Pourciau family. They buy everything we produce and insist that the goat hearts are delivered fresh daily. We heard they use it in various exotic meals for their pets. So, a couple days before Gabrielle got back to the islands, one of our trucks broke down on Mountain Road 22 that cuts through the mango groves toward Crescent

Moon Bay. The driver had to hike back to the ranch, leaving it on the side of the road for hours. The truck contained the goat hearts we were taking to the marina for the Pourciaus.”

“That’s more than enough time for someone to steal goat hearts from the truck,” Gabrielle said, glancing at Sebastian. The look on his face told her he’d come to the same conclusion.

“Could you tell if any had been taken?” Sebastian asked.

“Honestly, we didn’t check. The Pourciaus pay a daily rate regardless of how many goat hearts we deliver. If someone took a cooler or two from the back, we didn’t notice,” Remi explained. “But that’s not the weirdest part.”

“What else?” Sebastian asked.

“The truck was towed to a garage to be fixed. We got a call a few days later saying that it had been sabotaged. Water in the gas tank. The mechanic implied it wasn’t an accident, although we can’t be sure.”

“Water in the gas tank would cause the engine to behave erratically. Lots of sputtering and hesitation, unexpected changes in speed, rough idling and smoking.” Sebastian crossed his arms over his chest. “It wouldn’t take long to ruin the engine.”

“Which is what happened,” Remi said. “Dad thinks that one of the goat handlers we fired earlier in the week could be behind it.”

“What did the guy do to get fired?” Sebastian asked.

“He was stealing goat carcasses before processing and selling them at farmers markets on other islands,” Remi explained. “His name is Tony Brooks and he’s an ex-con. Dad was trying to give him a fresh start, but we can’t let that kind of behavior go unpunished. Tony was very pissed off when Dad let him go. Pleaded for another chance and when Dad wouldn’t give it to him, Tony went ballistic. He was cursing and trying to destroy equipment before we got a few of the guys to toss him out.”

“Did you call the cops?”

“Of course not,” Remi said as if the thought was ludicrous. “My dad is a former PC-5 gang member. He’s always trying to help people get a second chance. The amount of goat meat that Tony stole wasn’t enough to hurt us. Calling the cops could’ve landed Tony back in prison. Dad didn’t want that.”

“Maybe if we find Tony, we can get him to tell us if Quattro used him to sabotage the truck and steal the goat hearts,” Gabrielle said. “If he was in Tiverton, he could be a Quattro gang member.”

“Why do you think Quattro is involved in this?” Remi asked. “What the hell is going on?”

Sebastian said, “We think the threat was orchestrated by Damian Hester before he died. He was known to do favors for Quattro in prison and may have asked them to send Gabrielle a few messages in return.”

“And Quattro would follow through on anything they agreed to with Damian. His death wouldn’t change anything.” Remi shook her head. “Can’t believe that bastard could still be terrorizing you from the grave.”

“It could’ve only been one message, but I need to find someone inside Quattro who can tell us for sure,” Sebastian said.

“Do you know how we can find this Tony Brooks person?” Gabrielle asked, feeling hopeful that they could get to the truth. Once the threats were gone, she could move on with her life. Move on with Sebastian.

Sebastian stared at Remi. “I don’t have that skillset, but we both know someone who does.”

“No, I don’t want Bobby involved in this,” Remi said, an exasperated look on her face.

“He’s one of the best hackers on the island and he has former gang ties.”

“Which is why I want to keep my husband far away from that world. We have enough problems as it is without tempting him to go back to that life,” Remi said.

“You and Bobby are having problems?” Sebastian asked.

Tears sprung to Remi’s eyes and she blinked quickly, forcing them away. “I didn’t say that. What I am saying is that I don’t want Bobby reconnecting with his old buddies in the PC-5 to get you answers. I’m sorry, Gabrielle, but let the cops handle this. Force them to find Tony Brooks.”

“I understand,” Gabrielle said, surprised to hear Bobby had been seduced into the most powerful cartel in the Palmchat Islands. It seemed he was free of that life now and she didn’t blame Remi for trying to protect her husband. “We’ll get the cops to follow up on this lead.”

Chapter 26

“We told Remi that we wouldn’t get Bobby involved in this,” Gabrielle said, pressing her hands on her full hips. She was blocking the oversized wooden doors carved with island motifs that served as the entrance to Pourciau Market. The building housed dozens of small and mid-sized businesses, including Bobby Zaniewski’s IT security firm.

“*We* didn’t tell Remi anything. You did.” Sebastian pulled Gabrielle toward him and kissed her deeply on the mouth. This was the last stop before he could get her back home and fuck her brains out. “I never agreed to it. I’m here to pay my old friend Bobby a visit, since I don’t get over to St. Basil often.”

The cutest frown wrinkled Gabrielle’s forehead as she stared up at him. “Liar. She’s going to be pissed when she finds out.”

Sebastian grew serious. “I’m not going to let whatever shit is happening between Remi and Bobby stop me from doing whatever it takes to protect you. This is not a game, Gabrielle. It’s your fucking life. Bobby is a grown ass man. If he wants to get back in the PC-5, hacking to find out if Tony Brooks is part of Quattro won’t be the reason.”

He knew because Bobby had in fact never left the PC-5, despite what he’d led his wife to believe. Information Sebastian was sure Everett would want to know, but telling Remi’s former lover that her new husband was lying to her would detonate a nuclear bomb over their lives. Sebastian was going to keep his mouth shut and stay out of it.

Gabrielle caved. “Let’s go inside and talk to Bobby.” Turning on her heels, she strutted toward the doors and swung them open, giving Sebastian a much appreciated view of her tight ass in those short shorts. He rearranged his hardening cock, then followed her inside.

Stepping inside the cool air-conditioned building, Sebastian surveyed the layout of the three-story structure—an open indoor courtyard with palm trees and wooden benches dominated the middle. Around the perimeter were a series of doors in a U-shape, each representing a different business with a number and name on the glass doors. A hum of activity radiated through the space although only a handful of people could be seen milling about.

Bobby’s office was on the third floor, which could be reached by an elevator near the entrance or a series of stairs ascending from the middle of the courtyard. Sebastian opted for the elevator and they stepped inside. When the doors opened, they walked to the left and passed several glass doors until stopping at one that read, A-to-Z IT Security Solutions. Sebastian knocked, then paused as the glass door pushed in. He glanced down at the door handle, noting the biometric sensor lock in addition to two deadbolts.

Considering Bobby’s ongoing connection with the PC-5, the open door was more than unusual.

And concerning.

He turned toward Gabrielle. He didn’t want to leave her alone. Quattro could be lurking and waiting to pounce. But he couldn’t take her inside while he checked things out. There could be bigger dangers inside the office.

Grabbing the Glock from his waistband, he thrust it toward Gabrielle. “Have you shot a gun before?”

She grew pale and took a step back. “I’ve never touched a gun before. What’s going on? Why is the door open? Do you think Bobby is in trouble?”

“I don’t know,” Sebastian admitted, then peered into the office. There were no signs of anyone inside, but he couldn’t

be sure. "I need to check things out, but I also need to make sure you stay safe." Sebastian grabbed her hand and forced the gun into her palm. "Hold onto this. Finger on the trigger. If you feel threatened in anyway, shoot. Doesn't matter if you hit the target or not. You'll spook the bastard. More importantly, I'll hear it and I will come for you. Got it?"

"I don't like this, Seby." Gabrielle shrank back, staring at the gun in her hand. "Why don't we leave together and you can call Bobby to find out if he's okay? I don't want anything bad to happen to you."

"You don't ever have to worry about me," Sebastian said, stroking a finger down her face. "I'm not going to do a damn thing that would take me out of your life." He leaned forward and placed a soft kiss on her lips. Before he could pull away, Gabrielle placed her hand on the back of his neck. She pulled him closer, extending the delicious moment.

He was so fucked.

Sebastian broke the kiss. "Where's your purse? You could hide the gun inside and pull it out if you need to."

A sheepish grin spread across her face. "I left it on the boat with all my bags from our trip to the shops at Crescent Moon Bay marina."

Sebastian shook his head. He knew he shouldn't have indulged her little shopping spree. But when she'd insisted on buying new lingerie to wear for him tonight, how the fuck could he resist that? Not that she'd wear them for long. "Fine. Try to hide the gun from view so no one calls the cops on you. Got it."

Gabrielle nodded and followed his instructions.

Sebastian glanced around one last time, satisfied that the third floor seemed more deserted than the bottom two. He gave Gabrielle a reassuring nod, then pushed the glass door open wider.

The office was small with stark white walls and dark blue carpet. A receptionist desk sat in the middle of the room with two fake palm plants on each side. Sebastian peered over and

saw a laptop computer next to a phone and a bin containing files. A woman's purse sat partially open on the floor next to the desk chair. To the left of the receptionist desk was a smaller room, no bigger than a closet, stuffed with office supplies. To the right was a short hallway that led to Bobby's office.

Reaching down to his ankle holster, Sebastian grabbed his backup Glock and walked quickly down the hallway. Faint whimpers caused the hairs on the back of his neck to stand on end. Light banging noises started, then stopped and resumed again. He approached the door with gun raised, then kicked it open.

The door banged against the wall.

Sebastian stared in disgust as he lowered his weapon.

Across the room, a woman sat on a low wooden stool as Bobby thrust his dick in and out of her open mouth. Her blond curls flopped back and forth as she gripped the edge of the seat. Bobby's grunts grew louder as she whimpered and moaned.

"Swallow it, bitch," Bobby said between grunts. "Take all this cum." With one last thrust, his pale white ass clenched and he collapsed onto the woman's face, shuddering.

Sebastian rapped his knuckles against the door. "You done?"

Bobby's head whipped around toward him. A hint of relief in his sapphire blue eyes as he processed Sebastian in the doorway.

"I thought you'd changed your mind about coming. You called hours ago." Bobby ran a hand through his wavy blond curls, then rolled over and eased off the woman. He leaned down and pulled his navy dress pants up. Smoothing his button down shirt into his pants, he fastened his belt then placed a kiss on the woman's hair. "Go clean yourself up, hon."

The woman wiped a hand across her mouth and stood on shaky legs. Dazed from being face-fucked, she looked up at

Sebastian and flushed red with embarrassment. Lowering her head, she brushed past him and made her way to the front of the office.

“You fucking around on your wife? That’s a douche move and you know it,” Sebastian chided.

“Getting a blow job doesn’t count as cheating,” Bobby said, matter-of-factly. “Didn’t some American president prove that decades ago?”

“Would Remi agree with that?”

“Remi knows how much I love her,” Bobby said with a challenge in his gaze. “My wife is happy. Do not fuck this up for me. You’re the last motherfucker who should try to walk on moral high ground. What would Ike think about you fucking around with his little sister. Don’t try to deny it. Shit is written all over your face.”

Sebastian tensed. “Ike is my best friend. He wouldn’t have a problem with me and Gabrielle.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. He might be scared you’ll turn psycho on her like your old man did to your—“

Sebastian jerked his hand up, pressing the Glock between Bobby’s eyes. “Don’t fucking say it.”

“Calm down,” Bobby said, pushing the gun away. “What’s more likely to happen is that once you solve this mystery of who’s threatening Gabrielle, she’ll lose interest in fucking her hero. You’ll be on the side of the road with a broken heart and she’ll have moved on to some other fucker.”

Sebastian slammed the Glock across Bobby’s face. “If I didn’t need you, I’d put a bullet in you.”

Bobby frowned, then swiped at the blood oozing from the cut above his eyebrow. “You’re fucking in love with her, aren’t you?”

Sebastian ignored him. “I need you to find out if a man named Tony Brooks has any ties with Quattro.”

“Guess it’s back to business” Bobby smirked, then walked behind his desk and sat down. “I confirmed that Damian did a

bunch of favors for Quattro, killing off members who had probably betrayed the gang. He spent a lot of time in solitary for his efforts. All Damian asked for in return was a few dozen cell phones, which is fucking weird. Because of the importance of the King Family to the islands, all the gangs consider them off limits. My contacts are confident that Quattro wasn't involved in any attack on Gabrielle.”

Sebastian slumped into a chair adjacent to the desk. “Well, this information definitely changes things. Damian used those cell phones to watch videos of Gabrielle about her coming home to the Palmchat Islands. That was the reason he got into the fight with the prison guards, which led to his death. Remi said Tony Brooks spent time in Tiverton. Check and see if he crossed paths with Damian while serving time.”

Typing slowly on the keyboard, Bobby cracked his neck from side to side, then paused. Several minutes passed with neither man saying a word. A series of beeps emitted from the computer and Bobby leaned forward, then turned to Sebastian with a disturbed look on his face.

“Tony Brooks is an incel,” Bobby said, shaking his head. “Active on dozens of websites that those punks like to hide out on.”

“What the fuck is an incel?”

“Guys who hide behind their keyboard being pricks to women because they can't attract them sexually. They have no chance of being in a relationship even though that's what they want the most. They consider themselves involuntarily celibate.” Bobby made air quotes as he says the words. “Because no woman in her right or wrong mind would give them a second glance, they are bitter and angry. Jackasses like this hide out on websites commiserating with each other and bashing women.”

“That's pathetic.”

“Tell me about it. Some of them, like this dude Tony Brooks can take things to the next level. He's a frequent poster and has harassed women online,” Bobby said, flicking his finger along the computer mouse to scroll past the information

on the screen. “His time in Tiverton was for stalking a woman at a local grocery store.”

Bobby turned back to the computer monitor and typed again on the keyboard. A few minutes passed as the computer hummed.

“Shit,” Bobby muttered under his breath.

“What is it?”

“Damian was Tony Brooks’s cell mate during his time at Tiverton.”

“Fuck,” Sebastian said. “Two fucking obsessive stalkers in the same cell. Damian could’ve convinced Tony to do his dirty work for him. He could’ve used those cell phones to call Tony before Gabrielle’s plane landed and set this all in motion.”

“Or Brooks could’ve idolized that bastard and went after Gabrielle to pay homage. Kinda of like those sick Fury followers.”

Sebastian shuddered thinking of the secretive group of people who worshipped The Fury, a serial killer who murdered at will across the Palmchat Islands decades ago.

“Get me a location on Tony.” Sebastian wasn’t inclined to watch the justice system play out on this one. With Hester dead, Sebastian wouldn’t let some copycat punk pick up where Damian left off. He’d take the guy out before anyone realized the connection.

“Working on it. I’ll text you as soon as I find him.”

Sebastian headed toward the door.

“One last thing,” Bobby called from behind him. Sebastian turned back. “You might want to share with Serena that the photos leaked of Gabrielle online are the same ones that the police confiscated as evidence from Damian’s computers after Gabrielle was kidnapped a decade ago. Whoever posted them could’ve hacked into their weak ass police evidence databases to get them. I’m sure her lawyers can do something to get them destroyed now that Damian is dead.”

“Yeah, I’ll tell her,” Sebastian said, then walked down the hallway to the entrance. The blond receptionist pretended to be busy, watering the fake plants, as he passed by her and exited.

Gabrielle rushed toward him. “We need to get back to St. Felipe now. Detective Shannon texted me. He said there’s been a break in the case.”

Chapter 27

Gabrielle gripped the edge of the railing as the captain steered the yacht toward the dock. The crest of the King Family adorned a metal arch over the wide wooden planks as the golden sand beach stretched along its sides. In the distance, her family home loomed at the top of the hill.

She could feel Sebastian's eyes on her, but she didn't turn to look at him. She couldn't. Her mind was reeling from everything he'd found out from Bobby.

Discovering that the person behind the threatening message at the beach cottage wasn't a gangster-for-hire but could be another sick, depraved man who'd become obsessed with her had set her nerves on edge.

Tony Brooks had a criminal record for stalking and had been a cellmate of Damian's. No doubt she'd been the topic of their conversations during the two years they occupied the same cell. The thought of Damian Hester poisoning another psycho's mind sickened her. Unlike last time, she hadn't done anything to foster Tony Brooks's infatuation with her. She wouldn't let another creep ruin her life. Not again. Not when she knew what it felt like to be free.

As the yacht came to a stop, Gabrielle rushed toward the stairs.

"Gabs ..." Sebastian called to her, but she didn't turn around. She didn't want him to see the fear and anger coursing through her body. A part of her worried about how far he would go to protect her. She'd stopped being a job to him.

Everything between them was deeply personal, even if they hadn't talked about it yet.

Gabrielle double-checked that she had her cell phone, then turned to one of the staff members smiling at her from the dock. "Can you grab my purse and the shopping bags and have them taken to Sebastian's house? We won't be coming back to the boat after our meeting."

"Of course, Ms. King," the young woman responded with a brighter smile.

As she took a step off the boat, Sebastian was by her side, his hand outstretched to help her down. Slipping her hand in his, she felt an instant sense of calm spread over her. How did he do this every time? He was there when her chaotic thoughts and emotions were about to drown her. The rock she clung to when everything else was in disarray.

They walked side-by-side in silence toward the golf cart.

"I'll take her up," Sebastian said to the driver. "Can you get a ride back with one of the others?"

The man nodded, then jumped out of the cart.

Gabrielle sat on the cushioned seat and waited for Sebastian to get inside. He steered the golf cart up the wide dirt path, then said, "Don't tell the cops what we found out about Quattro or Tony Brooks. Listen to what they say, but keep our information a secret."

"Why shouldn't we tell them?" Gabrielle turned toward Sebastian. His handsome face had turned to stone. "I trust Brad. He was the one who found me and dragged me out of that fucking hole in the dirt Damian had trapped me in. He kept looking when everyone was giving up hope. He's on my side. If Tony Brooks is my new stalker, isn't it better that we all work together to stop him?"

"And how the fuck are you going to explain how we learned about Tony?" Sebastian gave her a look laced with frustration. "Bobby's methods aren't exactly legal. You want to get him in trouble for helping us?"

“Of course not, but can’t we say we have an anonymous source or something?”

“We’re not fucking journalists. It’ll take Shannon about half a second to link me to Bobby and put Bobby in hot fucking water. I can’t let that happen,” Sebastian insisted.

“Is that the only reason you don’t want to tell Brad what we know about Tony Brooks?”

Sebastian sucked in a deep breath. The golf cart slowed to a stop along the curving path. When he turned to look at her, the frustration had been replaced with concern.

“I told you I wouldn’t let anyone hurt you.”

His words sent a chill through her body.

“The cops can find Tony Brooks and arrest him.”

“Why? So you can live with that ticking clock again. Counting down the fucking days until he’s released from prison and comes after you for revenge?” Sebastian said, stroking a hand down her face. “It ripped my heart out hearing that Damian made you feel like that for the past decade. I’m not going to let Tony Brooks start a new clock. If he is stalking you, I will end him.”

“End him?” Gabrielle could barely get the words out. “Sebastian—”

“Stop fucking arguing with me.” The golf cart jerked forward. Sebastian steered it up the hill at maximum speed. “We’re doing this my way. Don’t mention Brooks.”

Gabrielle swallowed her protest as she stared at this perfect man willing to do anything to keep her safe. For most of her life, she’d lamented not having someone by her side to support and help her through the horrible things she’d endured. She’d had to face them all alone. Overcame them all by herself. Emerge anew from the tragedy without the people who claimed to love her in this world.

But that wasn’t her life now. Not anymore.

Gabrielle leaned her head onto Sebastian’s shoulder. He shifted to pull her into him. “Fine. We’ll do it your way,” she

whispered in his ear, then kissed his cheek, even though her acceptance scared the shit out of her.

As they turned into the circular driveway in front of King Estate, Serena stood outside waiting for them.

“Where’s Brad?” Gabrielle asked as she climbed out of the golf cart.

“On the back porch,” Serena said. “He wouldn’t tell me anything until you got here.” Her sister wore a brave face, but she could see the worry in her eyes. “I have a meeting with one of our distributors, or I’d stay with you.”

“It’s okay. Take care of business, and I’ll fill you in once you’re done,” Gabrielle said, then led Sebastian to the back porch.

Detective Brad Shannon sat alone at a teak wood table for six that overlooked the groves and tennis courts. A pitcher of mango lemonade sat in the center, along with a plate overflowing with cheese, crackers, fruit, and a bowl of goat paté.

Brad stood and embraced her in a warm hug. “How are you doing?”

“I’d be better if you told me you’ve caught whoever left the threatening message for me at the beach cottage,” Gabrielle said, encouraging Brad to sit back down. She sat in the chair next to his. Sebastian remained standing, stationed behind her. His hand rested against her neck. His thumb caressed circles in her tense muscles.

Brad pulled out a folder and opened it in front of Gabrielle. “Do you recognize this man?”

She pulled the picture closer and stared at him. He had pale brown skin and a gaunt, thin face littered with acne. Dull brown eyes that were too close together stared into the camera. It was a mugshot, but the name had been cut off.

“No, I don’t know who this is. I’ve never seen him before.” Gabrielle pushed the photo back toward Brad.

Brad slid the picture to the side and placed three more photos in front of her. “Do you recognize these things?”

Gabrielle nodded, running a finger on the outline of one of the photos. “This is the flask that my brother Ike sent for my birthday a few years ago. It’s engraved with my name on the back. You can’t see that in this picture, though. It was a joke because we would drink coffee out of it, not liquor.” She stared at the next photo. “These are the sketches for my new line of Emerge Anew journals. A top artist out of Portugal created them for me.” She turned to the last picture. “And those are the pearl hair clips my mom gave me when I turned thirteen.” Frowning, she looked up at Brad. “Why do you have pictures of these?”

“They are evidence in your case. Officers found them along the trail that leads from the beach cottage to the private boat dock. They were scattered in the brush and the shrubs,” Brad explained. “We believe you have a new stalker. This man,” Brad pointed to the picture, “is our prime suspect and believed to have been the one who left the bloody message. We positively identified his fingerprints on the items. Based on footprints, broken shrubs, and branches on the trail, we believe he stole these items to have mementos of you and was hiding out waiting for you to return home. When Mr. Luttrell was with you as you returned, he likely got spooked and took off.”

“Sebastian being with me stopped him from attacking me?” Gabrielle asked.

“We believe so, although we can’t be sure what he would’ve done if you’d been in the cottage alone,” Brad confirmed. “The man’s name is Tony Brooks.”

Gabrielle stifled a gasp and listened in silence as Brad gave a rundown on all the things Sebastian had already learned from Bobby. The cops had come to the same conclusions. Tony Brooks had been a first-time stalker when he was sent to Tiverton. But two years under the tutelage of Damian had brought Tony out of prison with a thirst for more dangerous attacks on the objects of his obsession.

And his current obsession was her.

“This cannot be happening.” Gabrielle gripped the edge of her seat. This time her fear wasn’t only for her safety. She was worried about Sebastian’s promise to end Tony Brooks and what consequences he would suffer if he followed through on his word.

“I don’t want you to worry,” Brad said, grabbing her hand. “We have several leads on Tony Brooks’s location. We will find that bastard before he makes another move. We will stop him.” Brad’s phone beeped. He glanced down at the device for several seconds, then stood up. “I have to go. I will keep you posted as we get more information.”

Brad turned a critical eye to Sebastian. “I’m counting on you to keep Gabrielle safe until we find Brooks. Don’t let her down.”

Chapter 28

The smell of fresh grilled seafood filled the air as yellow-orange flames curled above the grill and tendrils of smoke climbed to the sky. The sun went down minutes ago. Torches around the perimeter bathed the deck in a soft glow against the oncoming dark of night.

Sebastian stood near the grill with his back to Gabrielle. He wore a pair of khaki shorts that sat low on his hips. Nothing more. His back muscles flexed as he shifted octopus strips and conch over the grates.

Gabrielle couldn't ignore the heat and insatiable ache forming between her thighs. No man had ever made her feel the way Sebastian could. The sex was off the charts, for sure. But the infinite pull toward him wasn't driven by lust. A connection existed between them that couldn't be denied. He was the one she could lean on when she was tired of being strong. Tired of fighting battles. He carried the burden with her. For her.

Now that she had him in her life, she couldn't imagine what it would be like without him. She'd give anything never to know those days again. Walking to the bistro table, Gabrielle arranged the place settings.

"Damn," Sebastian called from behind her.

She turned around and faced him. "What's wrong?"

"Wrong?" He raised an eyebrow as his eyes raked over her. "Everything is right. You look gorgeous."

“In this old thing?” Gabrielle teased, then twirled from one side to the other. Sebastian followed her every move like a man in a trance. It was more than she’d hoped for.

A huge smile spread across his face as he tore his eyes away from her. “You keep that up, and we won’t make it to dinner.”

“Trust me, we’ll need food to have enough energy for what I have planned later tonight,” Gabrielle teased.

“Is that right?” Sebastian licked his lips slowly.

Gabrielle nodded as warmth blazed across her skin.

“Well, the food is ready.” Sebastian placed the platter on the center of the table next to the salad bowl. She sat as he arranged salad onto their plates, then topped the mound of vegetables with octopus and conch. He poured the soft drinks into their glasses and sat down next to her.

“Did you want wine instead of soda?” Sebastian asked. “I could have some brought up from the main house.”

“I don’t drink alcohol,” Gabrielle laughed. “But that has more to do with the King’s coffee empire battling with the Bishop’s liquor empire in the Palmchat Islands than anything related to my father being a minister. But don’t let me stop you. I don’t mind if you drink.”

“My old man was a drunk. Watching how booze made him a fucking jerk was enough to make me avoid the stuff.” Sebastian swirled his glass and then took a sip.

“It’s strange to hear you talk about your family. When you came to the islands, it was all a big secret why you’d become homeless and needed a host family. Everyone protected you, which made the bratty kid in me so jealous,” Gabrielle shook her head. If young Gabrielle could see her now, she’d be shocked that the bane of her existence was now the one person she couldn’t stay away from.

“You were only eight years old when I got here. The shit I’d gone through isn’t something you’d tell a child.” A pained expression clouded his face.

“I didn’t mean to poke old wounds. You’ve come a long way since then. I know what it’s like to want to leave your past behind,” Gabrielle said, reaching a hand to caress his. The last thing she wanted was to pressure him into talking about his past. It wouldn’t change anything between them. She was curious but didn’t need to know the part of his life that was long over.

“The bastard murdered my mother.”

His words knocked the wind out of her. Gabrielle looked into his eyes, then reached a hand to caress his face. He leaned into her touch. Encouraged that he wasn’t pushing her away, she leaned over and wrapped him in her arms. Sebastian held onto her, then pulled her down onto his lap. They sat in silence for several moments.

“I’m so sorry,” Gabrielle said, kissing him softly. “I don’t need to know details.”

“Yeah, you do,” Sebastian countered. “There’s a reason why I never let myself get too close to a woman. Why I’d go through them like tissues. But you’ve come into my life and changed everything. There’s no decision to make about whether I let myself get close to you. It’s already fucking done. I’m closer to you than any person since my mother.”

“Seby, you’ve changed everything for me, too. We’re the same. We’re used to pushing people away. Keeping our distance. But now we have each other. It feels inevitable and natural and perfectly us. Knowing what you went through is not going to change that. I promise.”

“Don’t make promises you’re not sure you can keep,” Sebastian said, dragging a hand down his face. “Here’s the difference between you and me. Through your Emerge Anew videos, you’ve told enough of your story for me to get why you’ve been aloof in relationships. Damian robbed you of your ability to trust men.”

Gabrielle sucked in a deep breath. Sebastian thought he knew her story, but there were parts that no one knew. And if she told him, he might not look at her the same. It could change how he felt about her. “Damian is a part of my past.

What happened back then didn't stop me from trusting you. I know in my heart that you're nothing like him."

"But you don't fucking know that," Sebastian said, pushing her off his lap. Gabrielle stumbled and then stood as Sebastian stomped away from her. He raked a hand through his hair, then turned to face her. The fear in his eyes tore at her heart.

"I don't ever want to hurt you," Sebastian said. "It would fucking kill me if I hurt you. Or scared you. Or made you lose trust again."

Gabrielle eliminated the space between them. Lifting his hands to her mouth, she kissed his scarred knuckles. "Don't do this. Not when I've found you. A man who understands me like no one ever has. You are my safe place. But I want to be that for you, too."

"Even if getting close to me could be dangerous for you? As dangerous as Damian Hester and Tony Brooks?" Sebastian challenged.

Gabrielle didn't flinch. Something dark and haunting lurked in Sebastian's past, but it didn't change a damn thing for her. "Trust me enough to tell me. Don't play God with my life. I've had more than enough people who did that to me in the past. Let me decide for myself if you're worth the risk."

Sebastian's shoulders slumped. He held her hand and led her back to the table. She sat down, and he pulled his chair directly across from her. He took a deep breath, then said, "My old man was an obsessed fucker. Like Damian Hester. Like Tony Brooks. My mother would take me with her every day as she did odd jobs to make money and keep food on the table. I'd see my old man, day after day, following us. He was obsessed, unable to stop being near her. She never noticed he was there, but I saw him every fucking day. Stalking us from a distance. Watching my mother as if he needed to see her to breathe. He'd get home after us and turn to alcohol, drinking because he couldn't deal with how loving her made him feel. He'd beat her and scream at her for making him crazy with love. The only way he knew how to love was out of control

and obsessive. That's the only kind of love I thought existed. It's how I was taught to love. Back then, I didn't understand him. It fucking scares me shitless that I do now because of you."

"I am so sorry for what you went through. For what your father did to your mother. But that has nothing to do with us. If you think for one second I believe you could do to me what your father did to your mother, you're delusional. You are not your fucking father. You are not that man," Gabrielle said.

"I can't stop thinking about you," Sebastian whispered. "I don't ever want to be away from you."

Gabrielle chuckled as a flutter filled her heart. "News flash, Seby. I feel the same way about you."

"It's not the same."

"The hell it isn't. You're my bodyguard now. I have the perfect excuse to keep you close. But when all of this stalking madness is behind us. I still want ... this. I want to keep being with you." Gabrielle glanced back toward the living room. "And I'll prove it."

"Prove it?" Sebastian asked.

"I'm going to show you my journal," Gabrielle said. If there was one way to convince Sebastian that she was as crazy about him as he was about her, it would be sharing what she wrote about her bodyguard in her journal.

She grabbed her purse from the side of the bed, then rushed back to Seby on the deck. "I've written about you in my journal. After you read what I wrote, then you'll wonder who's the obsessed one."

"You wrote about me." A sexy smile spread across his face.

Gabrielle nodded, then unzipped the purse and reached inside for her journal. A strange sensation brushed across her skin. She dropped the bag and leapt into the chair, shaking and screaming. Snakes tumbled from the purse, hissing and slithering along the deck floor around a single white card.

Tears coursed down her face as she read the message.
You will always be mine.

Chapter 29

Arms shackled behind his back and legs chained, Ike shuffled forward, easily matching the pace of the armed guards surrounding him. Humidity clogged the air, making it hard for him to breathe. A thick cloth covered his head but didn't conceal the darkness of night.

A hand jerked him to a stop. In the distance, the purring of helicopter blades slicing through the air was faint. The movement was designed to be undetectable to the untrained ear. The wind picked up, blowing in a chaotic frenzy, whipping against his body, almost knocking them over. The helicopter landed, and the blades slowed. A metal door creaked open, followed by heavy footsteps banging against metal.

The guards moved closer to him.

Guns jabbed into his side.

“Stand down.” Her voice was clear and confident. “I'll take it from here.”

It was her.

“He's dangerous. Are you sure you want to handle him alone? We can assist with the transport.”

“That won't be necessary.” She rubbed a hand down his chest as she moved closer to him. “I can handle Ike da Costa.”

The scent of her jasmine perfume surrounded him. He closed his eyes and inhaled the intoxicating fragrance. He wanted to touch her. To hold her. To know her. All in due time.

He didn't respond. He wouldn't. Not until they were alone.

“Payment in full,” she said.

A briefcase clicked open, then closed, followed by grunts of satisfaction from the guards.

“Where do you want him?” A guard asked.

“Take him inside,” she instructed.

Ike fumbled over his feet as the guards ran, dragging him toward the helicopter. They raced up the incline inside and then pushed him down onto the hard floor. He tumbled and rolled for a few feet before stopping with a loud thud against the side wall.

“Nice doing business with you,” a different guard said.

“Likewise,” she said.

The helicopter rose from the ground.

Ike flipped over on his back and then maneuvered until he sat upright. He closed his eyes and focused on the sounds, listening for her. But she wasn't back here with him. Was she in the cockpit? Or had she left him alone to be taken to his final destination?

To his home.

St. Felipe.

His mind wandered to his family as the helo rose higher into the sky. His sister, Serena, was the head of the family's coffee empire. She'd taken her rightful position in the spot she'd been groomed for since birth. A spot that would never have been his, no matter how much he'd wanted it. Hullabaloo Enterprises passed from mothers to daughters. Not sons.

He'd fought hard for the chance only to be thwarted by his mother at every turn. Until, on a trip to Los Angeles, he'd given up and accepted his destiny. He was expected to follow in his father's footsteps. The moral and charismatic minister who'd dedicated his life to helping others. Ike hadn't given a rat's ass about helping anyone but himself until a skinny blond kid stole his wallet and raced away down the sidewalk, jumping over the stars on the Walk of Fame.

Ike hadn't been upset. He'd been intrigued by the kid's boldness. For every blessing Ike had, others were scratching and fighting to survive. The minute he caught up with the kid and body-slammed him to the ground, ripping his wallet out of the kid's grimy hands, Ike's life changed.

He stared into the boy's scared brown eyes and was saddened by the desperation and hopelessness there. The kid was only a few years younger than Ike and was headed toward a life behind bars if he lived long enough. Ike felt what his father must have felt on every mission trip he took. He felt responsible for helping the kid, and that's what he did. He convinced his parents to rescue the kid. Set him up with a host family in St. Felipe and enrolled him in the local public schools as a foreign exchange student. Over the years, the kid had grown up to become his closest friend. Sebastian was the one he could rely on through thick and thin and the one who'd be the happiest to see him return home.

And then there was Gabrielle, his younger sister who'd survived a heinous tragedy and embarked on a journey of self-healing that inspired millions. Ike hadn't been around for most of Gabrielle's life. He'd done all he could to support her from afar, giving her the time and space to dictate the nature of their sibling relationship. For the most part, she kept him at a distance. He was as guilty as their parents for her being sent away. He hadn't stood up for her when he should have. It was one of his biggest regrets.

The scent of jasmine wafted in the air. Ike forced his thoughts away and focused on the footsteps coming closer to him. A hand stroked along his neck, then pushed the thick cloth off his head.

Fuck was she insanely beautiful. A force to be reckoned with like the mightiest hurricane but calm like the eye of the storm. He wanted her in ways he didn't understand. Couldn't put into words. He'd taken her promise to save him to heart. It was lodged there, buried deep and unmovable. Unshakable. Tethering their souls and their lives together.

She knelt beside him with a quizzical look clouding her face. "Why are you pretending you haven't gotten free of your

restraints?

“Because I need information,” Ike said, folding his arms across his chest. “Are you a PISCO?”

She responded with an incredulous eye-roll, “No.”

“How did you get a stealth-modified Palmchat Island military helicopter to transport me if you aren’t part of the special ops team?”

She smiled. “I’m impressed. They’ll sell a Cera P19 helicopter to anyone with enough zeros in their bank account.”

“Anyone who can toss away twenty-two million dollars for a stranger’s gambling debts must be loaded.”

“We’re not strangers, Ike.” She leaned closer to him, head tilted, revealing a long graceful neck. The urge to trail kisses along her skin rose within him.

“You may know me, but I can guarantee I would never forget meeting you. If our paths had crossed before, I would remember it.”

“Maybe,” she teased, a sexy smile playing at the corners of her mouth. “If you weren’t distracted.”

He frowned. “Who are you?”

“That doesn’t matter.” Her tone closed the book on that question. She wouldn’t make it easy for him to find out who she was.

“If you won’t tell me who you are, then tell me why you helped me with the Brazhenskys.”

“Because I promised I would save you. I’m a woman of my word.”

“Fine. Who are you working for?”

“Working for?” Her dark eyes flashed with anger. “I don’t work for anyone but myself. Everything I do is because I want to do it. No one controls me.”

Ike leaned forward, closing the distance between them. He could smell the sweet scent of her breath as it brushed against

his skin. “Why did you help me?”

“Because of Peter.”

“Peter? My father?”

“Yes.”

“My father is dead.”

“Is he? Do you believe that, Ike?”

“What are you saying? Have you talked to my father?”

“I have not. But I know the circumstances around his disappearance don’t make sense. I don’t know if your parents are dead or alive. But you need to find out the truth. And you couldn’t do that while you were in the hog pen. I had to free you so the prodigal son could return home.”

“How often can the prodigal son fuck up and return home welcomed with open arms?”

“As many times as it takes. Everyone saw how you were turning your life around. You’d found a group of men with similar backgrounds to work with. You wouldn’t be restricted by all the military rules that choked the conviction out of you and led you astray.”

“Until the family plane disappeared.”

“So what if you lost your way? Peter would want you to find it again. What you started two years ago, but didn’t finish, is the key to figuring out what happened to your parents.”

“How do you know all of this? Who told you?”

“Peter. He loved you so much. More importantly, he believed in you and the goodness deep in here,” she said, then pressed a palm against his pounding heart. “The goodness you thought had been corrupted is still in there.”

Ike reached for her, holding her face in his hands. His fingers caressed her soft skin. She closed her eyes as he pressed his forehead against hers. Their mouths found each other in a slow, gentle kiss. He parted her lips with his tongue and deepened the kiss, stroking and sucking on her as if time had paused for them.

She was breathless when she pulled away from him. “It’s time.”

“No. Come with me.” The words rushed from his mouth. He didn’t want to be without her. He’d say anything to keep her with him. “Help me find my father.”

“I’m a distraction you can’t afford. The only way you will embrace your calling is if you stay focused,” she stood, then pointed to a thick hawser-type rope coiled around a hook near the door to the helicopter. “How are your fast-rope skills?”

“Better than most.” Ike shrugged. Some skills you never forget. Especially since they’d been a regular activity for him as a PISCO. The Palmchat Islands had a unique threat to its existence—cartels that chose to use the islands as personal playgrounds, putting Palmchatters’ lives at risk every day. PISCOs hunted down those threats on the island or at the source abroad to keep the cartels from taking over their country. It was an endless fight. One they’d committed to continuing for as long as it took.

“The gear is in the bin over there,” she pointed to a steel drum near the wall. “It has everything you need: a jumpsuit, boots, knee pads, helmet, and leather gloves. All military-grade quality. You’ll have to do the rest yourself. It’s only the pilot on board with you and me.”

Ike dressed quickly, then turned the series of latches to open the side door. Air rushed inside the compartment, sending hair flying around the mystery woman’s face. He pushed the rope overboard. It dangled and twisted in the wind until dragging along an open clearing of the forest floor. The lush trees and brush of the Cabrito Mountains loomed in the background as dawn approached.

He stretched a gloved hand to hold the rope, then turned back toward the mystery woman. “Will I see you again?” Ike had to know.

“Only if I’m very lucky,” she said, then kissed him. She turned away. Her long braid was swept over her shoulder. Tattooed letters were etched against the nape of her neck.

AVA

Was that her name? He didn't remember meeting her, but with a name, he'd figure out where their paths had crossed and why she'd put her life and her money on the line to help him.

"Ava!" Ike called out. She turned, a look of surprise on her face. "Your luck has always been better than mine."

He hoisted his body onto the rope, squeezing it between his hands, thighs, and knees as he fell toward the earth. The island was stunning in the early dawn, awakening for another glorious day.

The zip of bullets blazed past him, bouncing off the helicopter. He twisted and turned in the air, trying to find where the shots were coming from. It was too dark. More shots were fired. Glowing orange lights pelted against metal until one hit its target.

The rope splintered. His body swung away from the open clearing toward a copse of trees. Two more shots. The rope snapped. Ike held on tight as he plunged into the forest below. Ike banged through branches, bounced off trunks of trees, and scraped against brush and foliage until he crashed onto the ground.

The dense trees had slowed his body long enough to prevent the fall from being fatal. But there was no denying he was hurt.

Cracked ribs. Broken leg. Dislocated shoulder. Concussion.

He fought to get his bearings. Every attempt to move sent searing pain through him. His head throbbed, a jackhammer rattling against his skull. The pain intensified. He was going under, unable to fight the darkness settling over him.

A low bark pierced through his pain. Raspy panting, then a low whine.

Ike laughed, sending sharp pain detonating in his chest.

Stupid fucking dog found him.

The white Labrador bounded over, pacing back and forth along his body, whining as he assessed Ike's wounds.

"Tucker ..." Ike gritted the words out. For once, he was happy to see the damn annoying dog.

The dog's ears perked up at hearing his name. He barked once. Then twice.

"Help ..." Ike tried again. "Go ... get ... help."

Tucker barked, then raced off into the night.

Chapter 30

“Come on,” Everett said, gripping Sebastian’s neck. “Let’s take a walk.”

Sebastian jerked away from his grasp. “I’m not leaving Gabrielle.”

He stood outside the interrogation room of the St. Felipe Police Department, staring through the one-way window. Gabrielle sat in a plastic chair in the corner of the room, legs and arms crossed as if trying to curl herself into a ball away from everything that hurt her. Her usual vibrant, glowing bronze skin was ashen. Her eyes darted around the room as if another threat would appear out of thin air.

He thought she’d been terrorized when she found the bloody message in the beach cottage. But that was a cakewalk compared to Gabrielle seeing snakes slithering out of her purse. The devastation in her eyes was his fault. He’d fucked up and let that stalking bastard, Tony Brooks, get close enough to torment her for a second time.

“I’m not suggesting that you leave her. We’ll take a quick stroll while she’s giving her statement to the detective,” Everett insisted, shoving him toward the doors. “We need to strategize and can’t do that in front of the fuzz. So, get your ass outside. Now.”

Sebastian pushed the door open with too much force. It banged against the wall, causing heads to turn. But he didn’t give a fuck. He only cared about finding Tony Brooks and making him pay for hurting Gabrielle again.

He stepped outside and turned to walk along the palm tree-lined sidewalk cloaked in darkness. Sooty gray clouds stretched across the night sky, blocking the moon. The air was thick with humidity, clinging to his skin, threatening to suffocate him.

“You sure Brooks didn’t get into your house and replace her stuff with the snakes?” Everett asked.

“Yeah, I’m sure.”

“You checked the surveillance?”

“Of course, I checked the fucking surveillance. It’s the first thing I did once we got to King Estate and had her driver take us to the police station,” Sebastian said. “Videos show us leaving early this morning, then the staff bringing her bags to the house while we were with Shannon getting an update on the case, then us coming home. That’s fucking it.”

“You recognized the staff? Could one of them have done it?”

“They’re all here and being interviewed by the cops. I don’t think it was one of them. They’re scared shitless that they’ll lose their jobs over this.”

“But Gabrielle’s purse was out of her sight while they took it from the yacht to your place, right?”

“Yeah, but it could’ve happened when we were in St. Basil. She didn’t have her purse when we went to see Remi. Then we grabbed it when she wanted to shop at the marina. After that, she left it on the yacht while we went to talk to Bobby.”

“Plenty of time for someone to make the switch.”

“I should have checked her things. Gone through them and made sure nothing was inside as soon as we got back.”

“Yeah, you should have. So why the fuck didn’t you?” Everett glared at him. “It’s not like you to slip up like this. You’re too fucking good at what you do.”

Sebastian didn’t respond. He couldn’t. From the minute he and Gabrielle left King Estate with confirmation from

Detective Brad Shannon that Tony Brooks was her stalker, his mind had been on one thing—giving her an escape from everything stressing her out. His thoughts had been consumed with how to wine and dine her. A romantic evening for the two of them where she could take her mind off Tony and Damian and focus on the two of them.

He'd been focused on the wrong fucking thing at the wrong fucking time, and Gabrielle was suffering because of it.

“Sebastian ...” Everett said, then yanked his arm, forcing him to stop. “What’s going on with you and Gabrielle?”

“I’m her bodyguard.”

“Don’t lie to me. Did you fuck her? Is that what has you off your game?”

Sebastian didn’t respond. If it was as simple as fucking a beautiful woman, his heart wouldn’t be ripped to shreds. He wouldn’t have strayed away from the job and everything he knew to do to keep her safe.

“I know that fucking look. You’re falling in love with her.”

“Let me guess. The look on my face matches the one you see every morning in the mirror as you think about Remi.”

Everett’s eyes smoldered with anger. “Fucking around with Ike’s sister is one thing. He’s going to kick your ass over that. Falling in love with her is an entirely different ball game. If you do anything to break her heart—“

“Ike will kill him,” Bobby finished as he stepped up on the curb and approached them. “I tried to warn him that getting involved with Gabrielle was bad news. But she’s more likely to trash his heart than the other way around, so I think Sebastian’s safe from Ike’s wrath.”

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Everett gritted through his teeth.

“Helping my friend,” Bobby said, brushing past Everett. He turned to Sebastian and continued, “I analyzed the surveillance from your place. The feeds weren’t tampered with. No looping segments. No overwritten clips. No

manipulation to cover up someone being there. Whoever put those snakes in Gabrielle's purse didn't do it at your house."

"Whoever?" Sebastian frowned, then stared at Bobby. "We know who did it. The cops confirmed that Tony Brooks is Gabrielle's new stalker."

"Maybe," Bobby glanced toward a few cops milling around the parking lot. "Let's walk."

Sebastian and Everett fell into step next to Bobby, walking in silence for a few minutes until they were alone on the sidewalk.

"These incels feed off each other. It's possible that there could be more than one copycat of Damian Hester trying to terrorize Gabrielle," Bobby said.

"What makes you think that?" Everett asked.

"I've been scouring the dark web and found another site popular with incels, but this one gamifies terrorizing women."

"Gamifies it? What does that even fucking mean?" Sebastian asked.

"The site has doers and donors. That's what they're referred to. The doers offer to make the donors' fantasies of threatening the women who've turned them down a reality," Bobby explained.

"I've heard about sites like this," Everett said. "The donors pay to post threats against women they hate."

"They also pay to upvote threats by others," Bobby added. "The doers set a deadline, and whichever threat has the highest money pledged wins. The doer selects the threat, gets the cash, then goes out and terrorizes the woman being targeted."

"That's fucked up. What makes you think Gabrielle is being targeted on this site?" Sebastian asked.

"I searched for snakes in a purse and got a hit. Yesterday's winning threat was exactly that. Steal everything out of the target's purse and put poisonous snakes inside," Bobby said.

"Anything in the threat about a note?" Sebastian asked.

Bobby shook his head. “But the target’s name was Black Butterfly.”

“Gabrielle’s entire Emerge Anew line is based on artwork depicting a black woman as a butterfly,” Sebastian said, remembering the journal she wrote in nearly every night. The journal she was going to show him when she went to grab it from her purse. She’d written about him inside it, and now it was in the hands of some punk bastard trying to scare her.

“Can you trace the doer profile?” Everett asked. “There’s a chance it could be Tony Brooks and not some other fucker, right?”

“I’m working on finding that out, but it won’t be easy. These bastards know how to hide. The encryption on these sites helps them stay hidden,” Bobby said. “In the meantime, I tracked down one of the last addresses for Tony Brooks. He lived with an aunt in Handweg Gardens in St. Killian.”

“Handweg is a rough neighborhood. The people there don’t trust cops.” Sebastian rubbed a hand down his face. “Even if the cops went to talk to the aunt, they may have come up empty.”

“But she might talk to me,” Everett said. “I’ll go over there first thing in the morning to see what I can find out.”

“And if Brooks left any kind of computer equipment or electronics, I need you to get it by any means necessary and bring it to me,” Bobby said.

“I can do that,” Everett agreed, then turned to Sebastian. “We’ll figure out who’s behind all of this and put an end to it. That’s a promise.”

Sebastian didn’t doubt his friends. He knew they would give him everything he needed to wipe these bastards off the planet. Stalking Gabrielle would be the last thing these fuckers did.

“Excuse me, Mr. Luttrell.”

Sebastian turned to see Gabrielle’s driver. “Is Gabrielle okay?”

“Yes, sir. But she needs to see you. She said it was extremely important.”

He didn't need to hear another word.

Sebastian broke into a sprint and raced back to the police station.

Chapter 31

None of this was what she wanted. It was what she was forced to do.

Gabrielle took a deep breath as Serena squeezed her hand. Her sister had arrived at the police station thirty minutes ago demanding that the St. Felipe police department provide round-the-clock protection for Gabrielle at a secure location. Seeing the fear and devastation in her sister's eyes wasn't the only thing that stopped Gabrielle from protesting this move. It was Brad explaining that the snakes in her purse were poisonous. If they'd gotten out and bitten her, the fast-acting venom would've killed her within the hour without medical care. She'd been hysterical as the snakes slithered along the deck, clinging to Sebastian as he carried her out of the house to the ATV, where they drove to King Estate.

But her mind had raced through thousands of what-ifs.

Only one had her terrified.

The one where Sebastian was attacked by the snake while trying to protect her. The thought of him dying in her arms because she didn't know what to do or how to help him. She cared too much about him to let him get hurt because some psycho freak was obsessed with her.

"This isn't like how it was with Damian," Gabrielle said, turning to her sister. Everything between her and Damian before he kidnapped her was a secret she'd take to her grave, but he'd never sent threatening messages. It was the reason his abduction of her had come as a surprise.

“That’s what makes it so scary, Gabrielle. These are direct threats to your life, and they seem to be escalating,” Serena said.

Brad walked over and rested a hand on Gabrielle’s shoulder. His touch was warm and supportive as he caressed her arm, then gave her hand a gentle squeeze.

“Your sister is right. The first message with the blood and goat hearts was disturbing. The one tonight was more dangerous than the last. We can’t take a chance on the third message finishing the job. Tony Brooks is becoming unhinged. We have officers from all the island police departments searching for that bastard, but we must do more to ensure your safety. You’re doing the right thing,” he said, a glint in his soft blue eyes. “Don’t second guess yourself.”

Gabrielle nodded as the glass door to the police station pushed open. Sebastian stepped inside, taking up all the air in the room. His presence shifted the energy, causing her heart to pound in her chest. He wasn’t going to like what she’d done.

Sebastian headed straight for Gabrielle, ignoring Serena and Brad as if she was the only person in the room. He stopped mere inches from her, concern swirling in his brown eyes. “Everything okay?”

“Nothing is okay, you arrogant asshole. You promised Gabrielle you could protect her, but you botched the job a week into it,” Brad interrupted. Disgust clouded his face as he crossed his arms over his chest with a smug look. “Officers from my gang task unit and the St. Felipe police will take over security for her. It was a mistake for Gabrielle’s life to be in your hands.”

“I appreciate everything you’ve done for my sister, Sebastian,” Serena added with more diplomacy. “But after this second threat, we need to make a change. It’s important to have more resources to ensure she stays safe until we can catch the maniac doing this.”

Sebastian clenched his jaw, but his eyes, clouded by hurt, never left Gabrielle. “Let’s talk. Outside. Now.”

Brad pressed a hand against Sebastian's chest, pushing him back. "She's not going anywhere with you."

Sebastian's eyes blazed with anger as he glared at Brad.

Gabrielle pressed between the two men. "Brad, you don't speak for me. You shouldn't have blurted it out without giving me a chance to explain." She grabbed Sebastian's hands in hers. "Come on. Let's go outside and talk."

"No way. Not outside," Serena insisted, waving her hand frantically. She turned to Brad and pleaded, "Isn't there a room where they can talk privately?"

Brad grudgingly pointed to an interrogation room near the back hallway. Sebastian pulled away from her and stomped into the room, not bothering to wait for her.

This was not how she wanted Sebastian to find out. Not that it mattered. She'd known he wouldn't like this turn of events. But it was what she had to do to ensure he was protected from her stalker. She refused to let him become collateral damage in a psycho's fixation with her.

Stepping inside the interrogation room, Gabrielle closed the door. The room was the size of a closet, but the chasm between her and Sebastian felt as wide as the Cabrito Mountains. His face was a mask of angry, chiseled stone. She reached a hand to touch him, but he caught her wrist.

"Don't." There was a warning in his voice, low and menacing.

She swallowed hard, hurt by his rejection. "Why? I'm not doing this only for myself. I'm trying to protect you, too. Please don't be mad at me."

"Fuck, Gabs. I'm not mad at you," Sebastian slumped against the table and squeezed the back of his neck. His body language shifted from on guard to defeated and weary.

"But you're angry."

"Yeah, I'm fucking angry that I let that bastard get close to you again."

“That wasn’t your fault. You told me not to treat the trip to St. Basil like a day trip, but I was shopping and prancing about as if a stalker wasn’t after me. It was foolish.”

“I was supposed to protect you from him. Make sure you were safe, and I fucking didn’t.” Sebastian banged on the table. “And you know why? Cause I was too busy falling for you. Being distracted by you. We got too close. The lines blurred in my head. In my heart. I stopped focusing on protecting you because all I could think about was how much I ...”

“How much you ...” She paused as heat blazed across her cheeks. He’d stopped before they crossed a line she wasn’t sure either of them was ready for. As much as she wanted to know what he was going to say, she couldn’t handle it. Not when Tony Brooks was raising the stakes. She had to diffuse the situation. Gabrielle raised an eyebrow and forced a sexy smile on her face, trying to lighten the heaviness between them. “How much you can’t keep your hands off me?” She stroked a finger up his arm.

“Don’t do that. You know this thing between us is deeper than that. You can’t deny the connection we have, and neither can I. So don’t insult me by pretending it’s just lust and sex.”

His rebuke pierced her soul. The raw honesty and simplicity of his statement reflected the truth between them. But neither of them could act on it. Not until the stalker was caught.

“As much as I hate it, Shannon was right. That fucker got to you on my watch *after* I promised to keep you safe,” Sebastian said. “Professionally, that’s a mistake. But for the man inside here,” He tapped his chest. “It’s about to fucking rip my heart out that I didn’t stop it from happening. I hate myself for missing it. And I hate that you’ve lost trust in my ability to protect you.”

“You think that’s why I agreed to let the cops take over my security?” Gabrielle asked. “It’s not. This has nothing to do with my trust in you or your abilities. From day one, you knew that I wouldn’t let anyone I cared about get hurt because

someone was after me. That means protecting my sister, my family, the staff at King Estate, and now that includes you. I can't sit by and know I'm putting your life in danger because you're trying to protect me. I have to do this so that you can be safe."

"Your safety is the only thing that matters. I can handle Brooks, Quattro, or any fucker who dares to hurt you," Sebastian said.

An eerie calm settled over him as if a switch had flipped. The caring man who'd stolen her heart had turned into a soldier in front of her eyes. A highly trained and deadly operative.

"Seby, I know you can handle anything. I haven't lost faith or trust in you. But I'm begging you to do this my way. Dealing with the stalker is hard enough without worrying about what might happen to you if you find him and get caught," Gabrielle said, almost choking on the words. The thought that Sebastian would find Tony Brooks and take him out, then go to prison for protecting her was terrifying. He wasn't a PISCO anymore. He didn't have a license to eliminate threats. "Let the police handle this. Please."

Sebastian gazed at her with intense emotion that caused her heart to stop. Never had a man ever looked at her like she was the only thing that mattered to him in the entire world.

His response came as no surprise to her.

"I can't." Sebastian walked past her and out of the interrogation room.

Chapter 32

When Brad suggested Gabrielle move into a hotel to make it easier for his officers to guard her, they picked the only place her family would approve of—Hotel Braganza. The four-story, square building dominated two blocks of prime real estate in Conrad, the island's town center. Built in the 18th century, the hotel boasted neoclassical architecture painted a gleaming white with repeating patterns of arches on the first floor and square windows on the floors above. The interior was Caribbean chic—terra cotta floors, marble bathrooms, bespoke furniture, and decorations reminiscent of the island's beauty outside its doors.

Modest compared to King Estate, the hotel was by far the most luxurious offering in St. Felipe, the poorest of the Palmchat Islands. Instead of the tax-paying citizens they were, the government treated Felipians like they were wards of the King Family since they owned half the land. Her family did more than expected to subsidize the lack of resources provided, but it never seemed to be enough.

It was no surprise that the St. Felipe Police Department didn't have the budget to pay for this heightened level of security. Naturally, Serena swooped in to save the day. Not only had her sister rented out the entire top floor of the four-story hotel, but she'd also made a sizable donation to the St. Felipe police fund for the strain the extra security had placed on their resources.

Gabrielle hugged her arms across her chest. It was almost midnight. The night from hell was almost over. She gave the officer a sympathetic smile. He was of medium height and

medium build, with kind but stern dark eyes. She was embarrassed to admit she couldn't remember his name after he'd introduced himself hours ago. But there was no doubt he didn't want to be here anymore than she did, yanked from whatever real police work he'd been doing to become her babysitter until the stalker was caught.

"Ms. King, as a precaution, we've disabled your cell phone and have it in custody at the police station. All calls should be made using the secure hotel phones, which will allow us to activate tracing if Brooks tries to reach out to you," the officer said.

Gabrielle wasn't concerned about getting a call from Tony Brooks. Without her cell phone, there was no way for her to call Sebastian. She hadn't memorized his number. Asking Serena to get it for her would be a waste of time. She could hear the lecture on what was important—surviving this new psycho. Not some crush she had on her bodyguard.

But what she felt for Sebastian went far beyond a silly crush.

She tensed, thinking about Tony Brooks having her journal, where she wrote her deepest thoughts and worked through her feelings. Since coming home, her nightly musings focused on her feelings for Sebastian. They were deepening and growing. She couldn't deny how hard she was falling for him. This was what she thought being in love would feel like, though she wasn't sure she was in love. If she was even capable of loving someone unconditionally because of the trauma she'd been through.

Still, they were her private thoughts, and she wanted her journal back.

"Any questions, Ms. King?" The officer asked.

She'd barely paid attention as he rattled through all the restrictions of her stay at the hotel. The gist was what she expected. She was to conduct all business meetings in her hotel suite. She needed to maintain her online presence. The cops didn't want Brooks tipped off that they were on to him and his fixation on her. All guests had to check in with the

police before visiting. Venturing outside the hotel was to be avoided. If she did leave the premises for any reason, she was to be accompanied by two plain-clothed armed police officers at all times.

“No questions. I’m in prison until you find Tony Brooks,” she muttered.

“Better to be in a gilded prison than a gilded coffin, Ma’am.”

The weight of his rebuke stung her soul. “Of course. I’m sorry. I’m being a brat. Ignore me.”

“Good night, Ms. King.”

“Good night, Officer.” She walked him to the door, then closed it behind him. She pressed her forehead against the smooth wood and reminded herself this situation was only temporary.

On the other side of the door, the officer joined two others. His words startled her. “Black Butterfly is secure for the night.”

She was “black butterfly,” a reference to her brand, which featured beautiful black women who appeared to be emerging anew like butterflies. She supposed it was a fitting code name, though his statement brought her no comfort.

Her head throbbed with the onset of a migraine. Exhaustion clawed at her, though she doubted she could sleep. The only person who could make her feel safe and help her to get sleep tonight was—

“Missed me?”

Gabrielle whipped around and stared across the room. “Seby,” she whispered.

He was standing in front of her like a vision from her dreams. He’d changed from earlier, dressed in dark black from head to toe as if he was on a mission, which she supposed he was.

“How did you get in here?”

He raised an eyebrow and responded with sarcastic bravado, “Ex-PISCO, remember? Piece of cake.”

“The guards didn’t see you?”

“No one knows I’m here but you.”

“How did you figure out where I was?” Gabrielle asked, unable to stop questioning him even as she longed to race into his arms. If her guards found out he was in the suite with her, she wasn’t sure what they’d do to Sebastian or what measures they’d put in place to ensure he couldn’t find her a second time.

He pointed to the bracelet he’d given her over a week ago. The one he could use to track her down if the stalker confiscated her cell phone. “I had to see you. I didn’t like how we left things at the police station.”

Gabrielle took steps toward him, slow and tentative as if he might disappear into thin air if she got too close. Her brain could have conjured him to soothe her anxiety.

Sebastian continued, “I hate that Tony Brooks has made you believe we can’t be together.”

“Not forever, Seby. I know this is temporary. We have to wait until Brad and his team find Tony.”

“You think I’m going to wait weeks while the cops fumble around to find Brooks.” Sebastian shook his head. “That’s not how this is going to play out.”

“What other choice do we have?”

“I told you what I’m going to do.”

“And I asked you not to.” Her heart lurched as she blinked back tears. “I don’t want you to get in trouble.”

“I don’t want you to worry about me.” There was an edge in his tone. Sebastian closed the distance between them, stroking his finger along her face. “If you knew what I’ve done in my past, you wouldn’t be concerned now.”

“That doesn’t make me feel better.” Gabrielle caressed his arms, then said a silent prayer of thanks that he was real.

“Then this should: I won’t do anything that will keep me away from you because I can’t imagine my life without you. I won’t fuck up. I won’t get caught.” Sebastian stepped away from her.

“Why?” Gabrielle swallowed past the lump in her throat. His words mirrored everything she’d written in her journal. The reciprocity of feelings was everything she hoped, but it also flooded her with panic. Could she live up to Sebastian’s expectations of her? Was she worthy of this remarkable man’s devotion? Would it change his feelings if he knew the truth about the things she’d done? Remind him of the spoiled, selfish girl she was and still could be.

With a wry smile, he said, “Because I’m falling in love with you.”

The words were like a bomb detonating, forever changing the landscape of their relationship in an instant.

Gabrielle stared at the floor, stunned and not sure how to respond.

A sickening thought played in her mind that those words could be the last he ever said to her. She didn’t know how long they’d be separated. She couldn’t fathom what he’d do to Tony Brooks if he found the stalker before the cops or what consequences they’d suffer from his rogue actions. All she could do was remember every sweet moment they had together. She would need those memories when she was kicking herself days from now.

When she looked up, Sebastian was gone. She glanced around as he disappeared into her bedroom.

“Seby!” Gabrielle said, not caring if the guards heard her. “Wait!” She raced after him, grabbing his hand before he reached the window that overlooked an alley.

He turned back to her with fiery passion burning in his eyes.

“Don’t go,” Gabrielle pleaded. “Please.”

Sebastian shook his head. “You are my weakness.” He jerked her toward him. “I will always do what you ask, even if

it's not what you need.”

“Trust me. I need you. Just for tonight.” She clung to him.

Sebastian leaned down and brushed his lips against hers. His lips were soft and warm, kissing her gently with a tenderness that melted away her fears and reservations. The intensity of emotion coursing between them radiated in every move of their lips and stroke of their tongues. She was overwhelmed and liberated in the presence of this man who meant everything to her.

She stood still as he undressed her, never breaking the kiss that held her in welcomed captivity. When he closed the distance between them, pressing his body against hers, she was amazed that he'd removed his clothes at the same time. His massive erection throbbed between their warm bodies. Her mind went blank as desire pooled between her legs.

He lifted her as if she weighed nothing, then collapsed backward on the bed, relinquishing all control to her. She pinned him to the bed with her hands, taking a moment to revel in his deliciously decadent muscular body. He didn't wilt under her stare but relished the attention she gave him. Nervousness raced through her until she remembered his words. He was falling in love with her. How could she feel anything but at ease with this man who'd poured his heart out to her? Emboldened, she leaned down and kissed him with all the passion she had inside, then licked and sucked trails from his lips to his neck and chest.

“Gabs,” Sebastian whispered. “I want you so much. It's killing me not to be inside of you.”

When he looked at her that way, she had no doubts that he was her future. He knew her in ways she never thought she'd allow a man. He was her safe space, and she was his.

Sebastian raised an eyebrow in anticipation as her knees straddled his thighs. His cock glistened and twitched, waiting for her. She stroked his muscular forearms, gripping him tightly to keep her balance, then lowered onto the tip of his cock. She rocked against him, drenching his shaft in her wetness.

Lust blinded her, driving her movements as she lowered onto his engorged flesh. His thickness stretched her, ravaging her until their bodies molded. Her movements were slow, gauging his reaction until they hit a perfect rhythm. Writhing against him, she moved up and down, a beautiful dance that had both of them panting heavily as they stared into each other's eyes. His hands pressed into the flesh of her hips, guiding and directing her faster and faster.

Neither of them made a sound to avoid alerting the guards outside. The struggle to hold back her moans as she panted ragged and heavy breaths exponentially increased the intensity of the pleasure blazing between them.

Desire burned within her. She clenched around his rock-hard cock. Every stroke drove her closer and closer to the brink of orgasm. She tried to keep her composure, but she was slowly coming undone by this man who'd infiltrated her heart as only he could.

He raised toward her, crashing his mouth on hers to stifle the passion-filled moan threatening to erupt from her. She craved every inch of him, her body longing for all he could give. She arched her back as he buried deep within her. The waves of pleasure had her trembling and bucking.

A dangerous glint flashed in Sebastian's eyes.

She teetered on the edge, grinding and gyrating on his cock as his hips moved upward with purposeful and determined thrusts. His tip stroked the sweet spot deep inside of her.

His name tumbled out of her mouth in a low-moaned whisper as a tsunami-sized orgasm crashed over her. He held her in place as wave after wave of aftershocks riddled her. Moments later, his body stiffened, then spasmed and shuddered. His plunging movements became uncoordinated as he filled her with every drop of his orgasm.

Collapsing on top of him, Gabrielle trapped him within her grasp and refused to let go.

Chapter 33

“You look like crap.” Hannah peered past the massive bouquet of tropical flowers in her arms. She dropped her purse in the chair, then crossed the room, beckoning for a hug.

“Is that any way to talk to your boss?” Gabrielle gazed down at her rumpled cotton pajama pants and turquoise Hullabaloo tank top and felt embarrassed.

This was Sebastian’s fault. After spending the night wrapped in his strong arms, she’d awoken to find him gone, with only a trail of hibiscus petals on the bed where he’d been. She’d burst into tears, understanding why he left without saying goodbye. If he hadn’t, she would have convinced him to stay another day and night, then another, until he was prevented from doing what he’d vowed to do—find her stalker.

In a fit of petulant defiance, she’d thrown on her most comfortable pajamas and crawled back into bed, ignoring her morning meetings as she cried herself to sleep.

She trudged forward, dodging the massive flowers, and hugged her publicist.

“Do you know what time it is?” Hannah pressed, as she placed the flowers on the coffee table.

“Yes, it’s almost two in the afternoon. What’s with the flowers?” Stepping out of Hannah’s embrace, Gabrielle staggered to the steaming carafe of coffee resting on a side table and filled her mug to the brim.

“The hotel concierge was on her way to your room. Since I was headed here, I told her I’d deliver them. Interestingly, she said a handsome man dropped them off early this morning, and he didn’t appear to be from a flower shop.” Hannah let out a low whistle. “Care to fill me in? Are you hiding out at this hotel because of a secret rendezvous with a new lover?”

Gabrielle shook her head, although that was what last night turned into. All thoughts of Tony Brooks and police guards outside the suite had faded from her mind. She and Sebastian connected in a way that was permanent and lasting. She was rattled by how quickly things were moving, but the idea of slowing down was more disturbing. She didn’t want space from Sebastian. She wanted him with her always.

Hannah placed the flowers on a side table and glanced back at the door. “Felt like I was entering PIIB headquarters to get on your floor. Is he a celebrity? A politician? Am I close?”

“Want coffee?” Gabrielle asked, deciding to ignore the barrage of questions. Her eyes were drawn to the coral and orange hibiscus in the vase. Sebastian sprinkled the same flowers on her bed before he left. The timing worked out for him to have dropped off the bouquet with the concierge. She fought a smile and plastered a blank look on her face.

“Quick with the deflection, as usual,” Hannah chided. “Yes, with sugar, please.”

Gabrielle poured the coffee, then added six sugars, stirring slowly as the cubes dissolved in the black liquid. She owed Hannah the truth, especially since coming to the hotel could be putting a target on her friend’s back.

“To answer your question, I’m under police protection.” Gabrielle handed Hannah her coffee, then joined her at the table in front of the windows that overlooked the calm turquoise waters of the Atlantic. The sun reflected off the shimmering ocean in brilliant golds and oranges.

“Police protection? Why?”

“I have another stalker.”

“What?” Hannah fumbled the mug before getting a firm grasp on it. “You can’t drop a bomb like that and not give me details. What happened?”

She briefly summarized the stalker’s actions since she arrived back in St. Felipe. “The worst part is the stalker stole everything from my purse.”

“Please tell me your journal wasn’t in there.”

“It was,” Gabrielle whispered.

“Anything in there that could wreck your brand?”

Gabrielle shook her head. “No, I don’t put names and places in it for that reason. They’ll see how I felt about situations but couldn’t trace them to a specific person. Mostly, it’s ranting about my nonexistent love life ... until the past week.”

“So Gabrielle *has* gotten her groove back?”

“Something like that,” Gabrielle said, unable to stop a big smile from spreading across her face. “Remember the bodyguard my sister hired for me when I got home.”

“Who could forget Sebastian Luttrell? Tall, dark, and out-of-this-world handsome. That deep voice alone was enough to make my panties wet,” Hannah said, then clamped a hand over her mouth. “Not that I tried anything when he met with me to lay down the law for your schedule. Seriously.”

Gabrielle laughed. “I believe you.”

“Because he let you know that he only has eyes for you?”

“Yes.” Gabrielle bit her bottom lip. “This is the real deal, Hannah. I know it seems fast, but—”

“When you know, you know,” Hannah squeezed her hands. “I’m happy for you, even if this new stalker is causing a pause in your new love life. Have the two of you done the dirty yet?”

“I am not answering that.”

“Oh, you have! Good for you! I was worried you had cobwebs down there, so I’m glad he gave it a good sweep.”

“Hannah, we are not having this conversation,” Gabrielle said, then gulped her coffee. The last thing she needed was to be inundated with memories of making love with Sebastian last night. “Back to the stalker. The good news is the cops know his identity, and they are confident he’ll be arrested soon. Until then, I need a distraction. What’s the latest with my calendar?”

“Forget your calendar. Don’t you think you should do a video on this new stalker? Tell your followers how some asshole is trying to rain on your homecoming, but you refuse to let him win.”

“I don’t know. It could impede the police investigation. What if the stalker sees it, and it spooks him or, even worse, makes him accelerate his plans to do something to me.” Gabrielle shook her head. “It’s not a good idea.”

“Hear me out. Part of your journey is about owning your true self without regrets or fear. The trauma you experienced made you feel like you had to dim your light so that you wouldn’t attract psychos. But you fought against that and emerged as the strong woman you are today,” Hannah said. “The public only knows what happened at the airport. They think you are safe and enjoying life instead of being holed up here, an inmate in a luxury prison.”

Gabrielle looked away. Hannah was right. The newspapers reported: *Police security arranged for Gabrielle King was mistakenly thought to be an attacker, causing a partial shutdown at St. Killian airport. The misunderstanding has since been resolved. Ms. Gabrielle King is safe and reunited with her family.*

Hannah persisted, “You didn’t balk at doing a video to share your feelings about Damian’s death. That could’ve backfired, but it didn’t stop you. In only a few days since we posted it, that video has become your most watched of all time, with positive reactions from your supporters. You let everyone in on your journey. That’s what they expect from you. That’s what you expect from yourself. It’s part of your Emerge Anew brand. I’m surprised you don’t want to do that now.”

“I haven’t had time to think much about it. I was whisked away to this hotel and told to put most of my life on hold until the stalker is found.”

“But I wouldn’t be here if the police didn’t want you to keep living your life. Running your business.”

“The cops think it’s important for me to maintain my same pattern of online activity so the stalker isn’t tipped off that they are on to him.”

“Well, you’re in the business of sharing content that motivates and inspires women to overcome devastating setbacks. There’s nothing more devastating than one stalker dying only to be replaced by another psycho. You need to talk about this. We can do it without the full crew. They can edit the footage later,” Hannah said as if Gabrielle had already agreed.

She wasn’t sure. There was wisdom in not poking a bear. She didn’t know much about Tony Brooks. Only what she’d learned from Brad at the police station. He didn’t have a history of physical violence toward women, but that had already changed with the snakes he’d left in her purse.

She did like the idea of putting him on notice through her social media. She didn’t have to give his name, but she could make it clear that her days of cowering were over. She was warming to the idea. If Sebastian were here, he would tell her if this was a good idea or if she was crazy to consider it. He was the only one who could lay things out with brutal honesty and objectively, without any agenda. But Sebastian wasn’t here. She’d need to make this call by herself. She gripped her butterfly necklace in her hand, squeezing it tightly.

“Let’s do it. Call the team. Have the video equipment sent over,” Gabrielle said. Tony Brooks would soon learn she wasn’t putting her life on hold for a stalker ever again.

Chapter 34

Holding the thick, black steel card in his hand, Sebastian rubbed his thumb over the etched outline of the stingray and then pressed it against the badge reader. The door to the compound swung open. He stepped inside and looked around the state-of-the-art facilities that seemed frozen in time.

Two years ago, they had planned on using the space as the headquarters for the security team. Ike had poured most of his inheritance into the start-up, only to have everything fall apart when the King family jet vanished over Africa.

Sebastian couldn't help wondering what could have been, how all of their lives would be different if Ike had been capable of handling his parents' disappearance. With Ike gone, none of those plans seemed viable anymore.

Until now.

The search for Tony Brooks had reunited them.

Ignited them.

Kane, back from his trip to Miami, had been the one to suggest they meet here. It felt right to all of them, even if Ike wasn't around. There was no other place on the islands with everything they needed to launch a coordinated, strategic, and time-sensitive search but the Stingray Security Compound. The compound had full living quarters, a kitchen, game room, and workout facilities rivaling the Air and Land Forces military headquarters.

Weaving through the maze of corridors, Sebastian pushed open the double doors of the war room. Everett, Bobby, and

Kane were inside, standing in front of three massive screens.

“This was two days before Gabrielle arrived back in the Palmchat Islands. See the request to send a message to Black Butterfly with goat hearts for all the hearts the slut has broken,” Bobby said.

Everett said, “Fits with Tony Brooks acting alone as Gabrielle’s new stalker. He worked for Black Spade Ranch and got fired after stealing goat carcasses. He had access to steal goat hearts, too.”

“I agree with both of you,” Kane said. “It’s most likely Brooks, but we need to definitively link him to the threats on these sites to rule out the chance that there’s a group of bastards out there trying to be copycat stalkers of Gabrielle. The cops are exclusively focused on Brooks and if they are wrong, Gabrielle could be in even bigger danger.”

“Started without me, I see,” Sebastian said, crossing the room. He gave each man a half-hug and signature handshake, then stood back to look at the screens.

The first one had Tony Brooks’s mug shot and excerpts from his police arrest, criminal trial, and prison inmate records. The middle screen had the guys’ attention. A site frequented by incels was on display, zoomed in on a series of posts related to Black Butterfly. The last screen damn near made his heart stop. The Black Butterfly herself was projected. The About page from Gabrielle’s Emerge Anew website and photos from her social media accounts.

She was stunningly beautiful, but none captured how fucking gorgeous she was sleeping on his chest when he awoke this morning. He’d wrapped her in his arms and held on for dear life as the familiar feelings flooded him. All-consuming desire to be with her always, watching her, holding her, fucking her. The thought that any other man thought she was his had him seeing red. In his heart, she was his, and he’d take down any fucker who tried to stand in the way of him being with Gabrielle.

Those thoughts compelled him to flee her hotel suite, using his PISCO skills to get out without waking her. The shadow of

the old man's sick obsession with his mother seemed to hang over him as he stared at Gabrielle in bed. Disgust settled in his gut as crazy thoughts ran through his mind. Understanding how the old man had felt and why he was driven to stalk his mother made him dizzy with fear.

He didn't want to hurt Gabrielle. He didn't think he was physically capable of harming one strand on her head. But he had to prove it to himself by getting away from her. Doing what she needed, which happened to be eliminating the bastard who was stalking her and robbing her of the life she deserved.

Still, he'd snuck back in one last time, unable to help himself. As he sprinkled hibiscus petals on the bed next to her, plucked from the bushes surrounding the rooftop pool, he felt like a moth drawn to a flame.

Sebastian tore his attention away from Gabrielle's photos and back to the incel website. "Was the goat heart threat a winning request on the incel site?"

Bobby swiped the massive touch screen. "It was. Same doer as the request for the snakes. Profile name Nospero."

Everett frowned. "No hope. Spero is 'I hope' in Latin."

"You think that fucker is an intellectual?" Bobby laughed.

"Fits with some of the profiles of incels," Sebastian said. "Nerds with no social skills who can't get women to give them a second look."

Everett added, "Again, Tony Brooks fits that profile from what his aunt told me this morning. She said he was always a loner, never had a girlfriend, and stayed on his computer all day and night. He got fixated on a girl at the local grocery store when she was nice to him, but couldn't see it was random kindness."

"This is the woman he stalked that led to him spending time in Tiverton?" Sebastian asked.

Everett nodded. "His aunt said she's more worried about him since he's returned home. He's still reclusive, but now he

is angrier with a short temper and prone to violent outbursts. That's why she kicked him out a couple of weeks ago."

"Did she have any idea where he was staying now?" Kane asked.

"No. I told her I was concerned that he had set his sights on a friend's sister and might be stalking her. That's when she took me to a back room and told me I could have any of the things Tony left behind to try to find him." Everett pointed to a couple of hard drives and a laptop sitting on the table. "Maybe Bobby can find something on them that links Brooks to the Nospero profile. Then we can cross 'the group of copycat stalkers' theory off the list."

"I hope there's something on those drives that tells us where he might be hiding out," Kane added.

"What about the cops? Why didn't Brooks's aunt give those things to them?" Sebastian asked. Since Tony was the prime suspect in the investigation, he'd expected them to have any evidence from the house he'd lived in already in police custody.

Everett gave him a dubious look. "Cops haven't come to visit her."

"Why the fuck not?" Bobby asked.

"Good question," Sebastian said, unable to shake his unease. "Can you track if more requests come in for Black Butterfly?"

"Already have an alert set on this website and dozens of others. If something gets posted, we'll know," Bobby confirmed.

The screen flickered as a bubble popped up in the corner.

Incoming call from Lachlan Ritchie.

Sebastian tapped the screen to connect the call.

"Where you at, man?" Everett asked.

"Flying back now since I got the all-clear on Quattro," Lachlan said.

“Good, because I’m going to need you,” Sebastian added. Hunting Tony Brooks across the Palmchat Islands would require the only pilot he trusted to get him in and out, off radar and undetected.

“Do you have a positive location on Brooks?” Lachlan asked.

“Not yet, but I’m working twenty-four-seven until I get it.” Bobby glanced over at the stack of computer devices from Tony’s aunt’s house.

Lachlan cleared his throat. “Well, it’s good that we’re all back and working together. I may have another mission for us to take on.”

“Nothing related to Paloma, right?” Kane asked.

Sebastian held his breath, waiting on Lachlan’s response. From the look of the other guys, they were doing the same. They’d all move mountains to keep Lachlan’s little girl safe from Quattro.

“No, no, she’s fine,” Lachlan assured them. “This is about Ike.”

Relief washed over Sebastian, and not just because Paloma was safe. The one person he needed to help him navigate the conflicting emotions about him and Gabrielle was her brother and his best friend, Ike da Costa. But he needed to find out what Lachlan knew before he got his hopes up about Ike coming home.

Sebastian looked around at the guys and saw the same reflected in their eyes. They all missed Ike and wanted him back. Nothing was the same without him.

“Kane, did you discover anything when you were in Miami?” Lachlan asked.

“No, I went to a few clubs, but no one had seen him. I didn’t have time to stick around since I had to deliver a package to Austria. Got back to St. Felipe last night,” Kane responded.

“Well, we stopped off in Miami for a few days at the beach after visiting Hershey, and I ran into a few old friends. Word on the street is that the Brazhenskys put out a hit on Ike for not paying his gambling debts, and another Russian mafia sent thugs to kill him. But he was saved by a mystery woman, who then booked a private meeting with Alexei Brazhensky to discuss Ike’s debt,” Lachlan said.

“Mystery woman?” Everett frowned. “Think it could be Serena?”

“You know Serena isn’t going to lift a finger to help Ike. Ever,” Bobby said.

“Well, it wasn’t Gabrielle. When she got to the islands, she mentioned she hadn’t heard from Ike in a while, and she’s been preoccupied with the stalker since,” Sebastian said.

“No one in Miami knows the mystery woman,” Lachlan confirmed. In the background, his daughter’s high-pitched chatter and squeals filled the air. “Just a second. Paloma, stop throwing your dolls. They could get hurt.”

“But you will fix the hurt, Daddy. I know you will,” Paloma said with sincere belief.

“Still, you need to take care of them. Be gentle,” Lachlan pleaded.

Paloma reluctantly agreed.

“Sorry, I’m back,” Lachlan said. “Rumor is that Alexei met with the woman a few days ago, and they reached an agreement. The woman paid off Ike’s debts, and the Brazhenskys called off their hit on Ike. Problem is that no one has seen Ike since all this went down.”

Bobby banged the table. “We don’t know if this bitch helped Ike or if the exchange was because Ike is in bigger trouble with her. Who drops twenty-two million without expecting something in return? Nobody.”

“That’s why we must figure out what’s going on and find Ike. He could be fine, or he could be in big fucking trouble,” said Lachlan.

“Daddy! You say bad word! Stop it!” Paloma interrupted.

“I’m sorry, honey,” Lachlan said. “Alright. Gotta go. Keep me posted on the search for Tony Brooks.”

Sebastian ended the call, then turned to the others. “Everett and Kane, the two of you start looking for Ike. Somebody has to know who this mystery woman is. Finding her is the only shot we have of tracking down Ike. If Ike is off the grid on purpose, we won’t find him.”

The guys nodded in agreement.

“Bobby and I will keep searching for Tony Brooks. I’m going to the equipment room to grab supplies.” Sebastian had a feeling the next few nights would be filled with stakeouts all over the island until he could nail down Brooks. Ike had invested a lot of money in night vision equipment and more guns than they’d ever need.

Bobby blocked his path to the door, a look of concern on his face. “Before you go, take a look at this.” He shoved a cell phone toward Sebastian.

Gabrielle defiantly stared at the camera in a live social media video. She spoke with confidence and no fear as she put her new stalker on notice that he wouldn’t get away with terrorizing her.

“Fuck!” Sebastian muttered, then stormed out of the compound.

Chapter 35

The door to the hotel room slammed with a loud bang. Gabrielle jumped as she looked up from her laptop to see Brad Shannon's dark menacing gaze.

"Did you think about consulting me before you posted this?" Brad stormed across the living room of her hotel suite and tossed his cell phone on the table where she'd been taking notes for a new empowerment series on learning from past mistakes. The screen showed the live video she'd posted an hour ago, which had generated over a thousand comments and ten times as many likes and shares. "I can't believe you would be so careless."

She resisted the urge to inform the detective that he had no right to barge into her hotel room unannounced without knocking. But she wasn't surprised to see him. From the moment she finished the live feed, she'd suspected Brad would reach out to her.

"I'm not being careless. Posting videos and interacting with women who've gone through the same things I did with Damian is how I got my life back. It's how I make sense of this craziness and keep sane. I needed to do it."

Brad glared at her. "You may have needed to do it, but your actions have bigger ramifications than you realize. You just fucked up my case."

"I didn't mention a damn thing about your case in that video. I didn't tell them we know Tony Brooks is my stalker. I gave no details on what he has done to me or insight into the

evidence you've found. I simply talked about the experience and my feelings. How does that fuck up your case?"

"That little video was like waving a red cape before an angry bull. Brooks is obsessed with you, and you just challenged him to a fight in public."

"I never said anything directly to him. I just put the world on notice that I won't let anyone control my life ever again. Stalkers get off on intimidating, terrorizing, and manipulating their victims." Gabrielle slammed her fist on the table, causing the coffee in her mug to splash onto the surface. "He needs to know that I'm fighting back this time. I won't run away. I won't leave the home I love. And I sure as hell won't let him scare me into not living my life."

"Well, I'm glad you're so pleased with yourself." Brad shook his head and sighed. He dragged a hand down his weary and worn face. "But you're probably why Brooks isn't in custody right now."

"What?"

"When the St. Killian police went to his hideout, he was gone. He left behind a few burner phones, and guess what he'd been watching."

"My video." Gabrielle swallowed hard. The truth of Brad's concerns sunk in. Guilt gripped her. If her actions led to Brooks escalating his threats, she'd never forgive herself. Gabrielle moved toward the window. Outside, the waterfront was busier than usual, with hordes of locals and tourists meandering into and out of the shops and restaurants below. Her gaze lingered on several men's faces, looking for Tony Brooks. Was he out there, watching her? Waiting for a chance to deliver another sick message or to do something worse.

Brad joined her at the window and placed his arm around her shoulder, giving her a gentle squeeze. "Sorry if I came down hard on you. I know what you've been through. The thought that Brooks could kidnap you like Hester did worries the hell out of me. I only want to keep you safe. That's all."

Gabrielle blinked away the tears. “I won’t post any more videos until he’s caught.”

Nodding, Brad said, “I think that’s for the best. I know your career is built on this kind of stuff and it’s important to you. But nothing is more important than your life. I will do everything to protect you and bring Brooks to justice. Trust me to do that for you.”

“Like you did last time.”

Brad hugged her close, then stepped back. “I need to get back to the station.”

She nodded.

“Nice flowers,” Brad called back to her as he headed for the door. “Please tell me they’re not from Luttrell.”

Gabrielle turned from the window and stared at the crystal vase overflowing with vibrant heliconia, calla lilies, and hibiscus. Hibiscus, like the petals Sebastian had sprinkled over her bed before leaving her this morning. She’d gotten so consumed with posting the video with Hannah that she’d forgotten about them. Tucked deep inside was a small ivory rectangular envelope, partially obscured by the tropical greenery. Her heart fluttered at what Sebastian might have written on the card. She kicked herself for only noticing it now.

“Yes, they are from Sebastian. Why don’t you like him?” During the mixup when her plane landed in St. Killian, it was clear Sebastian didn’t know Brad or at least didn’t remember him. She wasn’t so sure about Brad. Had Brad cross paths with Sebastian while Sebastian was a PISCO or working as the private bodyguard for her mother? Was there a reason for the tension between Brad and Sebastian?

Brad raised his hands in mock surrender. “Who said I didn’t like the guy? All I know is what I observe. I’m a keen observer, being a detective and all.”

“And what are you observing about him?”

“From what I can see, he took a job knowing that he couldn’t separate professional from personal. That’s a problem

in any line of work, but especially when you're supposed to be protecting someone's life," Brad said, giving her a stern look that reminded her so much of her father. "He can't hide the fact that he has feelings for you, which impacts his actions. I know from experience that will put your life at more risk. That's the only reason I pushed you so hard to let my guys take over. They are objective and professional."

"That doesn't mean it's wrong for Sebastian and me to get closer."

"It does if he's manipulating this situation to his advantage. Some guys want to be the hero because that's how they think they can get the girl. You've been through a lot since you've come home. It's easy to think you have deeper feelings for this guy because he was by your side through it all. You can't always trust those feelings."

"Sebastian was there for me in ways I didn't realize I needed. He's supportive and caring, and he listens to me. He's honest and upfront about everything, even his flaws and doubts," Gabrielle said. "So if you're implying that the only reason Sebastian agreed to protect me was to have sex with me, you're completely wrong."

"Sex hadn't crossed my mind. I think he has an entirely different agenda."

"What kind of agenda?"

"The kind that would get him access to your fifty-million-dollar trust fund in three years. Must look real good to a boy who grew up homeless in Los Angeles."

A surge of annoyance overtook Gabrielle as she glared at Brad. His views of Sebastian were blatantly wrong. Sebastian wasn't faking his feelings for her to get at her trust fund. "I thought you only knew what you'd observed."

"I'm protective of you. Sue me. I had the guys dig into his background after you hired him to be your bodyguard. He's qualified, but that doesn't make him the right choice. I'm going with my gut, Gabrielle. Before you trust this guy with your heart, you might want to find out what skeletons he's

hiding in his closet. Find out his real motive behind this devotion he has for you.”

“Are you done?”

Brad shrugged and gave her a sympathetic smile, then closed the door behind him.

Alone in the hotel suite, she turned around to face the flowers. Crossing the room, she reached into the vase and pulled out the rectangular card.

Pulling the card from the inside, she opened it.

The card fell from her shaking hand.

The message written in jagged black strokes was clear.

You will always be mine

Chapter 36

“Obviously, I was wrong,” Gabrielle threw her hands in the air. “Sebastian didn’t send me those flowers.”

After finding the third ominous message, she’d raced out of her hotel suite, catching Brad before he entered the elevators. He’d gone pale when she told him. Frowns creased his face as his blue eyes darkened. The stalker getting a message past his legion of guards had rattled him. Uniformed officers swarmed the suite as she gave her statement to Brad in the hallway. Hours had passed, and the place was still crawling with police. But Brad had returned with an entirely new line of questioning for her. One she couldn’t fathom.

“Hannah Ellerby corroborated your original statement that the flowers were sent to you by Sebastian Luttrell.” Brad glared at her. “Why are you trying to protect him?”

Gabrielle took a deep breath. She clenched the armrests of the brocaded chair, trying to stop her body from shaking with rage. “I’ll explain it again since you refuse to believe me. Hannah brought the flowers into my hotel suite. Not Sebastian. Did she tell you that?”

“Yes, that was part of her statement. But she said you immediately recognized the flowers as being from Sebastian —”

“It was a fucking assumption! I didn’t know for sure. I thought they were from him, but clearly, they weren’t. Sebastian wouldn’t send me flowers and include a note with those words. The same words on the card in my purse with the snakes. The same words written in blood on the walls of my

beach cottage. The same horrible words that bastard Damian Hester wrote on a notepad and shoved at me before he died!”

“What did you say?” Brad frowned, then leaned forward. “What did Damian do?”

Gabrielle covered her face with her hands. The jagged letters scratched on the small square paper slammed through her mind. “You know we were at the hospital when Damian died.”

“Yeah, but I never heard anything about him giving you a note. I thought he was unconscious and then coded.”

“He woke up while I was in his room,” Gabrielle looked away. “He saw me. That’s what triggered everything. He couldn’t speak, but he wrote a note to me. Marvin gave it to me after he was pronounced dead. He’d written ‘you will always be mine’ on the notepad.”

“And you didn’t think this was something I needed to know as I investigated these threatening messages?”

“There was no point in bringing it up. The note would’ve made you think that Damian was behind the new threats, which you already believed. It didn’t matter,” Gabrielle insisted.

“It matters more than you know,” Brad said, his face turning grave. “I need you to confirm one thing.”

“What is it?”

“Was Sebastian Luttrell in the hospital room with you, Marvin, and Damian that night? Did he see Damian’s message on the notepad?”

“Yes, he was there. He saw everything.”

Brad glanced at the two uniformed officers in the corner, then nodded. The men understood the silent message from the detective and exited the hotel suite.

“What’s going on, Brad? Where are they going?”

“To find Sebastian and bring him in for questioning,” Brad said.

“Questioning for what?” Gabrielle asked.

“Being your stalker.”

The words were a weight dragging her to the depths of confusion.

“Sebastian is not stalking me. You have evidence that proves Tony Brooks left those messages. That’s what you told me. Tony Brooks is my stalker.”

“We’re not convinced of that anymore.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Gabrielle.” Brad reached for her hand. She snatched it from his grasp. “Sebastian has been with you when you’ve received each threat. That’s a well-known pattern of behavior for certain stalkers. To see their victim’s reaction to their threats up close.”

“No. You’re wrong.”

“Listen to me,” Brad insisted. “Two things never made sense when the first message was left at the beach cottage. First, you were supposed to move into the main house, not the beach house. That last-minute change would be hard for an outsider to know. The second is that your trip to see Damian Hester was a secret. Sebastian had to sneak you in under cover of night. Even if the stalker found out you’d taken up residence at the beach cottage, how could he have known that you’d be gone in the dead of night? Who tipped him off?”

“You’re implying that Sebastian told Tony Brooks to vandalize my home with bloody goat hearts and write the message on my wall? That’s ridiculous.”

“Not so far-fetched now that I know he was with you when Damian wrote the message to you. He could’ve easily relayed the information to Brooks as part of his sick, twisted plans to stalk you. When you returned to the island that night, he purposely didn’t dock close to the beach house. Instead, according to the statements you and Mr. Luttrell gave the St. Felipe detectives, the two of you spent over an hour walking three miles from the furthest dock. Conveniently, that hour

gave Brooks time to put those goat hearts in the cottage and get out without being caught.”

“You can’t expect me to believe this.” Squeezing her eyes shut, Gabrielle exhaled slowly.

“No evidence links Brooks to the second and third threats. No fingerprints. Nothing. Sebastian had the best access to put snakes and the note in your purse. He’d been with you all day, but more likely, he did it after the two of you had returned to his house for the evening,” Brad continued to lay out his case. “Now we have this flower delivery. Tell me this, why did you jump to the conclusion that they were from Sebastian?”

Gabrielle stalled. No way in hell was she telling him that Sebastian broke into her hotel suite, evaded his supposed top-notch guards, and spent the night with her. She had to come up with a lie. “While I was staying with him, he would sprinkle hibiscus petals on the bed to make his home feel fancy for me. I think he was embarrassed that it wasn’t as luxurious as King Estate. Not that I cared about any of that.”

“You must admit that Sebastian had motive, means, and opportunity to be behind all three incidents.”

“You’ve made some connections to Sebastian based on circumstantial evidence, but there’s no motive for him to stalk me. I’ve lived with this man for over a week. I was literally with him every hour of every day.”

Brad motioned for another officer to come over to their table. The officer handed Brad a file, then returned to his position near the door.

“He’s stalking you to make you dependent on him. To make you need him more than anyone else in your life. Once he has that, he’ll start to cut you off from your family and friends until he’s the only person you have. It’s a typical M.O. of stalkers.” Brad opened the file and placed several pages in front of her.

“We got a warrant and confiscated Sebastian’s computer from his home and cell phone records. The only person who has watched more of your videos since you announced your

return to the Palmchat Islands than Sebastian Luttrell was Damian Hester,” Brad said with disgust. “In a few weeks, Sebastian has watched so many of your videos we don’t know how he’d have time to do anything else. One night, he watched ten hours of content from your website without stopping. The man is obsessed with you.”

She wondered what the police would think if they found her journal that the stalker had stolen. The endless pages dedicated to her complex feelings for her bodyguard. She was sure what she wrote about Sebastian could be interpreted as her obsession with him. At times, she felt that way. The intense emotional connection they shared made her long to be near him. The way he understood her like no other person ever had. The unexpected and undeniable compatibility. If Sebastian had anything like her online platform, she wouldn’t have been able to stop herself from watching his videos repeatedly.

But what convinced her deep in her heart that Sebastian wasn’t her stalker was that he’d shared this exact fear with her. Poured open his heart and soul and told her what worried him the most about his attraction and connection to her. She knew he would never do anything to hurt her.

Staring into Brad’s stony face, she couldn’t convince him of Sebastian’s innocence.

Gabrielle had no choice but to do the next best thing.

Warn Sebastian that the cops were coming after him.

Chapter 37

Sebastian stared at the windows of the fourth floor of Hotel Braganza across the street. It was a postcard-perfect day in St. Felipe. Conrad town center was busier than usual this afternoon. Locals crammed the sidewalks, laughing and carrying bags stuffed with fruits, vegetables, baked goods, and every goat dish imaginable from the Farmer's Market held monthly on the island. The happy faces passing him soured his mood further.

"I don't think this is a good idea," Lachlan told him for the hundredth time.

Sebastian hadn't listened to his friend when Lachlan showed up at the municipal jail with Octavia Constant, one of the best attorneys in the Palmchat Islands. He hadn't listened when Octavia got the cops to release him after twenty-four hours of the ninety-six they could've held him. And he damn sure wasn't going to listen to him now.

He'd been blindsided when the cops pulled him over on the drive into Conrad, demanding he come to the station to answer questions as a person of interest in the stalking of Gabrielle. When he refused, they handcuffed him, hauled his ass to the police station, and threw him in jail on an exploratory hold. Something he'd never would've been subject to if this was America. But Palmchat Islands laws gave the police four fucking days to hold a potential suspect without arresting them to continue to gather evidence. He later learned from Octavia that they'd gotten a warrant to search his home and had confiscated his laptop and security surveillance system. There was nothing he could fucking do to stop them.

But Sebastian didn't care what they thought.

There was only one person's opinion of him that mattered.

"I need to talk to Gabrielle," Sebastian said through clenched teeth. "You're either going to help me, or you're going to get the fuck out of my way. Which is it?"

Lachlan paced in front of him. "What is talking to her going to do? We both know there's no way in hell you are stalking Gabrielle. None of us believe you're behind these threats."

"I know." The unconditional belief in him from Adonis, Kane, Everett, and Bobby had made going through this hell easier, especially since they all knew about his past. About the old man.

"The cops are going to come up empty in this witch hunt, and when they do, Gabrielle will have all the proof she needs to know you're innocent."

"Don't you fucking get it. I want her to believe in me without having fucking evidence. I want her to know in her fucking heart that I could never do anything to hurt her. Ever." Sebastian glared at Lachlan.

His friend was sympathetic but unconvinced. "Think about this. Put yourself in Gabrielle's shoes. A decade ago, the two of you hated each other. She comes back, and the two of you have grown close, but she's also freaked out that someone else is stalking her."

"I know how having another stalker has disrupted her life. She's strong, brilliant, and amazing, but it's getting to her. She's a fighter, but it doesn't mean she's not scared to death about it."

"And that fear could make her unsure who to trust and who not to. She might not be sure you're the good guy. Do you want to force her to tell you that to your face? Shit man. Could you handle that if she did? If you saw doubt in her eyes?" Lachlan asked.

Lachlan's harsh words ripped through Sebastian's heart.

He stumbled back and collapsed onto a wooden bench draped with flowering hibiscus bushes. The same coral hibiscus he'd sprinkled on her bed the morning after they'd made love. He wished he could dispute Lachlan's perspective, but he couldn't. Lachlan had a point. The problem was that point made him more anxious to see Gabrielle. To wipe away any doubts the cops might have given her.

"Let me take you back to your place," Lachlan said, gripping his shoulder and squeezing it. "You could use a shower and a change of clothes before you see Gabrielle."

He wanted to take Lachlan's advice.

But he couldn't.

"I need to see her now." Sebastian rose from the bench and pushed past Lachlan, heading toward the entrance to the hotel. This time, he wouldn't sneak in. He'd talk directly to the hotel staff and the lead guard from the police force and ask to see her. It should be Gabrielle's choice to let him in. If she didn't, then he'd have his answer. His heart seized at the thought, but he would respect her wishes and give her space. The cops couldn't find concrete evidence of a crime he didn't commit. Once he was cleared, he would try again.

He would never give up on Gabrielle.

Never stop trying to be with her.

Pushing through the hotel doors, Lachlan on his heels, he walked to the check-in desk and asked to see the manager.

"I'm the manager. How can I help you sir?" The tall, thin man with dark skin and a beak nose peered at Sebastian over his glasses.

"The SFPD is guarding Gabrielle King on the fourth floor. I want to speak to the officer in charge of that unit," Sebastian said.

"I'm afraid that won't be possible," the manager said, looking uneasy as his eyes darted around the hotel lobby.

"I understand this is supposed to be a secret, but I know Gabrielle is here. She told me herself, and I want to get

clearance for a visit.” Sebastian tried a more sensible tactic instead of gripping the man by the neck and demanding that he allow him to go to Gabrielle’s hotel suite.

“It’s not possible because Gabrielle is no longer here.”

Sebastian whipped his head toward the voice and saw Serena.

She looked like she hadn’t slept all night. Her red-rimmed eyes were shadowed with dark circles.

Sebastian walked toward her. “Where is she?”

“Somewhere you can’t get to her,” Serena said.

“You believe the cops? You think I’m stalking Gabrielle? Serena, you hired me to be her bodyguard because you trusted me. I protected your mother for years. Now all of that means nothing?”

“Sebastian.” Serena swiped at a tear that escaped her eye. “I don’t know what to believe. I’m scared to death for my sister and determined she won’t have to fight another stalker alone. Our parents abandoned her a decade ago. Left her to feel like being stalked and kidnapped was her fault. I won’t let her feel that way again. I won’t stand by and let anyone hurt her.”

“I didn’t fucking do this. I’m not stalking her. I’d never hurt Gabrielle. I could never hurt her, I ...” Sebastian stopped himself before the words tumbled from his mouth.

He loved her.

The truth made him dizzy as it sunk into his soul.

He sucked in a deep breath. “I care about your sister more than you could know. I don’t want her to think I would torment her this way.”

“Detective Shannon has a growing pile of evidence that points directly to you. Instead of trying to see my sister, you should spend all your time proving you’re innocent. That you didn’t do this.”

“So I’m guilty until I prove otherwise. I thought you knew me better than this.”

“I don’t! I don’t know you at all,” Serena blurted out. “That’s why this is so confusing and frustrating.”

“If you’re mother was here—”

“Well, she’s not here! You have to deal with me! And I don’t want you anywhere near my sister until the cops have finished their investigation.” Serena faced off with him, skin flushed red and hands balled into fists at her side. “Don’t try to look for her. The cops took her to a place where no one could find her. They didn’t tell me the location, so I couldn’t inadvertently lead you to her.”

“I am not her fucking stalker,” Sebastian growled.

Lachlan tugged at his arm. “Hey, come on, man. Gabrielle is not here. Let’s go.”

Sebastian allowed Lachlan to lead him out of the hotel. As they stepped onto the crowded sidewalk, he turned to his friend.

Lachlan raised a hand. “I’m already ahead of you. We’ll return to the compound and get the guys to find out where they are keeping Gabrielle.”

Chapter 38

“Who fucking died?”

Sebastian glanced up from the laptop as Adonis walked into the war room carrying three pizza boxes in one hand and a case of Felipe beer in the other. He placed them on the table.

Adonis pointed a finger at each of them. “I’m serious. You fuckers sitting around here all doom and gloom like you aren’t the best of the fucking best. This shit won’t be easy, but we’ll nail that bastard Tony Brooks and find Gabrielle for my boy here.” Adonis turned to Sebastian and extended his closed fist toward Sebastian’s chest. Sebastian bumped it with his fist, even though he was running low on confidence that they would accomplish either goal.

The tracking bracelet was still offline, which could mean the cops had her in a secure location without access to WI-FI. It made it impossible for them to find her using the bracelet. He wondered if that was what Gabrielle had wanted. Did she purposely remove her bracelet to stop him from finding her? Had she started to doubt him? Her reliance on him as her rock may have turned from safety to suspicion.

Kane groaned. “Pizza? I said to bring something different for dinner, and that’s the best you could do?”

“Nobody is forcing you to eat it,” Adonis said.

Bobby reached for one of the boxes and grabbed a slice. “I fucking love you, man.” He shook his head as he shoved half the slice of goat meat and goat cheese pizza into his mouth. He pushed the box toward Everett, who grabbed a piece, then slid it over to Sebastian.

“You need to eat. No point in us finding Gabrielle, and your ass is too weak to go see her,” Everett said, nudging him. “Do it.”

He didn’t have an appetite, but he grabbed a slice of pizza anyway.

They’d worked nonstop over the past thirty hours. Each promising lead had turned into a dead end. Sebastian was reduced to scouring videos from the limited number of CCTV cameras in Conrad around the time they suspected the cops moved Gabrielle. He traced every person exiting the hotel and every car passing by for any sign Gabrielle was with them. It was mind-numbing and yielded no results.

Now was the time they needed Ike. Strategy was Ike’s strength. He keenly saw above the fray, picked out patterns, and helped navigate his teams through the most complex problems. But Ike wasn’t here, and they were struggling.

“Is that goat pizza I smell?” Lachlan asked as he walked into the room, making a beeline for one of the unopened boxes. “What are you doing here?” he asked Adonis.

“I could ask you the same thing,” Adonis responded. “Where’s Paloma?”

“Just put her down for a nap,” Lachlan explained, then sat on the couch against the wall.

“This ain’t no place for a little girl.” Adonis shook his head.

“It’s the safest place for her because we’re all here,” Lachlan countered. “Your turn.”

Adonis gave a begrudging shrug. “FOMO?”

“Well, we’ll take all the help we can get, though not sure we need your services,” Sebastian said. Adonis’s company had landed an exclusive contract as the sole crime scene cleaner for the PIIB and the network of Palmchat Island police departments. Sebastian dropped the uneaten slice of pizza back into the box. “Overhear anything at the police departments that might help with our search?”

“No,” Adonis shook his head as he peered at the various laptops and tablets scattered on the table. “St. X guys hate that douche, Shannon. They aren’t surprised he’s angled his way onto the stalker case for Gabrielle. It’s how he got promoted to detective, so why not use it to get the police chief gig here.”

“Wait. What are you talking about?” Sebastian sat up.

“Well, he solved one of the biggest cases since The Fury and rescued one of the heirs of the most revered families on our islands.” Sarcasm dripped from Adonis’s words as he referenced Gabrielle. “Rumor is that he’s on the list of candidates for the police chief job in St. Felipe.”

“You think that’s why he jumped on Gabrielle’s stalker case?” Sebastian asked, thoughts racing through his mind. “If he can solve this case and rescue her again, he’ll move to the top of the candidate list.”

“Especially if Serena King endorses him like Bernadette King did to get him promoted to detective,” Adonis explained. “The guy is ambitious at all costs. He’ll break any rule and use any connection to claw his way up the chain.”

Bobby leaned back in his chair. “He can’t find Brooks, so the next best thing is to pin the stalking on Sebastian so he can make an arrest. Look like the hero.”

Sebastian jerked up from his chair. “Fucking bastard. I knew there was something about that asshole that rubbed me the wrong way.”

“Yeah, I’m sure it has nothing to do with how close Gabrielle is to him,” Everett said, then took a long pull on his bottle of Felipe beer.

Sebastian glowered at him. “I need to get out of here.”

“Wait.” Kane wiped his greasy fingers on a napkin. “I’ll come with you.”

Sebastian shook his head. “No, stay here and keep trying to find Gabrielle. I got to clear my head.”

One thing Everett said had been right. He wasn’t in the optimal condition to see Gabrielle and convince her that

Shannon was trying to frame him. Anger boiled in his veins, and all he could think about was hunting down Tony Brooks, then turning his attention to getting revenge on Shannon.

Sebastian pushed through the doors of the compound and stood still, staring up at the Cabrito Mountains. The air was dewy with a hint of a chill. The sun sat low in the sky, round and bright. Sunset was still a couple of hours away. He squeezed the bridge of his nose and tried to clear his mind.

He missed Gabrielle so fucking much. It physically hurt.

He couldn't concentrate. The longer they were apart, the more time she had to believe Shannon's lies. Shannon, the guy who'd been her hero a decade ago. She trusted that asshole. Despite how close Gabrielle had gotten to him, Sebastian still wasn't sure they'd had enough time together for her to believe in him. Trust that he would always do what was best for her.

Sebastian stared into the dense thicket of trees, wishing Ike was here. Despite the guys' thoughts, Sebastian didn't believe Ike would be pissed about him falling for Gabrielle. Shocked. Absolutely. Upset. Never. Ike would be by his side, telling him to get a fucking grip and find his sister to make things right.

A flash of white caught his eye, darting between the thick brush. He walked closer to the mountain's edge, peering through the trees. There it was again. He reached for his gun, training it on the flash in the distance until it reached a narrow clearing within the foliage.

What the hell?

Chapter 39

Sebastian lowered his gun as he made eye contact with the white Labrador. Not just any white Labrador. The dog that claimed Ike as his human, whether Ike liked it or not.

“Tucker,” Sebastian called out to the stray.

The dog barked in response.

That damn dog only showed up when Ike was around. None of them had seen the animal in almost two years. He’d vanished when Ike left for Miami. But he was back now, sniffing around the compound.

Tucker barked again, more insistent.

Sebastian felt crazy, but he couldn’t ignore the thought creeping into his mind. If Tucker was here, did that mean Ike was, too?

He had to find out.

“Stay there, stupid dog,” Sebastian called out as he raced into the forest. “I’m coming.”

The dog barked and then raced through the trees. Sebastian sprinted, following Tucker onto path after path, splashing through muddy puddles and across gnarled tree branches. Jungle leaves scraped at his skin as he ducked and pushed his body to run faster. He rounded a bend and then another, then raced up a steep incline. The white Labrador burst through a tangled web of frangipani bushes, almost toppling Sebastian.

Tucker barked, jumped up on Sebastian, then turned and ran along another trail. He ran over ridges into dense jungle fauna, then emerged on beaten paths that S-curved around the

mountains. Towering banana trees blocked the sun's penetration leaving him in shadowy darkness as he kept an eye on Tucker in the distance. He followed the dog for over an hour, in and out of trees and brush, deeper and deeper into the mountain. Finally, the dog slowed its pace to sniff along the trail.

Sebastian bent over, watching the dog. "Alright, Tucker. Where are you taking me?"

The dog whined, then squeezed through two bushes. Sebastian got on his hands and knees, following Tucker to the other side. A clearing about thirty feet wide stretched in front of him.

Tucker whimpered as he approached a figure on the ground.

Time stopped.

All Sebastian could hear was the roar of blood rushing through his ears as he stared at the lifeless form. He walked closer, heart thudding in his chest. Tucker moved to the side, giving Sebastian an unobstructed view of his best friend. His knees buckled as he stared into Ike's face, twisted at an unnatural angle with eyes closed.

Ike couldn't be dead.

This wasn't fucking happening.

Not on top of everything else.

He wasn't going to lose his friend, too.

Sebastian scrambled to the ground, pressing two fingers to Ike's neck while he dug in his pocket for his cell phone with his other hand. The phone rang as he concentrated on any movement from his best friend. A slight tremor brushed against his fingers.

"Where the hell are you?" Kane demanded. "We've been trying to reach you—"

"I found ... Ike," Sebastian forced the words out. "He has a pulse, but it's weak. Not sure if he has any other injuries."

“Hold on, we’re triangulating to get your location now,” Everett said.

A rustle of frantic discussion was white noise in his ears as he stared at Ike. He prayed that it wasn’t too late. That they could help Ike and get their friend back.

Bobby’s voice came on the line. “Sebastian.”

“Yeah.”

“Listen to me. Adonis and Kane are headed out there to get Ike. Everett is reaching out to one of his old DEA contacts, a doctor, to come to the compound to check Ike out,” Bobby said.

“Okay.”

“As soon as they arrive, you need to go,” Bobby insisted. “I’m sending Gabrielle’s location to your phone.”

“You found her?”

“Yeah, we found her,” Bobby said.

Sebastian glanced up as the clouds broke apart, allowing a glorious ray of sun to bathe down upon him and Ike.

Chapter 40

It was night two at the safe house.

Alone with only a rotating cast of guards to protect her.

Most barely spoke, keeping a respectful and professional distance. She didn't mind because none of them was the man she wanted with her. Missing Sebastian was palpable, like a physical presence in the house. She longed to talk to him, but there was no chance. She gripped her butterfly necklace and squeezed it between her fingers. The message she asked Serena to give Sebastian would have to be enough for now.

As the officers secured her into an unmarked vehicle in the alley behind Hotel Braganza, she'd begged Serena to go to Sebastian and tell him she believed in him. She didn't believe Brad's theory about Sebastian being her stalker. She never could because she knew the man that he was. The one who meant more to her than she'd ever dreamed anyone could. She was counting the seconds until they could be together again.

She just wished she could talk to Serena. Find out what Sebastian's reaction had been to her message. But Brad had forbidden it. There were no cell phones allowed in the safe house. No Wi-Fi. No internet.

Gabrielle glanced down at her bracelet.

No way for Sebastian to find her this time since the signal emitted from the bracelet had to connect to Wi-Fi for him to find her.

She exhaled a resigned breath as her night guard knocked on the door.

“Come in,” Gabrielle called out.

The door opened. The officer gave her a polite smile as he held a brown bag filled with her dinner. He was a tall, broad man dressed in jeans and a dark blue windbreaker with a hood. Gabrielle guessed he was in his early forties with considerable experience in this kind of work, which she appreciated. His girth and presence would make any criminal think twice about breaking the law.

“How’d you get stuck on this crappy assignment?” Gabrielle reached for the bag. “You must be bored out of your mind out there.”

“It’s an honor,” the officer said. “Your mother has done so much for the islands. Gone above and beyond to help the less fortunate. Didn’t ask for a single thing in return and didn’t make a big deal about it in the media. She had a generous heart. It’s a privilege to be here to ensure no one hurts you.”

Gabrielle nodded as a sob caught in her throat. “I miss her,” Gabrielle said, blinking quickly. Being back in St. Felipe without her mother’s bold presence was strange. Bernadette King’s absence was felt all around, not just within her family or at King Estate.

“I’m sure you do. I hope that she and your father will be found ... one way or another.”

“Thanks. Me too,” Gabrielle said although she wasn’t sure she agreed. Did she really want to know if her parents weren’t out there trying to make their way back home? Was it better to find out that they hadn’t survived or continue to live in her blissful ignorance that she’d see them again one day?

Pushing the sad thoughts away, she placed the bag on the kitchen table and took out the contents. Brad had allowed her this one indulgence—dinner from the most iconic restaurant on the island, Nettie’s. The smell of jerk goat tenders, rice and peas, and fried plantains wafted in the air as she pulled the foil pan from the bag. Grabbing the jumbo-sized Styrofoam cup filled with sweet hibiscus tea, she tossed the bag into the garbage can in the corner. This meal was a favorite of every

Palmchatter in St. Felipe, regardless of status. Everyone loved Nettie's.

“Need anything else?” the officer asked.

“No, but there's plenty of food. Enough for four people. Did you already eat?”

“Yes, ma'am. I'll leave you to it.”

Gabrielle nodded, then watched as he exited the front door.

An hour later, she'd finished a third of the food and all the tea. Two days confined to the house with nothing to do had taken its toll. Fantasizing about Sebastian had become her pastime.

She'd imagine his lips on hers, on her body, on her most sensitive spots, while pleasuring herself. As vivid as her memories were, they dulled compared to the real thing. She wanted him tonight. Putting away the leftovers, she tidied up the kitchen and went to her bedroom. Opening the drawers to the chest, she ran a finger over the delicate silk lace of her lingerie. Sebastian's eyes would devour her whenever she wore pink. He loved the contrast of the bold color against her deep brown skin. She reached for a hot pink tank top and thong, then headed to the bathroom. She could almost hear him telling her how he planned to throw away all her clothes except her tanks and thongs. That's the only thing he wanted her to wear around him.

A hot shower was the perfect distraction for the intense ache and longing for Sebastian. Turning the knobs to the hottest setting, she removed her clothes as steam filled the tiny space. She tied her hair up in a satin wrap and opened the glass door. The shower spray was hot and prickly as she stepped underneath, drenching her instantly. Memories of her last shower with Sebastian filled her mind. The more she thought of him, the hornier she became. The urge to stroke herself grew strong. She clenched her thighs together and focused on soaping her towel. Her hands moved over her swollen breasts. The tight buds crying out to be sucked and kissed as only Seby could. The soap slipped from her hand at the thought and bounced along the floor.

Bending over, she picked it up and then glanced through the glass.

He stood on the other side, staring at her with dark smoldering eyes burning with lust. His gaze trailed from her face to her breasts and between her legs, lingering for a long moment before rising back to her eyes.

She couldn't breathe.

A scream caught in her throat.

Terror paralyzed her.

“No—”

He jerked the door open. His open palm slammed into her mouth, muffling her words. Forcing her backward, he stepped into the small shower, fully clothed. She was trapped against the tile, heart jackhammering in her chest.

A mask covered his face, with openings for his soulless eyes and mouth curled into a sneer.

The stalker.

Tony Brooks.

He'd found her.

Panic sliced through her as her survival instincts kicked in. She swung her arms wildly against his face and chest. Her legs kicked at his knees, trying to weaken him.

The blows didn't faze him.

His free hand pressed against her bare stomach, sliding slowly up to caress her breasts before settling around her neck. His fingers curled around her throat, squeezing tightly until she could no longer breathe. He dropped his hand from her mouth as gurgled sounds came from her lips. Her throat burned from the pressure to breathe. She couldn't die here, not like this. Clawing at his hands, she tried to loosen his grasp.

His face moved closer to hers.

“You will always be ... mine,” the stalker hissed through clenched teeth.

She shook her head as tears blended with the water coating her face.

A syringe appeared in his hand.

He held it high, taunting her as her gaze landed on it.

Her eyes followed the tip of the needle until it plunged into her arm.

Chapter 41

The night air was quiet. Not even a breeze rustled through the jungle. Sebastian pressed his back against the trunk of a tree, hidden in the shadows of the dense foliage surrounding the safe house. The wilderness provided a natural barrier, and the motion sensors filled in the gaps for anyone trying to breach the structure. He was careful to avoid tripping them as he moved along the perimeter. An SUV with mud-caked tires was parked on the gravel driveway in front of the house.

There were only two entry points.

A window above the kitchen, which deterred entry due to the narrow size and distance from the ground, and the front door.

He settled on the window as his way inside.

Sebastian took a slow breath, then studied the front of the cottage.

No sign of the police guard, which was unusual. Threats were more likely at night. Sebastian expected him to be on his post outside monitoring for any intruders, not inside getting his fucking beauty rest.

Grabbing his cell phone, Sebastian accessed the classified program used by PISCOs to sweep an area for security. He aimed at the house and checked for any signs of additional motion detectors or cameras. Four motion detectors registered through his tracking program. He'd need to scramble the codes the police used to monitor in order to enter the house undetected. But he didn't want to stumble upon the guard

inside the house. He needed to find a way to lure the man outside.

Sinking low against the tree, Sebastian picked one of the motion detectors near a flowering bush in the yard. One that could easily be tripped by a small animal but not easily checked through video monitoring. He rubbed his hand along the foliage until he felt a rock big enough to throw at it. He only had one shot. Thank goodness his aim was impeccable. Leaning forward, he threw the rock and watched as it bounced onto the motion detector. The device lit up, flashing an almost imperceptible yellow light at high speed.

The guard should be coming outside in seconds to check things out. Darting across the lawn, he kept low and to the shadows until he was pressed against the side of the house, directly underneath the window. He could no longer see the porch, but he'd be able to hear the door open and see the guard as he exited.

He sank into the shadows, hidden in the darkness, and waited. Seconds turned to long, excruciating minutes.

No one came outside.

No one ... fucking ... came.

“Shit,” Seby muttered under his breath. Taking off briskly, he reached back into his backpack for the suppressor and screwed it to the end of his Glock. He raced up the steps. Two at a time. Aimed for the space between the locks and the door jam. Two quick shots. The wood splintered. The door swung open from the force.

He stepped into the living room.

Smoky scent of goat meat lingered in the air.

Modest, traditional furniture.

A couch. Two armchairs. Coffee table.

Neat. Tidy. Undisturbed.

Turning in a full circle, he took in the surroundings.

Satisfied that nothing was amiss, he faced a short hallway.

His finger rested on the side of the gun.

Still and unmoving.

Ready at a moment's notice to slide over the trigger.

With silent steps, he moved down the hallway to the bedroom.

A deep male voice grew louder as he approached.

“I can't believe you wrote this. How could you do this to me?” Rage simmered in his voice. “You wrote this: He surprised me with his sensitivity. This bodyguard I didn't want has become the only person I want by my side.” The man's words grew louder, laced with disdain as he continued. “I always rolled my eyes at the idea of love at first sight. I suppose it wasn't our first sight, even though it felt like I was truly seeing him for the first time now. Anyways, I think I'm in love with him. Yes, already. How crazy is that? I love my bodyguard.”

Sebastian stopped inches away from the bedroom door.

Were those Gabrielle's words?

Had she written about *him* in her journal?

He pushed the thoughts away and focused on the man inside the room.

The stalker.

Tony Brooks.

“That's what you wrote about him,” Brooks screamed. “How do you think that makes me feel? Do you even fucking care?”

There was no response to his questions.

No protest. No defense. No muffled cries.

Sebastian took another step, peeking through the gap in the door.

Gabrielle lay across the bed.

Naked.

Her arm dangled over the edge.

Head lolled to the side, with damp hair pressed against her face.

The rise and fall of her chest gave him some comfort.

She was still alive.

But maybe ... drugged?

“You’re only supposed to love ... me,” Brooks said. “Me! Me! Me!” He screamed louder, stomping his feet.

Sebastian moved closer to the door.

He couldn’t see Brooks inside the room.

He had no clue what kind of weapons Brooks might have.

Sebastian wouldn’t do anything that could put Gabrielle’s life in danger.

Brooks’s voice grew cold. “You’re not supposed to love anyone but me. Don’t you see? You’re forcing me to eliminate the competition for your heart.”

A sickening dread filled the pit of Sebastian’s stomach as a horrible sound permeated the air.

He’d heard that sound before.

He’d caused that sound.

A steel blade plunged and sliced into human flesh.

With no mercy.

Sebastian pushed off the wall and kicked the door open wider, gun raised.

Brooks looked up at him.

His face was covered in a black stocking mask.

A bloody knife in his left hand.

A gun in his right.

Sebastian ducked just as Brooks pulled the trigger.

Two, three, four, five shots blasted into the wall across the hallway.

Scrambling to the floor, Sebastian rolled toward the corner and secured his weapon. The shots continued as Brooks raced out of the room, shooting barely above Sebastian's head.

Sebastian pressed his body against the floor, then turned and aimed at Brooks.

He got off two shots before the man disappeared into the living room.

Bullets flew through the air from the automatic weapon.

Sebastian crawled to the end of the short hallway.

Brooks raced through the open door and disappeared into the night.

"Fuck," Sebastian muttered.

As much as he wanted to go after the bastard, he couldn't.

Not with Gabrielle unconscious.

Not without knowing what Brooks had done to her.

The thought that the fucker might have ...

He stopped the thoughts before the rage consumed him.

Caring for Gabrielle was the only thing that mattered right now.

Putting his gun back into the holster, he walked into the bedroom.

A man lay on the ground. His polo shirt was torn open, revealing a bare chest with a message written in dark lipstick.

She's mine.

Blood poured from stab wounds in his abdomen.

Was this the guard Shannon had assigned to protect Gabrielle?

Brooks stabbed the man because he thought this was the bodyguard Gabrielle had fallen in love with.

A thud resounded behind him.

Sebastian turned around, gun raised and pointed at ...

“Lachlan?” Sebastian lowered his gun. “What the fuck?”

“Thought you’d need backup, and I was right,” Lachlan said, then looked down at the guard’s body. “What the hell happened here?” Lachlan dropped to his knees beside the bleeding man and felt his neck for a pulse.

Sebastian didn’t respond. He couldn’t. The only person who mattered to him was Gabrielle. He moved to her, fighting the fear clawing at his heart, and draped the bedsheet over her body. His only comfort was that she was still breathing. Still alive. But he had no clue what Brooks had done to her before he got to the safe house. He’d been too late to stop her from getting hurt.

Again.

Lifting her into his arms, Sebastian said, “That must be the cop assigned to guard her. Brooks got in here and killed the guy because of what Gabrielle wrote in her journal. He thought Gabrielle had fallen in love with him.”

“But she’s in love with you,” Lachlan said, raising an eyebrow as he looked up at Sebastian.

He was quiet. He couldn’t respond. Couldn’t process what her private thoughts meant to him. To both of them. Not with Gabrielle limp in his arms.

Lachlan said, “I’ll call 9-1-1.”

Sebastian nodded and held Gabrielle tighter, stroking her beautiful face as he waited for the paramedics to arrive.

Chapter 42

“Target, The Colonel, identified and confirmed.”

Ike gazed across the park at the man. He wasn't what Ike had expected. Thin and slight. Folds creased the loose skin of his face, deeply tanned from decades of basking under the Mexican sun. He moved slowly as if each step caused him pain. But his eyes were sharp, canvassing the area for threats he knew lurked in the distance as he played with the school-age children jumping and laughing around him.

The man was looking for Ike.

But he wouldn't find him.

He wouldn't see Ike coming.

Wouldn't be able to stop him.

“Stingray, confirm line of sight to target.”

Ike slid a hand along his ear, activating the comms. “Affirmative. The Colonel in sight.”

The mission had come together quickly in weeks instead of years. The first detection of fentanyl on the streets of St. Killian had occurred months earlier, sending all levels of government into a frenzy. The epidemic overtaking the U.S., North America, and Europe couldn't be allowed into the small nation of the Palmchat Islands. The Palmchat Islands Investigative Bureau was dispatched to identify the source. All criminal activity on the islands went through the notorious PC-5, and the cartel was the obvious starting point.

But the PC-5 wasn't behind the influx of the dangerous opioid.

Not only were they not engaged in selling the drug, but they'd been working within criminal networks to prevent it from reaching the islands. Navigating a delicate web that, if broken, could harm their other illegal operations.

It was rare that the PIIB and the PC-5 found themselves on the same side. This was one such occasion. The enemy of my enemy is my friend.

And now that the source of the fentanyl had been identified, PISCOs had been dispatched to do the dirty work.

Ike glanced down at his smooth, manicured hands and saw the years of blood, dirt, and grime from being a glorified mercenary for the Palmchat Islands government.

Why the fuck had he thought he was doing good for the world?

The military assignment inside the special operation force was supposed to get rid of bad guys. But too often, Ike felt like a pawn. A hired government hitman was no different from a PC-5 or Quattro henchman. There was no honor. He was no fucking hero.

Shouldn't it be on his terms if he was going to be a hired gun?

Terms he could live with.

Terms that would make his father proud.

He shuddered as his gaze left The Colonel and darted toward a swing set where a man sat on a blanket, seemingly enthralled with a novel resting on his legs. The man looked up, and their eyes locked.

Sebastian Luttrell.

The only person Ike trusted to be by his side for this op.

He never fathomed that a punk kid who'd picked his pocket on the streets of Los Angeles when they were teenagers would become his closest and most trusted friend.

The rest of the park was virtually deserted by design.

A college-aged couple lay on the grass in the distance, oblivious to anyone and anything but each other. An older woman sat on a bench, taking a nap underneath the warm rays of the sun.

The Colonel's legion of bodyguards had secured the area to give him private time with his grandchildren. The eight men were at a suitable distance, subtly dissuading but not denying other locals access to the park.

This was The Colonel's turf. A dangerous and perfect place to complete the mission. The town had been trained to see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil. No matter how many witnesses there would be to the outcome, none would speak up. None would identify the assailants because they'd been taught not to by The Colonel himself.

"Permission to proceed," Ike said into the comms.

Static filled the line.

Sebastian shifted on his blanket and stretched, placing his book into a backpack. The backpack filled with tear gas to aid in their escape from the area.

"Granted." The response was like a cannon, sending Ike hurtling into a dark abyss.

He slid his sunglasses from his face and pushed them into his back pocket, exchanging them for the butterfly knife. He maneuvered the blade along his forearm, covered by the sleeve of his linen shirt. A soccer ball rolled toward his feet. Picking it up, he tossed it at a young boy.

"Thank you," the kid said, giving him a wide toothless grin.

Ike smiled back, feeling no guilt or remorse for what he was about to do. He kept walking across the lush green grass, reducing the distance between him and The Colonel, who was watching over the playing kids like a proud grandfather. In his periphery, he detected the attention of two of the bodyguards. They were watching him. Alert.

The Colonel sensed his presence when he was within twenty feet and looked at him.

Ike's face hardened as he tilted his head at the man.

"Not in front of my grandchildren," The Colonel said calmly without any signs of distress.

"It's the only option." The butterfly knife slid down into Ike's hand. He gripped it tightly, slashed The Colonel's throat, and plunged it into the man's heart. The cries and screams of the children mingled with the deafening shots from automatic rifles. Bullets whizzed around him, bright orange fire blasts pelting the ground as he ran for cover.

A cloak of gas surrounded Ike.

Day turned to the blackest night.

He couldn't see. He couldn't hear. He couldn't move.

Smoke scratched at his lungs, burning fire.

Pain rumbled through his body.

Each tremor was more intense than before.

Sharp daggers pierced his chest with every breath.

The scream caught in his throat refused to press through his lips.

He tried to open his eyes but couldn't. They were too heavy.

This wasn't how it happened.

This wasn't what he remembered.

Something was off.

Muffled voices surrounded him.

Familiar frantic voices.

They grew clearer.

"Fuck," Adonis said. "How did he get here? Looks like he fucking fell from the sky."

"I'm not sure we should move him," Kane said.

"We don't have a choice," Everett said. "I called an ex-DEA buddy of mine, Rocco Forrester. He's a doctor. But he's

coming from Santo Domingo. It'll be an hour before he gets to St. Felipe.”

“Maybe we should take him to a local hospital,” Adonis said.

“Fuck no,” Everett and Kane said in unison.

“No one is going to know that Ike is here until Ike tells us they should,” Everett said.

Kane added, “There could be a target on his back. Someone waiting to finish him off. We have to keep him safe until we know more.”

“Okay. Okay. So, we take him back to the compound,” Adonis said.

“It’s the only option,” Everett concluded.

That stupid dog had done good. Real good.

The black abyss descended on Ike again, numbing the pain.

He didn’t fight it.

It was the only option.

And he was in good hands.

Chapter 43

“What are you doing here?” Gabrielle demanded, sitting up in the bed.

Dr. Marvin Hester raised his hands. “The hospital is buzzing about what happened to you.”

Her gaze darted from the face of the man who looked so much like her tormentor to the red alert button dangling from a cord hooked onto the wall. She willed herself to remain calm as Marvin entered her hospital room.

“I know things were contentious the last time we spoke. I’m sorry about that. I shouldn’t have lashed out at you or your sister. But none of that matters now. I want you to know that despite what I said back then, I would never have wished this on you. It’s horrible that you’re being stalked again.” Marvin looked pained as he shoved his hands into the pocket of his jeans.

Gabrielle tried to relax, but seeing Marvin triggered memories of his identical twin. Damian had kidnapped and tormented her a decade ago. Now Tony Brooks had picked up where he left off after being influenced by Damian in prison. She’d had enough of the Hesters in her life.

“I appreciate that. But you shouldn’t be here,” Gabrielle said, hoping he wouldn’t linger.

Marvin walked toward the window, his back to her. “I heard that the guy who is stalking you and stabbed your bodyguard was a cellmate of my brother. Tony Brooks. Damian talked about him when I went to visit. They were close.”

Bile rose in Gabrielle's throat at the confirmation of what the cops had already assumed. "Have the cops reached out to you? To ask about your brother's relationship with Tony Brooks."

"No, they haven't. Brooks deserves to die for hurting you."

Gabrielle stared at Marvin as he turned around and locked eyes with her. She saw none of the anger and hatred that had dominated their earlier conversations. He seemed to be contrite and upset about what she was going through.

Marvin continued, "It took me too long to understand how much my brother hurt you. I believe he had remorse for what he did. He wanted to make things right in his own way but couldn't figure out how to do that in a way that wouldn't hurt you more. It was unfair of me to expect you to get over what he'd done. To forget about it like it wasn't a big deal when it completely changed your life. I hope one day you can forgive me."

Gabrielle was speechless. She didn't know how to respond. Was there anything to forgive Marvin for? Loving his brother and sticking up for him despite the heinous things he'd done to her? Wouldn't she have done the same if Serena or Ike were in that situation? After everything she'd been through last night with Tony, the last thing she wanted to think about was forgiving anyone connected to Damian Hester. She looked away from Marvin.

"Maybe." She pulled the covers up, covering her shoulders.

"Guess I can't expect much more than that." Marvin shrugged with a sheepish smile. "I also thought you should know that I'm taking a leave of absence from my psychiatry residency." He ran a hand over his low fade. "It was approved for a year. I'll take the next few days to wrap up things here. Then I'm going to leave the island for a while. Maybe forever. I don't know. It might be better for me to move on. Go somewhere I can start a life where no one knows about my brother and what he did to you."

Gabrielle was quiet. She had no plan to convince Marvin that he should stay. He was nothing like his brother, but seeing that face in the same room with her was still unnerving.

Marvin lingered as if he wanted to say more but wasn't sure he should. He seemed broader and more prominent, consuming too much space in the room. She wanted him to leave. He'd said what he came to say. There was no reason for him to stick around, yet she couldn't get the words out to ask him to leave.

“Gabrielle, I was wondering if—”

“We are only allowing family members to visit Ms. King now. You need to leave.” Dr. Ebony Carey glared at Marvin as she entered the room, followed by two other doctors. “Now, Dr. Hester.”

Marvin nodded, then turned to gaze at her one last time. A longing in his eyes for something she couldn't quite understand but instinctively understood was guilt for everything his brother had put her through. He finally saw Damian for the obsessed and depraved man he was and could no longer defend his brother or his actions.

Gabrielle exhaled a shaky breath. Would Marvin feel guilty if he knew the truth? The truth she'd take to her grave.

As Marvin exited, Dr. Carey approached the bed and sat on a stool next to Gabrielle. “Are you okay? Did he do anything to—”

“No, it's fine,” Gabrielle paused. “He came to apologize for his brother and what I'm going through now.”

“Still, we made it clear that you were to have no visitors, and he misused his position at the hospital to break those rules. I'll see that this gets reported.”

“Please don't. I want to forget everything that happened over the past twenty-four hours.”

“You were fortunate,” Dr. Carey said. “The officer guarding you is still in surgery. It's been touch and go to repair the damage from the stab wounds—”

“Stab wounds?” Gabrielle bolted up, the covers falling from her shoulders. “What are you talking about? The stalker stabbed him?”

“I’m sorry. I thought you’d been briefed by the nurses when you regained consciousness,” Dr. Carey said, concern in her kind eyes. “We have our best surgeons in the O.R., and we’re optimistic he’ll survive.”

Gabrielle shuddered as a sob caught in her throat. She never wanted anyone harmed because of her, yet that’s what happened. The officer was stabbed while rescuing her from Tony.

Dr. Carey swiped the tablet in her hand, stopping to read the contents every few seconds. “All of your test results are back. The stalker injected you with propofol, a common anesthetic used in the hospital. No other illegal drugs, toxins, or medicines were found in your blood.”

Gabrielle jerked the butterfly charm along the chain. “And the sexual assault examination?”

Looking up from the tablet, Dr. Carey gazed at her with sympathy. “Preliminary results show no signs of forced intercourse. No semen was found, which is a good sign. But we need to wait for the full DNA results to be sure.”

“But you don’t think he raped me?” Gabrielle trembled uncontrollably under the thin bedsheet. When she’d woken up in the hospital, she’d focused on her body, trying to determine if she’d been violated. She wasn’t bruised and had no pain but she couldn’t trust her feelings. Her body was numb from the trauma and the drugs. There was only one way to be sure that bastard hadn’t raped her, so she didn’t hesitate to say yes when the doctors recommended the rape kit.

Dr. Carey reached over and squeezed her hand. “No, I don’t. Other than the slight bruising on your neck, it doesn’t appear he did any other *physical* harm to you.”

She let out a shaky breath. “Okay, what’s next?”

“I’d like to keep you admitted for another day for observation and a psych evaluation. You’ve gone through a

traumatic event, and this isn't the first time. It might help to talk to someone."

"What's the point? It's clear I'm a fucking magnet for psychos. I barely remember anything from last night. The stalker attacked me in the shower, then stuck a syringe in my arm. The next thing I knew, I woke up in the hospital. I guess the one thing the bastard did was spare me from watching his brutal attack on my security guard."

"From talking to Detective Shannon, you've been living under the shadow of this threat for weeks now. It wasn't the first time the stalker got past your security to reach you. The impact of all of this on your mental well-being could be more than you realize," Dr. Carey explained.

"No shit," Gabrielle said. "But I haven't had good experience baring my soul to shrinks. It doesn't work for me."

"Fine. I won't make it a requirement of your release. But I will ask one of the psychiatrists on staff to stop by in the morning and speak with you. If you decline her offer, then so be it," Dr. Carey said, then stood. "But if you don't want to talk to a doctor, maybe you should talk to someone you trust. Like the man who rescued you from the safe house. He said the two of you are close."

"I'm confused. The officer didn't protect me from the stalker? That wasn't why he was stabbed."

"I don't know the full details, but what I heard from the detectives was that after the stalker sedated you, he lured your bodyguard inside and was able to subdue him," Dr. Carey said, worry clouding her face as if she wasn't sure she should share the details. "Then he proceeded to read from your journal. Passages that agitated him. He stabbed the officer in the chest repeatedly as he ranted about what you'd written. That's when the other man came and chased him away, saving both of your lives."

Passages from her journal.

Stabbing her bodyguard.

Gabrielle couldn't breathe.

Tony must have thought the bodyguard she'd written about in her journal was the officer guarding her last night. But that wasn't true.

The man Tony wanted to hurt was Sebastian.

Sebastian was the man she was falling in love with.

God forgive her for being grateful that Tony had jumped to the wrong conclusions. She wouldn't be able to survive if she was the reason Sebastian was hurt or killed.

“And the man who saved us is here at the hospital?”

Dr. Carey nodded, then turned to one of the other doctors waiting by the door. “Did you get his name? I don't remember what it was.”

The man nodded, then said, “Mr. Luttrell is the man who carried Ms. King into the emergency room.”

Her heart fluttered. “I know you said I couldn't have any visitors, but is it possible for me to see Mr. Luttrell?”

Chapter 44

The fifth floor of St. Killian General Hospital was reserved for the island's elite citizens—elected officials, dignitaries, industry billionaires, and celebrities. The King Family was at the top of that list, so an entire floor wing had been evacuated for Gabrielle. The other rooms were filled with family members waiting their turn to see Gabrielle and wouldn't be available for other patients until Serena King said so.

Sebastian hadn't been invited to wait with the family.

Despite insisting that he and Lachlan had rescued Gabrielle and the officer from Tony Brooks's attack, Sebastian was still a potential suspect in Serena's eyes. She didn't know if she could trust his version of what happened at the safe house without corroboration from the officer, who had been whisked into surgery when they'd arrived at the hospital.

None of that concerned Sebastian.

All his thoughts were singularly focused on Gabrielle.

When she regained consciousness, she'd expect him to be there.

It was the only place he wanted to be.

Seeing her naked and sedated on the bed, vulnerable to that psycho, had ripped his heart out. His mind raced through the possibilities of what Brooks might have done to her. Each thought was more soul-crushing and deplorable than the last. If his thoughts turned out to be accurate, there wasn't a rock that fucker could hide under that would keep Sebastian from finding him and making him pay.

“Mr. Luttrell.” A gentle hand rested on his shoulder. Sebastian glanced up at the older woman with salt-and-pepper braided hair twisted into a complex chignon and dressed in crisp white. Her badge indicated she was a nurse.

“Is Gabrielle okay?” Sebastian asked, his heart kicking up a notch in his chest.

“Yes. She’d like to see you.”

The nurse led him to the private elevators.

All he wanted was to pull Gabrielle into his arms and hold onto her forever. He knew that she loved him. He’d listened to her declaration of love for him read by a fucking psycho, but they were still the sweetest words he’d ever heard. He couldn’t wait to tell her how much he loved her.

The elevator dinged, and the doors opened.

The nurse turned to him. “This way, Mr. Luttrell.”

Sebastian’s ears perked up as they approached the end of the hallway.

“You can’t go in there,” a male voice said.

“The King Stalker is my case,” Detective Shannon thundered. “I have a right to question Gabrielle. If you want to tag along, fine, but I’m going inside!”

“No, you’re not. This isn’t your case anymore. It’s been reassigned to us. We aren’t here to work with you. We are taking it over. You’re to report back to the St. Xavier Police Department ... immediately.”

“You can’t do this to me. I need to break this case—”

“Why? So you can land the Chief of Police gig in St. Felipe?” The man scoffed, laughing under his breath. “You’re lucky to have a job to return to in St. X. You’ve fucked up your reputation big time with this one. There won’t be any more promotions in your future, buddy.”

“I’m not your fucking buddy. Wait until Serena King hears about this. She trusts me to handle this investigation.”

“Not anymore. Who do you think called the Prime Minister to ask us to take over?” The man and Detective Shannon walked around the corner, heading toward Sebastian and the nurse. The man wore the signature steel gray jacket emblazoned with PIIB in teal. The island feds were taking over the stalker case.

The special agent pointed toward the elevator. “After you, Detective.”

Shannon’s shoulders slumped as he glared at the special agent. The tense standoff only lasted seconds before he grudgingly entered the elevator. The special agent gave Sebastian and the nurse a polite nod, then followed Shannon inside.

“Her room is the first door on the left,” the nurse said. “You can go in.” She gently squeezed his hand, then headed to the nurses’ station across the hallway.

Twisting the knob, Sebastian pushed the door open, then stood in the doorway ... frozen.

“Hey ...” He managed to get the words out.

Tears welled in Gabrielle’s eyes. “Hi.”

Sebastian closed the door behind him, then slowly approached her bed. She looked delicate and fragile. The attack from last night had dulled the feisty, defiant woman he loved. He hated to see her like this. Defeated.

Gabrielle swiped at the tears sliding down her face, then held up her hand. “I can’t take it if you come any closer.”

“Why?” Sebastian frowned.

“Because we can’t see each other anymore.”

“Gabs.”

“No. Listen to me. The officer assigned to protect me is fighting for his life because Tony thought he was you.”

“Tony thought the officer was the bodyguard you wrote about in your journal,” Sebastian clarified as he crossed the

room to stop at the foot of her bed. “The bodyguard you are in love with.”

“Do you know what a horrible person I am? No? Let me tell you. When I found out that’s why Tony attacked my guard, I was relieved that he’d stabbed the wrong man. I was happy that someone else suffered so that you wouldn’t. It would’ve killed me if you were the one fighting for your life in that operating room. All because of me.”

The pull to comfort her was too strong. Sebastian walked over to the side of the hospital bed and kneeled, grabbing her hands in his. Gabrielle tried to resist, but he held on tight.

“When I found you at the safe house.” His words were low and strained, choked with emotion. “There was blood everywhere, and you looked ... ” He inhaled a sharp breath, then let it out. “You looked dead. But I could see your chest rising and falling. You were breathing, and I thanked God I wasn’t too late. I didn’t know what Tony had done to you. I still don’t. But what I do know without any doubt is how much I love you.” He leaned his head on her chest as her hand slipped from his and caressed his face.

“Seby, he didn’t rape me,” Gabrielle said.

Relief flooded through Sebastian.

“Gabs.” Sebastian leaned closer to her face. “I won’t let anyone keep us apart. Not even you.” He pressed his lips against her sweet mouth and was encouraged that she didn’t push him away. He deepened the kiss, hoping that he was getting through to her. Changing her mind about the foolish idea that they not be together. His tongue slid slowly against hers as she welcomed him.

Gabrielle pushed his shoulders and jerked her head away. “No. Stop. I’ve made up my mind.”

“Did you not hear the part when I said I love you?”

“I’ll be damned if you die because of me.”

“I’m not dying at the hands of some fucker trying to stalk you—”

“Is that right? Because I heard he almost blew your head off last night. Gunshots riddled the walls where you must have been. It’s a miracle that none of them hit you.”

“It’s not a fucking miracle. I’m a trained special operative. I know how to engage in hand-to-hand combat with the worst of the worst criminals in the world.”

“But have you ever had to fight someone where it was personal? Where you were the target because they wanted to eliminate you. You, Sebastian Luttrell. Not get rid of a PISCO operative. Not take down law enforcement in their way. But, someone who is hunting you specifically. Because that’s what we’re dealing with now,” Gabrielle said. “It’s just a matter of time before that psycho realizes he stabbed the wrong bodyguard and comes after you. Trust me. He won’t play fair. You might not even see him coming—“

“How can you say that to me?” Sebastian grew irate.

“Because I see it in your eyes, Seby. You can’t possibly do what you were trained to do in this situation because you’re distracted and blinded by your feelings for me.”

“Feelings? I fucking love you. That doesn’t blind me. That gives me laser focus on what’s important—protecting you at all costs.”

“Not if the cost is your life.” Gabrielle snatched the cord from the wall, her finger hovering over the call button. “You should go.”

“You think it’s that easy? Go away, Sebastian, and I leave. You know me better than that.”

Gabrielle swiped at a tear cascading down her face. “None of this is easy. There’s nothing that I want more than to grab you and hold on to you forever. But I can’t. I won’t be the reason that maniac turns his sights onto you.”

Sebastian stroked a finger along Gabrielle’s face, but she forced his hand away.

“Seby, this is too much for me. I’m fucking freaking out right now. I’m scared to death for myself. For my family. For you. I can’t deal with this. Having you around makes

everything that much harder, don't you see? I need you to give me a little space. No, a lot of space. There's no way I can be in a relationship now. Even when Tony is caught, it may be a long time before I can, and that's not fair to you."

"Stop. You're upset. I get it. But don't tell me—"

"I'm not ready for this," she said, waving her hand between them. "I sure as hell can't deal with it while I'm trying to fight a stalker. My only priority is to protect the people I care about from being hurt because that bastard is after me. That's my only focus. There's no space for anything more."

"You're saying there's no space for me in your life? I'm glad that works for you, but it does nothing for me," Sebastian said, his heart breaking into a million pieces. "What if it's fucking impossible for me to stop loving you? To stop wanting to be there for you. To be with you. What do I do then?"

"You figure something out. You're a PISCO, remember? Make it your damn mission to get over me and do it quick," Gabrielle said with finality.

The pain in her face told him more than her words.

She was at her breaking point, and his attempts to push her would only make this worse. He couldn't bring more heartache and stress to her life. He loved her too much to do that, even though the alternative was about to kill him.

"Fine," Sebastian said, then took a long deep breath. "But I need you to do one thing for me before I go."

"What is it?"

"I need you to say the words." He had to know the real reason she was pushing him away.

"What's the point—"

"Because I fucking need to hear you say it. I need to know that I didn't make any of this up. That it was real. We were real. Even if just for a short time."

Gabrielle bit her lower lip as she crossed her arms over her chest. Her breaths were shaky as she shook her head.

“Please, Gabs ...”

She swallowed, then reached for his hands.

He placed his hands in hers, squeezing them tightly, as he gazed into her gorgeous brown eyes for perhaps the last time.

“Seby, I love you ... with all my heart and soul. I love you.”

Chapter 45

The floor-to-ceiling bookshelf dominated the wall, filled with hundreds of books surrounding dozens of framed family photos. Gabrielle ran a finger along the edge of one shelf, stopping at one picture she'd never seen before.

Her father, dripping wet and dressed in swim trunks, tickled her mother, fully clothed in a couture sundress, as she laughed with glee on a white sand beach. The photographer captured the expressions of pure happiness on their sand-covered faces. A moment in time from a life filled with pure devotion and love. She lifted the picture in the frame and turned to look at the back of it, wondering when the photo had been taken.

“Surprised to see you in here,” Serena said.

Gabrielle turned to see her sister entering their parents' three-room suite. Serena was regal in a simple white sundress. A stark contrast to the baggy jogging pants and oversized t-shirt Gabrielle still wore after being released from the hospital last night.

“Me too,” Gabrielle said. Her plans to avoid the house like the plague had been derailed by the PIIB special agents. They'd made it clear the safest place for her to be until the stalker was caught was her family home. The lead special agent believed the significant number of family and staff on the property and the heightened security were the perfect deterrents. Tony Brooks's previous attacks had been successful because she'd been isolated with a limited number of people around her. A critical mistake made by Brad and his team.

“Do you know when this photo was taken?” Gabrielle handed it to Serena.

Her sister took it. A bright smile spread across her face as she gazed at their parents’ photo.

“This had to be their fortieth-anniversary trip to the Maldives,” Serena said, then pointed to the massive mansion that appeared to float over the water in the distance. “Mom was so excited about that trip. This was about two or three years before their plane vanished.”

Gabrielle reached for the photo, trying to ignore the sharp pang of hurt in her heart. “After forty years of marriage, they still look so much in love.”

“They were—”

“They *are* in love,” Gabrielle interjected.

“Right,” Serena said.

An uncomfortable silence settled between them for several minutes. Gabrielle was happy that Serena didn’t mention having their parents declared legally deceased again. With everything going on, Gabrielle would unravel if she had to make that decision. She was barely keeping it together as it was.

She put the photograph back on the bookshelf. Staring at it for a long moment, she asked, “Have you ever been in love, Serena?”

Serena coughed, then sputtered, “Whoa, where did that question come from?” Her eyes bulged with shock.

“Just wondering. It’s not like we’ve been in touch over the past decade. We weren’t close as kids. I’ve missed out on a lot of your life.”

“Well, you haven’t missed anything in the love department,” Serena said, walking over to the curved, palm-frond-printed divan with a dark cherry finish. She eased onto the cushions and stared out the window at the Caribbean Sea in the distance. “I don’t think I’ve ever been in love, to answer

your question. My relationships have been strategic partnerships, not connections that fostered deep feelings.”

“Oh.” It was all Gabrielle could think to say.

“But I haven’t really prioritized love in my life. Being groomed to run Hullabaloo was all that mattered. It’s my dream and my passion. I won’t let anything or anyone get in the way of my success in running the company. Why do you ask?”

“No reason,” Gabrielle said as memories of Sebastian flooded her mind. He knew she loved him. He’d heard about her journal entries devoted to him, and he still asked her to say the words aloud. Words she wasn’t sure she would’ve had the courage to say at all had tumbled from her lips. It was the last gift she could give him. To know that his love for her was reciprocated even if they had no future.

“Is this about Sebastian?”

“What? Why would you ask me about him? You don’t even like Sebastian.”

“I don’t have a problem with Sebastian. I hired him to be your bodyguard. I’m even more pleased now that the PIIB have determined that he couldn’t possibly be your stalker.”

“I never believed that.”

“Of course, you didn’t. I could tell you were blinded by your feelings for him, so I went into sister-bear mode to ensure you were protected. We both needed an objective party to ensure we weren’t harboring blindspots about Sebastian. Especially since you think you’re in love with him. Don’t bother denying it.”

“Fine. I won’t. But I take it you don’t believe it’s real love?”

“Who am I to judge? I don’t know if I’d recognize the signs of real love if it jumped up and slapped me in the face. The bigger question is, do you think it’s real love?”

Gabrielle was quiet. She knew her feelings for Sebastian were real, but the intensity of the emotions confused her. The

depth of her love was something she'd never felt before. It filled her with an unwavering conviction that they were meant for each other. But in her mind, she couldn't stop questioning if their connection could survive. When stalkers continued to lurk in the shadows of her life, would she get the freedom to love anyone? Did she even deserve to have that kind of love? She had never loved a man the way she loved Sebastian, but she worried that a future together wasn't in the cards for them. There would always be some threat out there standing in the way of her happiness.

"Your silence speaks volumes, you know. If you're so in love with Sebastian, why did you kick him out of your life? I saw him when he left the hospital yesterday. He looked like his whole world had been destroyed. He's completely devoted to you."

"That's the problem. I can't let him risk his life for me."

"I see. You're scared of love."

"I am not scared of love! I'm being realistic. The threat from Tony Brooks is real. The island feds haven't had any more luck finding him than Brad's team. If I keep my distance from Sebastian, Tony will never realize that he stabbed the wrong bodyguard, and Sebastian will be safe."

"And what did Sebastian think about this plan of yours? He doesn't strike me as the type who wants his woman making unilateral decisions for the relationship."

"His woman? Seriously?" Gabrielle balked.

Serena cackled with laughter. "You know you like thinking of yourself that way. Nothing wrong with that."

"Well, I'm not his woman. I'm not his anything because we're not in a relationship. I'm not even sure I'm relationship material."

"Gabrielle, you are amazing. Why would you not be relationship material?"

"Because whenever I get close to people and open my heart to love, another psycho shows up. It's like the universe is trying to tell me that I should be alone." A heavy weight

pooled in her chest. She didn't want to be alone, but life forced her down this path over and over. "Maybe I should stop fighting it."

"If all your Emerge Anew platform fans could hear you now, they'd be disappointed. This isn't like you. What are you really afraid of?"

Gabrielle grabbed her butterfly charm between her fingers and moved it slowly back and forth along the chain. Despite decades apart, she was amazed at how easily Serena could read her thoughts and feelings. Telling Serena the truth about what held her back from relationships made her feel weak and vulnerable, but it also felt like something she needed to do. Maybe confiding in her sister would help her move past her fears once and for all.

She hesitated, her feet glued to the ground, while her heart urged her to take steps to close the gap between her and Serena. She took a deep breath, then crossed the room. Her sister smiled at her as she sat, then put a protective arm around Gabrielle's shoulders and hugged her close.

Gabrielle said, "That the same thing that happened a decade ago will happen again. Damian was obsessed with me. The police caught him, and he was sent to prison. But so was I, in a way. Mom and Dad banished me to Lisbon. They cut me off from everyone I loved. They worried about me and Damian's relatives retaliating against us. They said it was for my protection, but I felt like I was being punished. Now Tony Brooks has stepped into Damian's shoes. I'm forced again to make the tough decision to protect the ones I love from this evil in my life. I have to separate myself to protect all of you. That means a relationship with Sebastian is out of the question. I don't know how to stay in St. Felipe."

Serena's face twisted in concern. Her voice was stern as she said, "You're not leaving this time. I won't let you. You belong here. We must face this together—all of us, including Sebastian."

Gabrielle was quiet.

She had never dared to hope for a man like Sebastian. Finding him when she returned to St. Felipe was an unexpected gift she'd never anticipated. She would always treasure the time they'd shared, but she wouldn't put him at risk.

"Sebastian is better off without me in his life," Gabrielle said.

"Maybe. But are you better off without him in yours?" Serena challenged.

"I'd like to know the answer to that."

Gabrielle spun around, her stomach knotting at the sight of Sebastian standing in the doorway.

Chapter 46

“Why are you here?” Gabrielle asked, minutes after they’d entered her bedroom on the opposite wing of King Estate. He’d followed her silently through the maze of hallways, leaving Serena behind in their parent’s bedroom suite. The room he’d entered was only a fraction less opulent than the one they’d left behind. A breeze wafted through the open doors that led to the outdoor balcony. Sheer white draperies fluttered behind her as the sound of ocean waves crashing on the beach floated in the air.

Sebastian couldn’t answer.

His eyes were glued to her.

She was so close, wearing a Hullabaloo t-shirt and jogging pants three sizes too big. Even drowning in that ridiculous but comfortable-looking outfit, she was the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen.

Knowing Gabrielle, she was completely naked underneath. No bra. No thong. Nothing but the soft folds of cotton as a barrier between his body and hers.

He closed his eyes, shutting them tightly, and forced the thoughts away. He promised himself that he wouldn’t make her uncomfortable. And he wouldn’t make her remember how powerful and perfect they were together.

“Not to change your mind if that’s what you’re thinking.” Sebastian raked a hand through his hair. “I respect you too much to do that.”

Gabrielle's eyes closed for a moment, and she diverted her gaze. Was it disappointment that briefly crossed her gorgeous face, or was he imagining what he wanted to see?

If circumstances were different, he'd be long gone from this island after Gabrielle said they were done. Fuck if it wasn't easier to put distance between them than to stick around and risk running into her every day. But he'd found Ike. His best friend was back and in bad shape. Sebastian couldn't leave until he knew Ike was conscious and on the road to recovery.

Still, he knew Ike was the excuse his brain told his heart for the real reason he was sticking around. He was head-over-fucking-heels in love with Gabrielle. It was a love that would be with him until the day he died. Not having a chance with her didn't change that for him. It also didn't change his plans to stop Tony Brooks from terrorizing her again. The only sliver of hope he had was that if Gabrielle knew she was safe, she might rethink her decision to end the relationship between them that hadn't yet started. It was why he stood in front of her one last time, defying her wishes to stay away. He had to plant a seed in her mind to not give up on them, even if he had no control over whether it would blossom and grow or wither and die.

"Well, I appreciate that. Still doesn't explain why you're here." Gabrielle's fingers rubbed the butterfly charm on her necklace. He noticed she was still wearing the bracelet he'd given her. The one that gave him one last shot to find her if she was kidnapped.

It was the only sign he needed to know that he was doing the right thing.

"I came to tell you that I understand why the idea of being in a relationship with me or anyone is overwhelming for you. I get why it may take a long time for you to want that in your life, if ever," Sebastian said, rambling. Usually, he was to the point, but he was drawing out this moment because he didn't want to leave her presence. He wanted it to last as long as possible. "But you need to know I've decided to wait for you."

“Wait for me?” Gabrielle blinked rapidly, her brown eyes soft with the mist of unshed tears, as the weight of his words hit her. “I don’t understand.”

“I don’t want to be with any other woman but you. I will wait as long as it takes for you to figure out if there is space in your life for a relationship and if you want that relationship to be with me.”

“As long as it takes?” Gabrielle shook her head.

“Weeks. Months. Years. Whatever.”

“You can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because that’s not the life I want for you.”

“You’re not living the life I want for you, either. So, I guess that makes us even.”

“Seby, please—”

“No pressure. You take the time to figure out what you want. I won’t come around. I won’t bother you. You won’t even know I live on the same island as you. But I need you to know that if ever the day comes that you want us, I’ll be waiting.” He rattled the words quickly before she could stop him. He needed to know that he’d laid his feelings out there for her to process in her own time. “That’s all I wanted to say.”

Sebastian forced himself to turn away. His body ached to be near her as he put one foot in front of the other to give her the space she requested.

“Wait.” Gabrielle caught his arm. Her soft hand caressed his forearm. “If you knew the shit I’ve done, you wouldn’t wait for me. You wouldn’t even like me.”

He turned back to her and trailed his fingertips along her face. “Can’t be worse than when you sent a bunch of college jocks to beat me to a bloody pulp just to impress you.” He chuckled. “If I got past that, I can get past anything you’re worried about.”

Her face grew serious. He could see the distress in her eyes, and he could see pure love, too. He was the one person who'd gotten her to let down all her walls. He could see something was eating her up inside. She didn't want to end things with him, but she seemed to feel she had no choice.

He wanted to know why.

"No, I don't think so," Gabrielle blinked away her tears. She turned her back on him and crossed the room, slumping onto a chaise lounge. The sun's rays bathed her exquisite skin in a warm glow.

"You shouldn't wait for me," Gabrielle reiterated.

In four long strides, he was next to her, sitting on the chaise lounge. Sebastian touched her face, caressing her soft, deep brown skin. "What's going on in that beautiful head of yours? Gabs, talk to me." She'd told him that he was her rock. That he made her feel safe, and that's what he planned to remind her. "I'm not going anywhere. My love for you is so deep in my heart that I can't let go of it. I can't watch you in pain over something and not try to help."

She bit her lower lip to stop it from trembling. "I don't want to lose you."

"I know you don't."

"But it's inevitable. That's why it's better this way." She pulled away but stayed within inches of him.

"Trust me, please, Gabs. You know my ugly truth about my father. My worries about getting close to you. Did it change how you feel about me?"

Gabrielle smiled. "No. I love you, Seby."

"Say it again."

"Stop it."

"Please, I love the way that sounds."

"I love you, Sebastian. Since you left the hospital—"

"Because you told me to."

“I know, but since I asked you to leave the hospital, I’ve regretted it. Deep in here.” She pressed a hand against her heart. “I knew it was a mistake. But I’m afraid that if you knew what I’d done, it would change how you feel about me, and I’d lose you anyway.”

“If you’re so convinced, prove it. Tell me what heinous thing you’ve done in your past when you were a different person than the amazingly brilliant woman standing in front of me. Tell me so I can run for the hills and thank the universe that I didn’t get trapped into loving you.”

A laugh escaped her lips. “I’m serious.”

“So am I. If it’s inevitable, you need to kill my feelings for you. Put me out of my misery.”

“Are you miserable without me?”

“Hell yeah. This is brutal torture to have found you and not be allowed to love you how you deserve to be loved.”

She held her shaking hands out for him to see. “I don’t think I can do it.”

Sebastian grabbed her hands in his. “You are the strongest woman I’ve ever known. Stronger than my mother. Stronger than your mother. The battles you’ve fought against stalkers and to reclaim your life have inspired millions of women. There’s nothing you can’t do.”

“Why are you so perfect?”

“Why are you fucking stalling? Tell me what you did. Just blurt it out.”

Gabrielle inhaled a shaky breath, then said, “I had a sexual relationship with Damian Hester. He thought we were a couple. I used him for oral sex only because he was so devoted to me. I gave him reasons to be even more infatuated with me, luring and leading him on. That’s why he became obsessed. That’s why he stalked me. Kidnapped me. Beat me. Almost raped and killed me. It was my fault.”

Chapter 47

If Damian Hester wasn't already dead, Sebastian would kill him. He didn't care what kind of relationship they had in the past while they were teenagers exploring their sexuality, it didn't give the bastard the right to do the things he'd done to Gabrielle, and he told her so.

"You don't think I'm a horrible person?" Gabrielle whispered. Her head was downcast with shame.

Sebastian grazed his finger under her chin and lifted her face until her eyes locked with his. "I think you're still the woman I'm in love with. The woman I don't want to live without. The woman who I will move mountains to make sure no fucker ever hurts again."

Gabrielle threw her arms around him, burying her head against his neck. He held onto her tightly with no plans of ever letting go.

"Now that I know the truth." Sebastian stepped back from their embrace. "There are no more secrets between us, right?"

"Right." Gabrielle nodded, still unsteady and unsure.

"Can we leave the past in the past? Emerge anew and be together?"

Her hands cradled his face as she stared at his lips. Fingers stroked the soft stubble of his beard. She leaned in closer until her lips brushed slightly across his, sending a tingle of fire racing through Sebastian's body. His cock throbbed in his pants in anticipation of a moment he'd almost given up on.

"Is that a yes?" Sebastian asked, his voice low and husky.

Gabrielle eased from the chaise to the floor, filling the space between his open thighs. She rested her hands on his waist, then moved closer until no distance separated them. Her amazing body pressed against his as she stared into his eyes. The soft cotton of her shirt could not conceal the swells of her sexy tits. His eyes lingered on them briefly as his cock rammed hard to get out of his pants. No doubt she knew what kind of effect she had on him. It was hard to deny when they were this close. Heat pulsing between them.

“I will always be ... yours,” Gabrielle said, a sexy smile playing at the corners of her mouth.

The words hit him like a grenade. Her undeniable trust and unconditional love for him were embedded in the words two psychos had used to torment her.

Yet, she took them back.

Owned them.

Gave them to him.

“Fuck, I love you so much,” Sebastian said, fisting her hair as he pulled her face to his in a blistering kiss. His need for her was insatiable. This woman had walked right out of his fantasies and into his life. “I don’t want to be away from you ever again,” he said through intense, wild kisses. He plunged his tongue deeper into her mouth as she parted her lips for him. They found the perfect rhythm, stroke for stroke, sending heat flooding his body. He tore his mouth away from hers to trail kisses down her neck. “You own my heart.” He tasted the sweetness of her skin, like sugar against his tongue. “You own all of me.”

He pushed her back from him to look at her.

The smile on her face lit up his life.

“I guess that makes us even.” Gabrielle raised her arms as he pulled her t-shirt over her head and tossed it across the room. He lifted her from the floor, yanking her jogging pants down her hips to a puddle around her ankles. He breathed in a sweet breath of thanks to see he was right. Not a bra or thong in sight. Her perfect body was bare, with no barriers separating

them. Mesmerized, he stared at her for a long moment. This woman was all his.

Pressing his hands along her back, he stroked her smooth bare ass. His fingers kneaded the soft flesh as he pulled her flush with him. She shuddered, eyes growing wider as the full extent of his desire for her pressed against her stomach.

“Aren’t you glad you didn’t have to waste time with pesky lingerie?”

“I love how you look out for me,” Sebastian said, then pulled his t-shirt over his head and tossed it onto the floor. “I can get used to this.”

“You better because you’re stuck with me.”

“That’s all I’ve ever wanted,” Sebastian said. “You, with me forever.”

She unbuttoned his jeans and pushed them down. He kicked them from his legs. The jeans slid across the wood floor. Her fingertips grazed his skin with light feather touches as she gave his boxers the same treatment. Her hand gripped his cock, sliding up and down his shaft, accomplishing the one thing he didn’t think was possible—making him harder than he already was.

He eased back onto the chaise lounge, pulling her with him. She maintained her hold on him while she spread her thighs and straddled his hips. Sebastian shifted lower on the chaise as she held his shoulders for balance. She had a look of determination on her face as her eyes never left his. As much as he wanted to claim her entirely for himself, he knew this was also her moment to claim him. To take every ounce of his love for her and mark him as her own.

She lowered her body toward his. The warmth of her sex hovering above him was enough to drive him insane. She brushed against him. Teased and taunted him. The moistness of her slick folds coated his tip with each flex of her body.

He clamped his hands on her hips, unable to deny himself any longer. He couldn’t be separated from the beautiful soul who’d worked for years to reclaim who she was and who she

was meant to be, and along the way, she allowed him to be part of her journey. He was the man she wanted by her side for always.

“Ride me. Now!” Sebastian demanded.

He thrust upward as Gabrielle slammed down onto his cock. The tightness of her enveloping him as she pushed down, trying to take in all of him. Her hips and knees flexed instinctively against the cushions as she found the perfect rhythm to stroke up and down his shaft.

A moan burst from his mouth. Pure pleasure rocked him as she stretched and squeezed against his girth. Delicious friction built as she increased her pace. The hitch of her breathing grew raspier and more excited. Her breasts bounced up and down and entranced him. All his senses were overloaded by the insatiable desire overwhelming him. His vision blurred as he succumbed to the sweet feel of her rising and falling on his cock. She moved with conviction, completely unsheathing his cock, then plunging back down to take more of him inside of her. Her walls trembled and clenched around him, hurtling him faster toward an explosive orgasm.

“Seby, Seby ... Seby ... Seby,” she moaned. Her nails dug into his skin as her head tilted back, eyes closed in ecstasy. He tightened his arms around her back, locking her on top of him.

“You’re so fucking beautiful. What did I ever do to deserve you?” Sebastian fought to get the words out.

Gabrielle responded with a series of moans, her body almost falling apart as she approached the cliff of her orgasm. But she held on, driving the tempo on his cock even faster to take him over the edge with her.

Sebastian needed to see her. He needed to erase all the painful memories of her past. Destroy them so they would never haunt her or hurt her again.

“Hey,” Sebastian said through rushed breaths. “Look at me. Look at me!” He cradled her head and tilted her toward him. Gabrielle’s eyes opened slowly and graced him with the most stunning smile.

Sebastian's voice choked as he said, "You will always be ... mine."

"Yes ... Seby ... yes." A tear pooled in the corner of her eye.

That was all he needed to hear.

Flipping them over onto the chaise, he drove long and hard between her as she strangled his cock, demanding his release. He kissed her as he damn near lost control, pounding into her. His cock drove deeper and deeper into her slick, wet heat. Her hands threaded through his hair, clutching his head as her thighs locked around his waist. She grinded against him, with him, taking him apart stroke by stroke until he literally saw fucking stars as explosive pleasure ripped and tore through his body.

He pressed his lips harder onto Gabrielle's, smothering their primal screams with the deepness of their kiss. She shook and shuddered beneath him as his release flooded inside of her. He collapsed onto her limp body. Gabrielle wound her arms tightly around him as his head rested against the crook of her neck.

As his eyes closed, he heard her whisper ... "Mine."

Chapter 48

Gabrielle clung to Sebastian's body, her skin feverish and tingling from the passionate night they'd shared. Every fiber of her being still throbbed from their lovemaking that had filled every corner of her bedroom suite—from the chaise lounge to the chair, floor, balcony, bed, and back again. She craved more of him, hungry for his touch and desperate for the pleasure he filled her with. This man was everything she could have wished for and more. She felt like she was part of him and never wanted to let go. This was the kind of love she'd yearned for all her life, and it was finally hers.

“Morning, gorgeous.” Sebastian stroked a finger along her cheek, then leaned down and kissed the top of her head.

“Morning.” Gabrielle rubbed her eyes and leaned forward to give him a quick kiss on the lips. Her stomach growled loudly simultaneously, and she burst into laughter.

“I guess that's what I get for starving you all night long,” Sebastian said, easing from her embrace.

“Oh, you fed me in more important ways,” Gabrielle said, a sly smile on her face. Memories of her mouth on his cock last night, sucking and stroking until he came down her throat, flooded her mind.

Sebastian's grin grew wider as he gave her a soft slap on the ass. “I'll go grab lunch from downstairs. Want anything in particular?”

“Something hearty,” she responded, then tapped her finger against her chin. “Goat curry with peas and rice.”

“Good choice.”

“I’ll jump in the shower while you’re down there,” Gabrielle said, realizing she’d need to show her face to Serena soon and explain the change in her relationship status with Sebastian. Her worries hadn’t dissipated, but she could no longer deny herself this man. They belonged together. She knew she could withstand whatever Tony Brooks planned next with Sebastian by her side more than without him.

“Without me? I’m so hurt.”

“We tried that last night and failed miserably, remember?” Gabrielle teased.

“Good point.” Sebastian gave her a deep, lingering kiss, then put on his boxer briefs, jeans, and t-shirt. “I’ll check in with the PIIB agents and see if there’s any update on Tony Brooks while I’m down there. I won’t be too long.”

Gabrielle enjoyed the view of watching his tight ass as he left the room, then went into the bathroom for a steamy hot shower. Thirty minutes later, she walked out of the shower expecting to find Sebastian.

But he wasn’t there.

Across the room, a large plate filled with goat curry, rice and peas, johnny cakes, and sparkling water were placed neatly in the center of her sitting table. Next to the food was a page from her Emerge Anew stationery. She walked closer, heart thudding in her chest. An irrational thought that somehow her stalker had got inside and left another threat.

But she was relieved to see it was from Sebastian.

I promise you’ll get everything you want tonight. I’ll be back soon.

Love, Seby

She ran her fingers over the last line. The only thing she wanted was Sebastian. Well, that wasn’t entirely true. Her mind wandered to elaborate fantasies of him trekking across the island to get a romantic gift for her—chocolates, flowers ... engagement ring. Maybe that was too soon. But Sebastian

made her want to be married. A prospect she'd never thought was in the cards for her in the past was a real possibility now.

She busied herself over the next few hours with Serena going through Hullabaloo Enterprises business matters and dodging her sister's attempts to bring up having their parents declared deceased for the hundredth time. She wished Ike was here to help with the decision. Or to stop Serena from pursuing it. Gabrielle wasn't ready to concede that their parents were gone forever. Not without any definitive evidence of their deaths, which all the private search firms they'd hired had yet to find.

She returned to her bedroom suite alone. Her excitement had devolved into simmering frustration that teetered closely to panic.

Her texts and calls to Sebastian had gone unanswered.

But she didn't sound the alarm.

Not yet.

The cell phone buzzed against the bed table, turning slightly from the force. She glanced at the screen and frowned.

Not the person she'd expected to call today, but one she could never ignore. Pressing the call button, she answered the phone.

"I wasn't sure if you'd be willing to talk to me," said Brad.

Gabrielle sighed. "Just because the PIIB told you to stay away from the case doesn't mean I can't talk to you."

"I'm glad you feel that way. The two of us have a long history," Brad said, then added, "I'm here at King Estate, but they won't let me in to see you."

"That's ridiculous. What did they tell you?"

"To not meddle in the investigation. Go home," Brad said, a forlorn sadness in his tone. "I thought maybe you told them you didn't want to see me."

The hurt in his words tugged at her heart.

“Of course, I didn’t. Are you here about the investigation? Or for another reason?” Gabrielle looked around for her sneakers. Spying them in the corner, she slipped her bare feet into them and grabbed her keys from the side table.

“I wanted to see for myself that you’re okay after everything that happened in the safe house. To apologize to you face to face.”

After everything Brad had done for her a decade ago, she owed him that much. “I’ll come down. Are you at the front gate?”

“Not anymore. I didn’t want to cause any trouble, so I left. I’m at the fruit stand near the entrance to the private road that leads to King Estate.”

“Good. Behind the stand is a trail that leads down the hill to the beginning of our private beach. Wait for me there.”

“Are you sure?” Brad asked. “I doubt they’ll let you see me.”

“You let me handle the PIIB,” Gabrielle said. “They don’t understand our history and how close we are, but I do. It means a lot that you came by to check on me. I’ll see you in fifteen minutes.”

Fifteen minutes turned into thirty as Gabrielle struggled to navigate the web of security guards placed around the property for her protection. The last thing she wanted was to argue with them over going to see Brad. Despite their swarming presence, none knew this property as she did. Weaving along the grounds, she made her move when one of the lookout guards was distracted by a maid bringing him a snack. Navigating trails through the jungle that she knew by heart, Gabrielle emerged from the brush onto the narrow strip of beach. Frothy waves oozed over the golden brown sand peppered with pristine white and rose seashells. Towering rocks of the hillside bordered the beach, creating a natural barrier that deterred locals from venturing to the area that marked the northernmost end of the property owned by her family.

Stepping out into the warm sun, she glanced to the left.

Detective Brad Shannon sat on a massive square rock. Water cascaded across his boots, wetting the bottom of his gray pants. He stared out at the ocean with a look of concern. The grooves and wrinkles on his face were more pronounced than she'd noticed before.

"Brad ..." She took tentative steps toward him.

He looked up and gave her a small smile, then stood with arms opened wide. "I thought they might have convinced you not to come."

Gabrielle walked into his embrace and hugged him tight. "Impossible."

"I texted a few times, and you didn't respond, so I wasn't sure." Brad released her and sat back on the rock.

"Damn it," Gabrielle said, patting pockets she already knew were empty. "I forgot my phone back at the house." Berating herself, she glanced around for a dry rock to sit on. It would be just her luck that Sebastian would return her call or, worse, return to King Estate to find her gone. She didn't want him to worry that something terrible had happened to her. All the more reason to keep this visit with Brad short.

"Where's your bodyguard?" Brad asked, looking back toward the trail she'd exited from.

"I'll be back before they realize I'm gone," Gabrielle said, then sat on a rock a couple of feet away from Brad.

Brad tsked. "No guard. No phone."

"I know, I know. You don't have to lecture me. I left in such a hurry. I must have laid it down when I was looking for my shoes. So, I can't stay long. I want you to know I don't blame you for what happened in the safe house. You don't owe me an apology."

"I owe you much more than an I'm sorry. I got kicked off the case because my men didn't stop Brooks from getting to you. I almost lost one of my best officers, and who knows what would have happened to you if—"

“Sebastian hadn’t gotten there. I don’t want to think about that, and you shouldn’t either,” Gabrielle said, then grabbed Brad’s hand. “I know you did everything you could to keep me safe. What happened at the safe house was not your fault. Bringing the PIIB in was Serena’s idea. I swear she’s worse than Mom. There’s no changing her mind once she decides something needs to be done.”

“And she moves heaven and earth to get her way, just like your Mom.”

“For better or worse,” Gabrielle laughed.

“Well, I’m glad we had this talk. I’m glad you haven’t lost trust or faith in me.”

“Never. You’ve done so much for me. I’ll always be grateful. No matter what.”

“Well, that makes what I must do a lot easier.” Brad stood, towering over her. His skin flushed red, and his hand trembled as he wiped the sweat from his forehead. “I have a plan to catch Tony Brooks. He’s out of control, and I have to stop him.” Brad jabbed a finger against his chest. “I’m the only one who can stop him. Don’t you see?”

Puzzled, Gabrielle leaned back against the boulder. “I know you want to help, but the PIIB will find my stalker. I don’t know that there’s anything you need to do.”

“You’re wrong!” Brad thundered.

Gabrielle flinched.

“Brooks is unhinged. The guy is unpredictable, not acting like he was in the past. We need to go on the offensive and force his hand. That’s the only way to catch him.”

“As much as I appreciate your help, we both need to step back and let the feds handle it. I’ll do a better job of keeping you updated on the investigation. I know how hard it must be not to have access anymore,” Gabrielle gave him a gentle squeeze. “I need to get back before they sound the alarm for me. Take care, Brad.”

Brad looked away, obviously unhappy.

Gabrielle side-stepped away from Brad and headed toward the trail along the rocky sand.

Hard pounding steps splashed in the water behind her.

She turned to see Brad lunging toward her.

“Brad!” She squealed as his hand clamped down on her arm, gripping her tightly.

His gloved hand.

Why was he wearing surgical gloves?

“What are you doing?” Gabrielle tried to jerk away, but he grabbed her other arm and yanked her toward him.

“I’m helping you, Gabrielle. It may not make sense now, but once everything is over, you’ll thank me.”

“No! Let me go!” She twisted in his arms and tried to break free.

Brad held her tighter, slipping an arm around her waist as he lifted her from the ground.

He clamped his hand against her mouth, stifling her screams as he dragged her back toward the jungle trail.

Chapter 49

“What’s the latest on Ike? Is he okay?” Sebastian demanded as he walked into the war room of the compound. The cryptic text had caused him to drop everything and head over to see what was going on.

“Sorry, we couldn’t take a chance someone might intercept the text,” Everett gripped his shoulder, then patted him on the back. “My buddy Rocco Forrester is here. He’s a doctor and former DEA. Ike is banged up pretty bad, but Rocco believes he’ll pull through. It might take a few months. We will keep Ike hidden until he regains consciousness to tell us what happened to him.”

Sebastian relaxed. “So this is related to Brooks?”

Kane glanced up from his tablet. “We realized we were focused on the wrong man. Brooks is a stalker for hire, attacking Gabrielle to earn money from the incel website.”

“But whoever is posting the requests is the real threat,” Sebastian said, understanding the change in strategy. “Has it been the same profile?”

“It has,” Bobby confirmed. “Geppetto. Like Pinocchio.”

“More like a puppet master getting other idiots to do his dirty work for him,” Sebastian growled. “Have you found evidence that Geppetto requested the flowers to be sent to Gabrielle’s hotel or the attack at the safe house?”

“No, and I’ve searched everywhere. The last two don’t quite fit the pattern of the requests that come through the site,” said Bobby. “The flowers with the note are too benign. Violent

requests are quickly shut down on most of these sites. They get off on pranks, not actual bodily harm. Good thing is that I haven't seen any other requests posted that target 'Black Butterfly' since the snake incident."

Kane added, "We decided to switch focus to tracing an IP address for Geppetto. Bobby got a hit. It's to a house in St. Killian."

"And get this," Everett said, walking to Sebastian with his laptop. "When Bobby hacked into the home security cameras of houses on the same street, we got a match on Tony Brooks being at the property a couple of days before Gabrielle's plane landed in St. Killian."

"Does that mean Brooks is Geppetto? Why would Brooks send messages to himself to torment Gabrielle?" Sebastian peered at the footage on the laptop. There was no denying that it was Tony Brooks going into the house.

Kane looked glum, his tone serious as he said, "It makes sense when you find out who owns the house Tony Brooks was entering."

"Who?" Sebastian asked, looking around at each of the men who were like family. His fists clenched, and he fought the urge to break something.

"Detective Brad Shannon," Bobby said with disdain.

Everett said, "We think he was not only arranging for Brooks to perform the attacks for him but also setting the guy up to take the fall. Shannon planned to arrest Brooks, let him go down for the crimes, and look like a super detective for cracking the case. But Brooks must have gotten suspicious and left. He hasn't been seen at the house since the night Gabrielle found snakes in her purse."

"Fuck!" Sebastian slammed his fist against the table. "That fucker has been behind it this whole time?"

"He must have planned it when he found out Gabrielle was coming home. The photos leaked of her were the same ones the police had collected as evidence a decade ago," Kane said.

“Who had the best access to leak those photos than the lead detective on the case?”

“It gets worse,” Bobby said. “I traced pings from his cell phone to within a hundred yards of the safe house around the time Gabrielle was attacked. It would explain how the attacker got past the security and into the house without triggering the alarms.”

“He wants the St. Felipe police chief job. Remember what Adonis told us? He got fast-tracked to detective after saving Gabrielle last time because Bernadette King pulled strings for him,” Everett said. “He probably thinks saving Gabrielle again would make the King Family so grateful that Serena would step in and recommend him for the police chief role.”

Sebastian was quiet as the litany of evidence against Shannon became overwhelming. He paced around the room. A red haze clouded his vision. A job wasn't Shannon's only motive. He'd heard the bastard ranting about Gabrielle being in love with her bodyguard. Shannon had likely been harboring a sick obsession for Gabrielle since he rescued her from Damian Hester a decade ago.

The fucker wanted his woman.

There was no way in hell he would let that happen.

He was going to kill Shannon for tormenting the woman he loved.

“Means, motive, and opportunity are all there,” Kane said. “Problem is he has plausible deniability. We can't definitively prove that he's behind the Geppetto account. The house in St. Killian is listed for rent on dozens of websites. He could claim Tony Brooks broke in, and he had no clue the guy was squatting there, using it as a home base to threaten Gabrielle.”

“Then what's our move?” Sebastian asked.

“We need Brooks to turn on Shannon and take the truth to the cops,” Everett said.

“Brooks is a ghost. Nobody can find his ass. Where does that leave us?” Sebastian demanded.

“Who said we couldn’t find him?” Bobby asked, then pushed a button to project a picture of a neighborhood street onto the screen. “I searched for other rental properties owned by Shannon and got a hit in St. X. Did some recon on CCTV and home security cams and got this.”

Sebastian watched Tony Brooks entering a house on the street. It was dark, but his face was illuminated underneath the bright porch lights.

Bobby continued, “This was from last night. Adonis is staking out the place. Brooks was seen going inside but hasn’t come out yet. He won’t make a move until you get there.”

“Where’s Lachlan?” Sebastian asked.

“At the private airplane hangar waiting for you,” Everett said.

An hour later, Sebastian stared at the modest bungalow-styled home at the corner of two streets in the Coral Cove neighborhood on the island of St. Xavier. Filled with working-class families, the streets were lined with work trucks of various companies—party rentals, carpet cleaning, A/C tune-ups, island movers, and construction companies. Employees who used the company vehicles for their personal needs on the sly had made it easy for him to blend in. Adonis had borrowed a Caribbean Plant Company truck from one of his friends for the stakeout. From the front seat of the white van, he sat low in the passenger seat, unnoticed by anyone outside. Lachlan and Adonis were several streets over, monitoring video feeds from the security cameras in the neighborhood and feeding intel to him through ear comms.

Lachlan confirmed that Tony Brooks hadn’t been seen on any of the home security cameras of the neighbors leaving this morning. Brooks was likely still trapped inside, waiting for the right opportunity to escape. A child’s birthday party was held at the house across the street from the bungalow. Parents, and their kids, milled about the yard for the past three hours as Sebastian waited for the chance to ambush Brooks, making him an offer he couldn’t refuse.

Either he helped them take down Shannon, or he died.

It was that simple.

They knew executing the plan in broad daylight would be risky, but none of them could have anticipated the crowds in the neighborhood for the party. Postponing to another day wasn't an option. Brooks could be long gone by then. And Sebastian had promised Gabrielle he'd end things tonight. He wanted to return to King Estate with the good news that Shannon was behind bars for orchestrating the stalking threats on her life.

The party winded down, and the last of the visitors were leaving.

"I'm moving in five," Sebastian spoke into the comms.

"Affirmative," said Lachlan. "You have ten minutes, then get out of there no matter what. Chevy Suburban parked five streets south. Keys in cup holder. Adonis will follow behind and clean up after you."

"Confirmed," Sebastian said. No one would know if Brooks lived or died there once Adonis was finished. The man was that good.

Sebastian exited the van wearing Caribbean Plant Company coveralls, which were two sizes too big to accommodate several choices of weapons he'd brought along for the occasion. A baseball cap sat low on his head, hiding his face from the doorbell cameras Lachlan was monitoring. If any of them got an identifiable view of his face, Bobby was on alert back at the compound to erase it before it could be discovered.

Grabbing a potted palm tree from the passenger seat, he trotted to the back gate. Using the plant to obscure his moves, he pulled a small hacksaw from his pocket and wrangled the latch. The gate swung open, and he went inside. The yard was overgrown with weeds and looked like it hadn't been cut in months. Stepping through the tall brush, he sat the potted palm on the cracked concrete patio and slowly approached the glass doors that led into the bungalow.

Moving his hand to the inside of his coveralls, he pulled out a new magazine, slotting it into his Glock. The sliding glass door had been left open, with the drapes swaying in the breeze, billowing in and out of the open space.

Sebastian's heart slammed against his ribs. He growled, then stepped inside. The sickening stench of blood assaulted his nose, growing stronger as he crossed the living room toward the hallway, which he suspected led to the bedrooms. His fingers tightened on his gun as he neared the first bedroom. Empty. The stench had become almost unbearable. His stomach churned, but he continued down the hallway toward another bedroom, then a bathroom. Both empty.

One last door loomed at the end of the hall.

Sebastian used his boot to nudge it open.

Deja vu washed over him.

The room was identical to what he'd walked in on at the safe house, except the players were different.

A light-skinned island woman lay naked and unconscious across the bed, head, and arm dangling over the side. An eight-by-ten photograph of Gabrielle was taped to cover her face. Her bare breasts moved slightly with each breath. She was still alive.

He couldn't say the same for the man on the floor.

Tony Brooks lay in a pool of his blood, wearing jeans and no shirt. His eyes frozen in terror. Stab wounds covered his arms, legs, and neck. His chest was wiped clean with a single message scrawled in red lipstick on his skin.

She's mine.

Sebastian backed out of the room. His mind raced with the implications of the scene.

Shannon was sicker than they realized.

And he needed to get back to St. Felipe. Now.

Grabbing his cell phone, he turned it on and heard a series of beeps.

One voicemail, four missed calls, and three texts from Gabrielle.

If she was calling him, that meant she was still safe back at King Estate.

He spoke into the comms.

“Brooks is dead,” Sebastian said, backing out of the room.

“Get out of there. I’ll take over,” said Adonis.

Sebastian described the bloody scene as he made his way out of the house. “Shannon has lost it. He set the room up to look just like the scene in the safe house.”

“Crazy fucker,” Lachlan said. “We should’ve taken care of that asshole when he arrived at the airport and tried to grab Gabrielle.”

Sebastian agreed. Shannon had fooled them all. “I need to get back to St. Felipe. His next stop could be Gabrielle.” Sebastian jumped the fence, then jogged down the street, heading south. The Chevy Suburban sat on the side of the road a few streets down. “I’m headed to the hangar now. About twenty minutes out. Lachlan, how quickly can you get there?”

Lachlan responded, “I’ll be there in five with the plane ready.”

“And I’ll get over to the house and take care of things,” Adonis added. “I have to call it into SXPDP, but they’ll find no evidence you were there.”

Sebastian ripped the comms from his ear and slipped it into his pocket. He typed an emergency text to Bobby to locate Detective Shannon ASAP as he sat in the driver’s seat. Starting the engine, he burned rubber down the road and headed for the ferry.

Weaving through traffic, he connected the Bluetooth of his phone to the SUV’s infotainment system and dialed Gabrielle’s number. He needed to hear her voice. She wasn’t going to like what he had to tell her.

The phone rang twice, then was answered.

“Sebastian? Is that you?”

Ice-cold dread snaked through his body, numbing him.

“Serena ... why are you answering Gabrielle’s phone?”
His heart pounded against his ribcage, threatening to burst through the skin.

“She isn’t with you?” Her voice fell with disappointment.

Silence stretched between them on the line.

Sebastian swallowed hard. Realization hit him like a freight train, forcing the air from his lungs. His knuckles whitened as he tightened his grip on the steering wheel. “No. She isn’t.”

“Oh, God. She’s gone. Sebastian ... Gabrielle is missing!”

Chapter 50

Her lids heavy, Gabrielle's body ached as she forced her eyes open. She blinked several times, trying to acclimate to the room's darkness. A tiny window was near the ceiling, revealing the pitch black of the jungle outside. Memories crashed into her mind. Brad had taken her from the private beach, thrown her down in the jungle, and taped her mouth, wrists, and ankles. She'd tried to fight him. To get away. But he'd been too strong. No one was around to see him lift her body and place it into the trunk of his car. Tears had rolled down her face in waves as she watched the lid shut and trap her in darkness.

Now she was awake in a room that had been part of her nightmares in the past. The old recliner was covered with dust and spider webs. The fabric had faded over the years, but she still recognized it. It felt the same as it did when she was an eighteen-year-old girl tied to it. The fear she'd felt ten years ago rose in her mind. She'd thought she would die at the hands of Damian Hester all those years ago. There was no hope of being rescued. No thought that she'd make it through.

Only the guilt and shame of knowing that her actions had led to her misery. The boy she'd toyed with was now toying with her. Holding her against her will until she gave in to his demands. He wanted what he'd given her for years. Devotion. Adoration. Love.

Things she couldn't give him.

They both knew it.

That's why he beat her.

Starved her.

Punished her.

And she'd felt it was what she'd deserved.

But she didn't deserve this.

The man she'd trusted a decade ago to save her was now causing her torment and pain. Brad had betrayed her, bringing her back to the room where Damian had hidden her from his parents, brother, and friends for almost a week. Tucked underneath a backyard shed, he'd visited her in the afternoon, after school, and again in the night after he'd eaten dinner with his family.

He would touch her. Kiss her. Try to arouse her. But her fear made her body unresponsive. His touch repulsed her. She hated him with each passing hour, even as she resigned herself to the consequences of her sins.

That angered him.

Made it impossible for him to get the satisfaction he'd longed for.

He wanted to make love to her.

But his body wouldn't cooperate.

Had never cooperated.

Not once had he been able to enliven his limp cock when she was near.

It was the only reason he hadn't raped her.

She'd been grateful for that.

And she'd been grateful when Detective Brad Shannon opened the underground shed door and held a welcoming hand toward her. His words were soothing as he told her she was safe.

“That boy will never hurt you again.”

Anger blossomed within her.

Damian Hester would never hurt her again.

But Brad Shannon didn't hesitate to take his place.

How could she have been so stupid to trust him?

The wooden latch creaked, and the doors to the underground room opened. Brad eased down the rickety wooden ladder. He walked over toward her, flashlight in hand. She squinted from the bright light and glared at him.

"Please ..." Brad whispered. "Don't look at me like that." He ran a hand through his sweaty hair. "I promise it will all make sense after tonight. Just don't stop trusting me. Don't lose faith in me."

Gabrielle scowled as he lifted her from the chair and tossed her over his shoulder. She didn't bother to fight him. Her hands and legs were still bound. The tape on her mouth made it useless to scream. She had to wait for the right time to make her move. She'd been here once before. Back then, she'd had no hope. Tonight, she had everything to live for. She wasn't going to be the victim anymore. Brad would regret the day he stepped in Damian's shoes to stalk and torment her.

Minutes later, Brad carried her into the boarded-up home that had belonged to the Hesters. He walked into the kitchen, where the smell of goat stew filled the air.

Easing her into one of the chairs, Brad slowly removed the tape from her mouth. She winced from the sharp pain as tears poured from her eyes.

"Sorry, I had to do that. It was the only way to get you here without anyone stopping me. I didn't expect for it to knock you out for so long," Brad said, then walked over to the stove and lifted the lid on the pot that sat on the back burner.

"You drugged me?" Her voice croaked as she spoke her first words in hours.

"The tape was laced with a sedative," Brad confirmed as he stirred a wooden spoon slowly over the pot. He filled it with the dark stew and took a sip, then nodded his approval.

"You were behind this all along, weren't you? From the moment you came after me at the airport when my plane landed, you were my stalker. Not Tony Brooks," Gabrielle

said. Her eyes scanned the kitchen for options that could double as a weapon. Anything she could use to attack Brad and get away.

“Things got out of hand. I never thought he would lose control like this. To attack you and my officer at the safe house. That was never what I wanted to happen.” Brad ladled stew into a plastic bowl, then grabbed a plastic spoon from the counter and placed it in front of her. “You must be hungry.”

Gabrielle didn’t respond.

Brad reached into his back pocket and unsheathed a small hunting knife. With a flick of his hand, he cut through the plastic ties that bound her wrists. She jerked back and rubbed her aching and sore skin as he put the knife into his back pocket and sat across from her.

“Please eat. I don’t want this to be horrible for you.”

“Are you out of your fucking mind? You kidnapped me and brought me back to this hell hole, but you don’t eat this to be horrible for me? What are you doing, Brad?”

He flinched as she spoke, remorse and regret clouding his face as he slumped into his chair. “I had to kidnap you so I can make things right. I need to end what I started. It wasn’t supposed to happen like this.”

“You stalked me! You were why I was going through this nightmare for weeks!”

“It wasn’t like that. I didn’t stalk you. But I was the reason Tony Brooks became fixated with you,” Brad said, dragging a hand down his face. “I didn’t have much time to plan after I found out you were coming home. The timing was perfect, and I was sure it would be low risk.”

“What would be low risk? What are you talking about?”

“I was an outsider in the St. X police department for years. They didn’t like that your mother pulled strings for my promotion to detective. I skipped over a lot of officers with more tenure in that department. They never let me forget it. Never let me become one of them. I had my dream job and hated it. I wanted to come back home to St. Felipe, but there

weren't any openings for a detective on the squad. When the Chief of Police in St. Felipe decided to retire, I saw that as my opportunity to leave St. X behind. But your mother wasn't around to help persuade the powers that be that I was the right man for the job."

"My parents are missing, and you're worried about getting another job? I don't have any sway over the government. Stalking me is pointless."

"Rescuing you has more weight than you realize. If I could show Serena that you were in danger and I caught the criminal again, one word from her would have me installed as the new chief of police in St. Felipe," Brad said, a deranged glee in his eyes. "Everything was working as planned until Brooks went off the rails."

"You hired him to stalk me?"

"No. I couldn't take a chance that any of this could be traced back to me. I went to the online sites he hung out on and encouraged him to make you his next target. I'd gone through the guy's rap sheet. He was annoying but not dangerous. Your life was never supposed to be on the line. I just underestimated his connection with Damian Hester. That he would go rogue and escalate his threats against you."

"You were why he left bloody goat hearts at the cottage and snakes in my purse?"

He nodded. "But your life was never in danger from those pranks."

"Pranks? You're delusional. What about the flowers at the hotel? The note attached. Did you make him do that, too?"

"I put the note in the flowers when you weren't looking. The investigation was getting too close to me, and I needed another viable suspect to distract my team."

"So, you sacrificed Sebastian when you knew he wasn't guilty."

"It bought me time until I could figure out where Brooks had disappeared. Once I found him, I planned to go there. He would have the contents of your purse with him, proving he

was the stalker, and I'd arrest him. The nightmare would've been over. But he wasn't there. So, I had to figure out a Plan B. I went back online pretending to be the guy he'd attacked you for and offered him a hideout until the investigation died down. But he didn't respond."

"I guess he was too busy stalking me to the safe house you made me move into. Your big plans backfired."

"I had to wait until he resurfaced. There's no way I could've predicted how crazy he'd become. I didn't know what else he might do—"

"How about attack me in the shower, drug me with a sedative, and almost kill one of your officers. This is the man that you let loose into my life. Into your officers' lives. How could you do this?" Gabrielle could barely breathe. "I've been living in a nightmare since I came home. None of this had to happen. None of it. All for some stupid job!"

"Stupid job? Stupid job!" Brad erupted. "We weren't all born with a silver spoon in our mouths, Gabrielle. Some of us have to fight and work our fingers to the bone to get the success we deserve. Do you know how hard it is to be a detective in a Palmchat Islands police department? If your last name isn't Francois, nothing you do means shit! But I made a name for myself when I saved you. If I can save you again, I'll get the top gig, and everything will be fine."

"How is everything going to be fine?"

"I've left a few messages on the sites for Brooks. When he sees them, he'll know you're here at the old Hester house and will come for you. When he does, I'll arrest him."

"And how will you explain that you were the one who kidnapped me and brought me here in the first place?"

"I won't have to explain. I've already made it look like Brooks did this, and you aren't going to contradict any of that."

"You're crazy."

"If you do, I'll tell the world exactly why Damian Hester kidnapped you. All of your family and adoring fans will find

out that you had a consensual sexual relationship with Damian for years. I have the pictures he took of you. All of them. Even the ones you posed for him with his face between your thighs as you lost yourself in pleasure. Remember those?”

Gabrielle felt sick. She'd always wondered what happened to those photos. The ones Damian had thought would help him stay aroused long enough to make love to her. It had been stupid of her to take the pictures, but that was before Damian had turned on her. Before he'd become deranged and kidnapped her.

“You strung that boy along, making him think that there was a future for the two of you, while you fucked every Tom, Dick, and Harry at the school behind his back. No wonder he lost it,” Brad said, pointing a finger in her face. “Your Daddy was right to send a whore like you away. Your Mom made sure I was rewarded for my good deeds. I expect you to do the same to keep my silence and to stop those pictures from becoming public. I was the one who flooded the internet with the more tame photos before you came home to the Palmchat Islands. I know how to do it and keep my hands clean, so don't think I won't.”

“I can't believe this.” Gabrielle shook with rage.

“Calm down. I'm not heartless. I won't blackmail you for money. The Chief of Police gig will do just fine. All you need to do is stick with my story and convince your sister to help me get it. After I save you, of course.”

“You bastard!” Gabrielle said. She grabbed the bowl of stew and flung it at Brad's face.

He ducked as the stew splattered against the wall.

A male voice thundered from behind her. “What the hell is going on in here?”

Chapter 51

Sebastian glanced at the page of scribbled notes, half drawings, and doodles. He was perched on a stool in the kitchen away from Kane, Lachlan, and Bobby. Hours had passed since he and Lachlan had been at King Estate confirming that Gabrielle was gone. The island feds were perplexed and stunned, scrambling to figure out how she'd disappeared. There was no sign of forced entry. No message left by the stalker, and no sign of the woman he loved anywhere. He was the last one who'd heard from her. Her message to him had left him gutted.

Don't make me start worrying about you. Call me back. Forget that. Come home so I can wrap my arms around you and give you a big kiss. You know where our kisses lead ... so that should be enough incentive. Bye.

Gabrielle had no plans of leaving King Estate. She was waiting for him to come home. But Shannon had beaten Sebastian there and kidnapped her. Guilt threatened to drown him. Sebastian rehearsed every single detail of the stalker's activities since Gabrielle arrived back on the islands. He had to be missing something. As much as the evidence pointed to Shannon, Sebastian couldn't shake the one disconnect. He'd never witnessed any attraction between the man and Gabrielle. Shannon acted more like a doting and overbearing father figure than a man who was obsessed and in love with her. Was he that psychotic and able to cover? Or were they on the wrong track?

"I want to introduce you to Sebastian. He's a former PISCO," Everett said.

Sebastian looked up. A man stood next to him. Blond, brown eyes, definitely law enforcement trained, but something was off about him. A tinge of danger lingered in his gaze and mannerisms that set Sebastian on edge.

“You must be Dr. Forrester,” Sebastian said.

The man nodded. “No need for formalities. Rocco is fine.”

“So, Rocco, when the fuck is Ike going to wake up?” Sebastian asked. As much as the man made him wary, he knew they needed Rocco to treat Ike off the grid. Once his best friend was better, there would be plenty of time to learn more about Everett’s old friend from the D.E.A.

Rocco shrugged, grabbed an orange from the fruit bowl, and peeled it, dropping rinds on the counter. “You found him at the right time. When I got here, he was about ten minutes from flatlining.” Rocco shoved an orange wedge in his mouth, then took his sweet time chewing before continuing. “He has three broken ribs, broken leg, dislocated shoulder, and a nasty concussion. Not bad for falling out of the sky.”

“You think that’s what happened?” Sebastian asked.

Everett said, “He was fast roping out of a helicopter. We found the rope. It had jagged, frayed edges where gunshots splintered it. Residue was confirmed in tests I ran.”

“He was closer to the ground when he started the free fall, and likely the trees in the area helped to slow him down. It’s the only reason he survived,” Rocco said, then tossed another orange wedge in his mouth. “Treating his physical injuries is the easy part. The harder part is flushing his body of the drugs in his system that are inhibiting him from healing. Found both blue hibiscus powder and lazirprene. A wicked combination of fast-acting powders that sedate and paralyze. They’ve worn off enough for him to move but are still wreaking havoc on his body internally.”

“Rocco put Ike in a medically induced coma until he has better vitals,” Everett said.

Sebastian pinched the bridge of his nose. Not the news he wanted to hear when Gabrielle was missing, too.

“I’ll stick around to monitor him over the next few days,” Rocco said with a tinge of worry. “Not sure I can stay longer than that. Everett can update me, and I’ll come back when his vitals improve to finish treating him.”

Sebastian was relieved to hear Rocco say when and not if. “How much for you to stick around until Ike is better?”

“I don’t need your money,” Rocco said.

“But you need something from us. You and Everett may be old pals, but I sense you have another reason for doing this favor,” Sebastian said.

Rocco tilted his head and raised an eyebrow. “When I call for help, I expect this whole crew to come running. No questions asked.”

Sebastian asked. “And when should we expect this call?”

Rocco glanced at Everett.

Everett gave him a quick nod. Sebastian knew his instincts were right.

Rocco shrugged, tossed the last orange wedge in his mouth, then left the kitchen.

Everett eased down onto the stool next to Sebastian. “Rocco lost his way, but he’s still a good guy deep down. May need some time to reconnect with that part of himself.”

“Is he worth no questions asked kind of help?”

“Rocco was an undercover cartel doctor for the D.E.A. for the past few years before the cartel seduced him away. He has access to everything we need to ensure Ike gets the best care. We need him.” Everett looked annoyed.

“That’s the only answer I need. We’ll have his back when he calls,” Sebastian said, then lowered his voice. “This is going to sound crazy, but I’m not sure Shannon was the one who attacked Gabrielle at the safe house.”

“Why not?” Everett leaned closer.

“All our research on Shannon points to him being aggressively ambitious. He wants to move up in law

enforcement. Has political aspirations. Doesn't sound like the same man who'd risk all of that by getting his hands dirty?" Sebastian said, allowing his chaotic thoughts to ramble. "The attacker was deranged. He was livid that Gabrielle wrote in her journal about being in love with her bodyguard. He was so crazed that he screamed at Gabrielle and the guard when both were unconscious. Ranted about how heartbroken he was that Gabrielle loved another man. Just doesn't fucking fit."

Everett stared at the ceiling. "I agree. After the way Brooks was killed, not likely he was the attacker at the safe house either. So, we're dealing with another unknown stalker who is just as obsessed with Gabrielle as Damian Hester."

Sebastian froze.

Marvin charged Gabrielle. "My brother is hanging on for his fucking life, and you say, 'good riddance.' I hate you for what you did to him. He needed psychological help. Not a fucking prison cell. You bitch!"

He stood up from the stool. "It's Marvin Hester. He's the attacker from the safe house and Gabrielle's real stalker. He hates Gabrielle and blames her for his brother going to prison. Now that Damian's dead, that's enough to push him over the edge." Sebastian walked over to Bobby. "Can you find Dr. Marvin Hester's last known whereabouts?"

"I'm on it." Bobby typed quickly on the keyboard.

"What about his parents? Didn't he go to Toronto to fly his brother's body up there for the funeral?" Kane asked.

Everett said, "Yeah, let me give them a call. I'll pretend to be a colleague of his from St. Killian General Hospital. If he's not still up there, you could be right, Sebastian."

Minutes later, Sebastian had all the information he needed to know he was right.

"His folks said the plane arrived with Damian's body, but Marvin wasn't on the flight. They held the funeral without him there," Everett said, frowning as he tossed his phone onto the table.

“I have footage of Dr. Marvin Hester leaving St. Killian General Hospital on the same day that Gabrielle was admitted after the attack on the safe house. Records show he met with Dr. Roger Pinkerton to request a sabbatical from his psychology residency that day, which was approved. He’s not expected back into the program for a year,” Bobby added.

“So, Marvin never left the islands, and he’s not working. He’s been here the whole time.” Panic raced through Sebastian. “He got to Gabrielle. I know it, and there’s only one place he’d take her.”

“Where?” Everett asked.

Sebastian said, “Back to the scene of the crime.”

Chapter 52

“Marvin! Help me, please,” Gabrielle screamed as she rocked the chair backward and reached down to try to remove the constraints from her ankle. “Brad kidnapped me.”

“What? That doesn’t make sense,” Marvin said, looking from her and then back to Brad.

“She’s confused,” Brad said with an enigmatic smile. “It’s nothing like that, Dr. Hester.”

“Then what are you doing on my family’s private property? Why is she tied up?” Marvin asked, stepping into the kitchen.

“It’s a misunderstanding,” Brad said, walking toward Marvin. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“You have to help me. I know I’m not your favorite person in the world, but please help me stop him,” Gabrielle said, yanking at the plastic ties around her ankles as they dug into her skin. They were impossible to break without a knife or sharp object. She could not run if she couldn’t get them off.

“Then cut those things off her ankles,” Marvin demanded, his voice quivering. “Now, detective.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that. I can’t let you stop the plan I have in motion.” Brad grabbed the knife from his back pocket and flashed it toward Marvin.

“Watch out!” Gabrielle screamed. “He has a knife!” She toppled over in the chair, crashing against the floor.

Marvin jerked backward as Brad swiped the blade toward him. Brad swung again, slicing across Marvin’s chest, ripping

a gash in his buttoned-down white shirt. Marvin yelped, stumbling backward. He pulled the torn fabric as he glanced down to see if he was cut. Shaking his head, he looked up at Brad. “You almost cut me. What the hell is going on?”

“It’s in your best interest to leave,” Brad said, then charged toward Marvin with the knife. Panic crossed Marvin’s face, then he dipped low and rushed toward Brad, ramming into the man’s abdomen. The two men fell backward, banging into the kitchen counter. Marvin held on tight, punching Brad in the side. The knife fell to the floor as Brad went on the offensive, pounding his fists against Marvin’s back and jerking from side to side to free himself.

Gabrielle lunged for the knife. Her fingers barely reached it as the men punched and fought, banging against the opposite counter. Brad had Marvin in a chokehold as Marvin elbowed him in the face.

With a shaking hand, Gabrielle gripped the knife and sawed at the plastic ties binding her ankles until they popped free.

“Let him go!” Gabrielle screamed, searching the kitchen for something to break up the fight.

The men grunted as they collapsed to the floor, rolling from side to side. As they took turns gaining the upper hand, Gabrielle scrambled over to the stove, eyeing a cast iron skillet. She stuffed the knife in her pocket, grabbed the heavy pan, and heaved it toward Brad.

He yelped in pain as it made contact with his back.

The move gave Marvin the opening he needed. Two quick jabs flew into Brad’s face, knocking him backward. Marvin leaned over, grabbed the skillet, and swung it against Brad’s head.

The loud sound of metal cracking bone filled the air.

Marvin swung again.

And again.

Blood spurted from Brad's head, spraying red droplets across the linoleum floor.

Marvin held the skillet over his head and swung down one last time, crashing it into Brad's face. The man fell limp to the ground, his face and head a bloody, battered mass.

Staggering, Marvin dropped the skillet on the floor and turned toward her. He breathed deep heaving breaths. "Are you okay?"

"I am now," Gabrielle said through the tears pouring down her face. She ran toward him and wrapped her arms around his neck. His arms encircled hers as they held on to each other tightly. "Thank you. Thank you so much for saving me."

She pulled back. Marvin looked dazed as he stared down at Brad.

"I think ... I killed him," Marvin said, shaking in her arms.

"It's okay. It was self-defense. You saved me, but we need to get out of here."

"No ... we need to call an ambulance. Call the police," Marvin said.

Gabrielle shook her head. "We can do that later after we leave this house. Brad has lured a dangerous stalker here. A man named Tony Brooks. He wanted Tony to do God knows what to me so he could pretend to arrive and save me. Tony will be here any minute, and we can't be here when he shows up. He could ... he could kill both of us." She insisted, grabbing Marvin's hands in hers. "We have to go. Now."

"That's crazy. Why would he do that to you?"

"I will explain all of that later," Gabrielle said, tugging his arms. "Did you drive here? We need to leave. We can call the police on the way back to King Estate and explain everything. I promise you won't get in trouble for saving me. But we need to leave now."

"We need to call an ambulance. We can't leave him like this," Marvin said, pulling away from her. "I'm a doctor. I

shouldn't have done this." He dropped to his knees and pressed his fingers against Brad's neck, feeling for a pulse.

His head drooped as his hand fell away.

"He's dead ..."

Gabrielle shuddered. "Marvin, we need to go. A dangerous criminal will be here, and we may not be able to fight him off. Let's go." She tugged at his arms until he stood up and faced her.

"Okay, you're right. I was here earlier to get things ready to sell the property. When I got home, I couldn't find my phone and thought maybe I'd left it here. But I can't find it. Where's your phone?" Marvin asked.

"It's back at the main house. I forgot to bring it when I met up with Brad, and then he kidnapped me," Gabrielle said. "All the more reason for us to get out of here. If Tony Brooks shows up, there's no way we can call for help. Marvin, let's go!"

Marvin reached a hand toward her face and caressed her cheek. "I can't believe you want to save me. You're helping me."

"You saved me first. It's the least I can do," Gabrielle insisted, growing panicked.

Marvin grabbed the keys resting on the counter.

When he turned back to face her, she saw his bare chest beneath his ripped shirt.

Her heart seized in her chest as her fingers moved toward the butterfly charm of her necklace. Stumbling backward, she fought the chaotic thoughts racing through her mind.

She honed in on the tattoo on his chest.

A butterfly identical to the pendant she wore on her necklace.

"What's that?" She forced the words from her mouth.

Marvin looked down at his chest, then reached for the edges of his shirt to open it wider. His fingers ran across the

surface of the tattoo.

“Just something I got in Tiverton. It made me feel closer to you,” he said.

“Ti-Ti-Tiverton?” She couldn’t breathe.

“I remember the day you got your necklace. Five years after our last time together, right here on my family’s property. You never took it off. Every video you posted, it was always around your neck. I wanted one around my neck, too. But jewelry isn’t allowed in a maximum security prison. I had to settle for the next best thing.”

“You’re not Marvin.” The words sputtered from her lips.

“I told you that you would always be mine.” He took another step toward her. “Now, do you believe me?”

“Damian ...”

Chapter 53

“No, this is wrong. You died. I watched you die in that hospital room!” Gabrielle stood frozen with terror.

“It only looked like I was dead because that’s what I wanted,” Damian admitted.

“How?” Panic sliced through her as familiar eyes stared back at her.

This wasn’t a joke.

Damian Hester was very much alive.

“Gangs are a dirty business. One you learn to leverage to your advantage when trapped behind bars at Tiverton,” Damian said, staring away from her. “I never picked sides. Never joined one. But I did things for them. Favors so that when I needed one in return, they would help me.”

“Favors,” Gabrielle choked the word out. Paralyzing fear gripped her as her worst nightmare came true. “Is that what faking your death is? A favor from a gang.”

“I suffered months in solitary for making it look like I’d killed gang members they wanted to break out of jail. But I never had to kill. The gang members would take a drug cocktail that simulated death. Dead inmates get out of Tiverton quickly. I didn’t know how, but the dead gang members would wake up in a few days and be back on the streets with new identities,” Damian said, his eyes dancing. “I knew that every time I helped Quattro, I built credit with the gang. Credits I could use for them to help me get free the same way.”

“You made your move when you found out I was returning to the Palmchat Islands to testify at your parole hearing. That’s when you asked them to fake your death.” Dizziness overwhelmed Gabrielle. She stumbled backward and slumped down onto the chair.

“I wanted to be with you and make it safe for you to be with me. That could only happen if the world thought I was dead,” Damian said, his eyes lighting up as he sat at the table across from Gabrielle. “It was brilliant. Quattro smuggled drugs to me in the back of a few dozen cell phones. The plan to get out of Tiverton was in code in texts. I had drugs to mimic the symptoms of a heart attack and stroke. Prison medics rushed me to the Rakestraw Blake Center. Quattro has doctors there on their payroll. They gave me a time-released version of the drugs that simulated death. I flatlined watching you. It was the perfect way to die.” He raised his hands in air quotes. Damian smiled brightly at her. “I lay in the morgue with other corpses just to have this moment with you. To look at your beautiful face.” He stretched a hand toward her. Gabrielle flinched and jerked back. “It was worth it.”

“What about Marvin? Was he in on this? Where is he?” Gabrielle asked, hoping that the twin who’d loathed her for years might be the one to rescue her from Damian.

“I killed him for you,” Damian said.

“You ... what?” She covered her mouth with her hands as tears pricked her eyes. “You killed your brother?”

“He hated you, and I grew to hate him for that. He’d visit me and call you a bitch and a slut and a whore. Told me it was your fault that I was stuck in prison. But it wasn’t. I confessed because I love you. I wasn’t going to lie about what happened between us. I cherish every moment we ever shared, the good and the bad. As soon as I was free, I had to make him pay for hating you.”

“But ... but ... but we talked about that. He apologized—”

“I apologized to you on his behalf,” Damian said, leaning closer to her. “That was me. I cared enough to check on you in the hospital, not him. He was dead by then. Plus, I wasn’t sure

if I'd given you too much propofol, so I needed to make sure you were okay.”

“Propofol. You were the one who attacked me in the safe house? You stabbed my bodyguard?”

“Attacked is such a strong word. I was upset after I read your journal. Some other man had found his way into your heart. You couldn't love me if you loved him, so I had to get rid of him.” Damian nodded as if it was the most reasonable reaction in the world. “Now there's no one to stand in the way of us being together.”

Rage burst past her fear. “You're crazy! You attacked an innocent man!” She stood up. Damian jumped up from his chair and blocked her from passing.

“He wasn't innocent. He tried to take you from me.” Damian frowned. “You know I couldn't let that happen.”

“He wasn't the bodyguard I'm in love with! He has a wife and kids and almost lost his life because of you.”

“I saw him with you at Hotel Braganza, and he was with you at the safe house. You wrote pages and pages in your journal about him! What do you mean he's not ... the bodyguard you're in love with?” Pain and hurt cascaded across his face. “I thought you loved him—”

“You thought wrong,” Gabrielle said.

Relief flooded her body. Damian didn't know about Sebastian.

The man she loved was safe and away from Damian's lunacy. By now, he was looking for her, as were the island feds. But Gabrielle held out no hope they'd find her.

Knowing Sebastian was safe from Damian gave her strength to fight this monster.

She would get away from Damian, and this time, she would do it alone.

The look on Damian's face shifted from confusion to loathing. Gabrielle took a step back, then another.

But it was too late.

His hand shot out and grabbed her around the neck.

“Who the fuck is it? Who are you in love with?” Damian demanded.

Fire burned in her throat as she struggled to breathe. Gasping and gurgling, she scratched his hands, trying to get him to loosen his grip.

“Tell me!” He screamed, then slammed her against the wall.

Pain detonated in her skull, as tears streamed down her face. His grip tightened around her neck, making it impossible for her to fight back.

“Did you fuck him?” Damian demanded. “Has he been where I’ve always dreamed of going? Deep inside you?”

“Please ... don’t ... I ... can’t ... I can’t ... breathe,” Gabrielle managed to get the words out.

Damian loosened his grip on her neck, and she crumbled to the floor. He heaved deep breaths. “Look at what you made me do, Gabrielle. I didn’t want to hurt you. I never mean to hurt you. But you always do this to me. You turn to other men instead of coming to me!”

She cowered in the corner and refused to look at him. Dread seeped beneath her skin. She knew there wasn’t much time for her to figure a way out. Damian was becoming more unhinged by the second. He’d already killed Marvin and Brad. How much longer before he turned that violence toward her?

“Don’t you know that’s all I’ve ever wanted? I waited for you to be my first. All this time, I’ve never made love to anyone because that special time is supposed to be with you. Even though you didn’t wait for me, did you? Did you!” Damian screamed at her, spit flying from his mouth. “Look at me!” He jerked her around to face him.

She trembled as his fingers dug into her shoulders.

His voice softened as he gazed at her. “But I get it. I understand why. I don’t hate you. You weren’t sure that I

could ... be with you. I had problems back then, but I don't anymore. I can make love to you. I may not be good at first, but over time I know I can satisfy you better than any of them did. You'll be the only woman I make love to for the rest of my life. I may not have been your first, but I will be the last man you make love to, and we'll be happy. Together."

Damian leaned forward and pressed his mouth against hers. His lips moved across her face in a sloppy, uncoordinated kiss. She fought her gag reflex, realizing this was the chance she'd been waiting for. Sliding a hand into her pocket, she gripped the knife Brad had dropped.

Damian trailed wet, disgusting kisses down her neck.

She'd only get one chance at this.

She could not screw it up.

Chapter 54

The ATVs rumbled across the Cabrito Mountains. The dew breeze clung to Sebastian's skin as the salty scent of the ocean surrounded him. Followed closely by Lachlan, Kane, and Everett, Sebastian led the way to where Damian Hester had held Gabrielle captive for five days a decade ago. Bobby stayed behind to provide intel through the comms from drones he'd deployed to fly over them.

Criss-crossing through the cloak of darkness, they darted through trees and foliage underneath a full moon that barely penetrated the dense jungle. Rare glimpses of moonlight illuminated the path as Sebastian wove recklessly across the mountain to get to his woman ... before it was too late.

Time felt like it was going in reverse from the moment they'd left the compound. Sebastian's mind raced with memories of Gabrielle as they sped toward the Hester house. It had been hate at first sight, the day they'd first met. He, a scrawny twelve-year-old, had stared into the defiant dark brown eyes of Ike's eight-year-old sister, who didn't want him anywhere around. The disagreements of their past had faded away when she'd come back to St. Felipe. He'd fallen in love with the woman she'd grown up to be, and she loved him back. Losing her wasn't an option.

Sebastian focused on navigating S-curve twists around massive trees with low-hanging branches that slapped and struck him across his body. Rounding the last one, he slowed the ATV and turned the engine off. Lachlan, Kane, and Everett pulled up next to him, silencing their vehicles and heading over to him. An eerie silence permeated the air. In the

distance, about a hundred yards away, a lone dilapidated house stood. Lights shone through one of the downstairs windows. He scanned the area for any signs of movement.

“That’s the place,” Sebastian said, then turned slightly to the left and pointed to a low shed with a slanted roof near the back of the property. “That’s where Hester kept her the last time. Underneath the shed was an underground room dug out of the dirt. He put a chain around her neck and trapped her down there.”

The thought of Gabrielle restrained like a wild animal and kept from everyone she loved for the second time had him seeing red. If Marvin was re-enacting the torment his brother had put Gabrielle through, he’d kill the bastard with his bare hands.

“I thought the house had been abandoned after the Hesters moved to Toronto.” Everett frowned as he gazed through binoculars at the main house.

Kane nodded. “Someone got the electricity turned back on in the place for a reason. Gabrielle could be in the house, or she could be in the shed.”

“We need to split up,” Lachlan said. “Two of us cover the shed, and the other two take the house.” He reached into the back of the ATV and tossed weapons and night vision goggles to each of them.

Sebastian caught the goggles and rested them on the top of his head. His original theory was that Marvin would take Gabrielle back to the shed, but now every instinct within him told him to move toward the house. It was a gamble, but he knew the three guys with him would exact the same punishment he planned for Marvin if they found Gabrielle first.

Gabrielle had been missing for over twelve hours. They didn’t know what Marvin had done to her. His only hope was that the bastard would come to his senses before ...

He wouldn’t let himself complete that thought. He couldn’t. Not if he was going to keep his emotions in check

long enough to find Gabrielle and save her.

Everett clamped a hand on Sebastian's shoulder. "It's your call, but we need to move quickly."

"I'll take the house," Sebastian said. His hands grazed over his gear. Glock in his shoulder holster and another on his hip, within a second's reach of his hand. Knife sheathed and scraped to his calf. Everything he needed was at his disposal. "Lachlan comes with me. You and Kane check the shed. Radio if you find her, and we'll come running. We'll do the same."

Seconds later, they raced down the hill. Everett and Kane angled through the brush toward the shed. Sebastian and Lachlan crouched low.

Lachlan said, "The light could be a decoy."

Sebastian had thought the same thing. Splitting up was risky, but he had to give them the best chance of finding Gabrielle. "You take the far side of the house, and I'll investigate the room with the light."

Lachlan nodded and lowered his goggles, then took a wide arc around the house to avoid being seen by anyone through the downstairs windows. Sebastian navigated a straight route toward the house. Blazing through wild flowering bushes that had grown as tall as him from years of neglect, Sebastian jumped over tangled brush and honed in on his destination. As the house grew closer, his pounding heart roared in his head. He prayed he wasn't too late.

He spotted a door on the side of the house that opened to the kitchen. It was a typical design for Palmchat homes in the deep woods. A light shone through the window next to the door, but drapes blocked his view of the inside.

Sebastian eased toward the door, pressing his ear against the rough wood. His hand tightened around the Glock. He could barely make out sounds. Muffled words.

"Why ... why ... would you ... do ..."

Slipping a hand against the knob, he twisted.

"I've wanted this ... for so ... long ..."

It was locked.

“You ... won’t ... stop me ...”

He silently mouthed a curse and backed up, leaning down to grab his knife.

“I ... can’t wait to ... to be ... inside ... you ...”

Rage roared through Sebastian, recognizing Marvin’s voice. The bastard was going to rape Gabrielle. Fear and desperation grabbed Sebastian by the throat. He was almost out of time. He had to stop Marvin.

Sebastian stabbed the steel point into the keyhole, jamming it hard and twisting until the rusted lock and knob broke into pieces that fell into the grass. He threw his weight against the door. It flew open and crashed against the wall. In a swift motion, he raised the gun and aimed.

Marvin jerked around to face Sebastian. His expression morphed from lust to hatred. He was naked from the waist up. A massive butterfly tattooed in blue ink spread across his chest. Blood oozed from an open gash on his neck. His pants were unzipped. One hand was wrapped around his erection.

The other hand held a gun pointed at ... Gabrielle.

Sebastian’s heart lurched at the sight of her. She cowered in the corner, partially obscured by the kitchen table. Fully clothed, she wore yoga pants and a t-shirt. Faint signs of bruises surrounded her neck. A sheen of sweat covered her face. Panic clouded her gorgeous brown eyes as she stared down the barrel of Marvin’s gun. He couldn’t imagine what hell Marvin had put her through, but she was still alive. That was all that mattered to him.

Detective Brad Shannon was barely recognizable in a pool of blood in the opposite corner. His head bashed in. Sebastian tore his eyes from the gruesome scene and focused on the woman he loved.

“Gabs,” Sebastian called out. “I’m here. You’re going to be alright.”

“Sebastian.” Her voice trembled. She scrambled forward, eyes widened with shock as she stared at him. “Don’t come in here. It’s Damian! He’s crazy. He didn’t die. You have to go!”

Her words were like a bomb detonating.

“Damian?” Sebastian looked back at the man, his mind struggling to comprehend how it was possible that Damian could be alive. If it was true, that changed everything. Damian was psychotic and unpredictable.

Sebastian stayed calm, gazing at Gabrielle’s beautiful face. “I’m never leaving you. That’s a promise.”

Damian’s face twisted with rage. His grip tightened on the weapon pointed at Gabrielle. His finger caressed the trigger. “Drop the gun, or I blow her fucking head off.”

Chapter 55

“We heard everything. Headed to the house now.” Everett’s voice crackled over the comms in Sebastian’s ear.

“I’m inside,” Lachlan whispered into the comms. “Keep him talking until I can get a good position.”

Sebastian grunted in response, bent down, and placed his gun against the cracked tile floor.

“And the other one!” Damian demanded. “Put the other gun down and kick them over to me.”

Lifting the Glock from the shoulder holster, Sebastian placed it next to the other and kicked them. The guns slid across the floor and banged against the woodwork near Damian’s feet.

“I don’t need guns to stop you.” Sebastian clenched his fists.

Damian reached down and grabbed both weapons, then stuffed them into the back pockets of his jeans.

“You can’t stop me from being with Gabrielle. No one can,” Damian taunted as he walked over to Gabrielle. With his free hand, he yanked her up from the floor and maneuvered her body in front of his. He dragged the gun barrel along her neck, rested it against her temple, and then trailed his tongue down the side of her face.

Sebastian’s stomach churned. He wanted to charge forward, grab Damian and make him pay for what he had done. But he needed to be careful, or Gabrielle could be hurt

in the process. He kept his eyes focused on Damian while his mind raced to figure out a plan.

“If you say a fucking word to him, you die,” Damian said. His grip on Gabrielle tightened. “Do you understand me? You don’t talk to him in front of me. Don’t even fucking look at him! If you do, I’ll put a bullet in your brain and kill him, too.”

Gabrielle whimpered, nodding her head as she dropped her gaze from Sebastian.

The man was smart.

Damian knew the only thing keeping Sebastian at bay was the threat to Gabrielle’s life. Sebastian had limited options as long as the gun was pointed at her head. He wouldn’t do a damn thing to risk her life.

Just then, a voice spoke over the comms in Sebastian’s ear. “I’m outside the kitchen. Rile him up so I can get a shot.” It was Lachlan. The relief that washed over Sebastian was palpable. He knew what he had to do.

Sebastian said, “You’re delusional, Damian. I’m not letting you take Gabrielle. I stopped Tony Brooks from stalking her, and I’ll stop you, too.”

Damian turned his attention back to Sebastian. “You stopped Tony Brooks? You?” He scoffed. “I saved Gabrielle from Tony Brooks. He was supposed to be my friend. He helped me after I woke up in the morgue. He helped me hide out at house in St. Killian until I was ready to reveal myself to Gabrielle. Then he started popping off about all the shit he’d done to her. A friend wouldn’t trash Gabrielle’s house with bloody goats, put snakes in her purse, and steal her private journal. He thought I’d be happy about it. Happy that he was scaring the shit out of the woman that belongs to me? And he did it for money. Hurt her for fucking money!”

Tony Brooks had been working with Damian Hester all along. He knew Damian was going to fake his death and thought targeting the object of Damian’s desire would please his former cellmate. Tony never anticipated Damian would turn on him after finding out he stalked and terrorized

Gabrielle for cash. Tony likely never knew that Detective Shannon was Geppetto, the supposed incel asking for the attacks against Gabrielle. Sebastian wondered if Damian had learned of that connection. If that was why Shannon lay in a bloody heap, dead on the kitchen floor.

Damian continued, “He thought giving me Gabrielle’s wallet, and her journal would make up for what he did. He was wrong. I hunted him down in St. Xavier. Now he’s dead. I killed him for her! You’re just one of many men who thought they could come between Gabrielle and me. Detective Shannon thought he could. He wanted to use Gabrielle to get a fucking police chief job. Terrorized her for career advancement. Now he’s dead. And my brother was the worst of all. The things he said to Gabrielle sealed his fate. The only shot I had to be with Gabrielle was to take on a new identity, and my brother was the perfect cover. I couldn’t let him live. If I killed all of them, what do you think I’ll do to you?”

Damian’s hand caressed Gabrielle’s stomach, then moved lower to cover her mound.

Sebastian tensed. A rush of anger and adrenaline flooded his body. He stepped forward.

“Take your hands off her,” Sebastian growled.

“Why? She’s mine. She’ll always be mine,” Damian warned.

A sarcastic laugh erupted from Sebastian’s lips. It was time for Damian Hester’s reign of terror to end, and he knew how to push the freak’s buttons.

“That’s not what she told me last night,” Sebastian said, stepping closer. “You read her journal. Pages and pages of handwritten notes about falling in love with her bodyguard. You fucked up when you stabbed that cop at the safe house. You got the wrong man.”

Damian removed his hand from between Gabrielle’s legs and snaking his arm around her neck. “Who are you?”

“The man Gabrielle is in love with. The one she wants. The one she’s already given herself to.”

“Shut the fuck up!” Damian screamed.

“Last night, I was the one in her bed. We made love all night. But you don’t know how that feels, do you?” Sebastian taunted.

The gun eased from Gabrielle’s head, shaking in Damian’s hand.

“You don’t know how it feels to have Gabrielle scream your name as an orgasm pulses through her body.” Sebastian moved closer. “I do. I heard her last night and so many nights before it. My name was on her lips. Sebastian.”

Damian flicked the gun toward Sebastian. “I told you to shut the fuck up! Shut up! I will kill you, bastard! I will kill you for touching her!”

Tears streamed down Gabrielle’s face as Damian’s arm tightened around her neck.

“Target locked.” Lachlan’s voice came through the comms.

Sebastian said, “It wasn’t the first time I’d made love to her, and it damn sure won’t be the last. I can promise you that.”

Damian’s eyes turned to dark pools of stone. Sebastian had him right where he wanted him. The gunshot rang through the air.

Gabrielle screamed, “Sebastian! No!”

The bullet slammed into Sebastian’s chest. The impact whipped his body backward. A jolt of pain ricocheted through him as he crashed into the wall.

Two more shots rang through the air.

Damian Hester dropped to the floor, a hoarse scream tearing from his throat as he stared at the stump where his right hand had been. His pant leg was drenched scarlet by the blood pouring from the gunshot wound to his thigh. He clung to the mangled remains of his hand, his eyes wide with shock and terror as he writhed on the floor.

Everett and Kane raced into the kitchen, guns drawn and pointed at Damian.

Gabrielle leaped over Damian's body, pushing past Lachlan, and rushed to Sebastian's side.

"Seby, stay with me. Do you hear me? Stay with me," she whispered between sobs. Tears streamed down her face as she grabbed his tactical gear, trying to tear his shirt open.

He bit his lower lip to hide his smile, then eased his hands around her wrists to stop her frantic movements.

"Gabs, look at me," Sebastian said.

She stopped and gazed at him, a look of confusion on her face.

"I'm fine."

"He shot you! You're not fine." Gabrielle looked around him, stunned and disoriented. "But there's no blood. I don't understand."

Sebastian shifted slightly, wincing from the pain in his chest, and unzipped his jacket to reveal the Kevlar vest with a shiny bullet lodged inside. "I came prepared. Bulletproof vest. Back up security team."

Gabrielle moved her trembling hands over the vest, trying to process the horror of what happened. She ripped apart the fasteners with a sharp tug, exposing the ugly purple bruise that now marred his chest. She leaned down and kissed the bruise lightly as her tears left a trail of wetness on his skin. Sebastian pulled her into his arms as she shook with sobs.

"Thank God he didn't hurt you." She flung her arms around his neck and hugged him tightly. "I don't know what I'd do if I lost you."

"You won't have to find out," Sebastian said softly. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, savoring the feel of her body against his. "You're mine, and I'm yours. I love you, Gabs."

She leaned back and stared into his eyes. "I love you, Seby."

“Alright, that’s enough, love birds,” Kane said. “We need to get out of here.”

Sebastian shook his head. “You and Everett leave. We don’t want the island feds to know how much of this rescue was planned. Lachlan stays behind with Gabrielle and me. It’s easier to sell as a hunch that panned out. Once the two of you are gone, we’ll call it in.”

“I don’t like it,” Everett said. “I think we get Adonis out here and erase us. Let the PIIB figure out their own story.”

Gabrielle glanced from Everett back to Sebastian, worry in her gaze.

“I’m not asking Gabrielle to lie to the feds for us. The closer we stick to the truth, the better,” Sebastian said, then caressed Gabrielle’s neck. “Think you can tell what happened and leave out the part about Everett and Kane being here?”

“I can do whatever you need me to,” Gabrielle said confidently. “I don’t want any of you getting into trouble for saving me.”

“You heard the lady,” Lachlan said, then nodded at Everett and Kane. “Get out of here. We’ll take care of the rest.” He laid his gun on the kitchen counter, grabbed his cell phone, and followed the other two men out of the kitchen.

Sebastian helped Gabrielle stand, then walked her to the kitchen door. “Wait outside for me. There’s one last thing I need to do.”

Gabrielle’s eyes narrowed. “You don’t have to. He’s shot and can’t move. He’ll go to prison again. We stopped him. He’ll go to prison for the rest of his life this time.”

“That’s not good enough for me,” Sebastian said, jaw clenched.

“Sebastian ...”

“If you love me, you’ll let me do this. I’m not doing it for you. That bastard thought he could take you from me. I need to show him he was wrong.” Sebastian took a step back from the door. “I’ll only be a minute.”

Gabrielle nodded, then turned and walked toward Lachlan.

Sebastian shut the door, then crossed the kitchen to face Damian Hester. PISCOs were trained in hand-to-hand combat, skillful and deadly with knives, but he couldn't use his weapon of choice this time. He didn't want the blood on his hands. He was grateful that Kane had insisted on suppressors for their weapons. The gun molded to his hand like a natural extension of his arm.

He stared down at the man's face, twisted into a gruesome frown.

"You think this is over?" Damian said through gritted teeth. His left hand moved to his back pocket as Sebastian had expected. "It'll never be over. Gabrielle is mine! You hear me! She's mine!" Damian's hand shook as he pointed the gun and pulled the trigger, sending an errant bullet whizzing left of Sebastian's body.

"Yeah, I hear you," Sebastian said, then shot Damian between the eyes.

Chapter 56

“Sebastian won’t be upset if you go home and get some rest.”

Gabrielle jolted up from the sofa. She must have nodded off. Microbursts of sleep had overtaken her body dozens of times since arriving at the St. Felipe Police Department. Glancing at Serena, she accepted the paper cup filled with her favorite Hullabaloo coffee. “What time is it?”

“Ten til five.” Serena sat next to her and caressed her arm. “You’re exhausted. I can have the police admin call us as soon as the detectives are finished with Sebastian.”

“I’m not leaving.” Gabrielle counted the hours in her head. Seventeen. That’s how long the detectives had been in the interrogation room badgering Sebastian about what happened last night.

Fear gripped her heart.

She didn’t know what to do if the cops didn’t believe Sebastian. When he’d told her there was one last thing he needed to do, she knew it was killing Damian Hester. Sebastian was an ex-PISCO. She wasn’t naive. He’d probably killed many men in his past. As much as she wanted Damian dead, she hadn’t wanted Sebastian to make that sacrifice for her. It wasn’t worth risking his freedom to spare her from dealing with Damian again.

Yet, the look in his eyes told her not to refuse his request.

He loved her too much to let the man who’d tormented her for decades keep breathing.

As she walked away from the side door, she turned back to see Damian pointing a gun at Sebastian. When the gun fired, her heart stopped. She knew Sebastian was right. Damian would never stop coming after them. As she raced back toward the door, Lachlan grabbed her and lifted her from the ground. She cried and screamed, fighting to get out of his arms and back to Sebastian as Lachlan carried her up the hill. When they were a safe distance from the house, Lachlan whispered in her ear, in his Scottish brogue, “Trust him. Sebastian’s going to be alright. He’s not going to leave you.”

And he’d been right.

Minutes later, Sebastian trudged up the hill and enveloped her in his arms.

“It’s over,” Sebastian said, kissing her head. “Damian Hester won’t hurt you again.”

She had Sebastian to thank for that.

But their reunion had been short-lived.

Within ten minutes, federal agents and local police swarmed the house and yard. She was taken separately from Sebastian and Lachlan to the police station while they stayed behind to give their statements and walk the agents through what happened when they arrived and found her being held captive.

The man she’d loved had risked his own life to protect her from a deranged lunatic and survived. She couldn’t leave the police station without him. She couldn’t take the chance. They’d assume he’d shot Damian Hester in cold blood instead of self-defense, which it had been. She’d told the investigators that when they questioned her.

“Well, if you’re not leaving, neither am I.” Serena sighed. “I still can’t believe Brad Shannon was the one who put all of this into motion. If he hadn’t orchestrated the attacks against you, luring Tony Brooks to do his dirty work, we probably would have figured out earlier that Damian Hester had killed his brother and assumed his identity.”

“No one is more disappointed in Brad than me. I trusted him, and he used me and my tragic past for professional gain.” Gabrielle shuddered as memories of Brad’s delusional rant flooded her mind.

“His greed and selfishness led to his death.” Serena shook her head. “He never had a chance at the police chief job anyway. I’d been working with the Mayor and a search firm to find a highly qualified individual to step into the role. She’ll be starting in a few weeks.”

“Anyone I know?” Gabrielle asked, amazed at the power her sister wielded on the island. Serena had stepped into their mother’s shoes and not missed a beat.

“Not likely. Her name is Simone Brown. She’s an American from Atlanta, Georgia. Overqualified. Not sure how we convinced her to move to the Palmchat Islands, but we’re happy to snag her,” Serena said, then yawned. Her sister had been by her side when she arrived at the police station late last night.

The detectives had taken it easy on Gabrielle, finishing her interrogation in less than two hours. She’d kept her promise and removed Everett and Kane from her statement. Everything else she’d conveyed to the cops was precisely as it happened.

Gabrielle stood and walked toward the door. She peered down the hallway. The room the officers led Sebastian into was still closed.

“Why is it taking so long? Sebastian has less to tell them than I did. He showed up after Damian had killed Brad. How could my interview take a couple of hours and Sebastian’s still be going?” Gabrielle pressed her hands on her hips and turned to her sister.

“I can’t imagine the PIIB is happy that Sebastian withheld crucial information about your whereabouts from them. He’s not a PISCO anymore. As soon as he suspected Detective Shannon and Marvin Hester, he should have told the feds instead of trying to be the hero,” Serena said, running a hand through her long brown tresses. “What if his plan hadn’t worked?”

“But it did work. Sebastian was not trying to be a hero. He was my hero. He was the one who put all the pieces together and came to save me. There wasn’t time to convince the PIIB that he was on the right trail. You know how they can be. How much time could’ve been lost if he had taken that approach? Would I be here with you if he had?”

“Good point. Still, I’m not surprised they want to discuss how he gathered all the intel to come to his conclusions and find you,” Serena said, raising an eyebrow. “I wouldn’t be surprised if Sebastian dusted off the equipment at the Stingray Compound.”

“Stingray Compound?”

“I take it Ike never told you about the security firm he’d planned on starting. Sebastian, Lachlan and a few of the other guys Ike hung out with as a teenager were all going to work together. Ike used the bulk of his trust fund to build a military-grade training compound, fully equipped with top-of-the-line tactical gear and information technology systems,” Serena said. “When Ike left, all of that fell apart. The facility has been unused since. I’m guessing Sebastian had access to the compound and used the network and tools there to track you down.”

“Thank God he did.” Gabrielle was surprised Sebastian never mentioned it, though there wasn’t much time between them getting to know each other and her being stalked every few days. When had they had time to talk about mundane topics like what they each wanted to do with their lives when this chaos was behind them? “Have you heard from Ike lately? I’m not sure if news of my drama has gotten to him.”

Serena rolled her eyes. “He’s still M.I.A. We all lost our parents, yet he acts like he is suffering more than the rest of us. He doesn’t care about the family business or our legacy. I’m sure if he knew what you’d gone through over the past few weeks, he’d be here, though. He must be completely off the grid. That’s why we should move forward with the legal steps to enact our parents’ wills.”

Gabrielle looked away. After everything she'd been through, the last thing she wanted was to be pressured by Serena to have their parents declared legally deceased.

"Have you thought any more about it?" Serena pressed.

Gabrielle took a long sip of her coffee.

"Thought any more about what?" Sebastian's voice floated into the room.

Gabrielle fumbled her cup. It fell to the floor, splattering coffee across the linoleum, but she didn't care. She threw herself into Sebastian's arms, leaning into his rock-hard muscles as he hugged her.

"Nothing," Serena said. "It can wait. Are you free to leave?"

Sebastian nodded. "No charges will be filed against Lachlan or me. He's already gone home to Paloma."

"That's great news. I'll go tell the driver to bring the car around and give you two a moment alone," Serena said, then side-stepped past them and out of the room.

Gabrielle pulled Sebastian inside and closed the door. Turning to face him, she bit her bottom lip. "Is it over?"

Sebastian cupped her face in his hands, his gaze intense. "Over? It's not over." A sexy grin spread across his lips. "It's just beginning."

He leaned down and kissed her tenderly, sending a wave of warmth through her body.

When he pulled away, he held her close and stared into her eyes. "I want to know everything about you, from your favorite color to your biggest fear. I want to know your hopes, your dreams, and your secrets. I want to wake up every morning with you by my side. I'm not going to lie. I love you so much already, and it scares the shit out of me. But you've shown me that my love for you is not corrupt and deranged like what my father felt for my mother. I'm not worried about turning into my old man with you. There's no way in hell I

could ever harm a hair on your head. I may not deserve you, but I'm fucking glad that you're mine."

Gabrielle blushed and looked away, suddenly feeling shy and exposed. She had never let someone in like this before, and it both scared and excited her. She knew that with Sebastian, she could let down her guard and share her life with him. He was her refuge, her safe space. In the short time since they reconnected, she had no doubts in her mind or her heart that she loved this man. That she belonged with him. She wanted a future with Sebastian, one that started right now.

"I love you," she whispered. "Now that I've found you, I can't imagine living a single day without you. You're stuck with me."

Sebastian's arms tightened around her. "You're stuck with me, too." He kissed her forehead, then her nose, then gently pressed his lips against hers. His tongue caressed her mouth, parted her lips, and delved deep inside, consuming her with the most passionate kiss of her life. Gabrielle tightened her grip around his neck, leaning her body into his as she felt him respond in the most primal way. His cock awakened to life as they kissed as if their lives depended on it. Warmth flooded her center, and she was minutes away from throwing caution to the wind and making love to this man in the back room of the police station.

There was a loud rap on the door.

Gabrielle froze, then pulled back from Sebastian.

He chuckled softly as he stole one last kiss from her lips.

"Ms. King, the car is ready," her driver said, embarrassed for interrupting their moment.

She winked at Sebastian. "I just have one question for you."

"What's that?"

"Are you going home with me, or am I going home with you?"

Epilogue

Her hands moved at lightning speed. Unbuttoning his shorts. Unzipping his pants. She almost yelped with delight as she realized he'd gone commando. No boxers to separate her from him. She wrapped a hand around his massive cock. The weight heavy in her hand.

Sebastian moaned as he watched her. Like with every move, she weakened his defenses and took complete control over him.

His head tipped back as his eyes closed.

"Gabs ..." her name tumbled from his mouth, urging her into quicker action.

She firmed her grip around his girth and began a slow, tantalizing stroke. The response was instant as he grew thicker and rock-hard in her hands. She leaned forward and pressed her lips against his tip. Her tongue trailed lazy circles against his skin as her hands found a natural rhythm up and down his dick.

"Fuck, that feels good," he murmured.

"Not as good as this," she teased. She took him in her mouth, just a fraction of an inch, swirling her tongue around him.

A low growl escaped his lips. "Gabs ... you're killing me."

She encircled the head of his cock with her mouth. Her tongue flicked against his tip, lapping at the pre-cum gathered there, then took him deep within her mouth.

Sebastian hissed in pleasure as she sucked on his thickness while stroking his shaft. She gazed up and marveled at the look of pure lust on his face. It turned her on, flooding her thong. She quickened her pace as his body clenched, his hips thrusting toward her face, plunging his cock deeper and deeper into her mouth. She loved the taste of him—raw, sexy, and masculine.

“Fuck.” Sebastian muttered. His hand found the back of her head and grabbed a fist full of her hair in his palm. He tugged at her, holding her head at the perfect angle to drive his cock further down her throat. She dropped her hands from him and took him as deep as she could while sucking hard.

When his thighs jerked and shook, she knew he was close.

His hands stroked through her hair in brusque movements as he grunted in pleasure. With ragged breaths, he was close to losing control, and she loved every minute of it. She loved that she was the one who could bring him to this depth of intense and all-consuming pleasure.

“Shit. I’m coming ...”

With one last thrust of his hips, she felt him let go. His body shook with the intensity of his orgasm. She continued to suck, drawing out every last drop of pleasure from him. His fingers tugged at her hair as he gently pulled out of her mouth.

“You are amazing,” Sebastian said with a satisfied grin.

Gabrielle smiled, feeling all the love in his words. She stood and snuggled against his chest, wanting the moment to last as long as possible.

“Now, it’s my turn.” Sebastian stepped back from her and scooped her into his arms as if she weighed nothing. He carried her through his living room and into the bedroom, gently lowering her onto the bed.

He crouched and crawled over her like a predator, ready to devour his prey. When his mouth crashed into hers, it was pure ecstasy. An unbridled hunger and force to be reckoned with as she lost herself in the intensity of the kiss. All the times he’d kissed her before paled in comparison. He’d held back then,

but now the full depth and breadth of his need and want for her drove his ravenous devouring of her lips. Their tongues thrashed and sucked and slid against each other, threatening to consume her in the desire blazing between them.

Never in her life had she craved the feel of another man inside her as she did Sebastian. The need was overwhelming and consuming, leaving her aching for him to take her. Desire raced along her skin. Passion flooded her body until she was at his mercy. Her heart was his to take, to have, and to hold. The seed of love for Sebastian had bloomed into an orchard of wildflowers that could not be contained or denied.

Grabbing her dress, Sebastian forced it over her head, freeing her breasts to the cool air. A sheen of sweat coated her body as he trailed kisses from her lips down to her hard nipples, then back up to her mouth. He squeezed her swollen breasts in each hand, stroking and caressing them.

She moaned with pleasure as his touch heightened all of her senses. The ache between her legs intensified. She rocked against the hard swell of his cock, desperate to feel him inside her.

“Sebastian, please, I need you.” Her words were strained and low, full of a desperate hunger for him.

He looked down at her with smoldering, intense desire. Yanking at the thin lace of her thong, he ripped it from her body. She lay bare before him. He paused for a moment. His gaze traveled slowly over her from head to toe.

“I’m all yours, beautiful.” He gripped her hips and lifted her easily, allowing his tip to slide along the moistness of her sex. He brushed against the sensitive nerves of her clit, almost pushing her over the edge. She couldn’t wait any longer, and luckily, Sebastian felt the same way.

“My cock is all yours. I’m going deep inside you, so deep you won’t want me to ever come out.” He thrust his hips forward, following through with every single word.

A strangled moan erupted from her lips as she spread to take in his thickness and length. He claimed her mouth with

intimate kisses. Her body quivered in anticipation of what was to come. Friction exploded inside her core as she squeezed around him. He pumped hard and fast as he plunged his tongue deeper into her mouth, locking her into a kiss that blew her mind.

The intensity of their lovemaking was unparalleled. Each thrust sent waves of pleasure through her veins. With each movement, every sensation was heightened, pushing her closer and closer to the edge. She gasped in pleasure, her breaths coming in jagged spurts. She felt like he was part of her, and with each thrust, their souls became even more intertwined until they were one.

She matched his movements in perfect harmony. Their rocking and thrusting synchronized as she was drawn closer and closer to ecstasy.

“I fucking love you, Gabrielle,” Sebastian said between kisses and thrusts. “I love you so fucking much.”

His words sent her heart soaring. She tried to respond, but her emotions clogged her throat as tears flooded her eyes. She knew that this was what she’d always wanted and needed. His words shattered every disappointing memory from her childhood and every terrorizing memory from Damian Hester’s wrath. The last hold her past had over her disintegrated with Sebastian’s words. With his love. She knew her past would never control her again. She would face life and all its challenges head-on without fear because Sebastian loved her.

Wrapping her arms around Sebastian’s neck, she clung to him and arched her back, accepting him deeper inside her. He took all that she gave and stole even more. Slipping his arms under her thighs, he lifted her legs onto his shoulders and leaned into her. His thrusts renewed with intense savagery. Rough and hard.

But the look in his eyes was unadulterated worship and love.

“Sebastian ...” she pleaded as the precipice of her orgasm grew closer. Holding on for her life, she dug her fingernails

into his back. His pace quickened, and thrusts deepened, crashing into her most sensitive sweet spot. Wave after wave of pleasure pushed her closer to the edge. The loud slaps of flesh pounding against each other echoed through the night.

Her eyes fluttered and closed as she was overwhelmed with sensations.

“Don’t do that. Look at me. I want your eyes on me when I make you come,” Sebastian demanded.

Gabrielle gasped for breath as her eyes rested on Sebastian’s. His gorgeous face focused and hardened into a scowl of pleasure as he stared back at her. Her whimpers grew louder into uncontrollable moans as his pace quickened and thrusts deepened. She knew he was as close as she was to coming apart.

With one final thrust, she shattered into a million pieces, the orgasm powerful and undeniable. Her body ripped apart at the cataclysmic pleasure ricocheting inside her, leaving her panting and exhausted. Her hands gripped his muscular arms as his orgasm followed, exploding within her.

Sebastian slowly lowered her legs from his shoulders, then rolled her onto him.

“Have I told you how much I love you?” Sebastian asked, kissing her forehead.

Gabrielle laughed. “Not in the last hour. So tell me again.”

“I love you, Gabs.”

“And I love you, Seby.”

“Sebastian ...”

“I said I’ll think about it,” Sebastian said, laughing as he pulled her under the stream of warm water of the outdoor shower. A rain shower head extended from a pole partially hidden by flowering hibiscus and heliconia bushes. The Cabrito Mountains loomed in the background, lush and green,

basking in the early morning sun rays. Sebastian ran his hands along her soaked curls, caressing the back of her skull. “Why can’t that be enough for now?”

He kissed her forehead, then her eye, then her cheek trying to get her back in the mood and away from her unexpected morning fixation.

“This is the perfect location. I love that you’re so close to the Tango Lowlands, but you must admit that this is a glorified bachelor pad, and you’re no longer a bachelor. You’re in a committed relationship with a woman you adore,” Gabrielle said, pausing to allow water to cascade down her glorious body. His cock twitched as he gazed at her. “I promise we can renovate your house and triple its size in less than six months. That would be enough space for it to feel like a comfy home for both of us. Why don’t you want that?”

“I never said I didn’t want to live with you. You’re putting words in my mouth,” Sebastian said, then leaned forward to kiss her on the nose. “I hate that.”

Gabrielle leaned her forehead against his chest. “So what are you saying.”

“That we have more options than turning my nice home into a jungle McMansion. We should take our time and explore other places to live.” Sebastian maneuvered their bodies to block the stream of water. He lifted her face to look at him. Water pelted the back of his head, stopping her from getting wet. His hands stroked up and down her slick back. “I don’t want you to settle for living up here just because you think that’s what I want. I’m happy as long as I’m with you.”

“You are so perfect. No man has ever made me feel like you do, Sebastian.”

“You told me,” he said with a sexy grin. “Over and over last night.”

Gabrielle playfully slapped his arm. “I’m not just talking about the sex, which was out of this world. I don’t want you to think my feelings for you are only superficial and fueled by lust.”

Sebastian chuckled, his body shaking as he held her tighter. “I know that, too. Can you relax? This is the beginning of our first day as a couple, where we don’t have any threats looming or enemies to fight. Let’s enjoy it.”

“I am enjoying it.” Gabrielle graced him with a stunning smile that damn near stopped his heart. “But I also want to figure out where we will live. Serena wants us to move into King Estate with the rest of the family. If I don’t come up with a plan, she’s going to get her way. You know how aggressive she is.”

Sebastian groaned. “All I want to think about is how much I love you. We can deal with Serena later.”

“Fine, but you’re going to regret not listening to me,” Gabrielle crossed her arms over her chest, pushing her gorgeous breasts higher.

He caressed his hands over them, then leaned down and kissed her. His hands slid down her curvy body until he gripped the soft round globes of her ass. Her hands worked like magic across his skin with sensual caresses that elicited a moan from the deep recesses of him.

“I guess you didn’t get enough last night,” Gabrielle said, unable to ignore his cock pressing against her.

“I don’t know if I’ll ever get enough of you,” he admitted.

Sliding her hands up his chest, she pushed up on her tiptoes and pressed her mouth against his. He welcomed her lips, parting his mouth to let her tongue inside. As she deepened the kiss, his arms wrapped around her—

A harsh barking permeated the air.

Gabrielle stiffened as Sebastian pulled away from her. They looked to the right. A few feet away, poking out of the jungle fauna, was a white Labrador barking at them.

“Tucker?” Gabrielle said, pushing past him to lean over the edge of the shower to get a better look. “That’s definitely Tucker.”

Sebastian stiffened as he turned the shower off. He grabbed a towel, thrust it toward her, and then wrapped the other towel around his waist.

“If Tucker is here, you know what that means,” Gabrielle said, her face glowing with hope. “Ike must be close. He might even be back home.”

Sebastian was quiet as a tug-of-war waged within him. Was it fair to Gabrielle to tell her that her brother was on the island but in a medically induced coma until his body could heal itself? There was no guarantee that Ike would wake up or even be himself if he did. Or was she better off not knowing until he knew for sure Ike was going to be okay?

“Seby, Serena told me that you were going to work with Ike in a security team a couple of years ago before our parents disappeared,” Gabrielle said, gripping his hands. “I watched how you, Everett, Kane, and Lachlan worked seamlessly together to save me. I bet Bobby was helping too, and who knows who else. Were they going to be part of the team, too?”

He nodded slowly, not sure where she was going with this. “Your brother created Stingray Security for us to work together and provide private security services, surveillance, protection details, and event security.”

“Search and rescues? Finding missing persons?”

“Well, yes, we could do those, too.”

“How much would it cost to get the security firm up and running?”

“Why?”

“Because I want to be your first client. I want you and the team to find my brother. Find Ike for me.”

Want more of Gabrielle and Sebastian?

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About the Author



Angel Vane has a dramatic personality, is prone to exaggeration and is in perpetual pursuit of her creative muse. She loves writing, reading, traveling, spa days and soap operas. Angel resides in Tomball, Texas.

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