



THE SHATTER &
SHOCK DUET

SHATTERPROOF

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
XAVIER NEAL

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Shatterproof

By Xavier Neal

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Contents

[Dedication:](#)

[Warning](#)

[Playlist Selects](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Other works](#)

[Gratitude:](#)

[Follow Me!!!](#)

[FULL List of My Works](#)

Dedication:

To the Universe... Thank you for letting my love of writing be
shatterproof.

WARNING:

This novel contains EXTREMELY foul language (from both men and women), GRAPHIC sexual content (including some that may differ from your own), GRAPHIC violence (that many may consider gruesome or gory) and other adult situations. Some readers may find the content triggering or disagree with it entirely. This novel is intended for readers over the age of 18.

Please keep all these things in mind and proceed at your own risk.

Thank you.

- Xavier

Playlist Selects

Here are five songs from the *Shatterproof (The Shatter & Shock Duet #1)* playlist!

Feel free to follow the playlist on Spotify to find more songs I felt related to the book.

1. I Feel for You – Chaka Khan (R&B)
2. One Call Away – Chingy (Hip-Hop)
3. Under You – Nick Jonas (Pop)
4. My Happy Ending – Avril Lavigne (Punk Rock)
5. Bake It – Tanner Adell (Country)

More songs: <https://spoti.fi/3slZ7J7>

Chapter 1

Slater

There are people in this world who jump out of planes for their country.

Others who do it for work.

Some who simply do it for fun.

Me?

I'm one of those rare individuals who's done it for all three.

But currently?

There's an R&R contract – Rescue and Recovery – with the company I work for – Haworth Enterprises – that requires a certain willingness to plummet from the aforementioned aircraft into the coldest depths of the ocean.

I've done it to help rescue astronauts from water landings.

Why wouldn't I do it now to save a child that's being held for ransom?

A playful grin glides onto my face at the same time I lock eyes with Khary Blumel, my second for the mission as well as one of my best friends. “You ready, Blu?”

“Why do you look so fucking excited?” His caramel-colored forehead scrunches in irritation at the same time his voice bites through my state-of-the-art, waterproof ear com. “No motherfucker should be *that* excited to jump out of a plane, Wahl!”

“That's where you're wrong.” Arrogant chortles are launched into the air. “Every asshole should be *this* fuckin' excited to jump out of a plane, Blu.” One cocky wink is wedged between sentences. “See you down there.”

Without another word, I shove the mouthpiece in place, take a step backward, offer a two-finger wave, and then jump.

My lack of looking before I leap is what I call *style*.

And where's the fun in life without a little bit of that shit?

Plunging into the deep, frigid waters is about the level of exhilarating that I was expecting. On one hand, the uncharacteristically low temp for October would be enough to make my balls retreat for being put in such hostile fucking territory if they could actually feel it – shout out to the tactical tech team for creating such an amazing suit that they can't – but then again, on the other hand, water this cold is the type of shit that's good for the *soul*.

Cleanses it of the laziness that comes from working on the chiller side of shit better known as PS – Private Security – and then buffs out whatever remains of the complacency in order to make an actual fucking difference in this world.

And don't get that shit tangled.

Rescuing children – regardless of who their fucking parents are – always makes a difference.

It sure as hell did for me.

And I believe with every ounce of my heart, it will for those I've helped return home.

Most only take R&R assignments if the price tag going in is high, then even higher once you've returned the target; however, me and Blu live by a different set of standards. If the mission involves rescuing a child – in *any* fucking way – we're in.

Not kidnap.

Not transport.

Not exchange.

Just. Rescue.

Does it always pay as well as some of the other avenues?

No.

Does the reward of returning an innocent victim back to somewhere they belong outweigh the other bullshit?

Every. Fucking. Time.

Blu's eventual arrival nearby signifies that it's time to start moving. In tandem, we lower ourselves back below the undulating surface and begin to swim north for the beachside territory we need to infiltrate. Unlike when I sporadically take a couple days off to snorkel and surf and submerge myself in sex on the beach with a beautiful lady who has been *drinking* a sex on the beach, I ignore the alluring colors. Disregard the hypnotic blue magic and mysterious creatures calling to me to come play, to investigate more about them than the eye can merely see. I swiftly glide through the water, effortlessly crossing the miles of space we need to cover in great time.

Not record breaking though.

That number is still attached to my maroon beret.

The one that gave me skills and honed my determination to do whatever it takes to save a life that isn't my own.

Even if it means losing mine.

Stealthily approaching the dock increases in difficulty not only due to the change in depth but tint to the water. Maintaining our lower level requires our strokes to slow and splitting in opposite directions to be done in a synchronized nature to avoid creating alarming waves. Blu heads for the front end of the yacht while I make my way towards the rear. We each slide underneath the wooden edge so that we remain out of sight until the guards gravitate away from where they're having a smoke break with one another and back into their respective positions. My partner acknowledges the change in movement with a single nod prior to quietly following his mark to the other side. I patiently wade in one spot, listening for indications that his patrolling has finally resumed, and the instant, his heavy clomping reaches an unmistakable pattern, I push my plan into action.

Releasing the small rubber duck, I was storing in one of my pockets from underneath the dock works exactly as planned.

The member of security abruptly stops.

Leans slightly forward over the edge and reaches for the toy on a perplexed grunt, “What the f-”

One harsh pull is all it takes to drag him under.

Knowing that the splashing sound is what’s going to startle his partner, which mine will then use the distraction to disarm him, I hastily yank the assailant against my chest and wind my arm around his neck. Squeezing tightly cuts off his ability to scream along with the one to breathe, yet it doesn’t prevent him from trying to sink his teeth into my arm once he realizes his firearm is headed for the bottom of the ocean. Desperate, backwards headbutts occur next; however, they’re short-lived courtesy of the knife I drive into his right kidney. It doesn’t take long for his frame to lifelessly slump, nor does it take long to relocate him further underneath the wooden structure he was just protecting to prevent the possibility of alerting one of the guards closer to the mansion.

Crossing the short distance from where I am to where I need to be takes an unexpected hit when I’m forced to sink back beneath the surface to avoid being spotted by one of the yacht’s interior protection details who has suddenly stepped outside. Yet again, I watch and wade and wait for the perfect opportunity to have the advantage. The security guard lingers a moment longer than I would’ve bet – you know if I were a betting type of man – before he turns on his heels to resume his post inside. Having his back to the water, unfortunately for him, becomes a deadly decision. Sliding my arms across the floor of the ship silently occurs, and the second his ankles are within snatching range, they are. The first harsh jerk drops him completely to the ground, forcing his knees and chest and chin to all take the brunt of the fall. The next pummels his ribcage like a xylophone as it thumps and bumps into every unsmooth portion of the weathered deck during our descent deeper into the cold blue. His flailing motions to fight or swim forward are pointless and easily ended by a knife strike to the kidney that

precedes a swift, swipe upward to sever anything else it possibly can. Convulsions and choking begin in a surge of crimson that is now a countdown clock I have to race against.

Not because of sharks – which are not nearly as into humans as some of those shitty TV movies make people believe.

And not because of piranhas – which I personally find more fucking terrifying than *Jaws*.

But because splashes of red disrupting shades this gorgeous will inevitably catch *someone's* attention very quickly.

Whether that's a tanning topless neighbor or someone in the security tower who is actually watching the monitors versus jerking it to IG photos on their phone is a legit coin toss in a beachside paradise that houses models and mobsters alike.

After guiding the twitching male to his watery grave beside my other victim, I speedily swim back to the yacht, hoist myself up onto it, holster my knife, and collect the firearm that was dropped during the attack. I instantly check its status at the same time I begin moving, needing to verify that the Beretta 92 – a pistol I personally enjoy firing – is loaded and how many rounds there are to fire. Sweeping the first stretch I cover is fairly straightforward. There's only one room to check, which houses nothing more than basic survival supplies. Life vests. Lifesavers. Flares. Ration kits. Ropes. Relief from the lack of a more hostile discovery doesn't even bother entertaining the idea of settling into my system. Having spent the *majority* of my thirty-nine years of life in fight mode – and *never* in flight – ease is a language so foreign to me that even with help from Google Translate I'd still fumble to fully understand it.

And that's coming from a man who has an impressive amount of in the field linguistics capabilities.

I *rarely* ever let my guard down.

I even fuck within reach of a weapon at all times.

Whether it's a public place or hers.

Post mentally noting markers of my surroundings along with the exits – gotta always have an exit strategy – what can be used to defend me or us in an attack is always next.

Most people have this false sense of security wherever they go.

This thought process that no matter where they are in the world, they're going to get back home without a hitch.

Lucky them.

Some of us had a different type of reality check before they even started kindergarten.

Hell, some of us didn't even get to go *to* kindergarten.

Clearing the corner allows me to creep down the stairs in a prompt execution that provides me with the advantage on the attack. I don't hesitate to unload one bullet into the first approaching assailant's forehead nor is there reluctance to lean slightly to the side and unload two into the next. Blood splatters across the nearby white walls and then the fallen bodies when two more rounds are fired, clipping the taller oncoming aggressor's arm rather than his dropping him like the previous men. A kill shot is temporarily delayed to pump three into the leg of the male covering his six; however, the instant that man is crumpling in agony, I'm unloading one up through the chin of the first. He falls with a heavy thud, giving me a clear line of fire to the other. An execution shot is taken in passing and heading for the room they were pouring from hastily occurs afterwards. Inside, there's only one member of security left to guard the target and eliminating him is infinitely easier than those I met in the hallway. Squeezing the trigger just once shifts him from comfortably sitting in the white corner chair to slumped over on top of the magazine he was lazily thumbing through.

The small, boy child in the middle of the bed immediately pulls his legs to his chest, curls his arms around him, and buries his face from sight.

While I hate how much this probably scared him – both the shooting of his bodyguard and the *Creature From the Black Lagoon* gear I'm sporting – I'm simply grateful he's still alive.

And *hopefully* unharmed.

Removing my facial equipment is done prior to cautiously announcing, "I'm not here to hurt you, pal. I promise." I opt out of moving closer to further reiterate that and keep my bright blue eyes planted on his shaking frame. "Is your name Gentry by chance?"

At that his tiny head full of chestnut brown hair moves to meet my gaze on a small nod.

"Nice to meet you, Gentry." My southern accent seems to lower his tense shoulders. "I'm Wahl."

No reaction.

"Do you know your last name?"

"Timbers."

"Are you three-years-old?"

"Four!" he feistily corrects like I hoped.

"Good. Can you show me that many fingers?"

He does, which allows me to spot inspect that he still *has* all his digits, meaning the tiny fingers mailed to our client belonged to another child.

A child, I unfortunately wasn't hired to find or save.

Shoving down the sadness the thought conjures is swiftly done to verify I have the right target. "Great job, Gentry. I'm much, *much* older than that. I don't quite have enough fingers *or toes* to show you though." His tiny snicker inspires a brief smile. "Do you know your daddy's name?"

He hesitates to nod.

"Is it Gilbert Timbers?"

The next happens with no vacillation.

There's more excitement.

Enthusiasm.

It's full of life and light and all the indicators that I'm not too late.

That he probably hasn't been touched in the way they were swearing he has.

That the disgusting insinuations, like the mailed fingers, were just a bluff.

"That's great, big guy, because Gilbert is a good friend of mine, and I'm here to take his youngest son, Gentry, home."

Huge lie.

I mean, I am abso-fucking-lutely here to take his kid home, but we're not friends.

I'd *never* be friends with a piece of shit like that.

It's bad enough that I get paid to work for douches like him.

And just to be clear I *take* cases for assholes like him for two reasons, the first being to save an innocent child and the second being that they pay well enough that when those with less money empty their life savings to hire us to recover their kid, I still have more than enough funds to buy the expensive tequila I like versus the cheap shit.

I merely chose the word friend because it's the most appropriate and comforting and will dissipate any lingering fear the kiddo might have regarding the rescue situation. I need him to be compliant and calm, not stubborn and skittish.

"Ready to get out of this place?" I warmly ask, open palm extended his direction. "Maybe go take a nap in your own bed?"

"Yeah!" Gentry shouts as he leaps off the queen size boat bed. "I wanna go home!"

"Then let's get you there." Unfortunately, the instant his small hand lands in mine, there's a noticeable jerk motion from the vehicle we're still on, one that prompts me to halt our

movements and grunt into my com, “Little Boy Blu, tell me you’re not doin’ what the fuck I think you’re doin’.”

“You told me to get us a boat,” he cockily replies.

My head drops backward in defeat and disbelief alike. “Yeah, I didn’t think I needed to specify *not the one we’re already on!*”

“Well, you did,” Blu snips back in a snarky nature, “and rather than focus on my amazing comprehension skills-”

“*Lack of amazin’.*”

“-you should get your ass up here and cover mine. We’ve got three bogies-” he abruptly stops, hums, and sighs, “make that four. No. Wait. Six?” It’s his turn to grumble in irritation. “What are you, fucking carpet beetles?! Who multiplies this fucking fast?!”

“You finally made up with Aviva, didn’t you?”

“Don’t judge me for banging a woman who’s into insects, Wahl!”

“I judge you for usin’ weird fuckin’ metaphors that I know that apiculturist of yours is responsible for teachin’ you.”

Seriously.

Knowing my boy now gets a little wood when he sees ladybugs because the woman, he’s thinking about marrying gets turned on watching them fuck, is the type of shit I could’ve gone to my grave being clueless about.

“Could you fucking judge me from up here?” he grouses through what I envision are gritted teeth. “Maybe prevent us from losing an engine?”

“*Roger.*” My attention drops down to where our target is peering up at me in curiosity. “So, Gentry, I need you to do me a brave, big boy favor. Think you can?”

He eagerly bobs his head.

“I need you to go hide under that desk over there until I come back down to get you.”

“But it’s smelly in here!”

Yeah.

Doesn’t take long for dead bodies to do that.

Fun fact I *never* hesitate to point out during movie night at my place.

“I know it is, pal, that’s part of what makes it a *brave*, big boy favor instead of just a big boy favor.”

He nods again – this time like the assignment he’s been given is a top-secret mission – and rushes away to the most secure area in the room.

Chances are rounds won’t pierce this space, but I’d rather be safe than sorry. Yeah, the directive may just be a simple return the kid home; however, that doesn’t mean I wanna deliver him with more holes than he left with or spend my time during transport patching the poor, innocent child up.

Just because I have some of the best on site medic training possible doesn’t mean I wanna fucking use it.

Definitely not on a kid.

As Gentry secures himself under the furniture – including pulling the nearby chair in front of him like it’s a door – I free my 6’2 frame of my fins.

My mask.

My tank.

Grabbing a new, fully loaded Beretta from one of the dropped guards is executed prior to my cautious climb up the stairs to the main deck. One shot flies directly past my face forcing me to brace my back against the nearest wall. Ping sounds rapidly bounce around the territory announcing the magnitude of the assault while simultaneously stopping my ability to get an accurate surveying of the scene. Crouching offers me a bit of cover to get moving yet the uncertainty of which way I should be moving let alone returning fire remains a mystery.

“Whatcha see, Blu?”

“Three boats. Two flank. One rear.”

I fight the instinct to cringe.

Yeah, this pistol isn't exactly going to keep up with semiautomatic rifles.

“Got range?”

There's a short delay attached to an unexpected jerk of the watercraft. “Yeah. Cap was cat napping with an AR-15.”

“Toss it.”

“Roger.”

From my low squatted position, I swiftly scramble towards the front of the ship where Blu's steering, barely avoiding being clipped in the arm and – thanks to my bare feet slipping on freshly splashed water – the leg as well. Despite not proclaiming my arrival or even nonverbally signaling it, my partner senses my presence, momentarily abandons his enclosed post, and tosses the firearm down just in time for me to unload a shot that saves his ass. The aggressor stumbles a bit into the man driving their vehicle creating a perfect situation to eliminate them back-to-back. Seconds after they've hit the deck, I fire a couple bullets into their engine to minimize the possible damage from a boat collision.

Blu takes a sharp veer to assist in reducing the impact and in doing so provides me with a great angle to remove the problems that are a little too close on our ass. Two kill shots to the driver are followed by one to the passenger and another to their engine to ensure it becomes dead in the water too.

Progressing to the other side of the ship is suddenly stopped by the vehicle that was previously flanking us deciding to shift tactics instead. They begin a zig zag pattern that's tied to aimless firing, a technique I understand yet personally don't use because I loathe wasting ammo. Instead of playing the game of tag, you fire, I smoothly barricade myself behind the outdoor bar and patiently wait for a pause that will have to come.

See, that's the other issue with that method.

You're gonna have to stop and reload much sooner than I am, and when you do *that* will be my window to terminate you as a threat. The concept that the best way to destroy an enemy is to do everything first so they don't get the drop on you is outdated and idiotic and one that tends to cause more casualties than victories.

Broken glass continuously rains down in front of me, creating a shimmery waterfall that collects into a pool of sharp remnants I know are going to be a bitch to step through barefoot. Shots discharged too wide on each end of the area indicate that they're unsure of exactly where I slipped off to and the rev of an engine approaching informs me that the combatant not driving is most likely going to try to board the ship for a more direct attack.

The sudden pause in gunfire is my irrefutable cue to carefully lean around the edge of the bar, ignore the small discomfort from the sharp pieces piercing my suit, and aim at the intruder about to transfer himself from his boat to ours. Waiting until he's midmotion between watercrafts to squeeze the trigger not only disposes of him in the deep blue but his weapon too, leaving the wheelman hastily scrambling to drive *and* find something to defend himself with. His indecisiveness ultimately makes him and the boat easy targets, targets that only require one shot each to takeout.

My attention remains laser focused on the area I just secured during my announcement into my earpiece. "*Clear.*"

There's a pause barely worth noting before my partner echoes the statement, "*Clear.*"

The word allows me to lower the firearm, yet my gaze sweeps the seemingly vacant area once more. "Open blue?"

"*Roger.*"

"How open we talkin'?" Light chuckles are sprinkled between questions. "You on two shots of Wilcox, which is just enough for you to fess up about the weird shit your woman is into-"

“It’s not that weird to wear a bumble bee costume as lingerie.”

“Or you on night two of the Beers & Babes Beach Bash bawlin’ in the shower about the beagle puppy you never got for your sixth birthday?”

“See, that’s why I don’t like listening to country music. Makes a man get in touch with his inner Oprah side and no one fucking needs that.”

More chortles are attached to my counter, “Pretty sure you *definitely* need that.”

“Yeah, ‘cause I’m the only one on this fucking boat with some scripted for Bravo bullshit.”

I helplessly laugh even louder.

He’s not wrong.

I have definitely been through some made-for or adapted-for television type of shit. Like have already contacted me and my ma and my dad as well as stepmom for rights to my story level of fucked up trauma to triumph. Truth is, I don’t use what I’ve been through for profit the way most could or would or do. I let it lead me to a life of *helping*. It just so happens that nowadays *helping* is accompanied by a much higher price tag than it used to be when Uncle Sam was signing the check.

There’s still levity in my tone when I repeat the question, “How open, Blu?”

“Enough.”

Approval of the answer is met by a nod and a crafty contorting of my frame in hopes of minimizing the amount of glass I make contact with. Returning below deck to where our target is stationed is accomplished next. I get him secured in the bathroom – away from the corpses – rest my weapon within reach beside the door and distract him with the Play-Doh I keep on hand for every mission.

That shit is as much a necessity as ammo.

Ammo can keep us alive.

Play-Doh can keep them calm.

And a *calm kid* is a much more compliant one.

While it takes a little longer than we originally estimated for us to arrive at the HE marina, we're still within the approximate window we presented to the client and more importantly, our own allotted time constraints.

Each assignment we accept has quite the impressive dollar amount attached to it but having to radio in additional support on the fly cuts deep into those funds.

Blu and I have a spoken agreement about that being a Hail Mary, on our death beds, type of thing.

Wouldn't call us greedy but who the fuck likes to do all the legwork, risk their limbs or life, and then have to *split* the reward with someone who literally swooped in on a helo at the last minute because you can't uber a plane yet? You know factoring them into the assignment is one thing. Getting *fucked over* by unexpectedly needing them is a whole other.

Guiding Gentry up to the dock itself is easy. Trust has been built – which is why he doesn't flinch when I exchange the rifle for a pistol from the nearest dead body – a bond strengthened – thanks to making misshapen dinosaurs and talking about superheroes – and reliability reinforced each time we weave around one of the dropped enemies. Blu stays far enough ahead during our exit of the watercraft that his presence doesn't disturb the child's collected demeanor yet not so far that it screams danger, stop proceeding.

The instant his parents are in sight he prepares to take off running, an action that I stop by clamping my hand down a little tighter on his shoulder. “Just one minute, big guy. Dad has to sign some papers first.”

Gilbert and Debbie prepare to lunge for us when Blu steps in their way preventing their progress.

“Move!” Debbie immediately squeaks at the same time she tries to rush past him. “That's my son! That's my son!”

“I am well aware that is your son, Mrs. Timbers,” my partner professionally comments as our movements halt a

respectable distance behind him.

“Give him to me then!”

“I-”

“Now!” She squawks, more forcefully.

“Please, calm down, Mrs. Timbers,” Brittanie Martindale, one of our female field administrators, insists in an even tone. “Your hostile tone is unnecessary and unhelpful.”

Blonde bombshell in bed but mega bitch at the office.

I personally think it’s to overcompensate for how easy it is to get her on her back in bed – or in my case the backseat of my truck – while Blu is convinced it’s because she’s been stabbed too many times in the back – metaphorically and once physically.

Debbie screeches yet again, “Excuse-”

“No,” Brittanie interrupts with a pointed finger, “I am not interested in another emotional outburst that can be avoided by Mr. Timbers just signing here,” she taps the space on her tablet, “to complete the contract.”

“Sign!” His wife screams like a banshee.

“Your mom always like this kiddo?” I casually ask, voice directed at him, but gaze focused dead ahead.

“Loud?” Gentry innocently inquires as he looks up at me. “Or yelling at Dad?”

Not smiling is probably harder than it should be.
“Both.”

“Uh-huh,” he immediately informs. “She’s always both.”

“Are you finished?!” Debbie questions, hands fanning her overly faked tan complexion. “Tell me we’re finished! I wanna hold my son! I *neeeeeed* to hold my son!”

Brittanie releases a heartless hum. “I’m sure he wants that too after being held for ransom for six days.” Debbie doesn’t get in another word before Brittanie makes eye contact

again. “The transfer is now complete.” She politely gestures for Blu to move. “Thank you for doing business with Haworth Enterprises. It’s been a pleasure reuniting you with your loved one.”

Debbie’s high-pitched shriek of outrage falls on deaf ears along with Brittanie’s backside considering our field administrator and her security detail are already headed back to their vehicle. My partner steps out of the way and shoots me a simple nod to relinquish my hold.

“You’re good to go,” I state on a gentle pat to his shoulder. “Enjoy sleepin’ in your own bed, big guy.”

Lord knows that was the thing I missed most right after my parents.

Hell, I still occasionally get nightmares about that period of my life when I have to sleep on the floor.

I don’t wish that shit on anyone.

His genuine gratitude is expressed in his rapid goodbye waving along with his tone. “Thanks, Wahl!”

The grin he’s tossed is warm yet professional. “Anytime, kid.”

He takes off running, and rather than move a muscle or even indicate that I’m going to, I watch.

I wait.

I stay frozen in place until his arms are around them and theirs are around him because *this* is the reason, I do the shit I do.

Yeah, it’s nice having enough cash to keep my ma comfortable now that she’s stopped working, pay my own way on vacations with my dad’s side, maintain my top of the line truck, and sustain my luxury penthouse situation but all that *pales* in comparison to this feeling that’s swimming around my veins right now.

The one that money *can’t* buy.

The high that only comes from making an innocent child's life *better* the same way someone once did for you.

And what I like *most* about doing this shit for the private sector versus the alternative?

I don't have to quit because some overhead asshole has decided it's been too long or this case is more important or that case might get us better results or a new one has more resources being funneled to it so it matters more.

No.

I don't *ever* have to quit.

I get to *finish*.

I get to *finish* every mission I start, just like the men my father eventually hired to find and rescue me.

Ironically enough, I now work for that *same company*.

What goes around, comes around some might say.

They rescued me.

And now I rescue clients for them.

Post their initial reuniting moment, I meet up with Blu and journey over to the nearest parking lot where our transport vehicle is waiting for us. He grabs the key cleverly tucked in one of the rims and immediately pops the trunk. His first instinct is to ditch his gear. Get into more comfortable, less restricting wear, especially shoes.

But mine?

Mine is to call *her*.

To hear *her* voice.

Let her hear *mine*.

Exchange a few words after having to go so long without a single one.

I mean I *love* what I do, but I *hate* that it keeps us apart.

Retrieving my cell from my black bag in the back receives the expected eyeroll, which is easy to ignore, especially considering how long we've been working together. I hit number two on my speed-dial – although we both know she'd be number one if it weren't for voicemail – and anxiously listen to the ringing.

The first is typical.

The next uncomfortable.

The third has me shuffling my feet in concern that's instantaneously soothed by her sweet, sing songy voice, "*Slater...*"

Arlette "Arley" Carmichael is the only woman outside of my ma I've ever let call me Slater.

Only woman I probably ever will.

"Ah, there's my Angel Cake," I coo in return causing Blu to impishly shake his head. "Was gettin' worried you'd forgotten about me."

"How could I ever forget about you?" she sassily giggles, sound effortlessly infiltrating my senses.

Cleansing them.

Buffing out the bumps and bruises and broken bits that only she can even fucking reach.

Benefit and burden of being in love with your best friend, I guess.

Relief winds itself around my ribs at the same time I playfully say, "Guess what?"

"Mission complete?"

"Yup."

"And it was successful?"

"Affirmative."

"And it's time to put a cake in the oven because you're finally headed back to me?"

Smiling wide can't be stopped.

God, I love that me being away is equally as painful for her as it is for me.

We say shit like “finally” in spite of the fact it’s only been two days.

Two days, which for the record, always feels like years.

And three days always feels like decades.

And anything more?

Fuck...that shit feels like *eons*.

Light chuckles are attached to my response, “You know me so well.”

“I know you better than anyone else.”

True.

She knows everything about me except what my dick looks like.

And...I guess...that I fell in love with her six years ago despite knowing we would never work out.

Could never workout.

She’s beautiful and bright and brilliant and breathtaking and so beyond anything in my league I honestly question how the fuck I even got lucky enough to be her *friend* let alone her *best friend*.

“Midnight snack?” Arley curiously questions, faint typing beginning in the background, an action that calls to my brain to envision her toffee brown fingers caressing the keys the way I wish they would occasionally caress me. “Couple shots of tequila and an episode of *Crime Scene Kitchen*?”

The sigh that leaves me is coated in defeat, “Nah. Gonna have to be a wake and bake. Got a long drive back to Dalvegan, and we both know Blu doesn’t believe in breakin’ traffic laws.”

“A drive by, motherfucker?” my other best friend grunts in amusement. “*Really?*”

“Wake and bake it is.”

Hearing similar sadness in her tone somehow enhances mine. “You know I’d be clinkin’ forks with you earlier if I could.”

“You mean fighting over forks.”

“I mean you could let me land Airfork One every now and again. I’ve more than earned it.”

“Hey, I let you rock out with my heavy metal finger fork just last week!”

“And it cost me the last piece of that Heaven on Earth Cake, remember?”

“I don’t remember.”

“*Convenient.*”

“You know what’s not convenient?” More giggles grace my ears, melting my frame for a second time. “Not knowing what topping my Cowboy in shining armor wants on his baked treat.”

Her.

But she doesn’t have to be on top.

She can be on bottom.

I don’t mind putting the extra work in.

Feeling my cock stir uncomfortably in its wet suit confines is what causes me to fumble out, “What um... whatever you want. *Surprise me.*”

“I love to do that.”

The tiniest bite of my bottom lip is stolen. “I know you do, Angel Cake.”

“And this time I’ll be *baking* an Angel Cake.” Arley snickers, warmly sighs, and then asks, “Text me soon?”

Of course, I’m gonna text her.

I *always* text her.

When I’m hanging out with Blu.

Guys from work.

Ma.

Before dates.

After them.

Even once in the middle of sex, but only because it was an emergency, and the chick was blindfolded.

Okay.

It was *sort of* an emergency.

She wanted to borrow my truck to help T – one of her brothers – move his old desk to their cousin’s place.

Alright, so maybe it wasn’t a *real* emergency but her mixed up letters and overuse of exclamation marks made it feel like that.

“Text you?” It’s my turn to playfully tease back. “Isn’t that that thing you were supposed to do *to me* this mornin’? Where are last night’s game scores? You know it killed me havin’ to miss the first official game of the season.”

“Uh...you might wanna check that phone again, Cowboy, because I *definitely* sent them, along with a victory selfie, and a series of GIFs regarding my excitement over our boys *crushing it*.”

“Yeah?!”

“*Fuck. Yeah.* Three to one.”

Her excitement causes me to grin wider.

Laugh louder.

Become even more anxious to see her face in the next twenty-four hours.

“Think Blu will mind if you watch tonight’s game while he drives?”

“Doubt it.”

“Puck drops in thirty, which means-”

“I have thirty to catch up for our streamin’ date.”

“Exactly.”

“Then let me get off the phone and get to it then, Angel Cake.”

She offers me one last snigger prior to playfully scolding. “Is that any way to say goodbye?”

“You know I don’t say goodbye to you.”

Nope.

Never.

Nothing that permanent will ever leave my lips when it comes to her.

“Stay sweet, Angel Cake.”

“Stay safe, Cowboy.”

The instant I end the call, I shift my attention upward where it’s met by a mischievous smirk and more headshaking.

Yeah.

I’m very much so in love with my best friend, and she may be the only person on the whole goddamn planet who doesn’t seem to know that.

So, what am I supposed to do?

Just fucking tell her?

Uh...no.

Fuck. No.

I may not be afraid to risk it all to save an innocent person but losing what *we have* scares me more than anything else in the entire world. And if protecting it means having to spend the rest of my life – outside of us – buried in expensive booze, random one-nightstands, and death-defying assignments, then so be it.

Chapter 2

Arley

There are *typically* only two reasons people demand to see me at the office.

They either want something I won't give them or don't want what I've already given them.

No matter which way you spin it, *I'm* the bad guy in the scenario.

The villain.

The scapegoat for every shit mood, shit paycheck, and shitty career stumble.

Do I like it?

Um...no.

My job is soul crushing enough without adding to it the weight that comes with my position. I know they say, "heavy is the head that wears the crown", but that shit feels like the understatement of my *entire* career at Haworth Enterprises, the privately owned company which covers a multitude of avenues including but not limited to military, security, and biotechnology. From the moment I was hired for a lower-level analysis role, I continuously had responsibilities outside my paygrade thrown at me like confetti until one day – courtesy of my older brother Morris, the malpractice attorney – I had the guts to demand more.

More pay.

More vacation.

More titles.

All of which were given and haven't stopped being given since.

I mean I could ask for a platinum collared pony at this point as well as a golden walled stable to keep it in and their

response would simply be “male or female”?

Is that awesome?

To an extent, yeah.

But honestly, I’d take having a few decision-making jewels removed from the metaphorical crown over financial incentives any day.

Oh, and as for people demanding to see me *outside* of the office?

Only my family fits that bill.

Only my family has *ever* fit that bill.

Well...and *Slater*.

Though, I consider him family. And my family considers him family. And the imaginary family I envision us having together considers him family since in those delusions he *is* their dad or grandad.

And of course, those are *delusions*...

Very...*vivid*...delusions.

Very vivid, heart stopping delusions because Slater Wahl will never be more than my best friend.

My 6’2, built solid like his last name, angel food cake devouring, southern accented, could have any woman – *or man* – in the world without even trying, so why bother considering me for that position best friend.

I love the guy.

I’m kinda, sorta, a tiny bit in love with him too.

Ugh.

Fine.

That’s a lie.

I’m doodle his name in frosting, dedicate every lovesick Paramore song to him, daydreaming about us dancing at our wedding *in love* with him.

Not that it matters.

Like I said, he could have anyone in the whole world – probably the solar system if we happen to discover non hostile extraterrestrials – meaning there’s no need to go spelunking around the other side of the friends’ zone for a wife.

Or girlfriend.

Or good time to be more accurate in his case.

Pretty sure the man is more allergic to commitment than I am to pollen.

Even the concept of dating – actual dating not our friendship dates – seems to cause his throat to swell.

Could be because of his PJ past.

I know he didn’t want to form attachments while he was in the military due to never knowing if he was going to come home or in how many pieces or how damaged he would be if or when he did. I know he never wanted to put anyone “extra” through that. Part of him hated having to put his parents through it after they had missed so much of his life already, but he did it anyway.

That’s just...kind of...the man he is.

He makes up his mind.

And that’s that.

It makes him *perfect* for what he chooses to do for a living but a pain in the fucking ass to pick a movie with.

Don’t get me wrong, I love *A Few Good Men* and *Top Gun* and *Ladder 49* as much as the next person, but can we get a *John Wick* or *The Three Musketeers* rewatch once in a while?

Melissa Lindsay, my main assistant and biggest office rumors supplier, gestures in the disgruntled employee that was pounding on my door with one hand and cradles my caramel cappuccino closer to her red dress covered chest with the other.

“What the fuck, Carmichael?” Tyson Reynolds viciously bites during his angry stomp over to me, red words

flying through the air. “Why the fuck didn’t you give me the Frost assignment?!”

Why didn’t I send him to personally guard a set of aging billionaires during their private island shopping trip?

Perhaps because all it would’ve taken for him to get distracted would’ve been a pair of bronzed tits spilling out of a tiny bikini?

I don’t need that type of strike on my track record and truthfully?

Neither does he.

Reynolds chooses not to let me answer and slams his open palms on my sleek shaped desk. “Why the fuck would you give that shit to Underwood?! He’s only been here six fucking weeks!”

Right.

But he’s also retired secret service.

Pretty sure that trumps whatever it is Reynolds *thinks* he’s accomplished in his lifetime.

“*Why the fuck,*” more splashes of red words shoot past his lips, “*don’t you ever give me any good assignments?!?*”

I push up my bright, turquoise-colored glasses and do my best to ignore what I know for a fact *isn’t* there.

I *logically know* that bright red letters aren’t *actually* foaming from his mouth.

Aggressively swarming around his rectangle head and through the dark hairs of his beard.

I *logically* know they’re not violently crashing into my desk.

I *logically* know that the human body doesn’t spew words or colors; however, due to my condition, my brain is always on a mission to prove otherwise.

Or at the very least get me to *acknowledge* otherwise.

Which I do.

Just not around *most* people.

Redirecting my focus to his narrowed gray stare is preceded by me politely thanking Melissa for the hot morning beverage and dismissing her. “*Mr. Reynolds-*”

“Why the fuck have I been passed over for the last three top tier PS assignments?!” His balled fist pounds the open space near my toffee brown hand prompting me to mimic the action on my nearby stapler. Being taken off guard by my response stumbles him backwards and changes the shade of his words from red to pink. “Did you just try to fucking staple me?!”

“No,” I calmly retort, adjusting the hot pink tool to its rightful position, “I stapled *next* to you.” Once the object is properly angled, I meet his gaze again. “A...*warning*...staple if you will.”

The cursed grunt that he presents matches his earlier expelled shade.

Most people hear words and tones, but because I have synesthesia – a condition where my senses are crossed – I see words and hear colors.

And depending on their shades, as well as their movements, indicates how to respond.

Like now.

Most people would’ve heard Reynold’s tone and felt threatened, assumed he was in a fit of ire and ready to attack yet I *saw* its color, which wasn’t fire engine red so much as something you could pull out of an elementary school box of crayons indicating *irritation* rather than rage. And yes, his words rapidly poured from his mouth, presenting a sense of danger, but the way they stacked so haphazardly versus precise, it’s clear he’s flustered.

Frustrated.

A toddler on the brink of a tantrum that no one – self especially – is in the mood to listen to.

I didn’t get enough sleep last night for this shit.

Woes of your favorite hockey team going into OT and then having to text your dad *and* your best friend – who are also fans – about the whole thing, I guess.

“Mr. Reynolds,” pulling my unicorn coffee cup closer allows me a moment to steady my own voice, “I understand your current dissatisfaction-”

“You’re damn right I’m not fucking satisfied!”

“However, do you honestly believe it is in *your* best interest to barge in here, bark complaints at me like a pissed off pug on his way to the vet, and bang my shit around like someone going a little too hard at a Fall Out Boy concert? And that’s coming from a woman who *would* go a little too hard at a Fall Out Boy concert.”

Disbelief over the comparisons tumbles his jaw downward.

“You are offered assignments that have been evaluated as good fits for *you* but *more importantly*, good fits for *the clients* who are *paying* for our services.” Leaning back in my leather seat occurs between sentences. “This is not a popularity contest, Mr. Reynolds – although if it were, you would be *significantly* losing.”

“Excu-”

“This is also not about who can out peacock who – though again, if it were you’d be *epically* losing.”

“I-”

“And contrary to what circles around the cappuccino machine, this shit isn’t even about seniority, something you had in Highland but *do not have* here in Dalvegan.”

His mouth clamps closed.

“The simple truth is there’s *no* emotional factor that plays into matching client *needs* to capable agents. Everything is purely analytical. Every offer is based solely on risk analysis, completion statistics, and behavioral patterns, which are done through the highly advanced algorithm I assist in setting – and continuously *resetting* – the parameters for prior

to being verified one last time by me as to minimize the number of mismatches and wasted resources *during* an assignment.” Indulging in a small sip of my sweet beverage easily lifts my mood. “Now, you are more than welcome to change branches again, Mr. Reynolds – off the top of my head I know Vegas has a few openings – however, let me *remind you* that it does not matter *which* branch you transfer to, we all use the same basic program to aid in case assignments. If you don’t like what you’re being assigned, perhaps it’s time to either hone different skillsets or perform better in the field considering your last two ops had subpar results.”

“What the fuck did you just say to me, keyboard princess?”

This time the shade of his words are not only startlingly bright but precisely stacked on top of another.

Luckily for me, the person I adore most in the world that just so happens to also house the most irresistible hues of blue when he speaks, winds his hand forcefully around the back of the employee’s neck and hums, “I know you’re not givin’ my favorite woman in the world hell, are you, Reynolds?”

Watching the crystal letters calmly circle around his solid frame causes me to thoughtlessly smirk.

Appreciate the fact I can always rely on their shades to soothe me.

Protect me.

“Wouldn’t uh...” he clears his throat, red swiftly replaced by bright pink, “wouldn’t fucking dream of it, Wahl.”

“Good because that *dream*,” my best friend’s fingers dig noticeably deeper into the man’s peachy flesh, “would quickly become a nightmare.” Slater leans his bronze face a little closer to Reynold’s ear and lowers his volume. “The type of nightmare that you wouldn’t wake up for *weeks* from.”

Sounds menacing.

And given the jaggedness of his letters along with the deeper blue, it looks it too.

His hold increases once more at the same time he warmly beams, “Copy that?”

Reynolds swings his gray gaze around to meet Slater’s blue. “*Copy that.*”

“Good!” The condescending shoulder pat is used to be the exit he undoubtedly needed to take. As soon as the door shuts with the latest pain in my ass on the other side, my best friend’s attention rolls back to me. “Now, *you...*” he points prior to rotating his finger to curl inward, “come here to me, Angel Cake.”

Even if I wanted to resist the one and only Slater Wahl, I couldn’t.

Between the no need for underwear smile and blue eyes that seem to sparkle like stars in the night sky, it’s impossible.

I mean physically, mentally, and emotionally *impossible*.

The man is basically walking serotonin with a six pack and southern drawl.

We should all simply be thankful that I’ve managed to remember more than just my own name for the duration of our friendship.

Our very long, very *magical* friendship.

I’ve never been this close to another person in my entire life.

Not even the ones that share DNA with me.

Hopping my neon red, fashionably oversized business suit cloaked frame out of my seat and into his hold is swiftly done. While both of my arms curl adoringly around his charcoal polo covered torso, he braces one hand on the small of my back and the other on the nape of my neck. The initial squeeze he executes is always the same. It’s protectively tight, almost as if by holding me in the palms of his hands every fear, every worry, every ounce of uneasiness is obliterated. As if having just the ability to touch me, pacifies a piece of him

nothing else can. Nuzzling my nose against his chest prompts a secondary squeeze that's attached to a sigh of relief so heavy it shakes the ground beneath our feet. Low grumbles of gratitude vibrate both our figures pushing me to press myself tighter into him. Squeeze my eyes shut and steal an extra inhale of his sweet, woody scent.

Mmm.

Love his smell even more than that of fresh baked treats coming out of the oven.

Slater cranes his neck forward to softly purr beside my ear, "You have any idea how much I missed you, Angel Cake?"

Bright specks of blue dance around my darkened vision, lighting the place up like its first thing Christmas morning. "Less than I missed you."

Amused grunts precede him pulling back.

Meeting my gaze.

Offering me a quirked eyebrow that's attached to a crooked grin. "Is that right?"

"Well, I don't think it's *wrong*."

My teasing tone has him taking a small bite out of his bottom lip, something I secretly – very secretly – wish I could do. "And here I thought you were the brains of this operation."

"I'm *clearly* the brawns." Giggles are accompanied by wiggles used to free me from his grasp. "Don't forget it's *me* who can bench press a pound of strawberries with the best of them." Laughter escapes him as his eyes follow me over to where I'm flopping back down into my chair. "You got something for me?"

"Depends." His tongue slowly swipes his thin lips. "You got somethin' for me?"

Anything.

Everything.

“Depends,” I sweetly retort in return and reach for my nearby coffee mug.

“On?”

“You know the drill, Cowboy.”

He lightly chuckles on a gradual creep closer. “That I do, Angel Cake.”

“So...” a small sip is had, “status report. Holes?”

“No new ones.”

“Bones?”

“Intact.”

“Cuts?”

“Patched.”

“Bruises?”

“They’ll heal.”

Turns out offering him a tasty treat in exchange for a safer return was a wise incentive. Sure, coming home alive should be enough but dangling the promise of sweet deliciousness for the *less* injuries he has works well for both of us because the thing I love most about Slater is the thing I hate most too.

Devotion.

His *devotion* to getting the job done by any means, any cost – whether financial or physical – is admirable.

And incredible.

And horrifying.

The first time he went back on assignment after fracturing his hand I barely slept the entire time he was gone. He knew it, I knew it, and when he returned home, I withheld dessert until it was revealed that no new life-altering injuries had occurred.

I’ll never forget the look of amusement and appallment at having to physically *prove* everything was still where it

should be while standing on my sunset orange shag rug in the middle of my living room.

Well...*almost* everything.

His cock trying to touch the ceiling technically wasn't where it "should be".

However, I didn't mind where it was.

Okay.

I totally minded where it was but only because of where I *wanted* it to be instead.

Somewhere it will never be.

Outside of my nearly burn the cake that's in the oven fantasies, of course.

He's shot a sweet smirk that's followed by me casually motioning my head to the shelf on the back wall where the dessert is on display. "Chocolate ganache."

Slater's entire solid frame seems to melt into a puddle on the spot. "You know I can't resist chocolate."

I know I wish I was the chocolate he couldn't resist.

Ugh.

What is wrong with me?

Why have I been thinking about us being an "us" more lately?

Is it because the last boyfriend I had sent me a similar text last weekend?

Confessing some of the things he wishes he had said but didn't.

Done but hadn't.

Has it prompted me to subconsciously start reflecting on the "what will never be" scenarios with my best friend?

How very fucking rude and intrusive if that's the case.

And *sooooo* the last thing I need right now in my life.

Not with Hilda, Terence's fiancée – my youngest older brother – asking *me* – of all people with a pulse – to plan their engagement shower.

Didn't even realize we were that close until she said I was basically the sister she never had, which I also find odd considering we don't *ever* hangout sans my brother.

I don't typically people without their assistance except for when it comes to Slater.

And let's just say life was a lot lonelier before we started having hockey nights at my place.

Drunken air guitar or karaoke battles at his.

Taste tests from new restaurants that deliver and action movie marathons at whichever place is up to host the big event.

That's always done on rotation.

All of a sudden, Slater dives into his dark denim pocket and retrieves my surprise. “Found *this* little gem at a fun little local shop called Shoreside Treasure Chest not too far from where we grabbed dinner.” His presenting of the wood and resin pinky ring is attached to an ear-to-ear grin. “Owner said it had literally *jus*’ made its way to the shelf that mornin’.” With a simple nod, he summons my left hand to find its way into his. “Said it must’ve been meant to be.” He slides the sand and seashell filled accessory into place, stare lingering in mind. “I couldn’t agree more.” Slater delivers an additional stroke to the area before releasing his hold. “What do you think?” The throat clearing and small step back become clear indicators of boundaries that aren’t to be crossed. “Good fit?”

Him or the ring?

Glancing down at the fun trinket, I warmly smile too. “Definitely better than the pink flamingo Russian beanie thingy you brought me last time.”

“It’s called a *ushanka*.” His ass braces itself against the edge of my desk. “And you will *absolutely* be wearin’ it this winter.”

“Why?” Our gazes meet again. “Am I going *to* Russia myself this time?”

Mirth meanders through his expression. “You wanna go?”

“Can we skip the part where you break into a *Boyevik’s* home to return his daughter to her mother in the states before assisting in their relocation to Canada?”

“I mean if you want,” he chortles on a small shrug. “But if you ask me – not Blu – that was the most fun part of that trip.” This time chuckles leave us both. “I honestly don’t know what else we’d do while we were there.” I’m flashed a theatrical cringe. “Guess we could catch a hockey game, but I really think we should do that *here* first.” Slater throws his hands up in a playful surrender. “But it’s totally up to you. You know I’ll take you anywhere you wanna go, Angel Cake.”

Does that include my bedroom?

His?

Maybe just the backseat of his truck I’ve overheard too much about from women around the office?

Rather than lean into that line of questioning, I pull my cooling cappuccino back to my lips. “And where is Blu? You know at least half that cake is his.”

“A slice.”

My gaze transposes to a good-natured glare. “A third.”

“*Two slices.*” Slater defiantly folds his arms across his chest. “*Best offer I got.*”

Snickers and headshakes leave me in tandem. “We both know those cakes are one of the main reasons he insists on working with you.”

“You mean *only* reason.”

“Nah. You’re too much fun to *not* wanna be around.”

Faint redness coats his cheeks during an almost bashful beam. “If you uh...if you say so, Angel Cake.”

The shakiness of the floating words combined with their baby blue shade leads to me having another sip in an attempt to pretend I don't notice the uncertainty in the air.

Does he...does he really doubt that?

Does he really doubt that that's one of the reasons women are always looking for excuses to stick around his life? I mean...yeah...it probably...most certainly...has something to do with the other hotter...stickier...activity...but women can get good dick anywhere – or so I've overheard. Most women only hound a guy that hard when he has more to offer.

When they want *more* than they've been offered.

However, these are purely observational reports.

I haven't had enough experience in my life to brand that shit as facts.

Two boyfriends and one accidental fling – I thought we were going to be more – isn't a substantial amount of information to create an accurate analysis with.

“Why the interrogation on Blu?” His crystal coloring evens back out. “You got somethin' for us?”

“You guys *just* got back!”

“And?”

“And I haven't even been sent authorization for you to be back up *for* assignments yet.”

“Yeah, but you can look past that.”

“Not when you *literally* fail to cross your Ts and dot your Is on your analysis paperwork more than any other operative I've ever met.”

“I'm not that bad.”

“You are *so* that bad.”

“I'm kinda that bad,” he warmly concedes on a chuckle, “but let's pretend that I'm not and tell me what's on the docket.”

“No clue.” One leg crosses over the other. “I’m running a little behind schedule because I was flagging some discrepancies I stumbled across.”

“How behind?”

“We’re talking, I *just* made it intel before Reynold’s Clydesdaled his ass in here to complain about assignments.”

“Bet my truck after our little heart to heart that he doesn’t make that mistake twice.”

“Heart to heart?” I snicker between sips. “Is that what that was?”

“That’s what we’re gonna call it.”

Additional laughter reverberates around my private office overpowering the faint tunes of Panic! at the Disco pumping through my speaker system.

“I’m gonna grab my cake and let you get back to sortin’ plans on how to save the world-”

“Like an *anti-Pinky and The Brain?*”

“Your heads not that big.”

“But you think I’m that brilliant?”

“I *know* you’re that brilliant.”

It’s my turn to board the don’t blush struggle bus.

“Before I go...I uh...I wanted to run somethin’ by you first.”

Seeing flickers of the baby blue penetrating his speech again prompts me to put my beverage down and sit up attentively. “Shoot.”

“I know first night home *typically* means takeout at your place and STN for all the best hockey highlights-”

“Hot goss.”

“*News.*”

“The eyebrow raising relationship status of our current Dragons owner is totally more goss than news.”

“Yeah, but trackin’ trades and injuries is more news than goss.” He immediately scoffs. “I can’t believe you jus’ got me to say the word goss.” A slow headshake is accompanied by a gag. “I hope you know they’ll have my man card if that shit gets out.”

Giggling is a mindless response. “Your secret’s safe with me.”

“It better fuckin’ be.” His grin is briefly flashed once more. “First night home typically means *that* or action movie roulette-”

“I’m out of tequila.”

“*Noted.*” His smile falls to a nervous position yet again. “*But...* would um... Would you mind if we postponed that shit a day?” Surprise cracks my jaw just an inch, something that pushes him to swiftly explain, “It’s jus’ I’ve got this date scheduled and that I didn’t realize was scheduled because Aviva told her college roommate that I’d be available because I’d be home – not botherin’ to verify I didn’t have other plans – and since we’d already pushed the shit back four times because of work Aviva – again – just assumed it’s what I’d want and-”

“Hey,” my hand reaches out to land comfortingly on his arm, “it’s totally fine.”

He lets his stare linger a little too hard at where we’re connected.

A little too long.

A little too hot for me to leave it there any longer.

“Hoes before bros,” I impishly taunt returning my fingers to my mug. “I get it.” There’s no stopping the newest giggles that his mortified sneer creates. “We can just bro out another night instead.”

“For the love of my dear ma in church on Sunday, please stop fuckin’ callin’ me a bro.” He pops up from his position to retrieve his dessert. “I’m too close to touchin’ forty for that shit.”

Additional snickers swirl around the room brightening his beam even more.

God, I love how much time we spend smiling.

And laughing.

I know it's trite to say; however, I swear it's like life stands still when we're together. Traps us in a tiny bubble of snorts and sniggers and smirks that make me feel like we're the only two people in the whole world who matter.

Who exist.

Will it always be like this?

Can it?

Probably not if he ever decides that settling down is more fun than rescuing twin toddlers off a pirate ship on the coast of Jamaica.

Something tells me his future wife – whoever the lucky wench may be – isn't going to care for our level of closeness. I imagine I'll have to get used to more than just watching Snipes of the Week alone while gorging myself to death on delivery food. I just hope that when the day inevitably comes – statistically speaking its more likely to than not – that I don't have to give him up altogether.

Because the simple truth is I don't know how to live life without Slater Wahl.

And honestly?

I pray I never have to.

Chapter 3

Arley

I hit send on the email I marked as urgent and reach for the bedazzled apple trinket Slater brought me from his first trip to Applecourt, MI, needing something to fidget with while reflecting on my decision.

Not about sending it.

It definitely *needed* to be sent.

The number of agents unexpectedly quitting after assignments isn't typically something worth noting. No matter the division you're in, it's a hard gig. There are injuries – both mental and physical. Extensive travel – for unknown durations. Pay flexes – emergency aid costs someone and it's usually *not* the client. Once you add in mandatory training, continued education, and having to be open to work twenty-four hours, the turnover rate that occurs is expected. What *isn't* expected is the cycle it seems to have tumbled into. The company has been losing one agent from the top of their preferred department in the *same* order every three weeks for the last seven months.

That's a bit much.

And when you dig a little deeper into the data, you can spot another pattern.

They've been leaving in a geographical circle of north, east, south, west.

Coincidence?

Unlikely.

But I'm also not the biggest believer in things happening for "no reason".

The analytical portion of my brain recognizes patterns, searches for the causes, spots the anomalies, seeks the reasons,

and creates a hypothesis for *why* something has occurred.

Take this situation with my ex-boyfriend, for instance.

Despite the fact that I don't know what has caused *his* interest in rekindling what once was, I know the reason *I'm* actually entertaining it is because Slater bailed on me tonight. He's sharing dinner with some woman who can *be* in public *with him* without getting overwhelmed by all the voices after only ten minutes. He's out with some female he can take dancing or to play darts who won't have a panic attack because her mixed senses are screaming run, run for your life. His...*decision*...to go on a real date – something the one-nightstand fan he is doesn't typically do – has dredged up dark feelings of inadequacy. It's unburied the bleak truth that the number of men who can tolerate me long enough *to be* in a relationship is low. *Very low*. So low that...perhaps hearing Harv talk about giving us another chance is *logically* in my best interest. This consideration is a direct correlation coming from the idea of the man I'm secretly in love with being out there, right now, *openly* falling in love with someone else. It's not some seemingly random idea that "just so happens" to be occurring at the same time he's out with another female.

Same for this sequence of events.

There's an undeniable connection.

I just need to figure out what it is.

And also, I need to figure out if it's only affecting field agents or other areas that house other high value assets such as our engineers and scientists and finance specialists.

Running my fingers across the bumpy textures of the red object pulls a long breath of relief from my lungs.

Yup.

Marking it urgent was the right call.

Just like staying late to evaluate the information rather than looking for solace in a bottle of tequila regarding the Slater situation was *also* the right call.

Well.

Probably.

After putting the tackily decorated item back where it belongs, I log out of both my desktop and laptop, put the latter away in my flip flop pattern shoulder bag, and prepare to kill my light when my cell vibrates itself into view.

One quick password type later I'm revealing an unexpected message.

Harv: Got your email.

Of course, he did.

He's married to his phone.

Harv: I'll review it after this conference call.

Seeing no need to respond has me resuming my packing yet before the phone can dim itself, I receive another text.

Harv: Headed home?

Me: You frown upon me sleeping here.

I picture the smirk he's probably making.

Unlike Slater who *lives* to flash a toothy grin, Harv has always been more a smirker.

Which fits his personality to a tee.

Man is a control freak.

Only *he* gets to decide how many of his teeth you do or do not see.

Or whether those teeth get used on a begging woman's neck during foreplay.

Harv: Can I walk you down?

Caught slightly off guard by the request has me hesitating to reply.

Um...well that's...new.

He's always been one of those "independence is why I like you" people. From opening my own car door to picking up takeout tabs. "Taking care of me" wasn't something he seemed interested in doing, which was fine. I mean...I *can* and *do* know how to handle myself.

I've had to do it in some capacity for most of my life.

It's just nice when someone you love wants to do it too.

Harv: I just need five minutes to wrap this up.

Giving my bright red painted lip the tiniest bite is done in contemplation.

Maybe this is a sign?

Maybe just him making the effort to show he's changed or willing to change is a good motive to give us another go?

Or maybe I'm just being uncharacteristically hopeful because it beats the alternative of being predictively bitter?

Predictively bitter *and sober* are a terrible combination.

On a small shrug to myself, I swiftly reply.

Me: Five minutes it is.

Unfortunately for me – as I should’ve anticipated given what I’ve come to know about the man – five minutes easily turns into ten. And ten minutes quickly turns into twelve. And twelve becomes twenty-two before I realize I *definitely* made a mistake.

An all too familiar mistake.

God, I swear I’m like that kid who can never remember *not* to touch a hot stove because the pretty colors of fire are just so alluring.

Tossing my bag over my shoulder is followed by exiting my secure office for the elevators at the opposite end of the hall. Melisent Consuelos, the nightguard that works my executive floor over the weekend, offers me a respectful nod during her passing that I politely return.

Contrary, to her smaller build the woman is a weapon of mass destruction. She moonlights as a stunt double for action films, and once parkoured her way to the lobby to takedown an employee who was trying to steal office supplies. To this day, I can still remember watching the footage with Slater when he swung by to bring me lunch. We shared an order of shrimp fried rice – of course by share I mean I ate the shrimp while he ate the rice – and gawked at my computer screen in tandem, equally mesmerized by the scene. He spent the next ten minutes explaining to me why size isn’t everything – even in the security field – and then the next twenty recalling female soldiers who put many men he had come across to shame.

I also learned how many of those women he slept with.

And how many had slept with each other.

Interestingly enough sex has always been a rather easy topic with him.

Actually...*everything* is an easy topic with him.

Everything except confessing the whole secretly in love with him bit.

That one has never quite managed to get discussed over hockey reels or takeout.

Everything else?

Without a single doubt.

From the moment we met on the elevator – where we then got trapped together for three hours – talking to one another has always been the most natural thing.

Again.

Except for confessing that I wish he would've just asked me out that day rather than where my office was to chat in the future.

I'm pretty fluent in rejection – call it the gift with no receipt courtesy of being uncomfortably awkward in social situations since the age of four when I realized not everyone saw the alphabet the same way I did – so I knew his choice of phrasing that day wasn't a flirty attempt to ask me on a date in the future.

And *obviously* I was right since it's never happened in our six years of friendship.

On my way down to the main floor, I anxiously check my cell, once more wishing to be wrong about Harv.

Hell, I'd *love* to be wrong.

I'd love for him to already be waiting in the lobby, ask me what took so long, and then hold my hand while walking me to my car underneath the moonlight with sounds of *Evanescence* playing in the background.

The elevator doors loudly ding as if thumping me in the forehead to get my shit together.

There's no way in hell that scenario is happening, much like Slater standing on my townhouse porch, in the soaking rain, telling me some 80s movie cliché like "it's always been you".

Ugh.

Sometimes I hate how much I love those movies, although I primarily blame my condition for it.

See, they start speaking and rainbows of colors just burst through the air and flutter downward, entrancing me.

Hypnotizing me.

Imprisoning me in warmth until I'm paralyzed by passion.

The same thing happens to me with certain music.

Sometimes those colors lift me to my feet and spin me in circles that leave me breathless and grinning like a lunatic.

Which is the real reason why I'm usually gasping for air when people randomly knock on my office door, not because I was trying to squeeze in a Pilates workout on my lunch hour.

"Evening, Miss Carmichael," Valentine Yi, the guard patrolling the lobby, pleasantly greets.

"Hey, Yi." Tucking my phone into my jacket pocket occurs enroute towards him. "How are you?"

"Convinced that Hollander is eating my lunch every day." His cut jaw ticks in iteration. "That asshole has no respect for the rules of the fridge or the sanctity of marriage."

There's no stopping my head from tilting in confusion over the latter.

"No matter how busy she is with the kids or how crazy things are at the hospital, my wife always makes time to pack me a lunch. She even leaves me a dirty little love note inside that I have the sneaking suspicion he also violates much like he does my meal."

Amusement over his wavy maroon words threatens to overthrow my expression prompting me to press my lips firmly together.

"I told HR and a mandatory must read and sign memo was sent out to the entire department." Yi viciously smirks. "Meaning after this week, they can fire that shithead the next time he even *thinks* about going after my *tteokbokki*."

"Not entirely sure that that's what that means."

Yi snickers and presents me with a playful shoulder shrug. “Close enough.” Small chuckles are accompanied by me reaching the door he’s now opening. “Would you like me to escort you to your vehicle?”

“Nah.” I casually brush off while giving my bag another adjustment. “We both know it’s not a far walk. Perks of having your own parking space in executive parking.”

“*True.*” A crooked grin crosses his lips. “However, it’s still part of my job to offer. And then a bigger part of my job to *insist*. So, despite knowing what you’re going to say, I’m going to repeat the offer. Miss Carmicheal, would you like me to escort you to your vehicle?”

“I’m good, Yi. *Really.*” Giving him a small wave goodbye occurs next. “Just try not to get fired over food. I like you too much to see you go out like that.”

“He really shouldn’t be eating my shit,” Yi calls out after me, maroon letters bouncing against my back.

It’s a short stroll across the courtyard to the reserved parking area and passing by the intricate fountains that are merely status symbols reflecting the wealth inside of the building on the outside causes me to unconsciously sneer.

These eyesores were Harv’s idea.

One he – to this day – prides himself on like he carved the marble monstrosities himself.

God, if only he had.

His whole preference to pay someone to work with their hands rather than ever get his dirty thing wasn’t one of my favorites.

Slater *loves* to get dirty.

And sweaty.

And messy.

And build as well as break shit with his own fingers.

I swear sometimes he makes me feel like Sandra Bullock in *Hope Floats* when he gets to fixing things that have

“come loose” at my house.

Upon approaching my vehicle, I retrieve my keys from the same pocket I placed my cell in and prepare to hit the unlock button when something is suddenly wrapped around my neck from behind. The initial yank not only snaps my head backward, it cuts short my oxygen supply. Panic attempts to assist in immobilizing me as the hold tightens yet a southern voice, I know I’d be lost without faintly whispers in the back of my mind one critical acronym.

SING.

Driving my elbow straight has it meeting the first point of contact intended. While the attacker’s breath slightly hitches from the strike, they unfortunately manage to maintain their grip on whatever’s digging into my throat. Knowing my life depends on my refusal to give up, I execute the next move, stomping my foot on top of theirs with all the force I can muster up around our thrashing. Missing my intended target again and again and again promptly wears on my resolve, tempting me into accepting defeat.

Giving myself over to whatever awful scenario is coming next.

And it *is* awful.

The only real question is *how* awful.

I mean, what do they want from me?!

Money?

My car?

Sex?

Hot, musty filled air abruptly appears next to my ear delivering the answer, “*Stop digging or else.*”

The gray letters swiftly sweep across my bleary vision, wedging themselves between my eyes and glasses, spurring me to hysterically whip my head from side to side in hopes of avoiding being touched by them. This action of agitation unexpectedly results in me colliding with the attacker’s cheek

encouraging my best friend's command to come in a second time much louder.

Sharper.

SING!

Recalling the N being for nose, I propel my head backward, skull bashing into the other person's causing a cracking sound to echo across the parking lot. Unlike my previous attempts, this one successfully frees me. Presents me with the opportunity to rip away the wire. Gasp for air. Kick my leg the same direction I sent my head in hopes of smashing into their crotch or thigh or shin, somewhere – fuck *anywhere* – that will keep them out of my space. Using my newfound freedom to my advantage, I hit the panic button on my keys, relief flooding my system the instant the shrill shrieks and flashing lights conquer the night air. However, before I have the chance to call out or run for actual help, the assaulter darts past me, roughly clipping my frame during their flee. I naturally stumble and trip over the edge of the nearby curb. Instantly, I stretch my arms out, praying they'll cushion my fall, but my head still slams into the sidewalk, turning my currently dim, blurry world pitch black in a matter of mere seconds.

Chapter 4

Slater

Something's wrong.

Something *has* to be wrong.

Why else wouldn't she have texted me by now?

I guess she *could be*...just really caught up in whatever project she decided to stay late for...but even when that happens – and it *has happened before* – she still comes up for air.

She still sends me a cute one liner.

Or funny GIF.

Or a silly smiley face that lets me know she's alive.

Thinking about me.

Lord knows I'm thinking about her.

Even when I'm sitting across from an irrefutably attractive woman that fits the distraction bill.

I anxiously tap my phone for the thirtieth time in forty-two minutes to check if I've somehow managed to miss a notification in the ninety seconds that have passed since I last looked.

“Waiting on an important call?” Lila Rossetti, Aviva's college roommate, curiously inquires from the opposite side of the square table.

“Text.” Disappointed at the lack of change, I shift my stare up to the striking blue pair I'm sure most men fall to their knees over. “Sorry.” Reaching for my beer is attached to a sincere apology. “I'm not usually this rude.” A polite grin struggles to work its way onto my face. “I swear my ma *and the military* taught me better manners than this.”

She pulls her long, light brown hair to one side and lets her slender shoulders bounce. “Shit happens. I get it.”

It better *not* be happening.

And she better not have...decided to...go to...a bar or something with people from work where she met some random asshole who wants to get her naked.

I know it’s unlikely.

She rarely ever leaves her taste the rainbow decorated office.

Plus, people don’t exactly go out of their way to talk to her.

I love the woman.

I mean – I really fucking do – but she has resting panic eyes.

Some females have resting bitch face, some males have a resting fuck off expression, but Angel Cake? She has a “please don’t talk to me because I don’t know what to say back to you” stare.

So, that’s what most people do.

They *don’t* talk to her.

Their loss.

And currently, right now, mine.

“I swear I’m listenin’.” After giving my dark charcoal polo a minor adjustment, I prove it. “Runt’s is a great beer. *Obviously.*” My hand dangles the beverage before I sneak a sip. “It’s what I’m drinkin’ if they’ve got it.” Seeing her body relax in the seat once more pushes me to continue. “Which I’m highly impressed that this swanky steakhouse does.”

“My doing,” she sassily flicks her finger inward to where a normal guy would be trying not to drool over her rack that’s doing its best to spill out of her dress.

“How long have you been in sales?” I place the bottle back down near the untouched menu. “Or does what you do

technically count as marketin' since you travel city to city tryin' to convince people to carry it?"

"You *are* listening," Lila sweetly coos on an impressed smirk.

"What can I say? I'm a man of my word."

The waitress comes by to top off our water glasses, and I use the opportunity to glance at my device again.

Still nothing.

Maybe I don't have service?

Or maybe her battery died?

Or maybe...maybe Angel Cake is *punishing me* for going out with another woman instead of keeping *our* non-date date by giving me the fucking silent treatment?

If that's the case, then I'll pledge allegiance to my fucking hand.

Take a celibacy vow.

Become a child rescuing monk.

Whatever I gotta do to prevent this...nightmare from repeating itself.

We've never *not* talked this long when I'm home.

And I honestly don't fucking care for it.

Lila waits until it's just us again to inquire, "Work text?"

"Nah, I'm out of commission for at least a day or two."

"Just a day or two? I could've sworn Vi Vi said Blu was gonna be home for at least a week this time."

Doubtful.

Blu bitches about not being here enough, but we both know he craves the rush of a rescue about as much as I do.

"It's hard to predict exactly *when* an assignment we wanna take will come in," reaching for my beer again rather than the menu I've yet to look at mindlessly occurs, "but it's

mandatory that we wait for paperwork from the last job to clear the system before takin' on a new one, which for most operatives is at least a week."

"But not you?"

"I've uh...I've got an *in* in that department." Smiling at the mere thought of her is a habit I know I'll never break. "So, unless there's a required psych sign off, she never makes me wait longer than I want."

"And is she sending the text you're waiting on?"

"Yeah."

"But it's not work?"

My answer precedes another sip. "Correct."

Lila momentarily pressing her lips together is followed by a contemplative hum. "And exactly how long have you been in love with her?"

Being caught completely off guard by her blunt yet accurate accusation causes me to instantly choke on the latest mouthful headed down my throat. Loud, unbecoming coughs prompt me to pound my chest to assist in correcting the swallowing process; however, the redder in the face I get, the more amused she becomes.

She thinks *death* is funny?

What kind of sick, twisted woman did Aviva hook me up with?!

The moment I've finally managed to collect my composure, she playfully pokes, "That long, huh?"

My mouth moves to deny it only to be met by a challenging smirk, daring me to lie.

Daring me to invalidate my earlier claim of being a man of my word.

Which I am.

Which is why Angel Cake should've known if she didn't want me to reschedule our session all she had to do was

say *something*.

Fuck...*anything*.

She always comes first.

Always.

She knows that.

Or at least...I thought she did.

“I see.” Lila snickers at my silence prior to slowly nodding. “What’s her name?”

“Should we uh...um...look at the uh,” I kick my chin to the thick object, “menu now?”

“No.”

My date’s nonchalant refusal has me open mouth gawking again.

“Tell me her name.”

“Now, you don’t have manners?”

The poke to my earlier behavior causes her to smirk. “*Please*.”

“Arley.”

“Wow,” she unexpectedly beams, “you can’t even say her name without smiling.”

Heat burrows itself into my complexion prompting the need to hide my face.

Wash down the sourness of shame.

My date for the evening lifts her cocktail glass at the same time she investigates, “How long have you two known each other?”

“Six almost seven years.”

“And you’ve been in love with her...?”

“Six,” another gulp is used to shove down the new shame, “almost seven years.”

“Aw,” the woman across from me sweetly coos a second time, tempting me to glance away from the gushing, “love at first sight?”

“Uh...” my beer finds its way back to the table. “Something like that.”

“How’d you two meet?”

“We got trapped in an elevator together.”

Her blue eyes widen to the size of the bread plates I get the feeling will be the only ones we use for the night.

“What?!”

“Yeah,” warm chuckles thoughtlessly grace the table, “and it was my first day of work.”

“*Ohmygod!*”

“Probably would’ve been the *worst* first day ever had I not been locked away with her for three hours.” Recalling the event that’s imprinted into the very fiber of my existence is effortlessly done. “We sat on the floor. Shared a blueberry muffin. Of course when I say share, I mean, she picked *out* the blueberries to *not eat*, so I ate them.” More laughs fall free. “We talked about hockey and space travel and the weird sounds we’ve heard animals make and I don’t know. Time just...flew by. She was the easiest person to talk to that I had ever met.” An innocent shrug is wedged between statements. “Still is. We can talk about anything. *Everything.*”

“Except you being in love with her.”

Guilt has me redirecting my gaze down to my device. “Except that.”

“And why not?”

One gentle tap reveals the communication situation is still unchanged, which leaves me with no choice but to physically face the interrogation in front of me. “How about we change subjects?”

“How about this is the most *you’ve said* all night?”

Additional culpability causes me to adjust myself in my seat.

Fidget with my polo again.

Grab my beer and attempt to choke down the humiliation caught in the back of my throat.

This is fucking ridiculous.

I've *never* been this bad about hiding my feelings for Arley.

Why am I struggling so much tonight?

Is it because she's ignoring me?

Is it because I'm worried, she's pissed and didn't know how to say it?

It's not like we don't fight.

We just...don't do it often.

And it's usually over stupid shit like who forgot to put a bag back in the trashcan – me – and why is the coffee table already so fucking sticky when we haven't even had dinner yet – her.

Real shit?

Real emotional level shit?

That's rare.

Maybe because we've never done that whole song and dance of pretending to be someone, we're not so the other person we're with will feel compelled to become more invested in us? Maybe because we let one another see the ugly shit like how insecure her condition makes her or how anxious my trauma makes me? Hell, I think the biggest fight we ever had was me deciding to take an assignment too close to Christmas a couple years back. She wanted us to keep up our tradition of making the long drive out to Ma's small farmhouse for *Nochebuena* – aka Christmas Eve – and celebrate the same way we had since our first year together when I introduced her to the festivities. She immediately fell in love with the colors and the music and food, so much so that Ma *always* makes

sure to have enough *ponche navideño*, *tamales*, and *buñuelos* for Arley to take home at the end of the night, after midnight mass and presents. Typically, in most households, it's a large event filled with family and music and dancing but because of what happened to me shortly after my 5th birthday, it became just me and Ma. She would say the angels were with us, so we had more than enough company. She told Arley the same thing when I brought her yet swore, my woman already knew that since she was one in disguise. *That* was the year Ma confessed that she could worry less about me for the first time in a long time because she *knew* I was being protected. That same year, she promised Arley she was welcomed in her home at any time – with or without me. Possibly denying them both a custom that had become such an intricate part of their holiday celebrations had me receiving an earful in *both* ears and then doing whatever it took to guarantee my ass was on Ma's doorstep before the clock struck midnight. And I was. I hadn't showered. I hadn't shaved. I hadn't slept in almost fifty-two hours, but I was on her porch ready to escort the two of them to the service. Arley kept herself pressed to me for the rest of the night in relief. Gratitude. Ma even covered her up when she fell asleep on the couch in my arms a couple hours later. I swore to the saints, angels, and the big man upstairs himself in that very moment I would do whatever it took for the rest of my life to be the reason she smiled rather than frowned.

I was a goner long before that moment, but after it?

I knew exactly where the other half of my soul was.

Would always be.

“*Wahl*,” Lila gingerly calls out, drawing my attention away from the distance it had disappeared into. “I think it's safe to say that nothing's gonna happen *here*...” Her finger gestures to the empty space between us. “So, how about we drop the charade. The pressure. The fucks to give about possibly getting laid and just talk.” Seeing her eyes flood with kindness catches me by surprise. “You *clearly* need to talk to someone about this woman, and I'd bet the very expensive heels on my feet that Blu is of *no help* in that department.”

Chortles escape at the same time I lift my bottle to have another swig. “Not unless you consider singin’ to me ‘Do Your Nuts Hang Low’ on and off for twenty minutes during our drive home helpful.”

“Exactly.” She giggles, a sound that’s pleasant yet makes me miss Arley’s even more. “You need to talk, and I love a good love story – it’s the only shit Netflix even bothers recommending to me anymore – so really, this is a win, win scenario.”

More snickers slip free.

Lila’s fingers curl around her cocktail glass to lift it to her lips. “Why haven’t you told her how you feel?”

“I don’t wanna ruin what we’ve got.”

“Copout.”

Her bluntness receives an amused grunt. “Pardon?”

“*That’s. A. Cop. Out.*” Watching her head bounce side to side on every word encourages me to chuckle again. “I don’t want a copout. I want *the truth*. And we’re talking *the real truth*. The truth you can only tell a complete stranger because you know you’re probably never gonna see them again.”

Chances are I won’t.

She lives on the outskirts of the city.

She travels a lot.

And honestly, I’m not exactly in the market for new friends.

Especially not ones who would rather watch soccer than hockey.

“Tell me the scary truth, Wahl.” She leans back in her seat, glass clutched closer to her chest. “Why haven’t you told her how you feel?”

Being impressed and intrigued by the approach pushes me to reply openly. “I’m not her type.”

Lila's brow pulls tightly together. "Is she blind?"

Louder laughs are accompanied by a mirth-filled shoulder shrug. "She's a bit visually impaired, but her collection of glasses simply adds to her adorableness."

"Is she *deaf*?" Additional appall appears in her expression. "Can she not hear you when you say shit like that about her? Do you not say it *to* her? Is that the disconnect?"

"I don't think a day goes by that I don't dote on that woman."

"Then what is it? Wrong plumbing?"

"You could say that."

"Oh...okay," she enthusiastically nods, "I get it. I was mostly into chicks in college. Even had a *tiny* crush on Vi Vi at one point. And honestly, if the right one came along nowadays, I'd still be open to a relationship with one."

Confusion doesn't hesitate to cake my face. "What?"

"She's not into dudes, right? That's what you're saying."

"No. *Nononono*," I rush to explain while frantically headshaking. "Angel Cake-"

"*Angel Cake?!?*" Lila slaps one hand dramatically over her heart. "You call her angel cake?!?"

"I do."

"What does she call you? Please, don't say Wahl."

"Actually...she's the only other woman beside my ma, I let call me Slater."

Her eyes immediately bulge forward.

"But if we're talkin' nicknames? She calls me Cowboy."

"Because of the accent?"

"Between that and my truck, it'd make sense, but truth be told, it comes from the first time we went to the rodeo

together, and I borrowed a horse to rescue this little girl who was bein' kidnapped by a couple of clowns."

The booze in her glass damn near leaps out when she slams it back down on the table. "What?!"

"I make a habit of goin' to the rodeo every year because when I was a kid...I was taken from it."

"Taken like...*kidnapped*?"

"Yeah." Clearing away the instinct to clam up requires extra effort. "One minute I was waitin' in line with a bunch of other kids to pet horses and the next, I was bein' stuffed into the back of a minivan bein' called Charlie."

Horror drops her jaw and widens her gaze.

"*Because of that incident*, I decided – when I got out of the military – that I would volunteer to work plain clothes security every year to try to prevent what happened to me, from happenin' to others."

"*Ohmygod*, how is this woman *not* in love with you?! If you weren't already clearly in love with her, *I'd* probably be in love with you after just *hearing* that."

An almost bashful grin begins to grow.

"Why do you think you're not her type?!"

"Angel Cake-"

"*Swoon.*"

I helplessly chuckle and shake my head. "*Arley* is... *brilliant*. Easily the most brilliant person I've ever met in my entire life. And I don't mean that shit lightly. She graduated high school at sixteen. College at twenty. Has been sought after by some of the biggest corporations worldwide for her ability to analyze and evaluate data in effective and at times *creative* yet very efficient ways. She can analyze a person based on their handwritin', their speech patterns, their word choices when they answer questions, how quickly they finish their evaluations, and that shit's just scratchin' the top of a very long list of amazin' shit she can do. The woman's like a

textbook with a great ass and a smile I wanna bend a knee for.”

“*Double swoon.*”

“And I’m...” my shoulders unconsciously sag. “I’m... jus’ a literal hero for hire nowadays.”

“*Wahl.*”

“As a PJ – paramedic – I was top of my class for every physical requirement possible, which makes sense given that from the day I was returned home, I did everything I could to push myself in that aspect. Everything else?” A slightly defeated shrug is offered. “I passed but jus’ barely. Thankfully, I was better *in* the field and caught onto the med shit that books don’t exactly prepare you for faster than others.” Folding my hands together in the space in front of me is followed by a heavy sigh. “That woman is so far out of my goddamn league that I swear she *loses* braincells talkin’ to me most days.”

“I see.” Lila releases a contemplative hum, leans forward to match my body language, and says, “Woman that brilliant is probably aware of your feelings.”

“I have an amazin’ poker face.”

“Do you though?”

Laughter leaks free once more.

“Hey, why don’t you try this?”

Curiosity has me quirking an eyebrow.

“Why don’t you try letting *her* decide if you’re out of her league versus making that declaration for her?”

“Because this way saves us both from an awkward conversation and wasted time where we’d pretend shit wasn’t awkward until it actually became not awkward anymore.”

Her mouth twitches in what I imagine to be an argument yet is unexpectedly cut off by my phone vibrating.

Good to know the shit still works.

Haworth Enterprises flashes across the screen prompting me to swiftly lift a polite finger the direction of my date prior to answering, "Wahl."

"Wahl, this is Yi from security."

I know Yi.

I typically like Yi.

He's good at his job and doesn't allow those around him to slack at theirs.

What I don't like is him calling.

Especially when no direct reason comes to mind.

"What can do I for you, Yi?"

"I'm calling because you're listed as the primary emergency contact for Miss Arlette Carmichael."

Dread doesn't hesitate to drop to the pit of my stomach. "I am."

"There's been an incident." His typically stoic voice struggles not to shake. "She's been brought to the ER of Dalvegan Memorial Hospital." The pause he takes to remain calm compounds the piling panic that's stacking on my chest. "She's currently...unconscious."

Any further ability to breathe is robbed point blank.

"I've submitted her information to the best of my ability but-"

"I'm on my way, Yi."

"Is she allergic to any medications or does she have any pre-existing medical conditions I need to inform them about?"

"Her synesthesia."

"Her...what?"

"*Synesthesia*." Knowing I don't have time to explain it, I begin grumbling instructions while reaching for my wallet. "Just tell them she has it so if they ask sensory related questions, they can tailor them better." Opening the object is

done with so much force I almost rip the damn thing in two. “And tell the nurses to keep the door to her room closed. Too many voices all at once can get too overwhelmin’ for her, and she’ll...shutdown. Go completely silent. Even become unresponsive.”

“I’ll tell them that the minute I see them.”

“You find them now and tell them that.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’ll be there in a few.” Ending the conversation is attached to tossing a hundred-dollar bill on the table. “I uh...I have to go.”

Earnest concern coats Lila’s voice, “Everything okay?”

“No.” Raising my unsteady frame to my feet requires every ounce of strength I can muster up. “Arley’s...um...at the ER.”

“Ohmygod!”

“She’s unconscious.”

“Ohmyg-”

“Dinner’s on me,” I interrupt, in no mood to hear anything that isn’t from a doctor or nurse or some other medical professional regarding the diagnosis of my reason for fucking living. “Order whatever you want here or to go or invite that dude that’s been eye fuckin’ you from the bar all night over to take my place.” Pushing my chair in occurs next. “I really am sorry this didn’t go well-”

“I think it went exactly the way it should’ve.” She shoots me a playful wink that I wish could ease a bit of my anxiousness. “Now, get out of here and get to your woman.”

Lila’s given the best grin I can find, a respectful nod, and then promptly left to finish the date I knew I shouldn’t have gone on all by herself.

I’m done dating.

Period.

No more fucking fancy restaurants.

No more pretending the conversations are greater than they fucking are.

No more rearranging my schedule with the love of my life to accommodate the chance to get my fucking dick touched.

All that shit is finished.

It's never gonna happen again.

And the second Arley wakes up – and she *will* wake up – I plan to tell her exactly that.

Chapter 5

Arley

Throbbing pain pulses so unforgivingly against my skull that I can't seem to hold in the low groan of discomfort it causes.

Okay.

It's official.

T is right.

I can't keep consuming this much tequila at thirty-five consequences free. Clearly my body is trying to communicate that with all the Travis Barker drumming going on in my skull and the current unbearable cramp in my side.

Look, I get it liver. You don't have to try to take me down from the inside to prove your fierce doctor overlord is right.

Alcohol does damage.

Message loud and clear.

I'll switch to something lighter.

Less...boozy.

However, no part of me believes that taking shots of sweet tea in goal celebration is gonna hit the same.

I'm just saying.

Forcing my eyes to unglue themselves from being shut ignites more groaning, yet the immediate sight of Slater sitting in a chair beside me on the phone shifts the sound from that of agony to one of relief.

I'm glad he never leaves me alone after I accidentally get shitfaced.

I just hope I didn't puke on his favorite polo this go around.

Last time he didn't let me live that shit down for a month.

"*I know.*" Slater gives the side of his scruff covered face a frustrated rub. "*I...I know.*"

Huh.

Why are his words so...shaky?

And his blue so pale?

I've never seen that color come from him before.

What's wrong?

What's going on?!

Just as I prepare to let the questions flow out of my mouth, I realize I don't recognize the chair he's occupying. Or the window behind him. Or the machine beside him.

Concern crashes into confusion causing me to frantically whip my frame around to observe my surroundings, to try to figure out where I am, where *we* are, why we're here – wherever here is – yet the hysterical motions amplify aches all throughout my body to the point I release a blood curdling scream.

My best friend snaps his head up in horror and quickly ends his call. "I gotta go, Ma. She looks like she's actually awake this time."

This time?!

What does he mean *this time*?!

Questions aren't allowed to be verbally formed due to him sweetly scolding, "You need to be careful, Angel Cake. Last thing you wanna do is accidentally rip out one of these wires." Slater slides himself to the very edge of his seat to fix whatever got messed up during my thrashing. "Trust me. I'm a trained medical professional."

Desperate to see the color I love so much return to his words encourages me to tease, "Nah. You just play one on T.V."

A warm chuckle is attached to an amused nod. “Hey, if you wanna start callin’ me Doctor McHunky, that’s fine by me.” Giggles reverberate around the room, shifting his stare from my arm back to my eyes. “You have *no idea* how thankful I am to hear *that sound* again, Arley.” Rather than wait for me to say something, Slater resumes smoothing the tape back down, an action that elicits whimpers to seep past my slightly parted lips. The new noises have him cutting his crystal gaze back up to my brown. “Too hard, baby?”

Urges to repeat the sound are instant courtesy of the new butterflies dancing around my stomach.

Wow.

And here I thought I couldn’t love being called anything more than Angel Cake.

His eyebrows suddenly lift higher in question prompting me to answer in the form of a slow headshake.

Relief quickly reclaims his expression as he finishes the task in silence. Afterward, his hand lingers on top of the area, thumb gently stroking the territory, simultaneously soothing and protecting it.

Me.

“I know those glasses aren’t your favorite,” he kicks his chin the direction of my face, “but I didn’t exactly have time to swing by your place and grab another, so you’re stuck with the brown ones you keep in my truck for emergencies.”

Giving the leopard print spares an adjustment is absentmindedly done.

“Do you know where you are?”

“The hospital?”

“Do you know how you got here?”

A much faster headshake than before presents itself.

“What’s um...” He does his best to maintain his composure; however, the shakiness in the words falling into

the space between us tells me exactly how scared he truly is.
“What’s the last thing you remember?”

Sucking in a deep breath occurs in tandem with
shutting my eyes.

What *is* the last thing I actually remember?

Was it drinking with him on my couch?

Did we even...*drink* last night?

Today?

When is it?

Panic threatens to take over my mind, yet the sweet
caress from Slater swiftly brushes it away.

Reminds me I’m not alone.

That there’s nothing to fear.

That there’s *never* anything to fear with him around.

“I...” my gaze returns to him revealing uncertainty. “I
remember leaving the office. I think...late?” Pulling my brow
tightly together is accompanied by another attempt to recall
more information. “Pretty sure I was working late.” Fear
propels itself up the back of my throat into my words. “*Was I*
working late, Slater? Was I working at all? Why don’t I
remember?” New waves of worry wash over me. “Why can’t I
remember?!”

“Hey, now,” he sweetly coos, baby blue shades
invading his speech, “how about you give me a big, deep
breath?” The corners of his mouth try to turn upward. “One
with all the fixin’s.” Additional soft brushes from his thumb
make the request impossible to deny and given the grin that
successfully appears on his face, he knows it. “One where I
can *see* those music notes two steppin’ along your collarbone.”

The reference to the tattoo I know he can see because
of how loose the hospital gown is not only has me following
his orders but giggling again as well.

Gah...

How does he do that?

How does he always know just how to defuse a situation before it *becomes* a major situation?

Is that something they trained him for in the military?

“Alright then,” he warmly states and scoots his chair closer. “Let me start by saying trouble rememberin’ things is *normal* when dealin’ with a head injury. Especially if you’re sufferin’ from a concussion.”

“A concussion?!”

It looks like it’s painful for him to nod in acknowledgement. “You’ve been in and out for the past few hours and while there doesn’t appear to be any damage, they’re gonna do a CT scan to make sure everything with that big, beautiful brain of yours is still in the best condition possible.”

Headshakes are attached to a whispered argument. “I don’t want a CT scan.”

“I wasn’t askin’.”

“But-”

“And I’m not arguin’.”

The firmness in his voice has me pressing my lips tightly together to suppress further objections.

Pretty sure I get *some* sort of say in this situation as an adult.

Afterall, it’s *me* who has to suffer through that tube of judgment, not him. God knows I’ve had enough of those types of tests and evaluations for this lifetime and the next seven.

Woes of having a medical condition they couldn’t quite put their finger on prior to a million invasive procedures.

Before I have the opportunity to make a rebuttal, the door to my room swings open revealing a fair skinned face, I can honestly say was the last I expected to see. “*Harv?*”

“Harv?” My best friend’s blue words darken through the air at the same time he turns towards the opposite direction. “Who the fuck is Harv?”

Oh, this is about to get awkward.

“Number Seventeen?” Slater’s brow pulls tightly together when his gaze swings back to mine. “Since when are you on a *first name* bases with Number Seventeen?”

Really. Awkward.

“And are those fuckin’ roses?” He growls, jagged letters darting like arrows at my ex-boyfriend. “Why the fuck are you bringin’ her roses? Is that a new protocol I’m unaware of?”

Really. Realllyyyyy. Awkward.

“Thank god you’re alright, Arlette,” he sighs, pink shades catching me by surprise. “I came as soon as Yi informed me.”

“Not as soon as you heard if you stopped for fuckin’ flowers.”

“They have some in the giftshop, Wahl.” Our salt and peppered haired boss bites back yet keeps his focus on me. “How are you?” He cautiously approaches from the other side of the bed. “How are you feeling?” The vase finds its way onto the empty stand beside me. “You look...” his mouth bobs around in search of the right words, “better than I was expecting.”

Seeing his concern in both his expression and his words effortlessly melts me into the mattress.

“I was,” the pause he takes precedes him kindly reangling my pillow, “*worried* when Yi told me about the attack.”

“You *never* worry.” My head cocks to the side on a mirth-filled grin. “You’ve always claimed it was one of your best traits.”

“Because it is.” A small smirk is flashed. “However, the truth is, I do worry. But only when it comes to *you*.”

Surprise heats my cheeks and forces me to look away in hopes of hiding my blush.

That's new.

Not just the worry thing but the openly admitting something emotional.

"You're not the only one," Slater proclaims, electric blue lettering summoning my stare to his. "I must've checked my phone over a hundred times waitin' for you to text me last night." He tugs the pillow Harv just moved back to its previous position. Pats it as if that's where it belongs. "I swear had Yi not called when he did, I probably would've started arrangin' a rescue mission."

Seeing the playfulness return to his speech brightens my beam like only he can. "So, do you want me to call you Doctor McHunky or Hawaii Hunk 0 instead?"

"Honestly, it's whatever *you* want, Angel Cake. As long as *hunk* is in the title, I'll consider it a win."

Laughter isn't allowed to bounce between us for long due to Harv's throat clearing and casual blanket tucking near my thigh. "Surprised to see you here, Wahl." Their eyes lock in the space in front of me. "Did Yi call you as some sort of courtesy?"

"I'm her emergency contact."

"He is?"

"I am."

There's no ignoring the flickers of red in Harv's speech. "*Since. When?*"

"*Since. Always.*"

"Well, not since *always*," I mumble to myself prior to actively joining the conversation, "but for...a...while now."

"Five almost six years to be exact," Slater smugly announces, fingers nonchalantly yanking the sheet free from his side of the bed.

“Is that exact?” I less than quietly ponder. “That still feels like an estimate to me.”

“Why is he your emergency contact?” Harv’s question receives my gaze. “Are you two...” another throat clearing occurs like he’s trying not to choke on the words, “*together?*”

“No,” my head quickly moves to emphasize the answer, “we’re just friends.”

“*Just. Friends?*” Slater gripes, typical blue waves coming out in an almost purple shade as if he’s trying to keep anger at bay. “Now, I *know* you definitely need a CT scan, Angel Cake.”

Redirecting all my attention can’t occur faster.

Holy shit, did I miss something?!

Did we...*Are we*...?

Were we professing our love together and I passed out from shock and hit my head on the way down because *that* would be a strange but very much so an us type of story.

“We’re so much more than just friends,” he reassures, sending the butterflies I had trained to stay relatively dormant into a frenzy. “*We’re family.*”

Oh.

Right.

Talk about anticlimactic.

Disappointment does its best to remain out of sight during my slow nod of agreement. “Yeah, we’re...that.”

It’s Harv’s turn to release an arrogant sound in the form of a hum. “But you’re not a *couple*,” his fingers smooth out the folded sheet in front of me, “correct?” He waits for my gaze to meet his yet again. “You’re still available for discussions revolving around our relationship?”

“*Your. What?!*”

And now we’ve reached the next circle of hell awkward.

“You’re datin’ our fuckin’ boss?!” Slater practically shouts at the same time he springs to his feet, a sea of red letters spilling all over me. “How could you not fuckin’ tell me that?!”

“*Da-ted.*” I swiftly correct, forcing myself to sit up straighter despite the pain it ignites. “As in *past* tense.”

“However, I’m hoping there’s a possibility for it to become *present* tense,” Harv sweetly interjects, heavy scruff covered complexion lighting up.

Slater throws him a glare so powerful it’s comparable to a grenade blast before firing one at me. “How fuckin’ *past* are we talkin’, Arlette?”

It’s hard to hold back the sneer that hearing my full name come out of his lips conjures. “Almost seven years ago.”

“So long before us?”

“Not exactly *long*,” my confession is accompanied by me slinking back beneath the sheets in hopes of faking exhaustion to the point this nightmare can end, “but definitely before us.”

His splayed palms land in the space beside my leg. “*How. Fuckin’. Long?*”

“Couple weeks.” My best friend’s eyes widen like I’ve just bitch slapped him with the betrayal of the century pushing me to explain. “Like two to the day.”

Slater’s displeased expression remains.

“Harv and I split a few days before Christmas and we – you and I – met in the elevator January 2nd .”

“You remember exactly what day you two met?” Harv suspiciously inquires.

“Of course, she fuckin’ does,” my best friend protectively defends. “We celebrate it every year. For our last one we had Rumchata hot cocoa and cupcakes and a very messy fake snowball fight in her backyard thanks to the machine she got me for Christmas.”

“It’ll come in handy if it doesn’t snow again this year!”

“I know,” Slater concurs without looking at me. “We celebrate lots of shit together *because* we’re family. And that’s what *family* does.”

“And yet,” my ex coldly chomps, “*you* didn’t know about *us*.”

There’s no denying the change in Slater’s breathing.

“So, it seems only fair to ask, are you *really* family or simply wishing you were?”

Holy. Shit.

Can I fake a stroke or a heart attack?

Am I too young?

Would anyone buy that?

Statistically speaking, people with high pressure jobs – such as mine – are notorious for getting taken down by stress, I just always assumed it would be directly work related when it happened to me, not...whatever...this...shitshow turning into a fuckshow is.

A tiny knock on the door precedes a young woman’s face peering around the edge of it. “Is our patient awake?”

“*Very*,” I absentmindedly croak, encouraging the female to enter the room.

“Good,” she sweetly says, words pink and light and practically flowing through the air which is a nice change in comparison to the ones that have been recently attacking. “My name is Ali Raysarkar, and I’ll be your nursing assistant.”

An array of colors from the busy hallway instantly begin to barge themselves around the blockade; however, Slater slyly steps out of the way to not only shut the door but to provide the CNA appropriate room to work.

The instant it’s closed I mouth him my thanks.

He bashfully beams, nods, and rests his back against it.

“Let’s check your vitals, okay?” Ali asks as she arrives at my bedside. “We’ll start with the basics of your name, date of birth, and the year.” Once she’s been provided with the information from me, she nods in approval. “That’s good! Your head injury may be less severe than they originally thought.”

“She’s still gettin’ a CT scan,” Slater informs yet again with no room for rebuttal.

“How about you let a *medical professional* make that declaration, Wahl?” Harv less than politely insists.

“I *am* a medical professional,” my best friend viciously bites back. “Still licensed and still certified in this state, *sir*.”

“Being an operative capable of CPR is not the same thing and you know that.”

“Actually, Harv, Slater’s a certified paramedic.” Looking away from where the nurse aid is beginning to take my blood pressure and up at him occurs next. “It was required when he was a PJ and when he retired, he made sure to keep the certification up to date as to be able to provide the best care possible for whatever civilian may need it during R&R.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I manage to catch my best friend arrogantly grin.

Why do I get the feeling the two of them are now keeping score?

And why do I wanna know who’s winning?

And how do they determine exactly what constitutes as a point?

And am I the game or the referee?

“Blood pressure is high and your heart rate a bit elevated,” Ali states, returning my stare to her, “but given you could cut the tension in this room with one of niece’s Play-Doh knives, I think it’s safe to say that’s probably why.”

She’s correct.

Point for her!

“Dr. Kurtzman will be by shortly to discuss your status and touch base regarding next steps as well as possible discharge; however, in the meantime, I have just a few questions.” Her statement is followed by logging in to the nearby computer. “Do you currently have any head pain?”

Something tells me she’s talking about the *actual* ache and not the emotional one being caused by the two men doing their best not to childishly glare at one another.

“Yes,” I quietly reply, allowing her to keep my focus.

“It’s expected with the injury we were informed you suffered upon being brought in.” Her fingers quickly glide across the keys. “Any nausea?”

Not brought on by whatever happened to me, I’m sure.

“No.”

“Vision issues?”

A playful point is delivered the direction of my glasses. “Just the regular ones.”

“I’m glad your husband brought you another pair,” she sweetly exclaims. “That other pair was-”

“He’s not her husband,” Harv interrupts on a small huff.

“Closer than you are,” Slater absentmindedly mumbles.

Or...at least I think it’s absentminded.

And *is he* closer than Harv is?!

Is *anyone* that close to marrying me?!

“Oh!” Ali squeaks, pink words bouncing about. “When he said he was family, I just assumed-”

“He’s not even really that,” our boss needlessly clarifies. “They’re *just* friends.”

The other male in the room growls. “*Best. Friends.*”

“Don’t be childish, Wahl.”

“Rich comin’ from the man who can barely even admit the status of my relationship with Arlette.”

“Could you please *stop* calling me Arlette?” I less than warmly throw his way. “It’s giving me caught falling asleep in *The Business History of Popular Culture* vibes I *so* don’t need at thirty-five.”

Slater’s amused smirking is cut short by Harv asking, “Since when do you not like to be called Arlette?”

“You didn’t even know she doesn’t like to be called Arlette?” my best friend grunts a laugh. “How long did you two exactly date? A week?”

“Almost a year,” my ex snarls before I can push for us to discuss this later.

“A fuckin’ year?!”

“Blink twice if you’d like me to have them wait outside,” Ali whispers at a much lower volume. “It’ll be no problem.”

Maybe not for *her*.

I have the sneaking suspicion that kicking them out would just multiply my problems.

And my headache.

Let’s not forget the splitting headache.

“How about we get back to the symptoms questions,” my suggestion is purposefully louder.

Forceful.

Attention grabbing as well as argument ending.

Or so I hope.

“Right,” the CNA promptly concurs. “Have you had any trouble hearing?”

“Unfortunately not,” is rather clearly reported.

“Any trouble speaking?”

Oh, lots of that in these past twenty minutes.

Sensing what I'm thinking prompts the man I adore to say, "She's talkin' about slurs or stutters or trouble recallin' words not why you've kept *secrets*."

It's almost impossible to ignore the way the last word sizzles through the air. "No." My eyes lock with Ali's. "Nothing like that."

"Good. That's all good." Her fingers use the mouse to click around. "According to the person who brought you in, you appeared to have tripped or been pushed, and managed to hit the side of your head resulting in loss of consciousness leading us to believe you're suffering from a concussion. These things have already been put down in your chart for Dr. Kurtzman; however, is there anything else you – or someone in the room – would like added to the information in regard to the incident that brought you in?"

"I...I honestly don't remember anything."

"She has ligature marks around her neck," Slater factually reports forcing my attention to him. "Thin. Most likely from some sort of wire. Closer to deep sea versus piano."

Ali nods in acknowledgement while clicking away. "And you're sure they're from the incident?"

"Positive." His hands slide into his jean pockets. "They weren't there before I left for my date."

"That's right..." I thoughtlessly proclaim. "You *did* ditch me for a date!"

"I did *not* ditch you."

"You totally ditched me."

"I *rescheduled* with you."

"Kinda last minute."

"With *your* blessin'."

"Hoes before bros...I remember that now."

"And yet you *don't* remember me askin' you *not* to call me bro."

“It’s quite alright to reschedule on ‘*bros*’ when you have an *actual date*,” Harv casually concurs, hands reaching over to re-fluff the pillow behind my head. “There’s no need to be defensive, Wahl.”

“*I’m not defensive, Seventeen.*”

Tell that to the almost red words filing out of his mouth.

“And can we get back to the reason we’re here?” Slater rushes to demand. “Angel Cake’s attack.”

“Angel Cake?” Ali school girlishly giggles. “That’s so cute!”

Slater flashes a toothy grin that causes me to roll my eyes.

It *is* cute.

And he *is* sweet.

And seeing his chest all puffed out in jealousy *is* tying my stomach in knots.

But now is not the time for that shit.

Especially not when my life could possibly be in danger.

“Those marks weren’t there earlier. And accordin’ to the security footage, she never left the buildin’ before she went down to her vehicle to head out for the night; therefore, they had to have occurred during the attack.”

“Can’t say I *love* hearing that word,” I softly confess.

“Can’t say I *love* sayin it,” my best friend immediately comforts, body crossing over to give my leg a loving touch. “But I will handle this situation, Angel Cake.” A comforting squeeze is offered. “You have my word.”

“*We* will get it handled,” Harv corrects in a way meant to instill more relief rather than frustration.

“Any other notes for the doctor?” Ali asks the pair. After both answer in the negative, she turns the device off,

gently touches my arm, and asks, “You want some water? Ice chips? Maybe a whistle for when they start at it again?”

Swallowing my snickers is almost impossible. “I’d love some water.”

“Coming right up!”

To my surprise, Ali’s exit doesn’t just allow for Slater to return to my bedside – where he immediately un-fluffs to aggressively re-fluff my pillow – but it also allows for my youngest brother – who is just two years older than me – to come barging in. “Arlez, you okay?!”

“Terence,” exasperation at my best friend can’t be contained. “*You called Terence?*”

“Of course, Wahl called me!” A defeated hand toss is wedged between sentences. “Why wouldn’t you want him to call?!”

“I didn’t say I didn’t want him to call.”

“Kinda sounded like that, Angel Cake.”

“Right?!” T gestures his large, dark palm Slater’s direction. “You heard it!”

“*This,*” my hands wave through the air, “is what I didn’t want!”

“*See,* I knew you didn’t want him to call me.”

“And who are you, if you don’t mind me asking?” Harv cautiously inquires, shoulders pushing themselves back to lengthen his spine.

“You don’t know her brother T?” Slater’s perplexity is unmistakable and swiftly redirected to me. “How does he *not* know your brother?”

“He never met him.” Assuming where the line of questioning is headed next prompts me to add, “*Any* of them.”

“Should he have?” T quirks a curious eyebrow. “Am I missing something?”

“Sounds like we both are,” sighs the southern accented man determined to make my headache worse.

“Terence meet our boss Harvey Lenkov. Harvey Lenkov meet my youngest big brother, Terence.”

The two shake hands at the same time T compliments, “It’s nice to know you care so much about your employees.”

Before Harv can imply we are anything else, Slater smoothly echoes, “It’s *really nice* to know he cares *this much* about his *employees*.”

Momentarily shutting my eyes is attached to a heavy inward sigh.

Any chance I could convince that sweet little thing to bring me a shot of tequila instead?

Tequila really does make everything better.

“What exactly happened?” T resumes speaking to me shifting my stare back to his. “All Wahl said was that there was an incident at work that he would be looking into and that you had been rushed here because of a concussion.”

“*Possible* concussion,” Harv attempts to amend.

“No, she *has* a concussion,” the unrequited love of my life immediately argues. “It’s just a matter of if it’s minor or major.”

T tosses Slater an inquisitive look. “They order a CT scan?”

“It’s been mentioned and *will be* mentioned *again* when her doc arrives.”

“Who is it?”

“Kurtzman.”

“Not a total tool.”

“But enough of one to insist she needs more than a band-aid and an icepack?”

“Oh, fuck yeah.”

“And *this*,” my finger wiggles between the two of them, “*this* is the other thing I didn’t want. I have a doctor to look after me, Dr. Carmichael. I didn’t need another.”

“You’re a doctor?” Harv immediately ponders out loud.

“A hepatobiliary surgeon to be exact while our oldest brother Monte is a hepatologist, one of the best in the country. We’re actually partners in the practice together. Pretty sure his fascination with the liver is to blame for mine.”

“I wasn’t aware you had two brothers.”

“She has *three*,” Slater cockily chastises.

“And is the third a doctor as well?”

“Medical malpractice attorney,” the other two men in the room state in tandem.

“You’re the only one who didn’t end up tied to the medical field?” My ex asks at the same time he drops his gaze down to me.

“Correct.”

“Interesting.” All of a sudden, Harv’s hand lands on top of mine. “I look forward to learning more about why-”

“She likes behaviors more than blood tests,” Slater declares for me.

“And sociology more than biology,” T casually announces.

He nods at the two of them prior to locking eyes with me. “I would love to know more of why that is from you directly. Maybe over dinner later this week?”

Displeased rumbles unexpectedly rattle my bed preventing me from responding.

Fuck. Me.

Can I get like a thirty second timeout?!

They at least get that in my favorite sport!

“This incident,” Terence loudly begins again, pulling everyone’s attention thankfully away from me, “was it an *accident* or an *attack*?”

“Attack,” Slater immediately replies.

“Who would wanna attack her?”

“Not a fuckin’ clue,” my best friend unhappily grumbles.

“I might have an idea,” Harv offhandedly claims, collecting all of our gazes.

In spite of the interrogation, I know that’s about to leave Cowboy’s mouth, I beat him to the punch. “Why would someone wanna hurt me?”

“It could have something to do with that email you sent me.”

“*What. Email?*” Slater aggressively bites.

“Arlette – I’m sorry – *Arley*,” he begins, words taking an unusual lighter shade, “sent me an email before she left for the night about some discrepancies. I haven’t had a chance to review it yet because I was on a call-”

“Which was why I walked to my car alone!” I excitedly recall. “I remember now! You asked me could you walk me to my car, I agreed, but then you never showed up-”

“What kind of man ghosts walkin’ a lady to her car?” the love of my life snips on a snarky smirk.

“Not the good kind,” my brother instantly backs.

“I was trying to wrap up a conference call.”

“Did you try hittin’ the end button?” Slater snidely asks. “It’s typically the *red one*.”

“I couldn’t just hang up. It was important.”

“*So. Is. Arley.*”

Gotta give my best friend that.

He’s never let me feel like I didn’t matter or came second to anything.

“Alright,” T does his best to redirect the conversation, “so um, what happened when your boss boyfriend-”

“*Ex-boyfriend*,” instantly shoots from Slater’s mouth.

“Didn’t show up?”

“I decided to just go ahead and go.” More recollection continues to crawl to the front of my mind. “Consuelos was guarding my floor. Yi was in the lobby and offered to walk me, which I declined-”

“You’re not supposed to fuckin’ decline, Arley,” Slater instantaneously criticizes. “We’ve been over this shit a million times. You are a high value asset. People *target* high value assets. *Hence* why I don’t ever want you walkin’ alone.”

“I agree,” Harv concurs much to my surprise. “You are one of our most valuable assets at the company. One we can’t afford to lose.”

“One *I* can’t afford to lose,” the man I’m convinced is probably my soulmate gingerly declares, fingers slipping over to cup mine once more. “One I’m *not* going to lose.”

“What can we do?” T folds his arms firmly across his chest. “Assign her a bodyguard?”

Slater cuts his gaze over to my brother. “*Done*.”

An objection is barely able to form from me, “But-”

“I’m not askin’.”

“But-”

“And I’m damn sure not arguin’.”

“I am,” my ex states in what can only be concluded as an objective tone. “What if you’re not the best operative for the assignment, Wahl.”

“I’m the *only* operative for the assignment, sir. Make no fuckin’ mistake about that.”

Terence doesn’t hesitate to nod his head in unity. “Wahl’s got a point. No one protects my sister quite like he does.”

A grateful chin tilt is given my brother's direction prior to the man holding my hand announcing, "I'll run point. Blu will be my second. And until all this shit is figured out, until we have an idea on the who and the what and the why," his blue stare swings back to me, "you'll be staying with *me*."

And just when I thought we had reached the basement level of awkward hell, the flood boards spread apart to drop me into the deepest depths possible.

Being secretly in love with my best friend is hard enough, but being secretly in love with my best friend *and* having to move in with him is some sort of creative new torture tactic I don't remember reading about in my annual contract.

Chapter 6

Slater

I've never been a fan of torture.

However, I understand its purpose.

Especially now.

Sounds of a vehicle entering the currently closed parking garage shift my attention away from the view of the hospital that's close by and over to where a bright red Camaro is whipping around the corner at a needlessly fast speed.

The man gets points for driving a Chevy but loses twice as many for driving around like an idiot in a cop magnet.

Unlike my half-brother and our father, I never understood the appeal of a two-door.

Maybe it's because I know I'm better prepared in something bigger.

Or maybe it's because they choose to get laid in actual beds versus wherever is most convenient.

Not that that matters anymore.

Fucking anyone is the furthest thing from my mind right now.

Which is what always happens when I go from civilian mindset to mission mode.

And protecting Arley *is* a mission.

It's *the* mission.

It's *the* single most fucking important mission I've ever had in my entire life.

More important than saving and stabilizing stranded soldiers from mountains.

More important than diving and swimming behind enemy lines to extract fallen pilots from hostile territory.

Fuck, it's even more important than living through the beatings and burnings I endured while waiting to be rescued from my kidnapers as a child.

Making sure *nothing* ever happens to Angel Cake again is my sole focus.

My sole purpose.

My only reason for getting out of bed every morning going forward.

That attack should've never happened and had I been more concerned about caring for *her* than caring for my cock potentially getting touched it wouldn't have.

She wouldn't have strangle marks on her neck.

She wouldn't have needed to go to the ER.

And she wouldn't have been forced to have a CT scan that triggered traumatic memories from a time when the whole world was convinced, she was *broken* rather than simply built different.

Watching tears run down her cheeks as they slid her shaking figure into the machine had me hating myself and wanting to take my own life for causing the woman I love, so much fucking grief. Adding in the fact she refused to talk to *me* – and only me – afterward simply pushed me past pure contemplation to the beginning of devising an actual plan to make it possible.

A plan I would've probably put into action if it didn't completely contradict my primary mission of doing whatever it takes to ensure her safety.

Like I said before, *that* takes precedent over everything.

Including whether or not she actually likes me.

I loathe the idea that she doesn't, but I'll fucking deal as long as she's properly taken care of, which is what the

stupid test was doing. We needed to make sure she didn't suffer anything internally and head trauma is always a better to be safe than sorry situation. I've seen what happens firsthand when people make the mistake of assuming rather than assuring.

It isn't pretty.

And it damn sure isn't the type of shit I want for Arley.

The driver of the red vehicle positions it at an obnoxious angle – occupying multiple spaces – and quickly kills the engine. As soon as he emerges from his car, he flashes me a grin that matches his parking.

Crooked and annoying.

“Morning, Wahl!” Reynolds enthusiastically greets.

His seemingly warm sentiment is met by a small head tilt and question, “You bring me a peace offerin’?”

He shows me more teeth.

More of his mouth.

More of his excitement.

I swear to God, if he hasn't brought me exactly what I asked for I will redirect *all* of my fucking frustrations to him. His ass will be limping into his favorite champagne room for at least a goddamn month.

One simple push of his keys pops the trunk to his vehicle to reveal to me the reason he will be walking out of this place in one piece versus pieces.

Crossing over from where I'm leaning against my truck is followed by assisting in the relocation of the target to the nearest pillar. Despite being bound and gagged, he thrashes his body around, hoping to break free or possibly just slow down the inevitable. A single strike to the stomach ceases the flailing and sparks loud groans to propel themselves against the duct tape covering his mouth. Slamming him into the structure instantly alleviates a bit of the agony that's wreaking havoc on my system and upon feeling the first *hint* of relief I have in hours, I decide to do it again.

And again.

And again.

And each time his stout frame crumples, my own stands a little taller.

Higher.

Regains the bit of honor that was *lost* when he had that wire around Arley's neck.

Visions of what that probably looked like begin to creep into the front of my mind only to be surpassed by imagining how terrified she must've felt.

How helpless.

Pinning him to the pole by his neck is done at the same time I grunt an order, "Grab the rope from the back of my truck." Reynolds quickly fulfills the command while I increase the pressure around the target's throat. "Look at me." His hooded eyes threaten to close, prompting me to squeeze harder. Bang him into the pillar once more, this time in a more helpful fashion. "You wanna live to see another day?"

He nods to the best of his ability.

"Then this is how it's gonna go. *I'm* gonna ask you some questions and *you're* gonna give me some answers. Understood?"

The male attempts to bob his head again.

"Good." Reynolds returns with the requested item and swiftly swaps positions with me. "Now, there are a few ground rules you're gonna wanna keep in mind." Unknotting the bundle precedes me walking around the column to be behind him. "Lie to me?" Reynolds lowers his hold to allow the rope to be wound around the attacker's neck. "And I'll back my truck into you." I lean over his shoulder and speak directly into his ear. "*Try* to lie to me?" The initial tying occurs next. "And I'll back my truck into you." Forcefully yanking it around as I secure the object in place is attached to another set of statements. "Lie to me by omittin' somethin'? And I'll back my truck into you." Once I'm finally finished, I swing my

large frame back around to be face to face with the man responsible for hurting my best friend. “Waste my time?”

“And he’ll back his truck into you,” Reynolds confidently tries to add from where he’s standing to my side.

“And I’ll kill you.”

My target’s eyes instantly widen indicating we truly have an understanding.

I spin on my heels, pull the keys out of my pocket, and head for the front seat. The second I’m inside, I get the engine roaring, letting the sound that’s reverberating around the secluded area sooth me while simultaneously frightening him.

Meeting the man’s gaze in my side mirror, I command, “Take his tape off, Reynolds.”

The pain in the ass that’s always looking for a strip club buddy obediently does what he’s told.

To no surprise, the bound man idiotically begins shouting at the top of his lungs. *“Hellllppppp! Hellppppppp!”*

“Wrong choice.” I state and slowly begin reversing his direction. His screams swiftly get louder and higher pitched until my foot shifts back onto the break. “You wanna scream? ‘Cause I’d be happy to give ya somethin’ to really scream about.”

“I’ll talk! I’ll talk! I’ll tell you whatever you wanna know!”

Our eyes lock in the mirror prior to inquiring, “Are you Sebastian Messina?”

“Yeah!” His chin brushes against the rope while nodding. “Yeah! That’s me!”

“You left your cigarette butt at the scene which makes you too sloppy to be an actual button man or too stupid to stay in that position for much longer.”

“What the fuck is a button man!?”

His lack of knowledge regarding a basic term has me lifting a displeased eyebrow. “You fuckin’ with me?”

“No!”

“You *sound* like you’re fuckin’ with me.”

“No!”

“Mmm, it *feels* like you’re fuckin’ with me.”

“No! No! I’m not-” The sound of my engine roars for a second time during the process of my tailgate creeping closer. “Fuck!Fuck!Fuck! I don’t know what a button man is! I swear to God! Pleasedontkillme!”

Seeing his body uncontrollably shaking has me putting my foot back on the brake. “Don’t swear to God. *Swear to me.*”

“I *swear* to you – whoever you are – I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

That’s good.

Him not being a low level hired gun for a mob family means I’m most likely *not* about to have to single handedly take down an entire crime organization.

And thank fuck for that.

Unlike parasailing with Arley in Boracay, that shit’s not on my bucket list.

“Who sent you to kill Arlette Carmichael last night?”

“I don’t know.”

My foot immediately lets up so that the vehicle can inch closer. “What did I say about lyin’ to me, Messina?”

“I’m not lying!”

“What do you think, Reynolds? Is he lyin’?”

“Feels like he’s lying, Wahl.”

“Thought so.”

Tapping the accelerator not only escalates the distance closing but the rate at which words fall from his lips. “I wasn’t sent to kill her!”

His statement has me momentarily stopping my truck.

“I-I-I-I was just supposed to rough her up!” His Adam’s apple bobs uncontrollably. “Scare her! Tell her to stop digging!”

“Stop diggin’?” My glare narrows at his reflection in the mirror. “Stop diggin’ for what?”

“I don’t know.” Pressure relieves itself from the brake yet again causing him to shriek at the top of his lungs. “Ireallydontknow!”

“He’s uh...” Reynolds gives the side of his face an uncomfortable scratch. “He’s pissing himself, Wahl.” The fellow Haworth agent leans over to meet my gaze. “I don’t think he’s lying this time.”

After putting my foot back on the brake, I ask, “Who sent you?”

“I swear to G-” his voice cuts off and quickly corrects, “*to you* that I don’t know who sent me. It was a double-blind blackboard assignment.”

“Meanin’ you don’t know who posted it, and they don’t know who took it.”

“Right!” He frantically nods between snuffles. “That’s exactly fucking right!”

Except I don’t wanna be fucking right, because this means whoever wanted my woman scared isn’t some random asshole, she managed to piss off by simply being the smartest person in the room at the wrong time.

It means they’ve got connections and deep pockets.

And unknown enemies with connections and deep pockets are one of my least fucking favorite combinations.

“Was recon required for this mission?”

Confusion doesn’t hesitate to cake itself onto his sweaty face.

“Surveillance.” A heavy sigh of annoyance is released before further clarification. “Were you required to follow

around your target prior to last night or did they provide you with all the information you needed for the attack?”

“They gave me that shit! Whoever the person or persons were! They – They – They uh...” he unintentionally cuts off his own oxygen during his frantic movements, “they had everything arranged. I took the gig yesterday morning, got a keycode for a storage unit by lunch, and was told to attack at night. In the unit was everything I needed. Photo of her. Her car. Her license plate. The code for the back entrance of the building. A parking lot layout. Where *she* parked. When the guards made their rounds and shift changes. And then when she normally left work.”

His flood of information churns my stomach so much that I have to chomp down on my inner cheek to keep down the bile.

That’s the type of intel you only know as an inside man.

Or only know when you *have* an inside man.

“The only thing the shit didn’t account for was her working late. The info I was given implied she’d be leaving earlier, and when she didn’t, I had to...stick around...and wait it out.”

“That’s when you smoked,” Reynolds causally clarifies during the crossing of his arms. “And inevitably left evidence behind like a moron.”

And that’s *coming* from a moron.

“I thought about bailing on the whole thing, but it was too much cash to pass up.”

“How much?” New bits of discomfort bounce around his brown eyed stare pushing me to repeat the question before lifting my foot off the brake. “How much!?”

“Twenty K in cash!”

Twenty grand.

Simply *scaring* the love of my life is worth fucking twenty large?

Fuck, I can't fathom how much more someone would be willing to pay to have her...to have her...

Unable to finish the thought is accompanied by a low grumble and harder tapping of the accelerator. Screeches from the sensors crash into the unholy cries pouring out of him to create a symphony of horror that successfully relaxes my shoulders as well as brings a smirk to my face.

Reynolds poorly hides his cringes while nervously watching my lifted back end prepare to collide with the assailant's chest, an action that's never quite completed courtesy of my ringing cell.

Throwing the vehicle into park pulls a loud sigh of relief from the other two people in the area alongside an amused grunt from me. I tear my attention away from the reverse cam and professionally answer the call, "Wahl."

"The target is ready for discharge," Blu casually announces into the phone, mirth impossible to ignore. "However, she *hates* the outfit Monte brought her to wear and is refusing to leave the building in it."

"How bad is it?"

"She's given up trying to explain it to him and simply moos instead."

I grant myself the opportunity to chuckle for what feels like the first time all day.

"T has been laughing so hard that he nearly pissed himself two minutes ago."

Something I'm sure put *him* back in her good graces.

"She *begged* me to go get her something from the gift shop but-"

"Don't. Even. *Think*. About leavin' that room before I get back, Blu."

"I'm not."

"Tell her I'm around the corner and will swing by the giftshop on my way back."

“*Roger that.*”

I immediately end the call, slide out of the front seat, and stroll to the situation it’s time to end. “How do you feel, Messina?” My face cranes a little closer to his. “*Scared?*”

Instead of words, I simply receive choked sobs.

“Perfect.” An undeniable vile smile spreads from ear to ear at the same time I state, “Now, you know how she fuckin’ felt.” Grabbing his damp face allows me to snap it my direction to maintain eye contact. “Come near my woman again – *in any way* – and I’ll line your body bag with that same twenty k that got you into this shit. Clear?”

“Cl-cl-clear.”

“Word of advice?”

“O-o-okay.”

“You might wanna change careers. You’re clearly not cut out for this shit.” The condescending cheek pat he’s presented is followed by me redirecting my stare to Reynolds. “Leave him here. Let him wonder if he’s gonna live or die the same way Arley did. ”

He nods his understanding and begins backing up to his vehicle. “We square?”

“We’re square.”

Just like Yi is for finding this motherfucker so fast for me.

He *never* should’ve let Arley walk alone, late at night, by herself to her car. *His job* is to keep her ass safe especially when I can’t. He fucked up and had he not found this blockheaded idiot for hire in record time his slate would still be stained.

The thing is...I’m not really one for grudges.

They’re a waste of time and resources to me.

You have an issue?

Address it.

Correct it.

Do whatever it takes to fix it before the shit can spiral out of control and become something bigger.

Uglier.

Deadlier.

However, with that said, when I finally figure out exactly who made the grave mistake of coming after my heart, I still won't hold a grudge.

Just a loaded weapon.

Aimed right between their eyes.

Chapter 7

Arley

I've never been more convinced than I am *right now* that all the men in my life are completely clueless when it comes to fashion.

We're talking more than the stereotypical amount.

Latest proof?

This god-awful shirt my best friend walked into my hospital room and proudly presented like he had scoured each and every runway in Milan in order to find it rather than the new parent section of the giftshop.

Slater pauses outside his downtown penthouse apartment door and flashes me a wide grin again. "Come on, Angel Cake, it's clever."

"It's not *clever*."

"Then it's witty."

"It's not that either."

"Alright," he removes his keycard from his back pocket, "then just plain ol' funny."

"You mean *punny*? Because then *yes*, this Pac-Mom shirt is very punny."

"Which is what makes it *funny*."

"Yeah, in a Dad joke sort of way."

"What I'm hearin' is...you really do like it, and you just don't want the world to know it."

His deliciously cocky grin receives a sassy smirk. "What you *should* be hearing is...between this shirt and the Russian hat you are *not* to be trusted on clothing related missions." Loud, lively chuckles bounce his entire frame prior to whirling warmly around me. "I'll have to make a note of

that in your file. Recommend you get some much-needed training in that department.”

“Yeah, I must’ve went to *tactical* instead of *tactile* that day.”

Giggles are attached to a gentle poke to his bicep. “*That* was clever.”

“Thank you,” Slater chuckles at the same time he unholsters his weapon. “Now, protocol dictates I sweep an area before stationing the target into a new environment, so when we step inside, you need to wait by the front door until I announce that it’s clear. Understood?”

“Is this really necessary, Slater?” My head tilts to the side in obvious irritation. “It’s *your* apartment.”

“And you are *mine* to protect, Arley.” The shades of blue that rush toward me are bright. Bold. Unbending. “*I’ll* decide what’s necessary or unnecessary.”

“But-”

“I’m not askin’.”

“But-”

“And I *damn sure* ain’t arguin’.”

Irritation has me itching for a fight – a fight I know we’re going to have sooner or later – yet instead of allowing sooner to be now versus later, I slam my mouth shut.

Swallow my objections and lift my hands up in surrender.

I like that he wants to make sure I’m cared for, but I don’t like that he thinks that means I don’t get a say about it.

Slater swipes his keycard to grant us access inside and slowly opens the door, flashlight attached to his Glock, instantly lighting up the otherwise dark space.

The two finger “follow him” directive is taken without hesitation; however, holding in my snark regarding the situation isn’t. “Can I turn on the light when entering the room

Brash Bridges or is that something I need to run up the chain of command before doing?”

“*Funny*,” he sarcastically states, blue lettering jagged. “You know...in a bein’ a twat to the man tryin’ to protect you sort of way.”

Shock sends my jaw to the recently polished floors. “Did you call me a fucking twat?”

“Negative,” my best friend swiftly insists while examining the kitchen space, “but I did refer to your shitty play on words in that aspect.” He positions his back to be flush with the outside wall and prepares to whip around the closest corner. “Do with that what you will.”

Huh.

If I didn’t think this whole living together thing was going to be a bad idea *before*, I damn sure think it’s going to be *now*.

I flip on the light next to the intercom, illuminating the area as well as his stealthy actions and carefully slide my shoulder bag onto the ground beside me. From a slightly crouched position, Slater cautiously maneuvers around his luxury space, weapon extended forward, ready to fire first and ask questions later. Every door he passes is opened. Light turned on. Room inspected. And then reinspected before moving onto the next region. Intrigue over the amount of dedication he’s delivering despite knowing he doesn’t have to – after all I’m just his best friend not an *actual* high dollar client – is what leads to me bracing my back against the door and watching his actions more intensely. Admiration effortlessly amalgamates with awe each time he deems an area secure while desire threatens to demolish them both every time, he cuts a glance my direction to ensure I’m still here.

Still safe.

Still untouched by anyone that isn’t him.

And contrary to the very uncomfortable pissing contest I witnessed earlier, I *don’t* want anyone else but him.

I haven't *wanted* anyone else since that day in the elevator he teased me for giving him "blue balls" rather than blueberries, a moment we still laugh about every time we come across the fruit whether we're alone or together.

Too bad he doesn't see that.

Or maybe can't?

Unexpected vibrations begin in the pocket of the Pac-Man pajama bottoms I'm wearing redirecting my attention away from cowboy guardian down to the buzzing device I quickly retrieve.

Harv: Go ahead and send out those drafted emails whenever you're ready.

Wonder if he means now?

Or was that meant to be like when I feel up to working again?

Or is he just looking for an excuse to text me?

To check on me?

To prove he isn't the same guy he was when we dated forever ago?

Rather than dig at that ancient burial ground, I click over to the messages waiting to be sent to the department heads in which I'm requesting their records and begin emailing accordingly. Unlike Harv and Slater, I'm not necessarily convinced that the attack I suffered has anything to do with the shit I'm looking into. It could've been related to something else. Practically anything else. When you evaluate and analyze the amount of data that I do, about the types of people that I do, it's impossible *not* to come across something no one wants found out.

But like is trying to kill me for discovering you have a mistress or gambling problem or an STD from your favorite stripper really the right call?

That seems *excessive* to me.

“*Clear*,” my best friend announces upon his return to the kitchen. “The scene is secure.” He tucks his weapon back out of sight as he announces, “There haven’t been any security announcements on my phone, but once you’re asleep, I’ll review the footage closer in search of any abnormalities.”

“Abnormalities?”

“Odd or suspicious noises in the hall. Attempts to enter my apartment with the wrong keycard. Questionable delivery individuals. That sort of thing.”

The question fumbles off my tongue before I can even think of stopping it. “Is doing that *really* necessary, Cowboy?”

Perhaps the nickname is what keeps his words my favorite shade, “It’s *protocol*, Angel Cake.” He casually crosses his arms. “And that’s a word you better get used to me sayin’.”

“Gotta admit. Not my favorite P word.”

He arches a curious eyebrow. “You have a favorite P word?”

“Do you not?”

Humor doesn’t hesitate to paint itself in his expression. “Doubt it’s the same one you do.”

The perverted joke causes us both to laugh, successfully killing any lingering tension in the atmosphere.

Thankful for the shift, I do my best to keep things playful, “So when does protocol say I can get out of this mustard stained t-shirt and into *real* clothes?”

“You *are* in real clothes.”

“These are *not* real clothes.”

“They look pretty real to me.” His impish grin returns in full force just the way I like it. “*And* they felt pretty real to my bank account when I got the receipt that was just shy of a good steak dinner.”

“Hey, I didn’t tell you to break the bank to buy me something I’m never gonna wear again.”

“Never?!” Chuckles spring loose during his creeping closer. “Do you mean *unlikely* to wear again?”

“I mean once I get out of this shit, I’m not putting it back on.”

His teeth sink into his bottom lip as if trying to keep a groan at bay.

Seriously?

Does he want to see me topless?

Wait, is it *my* tits he wants to see or just *someone’s*? After all, I did ruin his chance at getting laid last night.

“Sorry about screwing up your date,” I meekly apologize. “I-”

“Better not even *think* about apologizin’ for that shit again,” Slater sweetly scolds, hands lifting to cup my face. “There is *no one* in this world that matters more to me than you, Angel Cake.” His thumbs softly stroke the skin underneath them. “You should know that by now.”

“*Still*...I didn’t mean to ruin your night or...*morning* more likely.”

“You didn’t.” The softness of his words blankets me as his hands fall back to his side. “I did that all on my own.”

Curiosity gets the better of my mouth prompting me to investigate, “How? How is that possible? You’re like *the perfect catch!*”

Unfamiliar redness suddenly appears in his cheeks. “Is that right?”

“To any woman that doesn’t snipe for the same team... uhh...*yeah*.” More words come rushing out of my mouth without waiting to be examined or evaluated or analyzed first. “You’re sweet. And kind. And charming. And funny. And built like The Commodores wrote that song about *you* but then had

to change it last minute to be about a woman in order for it to sell a zillion records.”

“And here I thought your music knowledge failed to expand past your inner emo girl shit.”

Tossing him a teasing glare naturally occurs. “Is that how you fucked up? You let your ‘The Devil Went Down to Georgia’ side come out too soon on the first date?”

“Hey,” he warmly chuckles, “I am as the good Lord made me.”

“Fiddle obsessed and sexy in a pair of Levi’s?”

Slater momentarily balks at my open flirting while I silently thank my “Sk8er Boi” stars for my vibrating device giving me a reason to look elsewhere.

Wow.

I might’ve hit my head harder than I thought.

I know nothing showed up as unusual, but something is *clearly* malfunctioning in there.

How else can I explain the shit I just said out loud?

One simple swipe across the screen reveals to me another surprise, although unlike my comment, this one I probably could’ve seen coming had I given the situation a little more thought.

Harv: I hope you know I’m thinking about you Arley.

And he’s probably the one I *should* be thinking about.

Not the man standing across from me in his good date jeans.

Not the man who had me eat a cheeseburger while we took his truck through the carwash to ensure we weren’t being tailed.

Not the man who literally carried me from his parking space to the elevator when my cheap giftshop flip-flop broke

all because he didn't want me to risk burning my feet on the hot concrete.

That is the man I definitely shouldn't be hoping stops looking at me like I'm a fragile trinket he's afraid will get damaged through customs and starts looking at me like he wants to rip off my packaging.

Briefly shutting my eyes to collect my composure is mindlessly done.

How am I this horny?!

Why am I this wound up?!

Was Morris right?

Does a brush with death have an undeniable way of forcing you to go after what you really want in life?

Another set of buzzes pulls my eyelids back up to see the screen.

Harv: I hope you know how glad I am you're okay.

Harv: Text me whenever you want. I'm here for you.

"That work?" Slater promptly interrogates, pulling my gaze back to his.

"Not exactly." He lifts both eyebrows in a wordless request for more information, which unintentionally makes me defensive. "Do you *need* to know who's texting me? Is that... protocol?"

"*Protocol* dictates I can confiscate your device and search it any time I deem necessary." Slater folds his arms firmly across his chest. "Would you like me to follow protocol or simply *tell me* who's textin' you?"

"It's just Harv."

There's no denying the hardlines that appear on my best friend's face.

"He was just checking on me."

“*Checkin’ on you.*”

“Telling me he’s glad I’m okay.”

“*Glad you’re okay.*”

“Why are you repeating what I say like I’m speaking in code?”

“*Are you?*”

My brow furrows in confusion over the accusation as much as the navy-blue dispersing in the air.

“Is ‘checkin’ on you’ and ‘glad you’re okay’ code for ‘are you alone?’ and ‘is now a good time to talk about dinner next week?’?”

“What?!” Bewilderment immediately bursts through my tone. “*No.*”

“No, it’s not code for that shit, or no, you’re not plannin’ on goin’ to dinner with him next week?” His words darken and tremble during their descent to the floor. “Cause protocol dictates I escort you on dates too, Arley. Even when they’re with our fuckin’ boss.”

Guess it was just wishful thinking that we wouldn’t have to revisit this subject again...*ever.*

“How about you turn *off* our cell for the night?” The dark hue in his voice indicates it’s clearly not a suggestion. “Worry about work, or what should be work but isn’t, in the mornin’ instead?” He sucks away whatever words got stuck in his teeth. “Get some *actual* rest?” His open palm extends itself my direction. “Phone.”

I begrudgingly slam the device into his hand and mock, “What’s next? Sending me to my room?”

“Yup.” Slater powers down the device without breaking eye contact with me. “*Your room* is now *my room*, and my room is now the couch.”

“You can’t be serious.”

His expression remains unchanged.

“I can sleep on the couch.”

“No.”

“You know I don’t mind sleeping on your couch, Cowboy. I mean I picked it out, remember?” Seeing the twitch of a smile has me playfully adding, “*You* wanted to bring home that white plaid flannel mistake that belonged in someone’s great grandmother’s backwoods basement, but I *saved you* by dragging you over to that gray, plush, luxury, piece of heaven that is now more than acquainted with my rounds of drool.”

“It is a medical marvel that that much spit comes out of somethin’ so small.”

Playfully punching him causes laughter to spill out into the air.

Yet again banishing the bad blood that’s trying to build between us.

“Regardless of your...*very intimate* relationship with my couch,” another swat is delivered to his shaking abdomen, “you’re sleepin’ in my room. It’s cleaner. It’s nicer. And it’s a much easier position to defend than the living room which has too many points of entry to protect.”

“But-”

“Angel Cake could you *please* just...*not* argue with me about this?” The pleading in his tone matches the one in his stare. “Could you just...let me do my job?” My sheepish nodding is by an almost whispered expression of gratitude. “*Thank you.*”

No more orders are given, nor words exchanged.

Slater abandons my phone on the counter, gingerly grabs my hand, and leads me to the one area I can honestly say I’m the *least* familiar with in his penthouse.

And you know what?

Part of me is more than okay with that.

I don’t *need* to constantly be in the area obviously not meant for me.

It's the place you bring the woman you're planning to fuck, not the woman you're planning to talk about poor decisions made during the NHL Entry Draft.

Upon entering the room, the switch is pushed upward, an action that causes all of the industrial styled lights to highlight a surprisingly lifeless space. Between the neatly made bed and the clutter free nightstands, I can't help myself from wondering where his real room is. Not because he's messy – he's actually obnoxiously neat, which is something I blame his military background for – but because this entire area screams “for display use only”. Hell, I'm pretty sure even the bottle of whiskey on the mini table next to his leather sitting chair still has its price tag on it.

I hope he knows, I'm more than willing to help him open and or empty that.

Slater releases his hold to cross over to the wall nearest the floor to ceiling windows. “I tend to keep these open when I sleep in here because I love the city lights, but I can close ‘em. It's no trouble. Just a push of a button.”

“So, you *do* sleep in here?” I playfully beam his direction. “This isn't just the place where the magic happens?”

He swings his stare back to me just in time to see my eyebrows waggle. Light laughs are attached to a slow headshake. “That type of magic *never* happens in here.”

Curiosity once more gets the better of me. “Then where does it happen?”

“Bathroom stall of the bar.”

“Super classy.”

“Or the back of my truck.”

“Getting more Double 0 Douche by the moment.”

“I'll have you know that when I'm on my James Bond shit, I book us a suite at The Frost.” His grin grows to match the impish nature of mine. “I'm a gentleman jus' like he is.”

“Are we sure *gentleman* is the word we wanna use for him?”

Slater chuckles, hits the button, and suggests, “Maybe we do a marathon tomorrow? Catch up on hockey highlights and then spend the rest of the day debatin’ on who wore the title best?”

“We both already know that answer.”

“I know one of us *thinks* they know that answer.” All curtains beginning to close precedes another round of chortles. “But because she’s so cute when she’s wrong, we jus’ let her keep thinkin’ it.”

“It’s like *you want* to start a pillow fight.”

“And it’s like *you want* to lose one.”

There’s no hesitation to reach over and grab the fluffy white weapon to launch an attack; however, unfortunately for me, my best friend’s reflexes are superhuman level. Not only does he manage to somehow dodge the poorly flung pillow while rushing my direction, he snatches it out of the air and throws it back at my torso like the world’s shittiest Frisbee. The instant my hands manage to catch the item, I’m captured from behind, arms crossed over mine to keep them as well as the object secured to my chest.

Arrogant chuckles hit the side of my face before neon bright words are seen leaving his irresistible lips. “Was that a fight, Angel Cake or jus’ an embarrassment?”

Despite my wiggling and giggling nature, Slater maintains his firm hold, theoretically keeping me trapped, but truthfully keeping me in the one place I love to be most. When I glance up at him over my shoulder to demand my freedom, an unexpected confession crawls out of the caverns of my damaged memory instead. “You saved my life.”

His dark eyebrows dart down in confusion.

“You taught me to *SING*.”

“Not crashin’ us into the nearest light pole durin’ those punk screamin’ sessions you have in my truck barely constitutes as savin’ your life, Angel Cake.”

“No,” I snicker and successfully slide out of his grasp so that I can turn to completely face him. “When um...When I was attacked in the parking lot...I...I could hear *your voice* telling me to fight back. To...*SING*.”

“Solar Plexus. Instep. Nose. Groin.”

“Yeah, not sure it was in that *exact* order, but I remember doing all those things or as many of those things that I could, which took him by surprise, ultimately giving me the chance to signal for help. And I know that the only reason that was possible was because of *you*.” Cradling the pillow closer is unconsciously done. “Because *you* pushed me to take that self-defense class you taught. Because *you* pushed me to practice those moves. Because *you* never fail to remind me of how physically capable I can be despite my condition that has a habit of crippling me. You kinda have this way of making me feel like I can do anything.” Admiration hits his gaze yet amusement dances in mine. “*Except* win a pillow fight.”

“Of course,” he airily chuckles, light blue words floating in the space between us. “I need you prepared to handle yourself out in the world, not take me down in cushion combat.” More laughter leaves us both prior to him tucking a loose strand of hair behind my ear. “But on a serious note? I’m grateful you *let me* push you to do those things. That you *let me* teach you to be all that you can really be.”

“Did you just PJ motto at me?”

“That was the Bullet Catchers line and *not* my intention.”

“Army...Air Force...” My head bounces from side to side in a taunting fashion. “It’s all the same, right? Military’s military.”

He twitches me the displeased glare that I’m anticipating. “Before you say some other shit to insult me in, how about we get you settled in bed?”

“Probably a good idea.”

Abandoning the pillow back onto the king size mattress is promptly followed by an odd, unexpected

interrogation regarding my sleeping preferences. While all the questions initially feel idiotic – which side of the mattress do I prefer to sleep on, what temperature does the room need to be at, do I want any light to be seen through the curtains – it dawns on me that they're far from it. His seemingly innocent investigation – that he insists is all about making my indefinite stay as comfortable as possible – actually reveals to us more than I would've imagined. Sure, we know an almost inconceivable amount of shit about one another, but there's also things we still *don't* know.

That we get to learn.

“Whale songs?” Slater's entire face scrunches in stupefaction. “Really?”

“*Ocean sounds*,” I sassily correct at the same time I snuggle underneath the crisp white sheet. “Big difference.”

“No difference.”

“*Huge difference.*”

“Not even a *little* difference.”

Slamming my head back on the pillow is followed by a small sigh. “See, I knew I shouldn't have told you. I knew I should've taken that one to the grave.”

“No, Angel Cake.” Guilt immediately grabs him as he plops onto the edge of the mattress beside me. “No more fuckin' secrets. No more fuckin' surprises. No more fuckin' sucker punches.” My mouth rushes to explain the ex-boyfriend situation, yet is stopped by him speaking again. “You can tell me *anything*. And I mean *anything*. I always thought you knew that, but I'm gettin' the feelin' here lately, that's not the case, so let me put this shit on record. Let me be as crystal fuckin' clear to you as I can be.” His blue gaze bores into my brown in tandem with his cobalt words cradling me. “*You can trust me, Arley. Always.*”

Can I trust him to let me down easy if I tell him how I really feel?

Can I trust him to pick up the broken pieces that would be left behind and help me patch them back together?

Why is it that I can logically predict an entire faction of operatives' responses and reactions in the field yet can't seem to grasp what his will be in this *one* aspect?

Too tired and too not ready for another hard conversation – let's be real, explaining our boss is my ex is hard enough – leaves me with no choice but to logically nod in compliance.

He didn't say I had to tell him everything *now*.

I'll ear mark that big reveal for my death bed.

Huh.

My *actual* death bed, not hospital bed where I *thought* I was dying.

“Alright then,” he begins at the same time he leans over to open the bedside drawer. “Back to the beached whale radio that puts you to sleep...”

“It's not beached whale radio,” I giggle while shaking my head. “Do you have any idea how *sad* that shit would be?”

“Look, you're the one into beluga depression.” Playfully nudging him with my knee occurs prior to him pulling out a tablet to use. “I just need to know if it's a specific station or will anything in the category due.”

Doing my best to get comfortable underneath the covers, I reply, “Any kind of soft waves are good. They have this way of painting my mind white. Erasing all the colors of the day and easing me into just...the most peaceful state possible.”

“We definitely want you peaceful, Angel Cake.” Slater shoots me a sweet beam. “Especially after the hellish twenty-four hours you've had.” A couple taps later, gentle sounds of crashing water flood the speaker system I didn't realize the room was wired with. My best friend carefully places the device on the nightstand, pulls up the cover a little higher, and offers me a kind grin. “Protocol dictates I keep the door open to maintain visual contact; however, if you need it closed, we can figure out a way to make that happen. Maybe use a video

chat service for surveillance until I can get proper gear. It wouldn't be the most secure, but-

“Leaving the door open is totally fine.”

“Really?” He instantly lifts an eyebrow in suspicion. “No argument?”

“You asked me to let you do your job.” Fluffing my pillow under my head occurs on a crooked grin. “Would you like me to make it hard again?”

“*Absolutely. Fuckin'. Not.*”

After we exchange a round of small nickers, Slater slides my glasses off my face, places them on the nightstand, and says goodnight. I watch him exit his own room, turning off the lights on his way out, yet wait until I hear him land on the couch to close my eyes.

For the first few moments, I lay completely still.

Remind myself that while I'm in a very strange bed, it's a familiar location.

That in spite of what happened to me exactly a day ago, I am *safe*.

I am *protected*.

I am...okay.

Turning away from the door becomes my next decision in the pursuit of sleep. I expect facing the direction I know houses his leather reading chair and favorite western novel to provide me with comfort and further feelings of reassurance; however, knowing those things are there but that he's not, that he's not relaxing, that he's in the other room, watching, waiting for something awful to happen has me flopping around onto my back.

Looking up at the high ceiling.

Wondering how many times Slater's aimlessly stared at it before bed.

Wondering what he thought about.

What he's *thinking* about right now.

Is it me?

Is it about the other people he's protected?

Others he's rescued and saved?

What he might have to do to keep me safe?

More questions violently surge in my mind with so much force that I'm pushed back into my original position. Being back in the same place I began restarts the cycle of insecurities. Resets the loop of worries. Reboots the series of concerns regarding my location. My purpose. My value.

"Why me?" is the unanswered question that repeats the most as I continue to twist and turn, tugging blankets on and off.

Who did I piss off?

What did I find?

Was it something discovered by logic or luck?

Knowing if I were in the comfort of my own home that I'd simply reach over and text my best friend is the reason for the next series of actions. I grab the pillow, slide on my glasses, switch my head to the foot of the bed, and position myself to be in his direct line of sight if he looks inside.

To my surprise, he's not only facing the same direction, he's also equally as awake.

Or at least I *think* he is.

It's pretty dark.

Kind of hard to tell, although the light in the far distance allows me to make a better guess.

Slater offers me a soft grin. "Can't sleep, can you?"

"You can't either."

"I *can*, but I'm on duty."

"Does that mean you're not allowed to sleep *at all?!?*"

"It means *light sleepin'* and only when necessary."

“That’s not...*good* for brain function.”

“Years of successful ops tell me otherwise.” Another small smile is shot my direction prior to him stating, “But *you*, on the other hand, my beautiful, brilliant brain ninja, *do* need sleep.”

“Did you just call me a brain ninja?!”

“That’s what you are.”

The top shelf snark that prepares to launch itself from my tongue comes to an unexpected halt thanks to the set of abs now fully on display due to him standing up.

Fuck. Me. Looking that good shirtless should be some sort of war crime.

An act of aggression against all lady parts currently in commission.

Slater’s arrival in his doorway is accompanied by him resting both his bent arms high up on the frame, presenting me with a perfect view of the parachuting tattoos on his cut chest as well as the deep v I have spent too many nights in the bathtub imagining myself tracing with my fingers.

And then my tongue.

Ugh.

I would almost rather whoever tried to kill me just succeed rather than have to continue to endure this new form of sexual torture for some unknown duration.

“What do you normally do when you can’t go down and the whale cries aren’t helpin’?”

Small snickers precede a small shrug. “Text you.”

“And when I’m on an assignment?”

“Do a few shots of tequila.”

The corner of his lip curls upward as he tilts his head to the side. “Is that why T is convinced you’re gonna need a new liver before you’re forty?”

A less than innocent expression appears on my face.
“*Maybe...*”

Laughter leaves us both prior to Slater investigating further, “Anything else?”

“No.” Adjusting my head on the pillow is executed between sentences. “Those two things always do the trick.”

“Alright, well, I ain’t givin’ you tequila,” he sweetly denies, “but I got a trick that might work.”

“There’s still booze in a hot toddy, Cowboy.”

“I’m aware, Angel Cake.” More chuckles bounce between us. “And it’s not somethin’ you drink.”

“Eat?”

“Nope.”

Intrigue instantly gets my already whirling mind moving faster. Unfortunately for me, before I can continue our guessing game, my best friend back tracks the direction he came. Sounds of cabinet doors opening and closing further build my curiosity yet rather than yell out or interrupt, I simply wait.

Impatiently.

But I do wait rather than sneak out of bed to figure it out.

When Slater finally returns, he parks himself on the floor beside me and proudly lifts the object into view.

“A candle.” Not shitting on his idea is a struggle I hope he can’t hear. “Your...solution is...a candle?”

“Affirmative.”

“Is it like a magical aroma?” Quirking an eyebrow quickly occurs on another thought. “Is it one of those tactical candles that releases a subduing scent for honeypot assignments?!”

The faintest smirk touches his lips as he meets my stare. “It’s a prayer candle.”

Huh.

No idea where this is going.

“You know when I was little my ma used to light one of these for me every night.” He wistfully twirls the object in his possession. “It was part of our routine. Bath. Teeth. Book. Candle.” It’s impossible to ignore the sparkle in his speech. “Without fail. She’d light it. Ask the angels to protect me while I slept. And then kiss me goodnight.” His twisting action suddenly slows down. Almost completely ceases. “See, I was their miracle. I wasn’t supposed to survive to full term, and my ma was so scared of losin’ me that every night while she was pregnant, she’d light a candle and ask the angels to protect me while she slept. And then when I was finally born – against the odds – she went down to the hospital chapel every night before she would try to go to sleep and lit a candle, askin’ for them to protect us *both* while we slept. They had told her chances were that I wasn’t goin’ to make it out of the hospital due to the fact I had trouble breathin’ as a result of underdeveloped lungs, so she was even more terrified of closin’ her eyes. She was scared she’d fall asleep with a son, only to wake up without one.”

I didn’t know that.

Hell, I would’ve never assumed he was anything other than a perfectly healthy baby boy considering I know how physically strict the special ops divisions of the military are.

It means he beat the odds again.

Doing what he does best.

Defying logic every chance he gets.

“And after I was taken, she went to my room, lit a candle, and said a prayer, askin’ for the angels to protect me while I slept. *Every. Night.*” Watching the hue of his words shift has me thoughtlessly reaching over and delivering a gentle stroke to his bare shoulder. “And every night that I was trapped in that fuckin’ basement...scared...beaten...and completely alone, I would look up at the night sky through the tiny window out at the stars. Except...I told myself they

weren't stars." He allows his gaze to meet mine. "That they were candles. Candles my ma had lit for me. Candles she had lit askin' the angels to continue to protect me and to *remind me* that regardless of how fuckin' terrified I was...things would someday be okay."

Unfathomable sadness surges itself through my vocal cords cutting off my ability to speak.

"And I know the reason *you* can't sleep – whether you wanna admit it or not – is because *you're* scared."

Tears threaten to build in the rims of my eyelids.

"But it's okay to be scared."

Is it?

Is it in this *particular* case?

It's nowhere near the level of shit he's lived through.

"We all...get scared sometimes, Angel Cake. Fear – much like hope – is jus' part of what makes us human."

Stilling my trembling jaw is impossible.

"So, I'm gonna do the same thing my ma does whenever she's scared. The same thing my dad hates to admit he does when *he's* scared. The same thing I pictured myself doin' in my mind when I was out in the field, *scared* I really wasn't gonna make it home that time."

My vision briefly blurs from the water building in my stare.

"I'mma light this." He tips the item towards me. "Ask the angels to protect you while you sleep. And then kiss you goodnight."

"Us," I airily croak, poorly fighting the overwhelming current of emotions trying to pull me under. "Ask them to protect *us*."

Rather than demand he doesn't need it or insist that he's got himself covered, Slater simply strikes his thumb against the lighter I didn't realize he was holding, fulfils the request, and leans over to plant his lips softly in the middle of

my forehead. The instant they touch, my eyelids fall shut, and I swallow the urge to sob.

He's right.

He's so fucking right.

I *am* scared.

Scared that this wasn't a fluke.

Scared that I'll be attacked a second or third time.

Scared that I might actually die if it happens again.

Scared that something might happen to *him*, the person I love most in the world, because of something *I* did.

Something I didn't mean to do.

Slater's mouth lovingly lingers as his thumb gingerly sweeps away the tears I didn't realize had fallen. "*I will do whatever it takes on God's green earth to keep you safe, Arley.*" Heat from his whispered words wraps firmly around me like a weighted blanket. Convinces me to relax my shoulders and sink into the mattress. "*Even if it means havin' to light every candle on the whole damn planet.*"

Chapter 8

Slater

**

I don't want spam.

Not glazed.

Not with rice.

Not with mixed vegetables out of a can.

Not four nights out of seven.

I don't want spam.

I hope someday I never have to eat it again.

"Eat, Charlie!" the man to my right barks at the same time his hand flies across the back of my head. "Your momma worked hard on this."

Okay...but...my name isn't Charlie.

And the woman to my left isn't my momma.

Or my mom.

Or my mother.

Not my real one anyway.

She's just the person who has been calling herself that for the past five years of my life.

My real ma?

She calls me Slater.

And my real dad?

He calls me champ.

I think he wants me to play sports.

His favorite is hockey.

Or...it was his favorite.

When I was home.

I don't know what he likes now.

Maybe he hates it.

Maybe he hates it the way I hate stupid spam.

“What did I say, boy?!” the silver haired man bites a second time before hitting me again in the same spot, much harder.

Hard enough that my head bounces forward.

He always hits so hard.

And the ring he wears.

His...wedding ring, I think?

It always makes it hurt worse.

Much worse.

Slaps hurt.

But his punches hurt more.

That's what will come next if I don't force myself to open my mouth and eat.

That's what always comes next when I don't.

I should eat.

I can throw it up later like I usually do.

Tomorrow doing “school time” maybe I'll get lucky, and the lady will make a sandwich.

But not a spam sandwich.

“Come on, Charlie,” the brown-haired lady quietly begs as her bruised, shaky hand pushes a dirty fork my direction. “You need... You need to eat.”

He hits her too.

In the face.

In the stomach.

Puts his cigarettes out on her.

That happens to both of us.

*They remind me of the circle rings from the candles my ma
lights every night.*

Except these don't protect me.

These make me think I'm not protected anymore.

*I force myself to nod and pick up the fork, but the second I'm
holding it, the window behind the silver haired man breaks.
Big and small glass pieces fly through the air landing all over
the table.*

All over our food.

All over me.

*Unsure of what to do, I stay frozen in place like a game of
freeze tag I didn't know I was playing while the silver haired
man tries to run away.*

Maybe for the kitchen?

*Maybe for the shotgun he likes to put in my mouth when I don't
listen?*

*The same shotgun he puts between my legs when I ask about
going to real school.*

*Three men dressed in all black holding guns – large guns –
climb through the open space like superheroes not afraid of
the silver haired man.*

Not afraid of the shotgun he has.

Maybe they don't know he has one?

Maybe their guns are better?

Maybe they're not afraid of nothing?

I wish I wasn't afraid of nothing.

*"Downontheground!" one of the men shouts, gun being
pointed at the lady in charge of taking care of me. "Now!"
She screams, falls, and smooshes her face in the dirty carpet
the silver haired man says is never clean.*

It's not.

But she tries.

And I try.

*When I'm not trying to do homework or what she calls
homework, I try.*

*"Don't. Even. Fucking. Think. About. It!" another one of the
superheroes shouts at the silver haired man who was very
close to his own gun. "I'll blow your fucking head off and not
fucking think twice!"*

I would be okay with that.

I would be okay with him going away forever.

Maybe I could go to my old home.

My real home.

"Hey," the last man in black says to me in a nicer voice.

*I quickly look at him and start to slide out of my seat to lay on
the ground too.*

Maybe they aren't superheroes.

Maybe they're bad guys.

Bank robbers.

We don't have much money to steal though.

*Just the pennies we pick up outside the grocery store parking
lot, but the lady who calls herself my momma uses those to buy
the cigarettes that burn us.*

They can have the pennies.

I hope it's enough.

I don't know what they'll do if it's not.

*"Whoa. Whoa. Whoa," the man says very fast, gun coming
down to his side, "don't go anywhere just yet, little dude."*

*I'm not sure why he wants me to stay put or what he wants
from me, but I can see one of his sidekicks – or partners – is
holding his gun to the silver haired man's head keeping me
safe from him and that means I should do what he wants to
show I'm thankful.*

“I’m not here to hurt you, kid.” He squats to look me in the eye. “I promise.”

Silver haired man never made me that promise.

Not even the day they took me.

“My name’s Bannon.” He pauses. Thinks. “My last name is Bannon. That’s what my buddies call me, especially when we’re working like we are now.”

Is bank robbing really a job?

Or maybe...maybe they are superheroes!

“But my first name is Douglas. It’s what my mom calls me.”

I smile even though I shouldn’t.

“She taught me that only the special ladies in your life should ever call you by your first name because your first name is a very special name.”

Hm.

What makes someone special?

“Wanna know why?”

I nod even though I don’t think I should.

“It’s the first name that the first person who ever loved you gave to you.” He smiles. “You copy?”

I don’t know what that means, so I smile again.

“What does your mom call you?”

My mouth opens to answer but is stopped when the silver haired man yells, “Don’t you fucking say a word, Charlie!”

Bannon’s face tilts to the side like he doesn’t understand something. “Is that your name? Is your name Charlie?”

No.

It’s not Charlie.

It’ll never be Charlie.

I don’t ever want to be Charlie.

“Shut him up, Kaut!” Bannon yells to his friend who hits the man in the mouth with the gun. The silver hair man makes a sound like the brown hair lady usually does, and I almost smile wide. “Are those people over there...” he starts talking again, and I look back at him, “the ones my friends are... watching...are they your parents?”

His question makes my eyes grow big.

I hate that question.

I have to say yes when strangers ask me, or I don't eat.

I have to say yes when strangers ask me, or I have to stand in the corner until I pee on myself.

I have to say yes when strangers ask me, or new circles from his cigarettes come to my back.

I have to yes to something I know isn't true or I get hurt.

I learned that a long time ago.

I don't like getting hurt but some days I think it's worth it to remember my old life.

When I don't answer his question, he nods like I did. “They call you Charlie, but that's not really your name, is it?”

Rather than answer, I swallow.

Hard.

“Do you remember what you were called before Charlie?”

I nod again.

“Can you tell me?”

“Charlie, don't!” screams the lady from the floor.

“Look at me, kid,” Bannon says in a dad like voice. “Don't look at them.”

My blue eyes glue themselves onto his.

“Tell me, little dude. What's your real name? What's the special name that was first given to you?”

**

The sound of footsteps crossing the hardwood floor to my left results in me swiftly reaching under the mattress to my right, unholstering the weapon, and rolling onto my side to aim it at the intruder. “Not another step!”

Arley releases a high pitch scream prior to shrieking, “Why do you have a mattress gun?!”

Words of relief prepare to fly off my tongue, yet the sight of her in just a pair of black panties and the shirt I bought her yesterday have a sexually frustrated grouse taking its place.

“Why aren’t you wearin’ any goddamn pants?!” Stating the fact out loud prompts my shaft to swell further until I flex my thigh muscles to redirect the blood flow. “Seriously, Angel Cake, where are your,” my eyes slowly travel upward as the weapon journeys downward, “pants? You had on pants before we went to bed. I distinctly remember that. They even had mustard stains on them from the burger you ate earlier.”

“Don’t say that like burgers aren’t a messy food.”

“Jus’ ‘cause they’re messy doesn’t mean you have to turn eatin’ them into a paint by numbers situation.”

“The pickles slipped out!”

“*Pants*,” I abruptly huff to get us back on the subject. “Where are your pants, Arley?”

Her fingertips fall to tug at the shirt not covering a damn thing. Especially not the rewind, pause, play, fast forward tattoo on her toffee brown, inner left thigh. The same tattoo that makes me fucking miserable every summer at the lake thanks to being able to see the sexy thing and not touch it.

Fuck. Me.

What I would give to touch it.

Her.

My tone grows firm along with my expression.
“*Arlette.*”

“I took them off!”

“Why?”

“I’m a hot sleeper.” An innocent shoulder shrug is wedged between statements. “I actually prefer to sleep naked.”

Visions of her wearing only a smile while rolling around in my sheets begin to invade my mind leaving me with no choice but to sit up completely straight. Flex my muscles again. Distract myself from mental images I’d take down a small country just to get a real-life glimpse of.

Now is *not* the time for that shit of all shit.

I need to focus.

I *gotta* focus.

Arley braces her body against the nearest wall in such a way I’m practically face to face with the sheer black material stopping me from having the best breakfast a man could ever ask for.

I instantly shut my eyes on a wolfish growl and give the back of my neck a hard squeeze.

Which torture tactic is this again?

And how quickly can I make it stop?

“Now,” it takes all the willpower I have to force my eyes to hers rather than the area I should be putting my signature on instead of the paperwork we’ve yet to file to make this security detail official, “why do *you* have a mattress gun?”

“The same reason I have a toilet gun.”

“You have a toilet gun?!”

“And a kitchen gun.”

“A kitchen gun?!”

“And a towel gun.”

“Why the hell do the towels need a gun!?”

“There isn’t a room in this penthouse that doesn’t have some sort of weapon secured in it, plus, the walls are reinforced because my father’s construction company – Wahl to Wahl – reinforces the penthouse levels of all their properties by design. It makes them a shit ton more expensive but also a shit ton more defensible in case of an attack from the sky level versus the ground.” Bending my legs to rest my arms over them is attached to my own innocent shrug. “I’m always prepared.”

“Yeah, I don’t *think* that’s what the Boy Scouts meant by that motto.”

“Maybe not, but it’s definitely what the *Man Scouts* did.”

“Ugh.” A look of disgust instantly covers her expression. “That sounds like a bad Village People tribute bar. Is that really what they call the military?”

“No, I jus’ get a kick out of it when you make *that* face this early.” She narrows her gaze in my direction prompting me to lightly laugh. “And that one.”

Honestly, I love seeing *any* expression from her first thing in the morning.

Our “too tired to drive home” sleepovers have always been my favorite since the first time they happened.

There’s just something about seeing her so relaxed and so content before the day has a chance to color her with its words.

Literally.

While Arley occasionally sees her condition in a positive light – getting lost in the way music comes alive and movies pop off the screen – she more often than not allows herself to be limited by it. Barricaded in her home or mine or the office due to the anxiety that comes from being able to see something other people can’t. The burden that comes from *interpreting* emotions in ways others don’t. She typically teeters between embracing and cursing the medical anomaly,

which is why I love to see her first thing in the morning before there's anything to accept or deny.

Those first few moments in the morning where she just...*is*.

Where she just accepts *her*.

My best friend shakes her head on a small giggle prior to asking, "How is it I've been here a million times and seriously had no idea that this place really is on some John Wick shit?"

"Because the best operatives know how to keep things hidden in plain sight." An amused, impressed hum instantly slips free from her, and the sound has pride unconsciously pushing my shoulders back. "So, Angel Cake, where exactly were you stompin' off to?"

"I wasn't stomping."

"It's like you were doin' the Texas Two-Step in boots fresh out the box."

"You know I only own one pair of those."

"I *do* know that 'cause I was the one that bought 'em." And dream about seeing them slung over my shoulders every time she puts them on. "Where were you headed?"

"To the kitchen. I needed to...check my bag."

Suspension has me instantly investigating, "Your bag or your phone?"

"Bag."

"For?"

"Something."

"What?"

"You..." her teeth steal a small nervous bite of her bottom lip, "don't wanna know."

"I do."

"You don't."

“I do.”

“*Trust me, Cowboy, you don’t.*”

The phrasing has me rising to my feet at the same time I grump, “*And trust me, Angel Cake, I wouldn’t ask if I didn’t.*”

“Fine.” Her hands are tossed defeatedly in the air. “I need to check my bag for lady products.”

“Makeup?” There’s no stopping my face from scrunching in annoyance. “You need to see if you have fuckin’ makeup? *Really?*” An eye roll is accompanied by a firm shake of the head. “Why? I’ve seen you without the shit a thousand times, baby. You look beautiful just the way you are.”

What appears to be a faint blush reddens Arley’s gorgeous complexion as she flicks a strand of hair away from her face. “That’s...um...*not* the type of lady product I was talking about, but I do appreciate the compliment.”

Rather than become embarrassed – like I probably should – I simply fold my arms across my bare chest and resume my interrogation. “Then what kind?”

“The *other* kind.”

“What other kind?”

“The *other* kind, Slater.”

“What *other kind*, Arlette?”

The displeasure from hearing her full name causes the unreciprocated love of my life to slam her hand sassily onto her hip. “The kind I need when I get a little too emo that’s *not* inspired by a My Chemical Romance playlist.”

“I don’t follow.”

“My period!” She shrieks loud enough that it damn near stumbles me back into my own bed. “I need to see if I have any emergency lady products for that!”

“Oh...” is mumbled under my breath before being repeated much louder and much more urgently, “oh! *Lady products!*”

“Yeah, I see that despite your *Walker, Texas Ranger* skills, you’re not the fastest cowboy at the rodeo this morning.”

Small snickers leave us both; however, I’m first to speak again after them. “You know I didn’t even realize you got one of those.”

Her frown is instant.

“I mean I *know* you get ‘em ‘cause you’re a woman and have...the woman parts and they...do the woman thing and uh...” the fumbling over my words is attached to uncomfortable cringing. “You *obviously* have that...time...but um...I jus’ never...have never...I don’t really...” Another round of wincing is displayed. “This is the first I’m hearin’ about it.”

Arley presents me with a confused, quirked eyebrow.

“*From you,*” I rush to explain. “You’ve never um...” clearing my throat occurs in order to bide me a moment to collect my composure, “brought it up before.”

“It’s not exactly, ‘pass the queso and fuck this ref’ conversation.” Her giggles should soothe my discomfort but don’t. “Besides, it only happens every three months or so and you’re *typically* not around.”

I want to be around.

Not because I’m *into* emotional torture but because...I don’t know. I always *want* to be around for her. Support her. Provide her whatever she needs, whenever she needs it. I want to be the one to take care of her and that doesn’t exclude when her hormones have lost their goddamn mind.

“When I know I’m close, I typically pack emergency products in my workbag; although, I’m a couple days sooner than I should be.”

“Stress and trauma to the body can do that. The unexpected spike of your cortisol levels can result in changes to your cycle.”

“Can’t pick up the context clues *about* the subject yet has the medical knowledge of a world renowned gyno just ready to go.” This time her teasing does get me chuckling. “You never fail to amaze me.”

“Not *quite* the way I like to, but who am I to turn down a compliment from the prettiest woman in the room?”

“*Only woman.*”

“Statement stands.”

“*Ohmygod,*” she good-naturedly giggles to herself while shaking her head. “What am I gonna do with you?”

“Same thing I’m gonna do with you.”

Arley’s head tilts curiously to one side in a wordless request for more information.

“*Keep you.*”

Swooning sounds precede a secondary headshake. “Oh, my hormones so *can. Not.* Handle that this morning.” Her body pops off the wall she’s been resting on and resumes its trek to the kitchen. “Come on, Cowboy. Let’s see if I’ve got anything or if we’ll be makin’ a trip to the corner store.”

“*We* damn sure won’t be,” I correct as I follow behind her. “That’ll be a *me* job.”

“I can go to the store with you, Slater. My legs are a little sore, but they *do* still work.”

Against my own volition, I allow my eyes to drink in the view of them doing exactly that. Each step she takes towards our destination not only has her hips swaying but the Gym Class Heroes lyrics that cascade down the back of her thighs singing to me.

Serenading my shaft to swell to full attention.

To yank her to me and bend her over the couch she loves so much.

When I don’t immediately continue the argument, Arley whips her head over her shoulder, catching me doing the one thing I shouldn’t be caught doing.

No.

She's my client.

My target.

My best friend.

The last thing I should be doing is imagining fucking her on every solid surface in this penthouse.

And I damn sure shouldn't let myself get *busted* doing it.

“Standard Operating Procedure dictates that we leave you – the client – unmoved from your secure location for at least the first forty-eight hours, so *no*, Angel Cake.” Reclaiming my sense of duty is swiftly done. “You *can't* go to the store with me.”

“And here I thought the P word was going to be my least favorite during this whole thing.”

I flash her a small smile that she greets with a gag before spinning back on her heels.

The task of checking her bag to no surprise is much worse than I was anticipating. Instead of squatting down to root around and search the object, she bends over. Right at the waist. Plump, perfect ass just unapologetically in my goddamn face.

I see.

I've accidentally invited a sexual terrorist into my home.

My cock is no longer safe – although it's secure – at this location.

Diverting my attention elsewhere requires discipline that I haven't had to exercise since the days I wore a maroon beret and had to put my advanced skydiving skills to their most optimal use.

It sounds insane – fuck – it *feels* insane that I've gotten through some of the toughest shit this world has to offer yet

can barely manage not to lose my shit around a 5'5, brown skinned knockout that's bent over next to my front door.

Maybe I need to re-enlist?

Look into a few refresher courses?

Because this is fucking embarrassing.

"Nope," my best friend sings as she straightens herself back to a standing position. "Nada."

"While I don't mind goin' to the store--"

"That means you have to put a t-shirt on."

"I know."

"And clean pants."

"I know."

"You've still got on your date jeans."

"*I. Know.*"

Amusement swirls around her stare prompting me to chuckle in frustration.

See.

We really do know just about everything about each other.

"While I don't mind runnin' to the store, let me check across the hall with Aviva first. Maybe she has something that can get you through a couple days that way you *can* go to the store like you want."

"*Need.*" I'm shot a small glare. "I *need* to go to the store, Slater. For products. For meds. And home. Home for clothes. And my good luck dragon pillow I sleep with through the season."

"How could I forget how superstitious you are when it comes to hockey?"

"Blame it on the whole me being attacked thing."

"And you being attacked is *why* you aren't going to any of those places. At least not yet."

“But-”

“And this wasn’t meant to turn into another discussion about protocols.” Crossing over to Arley precedes me gently ushering her away from the door. “Go wait on the couch for me, okay? I’ll be right back.”

She releases a theatrical gasp on a dramatic clutch of the chest. “You’re gonna let me out of your sight to do more than pee?”

“Don’t make me remove all the doors from their hinges so that’s no longer true.”

An incredulous glare is swiftly tossed in my direction. “You wouldn’t...”

“*I have.*”

Her jaw hitting the ground in shock is the last thing I see before exiting my place.

Look, I didn’t *want* to remove all the doors, but the kid had a nasty habit of playing an unapproved and unappreciated game of hide and fucking seek. Not being able to find the small person you literally *just* rescued in the expensive German boutique hotel her parents *insisted* she stay at while waiting for the exchange is not the type of stress anyone fucking needs.

Especially when you hadn’t slept in thirty-six hours.

After quickly crossing the hall to the only other occupant on the top floor, I deliver a polite knock to her front door.

It doesn’t take Aviva Huang long to answer nor did I think it would. Like me, she sticks to a fairly predictable morning routine, even when Blu is staying over. Which I know he is. It was part of the contract agreement. While sharing a sleeping arrangement is SOP – standard operating procedure – for typical assignments, this is far from typical.

And the very thought of him seeing my woman in her panties has me counting the number of ways I know I can surgically remove his eyes while making a minimal mess.

“Morning, Wahl!” She cheerfully greets, warm ivory hands planting themselves on her yoga shorts covered hips. “Is it time for Khar’s shift already? Fair warning, he’s still knocked out.” The back of her hand wipes sweat off her forehead. “Did you call? You probably called. But I don’t remember hearing the phone ring.”

My mouth isn’t given the opportunity to move.

“And I *know* I would hear it ring because Khar made sure his volume was up just in case you did call. Not that we figured you would. I think we both just assumed you’d wanna be the one to watch over your girlfriend for the full first twenty-four, which is why he’s sleeping in.”

Yet again she doesn’t pause for me to speak.

“But we both know we can change that. It’s not like it’s *hard* to change that. Or is it? Does he sleep that lightly when you’re out on a case?”

“*Assignment.*”

“Right!” She grins and giggles. “Of course. You think your sleeping patterns will bother your girlfriend? Do you think those things bother most girlfriends?”

Her word choice has me instantaneously exchanging my original planned line of questioning regarding lady products for another. “My...” the title struggles to leave my tongue, “my...my what now?”

“*Girlfriend.*” Aviva leans against her doorframe at the same time she sighs. “And while I’m a little bummed things didn’t work out with Lila – she said she was totally into you but understood the situation when I texted her this morning – I could not be happier that you and Arley are finally together!” Joy jumps into her expression and off her tongue before I get the chance to comment. “You two remind me of sexton beetles – or burying beetles as they’re more commonly called. You have something so...*rare* and unusual to your relationship that it’s impossible not to be enraptured by it.”

I don’t have any fucking clue what that means.

I *think* it’s a good thing.

It...almost...*sounds* like a good thing.

I'mma take it to be a good thing even if it is a *wrong* thing.

Last I checked, I had accepted my lifelong enlistment in the Best Friend Zone.

“Did Lila tell you about Arley and me being a...um...” my finger whirls around to indicate the word I can't seem to say, “or was it someone else?”

“Khar.”

“Blu?” New bursts of consternation cloud my demeanor. “*Blu* told you that we were together?”

“Yup.”

“What uh...” stuffing the emotions down is done in tandem with me folding my arms defensively over my chest, “what *exactly* did he say?”

“That Arley had a lifechanging brush with death and that that's what caused you two to *finally* confess your feelings for each other.”

That didn't happen.

That...could've happened.

Fuck, that probably *should've* happened but instead we somehow ended up arguing more than ever.

“And because you two lovebugs are going to be stuck together and mating like crazy, you're going to need your space versus having a third person invading it around the clock just waiting for their turn to do their job, which is why Blu is going to be stationed at my place until he's needed.”

Being equally impressed and outraged by the explanation is what leads to me slowly nodding.

Pressing my lips tightly together.

Drumming my fingers and toes to the same unhappy speed while internally cringing.

I fucking *hate* how much sense that explanation makes.

And what I hate more?

The fact that *he* was simply following *basic* operating procedures I should've.

That he knew he'd need a viable excuse for *not* sharing a space with us.

More often than not, we need a cover for private security ops. One that allows us to blend into an environment, especially when we aren't sure *who* is to be trusted or how secure an area is. The cover should be so natural that it doesn't raise the suspicions of the innocent bystanders we're surrounded with or those that we're there to evade while protecting our client.

It's another reason I don't fucking care for PS.

I hate pretending.

It always increases the chance of a mission going sideways.

However, as much as I may despise playing adult dress up, Blu acted accordingly. He protected the heart of the mission and didn't compromise its essence by doing something stupid like coming up with a *Tom and Jerry* approved plot for us to have to keep up with.

He did the right thing.

Even if it is about to make a fucked-up thing even more fucked up.

Realizing what I need to do next prompts me to clear my throat to casually ask, "Do you mind wakin' Blu for me?" The grin I force onto my face is polite. Cordial. "I need to step out to the store for a sec and can't take Angel Cake with me."

"Ohmygod, we can *both* go over there together!" she enthusiastically proclaims. "That way, if anyone just so happens to be researching us, it'll give off more of a cooperative care vibe instead of a fighting over the carcass one."

Her insect central comparison causes me to simply nod again. "Sure."

“Let me go wake him up, and we’ll be right over!”

One last bobble of my head precedes me returning the direction I came from, grumbles of new annoyance accompany my every stride.

The second I step foot back into the penthouse, Arley’s stare darts from the piece of cake she’s about to cut over to me. “Slater, how are you out of everything *but* cake?”

“I’m not out of everything.”

“You don’t have any bread.”

“I have tortillas.”

“You don’t have any milk.”

“I’ve got OJ.”

“You don’t have any tequila.” Her smile transitions to one of teasing. “And I checked *twice*.”

“Stop trying to get drunk before 8 a.m.”

“But it’s called a tequila *sunrise*,” she giggles, fork being lifted towards her mouth. “You’re supposed to have it in the morning!”

Laughter quickly leaves us both, successfully alleviating a bit of the burden that’s resting on my shoulders.

Well, at least I got to see her smile again before I make her scowl.

Fuck, am I tired of making her scowl.

That’s someone else’s job.

Mine has always been – and is always supposed be – to make her smile.

“Alright, Angel Cake,” my beam unfortunately fades, “you’re gonna need to put on your pants.”

“Aviva didn’t have anything, huh?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t exactly get a chance to ask.”

“Why not?” Panic I hate having to see firsthand springs into her bright brown gaze. “Did you see someone? Have we

been compromised? Do we need to-”

“Everything is still secure,” I verbally rush to reassure. “There has been no unusual activity on the feed nor the lobby or any other floor in the building. *And* security – inside and out – has been informed to let me know if they suspect or see any behaviors, they deem suspicious.”

Relief prematurely appears on her face.

“However-”

“I don’t like when you say however.”

“*However-*”

“It’s a fancy but and you only use the fancy but for really bad shit.”

“*However*, I didn’t get a chance to ask, because I needed to come back here, so that you could be properly briefed – unlike I was – on our cover.”

“We have a cover now?”

“PS assignments with your level of firsthand around the clock surveillance and an unidentified threat often require a cover to allow us – the operatives – to better blend into your environment. The last thing we want, especially when the enemy is unknown, is to tip them off that *we’re* onto them or what they’re doin’ in any way.”

“I’m aware. That’s why I don’t allow agents like Reynolds or Burke to take assignments where that’s the case. They don’t typically understand the concept of *blending in*.”

“Since you *do* understand that concept then you’ll fully get why Blu told Aviva we’re datin’.”

Her eyebrows dart down to the ground. “*Who’s dating?*”

“You and me.”

“Who are we dating?”

“Each other.”

As if the information still doesn't register, she asks, "Since when?!"

"About twenty-four hours ago?"

"What?!" Her head shakes in perplexity. "How is that even feasible?! You were like *just* out on a date with another woman!" Additional disbelief swoops into her expression prompting her to squeak, "Oh! Oh! And that other woman was Aviva's cousin!"

"College roommate."

"Close enough."

"Not really."

"*Slater.*"

"Blu explained that your...attack...had us confess feelings for one another, which is why it makes sense that you're stayin' with me around the clock versus stayin' at some safehouse. It's an easy-"

An immediate scoff of disagreement is thrown in my direction.

"And *believable-*"

"Maybe for me, but not for you," Arley defeatedly throws back. "Like – hand to the *Panic!* vinyl – have you seen you?!" The utensil flies from her grip onto the bar counter. "It would make sense for me, yeah, but for *you*? No. No way. You may be a cowboy hat wearing James Bond, but I am no Bond Girl."

"You're right, you're not."

She immediately gestures both hands in my direction to emphasize her point.

"You're *better* than a Bond Girl, baby, because you're both beautiful *and* brilliant."

Bewilderment drops her jaw to the ground granting me permission to continue talking.

“Now, that’s our cover, which begins the *second* they walk through that door.” I do my best to keep my focus on the current mission at hand versus the disbelief that the last thirty-six hours or so have been. “Questions?”

To no surprise, she doesn’t give me an immediate response.

I can’t exactly blame her.

I’m a little fucking speechless myself at the nonstop fuckshow our lives are turning into.

Wordlessly, I watch my best friend spiral internally, fingers and toes making the same drumming motions mine were earlier. Strands of hair are blown out of her face. Anxiously tucked behind her ear. Swatted at when they make the mistake of tickling the area. For what feels like six hundred deployments, Arley remains completely silent and keeps her stare on anything that isn’t me.

When her eyes finally find mine, her shoulders are dropped in surrender. “Does being ripped out of my normal life, not allowed to go home, and then having to pretend to be dating my best friend constitute as a good reason to get drunk before 8 a.m.?”

“Affirmative.”

“Then add *wine* to that grocery list, Cowboy.”

Happy to hear the nickname despite what’s in store for us is what allows me to unexpectedly grin with ease. “*Roger that, Angel Cake.*”

Chapter 9

Slater

I've made emergency slings in the rainforest.

I've removed shrapnel in minus four-degree temperatures.

I've even performed a cricothyrotomy on a rescue boat in the middle of the goddamn Caribbean Sea.

I can do this.

I can pick out a box of tampons.

Or pads.

Or...a cup?

Wait.

What the fuck is a menstrual cup?!

My head cranes slightly forward to read the description that immediately has me sealing my lips together in a tight line.

Nope.

No huh.

Not buying whatever the fuck that is.

Shifting my attention over to the colorful boxes, I resume my search for what I thought was going to be an easy thing to acquire.

But...it's not.

First question...Why are there numbers? And how do they work? Is it like the DEFCON stages?

And is the difference between thin and maxi like thin and thick? Why not just say thick?

Fucking. Hell.

Why do some of these things have wings?!

What's the point of that?

Is it decorative?

They don't make decorative lady products, do they?

Frustration reroutes my attention to the other side where the tampons are taunting me.

What's this "radiant" shit about?

And pearl?

Is that the one to get because I think *she's* a gem?

Because she's the one woman I would do anything in the whole goddamn world for including invading a hostile territory I know nothing about to return with the lifesaving required target.

I give my chin a contemplative stroke and continue searching the options, hoping I start to pick up on the foreign language sooner rather than later.

Not only because I *want* to get back to Angel Cake, but because I don't know how long she'll be able to hold her cover as my girlfriend.

The very thing I wish wasn't a cover.

And strangely enough...I can't deny this gut feeling that she wishes the same thing.

Maybe it was her statement of thinking *she's* out of *my league*.

Or maybe it was her award-winning response to Aviva's congratulations to our couple status.

Or maybe it was the reaction she had when I gave her a be back soon kiss on the cheek.

Call me crazy – I mean I fucking am nowadays – but I swear I heard her happy hum.

It's the same noise she makes when she bites into a good slice of pepperoni and black olive pizza, or her favorite Fall Out Boy song randomly comes up on our shared playlist.

It's this tiny, simple sound that tells me everything is momentarily right in her world.

And she made it when my lips touched her skin.

That's gotta mean something, doesn't it?

Letting my eyes scan the phrases again like "sport" and "super" and "shielded for odor" has me doing something that's a rarity for me.

Retreating.

Slowly backing up out of the aisle with my basket is executed on a series of nods.

I'm not actually retreating...just...*regrouping*.

I need a moment to get my bearings.

Do some shit I actually understand.

Warm up like I'm back in basic versus having moved onto all the advanced warfare training.

Turning into the open area, I casually make my way towards the extensive wine selection of The Concession Stand. One of the unique things about living downtown on the edge of the Locker District is that almost all of the businesses – including this local grocery store – have sports related names. Pretty sure it's a fucking requirement. Even Luxury Box Tower – the building housing my penthouse – is sports related in title. There are a couple athletes that call the place home like the Dragons' very own, Tanner "Snowman" Frosky, who lives on the floor below me.

Nice enough guy.

Great fucking player.

Enroute to the alcohol section, I decide to make a couple pitstops starting in the bread aisle. While I prefer tortillas for basically everything someone might use bread for, it'll probably be in my best interest to get Arley a few things *she* prefers, especially since we're not sure how long she'll be at my place.

I mean...I'd love for her to stay forever.

Forfeit her place *today*, have the movers pack up her shit *tomorrow*, be living together comfortably and permanently by next week, but I doubt that's gonna happen.

And despite my ma insisting she'll light a candle for us, I know that's not in the shit she's praying for.

Tossing a loaf of honey wheat in is followed by gently tossing in bagels as well as more tortillas. Rather than continue to the opposite end, I whip my basket around to go back the way I came from spotting a younger, sandy skinned male, watching me. The instant he's caught, he swings around the corner onto the next aisle, pretending that he wasn't.

But clearly, he was.

And it won't be hard to confirm.

Spinning myself once more to face the other direction, I commence strolling again. In spite of knowing exactly where the wine is, I feign ignorance. Continuously look up at the dangling signs for directions. The action allows me to use my peripherals to repeatedly spot the unidentified follower. After confirming I am indeed being tracked, I use my randomly timed stops where I pretend to be looking for the right condiments and sauces to mentally assess the threat.

Several inches shorter and years younger than me.

Stature smaller yet still solid.

Shoes built for show rather than function.

No visible scars or tattoos.

No distinctive signs of an affiliation like dog tags or crest rings.

My initial evaluation says he's here to recon.

Not engage.

Unfortunately for him, he picked the wrong motherfucker for surveillance.

Knowing there's a nearby hallway that leads to a family restroom, I steer my basket that direction, executing two more irregular stops to ensure my stalker takes the bait of

pursuing. Once I feel he's within a respective ear shot, I fake a groan of discomfort. "Man, I knew I shouldn't have had so many eggs this mornin'."

I pretend to look around for a restroom and then fake relief when I spot it. Abandoning my cart and making a beeline in that direction adds to the illusion my stomach truly is upset, a performance I sell even more by tugging at my t-shirt near the area of pain.

As I enter the territory, a member of the janitorial staff is pulling his cart outward prompting me to pause in order to politely let him pass by. My choice forces the young male following me to cease his own movements and needlessly look at the nearby coffee creamer. Slyly, I remove a plastic bottle of glass cleaner from the back of the object, a hanging "out of order" door sign, and slip out of view into the empty facility.

Tossing the flat item in the sink is swiftly followed by me positioning myself behind the door to wait for his inevitable arrival. It doesn't take long for the newbie to arrive outside the space, nor does it take long for him to cautiously test the knob to predetermine if I'm still inside. Panic – another indication he's new at this – pushes him further into the room and the instant he's there, he's met by two bursts of cleaner directly to the eyes. His mouth drops down to release a blood curdling scream, unintentionally offering me a second point of attack. Two chemical splashes are shot inside, leading to another one of his senses being violently overwhelmed. Loud gags are attached to thrashes which are easy to maneuver around as I lock the door. Dropping the bottle in the sink precedes me swinging my right arm around his neck to trap his trachea in the crook of my elbow. I grasp my own bicep, tuck my left hand behind his head, and create the necessary pressure required to restrict the blood flow to his brain.

While the flawless execution quickly results in an unconscious state, the truth is, he'll regain that same consciousness at relatively the same speed meaning the time I have to properly restrain him is minimal. Lowering his lifeless frame to the ground so that his head can rest against the edge of the sink occurs first. Hastily retrieving the emergency set of

zip ties, I keep alongside the knife that's holstered inside my pant leg and binding him to the exposed pipe is done next. By the time the unknown man finally comes to, the only thing left to be done is to secure his legs together at the ankles. Being too focused on his upper body aches leaves his lower half easy to manipulate, which is another telltale sign this young man has no fucking clue what he's got himself into.

So many mistakes.

So many exposed weaknesses.

So many chances he could've ended up dead.

However, depending on how this interrogation goes, the latter may still be in play.

I grab the edge of the bottle of cleaner, readjust my squat stance, shift the nozzle, and mist his face once more. "Wake up, rookie."

The man in front of me chokes on the mixture yet forces himself to look my direction.

"Tell me why you're followin' me." His reluctance to answer has me firing two more rounds into his eyes. A new wave of unholy screams escapes but speaking over them isn't that difficult. "Hesitate again, and I'll turn this shit from light rain to downpour. Copy that?"

This time he speedily nods.

"Good. Now, tell me why you're followin' me."

"Not you."

My head tilts to the side in aggravation. "Lie to me, and I'll drown you in the sink."

"It's n-n-n-not a lie!" He immediately croaks. "I'm not following *you*. Well, okay, I *am* following you, but *you're* not who I'm supposed to be following! You're just supposed to be leading me to the person I am supposed to find."

Swallowing the swelling lump in my throat isn't easy, "*Arley.*"

“Idontknowhername,” the terrified individual announces in one breath. “I just...I just have her picture!”

“Where?”

“On my phone.”

The eyeroll he’s given is mindless. “*Where is your phone, young buck?*”

“In my...” he wiggles around to make an offering, “my back pocket.”

I reach for it; however, rather than just letting me have it, the kid catches me off guard. He throws his head towards mine, intending to execute a headbutt, yet fails.

Epically.

Dodging his motion is followed by grabbing a fist full of his dark brown locks and using it to smash his head into the wall behind him. Blow by blow, pieces of the cheap tile are chipped off the surface and replaced by bright red spots. Howls of agony are recurringly expelled, only to be cut short by another bash. Familiar shades of bright crimson cascade along the crevices towards the floor and due to my medical knowledge – *and real-world experience* – it’s safe to conclude the stalker can barely withstand any more force let alone the velocity at which it would be delivered.

When it’s obvious disorientation kicks in, I safely remove the device and light up the screen. His fingerprint protected entry is easy enough to bypass considering his current status. I prepare to place his thumb on the phone but pause to inform, “Come at me again, kid, and I’ll kill you.”

A whimper is all he can manage to muster up.

Granting myself access allows me to expeditiously search through his downloaded photos and as luck would have it, I don’t have to scroll far. The picture is recent – like it should be – yet *how* recent is where the fucking problem is.

We’re talking about getting into my truck, leaving the hospital yesterday, level of too recent.

It's a security camera shot versus something more personal, but still.

This is exactly why tactics for losing a tail were a must before we headed home.

And why leaving her there this morning wasn't up for *debate*.

Someone is after her.

Someone is fucking after her and apparently has no intention of giving up until they have her.

Or silence her.

Either way, that shits not happening.

Not while I'm alive and breathing.

"I'm gonna take this toy with me," my fingers dangle the device in front of his hooded gaze, "but I'm gonna leave you in timeout."

After rising to my feet, I tuck the device in my own back pocket, lean over to the toilet paper roll, and begin unraveling it. I wait until the rough material has safely draped onto the floor before clamping the hostage's jaw tight to force it open. He twitches a bit at first; however, the second the object grazes his lips, he starts squirming like the little worm on a hook that he is. Using two fingers, I steadily shove the substance towards the back of his throat, smiling wider and wider each time he gags. Sure, keeping him quiet and unfound until I'm ready is the initial goal but that doesn't mean I can't take pleasure in what I'm doing.

In watching horror flood his gaze the way I imagine it would Arley's if he had found her.

In seeing tears drip down the angle of his rigid jaw the way my woman's did last night.

Her tears?

They break my fucking heart.

His?

They seal the cracks in it.

Knowing she's protected...knowing I'm doing everything possible to ensure that? Well, that's the adhesive holding the shattered shit together.

Drool dribbles past the edges of his mouth to join his tears and seeing some of it become absorbed by the TP is what convinces me to keep stuffing until the wad is so wide it dislocates his jaw. At that point, I stand completely back up and retrieve the waiting "out of order" sign I pilfered earlier. Crossing over to the door, I momentarily push my ear against it to listen for foot traffic. Once I'm certain it's clear, I exit, clicking the door locked behind me, and inconspicuously drape the sign on the knob.

My sauntering out of the area while texting Blu that we need a cleanup crew raises no suspicions and rather than collecting my original, abandoned cart, I walk right past it, still typing. Still pretending I just made a short pit stop to the bathroom before grabbing a couple items on my way home. Retrieving a small handheld basket from the nearby corner area further indicates to anyone else who may be watching that I intend for this to be the quick trip I originally planned for it to be.

Bread and milk and any other shit she needs can be acquired later.

As for now?

Lady products and wine.

Just the thought of the former causes me to groan.

Forfuckssake, why is disarming and disposing of an unnamed threat easier than picking out a box of fucking tampons?

Chapter 10

Arley

Today is the first day I get to leave this penthouse in over a week.

Am I excited about that?

Hell. Yes.

Am I a little sad about it, too?

Oddly...also yes.

Putting aside the looming unknown threat that is possibly watching me from the roof across the street, the past nine days have been incredible. Slater and I have been “nesting” like the “lovebugs” that Aviva and Blu keep telling the world we are. It’s just that...instead of doing what our cover implies we’re doing – having hot crazy monkey sex in every room of the penthouse – we’re stuffing our faces with white cheddar popcorn and playing overly intense games of *Risk* at the coffee table to classic action movies. And rather than having romantic dinners at the hottest haute cuisine restaurants in the city, we’re getting cooking lessons from his mother, via video chat, on how to properly season as well as cook barbacoa. Our sleeping arrangement is still on the platonic side yet over the past three nights it’s crept closer to actual couple than close friends. While I may *technically* sleep in the bed alone, I’m positioned right on the edge of the mattress next to where his pallet is on the floor. Each night he lights our candle, kisses my forehead, and waits until he thinks I’m asleep to link his fingers with mine – that just so happen to be dangling nearby. It’s light enough not to “wake me” but tight enough that I know it’s happening.

Actually. Happening.

And it doesn’t feel like it did before the incident.

His hand with mine doesn't feel innocent the way it used to. Sure, it's always given me slight butterflies but now they swarm and beat their wings so fast it takes my breath away.

And sure, I've fallen asleep on the couch in his arms while we're watching a movie probably a hundred times in the past, but now, I wake up to both tucked securely around my frame.

Cradling me.

Holding me like I'm the only thing in the world that matters.

I can't speak for him, but I know for me being hunted for some undiscovered reason – although I have a couple of theories I'm ready to present – has definitely put some shit in perspective for me. Ending up in the hospital and then discovering someone tried to follow Slater to get to me has led to a lot of introspection I wasn't expecting.

I've been texting back my brothers and their wives – okay wife and wife to be – a little more often with a little more enthusiasm regardless of if it's about their kiddos or their jobs or the pending engagement shower, I know I'm just going to mess up. I've been sending more selfies – with and without Slater in them – to my parents who we see significantly less face to face since they retired to Hawaii three years ago. Monte bought our childhood home from them – wanting to raise his own kids in it – and heavily renovated it to make it something they could call their own despite having it “passed down”. We all love the place. Most of our best family memories were made in the same backyard my nieces and nephews are making theirs.

Everyone in my family is openly worried about this frightening situation yet seems far less concerned each time my best friend explains how he's taking extreme precautions like when he video called me to assist in picking out only the necessities from my townhome before locking the shit up like Fort Knox.

Or how he has whatever we need – clothes, takeout, groceries – delivered downstairs for him to personally bring up so that there isn't a potential threat sneaking in.

He even has the elevator watched at night when we're sleeping by another HE employee, just to have that extra layer of security while we're resting.

Personally, I wouldn't have assigned Reynolds the job.

Fuck, even the system wouldn't have paired him to the gig, but Slater vouched for him.

Insists that he's already proven he can *be* trusted with what's happening.

To no surprise, he won't give me details about *that*; however, I think he'll cave eventually.

Maybe actually following through when I threaten not to let him taste the various dessert recipes I've been testing for the event I still can't believe Hilda somehow tricked me into doing. I don't know exactly why, but I'm inclined to blame Terence. Typically, when there's some sort of fuckery afoot in our family...*he's* to blame.

Burden of – rightfully – being branded the prankster of the batch.

It's the reason my nephews are not allowed to hang out with their “favorite uncle” without additional supervision.

Monte's had his days sabotaged one too many times for them to be trusted alone.

After dropping my hot pink toothbrush in the yellow rainboots holder Slater randomly ordered for us one day while I was working, I give my appearance its final onceover.

This is the first time I've had to put on more than comfy clothes since I left the hospital, and while part of me is totally fine with that – the logical part that knows how exhausting it is to put this much work into becoming business casual – the other part – the one that thrives on the chance to be seen in fun colors and cute shoes – is relieved to be returning to normal.

Er.

Normal adjacent.

Going *into* the office where I can sit at an actual desk versus the world's smallest kitchen table is at least a step in the right direction.

I adjust the bow on my tangerine, straight legged, suit pants prior to doing the same to my matching pair of round glasses. Convinced I'm now officially ready to join everyone else for breakfast, I slide my cell into my pocket and exit the area to head that way.

“This the weirdest shit I think I've ever seen you do,” Blu grouses from the island he's leaning against. “And this *includes* your really fucking weird tricks for removing splinters.”

Joining the conversation as I approach is easily done, “Are we talking about when he uses banana peels or baking soda?”

“*Both*,” Blu grunts at me yet keeps his attention on Slater. “And why do you do that? And why the fuck are you doing this?!”

“An increase in osmotic pressure results in the skin swelling up, forcing the splinter towards the surface for easier removal.”

“Why the fuck do you know that?”

“Because when you're in the middle of hostile territory, sometimes you have to improvise.” Slater uses his index finger to slide the tablespoon of butter into his black beverage. “Like putting ghee in your coffee – or butter in some cases – which can increase energy, cognitive functions, and provide your body with better fats as well as carbs to help you achieve a higher performance for the day.”

“So, the *military* is to blame for you turning a perfectly good cup of joe into something Betty Crocker approved?”

Giggles thoughtlessly leave me prompting my best friend to finally look up in my direction. His crooked grin is

ten times brighter than the early morning sun and a hundred times better. “You think he’s funny?”

“I think *that* was funny.”

He twitches me the smallest glare before letting his eyes sweep my figure, visually savoring my lowcut, swooping neckline the longest. “*And I think...*” the beautiful blue letters falling into his coffee deepen in color along with density, “*you look like an orange dreamiscle.*”

Heat burns my cheeks in spite of Blu poking the situation, “Is that supposed to be a compliment?”

“It is when it’s his favorite ice cream flavor.”

“Isn’t it creamsicle not dreamiscle?” my other bodyguard ponders out loud.

“Creamsicles have an ice cream center while *dreamiscles* have an ice milk center,” I casually explain. “So, similar but different.”

Blu slowly shakes his head in amusement. “You and your desserts and him and his MacGyver shit.”

“Speaking of desserts,” Slater segues, “how about I take my favorite one on a long, backroad drive out to Sunshine Bend for lunch at this tasty little diner they’ve got there?”

Whether it’s the newfound confidence that comes from my brush with death or the newfound confidence that comes from pretending to be the girlfriend I’ve always wanted to be that gets me openly flirting back is unknown. “How about you can take your favorite dessert to do exactly that *after* she puts in some facetime at the office?”

“An hour.”

Not surprised at all that he’s negotiating causes me to giggle. “Five.”

The spoon in his possession drops into his cup in tandem with his eyebrows darting down. “*Two.*”

“Four.”

“Two and a half.” Slater slowly starts to stir. “And that’s my final offer, dreamiscle.”

Holding in the swoon over the new and unexpected nickname is damn near impossible. “Fine.”

The bright blue that sparkles in his speech matches the arrogance in his smirk. “It’s a date.”

Holy shit...it *is* a date.

Like...a real one?

Or like a real pretend one?

Do I ask?

How do I even ask that without sounding like a bad title for a Fall Out Boy song?

“And now that we’re on the subject of work...” Blu turns his body my direction. “Why are we going in at all?”

“I need to acquire some information off the secure servers that can only be accessed directly *on site*.” Migrating Slater’s direction is absentmindedly done. “I *think* I know the reason *why* my emails to department heads and digging into the discrepancies set off alarm bells; however, I need to verify it before bringing these accusations to those we answer to.”

“What are you thinkin’?” My fake boyfriend cautiously inquires from beside me. “Mole?”

“Worse.” Our eyes find one another’s. “*Poacher*.”

“What the fuck is a poacher?” Blu asks, light yellow lettering bouncing through the air. “What the fuck does hunting have to do with *you* being hunted?”

“Poachers in our industry are actually one of the main reasons the private sector *thrives*. They use their resources to get access to the information of individuals that could be of benefit to whoever it is they’re working for. *Typically*, they’re scanning financials and personnel records of people who fit into whatever category it is they’re in charge of scouting for. For instance, operatives wise, they’d look for someone who is in active service yet close enough to their renewal date to be

persuaded to leave their shit government pay and make two or three times that while still being able to be home by dinner, or someone who is in active service yet close enough to retirement to be considering what life *after* the military has to offer them. Outside of the military they would look at those in government fields – CIA, FBI, NSA for example – that have remarkable skills that could be of high value. Of course, there are other places and types that get poached as well – scientists, doctors, lawyers, analysts – but to avoid pulling up the colorful line graph I made-”

“You made a line graph?” Blu interjects, words bouncing in bewilderment.

“-I’m trying to use broad strokes versus the actual details I think we’re dealing with.”

“I don’t even know how you fucking *start* making a line graph.”

“*Blu*,” Slater huffs, typically crystal shaded tone darkening in disapproval.

“Sorry,” he quickly brushes off, “*continue*.”

“Poachers aren’t a bad thing *unless*...” it’s hard to keep my voice steady during my explaining to both of them, “you’re poaching in the wrong territory.”

“Meanin’?”

“Meaning...it’s one thing if an operative is *unhappy* at a different company and looks for a change of venue all on his or her own, but it’s a whole other when you actively send someone in to *poach* directly from your competition. Clients are one thing. They’re fickle. They want the best price. They want the best service. They’ll go wherever they feel their money is better spent. Those are the woes of doing business. But taking *active* personnel from your competitors? That’s basically a declaration of war, *especially* when the company you are dealing with is Haworth.”

While I may not know *all* our enterprises most innerworkings – which is probably for the best – I do know enough to know that they didn’t get to be the most respected

and most *feared* by being the bigger person or turning the other cheek.

This business is *ruthless*.

And *they* – whoever holds the top title – rule with a steel fist.

“And I wanna be as certain as I possibly can be that that’s what’s really happening before making an accusation of that caliber. Hence,” my head tips to the side for emphasis, “needing to go into the office to physically access some files for analyzing.”

“Your diggin’ most likely alerted their inside source in the company,” Slater points out at the same time he lifts his coffee to sip. “And their inside source alerted them yet rather than deal with the heat that comes from eliminatin’ a high value asset, they chose to try to frighten you into silence.”

“And fuck them for that,” I immediately grumble.

“I don’t know,” the man beside me casually begins, “I prefer you alive and a little shook up than buried in a box I’d have to visit before ultimately joinin’ you after doin’ whatever it takes to avenge your death.”

Awe can’t be kept out of my gaze or my tone. “You’d really avenge my death like that?”

“Angel Cake, I left a man tied up to choke on his own blood in a grocery store bathroom for simply *tryin’* to get to you.” His face cranes a bit closer. Almost too close. “You don’t even wanna fathom the lengths I would go to if somethin’ were to *actually* happen to you again.”

Admiration and adoration and appreciation all send me to the tips of my toes.

Have my chest that’s starting to heave brushing steadily against his.

I let my eyes momentarily linger at his lips, and the instant they part, something deep inside whispers to take the opening.

The wordless offering.

The obvious opportunity to taste the one thing I've wanted for years.

"And since you've brought up the child you scarred for life..." Blu interjects, startling our bodies back to their respectful spaces.

"He wasn't a child," Slater grumps before having another sip of his coffee. "He was at least twenty-one."

"Twenty-two to be exact," his partner informs. "And unfortunately for us, a dead end. He was basically just some fuckboy who – up until he made the mistake of pissing you off – was in low level surveillance and extortion. Like follow my husband to see if he's cheating type of shit and then when they're inevitably caught in the act blackmailing them to pay him double so that he reports to their wives he found nothing."

"Ugh," I swiftly sneer, "I hope he's been using his hospital stay to do what sounds like some much needed self-reflection."

"According to him, he has no clue who placed the order. He simply saw the number of zeroes they were offering and took the gig."

"Another double-blind blackboard assignment?"

"Yup."

"And there's no way we can trace that shit?"

"*Well...*" Blu's lettering resumes its typical bouncy nature, "I didn't say that."

"Your ass better say somethin' if you'd like to spend the mornin' havin' biscuits with your girlfriend instead of handin' the dentist your teeth."

"There's no way we can trace that shit, *but* I have a contact willing to chase a few IP address leads. Maybe get an idea of *where* the assignments have been being posted from. Or – if the price is right – he can do us one better and lead us directly to the site's owner who we can then...*persuade* into granting us the access we need to find whoever this asshole is."

“Make sure the price isn’t wrong, Blu.”

He executes a single nod. “*Roger.*”

“Sorrysorrysorry,” Aviva squeaks at the same time she bursts back into the room with syrup in hand, “I didn’t mean to take so long!” The door shuts loudly behind her. “It’s just one thing led to another, and I got a little *too* caught up making notes about my bees and-”

“You have bees?” Intrigue has me rudely interrupting. “Like at work?”

“There too!” She places the bottle down on the counter and finds her way into Blu’s arms. “And while I love all sorts of insects – especially those with wings – bees are undeniably my favorite. It’s why being an apiculturist is my dream job.” Her boyfriend tucks his arm around her lower waist. “The fact that the ones I help cultivate for work are used for much greater causes than just their honey is simply an added bonus.” Her round face leans forward in a playful fashion. “But the ones I keep at home are strictly for pleasure.”

A dramatic wink is shot in our direction that causes Slater to shake his head in amusement while I simply snicker.

Oh, she totally means it in that avenue.

Aviva is far from shy when it comes to the topic of sex.

Although, in her defense, she’s usually talking about bugs boning versus people.

Guess we have that in common.

She has an easier time understanding the dynamics and structures of insects rather than people while I have an easier time understanding the characteristics of people’s handwriting and speech patterns rather than social constructs such as the appropriate time to bring up what’s someone’s favorite song to sing in the shower.

Curiosity continues to control the conversation that’s coming from me, “And where exactly are these bees?”

“Oh, on my patio,” she nonchalantly answers. “It’s one of the reasons I had to have a penthouse apartment. I needed

enough room for Williamsburg.”

“Named after the capital of the Virginia Colony?” Slater questions, finally joining in on the investigation.

“Yeah! You know a group of bees is called a colony, so all my colonies have different colonial names.”

There’s no dialing down my squeak. “You have *multiple* colonies on your patio!?”

“Nononono,” she shakes her hands in a frantic fashion, “I just have the one here at home. Yorktown and Jamestown are the ones I deal with at work.”

I nod my understanding prior to playfully looking up at Slater, “And here I thought it was safest for us to eat at our place for other reasons.”

He warmly chuckles while Aviva carries on explaining her disappearance, “I took so long because I was jotting some additional reactions I forgot to write down earlier. See, I’ve begun to notice that the mornings in which we engage in sex, the bees have a different response to my presence than on the mornings when we don’t. I’ve been working on discovering a more cohesive correlation in hopes of finding information that could be of value to those in my field.”

“And I am more than happy to be doing my part in this experiment,” a waggling of Blu’s eyebrows precedes a swift pop to her backside.

Slater’s laughs get louder yet are abruptly interrupted by his other best friend’s significant other releasing a loud contemplative hum, “You know I’ve also made some observations about the two of you.” The yellow hue of her words matches that of her boyfriends. “You aren’t extremely physical for two people *new* to a relationship nor does there seem to be any typical changes in your behavior as there should be when high levels of endorphins, dopamine, oxytocin, serotonin and prolactin are being released.”

Huh.

So that’s what “just friends” sounds like in scientific terminology.

“We’re just um...um...” my eyes swing up to Slater’s to wordlessly request a little assistance, “you know...”

His expression remains stoic.

Obnoxiously. Still.

“Taking things...kind of...slow?” When he doesn’t even attempt to aid in the justifying, I redirect my attention back to Aviva. “Transitioning from best friends to...a...non best friends situation-”

“We’re still best friends,” the man to my side unexpectedly insists.

Well, would you look at

He *can* talk.

“We’re just...taking our time with the whole thing.”

“Noted,” Aviva sweetly states, most likely mentally scribbling down the observation, “but remember that engaging in something as simple as a kiss can trigger the release of those powerful hormones and also have great neuro benefits too.”

“Hey, isn’t that why you put a hunk of butter in your coffee a few minutes ago?” Blu begins, words bouncing in a taunting fashion. “To help with brain shit? Maybe you should just kiss Arley more often.”

The glare he’s given from me is easily ignored due to Slater lowering his cup alongside his tone. “You don’t think I kiss my woman enough?”

“I *know* you don’t kiss your woman enough,” he impishly pokes.

“You can’t actually *know* that,” I promptly defend.

Blu tips his head his snickering girlfriend’s direction. “Science says otherwise.”

“You’re wrong, Little Boy Blu.” Slater argues, arm sliding around my waist to emphasize his point. “I handle mine.”

“Oh yeah?” He torments further. “Then *prove it*, Wahl.”

Really?!

This is how we’re gonna have our first kiss?

A show and tell to a school yard bully I will *so* not be letting have any more cake!

“*With. Pleasure.*”

I watch the two dark denim shaded words aggressively stab the air before refocusing on the man now pulling me closer.

Curling his grip possessively on my hip.

Lowering his mouth toward mine with what appears to be confidence.

If it wasn’t for the fact, I could hear his unsteady breathing and feel the slight tremble in his system each time he closes more distance, I would declare I was the only one a bit nervous about crossing a line we haven’t crossed yet.

One that once we do cross it, there’s no coming back from.

I mean once you kiss your best friend you can’t un-kiss them.

You can’t just pretend that you don’t know how they taste.

Or how soft their lips are.

Or how deliriously slow their tongue moves against yours.

An anxious, needy whimper mindlessly escapes regarding the latter prompting Slater to harshen his grasp and drop his mouth at a faster velocity. My heart furiously pounds against my ribcage like a bass drum, refusing to let me shy away from the rhythm. A single brush is gently executed, clearly meant to be a warmup note, yet rather than advance to the next line in the hypnotic melody, our succession of romantic tone is broken by the blaring ding of my cell. Our

frames instantaneously split, an action that leaves behind sexual tension and disappointment alike.

“Sorry,” I sheepishly apologize to him while retrieving the device from my pocket. “It’s probably just work.”

Slater slowly nods his understanding.

“Most likely Melissa wondering what time I’ll be in and if she needs to make a coffee run or if I want an in-house cappuccino.”

The corner of his lip initially kicks upward; however, the second it’s revealed otherwise, there’s no denying the blatant shift in demeanor.

How his arm falls back to his side.

How he steps away to actively create space between us.

Harv: My office is ready.

Harv: I can’t wait to see you.

“Everything okay?” Blu cautiously probes.

“Is it not work?” Aviva joins the search for information directly on his heels.

“No, it’s definitely work,” I enthusiastically proclaim to the crowd.

“Why don’t I go ahead and grab the food that’s stayin’ warm in the oven while everyone goes and sits down at the table?” Slater clears his throat and offers me a forced, cordial grin. “You too, Arlette. I can take it from here.”

Choosing the responsible choice *not* to make a scene in front of other people is what leads to me spinning on my heels and following behind our friends while internally humming the all too haunting lyrics from one of my favorite Avril Lavigne songs.

Why do I suddenly get the feeling she isn't the only one not getting a happy ending?

Chapter 11

Arley

Slater opens the passenger door to his truck for me in silence.

Complete and total silence.

And not the comfortable type that's there because you've just evolved to that level of communicating.

No.

The painful type that makes the cramps I had last week feel like a fucking all-expense paid cruise to the Bahamas.

Which I don't know if I could do but part of me wants to *try*.

That's the weird thing about getting a little too close to abruptly meeting death.

Late at night when you can't sleep, your entire existence plays back through your mind like an action movie you didn't ask to return to theaters for an encore showing.

Especially when you haven't exactly *lived*.

It's wild to realize I've somehow accomplished so much and so very little at the same time.

Travel out of this state?

Barely.

Most of it's been for work and rarely did I leave my hotel room for anything other than the conferences or meetings.

Hell, I haven't even gone to see my parents' place out in Hawaii.

Fucking. Hawaii.

And family?

Okay.

Yeah.

I have one.

One that keeps growing and growing and growing no thanks to me.

Dating is hard enough for the majority of people already, but when you have a condition that makes it difficult to do things in public or complicates your ability to even *meet* new people the shit becomes practically inconceivable.

Although...I guess...being “Cupid’s Chokehold” crazy about your best friend probably also doesn’t help.

Maybe I should just find something insane and totally out of character to do so there’s at least one gasp worthy moment in my “movie” besides being attacked from behind by a man the love of my life evidently left for dead after he interrogated him.

I wonder what that style was like.

Was it more *Jason Bourne* or more *The Gray Man*?

My phone dings just as my door is slamming shut.

T: Hilly LOVES the bubbles and brew evites you sent out.

T: She LOVES that it’ll be at Monte’s.

T: See. I knew you were the woman for the job.

Smiling absentmindedly occurs until Slater grunts, “*Work again?*”

The pale, almost lifeless blue lettering falling in my lap prompts my gaze to meet his. “No. It’s T.”

Immediate ease floods his expression and pushes me to keep talking.

“Hilda really likes the evites I sent yesterday, which is a *huge* relief because I swore, she would hate them.”

“You mean like she did with your menu?”

“My first *four* menus!” I squawk while buckling myself in. “*Four, Slater.*”

He lightly chortles and does the same. “I could’ve told you she wasn’t gonna go for somethin’ messy like BBQ.”

“Okay, but what was wrong with fajitas?!”

“Still messy.” Mirth revives the color in his speech as he starts the ignition. “Especially when you’re eatin’ them.”

“I...I...” my head bobbles around in a disagreeing nature only to be saved by the ding of my device. “Need to check that.”

Ignoring the huff that precedes his question is impossible. “Is *that* work again?”

Morris: Do me a solid, little sis. Keep track of how many hot single friends she has RSVP.

Rather than address my older brother’s sleaziness, I do what I probably should’ve done earlier and face the couple fight – we probably shouldn’t even be having since we’re not an actual couple – head on. “Do you mean is it *Harv* texting me again?”

Another grumble of disapproval is delivered upon him backing out of his parking space to head for the main exit.

“Do you mean is it *Harv* making me smile?”

The accusation seems to further agitate him by the way his thick neck tenses.

“Do you mean is it *Harv* that’s trying to stay on my mind?”

“Blu said traffic was slow during his sweep,” Slater grumbles under his breath, purposely avoiding my allegations.

“This is *not* slow.”

“Why don’t you just ask those things?”

He continues to watch the road in silence.

“Why don’t you just ask what you actually wanna know?”

The first opening my best friend can take, he does.

“Why don’t you just ask me what you really wanna ask me instead of ignoring me all over again like you did at breakfast?!”

“*Why. Him!?*” Both his volume and wording are suffocatingly large. “*Why him, Arley!?*”

Bafflement has me barely able to fumble out, “W-w-what?”

“*Why. Him?*” Red letters fly around the front seat, bashing and burning and bruising every inch of me they touch. “Out of all of the men on the goddamn planet, why Seventeen? Why my fucking boss?!”

“First off, he’s *our* boss,” I chomp prior to angling my back to rest against the door rather than the seat, “and second of all, he wasn’t *anyone’s* boss when we started dating!” A momentary face scrunch of contemplation is wedged between statements. “Okay, he was someone’s boss, but not mine. And not yours because you didn’t work there. And most importantly, he didn’t have a number yet, so he was just... Harv.”

“*Forfucksake, please stop callin’ him that.*”

“*Harvey.*” Sighing in exasperation is a thoughtless action. “And to answer your question, I went out with him because he fucking asked, Slater.”

The vicious bite of my best friend’s name catches him so off guard he damn near slams into the vehicle we’re following onto the highway.

“I know. Not the most *novel* of concepts to a serial dater like you-”

“*Ouch.*”

“-but to someone *like me*, someone guys give awkward hugs to and sympathetic smiles the *second* they find out I see shit that isn’t actually there, it was *refreshing* to be fucking wanted.”

Slater’s tone suddenly softens, “You deserve to feel wanted, Arley.”

“Yeah, well, *that’s* also a novel concept in my life.”

“It shouldn’t be, Angel Cake.” His declaration is followed by his hand unexpectedly falling to rest on top of mine.

“What is and what should be aren’t two things that always match up outside of assignments,” I warmly tease as I allow our fingers to fold together.

Merging lanes keeps him looking elsewhere during his additional questioning, “Why’d you break up with him?” Despite my own volition, a shit eating grin stretches across my face from cheek to cheek, an expression that Slater manages to catch out of the corner of his eye. “Why are you smilin’?”

“Because you assumed that *I* broke up with *him*.”

“Yeah.” An innocent shrug bounces his tan button-down covered shoulder. “That’s the most logical scenario.”

Ugh.

He didn’t need anymore reasons for me to stay in love with him yet here he is.

Just...stacking backups!

“Harv-”

“What did I *just* fuckin’ say about that?”

“*Harvey*...um...actually dumped me.”

“*Dumped?*” His growl gets me anxiously squirming in my seat. “Did you say *dumped?*”

“That’s what I would call having someone show up in your office during lunch, tell you that while they love

spending time with you, the promotion they've been offered is more important, and leaving your neatly wrapped Christmas gift on the edge of your desk like a consolation prize for playing some corporate version of *The Bachelor*.”

“You fuckin’ with me?” Slater glances in his rearview and changes lanes again. “Tell me you’re fuckin’ with me.”

“Nope.” Sounds of motorcycles have me momentarily glancing out my window to locate them. “But I like...I get it.”

“I don’t.”

“At some point, we all,” the dip in my voice is hard to stop, “have to evaluate and analyze how much value our career holds in our life.” Seeing the three black sports bikes take the same exit has me cautiously asking, “Are they following us?”

Slater uses one hand to slyly reach for his holstered weapon. “Unfortunately.”

“I thought Blu swept the scene.”

“They must’ve been waitin’ somewhere else.”

There isn’t time to ask more questions courtesy of my fake boyfriend taking an unforeseen sharp left turn under the overpass. One of the bikes manages to make the harsh maneuver; however, the individual doesn’t expect Slater to do a complete loop in the empty lane that divides traffic. The swivel motion causes the front end of his vehicle to slam into the front of theirs propelling the person through the air similar to that of a crash test dummy. He smashes into the ground at an angle that twists his head and frame in opposite directions, severing their connection, assuring us that if he wasn’t dead from the impact alone, he definitely is from being broken in two. Red streams steadily flood the road and passing vehicles unknowingly paint the area with his remains, honking not because of the horrific mess I’m not even sure they see, but the fact that we’re completely stopped in the lane.

Seriously?!

Dead body in the middle of the road and they have the nerve to be upset we’re unmoving in a turn lane you can’t even use for several more feet?!

Disbelief rams into disgust over watching the male's head roll into traffic yet before gags or heaving or screaming can occur, Slater shouts, "*Down!*"

I immediately fold my frame forward just in time for glass to rain down on me as a bullet whizzes through the vehicle. The sounds from weapons being fired at such a close range has me swiftly planting my hands over my ears in hopes of muffling the ear-splitting noises. Multiple rounds seem to be fired; however, it isn't until my head is knocked against the glove compartment during sudden acceleration that I know Slater isn't crucially hit.

Popping my figure back up is done in tandem with me screeching, "Holes?!"

"Only in my fuckin' truck."

Gratitude momentarily rests itself on my shoulders. "Bones?"

"Intact."

"Cuts?"

The revving of his engine is accompanied by him hopping curbs to continue weaving around cars. "I'll patch 'em when I patch yours, baby."

Between the nickname and seeing the coloring of his words remain a cool hue in spite of being chased, wrecking his truck, and being shot at, I allow myself to collect my composure.

Take in a deep breath.

Nod in reassurance that everything will be fine.

That Slater will make sure everything is fine.

That *we're* fine.

"You uh... You trust me, right?"

"Of course! How can you even ask me that, Slater0?!"

"Then I'mma need you to do somethin' for me."

I push past the ringing in my ears to dedicate all my focus to him.

“Lean your seat back as far as it’ll go, but stay up-” the word is cut in half by the trashcan we clip on a sudden turn, “right until I give the order. At that point, I need you to open your door all the way and then lie down, okay?”

“Okay.”

“You can’t hesitate.”

“Okay.”

“I mean it, Arley,” he firmly insists while checking his mirrors. “I don’t wanna pull a bullet out of you.”

Swallowing my fear like he needs precedes one final proclamation of my understanding. “*You won’t.*”

Rather than watch the road and note all the things we’re almost hitting – and the few random objects we successfully hit – I keep my attention on the task I was given. While I don’t understand the point and struggle to fathom how this is going to be helpful versus just giving me something else to focus on that *isn’t* being shot at, I work to complete the goal. To get my seat back into the spot it was requested, and fingers hooked into the handle. I disregard the minor scratches from the broken glass grating my skin, dismiss the few aches from being jerked around, and totally ignore the fractured nature of my glasses frame. Ringing from the shots fired has yet to fade, which would require a normal person to have to concentrate harder on hearing their cue, but thanks to my condition, I know that I don’t.

The second the first burst of blue crosses my vision I need to execute the orders I was given.

I can’t hesitate.

I can’t risk letting down Slater.

I can’t risk dying.

Not today.

Definitely not before I know who wants me dead.

Slater slams on the breaks at the same time he shouts, “*Now!*”

There’s no reason to wait until the word has finished leaving his mouth to perform the two-part movement. Violently swinging the door open forces the last rider to crash into it, and being flat on my back – in what has to be the one way I never pictured happening in this truck – allows for my best friend to have a completely uninterrupted angle to fire two shots. Faint thuds occur on the outside of the vehicle; however, my best friend holds his position. Keeps the gun extended with his finger on the trigger and his intent to kill.

Several moments of stillness pass between us except they’re nothing like the ones we shared while clearing the dishes or gearing up or taking the elevator to the garage.

No.

These are the ones worth appreciating.

Treasuring.

The ones we will be thanking the angels for providing tonight.

Once he’s convinced the enemy has been eliminated, he peers down at me, gaze swarming with an overwhelming amount of worry. “Status report?”

I offer him a small smile at the same time I playfully tug on his shirt, hoping to alleviate some of the anguish. “Ready to be patched up when you are, Cowboy.”

Slater flashes me a short smirk, lets his head fall forward, and releases a long sigh of relief that I almost instantly echo.

I hope after what just happened, he never questions my loyalty again.

Because I *absolutely* do trust him.

To protect me.

To care for me.

To love me.

To know that no matter what the circumstances are, he can trust me, too.

To follow his lead in the middle of a dangerous situation.

To have his six whether we're dealing with a car chase or dominating at *Taboo*.

I will always be there for Slater Wahl.

Always.

Even if it means needing my heart patched up next time instead of my arms.

Chapter 12

Slater

I hate that I have to meet him.

And not in that “everyone hates meeting with their boss” bullshit sort of way.

No.

I don’t give a fuck that he’s my boss.

He’s her fucking *ex-boyfriend* and *that’s* the shit that matters here.

That’s the shit that has me wanting to unpack my rifle right here in the lobby of the range.

Load it.

Angle it in the direction of the door to take him out with one shot before he’s even pulled onto the property.

It’s not the fact that he’s had my woman that bothers me.

I’m not *that* irrational.

Arley’s a fucking gorgeous woman, in her thirties, who has *obviously* had men in life before me. She’s not a virgin and I don’t wish that she was. It’d honestly piss me off more if she were. Angel Cake has enough hang ups about being “enough” in this world as is, if you tacked on her never having been touched in that sense, it would only amplify that insecurity.

I don’t ever want it amplified.

I only want it dulled or dead.

Him having been with her in that aspect may rub me the wrong way – any day that ends in y – but what really chaps my ass is that this asshole is like a bad fucking penny. He *always* turns up at the worst time.

Always manages to stop *me* from having her the way he once did.

The way he'll never fucking have her again.

No.

He had his chance and picked a promotion over the most incredible woman in the world.

That was *his* fuck up.

That's *his* bullshit he has to live with.

Don't get me wrong.

I could not be more grateful he's a moron and made that mistake.

I just need him to stop trying to correct it.

Especially now that it's my turn to try to make what we have into something...*more*.

You know if...people would just stop trying to kill her.

Or kidnap her.

Or silence her.

Whatever...fucking super villain shit they're up to.

That is the second biggest cockblock in my life at the moment.

The chiming of the door has me dragging my attention away from where Anne Bigpond is cleaning the glass counter of The Hunt Locker over to where Seventeen is casually strolling across the threshold.

And here's the first.

"Someone's a little overdressed," teases the dark-haired woman who owns the largest indoor- outdoor shooting range in Dalvegan during his approach. "I get the feelin' you're a little lost, sugar."

Seventeen slides his hands into his suit pockets prior to politely proclaiming, "I actually just came straight from the office."

“My boss,” I casually interject on a small head tip his direction. “The one I mentioned earlier.”

“Oh!” Anne tosses an understanding hand in my direction. “Right! The one who’s embarrassed about needing a few tips when it comes to handling something so much bigger than he’s used to, which is why you reserved the entire rifle range for an hour.”

“This would be him.” Hiding the urge to grin almost isn’t done. “And *he* reserved it.” My stare shifts over to his. “I’m just usin’ my membership to save him a few bucks.”

“How...” Seventeen struggles to find an appropriate word choice, “*thoughtful.*”

“You’re getting a great deal,” Anne reassures while typing on her computer. “Non-member rates – especially for a reservation *that big* – can be killer.”

This time I toss him a smug smirk. “You’re welcome.”

He begrudgingly offers me a small nod of fake gratitude while retrieving his wallet.

As much as I’m enjoying sticking it to this prick – *and make no mistake about that I am enjoying the fuck out of it* – it’s not about that.

Okay.

It’s not *just* about that.

We need to be able to discuss things that have to directly deal with the woman we both care about, and I don’t trust our building yet. Despite Yi doing his job and going out of his way to increase, along with tighten, protocols courtesy of vehicle sweeps for tracking devices and hall sweeps for listening ones, my gut tells me there’s a source inside HE alerting someone on the outside to our movements. Whereabouts. Plans. I don’t know who. And I don’t know exactly when. But too many things keep getting compromised too quickly for there to be any other type of explanation.

Only a handful of people were supposed to know Arley was going *into* the office last week.

We have a fucking leak, so until I have time to deal with it, other measures have to be taken.

Like meeting alone, in a secure location, in a way that wouldn't warrant suspension.

I.E. my pencil pushing boss needing a few pointers on how to properly handle a semiautomatic rifle.

“Let's get things going, so you boys can get back there, already,” Anne begins at the time she presents him with a tablet. “This is just the basic consent and liability information. Your understanding of the rules of the range. Few expectations. Once you've read it over, go ahead and sign. Then I'll scan your ID – which I'm sure is valid – and charge your card, unless of course you need to rent one of our rifles since you didn't come with your own and I *know* Wahl isn't one for sharing.”

Not my guns.

Damn sure not my woman.

“Yeah, he's gonna need to rent somethin',” I reply just as my phone starts vibrating. “Maybe somethin' smaller than my AR 15. Definitely somethin' easier to manage too. Maybe the Mini-14.”

“I can *handle* a full-sized weapon, Wahl. I'm not an invalid.”

I swipe open the text from Arley and offhandedly argue, “The Ruger Mini-14 *is* a full-sized weapon, Sir. Mini may be in the name but it is by no means a miniature weapon that underperforms. Plus, my AR has added optics. You're new to this shit. Starting with good ol' fashion iron sights is standard.”

Angel Cake: We need pods again.

Me: Laundry or Dishwasher?

Angel Cake: Laundry.

Angel Cake: Wait.

Angel Cake: FML. Let me double check.

Gotta admit.

My first time living with a woman isn't going quite like I imagined.

There's way more "who used the last of..." conversations and not nearly enough couch sex.

But I will say that I'm glad the first female I've ever lived with is her.

And if I have it my way?

She'll be *the only*.

"Something more important than our training session, Wahl?" Seventeen inquires, pulling my attention up to his.

Rather than ramble the first answer that hits my tongue, I casually shrug it off. "Sorry, Sir. My woman just needs me to bring home a couple things."

His entire frame noticeably tightens, encouraging another arrogant grin to grow. "I see."

"Didn't know you had a little lady at home!" Anne loudly exclaims as she slides the tablet back out of sight. "Why's this the first I'm hearing about her?"

"Private man, Anne," I playfully retort and let my gaze fall back to my vibrating device. "My weapons aren't the only thing I don't like to share."

Angel Cake: How do we go through soap this fast?

Angel Cake: And sponges?!

Angel Cake: You know they're NOT needed to make the cake, right?

Me: Be. Less. Messy.

The TV show GIF she sends causes me to burst out laughing, an action that catches both people by surprise.

“*And she makes you laugh?*” The store owner quirks an intrigued eyebrow at me. “No. I’m gonna need details, Wahl. And *all* of them.”

“Perhaps *later?*” Seventeen uncomfortably clears his throat. “*After* our lesson?” He tries to lighten his tone. “Something tells me chatting time isn’t figured into the cost.”

“You’d be right about that, sugar.” Anne shoots him a wink. “So, you want me to rent you the Mini-14 like Wahl suggested or-”

“Why don’t you rent me what he has?” Seventeen abruptly insists. “*Exactly* what he has.”

“I can’t rent you *exactly* what he has because it’s *aftermarket customized* but...” She bobs her head back and forth in momentary thought. “I can get you a stock version.”

“Done.” Seventeen places his credit card down on the counter. “And who knows? Maybe I’ll just purchase one myself after we’re done.” He cuts me a cocky glimpse. “Customize it too. *Even better than his.*”

“We do sell firearms and aftermarket accessories as well as care equipment.” Anne hits him with a round of finger guns. “The Hunt Locker is Dalvegan’s number one stop shop for all your firearm needs.”

Fighting the urge to put him in his place is done by patting my boss roughly on the back. “How about just the rifle for now, Anne?”

“You two got it.”

She summons over Laura Fay, the strawberry blonde working the other counter, and I do my best to nonchalantly turn on my heels.

Face the opposite direction.

Not have direct eye contact with a woman I may have almost gotten fired for bending over the counter after hours.

She can't *really* be fired.

Her brother's married to Anne.

“Wahl,” Laura sweetly calls out in a high-pitched tone, “long time no see.”

And if I don't turn around that'll still be true.

“Don't waste your breath flirtin' with him today, honey,” Anne swiftly scolds. “He's a taken man.”

The scoff of disbelief that leaves her sends shivers down my spine. “*Since when?*”

“For a while now,” is the answer that feels most honest leaving my lips.

“Yeah, but I just ‘saw’ you not too long ago.”

True.

A little *too* fucking true.

But what can I say?

Repeats around movie marathons with Arley and BBQs with her family *occasionally* happen.

Sometimes I just don't have the time or energy to go out to a bar, grab a beer, and two-step for forty-five minutes until I can get the little cowgirl that's been eye fuckin' me all night to rodeo me in the back of my truck.

Sometimes I need efficiency that isn't from my hand.

Well.

Needed.

I'm done with that lifestyle.

"How not too long ago?" Seventeen needlessly investigates.

"I don't know?" Her questioning tone has me glancing over my shoulder. "What was it? Like six weeks ago?"

"Ah, well, don't worry...Laura...is it?" My boss nefariously inserts. "I'm sure he'll be back on the wall for taking again soon enough." A haughty laugh escapes the man who holds too much power for his own good, warranting my gaze to wander to his. "Pun intended."

Hm.

Is fragging really *that* wrong?

What if your superior honestly has it coming?

Thankfully, the process of getting Seventeen a weapon, his credit card charged, and out to the secluded space doesn't take too much time nor does it require any additional conversation or accusations from the woman who made sure to whisper in my ear prior to our exit that she won't tell my girlfriend, if I don't.

After visually sweeping the entire stretch of the sections to guarantee we are in fact the only ones out there, I lead us to the area farthest from the entrance and place my case on the counter, making sure to keep my head down so that most of my face can't be seen. "There's visual but no audio."

Seventeen places his case beside mine. "Understood."

"It's gonna look like I'm explainin' shit to you about this, so do your best to look like your tryin' to learn."

"Yeah, I understand basic principle of a covert op, Wahl."

"*Then act like it.*" I deliver the object he needs to open a single glance. "Unpack your weapon."

He nods and keeps his head down during the process. "What can you tell me about the status of this assignment?"

“Not much.”

“Has there been progress?”

“Not a lot.”

“Do you have any leads?”

“Nothing solid.”

“Then why the hell are we meeting?” He damn near slams the weapon onto the counter. “What is the point of this briefing if you’ve got *nothing* to report to me? If you’ve got *nothing* for me to give the other numbers?”

“Arley’s still alive.” I cut him a cold glare. “*Give them that.*”

Seventeen briefly presses his lips together before copying my actions of inspecting the firearm. “It’s not that we don’t care that she’s alive, Wahl. We *want* Arley alive. We care about her wellbeing. She possesses great value to the company. She is quite an asset to have. She-”

“*Forfuckssake*, could you *stop* givin’ me the rehearsed speech you were instructed to fuckin’ give?” Slowly shaking my head is attached to placing the magazine down on the surface. “You got somethin’ you really wanna say? Fuckin’ say it, Seventeen.”

“I don’t think you’re the right man for this job.”

There’s no delay in meeting his hard stare again.

“I didn’t think you were the right man when you *took* the job.”

Clenching my jaw is unconsciously done.

“It’s been *weeks* and the *most* you have to report to me is that you’ve managed to keep her alive. Congratulations, Wahl. You are capable of doing the basic bitch minimum of any operative fresh out of training. She needed a bodyguard, so you volunteered for the assignment; however, that was only *half* of the operation. The other half? The other half instructs you to find and eliminate the threat, which you have not only failed to do but failed to yield any sort of progress on. If you

were *any* other agent in this company, you would've been pulled off this case by now, and the only reason you haven't been yet is because Arley *swears on her fucking career* that you are the only man for the mission. That against all calculations, analysis, and evaluations that say otherwise, you are the *only person* who can handle this. So, why don't you give me something to verify that her relationship with you isn't derailing her ability to do her goddamn job."

Fuck, it would be so easy to just hit him with the butt of my rifle and make it look like an accident.

A very messy, very no need to investigate what really happened here, accident.

"*Dead men don't talk.*" Horror doesn't hesitate to hop into his expression momentarily pacifying my rattled nerves. "Therefore, there's no one to interrogate. No *direct* leads to follow, leaving us at a disadvantage. Our usual contacts and connections and resources we would use directly *through* the company are compromised since at this time we're still unaware of exactly who we can and cannot trust, which means using outside sources. And those outside sources have their own schedules and their own timetables, to which they do shit that we have no choice but to abide by – again – leaving us at a disadvantage. However, given the organized orchestration of the most recent attack, a few educated deductions have been made." I pick up the magazine and demonstrate the proper way to load it. "Whoever wants Arley dead – and that is now the case after the amount of gunfire they unloaded into my truck – is directly connected to the poachin' discovery she presented to you last week."

"That's what the other numbers have been wondering."

"And considerin' that there were very few people who *knew* we were leavin' the penthouse that day – let alone that time – it means whoever wants Arley dead is either inside the company with direct ties to her or has an inside person with direct ties to her. Tryin' to get this information without settin' off alarms or alertin' the enemy to our discoveries also requires *time* and *discretion*. It's why Yi is workin' that angle rather than myself or Blu. His buildin' wide monitorin' actions

indicate we are doin' somethin' yet don't inform our threat to exactly what."

"And you know for a fact that Yi can be trusted?"

"He's not interested in makin' his wife a widow." The click of the magazine being placed emphasizes my firmness. "Sir."

Seventeen picks up his weapon and the ammunition to complete the actions I just did.

"This...*assignment* is not your average assignment. We're in a game of chess. And our opponent? Seems to always be two steps ahead of us. Those are steps you cannot take if you don't have some sort of clue as to the strategy we're workin' with. It's another reason why I'm not makin' the moves that *you* or the other higher ups think I should be makin'. Those are probably the moves that they're expectin' me to make and the moves they've already got maneuvers for."

Once he finishes loading the weapon, he mumbles, "Which is why you're keeping Arley at your place versus a traditional safehouse, correct?"

My finger rolls around to indicate for him to unload the firearm next. "It's one reason."

Knowing the ins and out of the building including entries and choke points, knowing the security staff by name and background, being able to access the footage of the entire area with a couple clicks as well as having three mapped exit strategies lined up are also reasons.

Of course, the most important one is that it's where Angel Cake feels most comfortable.

And much like a calm kid is a compliant one, a comfortable adult is a cooperative one.

And when handling something like this that's exactly what you need.

You don't need the person you're protecting to do everything they can to make doing that harder.

After he successfully unloads the rounds, I point to his set of headphones. “I’m actually gonna fire my weapon, so you need to put those on.”

He reaches for the ear coverage at the same time he states, “I know I can’t *visit* Arley, but I do look forward to seeing her again hopefully soon.” Seventeen begins to put them on. “Perhaps next time I’ll order us to-go lunch from Just Poké or rent the entire backroom for us to share – after all Chef Oka owes me a favor or two. Hm. I wonder if she’s still a fan of their ahi tuna bowl.”

The fact I didn’t even know she liked ahi tuna at all causes me to scowl.

How is it *he* knows that shit but didn’t know she prefers to be called Arley?

Or was that...something special she let me start calling her?

What else does he know that I don’t?

Shoving on my ear gear is followed by the reloading, checking the chamber, and positioning of my firearm. While there are an array of green and white targets to hit both close and in the distance, I choose to keep our cover intact by picking the ones that’ll be easier for him to hit.

Lining up the shot itself is effortless.

Not delivering overkill due to the frustrations I would like to unload is a bit more difficult.

Working from left to right and then right to left, I steadily deliver two rounds into the dead center of each target, executing pristine trigger discipline and timing. The ability to hit center mass each time with minimal effort is far less impressive to me than the amount of recoil I’m enduring with my most recently modified firearm.

I like guns, but unlike my dad, I don’t like them for show.

I don’t have a collection to impress my colleagues the same as I do my golf clubs.

Every weapon I own has purpose.

Function.

I understand how it's put together.

How it operates.

Its intent and the damage it's capable of committing.

Weapons training didn't cease when I retired my beret.

If anything...it became more crucial.

The last thing I would ever want on the job is for a child to become a causality in the pursuit of a rescue.

Once my magazine is emptied, I check the chamber to ensure it's empty as well as to ensure there was no malfunction and completely disarm it. The instant I'm finished, I place the pieces down on the counter, step back, and motion my hand forward that it's his turn.

"Yeah, I guess I should probably fire the thing to make this whole thing look real."

"Affirmative."

Seventeen nods, ditches his suit jacket, mimics the actions I took, and prepares to fire.

Surprise over the fact he can even properly hold the rifle pales in comparison to the shock that shoots through my system every time he successfully hits a target. It, of course, takes him longer to complete the same cycle I did; however, he still finishes.

And there are still an unpredicted number of holes close to mine.

He empties and disarms his weapon with a smug smirk prior to stepping back to be beside me. "Not too bad, huh?"

No.

But not too good, either.

And he's lucky nothing was actually at stake here like someone's life.

Or a seafood dinner.

Some of my retired frogmen contacts have had to pay for many of those for me.

I swallow the bitterness clogging my throat and force myself to state, “Better than I was expectin’.”

“Contrary to your belief, I know my way around a rifle, Wahl.” The folding of his arms across his chest is attached to a glare. “I grew up hunting geese and grouse with my father and grandfather in Vermont.”

Why am I not surprised?

“I wonder if Arley’s ever been hunting.”

My mouth twitches to reveal the answer when I realize I don’t honestly know.

Hm.

Not loving the increase in information I don’t know about the one person I thought I knew best in the world.

He searches my stare for a split second before grunting a laugh, “You don’t know, do you?”

Rather than reply, I step forward to reload my gun.

“Maybe when all this is over, I’ll fly the two of us up to my family’s lake cabin on a private jet to rekindle our romance.”

I tap the new mag into place.

“Do a little hunting.”

Tug it to check the chamber.

“Maybe some skinny dipping.”

Lift it to fire at the furthest target possible.

“Lick maple syrup out of her belly button again.”

Pulling the trigger silences him, yet not the voices in my head.

Not the ones reminding me he’s had her in ways I haven’t.

That he's done to her things I've only fantasized about.

Most likely will *only* get to fantasize about.

When flying through the first magazine isn't cathartic enough, I nimbly reload with a quick swap, tap, and tug to unload the fresh ammo into the same object, obliterating whatever pieces of it have the balls to still be standing.

This time after checking to make sure the gun is empty, I toss him a taunting grin. "Like that target down there, your romance with Arley is *dead and done, Seventeen.*"

My boss flashes me an equally obnoxious smirk at the same time he steps forward. "And like that target down there, your romance with Arley *isn't real, Wahl.*"

Chapter 13

Slater

He's not right.

It's just...he isn't entirely wrong either.

And I *hate* that.

I really fucking hate that.

And I hate that my little brother Kolby – biologically my half-brother – wanted to talk about my fake relationship with my very real best friend in grave detail over tamales and Tex-Mex potato salad post our joint workout session.

He meant well.

I know he did.

He was just doing the bullshit family does, especially when you haven't seen them in a while.

And it was good to get to see him.

And spend time with him.

And I love the fact he got traded from Vegas to Dalvegan because that means we can possibly spend more time together, something we didn't exactly get much of growing up.

It's kind of what happens when your parents split over the pressure of a lost child and your father decides to move forward with his life.

Not that I resent him for that shit.

I mean he may have decided to continue living, but he never stopped paying people to find me.

In my book?

That counts for a lot.

Some people give up on their children.

Lose hope.

Stop searching.

I consider myself one of the fortunate ones.

And when you add in the fact that he, ma, and my stepmom Natasia all did whatever it took to co-parent a healthy existence for me upon my return home, I consider myself one of the *extremely* fortunate ones.

Slamming the door behind me is so absentmindedly done that it doesn't even register that's what happened until Blu playfully bitches, "I am *not* helping you put a new one of those on because you Wyatt Earped your ass in here like we're about to have a final showdown at sunset you forgot to tell me about."

Carelessly dropping my gym bag near the island he's occupying occurs prior to me putting my gun case down on the surface. "Not in the mood, Blu."

"Don't recall asking if you wanted a little 'happy ending' to your outing."

Man...when was the last time I even rubbed one out?

Has it really been that long?

Is that why the shit with Seventeen has managed to get so deep under my goddamn skin?

Is that why I'm so fucking tense all the time?

Is that why I almost ripped the door from its hinges?

"What's going on?" He asks at a much lower volume than I expect.

"Why the fuck are you whisperin'?"

"Because Arley's napping on the couch."

Craning my neck slightly to the side gives me a picture-perfect shot of her curled up under the new hot pink and purple throw blanket I ordered her last week.

Ever since she's moved in, I've done an odd amount of shopping.

We're talking an embarrassing amount.

But I can't help it.

I want her to feel like this place is home.

And she feels at home when she's surrounded by brightly colored shit.

Nowadays, my penthouse appears to be sponsored by fucking Crayola.

Don't even get me started on the overly vibrant display area she bullied me into displaying my flag and medals in.

They'd take them all back if they saw it.

I let a small smile cross my expression and meet his eyes once more. "How long she been out?"

"About an hour." He casually shuts his laptop. "She started working on the dessert menu for that engagement shower thing again and ended up stressing herself out, so she put on some baking shows, which made me hungry, but-"

"Calmed *her* down." The grin on my face thoughtlessly widens. "They always calm her down."

Blu kicks his chin in my direction. "Same way she always calms *you* down."

There's no denying the accusation as I give the nape of my neck a good squeeze. "Better than a five-mile run ever could."

"Five miles?" My partner gawks in disgust. "What the fuck are you running five miles for? Were you being chased by the Yakuza again?"

"It was cardio day."

"And?" Bewilderment quickly takes hold. "Isn't your brother a professional hockey player, not cross country?"

"Like I said..." mirth remains in my gaze, "it was cardio day."

"*Fuckkkkk*," he grumbles during a headshake. "I hate cardio day."

“He said the same shit.”

“Between running to catch trains and running from jumping off of trains and running to find trains-”

“You know we don’t deal with trains nearly that often.”

“I feel like we cover enough cardio without having to add to it like you demand.” Small chuckles bounce between us before he asks, “How’s Kolby doing, anyway? Happy to be back in Texas?”

“Happy to be near his mother’s cookin’ again.”

More laughs precede him further investigating, “Can she cook? I mean, I know you didn’t grow up in that house *with* her, but you had weekends there. I’m sure she made your ass mac and cheese or something.”

“Eh.” A small shrug is presented. “She could use a few tips.”

Another round of snickers are instantly shared further alleviating the stress that settled on my shoulders.

Nothing can bring me peace quite like being around Angel Cake, but bullshitting with Blu is a distant second.

However, it does come first when we’re in the field and I can’t so much as send her a text to see how her day has been.

“How’d the briefing with Seventeen go?”

Aggression instantaneously takes hold of my demeanor, pushing my shoulders back and commanding me to fold my arms over my chest. “Well, let’s see. He wants answers we don’t have.”

“Pretty standard.”

“He thinks I’m underqualified for the assignment.”

“Don’t you have like a star or some shit?”

“Medal of Honor,” I offhandedly correct. “*And* he’s plannin’ a fuckin’ romantic getaway with my fake girlfriend.”

“*Ahhhh*,” Blu waggles a finger my direction, “there’s the reason you *Fistful of Dollars* your ass in here.”

“Why?” My hands are thrown up in the air. “Why the fuckin’ western references?”

“It’s what we were watching while we were working earlier.” The corner of his mouth kicks upward. “You know if I hadn’t met your pops, I *might* think you were one of Eastwood’s illegitimate love children the media doesn’t know about yet.”

“That’s not what you were workin’ on, was it?” Humor manages to find its way back into my voice. “Tryin’ to build my family tree?”

“Guys gotta have hobbies other than banging the hottest beekeeper on the planet.”

“Is that a hobby?” Chortles shake my shoulders. “I thought that was your contribution to the science community.”

“It can be both.”

Our laughs echo loudly around the kitchen prompting me to lean to the side to see if we accidentally woke my woman.

Er.

Fake woman.

Fake woman I have very real feelings for.

Fuck. Me. That sounds like shit I need to have my head checked over.

“You hear back from your contact?” I enthusiastically ask, hope overwhelming my tone.

“Not yet...but...” Blu leans forward onto his bent arms, “I heard about this situation that happened within the company a few years back where a guy hired PS to protect his ex-fiancée from a supposed threat except that the threat wasn’t real, it was just a ploy to get her to go back to him because he believed she’d rush into *his* arms for a ‘safe place’ to stay once her place had been compromised. Problem was...she didn’t. She *did* run into the arms of an ex, but it wasn’t him. And

when it wasn't him, *he* became the threat he had hired people to protect her from. It was all very stolen from a Lifetime movie bullshit, but it got me thinking about your competition..."

The glower that he's delivered is deadly.

"I mean...*our boss*." His impish smirk simply deepens the expression. "And I started to wonder if maybe he took a page out of that playbook."

"Tell me I get to shoot him in the face."

"*Negative*." My best friend folds his fingers together. "At least for now. I'm still looking, combing through his shit, so I'll keep you posted. Oh! Did you know he has a cabin up in Vermont?"

Our conversation from earlier has me replying through gritted teeth. "*It's come up*."

"Pretty sure he's got deep ties to the maple syrup mob, but I need to keep digging. My other contact – the one that does tattoos *and* works at his family's mechanic shop – just sent me the files this morning."

"How many computer contacts do you have?"

"Like rubbers, you can never have too many, Wahl."

Louder laughs leave me as I grab the handle to my case. "I need to lock this up and shower off. Can you wait around until I get out?"

He nods and opens his laptop, which becomes my cue to exit.

Securing my rifle back in the hidden wall safe in my closet alone allows me a much-needed chance to truly breathe. Under regular circumstances, I do that while driving; however, having to ensure that I'm not being tailed or that my newly repaired truck has managed to collect a tracking device on it has been preventing that from happening.

The truth is...I gotta get my shit together.

I gotta get my head back on the mission – and *only* the mission at hand.

And as much as I want that mission to be making Arley scream until the cows come home, it's not.

Being “together” isn't even really a necessity.

It's just an easy tool to distract those that may be watching.

But fuck...if it isn't distracting me too.

Not wanting to keep Blu around longer than necessary, I high tail my ass to the glass contraption that was definitely one of the selling points for me.

What can I say?

I like that its big.

I like that it's wide.

I like the fact I practically see my entire bathroom from my position inside making it a little more defensible than others.

Hot water pours from the showerhead, yet rather than race to rinse and wash and hop out, I wrap my hands around the bar in front of me.

Drop my head forward.

Let the heat cascade off my shoulders and down the tattooed Air Force insignia that's stationed in the middle of my back.

I just need a minute.

One minute to forget that someone's trying to kill the person I love most in the world.

One minute to forget that now is not the time to tell her how I really feel.

One...goddamn...minute to forget about the fact that when all this is over, when all is said and done, that how I really feel probably won't even matter because I'm probably not the man she really wants.

I've never rented out a room at a restaurant.

I don't know any chefs that owe me favors.

I damn sure don't have a fucking cabin in Vermont.

Although, at this point in my life I guess I could if I wanted.

And I would absolutely take Angel Cake there if she were *actually* my woman.

And you can bet your ass I'd lay her flat on that table.

Drizzle syrup across her naked body.

Lick away a lot more than just the drops that fell into her belly button.

Images of the thick, sticky condiment creeping past the area toward the sweet spot between her thighs not only summons my cock to full attention but has it swelling so mercilessly I have no choice but to give it a hard squeeze in hopes of relieving a bit of the ache. To no real surprise, one squeeze leads to two and two leads to a stroke.

And another.

And another.

Yet before one more can be executed, creaking sounds from the door being opened send my palm back to my side.

Seeing Arley wedged in the doorway on its own is enough to cause my balls to throb but seeing her standing there, wearing nothing but the old gray squadron shirt I like to work out in has me ready to come without needing another fucking touch.

Unsure how long she's been standing there or what she's seen or what she's seeing or what she doesn't seem to mind seeing leads to me remaining completely still.

Silent.

Holding my breath in hopes that this isn't about to get more uncomfortable than it probably already is.

Slowly, the woman of my dreams slips further into the room.

Begins to slink across the marble tile.

Let's her red cat-eye glasses covered stare along with her jaw lower over what the fog is barely hiding.

Ignoring the heavy pounding in my chest is a lot easier than ignoring the thrums of pain running rapidly through my cock, but it's done. And so is observing the way her chest is harshly heaving. And the way she's struggling to breathe. And how her nipples are hardening under my scrutinous stare.

While I'm not entirely sure what's going to happen next, her pulling on the handle, removing the only barrier between us isn't what I would've guessed.

Not today.

Not tomorrow.

Not even if I lit every candle in the great state of Texas, begging for it to.

Warm water droplets do their best to welcome her half-dressed frame at the same time cool air does its best to convince me to go back into the shower. To stop leaning forward. To stop invading space that isn't mine to invade. Rather than be guided by the clashing temperatures, I simply study Arley's actions. I watch her watch me. I suck in the shaky breath she's trying to steal before she ever has the chance and keep her gasping. Lightly whimpering. Angling my face close enough for my lips to just barely skim over hers is done to allow her one last chance to retreat, one last chance for her to stop us from crossing this boundary we haven't crossed, that we *never* have to cross, yet when the opportunity isn't immediately taken, I smash my mouth against hers to finally have a taste of what I've always wanted. The initial impact is rough and sloppy, and my primal instincts to have and claim her only intensify those actions. Our tongues twist and tangle and tangle and twist and no matter how fast or frantic mine moves it can't have enough.

Taste enough.

I cruelly yank her against me using a fistful of my shirt at the same time I dive my tongue deeper.

Command she gives me everything I'm searching for.

Everything I don't know I'm searching for.

Everything and anything I can possibly imagine ever finding during every swift sweep.

Savagely dragging her inside and slamming her against the nearest wall successfully breaks us apart but no apology is delivered. Instead, my grip tightens while my other hand harshly grasps the nape of her neck on a gruff declaration, "*I'm not a gentle man unless you ask, baby.*"

"Don't worry." Arley leans forward so that I can feel the heat of her words singe my lips. "*I won't ask.*"

An inhuman growl bursts free in tandem with me pouncing her mouth all over again. This time she doesn't simply submit. She doesn't just let me have control and surrender what it is she knows I'm craving. There's suddenly a brutal battle for the right to everything I want, everything I've dreamed about, and it's one fight I refuse to lose. Breaking free from the war of our mouths grants me permission to take the sexual skirmish elsewhere. My teeth nip at the corner of her lip prior to dragging themselves to the line of her jaw. Littering its length with bites and sucks is accompanied by the tips of fingers mimicking the actions on her nipple. Tugging and pulling. Pinching just enough to have her gasping which is when I plunge my tongue back into the unsuspecting territory. Whirl it around. Rip it out to sink my teeth back into her neck. Arley needily arches against me, nails hastily searching for a home on my biceps.

Triceps.

The instant they latch onto my back whatever restraint I'm holding onto is shredded.

Regardless of how heavy my balls are and begging to be emptied, the only thing I give a shit about is getting *her* off.

Hearing what it sounds like when she's calling my name.

Crying out that she can't take any more before proving to her she can.

Will.

My knee brutishly bumps itself between her thighs, wordlessly demanding they open wide, while my teeth mercilessly mark every inch of skin they touch, wanting the world that watches us to know what happened here and what's gonna happen again and again and again until the day she dies sixty years from now.

Once there's space, my fingers dip down to the untouched territory so that my knuckles can barbarously brush her clit right over her underwear. Her entire body buckles under the caress prompting me to harshly clamp my teeth onto her collarbone to help hold her up. Quickly, tugging the damp fabric out of the way reveals to me her pussy is bare.

Soft.

Smooth.

The type that typically comes from getting waxed – home or out – another fact she's never told me.

One I'm sure her ex fucking knows.

Jealousy ripples through my veins and assists in dictating the speed as well as the power of my next movements. How swiftly I slide a finger inside. How much force I use to pump. How steadily I use my palm to bump against her clit, delivering teasing touches that have her panting and throwing herself into the motions.

“Ohmyg-”

“No,” I cruelly bark, lips moving to knock against her earlobe, free hand smacking the glass, *“you call out my fuckin' name and only my fuckin' name.”*

She eagerly nods her understanding on a whimpered, *“Yes, Slater.”*

“Fuck, what a good girl you are...”

Arley moans again.

Louder.

Headier.

“Can you be a filthy one?”

Her nails claw at my back at the same time her breath hitches.

“Can you come on all my fuckin’ fingers?” Increasing the speed and severity in which I move them is savagely done. *“Can you show me how good you’re gonna look comin’ all over my fuckin’ cock someday?”*

Another missed breath occurs and just as an arrogant smile slips onto my face, her fingers possessively curl around my shaft. *“This cock, Cowboy?”*

“Fuckkkkkk...” bulldozes itself around my clenched teeth.

“Will you come for me, too?” she devilishly purrs during her first jerk. *“All over me?”*

Now I’m the one who can’t do more than groan.

Louder.

Heavier.

“Show me how good it’s gonna feel when you come inside me someday?”

“Fuckkkkkk...” fumbles off my lips prior to pushing them against hers again.

Our tongues mimic our frenzied hand movements, racing to simultaneously outpace and outlast one another. Wetness drenches my fingers and palm and wrist on every relentless thrust, reminding me alongside the whispering of my name exactly who she wants.

Who she belongs to.

The notion that Arley wants me as badly as I’ve wanted her has my balls even more anxious to deliver that news. And the heavenly way she jerks like she owns my dick – *owns me* – like she isn’t afraid it’ll break from being stroked

too fast or too hard or unrelentingly forces my entire body to tense in order to stop from unloading.

Feeling my cock stiffen makes her pussy do the same in warning that she's close.

So. Fucking. Close.

Greed to let go grapples with the one that insists she lets go first until the latter eventually causes me to abandon anything that isn't getting the job done.

Because *this* is single-handedly the most important shit I've ever done to date.

And that includes what I got a medal from the president for.

"Look at me, Angel Cake," I rasp, pressing our foreheads together. *"I want you to watch who's makin' you fuckin' come."*

One final sharp intake of air precedes the most beautiful sound I've ever heard in my entire life.

Airy screams of my name are instantly echoed by her lower lips alongside otherworldly shudders that shake her frame. My frame. The fucking tile floor. Between the ceaseless clenching of her pussy and continual stroking of her hand, I barely have a chance to fathom what's happening before white hot bursts are covering her beautiful brown leg. Possessive snarls are chased by even more possessive sucks of her bottom lip, the overwhelming impulse to stake my claim elsewhere too powerful to ignore. Sated sighs are sweetly offered and lapping them up to be sacredly buried deep in my soul becomes my entire reason to exist.

To have ever fucking existed.

"Uh... Wahl?" Blu's voice unexpectedly invades, pulling my attention away from the shaking woman beneath me over to the very same doorway she was in not too long ago. "Hate to interrupt – seriously, mazel tov or whatever on finally consummating your relationship—"

"Don't make me shoot you."

“-but we uh...we need to talk.”

Arley winds herself around my torso and dreamily asks, “Can it wait a bit, Blu?”

Her face softly nuzzles against the parachuting tattoos on my chest pushing me to grunt, “*Yeah. Yeah, it fuckin’ can.*”

“Except that it can’t,” the best friend I don’t enjoy seeing naked counters from his position.

“What did I just say about shootin’ you?”

“Do you really have a shower gun?”

“Yeah, there’s a built-in spot on the wall behind the shampoo and conditioner,” I offhandedly explain. “What’s so important that it can’t wait until I properly wash and dry my woman off?”

“Intel just came in,” Blu firmly announces. “And I think we finally have a way to find out who’s behind all this shit.”

Chapter 14

Arley

“Can rescue a diplomat’s twelve-year-old daughter from a sex trafficking ring off the coast of Croatia but can’t measure cake flour,” I giggle while leveling off the ingredient I’ve scooped into the measuring cup.

“Don’t say that shit like one of those isn’t *significantly* harder than the other one,” Slater chuckles in return, bright blue lettering weaving around the colors that are pumping from his speaker system.

“Oh, it is...” my mirth filled stare cuts across the island counter to his. “Just not the one you’re thinking, Cowboy.”

He throws his head back in laughter and not stopping everything I’m doing to drink in the sight is impossible.

Physically.

Impossible.

Like I’ve *tried* not to suspend my entire life to watch him laugh and I can’t do it.

It’s just too hypnotic.

And magical.

And comforting.

I always thought music was the ultimate sound of solace for me, but I was wrong.

This is.

His laughter never fails to make everything alright.

Once Slater’s chuckles die down, he adjusts his white Dalvegan Dragons t-shirt and warmly insists, “I really can help, Angel Cake. I may not be king of measurin’-”

“You’re not even a resident on measure island.”

“But I can do somethin’ else. I can help with somethin’ else. Pretty much anything else.”

“You already helped, Slater. I mean you bought all the ingredients-”

“I just added them onto our grocery list.”

“Which you *won’t* let me help pay for.”

“You don’t *need* to pay for them.” Folding his arms firmly across his chest is attached to retrieving a scowl. “Puttin’ aside the fact, you’re my...my...my...” the unsteady shading of his words indicates his uncertainty, “what you are,” he poorly declares, “the company is coverin’ *all* expenses, which includes, but isn’t limited to groceries. So really, neither of us are payin’ for them.”

“Uh-huh and are you keeping your receipts for your expense report?”

Slater feigns a clueless face.

“Have you started your expense report?”

The expression only deepens.

“Do you need me to create you an expense report?”

“You keep sayin’ expense report like that’s a real thing.”

“*Ohmygod,*” I mutter around more giggles. “*Slater!*”

Rather than argue, he simply grins wider.

What am I gonna do with him?!

You know aside from continuing to let him make me come multiple times in a day all around the penthouse.

Pretty sure the only reason he’s giving me space to bake versus finding a new corner for us to fool around in is because I started while he was in the other room with Blu discussing and creating tactical plans for infiltrating the property of the man that owns and operates the blackboard site that’s been posting the listings about me. While they haven’t

been able to track the person directly who's been targeting me, they managed to find the individual in charge so to speak. To my understanding, the plan is to get in, get him, and get access to the records – whatever records – he's keeping in hopes of discovering a better lead.

And we know he's keeping records because people like him always do.

It's called leverage.

It's the first thing you are prepared to pull out when you're cornered by cops or the feds or a criminal organization you should've never pissed off.

“We both know buyin' ingredients isn't *really* helpin',” my best friend turned fake boyfriend turned real friends with benefits sweetly rebuttals.

“Okay.” Placing the copper measuring cup down beside the other tools is gently done. “Can we agree then that buying me *all new bakeware* is helping?”

“Nope.” He glances around at the items I'm referencing. “This was a necessity since you couldn't get to *your* personal bakeware.”

“And the new wedding themed cookbooks?”

“You needed research materials. Still doesn't count.”

“And this bright pink, 'hot stuff coming through' apron?”

“Gear,” Slater replies without missing a beat. “You needed proper clothin' for the mission at hand.”

Resisting the urge to laugh again isn't even entertained.

“Now, what can I do to really help?” The corner of his lip curls upward. “You know I'm not afraid of gettin' my hands dirty.” Heat instantly burns my cheeks prompting me to bite down on my bottom lip, an action that pushes him to purr, “I haven't seen that look enough today.”

Maybe not, but he's damn sure seen it plenty over the past seventy hours.

Rather than acknowledge his statement, I decide to switch subjects, “Why do you wanna help me bake?”

“Why do you wanna not let me help you bake?”

“It’s not that I don’t want your help-”

“It kinda feels like you don’t want my help.” Humor has his words bouncing through the air. “Is this because I didn’t know there was a special way to measure flour?”

“*Cake flour.*”

“Is it because I didn’t know there was a difference between flour and *cake flour*?”

Dropping my palms onto the nearby countertop is attached to an amused headshake. “No.”

“No, it’s not because I didn’t know the difference in the ingredients or no, it’s not because I’m not great at measurin’ in the kitchen?”

“*Neither.*” The wide mouth grin he inspires stays in place. “If you actually wanna help me bake, I will happily let you be my second, but if you’re only helping me because you think you *have to* help since you’re here or since it’s happening in our kitchen then I would rather do it alone. Baking brings me joy. And peace. And it’s one of the only places where I don’t feel like a giant weirdo for being so precise and overanalyzing every little detail during the process.”

“First off, your analytical skills that you think make you too strange to socialize with have saved *so many lives* over the years, Arley, it’s remarkable.” He lets his stance match mine. “Your attention to detail, your ability to tweak the smallest portion of an equation for better results, is the reason men like me have the success rates we do. If you didn’t overanalyze and evaluate our patterns and behaviors and movements and cross check them with environments, we’re most equipped to handle and the terrain we’re most familiar with and the skills that are the sharpest, more people would be dead. More children – *like me* – would still be in the hands of people who should’ve never had them to begin with.”

His words wrap so tightly around me I can barely breathe.

“And second, I’d never wanna *take away* somethin’ that makes you happy, baby. I only wanna give you more of it.” Slater’s smile suddenly softens to the point it melts my soul. “And if you let me...be *a part* of it.” He presents a small shrug. “You’re always learnin’ somethin’ new for me. Let me learn somethin’ new for you.”

“That’s...different.”

“How is that different?”

“Learning about weapons and foreign policies and cultural customs helps me be better at my job.”

“And learnin’ how to properly separate egg yolk helps me be better at mine.”

Confusion causes me to twitch my eyebrows.

“Bein’ the best in the field matters to me, but bein’ the best *here...at home...for you...* matters so much more.” Watching the words practically twinkle as they leave his mouth takes my breath away. “Bein’ the best man in your life is a job I take very seriously, Angel Cake. Always have. Always will.” The faintest hint of red stains his cheeks; however, he does his best to brush it off, “Now, what can I do to help?”

After giving my bottom lip another small bite, I finally surrender. “You can help me put the cupcake liners in the muffin pans.”

“Happy to, General.”

Snickers leave us both, yet it’s me who directs the conversation, “You know serving some type of cupcake at this thing was T’s idea.”

Slater strolls around to grab the items we’ll need.
“Really?”

“Yeah, I think it’s one of those old habits die hard kind of things.”

Amusement along with curiosity cloud his crystal gaze.
“*Explain.*”

“When we were in high school, I spent most of my Friday nights at home baking with our mom.” I cross over to join him at the counter space closer to the oven. “Socializing is hard for me now but back then?” The slow headshake he’s presented is painful. “Between being in the same grade as my brother but two years younger and seeing things float through the air that others don’t, people either treated me like I had leprosy-”

“Hansen’s disease,” Slater casually corrects in between separating the pans.

“-or should’ve been wearing something white and tight and full of buckles.”

“You can be my buckle bunny anytime, Angel Cake.”

His teasing receives a playful elbow prior to me accepting a stack of liners. “My Friday and Saturday nights didn’t consist of dates or dances or live sporting events, but watching televised hockey highlights with my dad and baking with my mom.” Pulling the first object out occurs with a smile. “She’d put on a little Patti LaBelle or Gladys Knight-”

“Classics.”

“And turn the music way, way up, so I could dance around the colors in the air while creating colors on the counter. She always had the most colorful ingredients for us to work with, and I think it was because she wanted me to learn to have control over them versus letting them have control over me.” The two of us each begin putting the pastel-colored sheets into place. “We’d make rainbow cake batter truffles and rainbow Jell-O stacks and Rice Krispy Treats with sprinkles and different berry cakes in mason jars and almost always – we’re talking practically every baking session – some sort of cupcake. Always different types of frostings and toppings and you can bet your ass come Sunday morning, the good ones would be gone, and the less good ones would become treats for the neighbors.”

Slater warmly chuckles as he adjusts the liners he's responsible for.

“Around prom – our junior year – I found out that T had this system he had been using to impress girls. Each weekend, he'd stash one of the good cupcakes when he got home from his date after everyone was asleep and then take it to whatever girl he was into on Monday morning and claim *he* baked it, just for her.”

“Slick.” My best friend hits me with an amused gaze. “Deceptive as fuck but *slick*.”

“Yup. Evidently, my cupcakes got my brother laid *a lot* in high school.”

More snickers precede a headshake.

“He had no choice but to come clean to me about his scheme when one of the girls asked for a list of ingredients due to an allergy and he had to fake a stomachache to get out of answering.”

“I think the patron saint of baking calls that Karma.”

It's my turn to chuckle. “On one hand, I was pissed he was taking credit for my work-”

“Rightfully so.”

“But on the other,” Slater switches to the remaining pan that needs to be lined at the same time I finish up mine, “I was flattered that they had somehow managed to make *him* more popular. That they had been bringing *joy* to his life. And I loved the notion that I was making people's day a little brighter...a little more...*colorful*...like my own.”

He pauses his actions to meet my stare again.

“Eventually, he started making requests-”

“Ballsy.”

“Yeah, but he'd tell me all about her – whoever her was that week – and why he liked her and why he wanted to impress her and how she was the reason for him getting out of bed in the morning. It was romantic and melodramatic and

funny enough, how me and him grew closer. He trusted me not to harp on him for getting all in his feelings over a girl and he gave me all sorts of dating advice I later – *much later* – put to use.” Turning to rest my hip on the counter while Slater completes his task is mindlessly done. “I kind of think that’s why he wants them served at his engagement shower. Like a subtle nod to that time in our lives.”

“I get the feelin’ you’re givin’ him credit where credit isn’t due again,” my best friend good naturedly jokes.

This time it’s me who tips my head back in laughter.

Freely giggles and grins like it’s the only thing I have to do in the world.

“Huh.” Slater grunts, tosses the unused liners to the side, and angles himself to face me. “Is that why you have that cupcake tattoo behind your ear?”

An enthusiastic nod instantly occurs.

“And is it by your ear *because* of all the listenin’ to your brother?”

Another nod is delivered at the same speed.

“Huh,” the man beside me thoughtfully hums, “that’s uh...that’s wild.”

“What?”

“That after all these years, there’s still so much to learn about you. For instance, I know you like tats because you find the buzz of the gun calmin’, but I didn’t realize that *every* design on you tells its own tale.”

“I know what you mean.” My beam lingers. Keeps the situation bright. “I’m still learning about you too, Cowboy.”

“How good I am with my tongue between your legs doesn’t really count.”

There’s no stopping the squeak of shock his comment conjures.

“I was tryin’ to be serious here, Angel Cake,” Slater states in an overdramatic fashion, blue lettering giving away

the same thing his grin is. “I was tryin’ to have a real Hallmark moment with ya.”

“*Hallmark this,*” I sassily state and snatch up the nearby dishtowel to whip against the side of his leg.

The challenging expression I’m instantaneously met by after the fabric makes contact with his jeans doesn’t surprise me. “You really wanna do this?” He cockily tilts his head to the side. “Did you learn *nothing* during the Siege of Pillowsburg?”

More laughter escapes during my retreating steps. “Bring it on, Cowboy.”

One last skeptical look is all the warning I’m given before he advances. Knowing that speed and agility are both on his side is what leads me to taking other measures of defense such as tossing the freshly washed raspberries in his direction. Slater easily ducks and dodges, barely being slowed down at all as we work our way round and round and round the island. He eventually manages to catch the end of the towel I’m swinging around yet instead of playing tug-a-war with it, I do the unexpected.

I let go.

Grab my perfectly measured cup of cake flour.

Show him the impish gleam in my gaze and then throw the contents at him.

“*Sonofabitch!*” comes out in a chuckling nature informing he’s amused, not mad.

However, rather than using the opportunity to put more distance between us, I do something unwise.

I gloat.

Hard.

I do a little dance of victory timed to the country music swirling around the kitchen only to have him chuck a handful of the ingredient at my chest. “*Sonofabitch!*”

“Ha!” Slater mirthfully barks. “How do you like-”

Whip cream lands smack dab in the middle of his face prompting me to toss my spoon free hand up in victory. “Bullseye!”

Slowly – almost terrifyingly slow – my fake boyfriend turned kitchen enemy wipes away the contents off his nose and onto his tongue. The hum that reverberates around the room is attached to a pleased expression. “Sometimes I forget how much better your homemade shit tastes than that shit out of the tub.” He doesn’t leave a chance for me to comment. “Doubt I’ll ever forget again after I lick it off of you.”

Letting my jaw fall to my feet leaves me vulnerable for the attack like he’s counting on.

In what feels like a blink, Slater equips himself with the powdered sugar I left out from our Belgian waffle breakfast with Blu, throws a fistful of it at me like a smoke grenade, and takes protection behind the island counter.

Sweet flavors invade all of my senses like a hostile takeover, pushing me to mimic his combat choice of grabbing my weapon and looking for cover. Positioning myself on the exact opposite end doesn’t seem like the smartest option but a wise one the instant additional white powder falls from the sky. I scoop up a spoonful, lean to analyze both sides for the best angle, and then wait for Slater to peek his head around one corner. As soon as he does, I launch more whip cream, although this shot is a bit short. Back and forth the two of us attack. Laugh. Attack again and laugh louder. Music seamlessly shifts itself in a fun pattern of songs we separately like with ones we have a mutual love for in between, and singing along a little too passionately to the latter is how I miss the ambush. While checking to the right, Slater sneaks around on my left and snags the bowl from my loose grip. A tiny squeak barely manages to break free due to having my legs yanked forward and my torso gently pushed backward.

Sticky fingertips inch themselves upward for the waistband of my sleep shorts encouraging me to lift my hips.

Offer myself up like I’m the dessert he can’t wait to taste.

“For your act of treason,” Slater begins, words dark in color but steady in flow, “you will be forced to surrender an orgasm.”

“I won’t be giving it up without a fight.”

“*Oh, Angel Cake,*” he wolfishly growls, lettering clawing itself down my now exposed bottom half, “*I’m fuckin’ countin’ on it.*”

I anxiously watch as he throws my Dalvegan green bottoms out of sight.

Slides back onto his stomach.

Drops his face between my thighs and wraps his arms around my legs so that I can’t get away.

Not that I *want* to get away.

I mean what woman doesn’t want a man willing to spend however long it takes to make you come wedged between your legs.

Hot breaths intertwining with the slickness already spread along my lower lips causes me to arch in anticipation of the first lick; however, it isn’t delivered when I want.

Nor expect.

Slater chooses instead to sink his teeth into the sensitive skin on my inner thigh and suck.

Whimpers of unhappiness grow in volume when the action is mercilessly repeated on the other side. The second bite is accompanied by a harsher and harder suck, one that I’m all too familiar with and more importantly, all too happy to be on the receiving end of.

Maybe it’s because I didn’t get to have hickeys in high school.

Or college.

Or even in what my brothers dubbed “the night club phase” of a person’s twenties.

Or maybe it's because the marks on my neck are big, undeniable signs that I have a life outside of work.

That there is someone out in the world who *wants* to be around me.

Enjoys being around me.

Fuck.

I don't know.

Maybe I just like how turned on I get every time I pass by a mirror and see the reminder that something that isn't my vibrator – which I don't even have here – is giving me an O.

Feeling his mouth drag itself away from the area he's been torturing encourages me to brace for the deliciously agonizing treatment to continue back where it originally began yet having his lips feather the place, I want them most during the repositioning has my fingers flying to his hair in outrage.

Threatening to claw and tug, and tug and scratch until he sucks where he's supposed to suck.

Tastes what he's supposed to taste.

What I *need* him to.

Wetness slowly drips towards the curve of my ass, yet rather than use his tongue to lick up the mess he opts for his middle finger.

Drags the digit upward to collect the thick, creaminess.

Teases it lightly inside.

Rolls it around my clit the way I want his tongue before sucking it all away.

Heavy cries of desperation pry their way out of my chest, "*Slater...*"

"*There's my name,*" my torturer smugly smirks, devilish glare locking onto mine. "Sounds like we're off to a good start."

"*Please.*"

“Mmm,” he loudly hums so that the vibrations can be felt against my pussy, “and it’s gettin’ better.”

“*Please, Slater,*” I pant at the same time I pull his head forward.

“*Almost.*” The tip of his tongue lightly touches the very edge of my clit. “*There.*”

“*Please, Slater, please make me come.*”

A haughty laugh hits my ears, but I don’t care.

I don’t care about how brazen I sound.

I don’t care about how ridiculous I look.

And I damn sure don’t care about who the fuck hears me scream out the moment his mouth finally latches onto my clit. One long, back bowing suck is followed by another. And another. And another. And another until I realize that his plan isn’t just to get me shrieking but to sexually suffocate me.

To stop me from being able to even get air in my lungs so that they burn for the same reprieve the rest of me is.

With my eyes screwed tightly shut, I rock into the furious feasting while kicking my heels in a wordless encouragement to keep going. To go faster. Slower. To keep the same speed. To do anything or everything as long as it’s something versus the nothing I was getting before. I yank his hair to the same rhythm that I’m releasing crazed moans and wildly bang my head against the floor, simultaneously hoping he moves his efforts lower and stays exactly where he is.

All of a sudden, Slater lazily leads his tongue lower.

Glides the muscle deep inside.

Sluggishly twists and turns it.

Turns it and spins.

Spins and spins and slips his mouth completely away without giving me the climax I’m already painstakingly close to.

Vocalizing my unhappiness with his choice is cut short courtesy of cold, thick cream being spread the entire length of my pussy. There isn't time to contemplate if I should gasp or object or praise him for adding it to the mix before his entire face is buried in the mixture. An unrelenting oscillation of slow, savage strokes and fast, ferocious licks light every bone in my body on fire, overcooking each one, until I'm burnt.

Breaking apart.

Crumbling and coming on his tongue as it ferally fucks me into another mess that joins the ones already on the floor.

Unlike those, I hope our relationship isn't so easy to clean up, because honestly?

I love it like this.

And the last thing I would ever want is for it to get washed away.

Chapter 15

Slater

She's beautiful.

So fucking beautiful.

And brilliant.

Good God almighty is she brilliant. I mean I get gobsmacked every time we start talking about salaries in our favorite sport and she busts out with shit about projected total cap hits, projected end of season cap space, how they're calculated, and how certain analyzing equations could be used to have teams make better trades. All that shit sounds like a foreign language to me, hell, foreign languages are easier for me to understand than any of that shit, yet both seem to come naturally to her. She's somehow managed to pick up on the few French phrases she overheard me speaking like it was nothing.

As if she had been born in France and spoke it her entire life.

She's also give you a toothache sweet.

For the past six days, before the sun is up, she's snuck out of bed – or at least she thinks she's sneaking – gone to the kitchen, made me a cup of regular coffee – no butter but a dollop of her homemade whip cream – and brought it to me.

Here.

She places it on the bedside table.

Kisses my cheek.

Uses her nose to nuzzle mine like I'm not already wide awake and whispers good morning.

It's her way of trying to take care of me.

And it doesn't stop there.

She makes sure to have me a post run smoothie blended and ready to be drunk the second I walk through the door.

She orders me the next book in a series I'm reading when there's about four chapters left so that I can just continue on when I'm ready.

She even massages silicone gel on old scars in an attempt to help them fade.

Not because she hates the marks, but because she wants me to know she respects them.

Where they came from.

What caused them.

How I put my life on the line again and again.

It's a wordless act of appreciation.

Arlette Carmichael is more than any one man deserves to have in his life.

Which is all the more reason to do whatever it takes to be the one that gets to keep her.

Rather than wait for her to finish her trek over to me, I prematurely open my eyes and tease, "Pretty sure your mornin' stompin' is why my downstairs neighbors think I'm housin' a sanctuary for squirrels."

Arley's jaw hits the ground at the same time she pauses so that her coffee free hand can plop onto her hip. "*Excuse me?!?*"

"You've got squirrel feet, Angel Cake." Warm laughs leave me as I drag myself up to a sitting position. "Question is, are the stomps to warn off others from comin' near our territory or to tell others I'm a taken man?"

"Well, taken man, you just talked yourself out of a morning blowjob." She sassily announces and resumes her stroll over to me.

More chuckles leave us both, yet the instant she slightly leans forward to put the mug down I smoothly angle myself to the side to capture her lips. Sweet hums are swiftly met by my mouth eagerly looking to devour the sound, fueled by it much more than the dark brew that's waiting for me in the cup. One simple tug of my old t-shirt she slept in prompts Arley to crawl into my lap, and once she's there, my arms circle her figure while my tongue does the same around hers. Around and around and around it languorously rolls, luring the love of my life into widening her thighs. Hooking her arms around my neck. Lightly rocking against my rising cock that's being covered by just the sheet.

Before her I never slept naked.

It's not a wise tactical decision.

It adds a multitude of unnecessary steps to a potentially dangerous situation.

Having to find and/or put on some sort of bottoms is just one more step that could make the difference between getting the upper hand or being overpowered.

It's the *opposite* of always being prepared.

However, sleeping in nothing but my birthday suit is the best way to be prepared for a midnight sixty-nine scenario.

Which unlike a breaking and entering situation *has* happened.

Twice.

Worse comes to worst, fuck it.

I can apprehend an intruder with my dick swinging.

I've lived through much more traumatizing shit than that.

Familiar whimpers are accompanied by light scratches on the back of my head, prompting me to pull back and wickedly whisper, "Talked myself out of a blowjob, right?"

Arley proudly nods. "That's right, Cowboy."

“Any chance I can talk myself *into* somethin’ else?”
The tips of my fingers slip underneath the edge of her t-shirt revealing to me another reason to groan. “*No panties?*”

She flashes me an even brighter beam on a slow headshake.

“*Just...*” my eyes help themselves to a handful of her tits in tandem with my palms doing the same to her ass, “*my goddamn t-shirt, baby?*” Her suggestive snickering instantaneously receives a swift smack to her backside, which makes her needily whine yet again. “*I swear, it’s like you’re beggin’ me to fuck you somethin’ rotten, Angel Cake.*”

“You promised you wouldn’t be gentle with me,” my woman boldly states, one hand assisting in inching the sheet out of our way. “*Don’t break a promise, Cowboy.*”

Inhumane rumbles rattle my entire frame as I slide one finger down her crack to greet the stickiness that’s rushing to meet me. “*Tell me what you want.*”

“You,” she purrs without missing a beat.

“*You have me.*” The declaration is attached to a shallow teasing of her sopping wet entrance. “*You’ve always had me.*”

Her head falls to my shoulder on a hitched breath due to the deeper pushes.

“*You’ll always have me.*”

Tiny pawing at my shoulder encourages me to aggressively urge the other side of her to come out. The side that wants me to cover her entire body in bites and bruises and bursts of cum. The side that traces each of my tattoos with her tongue while she rides her own fingers. The side that no other man will ever experience in this lifetime or any that follow because it’s meant for me and only me.

Because *she’s* meant for me and only me.

“*Tell me what you really want, Arley.*” I plead, voice airy and raspy, finger steady and unwavering. “*Tell me what that is so I can give it to you.*”

“*Fuck me, Slater,*” unexpectedly hits my ears, successfully faltering my movements. “*Fuck me until it hurts.*” Her teeth savagely steal a bite of the skin closest to them prior to another request being made. “*And then fuck me some more.*”

Lord have mercy...

This woman really is going to be the fucking death of me.

There’s no holding back anything that happens next.

No second guesses on the force I use to thrust inside.

No silent deliberations over the way I monstrously lift her up to the tip of my cock before slamming her down, leaving her no choice but to take every single inch on each pitilessly pound. Cries of my name are repeatedly launched at the ceiling to the same speed she seems to be scratching it into my back. White-hot wet streams persistently seep from her pulsating pussy, searing the skin on my thighs.

Soaking my nuts.

The sheets.

The mattress.

“*Fuckkkk...*” I groan as I grip her ass tighter. “*You feel so good.*” Another brutal buck is delivered. And another. “*Too fucking good, baby.*”

Arley’s slick muscles suddenly clamp down harder.

Practically clap their approval of the praise.

Beg for more while she’s panting for mercy.

“*Too fucking perfect.*” Bawdy sounds of labored breaths and my balls slapping her pussy reverberate off the walls and windows. “*So fucking perfect for me.*”

Louder shrieks of my name pour from her chest as she furiously begins bouncing into the ferocious movements, meeting me thrust for thrust, hit for hit. The sadistic sensation of her knees knocking into me spurs me to intensify my strokes. Speed them up even more so there isn’t a single second she’s not struggling to suck in air.

“*This pussy is mine.*” Bestial grunts are expelled on heavier heaves. “*You are mine.*” Arley whimpers in warning of the orgasm that’s about to make an entrance, pushing me to put one hand on the nape of her neck to redirect her hooded stare to mine. “*Watch my words, Angel Cake.*” The command causes her mouth to crack open. Muscles to tense. “*You.*” I yank her once into the feral pounding. “*Are.*” I drive my dick to the hilt and press our foreheads together. “*Mine.*”

The softest, faintest, heavenly sigh clears the path for the orgasmic screaming that occurs next yet it’s the sigh, the single, burst of air that convinces my balls to swell in anticipation.

The sigh that tells me she *heard* what I said.

Felt it.

Accepts it in much more than just her body.

She shakes and shudders and shouts while throwing her chest at me, nipples continuously brushing against my chest, calling to my fingers to lower themselves to pinch.

Pull.

Pinch once more a little harder.

Slurs of my name fuse with swears as she covers my hand with hers.

Encourages me to get rougher.

To forgo the idea that it’s time to slow down now that she’s came.

Ripping off the fabric barrier is quickly followed by both of my hands cupping her tits, feeding me mouthfuls of the luscious brown treats begging to be abused by my teeth. An un-cadenced cycle of carnal groans and thrusts and bites and growls ceaselessly continue with us knocking into the headboard along with the bedside table, which causes the now cold coffee to splash onto the floor. Whether it’s seeing the mess we’re making or clamoring sounds of things possibly becoming broken that breaks my woman a second time, I’m not sure.

But it's a discovery I put in the back of my mind to test again this evening.

You know.

After the workday.

After I've got answers regarding who I have to kill for what they've done to her.

"*Slater,*" Arley whimpers, sweat covered figure folding forward in submission at the same time her face lands in the crook of my neck, "*I can't...I can't...I c-*" the incompleteness of her muttered surrender tightens my balls. "*I...I...*"

"*My pussy,*" I grumble on a sharp pop of her ass cheek. "*My come.*"

Her body seizes and shivers over the statement.

"*Give me what's mine, Angel Cake.*"

Bone breaking pulsations begin so abruptly in her pussy that even if I wanted to resist – which I don't – I couldn't. Her dripping wet muscles swell and swell and swell until they're greeted by scorching splashes that are instantly sucked in.

Squeezed.

Submerged as deep as they can go to ensure they never get away.

Fuck, I never wanna get away.

"*Yes,*" my best friend breathlessly whispers, "*I wanna feel you there all day, babe.*"

Additional animalistic snarls slip through my gritted teeth to the same pace my cock continues pumping out every last drop of cum possible, not only fulfilling her request but one of my favorite fantasies.

Come on, now.

Is there really a man on this planet that doesn't want his woman sitting around full of him, thinking about the next

time he's gonna get back between her legs to do it all over again?

Our transition from the bed to the bathroom isn't smooth.

Or quick.

There's a lot of maneuvering around wet objects and laughing while trying to avoid making bigger messes, both of which are relatively rare experiences for me.

Typically, my post sex cleanup is pretty simple.

Condom gets trashed.

Clothes get put back in place.

Compliments and "had a good time" kisses given prior to the woman proposing we do it again sometime.

I get out of my truck, help her out, and then go home.

Alone.

On the occasion – usually vacation – there's bed action like this; however, I can't recall the last time it got *this* messy.

Or lasted *this* long.

Or wasn't uncomfortable because one of us was ready for the other person to leave so that they could shower, shit, and text their best friend who was working too hard at the office.

Post getting things mopped up, in the wash, and that blowjob I talked myself out of, yet fucked myself back into, we rush to get ready for the day we're now running behind on. Breakfast for her and coffee for me – this time *with* butter – are grabbed on the go under the agreement we'll have a proper meal together when I get back from my assignment.

The same assignment that irks her to know so very little about.

"I don't understand why I can't have more information," Arley pouts, fingertips brushing her loose,

brown locks away from her face. “I mean I do have top level clearance.”

“Yes, but you are also the *client*,” I gingerly remind while backing out of my parking space. “And the *client* isn’t meant to be privy to the ins and outs of every op.”

“You know I used to love it when you would say op? It was almost like secret spy novel sexy, and now? Now, it might be my least favorite O word.”

“Bet I know what your favorite O word is.” The impish waggle of my brow receives an equally playful swat to my stomach. “Hey! You want us to crash?”

“*Puh-lease*,” she giggles during a headshake. “You’ve driven in much crazier conditioners than this.” Arley lifts her homemade jalapeno cream cheese covered bagel to her pink glossed lips. “*With me in the car!*”

“*Truck.*”

“*Vehicle.*”

Her refusal to say exactly what I want causes me to chuckle as I pull into traffic. “Have you always been this stubborn?”

“Absolutely.”

More laughs absentmindedly leave me.

My woman waits until I arrive at my first stoplight to lift her bread my direction. “Bite?”

I probably shouldn’t.

“I know you’re *actually* hungry.”

Yeah, but it’s better to have my system stacked with the optimal formula I know is best for top performance.

Especially in these circumstances.

“And I know the harder you work out, the hungrier you get.”

She has *no idea* how fucking true that shit is right now.

“Come on, Cowboy.” Her grin grows mischievous.
“*You know you wanna...*”

“Fuck, I don’t know what’s more temptin’, Angel Cake. You in that dress or those carbs cryin’ out in my face.”

“Well, you can’t have me in my dress until later-”

“But you’re sayin’ I *can* at some point?”

“Yes.”

“And *will*?”

“Still yes.”

“Jus’ not here and now in the middle of rush hour we could’ve avoided if you would’ve skipped makin’ me coffee and jus’ let me grab somethin’ from the kitchen at HQ?”

“I was trying to be sweet!”

“Angel Cake, you are naturally sweeter than the treat I named you after,” she’s tossed a sugary smirk, “and you don’t have to make me coffee every mornin’ to prove it.”

“Have a bite,” she sassily commands rather than asks this time. Once I do, she lowers the bread back to her own lips and confesses, “I *like* making you coffee, Slater. And smoothies. And cakes. And grabbing you a beer during the game. I *like* getting to...do the little girlfriend things I’ve never really gotten to do before. I mean, yeah, I’ve done some of them as your friend – or really *most* of them – but it’s different doing them as your...more...than...friend. It just...I don’t know...*feels...different...*” Arley sinks her teeth into the cream cheese around the time I swallow the bite I had. “Did you bang my brains out?” She mumbles around the food in her mouth. “I swear I’m usually better with words than this.”

Loud and almost uncontrollable laughter escapes from us both and echoes around the cabin, overpowering the country music mix I’ve got going.

God, I’m so glad that going from friends to more is going so fucking easy.

So fucking easy that I owe myself a thorough ass kicking for not doing this shit sooner.

“Since we’re on the subject of us bangin’,” I segue the instant my composure is collected, “remember our *cover*.” Accelerating onto the highway is attached to my statement. “You’ve been workin’ from home because of this relationship. Nothin’ else.”

“Got it.”

“It’s crucial that no matter what results we get from the op that that cover stays intact.”

“Got it.”

“We *cannot* have anyone thinkin’ anything else until we know exactly *who* our inside man is.”

“Or woman.”

“*Person*,” is huffed in an attempt to prevent an argument from ensuing. “In fact, we need to spend this time drivin’ discussin’ key phrases you can and cannot say as well as key words you need to be aware of.”

Intrigue has her ignoring her vibrating phone and sitting up straight in her seat. “Are you saying I get to actually *participate* in this op?”

“I’m sayin’ you’re an important asset that we plan to put to use, Arley.” My tone increases in seriousness. “Now, listen up...”

Going over the two distinct lists and sharing bites of her breakfast dominates the remainder of our commute. We play up our “couple status” the moment we know security cameras are in sight and continue exaggerating our actions along the stroll in the building. My attention does its best to casually focus on those around us yet finds itself repeatedly stuck on watching my woman’s hips sway from side to side in the long, light pink dress I know she wore to get fucked in.

She told me that shit.

And then *handed me* the panties she wouldn’t be putting on to insure it.

I damn near called Blu right then to reschedule this mission.

I swear, if her life weren't in danger I absolutely would've.

Intel gathering could've waited another few hours.

Mere seconds after Arley swipes her keycard for the elevator to take us to her secure floor, she's being guided into the nearest corner. Trapped by both of my hands pressed firmly on the wall and my mouth mounted on hers. Rather than resist in the least bit she grips hold of my shirt with both hands and surrenders to the slow rolls being executed. Feeling her fingers lightly brush my abs threatens to make me groan; however, having her slide one hand down to graze my cock successfully summons the sound, prompting our mouths to fall apart.

“Do that shit again, Angel Cake, and I'mma have to start callin' you trouble instead.”

She saucily smirks at the same time she playfully tugs on my shirt. “*You started it.*”

“True.” The shrug I offer is mirth-filled. “But in my defense, I've been waitin' a long time to kiss you in this elevator.”

Undeniable excitement pierces her stare. “*How long?*”

“Since the day we met.”

Arley whimpers and rushes to push her lips against mine but unfortunately for us both, the doors chime open exposing us to Yi who is impatiently pacing the hall.

“Good morning, Miss Carmichael,” he immediately greets, frame coming to a complete stop to take on a professional stance prior to meeting my skeptical stare. “Wahl.”

“Yi,” I politely acknowledge in return and lift the love of my life's computer bag off the ground for her.

“It's nice to see you both back at the office,” the in-house security guard states as he steps out of the way to follow

us.

“We had to come up for air sometime,” Arley good naturedly teases while continuing towards her office. “Pretty sure if we didn’t his neighbors might’ve filed a noise complaint with DPD.”

“Who’s to say they already haven’t?” I taunt back on a wink that gets her cheeks reddening.

“*Ohmygod*, are the neighbors really complaining?!”

“Do you care if they are?”

“Yes!” she squeaks, crimson in her face deepening. “That’s so embarrassing!”

“Or,” my hands find their way to my black tactical pants pockets, “*flatterin’* dependin’ on how you look at it.”

“Slater!”

My laughter can’t be contained, which prompts Yi to join me. “Oh yeah. You two are definitely in the early stages of a relationship.”

Huh.

We really are, aren’t we?

“And with that said,” he verbally begins a transition, “I need to thank you both.”

“For?” my girlfriend asks prior to keying in the code to unlock her door.

“Having my shifts switched.”

She tosses him a confused look. “Huh?”

“I’ve always been on the nightshift and for most of my stretch here, lobby patrol and control, but thanks to a request of transfer from the two of you, I’ve been promoted to daytime floor security.” The announcement surprises only her. “It’s helped my marriage *tremendously*. I get to actually spend time with my wife. And my kids. And the bump in pay that comes from a little extra work is gonna help us finally start saving for a family vacation.”

Awe immediately floods Arley's stare, and afterward, she redirects it to me.

Getting him moved wasn't a big deal.

And honestly, it wasn't *for him*.

It was for *her*.

While it was his fuck up of not walking her to her car that left her open to the attack, he was the one who handled getting her to the hospital. And calling me. And pulling in extra hours to canvas the scene eventually finding the cigarette butt that helped us track down Messina. So *that* set of actions combined with being able to eliminate him as the inside man is what led me to requesting a shift change for him to be on duty – in house – to protect Arley during this assignment. I need Blu and Reynolds hands on, so someone has to be around to ensure her safety. Thankfully, Seventeen considers her safety top priority and is more than willing to fulfill whatever request I make to keep her secure.

I may hate the man, but when it comes to doing what's best for keeping Angel Cake protected, we're typically in agreement.

"Word of free advice about family vacations?" Yi light heartedly proceeds. "Don't ask your kids where to go. Someone always votes Disney." Our small chuckles are expelled upon entering her office. "Just wait. You'll see." He gives his belt buckle an adjustment. "Assuming you two want kids."

"We do," leaves me without hesitation.

Her frame instantly spins so that we're face to face again. "Do we?!"

"Don't we?"

"We've never *discussed* that," she nervously announces, fingers fiddling with the bright red piano keys themed computer bag I surprised her with last week.

"What?" It's my turn for bewilderment to burst onto my face "What are you talkin' about, Angel Cake? We've

talked about wantin' kids for years.”

“Yeah, but like separately! We haven't...done that...*together*,” she gestures her finger in the space between us, “*together*.”

“You mean where you know I want you to have mine, and I pray like hell you want me to be the father of yours?”

A bashful grin is instantly offered. “I do want that.”

“*There*.” My smirk transposes to one of victory. “Talk had.”

Arley's jaw briefly falls to the ground before she gags, sneers, and resumes strutting to her desk.

Not sure what the problem is here.

She wanted to have a needless talk, so we had it.

End of story.

Details like names, numbers, and nursery decorations can come later.

Like *after* I've officially put a ring on her finger, which I will be doing as soon as we can close this assignment.

And that ring *is* coming.

There's no going back to the way things were.

Ever.

“Didn't mean to stir up shit,” Yi cautiously apologizes.

Arley offers him a kind smile at the same time she plops down into her chair. “You're fine.”

“But you won't be if *anyone* comes in or out of this office while I'm gone.” The command collects his attention. “Understood?”

“Yes, sir.” He respectfully nods. “I will be positioned right outside the door.”

“*Directly. In. Front. Of. It.*” My face hardens. “You copy?”

“Yes, sir.”

“The assignment shouldn’t take more than a few hours and Angel Cake has already assured me she has plenty of work to keep her right where she’s sittin’.”

“Not *actually* right where I’m sitting,” Arley promptly corrects. “Sometimes I get up. Dance around. It helps me think.” She innocently shrugs. “*Process.*”

He nods his comprehension. “Understood.”

“Hope you’re a Thirty Seconds to Mars fan because *that* is what I’m vibing to this morning.”

Yi’s forehead wrinkles in obvious discomfort. “Is that a...song?”

“It’s a boy band,” I reply, beam bright and crooked.

“It is so not a boy band!”

“They’re boys-”

“They’re men!”

“They hold instruments-”

“They play them!”

“Put the two together and what do you have?” Humor continues floating in my tone. “*Boy band.*”

“You’re standing in my office declaring war, I hope you know that.”

The corner of my lip lifts higher. “Excuse me, Angel Cake, but the *song* is actually called ‘This is War’.” My smirk deepens as does her glare. “You should really know that if you’re gonna call yourself a fangirl.”

“Should we start calling you a fanboy because *you* know that?”

“I prefer *attentive boyfriend.*”

She giggles, shakes her head, and sighs, “What am I gonna do with you?”

“Kiss me and tell me to stay safe,” I casually command during the short cross over to her, “and in a few hours kiss me hello and say you’re glad that I did?”

“I can do that, Cowboy.”

My frame leans forward for her arms to wind around my neck. “So do that, Angel Cake.”

Our mouths knock into one another’s and on instinct, I curl one hand around the back of her neck to keep her in place. Gentle presses meant to say goodbye don’t take long to turn into heavier pushes to indicate what I want her thinking about while I’m gone. By the time I pull back to rest my forehead against hers, she’s slightly panting.

And shaky.

And so fucking beautiful it sparks an ache in my chest.

“Stay safe, Slater.”

“And you...” my hand slides around to lovingly pinch her chin, “stay sweet, Arley.”

Arley simply nods once prior to planting a chaste kiss on my lips. “Go get ‘em, Cowboy.”

“You have been waitin’ way too long to say that, haven’t ya?”

Snickers are shot my direction on a gentle push away. “Get out of my office.”

With one final sweet smirk, I do the toughest shit I’ve had to do in weeks.

I leave Arley behind for a mission.

Except this time, it’s *her* life that hangs in the balance.

Chapter 16

Slater

Shutting off the SUV is followed by Reynolds leaning over between the seats. “I’m telling you. Dr. Rothwell may have terrible taste in dudes-”

“Because she wouldn’t fuck you?” Blu playfully interrupts as we turn to face him in tandem.

“She’s not my type.”

“Because she doesn’t spin around a pole covered in glitter?” I add to the jeering.

“Look, it’s not my fault I only have time to fuck strippers!”

“Yeah, man, that’s *entirely* your own fault,” my best friend argues between chuckles.

“My point is-”

“Oh good,” more snickers break free, “there *was* a point to this shit.”

“Terrible taste in dudes, fucking *incredible taste* in tech.” He displays a small black box in his open palm. “She created these new coms that not only allow for optimal communication between agents in remote locations but also give you the combined protection you’d get from using plugs *and* muffs at the range.”

An intrigued hum doesn’t hesitate to leave me. “Impressive.”

“She is when she’s not trying to light you on fire or electrocute you.”

“Is *that* really why you changed branches?” Blu investigates during another laugh.

“Can we just um...” he flips open the item, “go over all this shit one more time?”

Blu retrieves the tactical tablet from under his seat, enters his passcode, and then props it on the dash for everyone to view. “It’s simple but *stringent*. We go in hot and quiet. Due to the really tight schedule Guggenheim’s security team keeps there’s no room for fuckups or hesitations.” Another swipe reveals the layout of the riverside property. “Our breech points are gonna be here.” He points to the area on the far left. “Here.” His digit moves to the opposite side. “And here.” It lands on the spot near the river opening. “One guard is stationed in each section, and they sound off every seven minutes that their area is clear. Then at the top of the hour – every hour – someone new comes out to take over their position. *This* is the optimal time to strike because we’re effectively killing two birds in the same minute, preventing them from calling into security for additional reinforcements for at least seven minutes. The one area we’re *not* breeching will be the first to sound off, so we have to get inside and take out head of security before he has a chance to alert Guggenheim that there’s been a breach. If we don’t? If Guggenheim gets a chance to get to his saferoom and push his panic button, everything is over.”

“Because it’s impossible to break into his saferoom?” Reynolds instantly inquires.

“No, because if he pushes that button, it will *literally* drown his hard drives and servers in sulfuric acid, alcohol and water that could not only react violently with organic materials most likely causing a hazardous eruption that’ll kill us, but also produce a toxic gas that would do the same if for some reason we don’t die in the previously mentioned J.J. Abrams approved explosion.”

Horror overwhelms his face on a huff, “*Fuck.*”

“Yeah, pretty much,” Blu brushes off and resumes his explanation. “I’m taking the left, Reynolds you’re to the right, and Wahl you’re taking the escape tunnel which is right here,” he makes a circular motion, “passing itself off as a set of rocks. The good news is it’s pretty much a straight shot from

there to the set of stairs that lead directly into the backside of the saferoom.”

“The bad news being that it’s heavily patrolled, gunfire echoes, and my clearance time is the most crucial.”

He hits me with an amused grin. “Exactly.”

Honestly, this shit is nothing new for me.

And given my impressive track record, I’m not worried.

And I don’t have time *to* be worried even if I wanted to be.

Worrying gets you killed.

Staying calm and focused significantly increases your chance of survival.

“Wiz is already looping the surrounding security footage giving us the all clear to approach the property undetected,” Blu informs, tucking the tablet back out of sight, “so we need to get moving.”

“And you’re fuckin’ *positive* this Wiz guy can get into Guggenheim’s shit?”

My best friend shoots me a good-natured wink. “They don’t call him Wiz for nothing.”

Reynolds needlessly interjects, “Maybe it’s because he really likes magic and that was the best magician’s name they could come up with.”

“Huh,” Blu grunts in amusement, “I think I’d go see a biker magician. He’d probably do some dope shit like cut a Harley in half.”

“Or make one disappear,” the other member of the team adds.

“Right now, I’m tempted to have him make both of *you* disappear and do this on my own.”

“Except direct murder for hire isn’t really the Misfits style,” Blu informs as we wedge the pieces in our ears.

“They’re more chivalrous than that.”

“Stop watchin’ Bridgerton with your girlfriend.”

“Stop listening to Green Day with yours.”

Reynolds delivers unexpected pats to our shoulders.
“You both live very sad lives.”

“Says the boy who cried herpes,” I jab in tandem with opening my door.

“The drip!” He bites back. “It was the drip!”

“Not *that* much better,” Blu chuckles and follows my exit.

We each make our way around to the rear where we put on our vests, load them up with the appropriate gear, and test out the new coms. Once our watches are set and synced, we spread out to conquer our assigned terrain. Traveling straight downward in order to follow the river line is the easiest part. Even if I hadn’t trained in rough regions, the later part of my adolescence featured a lot of time hunting with my dad sans Kolby who wanted to spend all his time in the rink.

Jogging along the path near the water is where things get a little slipperier.

Literally.

The damp ground isn’t the greatest for footing even in the appropriate boots and doing my best to avoid an easy trackable trail merely adds to the speed complications.

By the time I manage to arrive at the location I need to be, I’m twenty seconds behind and struggling to determine where I can shave off that time in order to not blow the op.

Because I *can’t* let Guggenheim destroy those drives or servers.

And I damn sure can’t let Arley become a widow before she’s even been fucking married.

Peering around the tree closest to the escape hatch gives me a fairly direct line of sight to my obstacle that is

already making a deadly mistake by not paying attention to his surroundings.

Talk about a great opportunity to get back that time.

High pitched moaning sounds pour from his phone providing me with the perfect cover for a covert attack. Three quick steps over and I'm swinging one arm around his throat. Locking my forearm under his Adam's apple. Wedging the muzzle against his side and unloading two rounds into his liver. His frame instantly becomes limp allowing me to strip him of his weapon and easily slip him into the small waterfall to drown while bleeding out versus wasting ammo or risking additional shots being heard.

Opening the door hidden amongst what appears to be a collection of trees occurs just as the porn watcher's replacement is exiting. Instantly, I grab the sides of his head and forcefully yank him downward at the same time I send my knee upward. The first crack I hear is his nose breaking. The next four are optical bones. The remainder of the rattles are from his jaw and teeth shattering. Blood splashes onto the surrounding foliage as he's flipped around onto his back and kicked into the water but the red splatters on my shoes easily wash away when I stomp on his chest forcing him to gasp underwater, an act that will assist in him meeting the same watery fate that the other member of his team did.

With two bodies down, I lower my stance and cautiously check the corner before proceeding further inside the dimly lit space. Speed is equally as important as stealth, and the silence of my coms signals that everything is going smoothly.

Smoother than anticipated for sure.

Or at least it is until I come around the first bend in the tunnel at the same time the assigned guard does.

Unfortunately, he manages to get a couple shots off but throwing my back to be flush with the wall prevents them from hitting me. No longer able to execute the noiseless approach I had planned – actually to be more honest had *hoped for* – I fire my Glock 19 three times center mass,

dropping him exactly where he stands. Knowing the next guard isn't far ahead, I quickly push forward, weapon raised and ready to go again.

My arrival at the next hallway has me planting two bullets in the back of the unsuspecting security member's head, yet his replacement that I didn't see due to the angle, is given a viable chance to fire forcing me to retreat around the corner I just cleared. His rifle going off alerts the next guard along the route to the situation – along with him yelling out – and the two begin spraying rapid fire in tandem.

“Uh... Wahl?” Reynolds's voice appears in my ear. “We've got...movement.”

“Heavy movement,” Blu echoes in tandem with me sliding myself down to the ground to avoid their streams. “Thermal imaging indicates one of Guggenheim's in house members is headed towards him.”

“I can take that shot,” Reynolds nervously informs, “but the second that round goes through the house they're gonna *definitely* know something is up.”

The fact I'm running point on the op is why he hasn't done it yet.

You have to wait for your team leader to make those kinds of calls.

And considering the abundant amount of gunfire I'm currently experiencing, there's no reason to believe that *not* pulling the trigger is gonna buy us anymore time.

If they didn't know we were here before, they fucking know it now.

“Take the shot,” I command prior to curling my gun around the edge of the corner.

“*Copy that.*”

Assuming Reynolds instantly takes the shot, I do the same, hitting the shooter on the left in the leg. The small pause in firing has me sliding into sight, delivering one shot to the ribs of the male bent over checking the other male's injury,

one shot to the first man's forehead, and one kill shot to the assailant struggling to process his pierced lung.

“And Guggenheim's on the move,” Blu announces, although there's mirth in his tone. “I repeat, the German Cockroach is on the move.”

The need to scramble to my feet increases exponentially.

“You've got maybe twenty seconds.”

Which isn't really enough time but fuck, I gotta make it enough.

I can't let him hit that switch.

Sprinting even harder than I did the day I earned my medal, I race to the end of the tunnel, taking the curves without caution and ready to shoot anything that moves. The rapid pounding of my heart matches the one of my feet as I push every muscle I have to defy the odds.

Do the impossible.

Rather than taking the few short steps up to the door, I leap over them. Use my shoulder to burst open the door seconds after Guggenheim and the head of security team. There's no hesitation to unload a bullet between the gunman's eyes nor is there any when it comes to clipping the computer guru in the arm, successfully stumbling him away from the switch his beige shaded fingers hadn't quite managed to collide with.

Agonizing cries get drowned out by my declaring, “That was a warning shot.”

As if he hadn't heard me or now magically doesn't speak English, Guggenheim makes a second attempt to reach for the failsafe prompting me to clip him near the knee.

“*Fuccckkkkk!*”

“That was a timeout shot.” His body rumples against the doorframe. “The next won't be so gentle.”

“*Fuckkkkk,*” the Doctenn accented man howls in agony.

Wrapping my hand around his throat is accompanied by wedging the edge of the weapon into his mouth. “Here’s the thing about me, Guggenheim. I’m not jus’ trained to *save* lives...” The firearm gets shoved in a bit deeper. “I’m trained to keep a person alive until *I’m* ready to let them die.”

His muffled sobs around the pistol aren’t shocking.

“If you would like to live more than a couple more hours, I suggest you stop tryin’ to push that button and give me *exactly* what it is I’m here for.”

Blu suddenly appears over the man’s shoulder. “He ready to talk?”

The hasty nodding causes me to smirk and gingerly slide my weapon back. “Seems like it.”

Guggenheim sucks in a deep breath prior to shouting, “The safe combination is-”

I keep my firearm positioned for firing while Blu begins the zip tying process, “We’re not here for what’s in the safe-”

“Could we be?” Reynold’s joking is attached to him holstering his weapon. “Maybe call it a bonus?”

“What’s wrong, Reynolds?” Blu tightens the restraints, wordlessly informing me I can lower my gun. “Running out of escort money already?”

“*Stripper.*”

“Still not much better,” my best friend taunts between chuckles.

“I’m bleeding to death!” Guggenheim loudly whines. “I’m gonna lose my leg if you don’t do something!”

“*You’re fine,*” Reynolds insists and joins Blu in the transporting action. “The bullets didn’t even hit you.”

“They did!”

“They *grazed* you,” Blu mirthfully corrects.

“I’m gonna pass out from all the bleeding!”

“Don’t worry,” Blu suspiciously starts, “if you pass out, Wahl’ll just shoot you again to wake you up.”

Guggenheim glances over his shoulder my direction only to be met by an arrogant beam.

Like I’ve said before, I don’t like torturing people.

But if it’ll help me get to whoever is trying to kill the only woman I’ve ever loved?

I won’t hesitate to do it.

After relocating him to his corner office only a couple doors over, he’s dropped down into his caramel-colored leather chair at his desk as I park myself on the edge of his built-in bar and remove one of my coms. “We know you’re the owner and operator of Blaakkboard. We also know *how* it works. We know all the ins and outs you do so that the clients who need something posted maintain their anonymity, that the entire reason your site thrives over the competition’s is *thanks to* this anonymity, that your programs and structure were created to *protect* that anonymity.”

A small snuffle precedes a quiet, “That is correct.”

“We are also aware such skills were groomed and perfected under the eyes of the Doctenn government, courtesy of your lengthy career for the royal family.”

Guggenheim adjusts uncomfortably in his seat. “That is...also correct.”

“Your years with them, undoubtedly taught you the undeniable importance of proper security-”

“You really should’ve hired higher quality than the bouncers with guns you had,” Reynolds criticizes.

“*And* the importance of proper leverage, which is why I know that when you may *claim* that those posting jobs and those accepting them are both remaining anonymous, you’re lying. You store that information on backup drives and servers just in case the wrong people ever come knocking.” I lean slightly forward. “*Knock. Knock.*”

Guggenheim loudly gulps down his fear.

“The good news for you is all I want is information about *one* person.” One leg crosses in front of the other. “And all you have to do is grant access to my associate for him to grab it. Understood?”

“But-”

Calmly firing off a round that pierces his left pinky toe cuts off the remainder of his sentence. “I’m not negotiatin’, Guggenheim.”

“*Fuccccc-*”

A matching shot is delivered to the right. “And I’m not arguin’.”

“And if he keeps pumping holes into you, you won’t be able to pull off that move your favorite fuck boy from Dalvegan University likes so much,” Reynolds casually reminds. “It’d be a shame if he had to find himself a new ‘daddy’ to help put him through college and take him on dick sucking adventures in Cabo.”

Horror immediately floods our target’s stare.

“Oh yeah, Guggenheim. We know *all* about Crispen.” His shallow gasp simply convinces me to continue. “And Andre from Ashwin who probably *doesn’t* know about Crispen or Peanut Butter for that matter.” The sinister expression on my face deepens. “Peanut Butter who is waitin’ for your call about goin’ out on your yacht tonight, isn’t that right?”

Guggenheim’s jaw hits the bloody floor beneath his feet.

“Gonna be hard to bring him the jelly if we don’t get you patched up soon,” Reynolds villainously teases. “And he,” his finger motions my direction, “needs me,” he kicks his thumb inward, “to get the gear to stitch you up, which I *won’t do* until you give our associate the access we’re requesting.”

“And it’d be such a *shame* for somethin’ to happen to those barely legal boys that would ruin their lives as well as ruin *yours*,” Blu joins in on the persuading. “Leaked sex tapes or photos or voicemails *or* letting it slip *you’re* the reason each caught that case of the clam they all pretended *not* to get

because you decided *not* to wrap it with that snow bunny you let your brother watch you bang when you were back in your home country visiting your sick mother.”

“Be such a shame if you died of blood loss right after she won the battle with blood cancer,” Reynolds theatrically adds.

“Multiple Myeloma,” I announce to further demonstrate the severity of the situation. “Isn’t that right, Guggenheim?”

New waves of fear rise in his wide-eyed gaze.

“I’ll take that look as a yes. So,” I lift my eyebrows to the ceiling, “what do you think? Do we have an understandin’ here?”

“*Yes.*”

“Good. Blu, you’re up.” He dives into his pocket to retrieve his cell. “Reynolds cut him loose and get the gear bag.”

“*Roger that.*”

His freeing action successfully starts what I hope will be a fairly quick process.

I don’t know much about hacking.

Or data diving.

Or dealing with encrypted files.

Computer shit has never really been my thing and unlike those that feel the need to be great at fucking everything, I don’t.

I’m okay knowing my strengths.

Using them.

Especially when it comes to protecting those I love.

Blu handles the conversation with Wiz on speaker while I hold the weapon in place to ensure he does what’s he’s told. Once Reynolds returns with my med kit, I allow him to play the primary role of “the muscle” and focus on patching

the minor injuries our target continuously complains about until Wiz shuts him up by very humorlessly stating that if he can handle a dick in the ass, he can handle a needle to the toe.

Not exactly the same thing, but valid point.

It takes a little longer than I would've guessed for everything to get settled yet when it is, there's no reluctance from Wiz to inform us. "Done."

I cut my attention away where I was staring out his floor to ceiling glass walls for possible bogies and over to the device Blu's holding.

"Everything?" my partner asks, needing more information before we can officially leave since it's not like we can just call up Guggenheim like tech support for this shit.

"Codename Songbird has been flagged. The system is set to alert me to any mentions or assignments using that tag going forward and is pulling up all mentions or assignments previously posted with that tag dating back to a few weeks before Songbird's first attack. It's gonna take me some time to sort through the data and pull anything usable so for now? Yeah. We're done."

"Roger that," leaves me at the same time I grab the syringe from the top of my bag. "Thank you for your service, Wiz."

"Blumel tell you where to send the payment?"

"I did," he reassures on my behalf. "And will do the second we end this call."

"I'll be in touch."

The click of his device is followed by the click of mine into the neck of Guggenheim. "*For the pain.*"

"How mighty kind of you," he grumps and gives the spot on his neck a small rub. "Quite the change from your other...much more...barbaric behaviors."

Rather than retort, I simply grin and watch him drowsily collapse forward, forehead landing on the keyboard his hands just left.

“Is it *really* though?” Reynolds asks between snickers. “How long will he be out?”

“Depends on how fast his body metabolizes the shit.” Sealing the syringe in the disposal bag, I toss it near his feet for the cleanup crew to get rid of as well. “The dose should be enough to keep him out while the team tidies. He’ll wake up with a *throbbing* headache and not remember anything. Hopefully, Wiz is as good as he says he is and has covered his tracks.”

Blu looks up the instant he’s sent the payment to the charity we were instructed. “Why must you second guess my outside resources?”

“New Zealand.” Snatching up my bag, I command to the other conscious male in the room, “Make the call.”

Reynolds nods his understanding at the same time Blu grouses, “One contact! Over all our years together I had *one contact* not pan out!”

“She was kind of a big one, Blu.”

“It wasn’t...she wasn’t...the whole thing,” he fumbles over his words during our exiting of the room. “It um...it-”

“Went to shit, very quickly, very messily, and is the reason I *still* struggle to look at fucking kiwis.”

“The fruit or the people?” Reynolds investigates around confirming orders.

“*Both.*”

“He’s...being...dramatic,” Blu brushes off to answer his now ringing phone. “*Blumel.*”

“You have a situation,” Wiz’s voice unexpectedly bleeds through the speakers. “Songbird had a capture listing posted and picked up yesterday.”

There’s no disregarding the sinking sensation in the pit of my stomach. “Details?”

“It says she’s in a cage.”

Cage?!

What could cage be code for?

The second it hits me bile threatens to burn up the back of my throat.

Shit.

Her office!

“There was a location for a dead drop to receive a key about one a.m. this morning.” Faint clicks can be heard encouraging us to pick up the pace. “Note says the little birdie can be delivered singing or fed. Fed is preferred.”

Decoding the message doesn't take more than a few seconds.

Alive or dead.

They *want her* dead.

They're openly looking for someone willing to kill an innocent woman out in the open.

Fuck!

“*Move! Move! Move!*” I shout, darting up to the main floor, heading for the front door. Running for the SUV a couple blocks down the road and dialing HE main security at the same time isn't ideal but it's the only choice I have. Repeatedly receiving no answer not only convinces me to push myself faster, it has me damn near peeling away before my teammates are even in the vehicle. Trying Yi directly is followed by attempting to reach her and when there's still no open line of communication, I slam on my accelerator, racing against an unknown clock.

I can get there in time.

I can get there before something happens to her.

I *can't* let anything happen to her.

There has to be something that can be done.

Right now.

Fuck, why doesn't she have a weapon in her desk drawer?!

She should!

That should be fucking policy going forward!

At least a stun gun!

Something so she isn't just a helpless, sitting duck.

The poor choice of words has me taking the corner a little rougher than intended.

She's not the one that's helpless.

I am.

I'm the stupid one a million miles away with no way to warn her that her life's at stake.

"What about Seventeen?" Blu unexpectedly invades my thoughts. "Can you call Seventeen?"

"What?!" I holler at the top of my lungs and pull onto the main road damn near side swapping a vehicle. "What the fuck did you jus' say to me?!"

"We can hate me later for suggesting you call your girlfriend's ex-boyfriend-"

"Holy shit, Carmichael used to fuck Seventeen?!"

Blu throws an exasperated hand in his direction, "Is this really how you wanna die? Being shot to death in the backseat?"

Nice of him to save someone else's life since I'm about to take his.

"And like I was saying-"

"Is this really how *you* wanna die, Blu? Thrown through the windshield for pickin' the wrong time to fuck with me?"

"I'm not fucking with you," he rushes to explain. "I know it's not ideal and that he probably couldn't hit a target standing still with a beanbag gun two feet away-"

"He's actually got an irritatingly good shot."

“Then how about we call *him* down there to check on her with a member of *his* security detail for assistance?”

“That’s a...” my head bounces back and forth in new annoyance, “fuck... That’s a really good call.”

“One you may not shoot me for.”

“Not right now at least.”

Unsure which I hate more – having his number or having to use it – I scroll through my contacts while steadily dodging what has to be a gang of blind nuns individually transporting nitroglycerin in the backseat of their separate vehicles given how fucking slow, they’re moving on the highway.

To my surprise, it only rings once before he answers, “Not a good time, Wahl. I’m in the middle of an important meeting.”

“Make it a good time, Seventeen!” I viciously bark back.

“Excuse me?”

“I said make it a good time!”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure he heard you loud and clear, man,” Blu less than quietly mutters.

“Arley’s in danger and I’m still at least twenty minutes out!”

“Wha-”

“End this call. Take a member of security from your own fuckin’ floor down to hers and stay *with her* ‘til I get there.”

“Wha-”

“Don’t you *dare* let *anything* fuckin’ happen to her, Lenkov, or you’ll be the second person I put a bullet in when I get there.” Hanging up is followed by me tossing an order over to Blu. “Put a call in to our contact at DPD about my emergency driving. Let’s get me a fuckin’ pass on this shit so I

don't have to kill a cop while trying to save my girlfriend's life."

Chapter 17

Arley

Are you kidding me with this shit?!

An annoyed eye roll is given at an old psych eval of approval given to one of the operatives who is no longer employed through us by one of the therapists who isn't either.

There's no way this guy should've been cleared for another assignment so quickly. All it takes is one long look at his handwriting to tell the amount of duress he was still dealing with. And then if you look deeper at his answers, it's filled to the fucking brim with trigger words that indicate the same damn thing.

Why did this doctor sign off knowing this?

Did he miss these things?

Did he not know to look for them?

Oh shit!

Is *he* the poacher?

Is he the inside man we should be looking for?!

Quickly switching from my desktop to my laptop, I key in the name to search.

Unfortunately, the results don't match the timeframe. His start date is *after* the first few poaches had begun and ends before several more occur meaning he can't be the poacher.

And he can't be the inside man because he doesn't work here anymore.

However, he's still bad at his job.

Good Charlotte continues to pump through my speakers inspiring me to grab my light up green froggy pen Slater got me from one of his first rescues in Georgia and use

it like a microphone to add my own bright pink shades to the swirling mix spinning around the room.

God, I've missed this.

I mean as much as I love working from home – with my cowboy *literally* at arm's length – I'm glad to have space again.

Something familiar as well as *actually mine*.

And the fact that I can listen to Dashboard Confessional or Story of The Year without being mocked or pleaded to put in headphones for a little while is nice too.

I love rocking to music this loud *and* lively.

Neither are the easiest or most courteous things to do when you're living in a penthouse apartment.

All of sudden, my office door flies open causing the pen to leap from my clutches and damn near land directly at the feet of the person who gave it to me. "*Oh, thank fuck, you're alright.*"

Confusion crinkles my forehead yet before I can say anything, Slater's entire body begins seizing in place. Momentarily paralyzed by the sight of his limbs spasming and eyes twitching from the electrocution being shot through him, I simply tremble in my seat.

Gasp.

Gawk.

It isn't until his large frame hits the floor that something in my mind triggers me to move.

Do whatever is necessary to not become the stranger's next victim as well as get my best friend some help.

I spring to my feet and snatch up my pair of scissors silently hating it's the best weapon I've got.

Pre-this whole poacher situation, it never occurred to me someone might actually try to kill me!

Equipping this office with something more dangerous than what I'm holding is going to the top of the must list.

After getting Slater conscious and to the hospital, of course.

“Hello, Songbird,” the black-haired male greets, dark red lettering dripping during its decent to the floor. I'm not given an opportunity to move so much as another muscle before he's pointing his handgun in my direction. “*Let's take a little ride...*”

Thank you for reading *Shatterproof (The Shatter & Shock Duet #1)*! I hope you loved this slow burn, best friends-to-lovers, forced proximity, romantic suspense novel. Find out what happens next in the conclusion novel *Shockproof (The Shatter & Shock Duet #2)*.

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0CG6NS3FH>

You can find out more about Haworth Enterprises by reading the first book in the series, *Bulletproof (Haworth Enterprises #1)*, which features another brainy heroine and overly protective hero.

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B097LNYH1B>

Be sure to check out my other book, *Horseback Hero (The Culture Blind Series #3)* where you will find a Haworth Enterprises security member who is a single father that's given a second chance at love with his high school sweetheart.

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B08636FHM8>

And don't forget to sign up for my newsletter and receive a FREE read:

<http://bit.ly/XNNLSL21>

Did you enjoy reading Shatterproof (The Shatter & Shock Duet #1)? I would appreciate you leaving a review if you did!

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0C1CNS58X>

OTHER WORKS

Do you love EASTER EGGS in books? Well, mine are often full of them and this one is no exception.

Here are links to other stories/places/people that were mentioned/referenced in the book!

Did you catch all of these?

Dalvegan/Dalvegan Dragons (The Owner) –

<https://amzn.to/3IImDpx>

Beers & Babes Beach Bash (Redneck Romeo) –

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07CBC84DJ>

Timbers Family (Unleashed) – <https://amzn.to/2VVhcfT>

Frost Family/Frost Luxury Hotel

(Free-Form: The Extended Edition) –

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0C5RXHJBG>

Shoreside Treasure Chest (Baewatch) –

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B08FRRRCRN>

Applecourt (Aleatory) – <https://amzn.to/3xKJQ2L>

Runt's Beer (Must Love Hogs) –

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B074HX1VK2>

Sunshine Bend (Baby Got Pack) –

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B09VKBRJJK>

Mechanic Hacker Contact (Error) –

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B017CCHVQY>

Dr. Rothwell (Bulletproof) –

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B097LNYH1B>

Misfits MC and Wiz (Camelot Misfits MC) –

<https://amzn.to/2TTnNCI>

Doctenn (Eden) – <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B09MJJ47RT>

The Royal Family (The Duched Series) –

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B01N1S4PYX>

GRATITUDE:

The list of people who assist in this entire process is truly too many to name. So rather than run the risk of forgetting anyone,

I want to just say thank you to EVERYONE. Readers, bloggers, book influencers (new and old), friends, family, reviewers, and street teamers...you have allowed me to grow without shattering my love of writing. Thank you for supporting me and making every stride of the journey filled with love and acceptance and protection of my vibe.

Until next time...

FOLLOW ME!!!

Website (Signed Paperback Purchases Available)

<https://www.xavierneal.com/>

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Facebook Group

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1471618443081356>

Twitter

@XavierNeal87

Instagram

@authorxavierneal

Pinterest

<https://www.pinterest.com/xavierneal/>

Bookbub

<https://www.bookbub.com/authors/xavier-neal>

Goodreads

https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/4990135.Xavier_Neal

New Release Alerts

<https://www.xavierneal.com/newsletter>

Tik Tok

<https://www.tiktok.com/@authorxavierneal>

Spotify

<http://bit.ly/XNSpotifyProfile>

Store Front

<http://tee.pub/lic/authorxavierneal>

FULL List of My Works

Standalones

- Cinderfella (YA Contemporary) - <https://amzn.to/2pBHZff>
- The Gamble (Romantic Comedy) - <https://amzn.to/2uf4ZFW>
- Part of The List (Contemporary Romance) -
<https://amzn.to/2udYwuz>
- Walking Away (Contemporary Ménage Romance) -
<https://amzn.to/2pAOEGf>
- Can't Match This (Romantic Comedy) -
<https://amzn.to/2XapsVw>
- Hike, Hike Baby (Romantic Comedy) -
<https://amzn.to/2PNj456> (Available in Audio)
- Baewatch (Romantic Comedy) – <https://amzn.to/3izNvaG>
- Sleigh Bride (Holiday Romantic Comedy) -
<https://amzn.to/2J0Qk8D>
- Aleatory (Contemporary Age-Gap Romance) -
<https://amzn.to/3xKJQ2L> (Coming to Audio)
- Picnic Perfect (Romantic Comedy) - <https://amzn.to/2UZdgeN>
- Eden (Dark, Taboo Romance) - <https://amzn.to/3mumx98>
- Baby Got Pack (Romantic Comedy) - <https://amzn.to/3rsQpoO>
- Waiting (Contemporary Age-Gap Romance) –
<https://amzn.to/3QwTXBa> (Available in Audio)

Senses Series

(Sports Romance/ Romantic Comedy) (Complete Series)

Vital (Prequel Novella)- FREE ON ALL PLATFORMS

<https://amzn.to/2ueL5KJ>

Blind- <https://amzn.to/2GmEMcO>

Deaf- <https://amzn.to/2IK71Rf>

Numb- <https://amzn.to/2pAOYVt>

Hush- <https://amzn.to/2pzV2gS>

Savor- <https://amzn.to/2HZsVP1>

Callous- <https://amzn.to/2pAPmTV>

Agonize- <https://amzn.to/2ILLaZw>

Suffocate - <https://amzn.to/2GjLU9T>

Mollify- <https://amzn.to/2GgRJoJ>

Blur- <https://amzn.to/2pD1rrK>

Blear - <https://amzn.to/2DQGb6a>

Blare- <https://amzn.to/33nnqV8>

Senses Box Set (Books 1-5) – <https://amzn.to/2Gkxruw>

Adrenaline Series

(Romance/ Romantic Suspense)

Classic (FREE ON MOST PLATFORMS) -

<https://amzn.to/2I0wd4D>

Vintage- <https://amzn.to/2HXksMw>
Masterpiece- <https://amzn.to/2G0tWKj>
Unmask- <https://amzn.to/2Gn2tBK>
Error- <https://amzn.to/2pBakC6>
Iconic- <https://amzn.to/2G1Q8Ua>
Box Set (Books 1-3) - <https://amzn.to/2IP7GRe>

Prince of Tease Series

(Romance/ Romantic Comedy)

Prince Arik- <https://amzn.to/2pAuhbF>
Prince Hunter- <https://amzn.to/2IKzuGu>
Prince Brock- <https://amzn.to/2ufmghN>
Prince Chance- <https://amzn.to/2LuclMw>

Prince Zane- TBA

Hollywood Exchange Series

(Romance/ Romantic Comedy)

Already Written - <https://amzn.to/2G0F2ix>

Already Secure- TBA

Already Designed (The South Haven Crew #1) -
<https://amzn.to/2G8A0fp>

Already Scripted (The South Haven Crew #2) - TBA

Already Legal (The South Haven Crew #3) - TBA

Already Driven (The South Haven Crew #4) - TBA

Already Cast (The South Haven Crew #5) - TBA

The Just Series

(Second Chance Romance)

Just Out of Reach- <https://amzn.to/2ubzfBe>

Just So Far Away- <https://amzn.to/2DR57KM>

Private Series

(Romantic Suspense) (Complete Series)

Private - <https://amzn.to/2IN7P7R>

Public- <https://amzn.to/2pAF7it>

Personal- <https://amzn.to/2vejdHt>

Popular (A Private Series Standalone) – TBA *(This novel will be about how J.T. and his wife, Janae got together.)

Duched Series

(Romantic Comedy) (Complete Series)

Duched- <https://amzn.to/2G4Xlim>

Royally Duched- <https://amzn.to/2pAnvDh>

Royally Duched Up- <https://amzn.to/2G089SP>

Duched Deleted (FREE Novella ON ALL PLATOFRMS)-
<https://amzn.to/2G1OQTy>

The Bros Series

(Erotic Romance) (Complete)

The Substitute- <https://amzn.to/2ub9CAc>

The Hacker- <https://amzn.to/2FZFxJr>

The Suit- <https://amzn.to/2poTcyX>

The Chef- <https://amzn.to/2Dgi7MR>

Must Love Series

(Sweet, Romantic Comedy)

Must Love Hogs- <https://amzn.to/2IMmmkg>

Must Love Jogs- <https://amzn.to/2pBIqp>

Must Love Pogs- <https://amzn.to/2ueUUlu>

Must Love Logs- <https://amzn.to/2IFGrL7>

Must Love Flogs- TBA

The Culture Blind Series

(Contemporary Romance)

Redneck Romeo- <https://amzn.to/2vYuPhM>

Cowboy Casanova- <https://amzn.to/2sxwqGT>

Horseback Hero- <https://amzn.to/2BhT91r>

Blue Jean Bachelor- TBA

Camelot Misfits MC Series

(MC Romance/ Romantic Suspense)

King's Return - <https://amzn.to/2TTnNCI> (Available in Audio)

King's Conquest - <https://amzn.to/2IaYZo8> (Available in Audio)

King's Legacy – <https://amzn.to/2YfvY1i> (Available in Audio)

Wiz's Remedy – <https://amzn.to/2PMmJDK> (Available in Audio)

Locke's (Currently Untitled) Novel - TBA

Trick's (Currently Untitled) Novel – TBA

Synful Syndicate Series

(Dark Romance)

Unleashed- <https://amzn.to/2VVhcfT>

Unleashed Syn- <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0BZQRYT72>

Unchained- <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0BZSPT8J7>

The Bennett Duet

(Dark, Mafia/Mob Romance) (Complete)

Dark Ruler – <https://amzn.to/3z5oEWI> (Available in Audio)

Dark Reign - <https://amzn.to/3H9v3SQ> (Available in Audio)

Haworth Enterprises Series

(Romantic Suspense)

Bulletproof - <https://amzn.to/3FHw8nr> (Available in Audio)

Shatterproof – <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0C1CNS58X>

Shockproof – <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0CG6NS3FH>

The Hockey Gods Series

(Sports Romance/Romantic Comedy)

Can't Block My Love – <https://amzn.to/38HYH0z>

My Fair Puck Bunny – <https://amzn.to/33t2nSw>

The Forward Must Cry – <https://amzn.to/3ijTfpm>

Defenseman No. 9 – <https://amzn.to/3sqAgiJ>

Taming of The Crew - <https://amzn.to/3jo5gwR>

The Draak Legacy

(PNR Romance)

Saving Silver – <https://amzn.to/3J5jG06> (Available in Audio)

Getting Gold - <https://amzn.to/3ejkdNW> (Coming to Audio)

Pleasing Platinum – <https://amzn.to/3rsCQ9g> (Coming to
Audio)

The Love Duet

(Contemporary/Second Chance Romance)

First Love – <https://amzn.to/3xrUnlt>

Last Love – <https://amzn.to/36hyjit>

Complete Boxset (w/bonus material) –
<https://amzn.to/37RNpeK>

The Debt Tales

(Dark Fairy Tale Retellings)

Twisted Debt – <https://amzn.to/3c2eyhM>

Savage Debt - <https://amzn.to/3E08QrX>

Compassion Series

(Slow Burn Contemporary Romance)

Compassion: The Extended Edition: <https://amzn.to/3zI6GdI>

Silent Knight: <https://amzn.to/3FGIqfT>

Dalvegan Dragons Series

(Sports Romance, Romantic Comedy)

The Owner – <https://amzn.to/3IImDpx> (Coming to Audio)

The Free Series

(Opposites-Attract, Romantic Comedy)

Free-Form: The Extended Edition –

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0C5RXHJBG>

Free-Spirit – <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0C5RWB63Y>