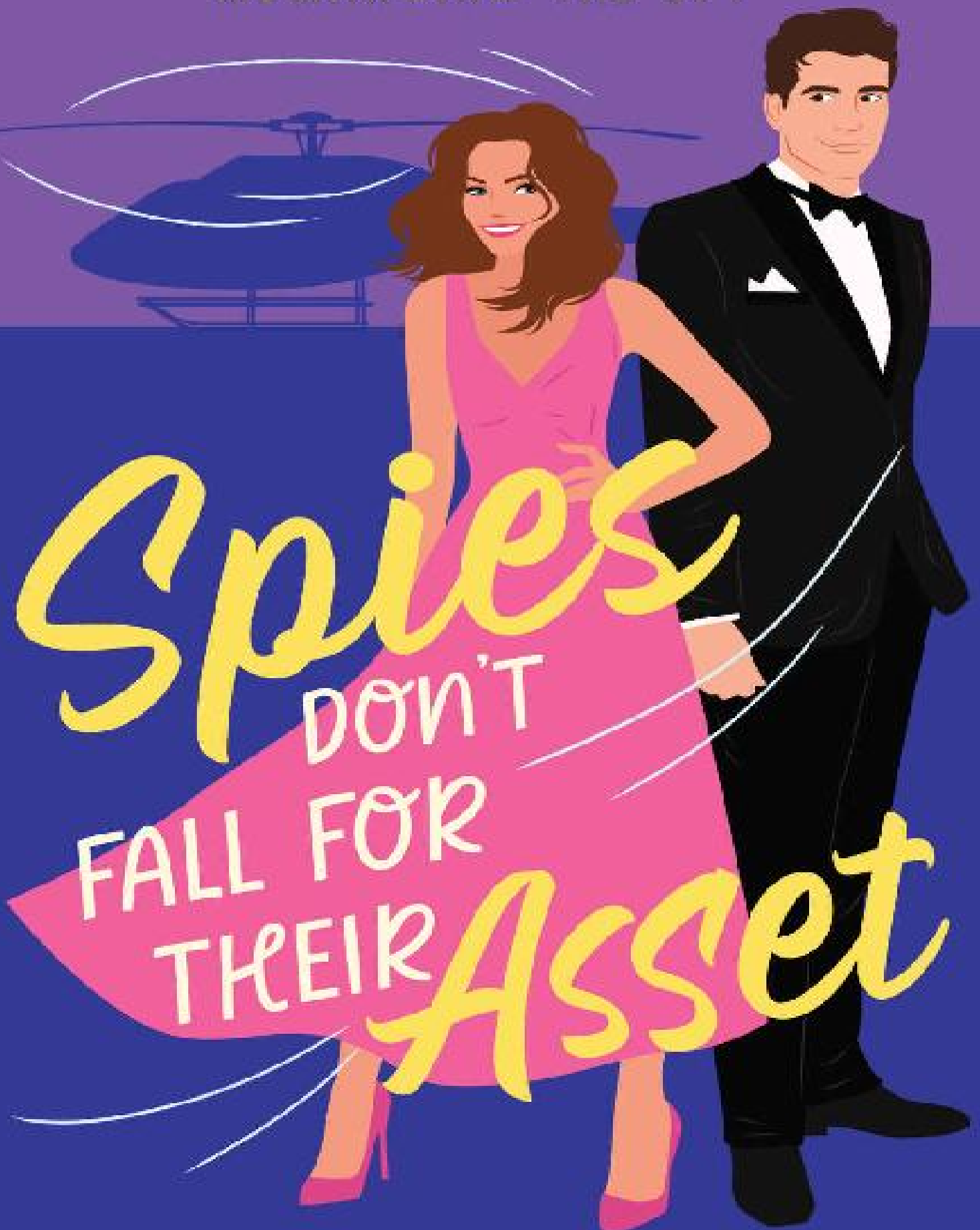


ROMANCING THE SPY



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MEG EASTON



Spies Don't Fall for Their Asset: A Sweet Romantic Comedy

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SPIES DON'T FALL FOR THEIR ASSET

ROMANCING THE SPY

MEG EASTON



For anyone who has accidentally found themselves in the wrong place at the right time (or the right place at the wrong time), and it changed everything.

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CHAPTER 1

FALLING FOR THE AMBUSH

MACKENZIE

You are killing it, Mackenzie! I tell myself as I unlock my apartment door. Who says positive reinforcement isn't effective when used on yourself? Not me. I do it all the time and it works.

I take a right into my bedroom, kick off my running shoes, and then swap my jogging shorts and top for my baby blue t-shirt and knit shorts that are made out of *the* softest fabric. I heard once that if you let yourself feel positive emotions after doing a task that you want to cement as a habit, you'll have more success. So I smile and think about how great it is to be done with my run for the day.

Okay, it was a walk. I *walk*. When walking, there's always at least one foot on the ground at all times. When running, there's a moment with every step when neither foot is on the ground. You always hear that it's wise to stay grounded. I prefer to think that keeping at least one foot on the ground is what they mean.

Plus, every once in a while, I decide to run, and I last about ninety seconds before I am convinced that I will die if I continue. Which, quite frankly, is a little embarrassing. So, instead, I power walk like a sixty-five-year-old in the mall thirty minutes before they open.

But, hey, at least I'm consistent. I have an app where I record my walking streak, and I am on day one thousand two hundred and thirty-seven of walking without missing a day.

I head back into the hall. Just past my bathroom, the hall widens enough that I can consider it my living room. Then I turn the corner to my kitchen and dining room area. The thing is, my apartment is actually a garage. (As evidenced by the giant garage door that can be partially seen just beyond my little kitchen table.)

Specifically, my sister Maggie's garage. This apartment was already built when Maggie and her husband, Rowan, bought this house, and I moved in the same weekend that they did. I love it here—for being a garage, it still has everything. An enclosed bedroom, a full bathroom, a kitchen sink, a fridge, and a freezer.

Well, everything but an oven and stove. But that's okay because I've got a long kitchen counter that holds lots of trusty appliances. I turn on my waffle maker, put in a bit of butter, and then pour on some frozen hash brown potatoes. I add a bit of salt and pepper, then close the lid and open the top of the rice cooker. Before I left for my walk, I'd whisked some eggs right in the rice cooker bowl, then threw in a bunch of diced vegetables. Now this frittata looks and smells like perfection.

My phone lights up with my best friend Livi's face and I swipe to answer the video call. "This is your mission, Mackenzie, should you choose to accept it. Turn on your TV and click the watch party link I sent you."

I can't help the giddy sound that escapes me as I race back to my living room and grab the remote to bring up our movie. "I can't believe we are finally going to re-watch the first *Mission: Impossible* movie."

"The one that started it all."

It was the first movie that Livi and I *ever* watched together. We were maybe three weeks into being randomly placed together in the same dorm our freshman year of college, and we decided we needed a movie night. Somehow, that started a Tuesday night tradition of watching a spy movie or TV show. It's been eight years, and the tradition is still going strong.

We shared an apartment after leaving dorm life behind up until nine months ago when I moved here to work at a physical

therapy clinic and she moved to a Baltimore suburb to work at a mechanical engineering firm. But we weren't about to let a little thing like living a thirty-minute drive apart stop our tradition.

I push my coffee table, which stays pressed against the couch whenever I'm not using it, out into the walkway so that I can sit on my couch. As the first trilling notes of the theme song play, I remember that I still have food cooking. I rush with my open phone back into the kitchen and fling up the lid of the waffle maker, flapping my hand to clear away some of the smoke. "I think I missed the 'these hash browns will self-destruct in five seconds' message."

"They still look edible," Livi says, squinting into the phone screen.

I nod. They're only a little bit blackened. Totally fine. I put them onto a plate, then cut the frittata into fours and add one of the wedges to my plate.

"It still looks way better than my dinner," Livi says. "I've got a full kitchen, yet I'm having Cap'n Crunch cereal."

"Rough day with the machines?"

"I think one of them is trying to kill me. Ready to start?"

"You know it." I take my food into the living room, curl up on my couch, and start to eat as Tom Cruise pulls off his mask, revealing that he's not, in fact, an older Ukrainian man.

As usual, Livi and I talk all through the movie, throwing in our own witty commentary and jokes, pointing out plot holes, cheering for the characters, and acting shocked at all the big reveals, even though we've seen the movie before.

My phone sounds the queen's royal trumpets text tone that my sister set for herself (even though we both know that our older sister, Mari, is the bossy one) and I swipe to her text. It's a picture of my five-month-old niece, Adelaide, with tears streaming down her face. The text reads *Addi requires emergency kisses. Are you free?*

I send a quick *Be right there*, and say to Livi, "Addi needs the kind of love that only her favorite aunt can give. I'll be

back in a minute— keep the movie running.”

“Are you sure? I can pause it.”

“I’m sure. We both have an early day tomorrow. I won’t be long.”

I climb the three cement steps in the corner between my kitchen and living room, open the door to Maggie’s, and then hurry through her kitchen and down the hallway toward the bedrooms and the sad sounds of my distraught niece.

The moment I walk into Addi’s room and she spots me from her mom’s arms, her crying stops and she tries to smile through tears and jagged, hiccupping breaths. She holds her arms out to me and I immediately scoop her up.

Maggie and Rowan look pretty haggard, and the way my sister’s arms drop to her sides tells me that they’re exhausted from holding Addi for so long.

“Thank you,” Rowan says in the most earnest and genuine voice I think I’ve ever heard from a human. Then, to Maggie, he says, “See? I told you that would do it.”

“We left her lovey at Rowan’s parent’s house,” Maggie says. “She’s exhausted and inconsolable. We’ve tried getting her to go to sleep for an hour, offering every other soft blanket in the house, but nothing is working.”

I look down at my five-month-old niece in my arms. She’s snuggling into me like a tired puppy snuggling into a warm, cozy bed, and I am soaking it up. I know that if I’d been babysitting and spent the last hour with a crying Addi and her mom finally got home, Addi would be snuggling into Maggie like she’s snuggling into me right now. But I don’t even care. This little girl makes me feel vital and cherished in a way only a baby can.

It only takes a couple of minutes before Addi’s breathing calms, the sniffing and tears stop, and she’s falling asleep against my chest. Both Maggie and Rowan release a long breath in visible relief. The moment I try to lay Addi in her crib, though, she starts crying again. And the moment I pick her back up, she stops crying and snuggles right back into me.

“Give me your shirt!” Maggie whisper-shouts.

“My shirt?”

“Rowan, go grab one of mine. Mackenzie, I will be forever indebted to you if you let Addi use your shirt as a lovey tonight. Seriously, I’ll do *anything*.”

Rowan comes into the room, tosses Maggie a t-shirt, and as he’s exiting, she says, “This one? Really?”

Rowan shrugs and pulls the door shut on his way out.

I hand Addi to Maggie, then shed my softest t-shirt and put on the one Rowan just brought. Maggie lays Addi in her crib, then scrunches my shirt, folds it in half, and puts it in the baby’s arms. Addi hugs it tight and closes her eyes.

“You’re a life saver, sis,” Maggie whispers.

We hold our breaths for a moment and just like that, Addi is asleep. We are both grinning as we leave the room and pull the door shut silently behind us.

We don’t utter a word until we get to the kitchen. I’m opening my mouth to say something along the lines of “Anytime you need a superhero, you know where to find me,” but before I get even the first word out, Maggie grabs my arm. “Hang on. We wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Oh?” I lean my hip against the island counter and Maggie does the same, facing me, Rowan at her side.

Maggie is the first to speak. “We want to set you up on a blind date.”

“No, thanks,” I say and turn to leave. But Maggie grabs my arm. She means well, and as far as sisters go, she’s a good one, so I don’t actually leave.

“I saw that look on your face when you were in there with Addi. You want one of your own.”

“Sometime *in the future*, yes.”

I want it all. I don’t plan to live in my sister’s garage forever. I want my own house in a small town, maybe my own physical therapy clinic, to be able to really make a difference

in people's lives, to have a baby, all of it. Right this second? No. And I'm not super sold on the husband part of it, either. I haven't had the best experiences with dating, so I'm fine to just shoot for all of my goals on my own.

Maggie's eyebrow rises. "You can't get the baby without dating."

That's debatable, even if Maggie doesn't agree. And if I did ever meet a guy I feel I could spend a lifetime with (or go on more than one date with), I would. I just haven't. And I'll admit that I might be a little skittish about dating in general. Dating someone like my last boyfriend will do that to you. "I date," I insist, making sure my voice sounds sufficiently hurt.

"I misspoke. You can't get there without *second* dates."

"I go on second dates!" I'm a bit offended now. It's not like I'm a serial first dater. I just haven't found someone for quite a while who was worthy of a second date. But even as I'm protesting, it hits me that somewhere along the way, and without even realizing it, I've adopted a "No second dates" rule that I stick to pretty strongly.

Maggie looks confused at my statement. But Rowan's eyes light up and he turns to his wife. "It was that French guy. Cranky. No, Ornery."

"Henri," Maggie says, and they both look pretty proud of themselves for remembering.

I roll my eyes.

"The point is," Maggie says, "it takes a long-term, committed relationship for that to happen, and the first step to that is dating more. Like, say, Spencer."

"Who is Spencer?"

"Do you remember me talking about Peter, the guy I work with?" Rowan asks. I don't. "It's his brother."

"Okay," I say, "tell me about Spencer."

Rowan shifts uncomfortably. "Well, I don't actually know much about him, but Peter is a pretty good guy and he recommended him."

“*Pretty good?*”

Maggie opens her mouth to say something, but then motions to my shirt and says to her husband, “I can’t even take her seriously. Did you have to grab her that shirt?”

I look down at the shirt for the first time. I’ve never seen Maggie wear it, so maybe it’s one she only wears to bed. Across the chest, it reads, *I could agree with you, but then we’d both be wrong.*

Maggie seems to be trying to ignore my shirt by focusing intently on my eyes. “You know a good way to get to know Spencer? Go on a date with him.”

I look at Rowan since this was initially his and his coworker Peter’s idea. “Name one thing that Spencer and I have in common.”

“We didn’t actually talk much about his personality.”

“So the only thing we have in common is that we are both single.” Why do married people think that’s all it takes for people to date and fall blissfully in love? Does tying the knot make people instantly forget what dating is like?

“Oh!” Rowan says like he just realized the final pile-of-money-winning answer in a game show. “The guy likes spy movies! So you have that in common, too.”

My arms are crossed, my eyebrow is raised, and I’m giving them my best “You’re joking, right?” stare.

I think I’ve used it on my sister too much, though, because it has lost all effectiveness. She says, “Tell me how many guys you’ve run into at work or in town who are on your mental list of guys you might want to date.”

Okay, now I’m the one who’s shifting uncomfortably because that list is alarmingly close to zero. Okay, it *is* zero. Maggie’s got me, and she knows it. The victory smile is showing through her exhaustion.

“Does this weekend work for you?” she asks.

“Fine,” I say, mostly because I can hear a bit of *Mission: Impossible* coming through the door that separates her house

and my apartment, and from what little I can hear, it's at a really good part, and saying yes will get me back to it the quickest. "But if it's a bad date, it's the last time you two set me up." And that's the rest of the reason why I say yes.

"Deal," Rowan says, and I think it might be worth going on the date if only to forever close the door on them setting me up. I even shake his hand to make it officially official.

When I get back into my apartment, Livi asks, "That took a while. Addi really wasn't doing well, huh?"

"She wasn't, but she is now. Please tell me I didn't miss the part where he breaks into the vault at the CIA, hanging from the ceiling in a harness, almost falls to the floor, and hovers just inches above it."

"With the bead of sweat that's about to drop from his face, and you know it's going to hit the floor and get him caught, but then he catches it at the last second?"

I nod, feeling the excitement of the scene all over again.

"Yeah, you totally missed that. But the good news is, you haven't missed the part with the helicopter and the train in the tunnel."

I plop back on the couch as Ethan Hunt is at a payphone, clearly aiming to let the IMF trace his phone call. "Maggie and Rowan want me to go on a blind date."

"Did they show you a picture of the guy?"

"No. And they don't even know much about him."

"Oof. That's rough."

"They lured me in with one job and then ambushed me, like what we just watched in this movie! Have I learned nothing from all of our hours spent watching spy movies?"

Livi shakes her head in commiseration. "But what are you going to do? Say no to helping Addi just in case there might be an ambush?"

"Not a chance."

"You said no to the date, though, right?"

I grimace. “Not exactly. But I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

CHAPTER 2

CLANDESTINE CONVERSATIONS

JACE

I glance toward the restaurant as I take off my suit coat and lay it in the back seat of my car. Then I remove my tie and add it to the backseat, too. The restaurant is nice, and although most— if not all— of the men in there will be wearing suits, they aren't required.

With as nervous as my asset typically is, my goal is to make him feel calm and not intimidated. My goal isn't for me to fit in, so I leave the suit behind. Four years ago, I was on a mission in Caracas that hinged on me turning an asset and getting vital information from him. I hadn't learned that lesson yet, and it didn't end well.

I undo the button at my neck as Charlie, who is both my sister and my handler, says into my earpiece, "Okay, Gianna just called the asset's wife. She's pretending to be someone in finance at the wife's work, trying to file a budget report by a deadline, and panicked because she needs some info from the wife. That should get her to step out of the restaurant at any minute. Because, really, who's going to want to talk budgets and finance with an audience? Well, who wants to talk about that ever, really."

"Charlie."

"Going silent."

I shut my car door and head toward the restaurant. "I see her," I say just barely loud enough for Charlie to hear. I brush past the middle-aged woman in the deep blue dress who just stepped out of the restaurant, a phone to her ear, looking a

little stressed and a lot annoyed that she is dealing with work in the middle of dinner.

As I step into the restaurant and the door closes behind me, the noise from the street immediately fades away. The place is nice. Dark wood, cream fabric. Fancy, yet cozy, with low golden lighting and a staff dressed like Gordon Ramsay himself inspected their appearance before they stepped foot on the restaurant floor. Totally the kind of place to take your wife to for an anniversary dinner date when you're also meeting with a Clandestine Services Agency intelligence operative to pass along covert information about the shady dealings of some people you work for, all while keeping it a secret from your wife.

It only takes a quick glance to spot my asset, Carl, seated in a booth against the north wall. I am the one who turned him, but I would recognize my contact even if we'd never met based solely on the way his gaze darts around the room and his hands twist his cloth napkin. It isn't the first time Carl and I have met so he can pass me information. I assumed that, by now, the man would stop looking like I've just asked him to jump out of a plane with me at thirty thousand feet, but nope.

Earlier today, I got a whispered phone call from Carl on the encrypted phone I'd given him. He said he'd gotten some information that was time-sensitive and wanted to meet tonight. But he also said that he wasn't about to cancel his anniversary dinner with his wife and definitely wasn't about to let her in on his extra-curricular spying.

An asset can be motivated to gather intel for us because of at least one of four factors: money, ideology, coercion, or ego. For Carl, it was money. He works with us and he doesn't have to ever tell his wife about the money he unwisely pulled from their savings to invest in his friend's startup treadmill shoes business. ("You don't even have to leave your chair to get a workout!") But he's also motivated by ideology, and I've since learned that it's also a tiny bit of ego, so I make sure to stroke that, too.

I take a seat across from him in the booth— in the spot his wife just vacated. The seat is still warm, but the mostly-

finished lobster bisque in front of me is getting less so by the moment. The entrees haven't been served yet, so they aren't in danger of getting cold, which was some pretty impressive timing on my handler's part. I'm suddenly wondering if there are cameras in this place that Charlie tapped into so she could time Gianna's call perfectly. It's something that Charlie would think of.

The way to be an effective field operative is to always be in control of the situation and to never let external factors dictate how the mission is going to go. Whether those other factors are an asset, a target, a bystander, the weather, anything — stay in control. It's why I go fully prepared into every situation.

“Gianna says you've got at least four minutes,” Charlie's voice says in my ear, “but she can push it to eight if you need it.”

“Hello, Carl,” I say, making my voice come out calm, confident, and un-rushed.

Carl's eyes dart to the door, then to the couple behind me, then over his shoulder.

“Carl,” I say, “eyes on me.”

The guy's eyes finally meet mine, and I try to hold them on me by sheer force of will. “It's hard to appear nonchalant when you're putting your napkin in a headlock.”

Carl lets out a breath and his shoulders relax as I'm guessing he lets go of the napkin in his lap. I try to help calm his frayed nerves even more by pulling a device from my pocket that looks like a regular cell phone and placing it on the table between us.

“This device will make it difficult for anyone outside of this booth to hear us. Notice how loudly I'm speaking. Keep it under that, and you'll be fine. It also jams any transmissions from phones within a twenty-foot radius. We aren't being overheard.” The device isn't perfect, but it's a good precaution. Nothing beats observation by trained eyes. And

my trained eyes are telling me that no one in here is paying particular attention to us, even surreptitiously.

And no one nearby cares what we are saying. The older couple in the booth behind me are currently debating whether there are any plot holes in the true crime documentary they've been binging. The couple in the booth on the other side of Carl are discussing what's behind their first grader's distractibility at school. (The prevailing argument is that it's the kid's candy addiction and possibly red dye issues, in conjunction with the fact that his after-school snack of choice is handfuls of Sweedish Fish from a Costco-sized bag.)

The table to my right and diagonally behind me currently has no one sitting at it and hasn't been bussed. And the table to my right and diagonally in front of me has a couple on a first date, based on the body language they both had as the woman took a selfie of the two of them and the introductory-type things they're talking about. Well, mostly the guy is talking, non-stop, trying hard to make his voice smooth and confident, while also trying to make his job as a security guard sound impressive.

None of them have given us a second glance.

"I know you don't want your wife involved in any of this. Don't worry— she's on the phone with one of our best intelligence operatives, Gianna, who is pretending to be someone with a work issue at your wife's company. Gianna's good at keeping people on the line for as long as needed, and I'll get a head's up when their conversation is coming to an end."

Carl nods. His eyes stay on the door for a moment, but the muscle at the side of his neck seems to stop pulsing like it belongs at a night club. He turns his focus back to me. "We had a company meeting today. Everyone was supposed to attend, so I stayed behind to see if I could find any lose papers or something in Hendrickson's office. But when I got close, I heard voices."

The guy glances around again. I want to nudge him to hurry but as twitchy as he is, I decide calm patience is what I

most want to exude.

“I didn’t catch everything, because they were already talking before I got there, but I got the important parts. They’re passing off the ‘key’ to their buyer tomorrow morning at eleven-thirty.”

“And you’re sure this ‘key’ has to do with the Eradication project?”

The company Carl works for creates what is essentially a virus, but is used for medical research and disease eradication that, in the right hands, will be life-changing for many people. In the wrong hands, it could be altered to become a deadly biological weapon. My agency got a tip that someone at Carl’s company is looking to sell the research and the information on how to weaponize it to the highest bidder.

So we did surveillance and discovered which employees might have access to the information we needed and came up with Carl. Underneath the nerves, Carl is a good guy. It wasn’t hard to turn him.

Carl nods. “I’m sure.” Then he glances around again like he’s worried he’s talking loudly enough for someone to hear. He’s not, though— he’s barely talking loudly enough for me to hear, and only because I can lip read.

Besides, the elderly couple behind me is currently getting very concerned that investigators didn’t find a key piece of evidence that they’re sure is important, and they’re wondering if maybe they should call “the authorities.” The discussion with the couple behind Carl is now focusing on video games, which is making their hand movements rather animated, and the guy diagonal from me on a first date is telling a story about how he simultaneously saved a life, stopped a drug deal, and returned a kid’s stuffed penguin to him.

I am trained to listen to multiple conversations at once, and none of the surrounding tables are even attempting to make it a challenge for me by speaking in hushed tones. Carl really has nothing at all to worry about. He either senses it or sees the lack of worry on my face because he continues.

“The person they’re passing it off to is a woman in her mid-twenties, about five foot seven, wearing a ‘sundress’— whatever that means— and carrying a dark pink purse.”

“Did they mention hair color?”

“Oh. Brunette. I knew my nerves were going to make me forget a detail.”

Speaking of brunettes, I’m having a hard time not letting more of my attention go to the woman on the first date at the table diagonally from me. Especially because her date just said, “Can you keep a secret?” and the woman responded with “Occasionally,” which made me internally chuckle a bit. Maybe because the response is unusual. Most people respond with something along the lines of “Of course,” even when they have no intention of keeping the secret.

I perk up even more when the date’s next words are, “I also do some spy work for the CIA.”

The date who can’t stop talking about himself is a CIA asset? My agency often does joint projects or missions with the CIA. I know pretty well how things work there, and my gut tells me he’s not an asset. What kind of asset shares that kind of info on a first date, especially right after the date said she might not keep the secret? The asset across from me isn’t even telling his wife and they’ve been married for twenty-five years today. I’m so curious to know how the woman is reacting to that bit of news.

But I’m a professional, and my eyes don’t leave Carl’s. “Where are they meeting?”

“An outdoor pedestrian mall just outside of Baltimore, off I-70.”

“I know the place.” It’s even closer to the agency than this restaurant is.

“It’ll happen somewhere in the courtyard area. It sounds like near some outdoor tables by a café. The guy is supposed to just drop it in her purse as he walks by, not stop and talk to her or anything.”

I nod. “A brush pass.”

A waiter is heading our way, eyes on us, so we both stop talking. And now the guy on the first date is saying that the CIA gave him a badge, and I'm trying not to roll my eyes at how hard he is trying to impress. When he mentions it being so shiny and gold, I legitimately worry a laugh might escape me on accident. Maybe he's confusing the CIA with the FBI?

Even more curiosity about how the woman is reacting gets me to look in her direction. All I can see of the guy is the back of his head, but I can see the woman's face, and she is clearly not buying his story. She responds with, "I don't think they give badges to assets."

They really don't. They rarely even take assets inside CIA headquarters. It's hard to make adversaries believe you aren't working with the CIA if they spot you walking right into the building.

"Yeah," her date says, "you probably got that from watching TV shows. They never get things at Langley right. They give badges to high-value assets."

When the waiter reaches our table, he looks at me and asks, "May I take your order, sir?"

I shake my head. "No. I'm just an old friend who came over to say hello."

Then the waiter turns to Carl and asks about his wife which is taking valuable time, and I need to vacate Carl's wife's seat soon. Yet a small part of me is grateful for the waiter's distraction because it lets me focus on the train wreck of a first date going on at the next table.

"Stick with me, Mackenzie," the date says, "and you'll get the inside scoop on a lot of exciting and dangerous missions. I'm betting you don't have enough excitement in your life. People rarely do."

So the woman's name is Mackenzie.

"I don't know about that," Mackenzie said. "Just yesterday, I had a patient who learned how to twist open a bottle of Dr. Pepper after having carpal tunnel surgery. That was pretty exciting."

It's the first time I've heard the woman get a chance to say anything about her life. Then she changes the subject. "The roasted chicken breast with mushrooms and Parmesan risotto looks so good. What are you getting?"

Her date closes his menu and says, "You know how sometimes you go to a restaurant you love and decide to try something new and it just turns out disappointing? I've been here many times before. I know what's good. Let me order for you— then you won't have to worry about getting something disappointing."

"That's okay," Mackenzie says. "I like living on the wild side."

I smile. I like her.

The waiter at our table glances at me, and then nods at Carl. "Your entrees should be ready soon. I'll make sure your wife is present before I bring them out."

Carl thanks the waiter, but the man doesn't walk away—he turns to take the order of the couple on the first date. Carl doesn't seem comfortable talking to me with the waiter so close. The man might not have nerves of steel, but he has good instincts. He's been able to get us a lot of valuable intel over the past couple of months. But he is getting more and more agitated the longer we wait, and his eyes dart to the door again.

In my ear, Charlie tells me that Gianna is having no problem dragging the phone call out, so I say to Carl, "That issue at your wife's work has turned into a bigger problem than either of them thought. It might take a few more minutes."

Carl nods just as I tune into Mackenzie's date saying, "And the lady will have the seared salmon."

I'm sure my eyebrows rise because that is a ballsy move after the woman said she didn't want the man to order for her. Either he isn't good at reading the room or he is just plain controlling.

I glance at Mackenzie, who's looking equal parts annoyed and up for the challenge, and I really start rooting for her as she says to the waiter, "Actually, that's not what I want. I'd like the roasted chicken, please."

"You don't trust me to order for you?"

She looks at her date and shrugs. "I'm allergic to salmon."

"Allergic?"

"It happens."

You'd think the guy would've learned his lesson in ordering for her, but no. The next words out of his mouth are, "I'd like a red wine, and since I'm sure the lady is watching her figure, she'll take seltzer water with lemon."

I'm glad Carl and I can't continue our conversation right now, because I really want to see how this all goes down.

Mackenzie's eyes narrow at her date before she scans the menu. "Okay, I'll take the seltzer water, like he said, but with a root beer float on the side, please."

The man cocks his head. "Root beer floats are for children, don't you think? I don't think you're considering the fat and calorie content."

Mackenzie turns a brilliant smile on the waiter. "Do you put whipped cream on top?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She hands him her menu. "I'd like double, please."

If I could mentally give someone a high-five, I would definitely be high-fiving Mackenzie right now.

As the waiter takes the man's menu, too, and then walks away, I force my head back into the intelligence-gathering game. Carl swallows hard and takes a glance around before he hisses, "If you take the key, they're going to know someone sold them out. What if they find out I didn't go to the meeting? I mean, sure, nine hundred people were at that meeting and they didn't take roll. There aren't cameras in the hallway by Hendrickson's office, but they have them in the hallway by the

auditorium. It'd be tedious, but they could find out who attended."

The guy is talking faster than a chipmunk on espresso now. "Carl. Look at me." I pause until his darting eyes meet mine. "My goal is to keep you safe. We won't intercept until after the buyer has taken possession, so your company will assume that the leak happened on the buyer's end."

"You think they will?"

In my ear, Charlie says, "You've got about sixty seconds until the wife comes back in." Honestly, I'm impressed that Gianna has kept her on the line for as long as she has. I hadn't expected things in here to take so long.

"I do," I say to Carl in my most comforting voice. Even though I know I have a time limit, I slow my talking speed to convey as much calm confidence as possible. "You've got nothing to worry about. Now enjoy this anniversary dinner with your wife, knowing that the world is a safer place because of you. *You*, Carl. Puff that chest up."

The guy sits up visibly straighter and breathes in deeply.

"Put a peaceful smile on your face because your part is done. You did well. You're a hero. Your wife is going to walk back through that door in about thirty seconds—you let that smile show her how great you are and how great you think she is."

Carl nods. He actually looks about a billion times more confident than he did when I first walked in, and I give him my best "I'm proud of you" smile. Because I *am* proud of him. He did something dangerous and scary and he did it well.

At some point, I'd stopped listening to the first date conversation, but I tune back in just as the date, who is now leaning back in his chair with his arms folded, says, "I'm an expert on what women want."

"Are you an expert at what *this* woman wants? Because you know we aren't all the same."

I hear the smugness in his voice as he says, "In some ways you are. A little later, I'll show you just how much I do know

about you.”

The way the guy said that last sentence instantly makes me want to throw a punch. I can now tell that it isn't social awkwardness steering the ship— it is the need to control. I know the guy's type. They like to stage coups to take over small countries and pretend that all of their subjects adore them.

It isn't just me, either— a glance at this woman tells me that she is currently having thoughts of punching her date, too. I have no doubt that she can get herself out of this just fine. But that doesn't mean I shouldn't offer to help, just in case she wants it.

I ignore Carl for a quick second to make eye contact with Mackenzie and mouth “Help?” My lips barely move— I let my raised eyebrow do the bulk of the asking.

The woman shrugs, but then she gives me a faint smile and a subtle nod. Our two-second conversation probably would've gone unnoticed even by people looking straight at us.

Carl reaches across the table and I grab his hand with mine and give it a shake as he says, “Thank you.” The guy is thanking me when he is the one who risked everything over the past two months by spying on people at his company to get us the information we need.

I stand, vacating his wife's seat. “Thank *you*, Carl. I'll take it from here. Relax, and have a great anniversary evening with your wife.”

“She's walking in now,” Charlie says in my ear.

Whew. I cut it a bit close. I don't even look back toward the door to confirm— I just walk in the direction of the kitchen where I can see the waiter. As I pass the table with Mackenzie and the guy whose face I'm seeing for the first time, I hear him telling a story about his ex-girlfriend and how her brother didn't like him, so he planted some drugs in the guy's truck and then tipped off the police.

Classy guy. I roll my eyes.

“I’m going to be a minute longer,” I mutter just loudly enough for Charlie to hear and hopefully not obvious enough to make it look like I’m talking to myself.

“What are you doing?” she asks. “Please tell me you’re not staying for Mackenzie’s sake.”

I ignore my handler, but it doesn’t surprise me that she also picked up Mackenzie’s name. She can eavesdrop on multiple conversations with the best of us.

“Jace, you can’t protect every random girl you meet. Besides, from what your mic picked up, I can say with almost complete confidence that she can handle herself just fine.”

“I know,” I say, right before I reach the waiter. Then I hand the man my credit card and tell him that I’d like to pay for Mackenzie’s and her date’s meals, and then I ask him to pack hers in a to-go container. He doesn’t seem surprised by any of it, but then he was witness to enough of the guy’s personality to guess that Mackenzie would want to leave.

I turn and smile when I see Carl’s wife beaming like Carl definitely gave her his “I think you’re great” smile. Then I head back toward Mackenzie’s table. I am really going to enjoy introducing myself to her date.

CHAPTER 3

THE MUTUALLY AUTHORED ORIGIN STORY

MACKENZIE

Most people think there are only red flags in dating, but there are lots of colored flags. Like blue, where one person in the relationship really brings the other down. Or green, when one is really jealous or insecure. Yellow is for the incompatibilities that may or may not be deal breakers. (Like wanting to live in different parts of the country, or putting the toilet paper roll on under instead of over, or being the kind of person who spoils TV shows or movies.)

Purple is where one is controlling or manipulative. And then orange, which is when one person shows about as much enthusiasm about the relationship as a sloth on tranquilizers. Or the sometimes elusive pink, where every issue is ignored because of rose-colored glasses.

This guy, Spencer, is basically a bag of Skittles.

Wild Berry-flavored Skittles, specifically, because he doesn't have any orange and he's got a *lot* of red. Plus, I don't think he's actually watched many spy movies or he would know how the CIA works.

I smile and nod politely at my date as he tells me about his ex. Yes, *his ex*. But the nice part about his story is that it showcases even more colored flags, leaving me no doubt that leaving this date early is the right thing to do.

The hottie without a suit coat— who had been sitting for several minutes in a booth where I'd had the perfect view of him— walks up to my table and says, "Mackenzie, is that

you?” He grabs a chair from the empty table behind Spencer, pulls it over to our table, and takes a seat.

For a split second, hearing this man say my name makes me wonder if we actually know each other. But no, I’ve never seen him before today. He must’ve heard Spencer say my name. He obviously heard Spencer make that comment about how he’ll show me how much he knows about me later because he seemed as bugged by it— or by the way my date said it— as I was.

I still can’t believe I said yes when this complete stranger asked me if I wanted help. I do feel like I need to end the date soon, but I didn’t feel like I needed help before he offered. So why *did* I say yes?

Maybe because at first glance, the man appears to be everything my date is not. Self-assured. Confident. Suave. And, okay, maybe a bit like he’s interested in me instead of only being interested in telling me about himself. And maybe I am curious to know if he actually is as he appears.

“Hi,” I say as if we are long-lost friends. “It’s so good to see you!” Now, if only I knew his name. Am I going to have to introduce him to Spencer? Maybe I should start thinking of a fake name to say.

“You, too. Wow. It has been so long. When was the last time? Senior year of high school?”

“Senior year,” I say, nodding, not having a clue where this is going but very interested to find out. “Since I left Leesburg to go to college.”

“No, wait,” the man says. “You came back home that Christmas, remember? We all got together at Burger Bliss.”

For the record, I’ve never heard of Burger Bliss and don’t know what type of place it is in this guy’s mind. But this is now a mutually created backstory. Like when my sister and I were little— during long church sermons, we’d start with a squiggle on a piece of paper and pass it back and forth, each adding a line, a dot, or a squiggle until it became a picture that neither of us had planned. “That’s right! Wow, I can’t believe

it's been so long since we last got jalapeno burgers and went up on that rickety stage to sing karaoke.”

The guy puts the knuckle of his pointer finger to a lip, then chuckles as he shakes his head. “Remember how Darek used to go up every Friday and he would always sing—”

“— Eye of the Tiger,” I say, finishing his sentence.

“Always wearing those mismatched socks. One was bowling-themed and the other...”

He pauses, thinking, and I say, as if I just remember (when, really, I just thought of it), “Cheez-Its!” I shake my head. “His lucky socks. I wonder if he still wears them every Friday.”

The man leans back, studying me like he's drinking me in after all these years. “How long has it been?”

“Eight years now.” I wish I would've thought to ask that question because his answer might've told me how old he is. Not that it matters beyond this very moment— I'm just curious. Although I am having enough fun that I kind of hope this moment will continue for a while longer. (A few years, maybe?)

“Wow. *Eight years.*” I can tell he's calculated my age, and that smile tells me he's pleased it came to twenty-six. “So have you seen any of the old gang?”

“Want to introduce me to your friend?” Spencer finally asks, his voice tight. I can't believe I almost forgot he is at the table. Especially because, based on the waves of annoyance coming off him, he's been exuding the emotion for likely the entire length of this conversation and has been trying not to let the emotion explode out of him. And I've been so focused on this stranger that I didn't even notice.

I scramble because I didn't actually think of a fake name for this guy. Luckily, my partner-in-backstory-creation saves me by not even missing a beat before he reaches a hand out and says, “Hi, I'm Jace. Mackenzie and I went to school together.”

Jace. It's nice to have a name to call him.

“Yes, I gathered that,” Spencer snips. “So, what are you doing here?”

Jace turns to me. “I actually drove up because Terrence lives here now. Ashley is here for a couple of days, too, so we are all getting together.”

“No,” Spencer says, the word controlled but just barely so, “I meant, what are you doing here *at my table?*”

“Just catching up with an old friend. I apologize for cutting in on your date.”

Jace is definitely suave. I’m impressed he’s being so polite to Spencer, especially when Spencer looks like he’s got very impolite thoughts running through his head.

“Yeah, high school was a fun time. *Back when we were kids.*” Spencer motions between himself and me. “We are having an adult date here right now.”

Ignoring the guy, Jace turns to me and asks, “So have you seen any of the old gang?”

“Not since high school.”

“You should come hang out with us tonight! Everyone would love to see you. We are trying to get Casey and Brynn to drive up, too. We are going to see if we can find a karaoke bar somewhere. Recreate a bit of the magic from Burger Bliss.”

I know that Jace is making everything up, yet I still want to buy into it. I want to go with him to hang out with the old gang, sing karaoke, experience Burger Bliss magic, and find out if Darek still wears his lucky socks.

“Except she’s on a date right now,” Spencer says, punctuating every word.

I turn my full attention to Spencer, putting a hand on his arm so his focus will be on me instead of Jace. “Listen. I think we’ve talked long enough to realize that this isn’t going anywhere. I think we should call it a night.”

Spencer shakes his head. “No. You haven’t given me enough of a chance yet. I’m a nice guy. I’ve never met a

woman who doesn't love me. And you're really going to be impressed with my apartment later tonight as I tell you stories about my secret missions."

My eyes are still on Spencer, but I can see the expression on Jace's face from the corner of my eye, and I can tell that he's objecting to so much of what Spencer just said.

"I know there's a woman out there who will love doing exactly that," I say. "I am just not her."

Spencer spreads his hands at the mostly empty table. "They haven't even brought out the food yet. What, am I just supposed to sit here by myself with two entrees?"

I get why my date is angry. I do. I am trying to skip out early. I thought I was being clear that the date wasn't going well all along, but maybe I wasn't clear enough.

That's the exact moment when our waiter arrives at the table and places a beautiful plate of sea bass in front of Spencer and a takeout bag in front of me. Did Jace set this up with the waiter? Or did the waiter see the writing on the wall more clearly than my date did?

"So I'm paying for your meal, and you're going to just leave with it?"

"It's already paid for, buddy," Jace says. "Yours, too."

Jace paid for our meals? I'm trying to figure out my conflicting emotions around that when my attention flies to Spencer as he says to me in a fierce voice, "No. You are *not* leaving in the middle of our date."

And, it has nothing to do with being clear and everything to do with him not being okay with it ending before *he* says it ends. I'm not about to keep myself in a bad situation just so he can get what he wants.

"You don't know what you're missing out on," he adds loudly enough that heads really start turning in our direction. "I'm the perfect guy. Women love me."

Yeah. Women love their dates being loud and demanding in a restaurant.

“You are not going to embarrass me like this. No, you agreed to this date, and you’re with me until the end.” He jabs his pointer finger into the table as if it’s final.

Jace shakes his head. “Listen. It’s not going to happen.” He stands and holds out a hand to me. I smile and take it as I stand up, too, and then grab my to-go bag.

Spencer stands and steps right in front of me, attempting to block me from leaving. But Jace just gives him a curt nod, gives me a little tug toward him, and we walk around Spencer and to the door.

When we step out into the night, I want to pump my fist. Do a victory cheer. This isn’t my first bad date where I’ve left early, but it’s the first one that has made me feel so triumphant.

I turn to Jace, a smile spread clean across my face. “I kind of wanted to punch Spencer at the end. I’m impressed you stayed so calm.”

Jace shrugs with one shoulder, and that simple gesture in his crisp white button-down shirt shows off some pretty great shoulder muscles. It’s a testament to how much fun I was having chatting with him in the restaurant that I didn’t notice earlier. Then he says, “I’ve had a lot of experience figuring out when to punch a jerk and when to walk away.” He glances toward the street. “I can get an Uber to take you home.”

“Oh. No, that’s okay— I drove here. You never know how a first date is going to turn out, and I like to come prepared. Thank you for jumping in to help, by the way. I had no problem ending the date in the restaurant, but I worried that with Spencer’s persistence, he’d follow me to my car.”

“You’re welcome.” He holds out a hand to me. “We weren’t officially introduced. I’m Jace Lancaster.”

I shift my bag of takeout (which smells amazing) to my other hand and shake Jace’s. “Mackenzie MacNeil.”

Jace scratches the back of his neck like he’s unsure if he should ask, but he says, “Out of curiosity, can I ask how you wound up on this date?”

I laugh a little. “Valid question. My sister, Maggie, is always giving me grief about not dating much.” Jace raises an eyebrow in question, but I’m not about to get into my history of past relationships gone awry with someone I barely met, so I barrel forward. “And her husband, Rowan, works with this guy’s brother. I had planned to tell them that the date went horribly wrong so they won’t line me up with anyone again, but I didn’t think it would be so true.”

Both of us glance toward the front doors of the restaurant as Spencer storms out, his eyes immediately finding us in the parking lot. “Looks like your hunch about him following you out of the restaurant was right.”

I sigh. “Do you think he was delayed in coming out because it took that long for enough righteous indignation to build or because it took that long for the waiter to box up his food?”

The restaurant door opens again and the waiter steps out, holding a bag of food and wearing a confused expression, like he doesn’t understand why Spencer left without it. Spencer snatches it from the guy’s hand and starts stomping toward us.

“Go,” Jace says. “I’ll take care of this.”

“Are you sure?”

Jace nodded. “I’ve got it.”

I walk toward my car and Spencer doesn’t follow— he stalks right up to Jace and jabs him in the chest with a finger. “You’re not going to ruin my date like this.”

“Your date was already ruined. She’s not interested. Just accept it and move on.”

I unlock my door, but the part of me that would also watch a train wreck keeps me from opening it yet.

“She was interested until you came along. She doesn’t even know yet what she’s missing out on.”

I can tell by the way Jace’s breathing makes his shoulders rise and fall that he’s getting a little annoyed. Then I hear him

say, “Maybe you should pull out that CIA badge and take it up with Langley.”

“You know, I think I will,” Spencer says. “Whatever your job is, it’ll be gone by tomorrow. Maybe a few nights in jail will teach you a lesson.”

I want to keep watching, but they’re likely to look over soon, and it’ll be weird if I am just standing like a statue at my car door. I get in my car and start it, but as I’m backing out of my parking stall, I keep craning my neck to watch them.

I glance out my side window as I put my car into drive and start inching toward the road. Spencer takes a step back, holding his hands up, and I really wish I had thought to lower my window so I could catch their conversation.

Just before I pull out of the parking lot, I see Jace clap Spencer on the shoulder, and the tense situation seems miraculously diffused. Wow. The guy really does know how to get out of a situation without throwing punches. I am impressed. I give a little wave as I turn left onto the street and head toward home, the roasted chicken in the seat next to me smelling divine.

CHAPTER 4

DEFENDING DATES AND FABULOUS FINDS

MACKENZIE

I step to the other side of some racks of blouses on the sidewalk outside one of my favorite clothing stores, reveling in the feel of sunshine on my skin. I'm wearing a fun dress, my legs still feel freshly shaven from my date last night, and the weather is so perfect that I take off my cardigan and stuff it into the shopping bag that holds the pair of jeans I bought moments ago. The sun feels even better on my bare shoulders. The physical therapy clinic I work at has been short-staffed so I've worked the past two weekends, and it feels glorious to be doing normal things today.

It's even better that I'm here shopping with Livi. It hasn't been the easiest adjusting to my BFF being a thirty-minute drive away instead of a four-step walk.

This mall is one of my favorites. Not only is it almost exactly halfway between my house and Livi's, but all the storefronts open into a partially enclosed courtyard. When the weather is warm like this, they all bring their racks out to the sidewalks and the ambiance is downright festive. I am in the middle of considering a cute coral-colored, off-the-shoulder shirt with a ridiculous amount of ruffles along the neckline when a rack of shoes to my left catches my attention.

I rush over to them and pick up the cutest pair of heels that I've ever laid my eyes on. They're about the same shade of magenta as my purse— they're a rich, saturated, striking color that I swear speaks to my soul. The heels are some kind of metal and have a cool-looking vine wrapping up them and onto the magenta part at the back of the shoe. Livi is at my

side in an instant, ogling the shoes with me. “I’ve been feeling like something is missing in my life lately,” I say, “and I’m pretty sure it’s these shoes.”

Livi turns the full force of her significant gaze on me, placing a hand gently on my upper arm. “Oh, Mac. You can’t fill that hole with shoes.”

My friend has said some hard truths over the years, but this one hurts.

Then she continues. “You also need a place to wear them.”

“You mean I can’t just wear these to the drugstore?”

“Girl, you wear those wherever your heart desires.”

I kick off one of my sandals and slide my foot into the soft, smooth surface that feels as good as a down comforter and petting a kitten wrapped into one. And they just happen to be my size. Almost like a sign from heaven. And boy do these feel like heaven! I lift my other foot, putting all my weight onto the shoe. I had no idea there were heels out there that could feel this great.

I’m turning my ankle from side to side, admiring how perfectly beautiful they are and how they feel like they’re *mine*. Like they were made just for me. “That’s my goal,” I announce. “To find a place to wear these.”

“Please tell me you’re buying them,” Livi says.

I nod. “Then if a mystical event to wear them arises without warning, I’ll be prepared.”

As I am putting them back into the box and looking for the outdoor register to go pay for them, Livi asks, “Did I tell you that Felipe is taking me to the opera? On the box tier!”

“Once or twice.” (On this shopping trip alone. The real answer is *five times*.) Livi is a jeans and steel-toed boot-wearing, tool-wielding mechanical engineer by day and a short, flowery, and flowy skirt-wearing, accessory-adorned girly-girl by night who has surprised me more than once since I’ve known her. The girl can jam out to music with the best of us, but I still have a hard time picturing her enjoying the opera.

Every time she talks about it, though, she's so excited, so she's surprising me all over again. "Oh! Maybe you should get these shoes so you can wear them to the Kennedy Center!"

"Don't need to." She grins. "Felipe already bought me an outfit."

Livi never really says it, but I think it's a pretty good guess that Felipe comes from money.

We get in line behind a woman who is peering around the tower of seven boxes of shoes she's holding, watching the customer in front of her finish checking out. It kind of makes me wish I would've looked a little more to find other gems. No. This pair in my hands is lightning striking. It doesn't strike twice at the same sidewalk sale.

Livi sighs. "It's just that he's so great. It's hard to not talk about him nonstop." I feel her gaze on the side of my face just before she asks, "When are you going to start dating someone again?"

"You do this every time you start dating someone new and get all enamored with them."

She's not going to try to refute my comment because her relationships don't typically last long. She starts dating someone new and gets enamored quickly. Then just as quickly, she turns her focus on wanting me to be enamored with someone. Not that dating someone soon after the last guy and falling in love quickly are bad things— I kind of wish I could be a little more like her, actually.

"Well, you haven't dated anyone since Dan."

Her comment hits like a gale-force wind sneaking up all ninja-like and nearly knocking me down, blindsiding me. "Livi! Why did you have to bring him up? That was so long ago!"

"That's my entire point. It was *so* long ago. There have to be guys you find attractive."

Partly because I want to change the subject as far away from Dan as possible and partly because I know what her reaction is going to be and I want to experience it, I say, "The

guy who saved me from my disaster date last night was pretty attractive.”

Her eyes go wide and her hands start fluttering as she’s taking in a huge breath. “Oh my lands, I completely forgot you had a blind date last night. I can’t believe we’ve been here this long and you haven’t mentioned anything! I want to hear all about it.”

So while the clerk finishes bagging the first customer’s shoes and starts on the woman’s seven pairs, I tell Livi about my self-involved date, and because she knows I always take a picture of me and any guy I go on a first date with, she asks to see it.

As I’m showing her, I ask, “Remember when we watched that movie True Lies?”

Livi nods. “Of course! Arnold Schwarzenegger was married to Jamie Lee Curtis. She didn’t know he was a spy and it came back to bite him.”

“Remember the used car salesman that was hitting on Jamie Lee Curtis?”

“Hard to forget a guy that sleazy.”

I nod. “I think my date took inspiration from him.”

“Oh, no,” Livi says, laughing.

And then I tell her about the gorgeous and fun man who stepped in, what happened in the parking lot, and how the roasted chicken breast with mushrooms and Parmesan risotto was the best I’ve ever tasted (even after the forty-minute drive home).

“Hi,” I say to the store clerk as the woman in front of us walks away with her two bags of shoes and I place mine on the counter. The clerk opens the lid and her eyes go wide. I smile. “Aren’t they the most glorious shoes you’ve ever seen?”

She nods, still looking stunned. (I get it, girl.) “I might have to go see if they have a pair of these in my size.”

“You should,” I tell her, and then turn to Livi. “For the record, I could’ve handled getting out of the date on my own.”

“Of course you could.”

“I mean, the guy was really persistent and egotistical and probably would’ve followed me out to the parking lot, demanding that we finish the date, so I would’ve chosen to leave at the same time as another couple and it would’ve been fine. But sometimes, it’s nice to get help, you know? Especially when the help is so much fun.”

“And good-looking,” Livi adds.

I nod. “And *very* good looking.”

“And then you just let him drive away without getting his name and number.”

“You didn’t get his number?” the clerk asks as she slides the box into a bag, looking just as stunned as she did when she opened my shoe box.

I swipe my credit card. “I got his name,” I say in my defense. Which I’m glad for because otherwise, I would’ve had to tell the story by referring to him as “my very hot date interrupter” instead of Jace.

“Okay,” Livi says, dragging the word out, “but you have no way of ever contacting him again.”

I shrug, not nearly as bothered by that fact as both of them are. “I like that I didn’t get his number. The whole thing felt serendipitous as if we were in a bubble of a magical moment. Getting his number would’ve ruined that. I figured that the magic happened once— if it’s meant to be, the magic will happen again, and we’ll run into each other somewhere else.”

The woman at the register hands me the bag with my shoes in it and says, “Well, if you do meet again, I hope you get to wear these shoes.”

Me, too.

As we are walking toward a rack of dresses in front of the next shop, Livi says, “Okay, I get where you are coming from. I do. But don’t you think that’s relying on the universe to have your back a little too much? You don’t even know if he is local to the area, or if he was there on vacation, or what.”

“He is local.”

“You know that?”

“I don’t *know* know.” I start going through the dresses on the rack, pulling some of them out to get a better look. “But there was a guy in the restaurant having dinner with his wife. She left for a moment to take a call, and Jace walked in and talked to that guy for a minute. He wasn’t dressed in a suit, so he wasn’t planning on eating. I don’t think that would’ve happened if he was there on vacation.”

Livi grabs my arm. “Ooh! Maybe he’s a spy.”

I laugh. “Yeah, and that was some kind of clandestine meeting.”

“Maybe that was why the man was so good at making up a story about your past with you. He’s used to coming up with cover stories.”

I laugh. “As fun as that sounds, I help little old ladies walk again after hip surgery, teenagers get full range of motion again after basketball-induced ACL surgeries, and construction workers recover from shoulder labral tears. My life isn’t nearly exciting enough to have witnessed a spy meeting or to have had a conversation with a spy about our fake shared life.”

I pull out a sundress that’s fairly similar to the one I’m wearing, but instead of the boring, solid-colored teal of mine, it has a bold pattern that looks like abstract art and is adorable. “But also for the record,” I tell Livi, “neither was Spencer’s life. Just because he says he ‘works under the cover of darkness to investigate shady characters and thwart their intents to do harm’ doesn’t mean he isn’t a security guard who stares at computer monitors all night, pretending to be a CIA agent on dates.”

That was actually a first for me. Well, not my date pretending to be something he’s not, but the CIA Agent thing, specifically.

“He needs to go to your Outside the Bubble club! Well, not *your* club, obviously, because that would be awkward, but one

like it.”

I laugh. “He should. Everyone should.” I know it helped me. Nine months ago, when I first moved into my garage apartment, the only people I knew in the entire town of Cipher Springs were Maggie and Rowan. Livi and I used to do fun things together all the time, and I was having not only Livi withdrawals but fun withdrawals.

I kept finding myself *not* doing fun things even though I was desperately craving it because a) I didn’t know anyone and b) I now lived with my sister. I like Maggie, and I get along with her, and we used to do fun things together. But then Addi was born and their lives got kind of focused on her.

Eventually, I decided I needed to take matters into my own hands. Grab the bull by the horns. Roll up my sleeves. Jump in with both feet. Set some adventure-loving wheels into motion. Then I was watching Bexlandia— a YouTuber I love— and she interviewed a guy about an app he developed called NudgeOut. It felt like it was made for me, so I downloaded the app, let it track what was normal for me, and then started tapping the “Nudge me out” button to have it suggest new things for me to try.

It was life-changing. There were some things, though, that I only wanted to do if I had someone to do it with me. I figured there had to be other adults in my town who needed to get out and enjoy life and weren’t going to do it without an adventure buddy. So I started posting signs to invite adults of every age in Cipher Springs to join me on the third Friday of every month, and the club was born.

Well, born but not wildly successful. Those first few meetings were kind of disastrous. But I’ve since learned some very helpful things. Like to change the plans away from roller coaster-riding at Six Flags when only an adorable but very elderly couple shows up.

Or to not line up a cooking class for a three-course French meal after a naturally scatterbrained, made-worse-by-sleep-deprivation-from-parenting couple joined the mix. (Cleaning up from that event took longer than the class itself. Plus, there

was that whole incident that required a visit to Urgent Care. We don't talk about that.)

Oh, and I now know that petting zoos are particularly stressful for germophobes.

But the last few have gone well. And I've been advertising the one coming up on Friday quite a bit. A flyer about it is even supposed to go out with everyone's water bill this week. I'm hoping for a bigger crowd because I'm feeling pretty desperate for some good, solid adventure. "My date told me, 'I'm betting that you don't have enough excitement in your life. People rarely do.' For as little as he got to know me, he sure nailed that part."

"Okay, our goal over lunch," Livi says, "is to brainstorm ways to make our lives more exciting."

"Deal."

"Do you know what will make my life more exciting?" Livi says as she glances back in the direction we started shopping. "Getting those fabulous sunglasses after all. They were just so well made!"

Livi designs the machinery that companies buy in order to fill vials, tubes, syringes, and things like that. Cosmetic foundation? Check. Lotion? Yep. Soda cans, cleaning chemicals, you name it, she's made a machine that will fill its container and close it tight. It makes her a sucker for anything well-made.

"You should!"

I turn to head back to the sunglasses with her, but she holds up a hand. "I think I'm going to try to haggle on the price, and that always works better solo. I'll catch up with you in a minute."

As she heads off to get the sunglasses that excite her as much as the spectacular shoes in my bag excite me, I go around to the other side of the rack as I hike my magenta purse onto my shoulder a bit better. I am ready to discover something else exciting.

CHAPTER 5

JUST YOUR AVERAGE JACE

JACE

I'm sitting at a table in an outdoor café, a crab cake sandwich on a plate in front of me that I've barely touched, pretending to read something on my phone. This shopping center has the feel of a courtyard, even though only two sides of it are enclosed by the shop buildings. Probably because the other two sides are bordered by trees and shrubs.

The area is mostly cement except for square sections with small trees planted here and there. I'd probably have a good view of everything if it weren't for all the racks and racks of clothing and shoes filling so much of the open space. My sunglasses hide my eyes just enough that I can scan the area constantly without looking too suspicious.

"Have either of you seen anything yet?" I hear Charlie ask through my earpiece. "I've tapped into the CCTV feeds from the area, but they don't have the best resolution. The feeds I'm getting from your glasses are forty-billion times sharper."

"Nothing over here," Ledger, my brother and my partner for this mission, says from where he stands leaning against the building nearest the north parking lot.

"Nothing from here, either," I add. Not a single person appears as if they are looking for someone. I glance at my watch. Eleven twenty-eight. Brush passes don't tend to be late, so any second now, something should be happening.

As I scan the area again, my eyes fall on a woman across the courtyard. Her hair is brunette, slightly wavy, and falls just below her shoulders, and she is wearing a flowing teal dress

with spaghetti straps that ends just above her knees, a dark pink purse hanging from her shoulder.

“I’ve spotted her,” I say into my comms. “She’s standing next to a rack of dresses in front of Squeaky Chic.”

“I see her now, too,” Ledger says.

I tap on the right frame of my glasses to zoom in for a close-up of the woman’s face. I know Charlie will pull a still image from the video that’s streaming to her, and that it’ll only take her a moment to ID the woman.

But the instant I zoom in, I know Charlie doesn’t need to ID her. I stare at the woman my glasses have focused in on, momentarily stunned. “Her name is Mackenzie MacNeil,” I say at the same time Charlie does.

Then Charlie gasps and adds, “She’s the woman from the restaurant in Baltimore last night. Oh, it’s so nice to have a face to go with the voice. You didn’t say she was so pretty!”

“Something’s wrong,” I say. “I didn’t get threat actor vibes from her at all.”

“So she’s skilled,” Ledger says before almost immediately adding, “I’ve spotted Hendrickson— he looks like he’s about to make the brush pass. Your two o’clock, Jace. Tan jacket.”

I spot the guy instantly. His focus is one hundred percent on Mackenzie and the purse on her shoulder. The guy isn’t the best at acting natural as he heads through the crowds of shoppers that separate him from her.

But I’m watching the girl, and something is off. She isn’t checking for a tail, scanning the area, glancing toward her exit path, or memorizing the faces of everyone around her, even surreptitiously. She’s simply looking at dresses.

I stand, leaving my uneaten sandwich behind but taking my soda with me, and make my way toward the opening between the trees that leads to the parking lot, where Ledger and I can flank the woman after she receives the brush pass. As I walk, Charlie gives us the rundown on Mackenzie through our earpieces.

“Her cover is amazing. She lives in an accessory apartment that’s part of her sister’s home in Cipher Springs. Oh! Her place is only about three blocks from my apartment! How wild is that? She’s a physical therapy technician and nothing at all on any bit of information I can find screams international terrorist. And oh, wow, she posts on social media a lot. And by ‘a lot,’ I mean the internet is thinking about charging her rent. Strange for someone in her line of work.”

Hendrickson is about three feet from Mackenzie when something catches my attention on the other side of the courtyard.

“She’s not the target!” I hiss into my comms just as the man drops the small package into Mackenzie’s purse and keeps on walking.

Charlie can see on my feed that I’m looking at another brunette in her mid-twenties, this one wearing a tan and black striped dress but also holding a dark pink purse. “Oh, fudge balls!” she says. “Ledger, your one-o’clock, near the Japanese maple tree in front of the ice cream stand.”

My eyes are back on Mackenzie. It’s clear that she’s not the target simply by the way she’s acting exactly like a normal person who has absolutely no clue that the key to a weapon that can take out a small city is currently in her purse.

“I’m going to go steal her purse,” Ledger says, and I can see him moving toward Mackenzie’s blind spot.

“With all these people as witnesses?” I ask.

From my vantage point, I can see Ledger as he runs a finger over his fake mustache. “That’s why it pays to wear a disguise for missions like these.”

Ledger is a full six inches taller than me and has the broad shoulders of a hairless yeti. A mustache, a hat, and a jacket aren’t enough to hide a highly recognizable body.

“Okay,” Charlie says. “As soon as Hendrickson dropped the key into Mackenzie’s purse, he took off to the east and went between some shrubs into the parking lot. We’ve got

agents going after him. The intended target is southwest of your location, still watching and waiting for the brush pass.”

Charlie is good at muting herself when she’s talking to other operatives and officers on the floor. Her microphone is good at filtering out other sounds, too, but I can still imagine all the action that is going on back at the agency right now as they all watch this mission on the big screens while coordinating everything.

I drop my cup into a garbage can as I head toward the area where Ledger stood until moments ago. “Ledger, after you get the purse, run toward the north parking lot and you’ll stay out of sight of the intended target. I’ll tackle you to the ground to save the woman’s purse from her ‘thief.’ Try to spill its contents when you fall.”

“Bro,” Ledger says, “*try* to spill its contents? You’re talking to a professional, here.”

Charlie adds, “Ledger, once you get the key, bring it back here. Then, Jace, you take the purse back to Mackenzie.”

“I don’t think having Jace do it is a good idea,” Ledger says through our comms. “He should just hand it off to someone else to give to her and come with me. We need to get on this.”

“No,” I hiss as loudly as I can without the people nearest me hearing. “It’s going to take less than a minute for the intended target to figure out that it went to the wrong person. Shortly after that, her people are going to figure out who did get it and go after Mackenzie.”

“She’ll be okay,” Ledger says. “They’ll get that she’s innocent in zero time flat. That woman doesn’t have a single bad guy vibe coming off her.”

“But once they discover that the key isn’t in her purse, whatever vibes aren’t coming off Mackenzie won’t matter. You know it won’t.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“I’m going to go protect her.”

I can see that Ledger has stopped near Mackenzie, right in front of a rack of women's bathrobes, like he's shopping for a new one. "This is a bad idea, bro. It should be me staying with her."

"No. I'm the one who has a connection with her."

"But I'm the one who is not going to fall for her."

The comment came from left field and takes me aback. I have never fallen for anyone while working for the agency. "What makes you think *I* would fall for her?"

"I'm with Ledger," Charlie says. "I'm looking at all her info— she's totally your type."

Why are we having this conversation in the middle of an important mission? Lives are on the line here. "I haven't dated anyone since Lindsey, and that was more than *six years ago*. How would you even know my type?"

"From being your siblings our entire life," Ledger says.

"And as my siblings, you know I would never compromise a mission for any reason. And I never let things get personal." I repeat the line Ledger just said to me. "You're talking to a professional here."

Both are silent in my earpiece for a moment before Ledger says, "Okay, let's do this," and I see him saunter casually toward Mackenzie and me. When he reaches Mackenzie, he slides the purse off her shoulder in one smooth motion and then races toward me and the parking lot.

I plant my feet in preparation, then take off running as Ledger passes by me. The moment he's cleared the row of bushes at the edge of the courtyard that I know will shield us from the view of shoppers, I leap on him, tackling him to the pavement. Sure enough, Ledger manages to spill the contents of Mackenzie's purse.

We both immediately spin from the ground to a crouched position on either side of the purse. Lying on the asphalt are two half-filled lotion tubes, four lip balms, three pens, a highlighter, a Sharpie, car keys, a cell phone, fingernail clippers, a nail file, hand sanitizer, half a dozen bobby pins,

several crumpled receipts, a small wallet, several hair bands, and, oddly, a little honeypot with a tiny wooden dipper stick. Where the label should've been is a sticker that reads, *You are memorable*. Based on how beat-up the label is, it has been in her purse for a while, and I'm curious to know its significance.

There is also a clear, acrylic object the size of a double-thick credit card that must be the key. Ledger grabs it as I say, "Go."

He takes off running toward the secluded spot on the main road where he left his car, probably pulling off his hat, jacket, and mustache as he goes. I quickly scoop all the items back into the purse and stand. Several people have stopped shopping to watch the short-lived chase and are giving me smiles now. A little boy standing nearby holds up a hand as I walk past him. I return his high-five, and the kid says, "Nice job!"

I want everyone to go back to shopping already and to take their eyes off me. My own eyes, though, are roaming for adversaries— especially for the intended target— as I head back to Mackenzie.

When I reach Mackenzie, it's been less than a minute since Ledger grabbed her purse, and she's still standing in the same place, looking shocked at what just happened. Good. Shocked people don't remember details well. Her eyes fall to her purse in my hand, and the expression of shock is replaced with relief and gratitude. Then, as her eyes dart up to meet mine, it's replaced with recognition. A smile spreads wide across her face, all traces of shock at the situation gone.

"You saved me again," she says. "Well, you saved my purse."

I hand it to her and say, "Oh, hey— it's you!" like I didn't realize it was until this very moment. "Been on any bad dates lately?"

She laughs. "Since last night? No." She slings the purse onto her shoulder, just like it was before Ledger "stole" it. In just the way that made Hendrickson mistake her for the target.

If she leaves it there, it won't take long at all for the intended target to find her.

So I tell her, "I just read an article that said when someone gets a bag or purse stolen and it's returned quickly, there's a thirty-one-point-seven percent chance it will get stolen again within the hour. Something about the original theft making the object appear valuable to everyone else, so it triggers a crime of opportunity." I gesture at the shopping bag she's carrying that looks like it only has a single box of shoes in it. "That might be a good place to put it to keep it out of sight."

"Oh!" She takes the purse off her shoulder and pushes it into the bag. "Thank you. I haven't heard that before."

Probably because it's a statistic I just made up. It's likely wildly untrue in a general sense, but in this specific sense, there's a one-hundred percent chance it will get stolen again. And it marks her as a target for some unsavory people.

I am surreptitiously looking around for threats coming from any direction. The woman who was the intended target has disappeared from my line of sight. I need to get Mackenzie out of this area, and soon, in case the agents didn't capture Hendrickson and he comes back, or if the intended target realizes that Mackenzie was given her key.

Flirting right now would be a good way to accomplish that. But between the adrenaline that comes from any mission and the adrenaline from tackling Ledger to the ground, I am not on top of my game, and what comes out is, "It's good seeing you again. Would you like to grab lunch with me?" Way to lead into it, Jace.

"Oh, um," she glances toward her left. "I'm here with my friend, and we are getting lunch together."

Finding a way to joke while I'm worried for this woman's safety, I chuckle and say, "Oh, and you don't want to have an awkward third wheel again?" just as her friend comes from behind her, hearing my response.

The friend stops beside Mackenzie and her eyes scan me from head to toe. I'm wearing a t-shirt and jeans to blend in

with the crowd instead of the dress shirt and slacks I wore at the restaurant, but I can see the moment that she's connected the dots anyway.

“Oh, you're the mystery man from last night!” She turns to Mackenzie to confirm, and when she nods, the friend turns back to me and holds out her hand. “I'm Olivia. The best friend.”

I shake it and say, “Hi. I'm Jace. The third wheel.” The ID in my wallet right now says Jason Langston, which is my most frequently used cover name, although I have a dozen in total. Each has its own purpose. All have ID cards. All have passports. All have elaborate and verifiable backstories, and I embody each of them when I use them. It wouldn't be a stretch to say that I am one of my cover identities more often than I am myself. If I am ever introducing myself to someone, it's almost always as one of those covers.

Yet, both last night and today, while in the presence of Mackenzie, my real name came out without me having consciously made the decision to do that. I'm not even sure why, since it never happens. I nearly trip up and say a cover name even when I'm doing something non-agency-related that requires my real name, like changing car insurance, meeting with my accountant about taxes, or leaving a voice message on my grandma's phone. There's just something about this woman that brings my real name out.

“I can't speak for Mackenzie,” Olivia says, “but I totally want an awkward third wheel to join us. I'm sad I didn't get to experience it last night, but I would love to today.”

I am mentally cheering. But Mackenzie is giving Olivia a look I can't interpret because it seems to be attached to a conversation I wasn't a part of, and I suddenly really want to know what she's thinking.

I manage a chuckle. “Let's do it, then. I know a place just up Interstate seventy a bit that is amazing. If we go now, we can beat the lunch rush.” I spot a beefy man wearing a cheap suit that screams *Bodyguard for hire*, but he doesn't notice us before he's lost from sight again.

If I was here as Jace, the person, trying to flirt with a woman I might want to go on a date with, and not Jace, an intelligence operative for the Clandestine Services Agency, who is currently attempting to keep someone out of danger, then I would be much more accommodating. I'd let them finish their shopping, for one. Maybe try to set up a time to get coffee or ask her out to dinner. Build more of a relationship before suggesting she leave with me right now.

But I'm not just Jace, the person, right now. And Mackenzie isn't safe here.

"Actually," Mackenzie says, "we were planning to go Beacon's Bites, right over there." She points to the lighthouse-themed outdoor café whose tables are right next to the one I was sitting at while watching for the brush pass earlier. A place right out in the open.

I glance at it then turn back to the women. "But Black Eyed Sue's has the best chipotle chicken paninis around."

"I think we're in the mood for Beacon's Bites," Mackenzie says.

I am suddenly very aware that just last night, she was on a bad date with a guy who wanted to make all the decisions without taking her input at all, and I can only guess that it has made her even less likely to go somewhere she doesn't want to go today. Not unless I pull out the "You are in danger—I need to get you out of here immediately" card. I've had to use that one a few times, and it rarely ends well for a multitude of reasons.

Besides, what am I supposed to say? "Hi. I'm an intelligence operative with the CSA and you should listen to me." Right after the sleaze last night claimed to be a CIA agent? Yeah, she'd never believe me.

So I say, "Do you know what? That looks like a great place. And who wants to trade paninis for indoor dining on a day as beautiful as this?"

It's okay. A wrinkle comes up in virtually every mission. I haven't lost control of the situation. I'm just adapting to the

changing conditions and finding a new way to keep Mackenzie safe.

At least that's what I tell myself. The situation with her is fluid.

CHAPTER 6

CHAOS AND EMERGENCY EXITS

JACE

Eight minutes later, we've ordered— a salmon salad for Mackenzie, a turkey club sandwich for me, and a southwest chicken salad wrap for Livi— and are sitting at a table in the sun, personifying sitting ducks. I don't even have a good vantage point, because all the tables where I can keep an easy eye on things are taken.

Our table is square, with a chair on each side, and Mackenzie holds out her two shopping bags, one also containing her purse, toward her friend and says, "Will you put these on that empty chair for me?"

I give a chuckle that I hope comes out as half nervous and half teasing. "This purse that was just stolen moments ago? Maybe we should keep it a little more hidden." I grab the bags and place them right between Mackenzie's feet and mine. I also take the opportunity to stick a tracker that looks like a button to the inside lining of the purse— just in case— then grab the cardigan in the second shopping bag and cover the purse with it.

Yep. This woman has no covert operative instincts at all. That purse is like a homing beacon for the bad guys, and I just spotted a second meathead in a cheap suit looking around the courtyard.

"Your purse was stolen?" Livi asks, sounding more than a bit alarmed. Good. At least one of them is acting as if this is an issue.

“Yes, but only for a minute. Jace saved it for me.” Mackenzie turns her gaze back to me. “I think purse snatching is like lightning striking. It’s not going to happen twice.”

“I don’t know,” I say jokingly. “Someone could’ve seen those four strawberries-and-cream lip balms that spilled out when I tackled the thief and decided they *really* want them.”

She taps a finger on her lips, like she’s thinking, but it’s really just making me focus on how nice those lips are. Her entire face, really, is rather attractive, and so is the wavy brown hair that’s loose and falls just below her shoulders. But that smile of hers is especially captivating. “You’re probably right. It *is* the best flavor.”

“CCTV isn’t giving me much,” Charlie says through my earpiece. “I lost the intended target. It’s unclear whether she knows about Mackenzie or not. The woman may not want to make a scene in the courtyard, but she could be waiting in the parking lot, ready to ambush Mackenzie. The cameras aiming that direction aren’t great.”

I give my glasses a nudge up— my way of telling Charlie that I heard but can’t respond.

Mackenzie, Livi, and I are making small talk, joking about the contents of Mackenzie’s purse and whether or not a thief would be disappointed in them, whether Mackenzie’s date last night was home polishing his shiny gold “CIA badge,” and the nice day after so many cloudy and chilly ones.

There is a lot of laughing, all while I’m trying to keep an eye out for threats. The two thugs I saw earlier, who I can only assume are working for the intended target, have started going inside stores to look for the *other* woman with the dark pink purse who accidentally received their boss’s brush pass. It simultaneously relieves and worries me. Relief, because they’re wasting time and I could use all the time I can get right now. Worry, because I’d rather have them in my sight at all times.

Someone from Beacon’s Bites comes over and sets the three plastic containers of food on our table, and Livi hands us each our order. As we are opening the lids, I motion at

Mackenzie's and ask the question I've wanted to ask since we first ordered. "You ordered a salmon salad. I thought you were allergic?" That was what she'd told her date last night.

She gives me a confused look for a moment, and then a laugh bursts out of her. "Oh! Yeah, no— I'm not allergic. I just said that because I didn't want my date ordering for me."

The friend nods. "The only thing that Mackenzie is allergic to is people telling her what to do."

Great. So probably shouting "Duck!" or "A bad guy is in that direction, so let's go this way" isn't exactly going to work with this woman. Yet, I need to get her away from this mall. If the meatheads don't find her soon, they'll likely send more people, starting their search here and then branching out.

"We should snap a picture for Instagram before we eat!" Mackenzie says. "Livi, scootch over here so I can get all three of us in it."

I try to not let shock and horror show on my face. Here we are— a woman who currently has adversaries thinking she has intercepted their key to a destructive weapon and are trying to find her, her best friend, and me, an intelligence operative with the CSA— and she wants to post an image of us on social media? Will she also tag the mall in her post to make it that much easier to find her?

I stay calm. I mean, I do have experience diffusing bombs and infiltrating enemy compounds. But I'm not about to let the post to social media happen, either. I have a government-issued app on my phone that, when tapped, mimics a phone call coming in from a generic-sounding company. A carpet cleaner, an internet service provider, a plumber, an electrician, and the like. I can't press the button fast enough.

Just as the three of us are posed and Mackenzie is stretching out her arm to take the pic, my phone rings and I pull it up where it can be seen by the two of them. The caller is showing as Bob's Bug Battalion Pest Control, and I say, "I'm so sorry— I have to take this. We've been playing phone tag." Then I step away from the table to a spot where I can keep an eye on both of them and the crowds of people.

As if I would actually let someone like a pest control company into my apartment where they'd be free to spy and plant bugs. But it does give me the excuse I need to talk to Charlie. I don't actually need the phone to talk to her— she can hear me through my comms, and I can hear her through my earpiece. But I put the phone to my ear to keep up the ruse.

“I need help getting them out of here,” I say the moment I'm out of earshot of anyone. I'm grateful for the sunglasses so I can scrutinize the crowd without seeming like I'm either a creeper or a paranoid conspiracy theorist. One of the goons just went into the last boutique in this mall. “Those guys searching may look like they have the IQ of a loaf of bread, but I can bet they aren't dumb. The only reason I can think of as to why they haven't found us yet is that they're looking for a woman who's alone and with a dark pink purse.”

“I think you're right,” Charlie says.

“Eventually, they're going to figure out they need to start looking for any brunette woman in a sundress, and then things will get ugly. But I don't want to simply tell Mackenzie and Livi they're in danger because I don't want to blow my cover or the agency's cover, and I definitely don't want another Prague.”

“Right there with you,” Charlie says. “Who knew that a scared woman, a can of aerosol hair spray, and a freaked-out beaver in imminent danger could do so much damage?” I hear her fingers flying over her keyboard as she talks. “But don't worry. I already got a distraction on its way to you. Watch for it any minute and then get Mackenzie and her friend to the parking lot and their car. An FBI protective detail is almost there— they'll shadow the women after they leave and keep them safe.”

I growl. The FBI doesn't provide the most surreptitious tails ever. But I'll need to meet at the agency soon for debriefing and to come up with a plan, so we need their help.

I head back and take my seat, where, thankfully, Mackenzie and Livi have each just taken a bite of their food and are looking like they've forgotten about the selfie. I pick

up my sandwich but haven't taken a bite yet when everyone in the entire courtyard turns toward the sounds of sirens.

A moment later, emergency vehicles— half a dozen police cars, a couple of fire trucks, and an ambulance— pull into the lot, parking at all angles. Then a bunch of men and women in uniform spill out of the vehicles and swarm the courtyard. Mackenzie and Livi are looking to each other, to me, and to the action, like they're confirming that we are just as surprised as they are and just as in the dark. I wear the same expressions on my face, of course.

Someone on a megaphone calls out, "There's been a gas leak. Everyone move in an orderly fashion toward the parking lot."

Both Mackenzie and Livi stand, grabbing their bags as they look around with wide eyes. People everywhere are pulling their shirts up to cover their noses and mouths, a few are coughing— even though there isn't actually a leak— and are heading toward their cars in anything but an orderly fashion as the sirens on so many vehicles add chaos to the din.

I mutter just loud enough for Charlie to hear, "A gas leak? Really? I thought Chief Miller said he was going to come up with better cover stories for situations like these."

"He did come up with a... different cover story," I hear through my earpiece. "I just wouldn't say it is a 'better' one."

"What was it?" I say quietly as I try to usher Mackenzie and Livi in my direction while searching the crowd for the two men or any other suspicious characters. "A chemical spill? Natural disaster? Killer hornets?"

Charlie laughs. "Even worse. Mice coming up through the sewer and about to invade."

I nod. "Gas leak it is."

I spot one henchman behind us and the other to our right as their eyes scan the crowd, searching for the woman with the dark pink purse. The place is noisy with panic, so I lean in close to Mackenzie so she can hear me and say, "I know a way out. Grab Livi's hand and come with me." Then I take

Mackenzie's hand in mine and lead her along the edge of the scrambling crowd. It's always the place with the most maneuverability, and in no time at all, we make it to the parking lot ahead of the men looking for her.

The parking lot is its own kind of chaos because the emergency vehicles are all parked askew and are currently blocking cars from leaving. The flashing lights and the sirens add to the pandemonium. But I see no sign of the woman who was the intended target. She probably slipped away the moment she realized that things went awry, leaving the meatheads to finish up.

I would prefer doing systematic countermeasures to ensure we don't have a tail, but in this situation, getting out of the area quickly and quietly trumps elaborate precautions.

Luckily, Mackenzie and her friend parked in the section nearest the road, and therefore the area with the easiest escape route. As Mackenzie and Livi get into Mackenzie's car, I spot the very non-subtle black SUV of the FBI pull into the parking lot, and I give the driver, Agent Wright, and his passenger a subtle nod.

Mackenzie pulls her car door shut and immediately lowers her window. I lean down, resting my folded arms on her car door. "Thank you for letting me crash your lunch."

She smiles. "And thank you for rescuing my purse. And for rescuing us from the gas leak and the crowd. Is there always this much excitement everywhere you go?"

I chuckle. She has no idea. "And here I thought you were the one bringing the excitement."

She laughs, and I realize that I really like the sound of it. Or maybe it's the look on her face as she's laughing. I wonder how many of my reasons for wanting to protect this woman are because she's a human and therefore deserving of protection, and how many are because I want to protect *her*, specifically, because of who she is. As much as this day hasn't gone according to plan, I have rather enjoyed being with her.

No. Ledger and Charlie cannot be right about me and falling for this woman. I tell her goodbye and walk away.

As I near my car, parked at the outer edge of the lot, I hear the chief announce through the megaphone that the gas leak was a false alarm and that everyone can go back to their shopping.

“Charlie, I know we’ve worked with Chief Miller for many years and that he’s good at keeping things on the down low, but maybe we should start using less chaotic sources for emergency distractions.”

“Like a circus?” she asks.

I smile as I open my car and get in. “Or maybe an interpretive dance company.”

“Or a field trip of kindergartners hopped up on sugar and blowing into kazoos.”

“Any of those.”

“On it,” she says, and I have no doubt that she is.

I start my car and glance in the direction of Mackenzie and her friend as they turn toward Interstate 70. I hope they stay safe. I like them.

CHAPTER 7

EVASIONS AND PEDICURES

MACKENZIE

I pull out of the parking lot and without really thinking about it, I turn in the direction of the freeway. Probably because I feel the need to drive faster than I can through towns. Between the purse snatching, the lunch with Jace where we didn't really get a chance to eat, and the gas leak, I have an excess of adrenaline coursing through my body and I need somewhere to spend it.

A marathon shopping trip might've done the trick, but since that was cut short and our plans for the rest of the day include getting takeout for dinner and a chick flick movie marathon at my apartment, Livi and I have extra time on our hands. "What do you want to do now?" I ask as I near the freeway entrance, where I can either go east toward Baltimore or west toward home.

Livi shrugs. "Let's figure it out on the way."

I grin and steer the car to the on-ramp leading toward Baltimore. We are only on the freeway for a few minutes when I notice that there is a black SUV behind me, and I'm pretty sure the same vehicle was also behind me at that stoplight before getting on the freeway.

Likely scenario: it's someone who a) was also at the mall and had to leave because of the gas leak and b) just happens to live in this direction.

The scenario that seems much more exciting and therefore the one I'm going to act like I believe: We are being followed. (Adrenaline, remember?)

I glance at my rearview mirror and jerk my head toward the big vehicle. “See that SUV behind us? What do you say we pretend it’s an FBI surveillance team?”

From the corner of my eye, I see a smile spread across Livi’s face as she glances at her sideview mirror. “Well, if we’re being followed, I think it’s only responsible of us to try to lose our tail.” All week long, Livi works with math and machine tolerances within fractions of millimeters. I think that’s why she really likes to cut loose on the weekends. There’s only so much order and exactness a person can have in their life.

Since I’m not the only one with an abundance of adrenaline, I make a few lane changes, but honestly, we are on the freeway— everyone here is going the exact same direction, so it’s not like we are going to lose anyone.

Livi gasps as her hands flutter to her right. “Take this next exit! This is the one where the road curves around big and goes under the freeway, then not far after that, the road turns in a giant three-sixty! Remember it?”

Of course, I remember. We found ourselves on that three-sixty loop not long after we moved here, and there were so many roads to turn off from the main one that we couldn’t figure out if we were even headed in the correct direction by the time we got to the end of it. Both the curving off-ramp and the three-sixty parts are densely lined with trees, making it hard to see very far in front or behind you. It’s perfect.

I stay in the middle lane until the last possible second, then I slide over the right lane and onto the off-ramp. I think the black SUV isn’t going to be able to follow us, but then it manages to make the exit, too. The driver probably wasn’t paying attention and that’s why they nearly missed their exit, but still, I felt a new surge of adrenaline course through me that they got off the freeway, too.

Okay, so maybe this isn’t the most effective way to spend some adrenaline.

I’m following the off-ramp as it curves widely downhill when a realization hits. “Not only did I not get a picture with

Jace, I didn't get his number!" This time, I'm not all zen about it— I'm actually pretty upset, and I don't think it's just because of the adrenaline. Sure, adrenaline is about the exact opposite of... whatever brain chemical is responsible for zen-like thoughts, but it's more than that.

I think it's because I enjoyed myself so much both last night when he helped me out of my date and today at lunch, right after he saved my purse. Being around him makes me happy. He's just so sweet and thoughtful and *normal*. But not in a normal way. In a better-than-normal way, which might not seem to make sense, but whenever I think of him, it just fits.

And, okay, he's also about the most attractive guy I've laid my eyes on in... I can't actually think of a more attractive guy I've seen in the past, so I can't say exactly how long it's been. He has a shape to his face and his jaw that is just so eye-pleasing. And a look in his eye that says he'll step in front of a speeding bullet for you.

"Lunch wasn't exactly a first date," Livi says. "You can get a picture when you actually go on a first date with him."

I follow the road under the freeway and then merge into the right lane. The black SUV changes lanes, too. "You're focusing on the wrong part. What if I never get a chance to go on a first date with him just because I didn't get his number or give him mine? How often does serendipity happen? I decided to let the universe be in charge of getting the two of us in the same place at the same time, and it delivered. But when those things happen, you have to show the universe that you're grateful and that you want it by *doing something*. Like exchanging phone numbers. How am I going to find him now?"

I take a slight right onto the road that makes one big circle. Trees line both sides of this road, too, and it's hard to see very far behind me. But there are a lot of cars that are doing exactly what I'm doing, so I change lanes back and forth a few times, getting lost among them, hopefully. I can see the black SUV back about four or five cars, but only because it's a giant of a vehicle. I doubt it can see me.

“Well, we know his name,” Livi says. “What did he say he does for a living?”

I rack my brain. It was something kind of vague-sounding. “Business solutions?”

“So we Google ‘business solution companies’ and look at the ones within a twenty-mile or so radius. There can’t be many businesses like that in all of Maryland. We’ll just narrow it down by location— if he was at the mall, he probably doesn’t live too far away.” The way she says it makes it sound like it’ll be so easy.

I say “Okay,” and then check my rearview mirror again. “I don’t see the black SUV anymore.”

“Yes!” Livi shouts. “Oh, do you know what we should do? Go get pedicures! I bet that indoor mall we saw by the freeway has a nail salon.”

Livi does a lot of hands-on work with minute and often greasy things at her job, so her nails are usually short and “not pretty.” Her words, not mine. She hates the nail thing but loves her job, so she compromises with pedicures. So many pedicures. I’m not complaining— if it wasn’t for her pedicure addiction, my toes would probably look like a Sasquatch’s.

I like this road. If I don’t care where I am going, I feel like a race car driver on it. But now that I know I need to head back in the direction of the freeway, and with all the braking I’m doing while trying to figure out where I need to make a turn, I feel more like a teenager driving a stick shift for the first time than I do a professional Formula One racer.

A moment later, we are both laughing because, once again, neither of us can figure out how much of the circling road we’ve traversed or which of the many, many roads we are supposed to turn onto. Livi ends up asking her phone how to get to the mall, and it eventually leads us there and I find a parking space near an entrance. As we are walking into the building, I turn and do one more scan of the parking lot and the road leading to it— not a single black SUV in sight.

It's a little thing, but I'm not going to lie— it makes me feel pretty accomplished.

And so does magically showing up at the nail salon at a time when we have to wait less than ten minutes before two pedicure chairs open, and we're both seated. Today is my lucky day. I found the greatest shoes ever, I got my purse returned, I ran into the guy I was hoping to run into, I successfully evaded a (possible) tail, and I had almost no wait after walking in without an appointment. I should probably think about betting on horse racing, asking for a raise, or attempting to parallel park in a small space while a crowd is watching.

We are seated in the best view for people-watching, too— right where we can see everyone walking down the main walkway as the nail techs file and buff and we talk about strategies for finding Jace. As the two pedicurists massage oil into our freshly exfoliated feet (my favorite part— as a physical therapy technician, I know the value of a good massage), Livi starts giggling (even though it's her least favorite part). The girl is ticklish, and soon, the giggling turns into laughing.

I've done enough pedicures in the seat next to Livi to know that if it turns to laughing, it's almost always closely followed by her reflexively (and completely accidentally) kicking the nail tech and/or the bottles of creams and oils, apologizing profusely, and occasionally knocking over more things while trying to right the tipped bottles. For a woman who relies on the steadiness of her hands, they somehow forget how to function when her feet are tickled.

“Maybe move on to the next step?” I suggest to the younger tech doing Livi's toenails. Then I reach across the space between us to put my hand on Livi's arm and try to distract her with a question— it sometimes helps to lessen the chance of chaos ensuing. “Tell me about this date you're going on with Felipe.”

She shakes her head. “No. The subject is still on you and Jace.” She cringes, and I glance at her foot to see that she's summoned the strength of every muscle in her leg and foot to

keep it still. “So let’s say we do some sleuthing and we find this guy again. What do you think the chances are that you’ll go on more than one date with him?”

“I go on more than one date with guys!” Has Livi been talking to Maggie and Rowan? Okay, maybe my going on a second date doesn’t happen often, but it isn’t exactly unheard of, either.

My outburst seems to have distracted her enough because her foot relaxes and the woman wraps a hot towel around it. And no one got kicked. See? My lucky day.

“Okay, sometimes you go on two dates with a guy,” Livi says, “*if* the guy is very obviously fantastic. Have you ever asked yourself why that is? Because having a committed relationship is actually pretty great.”

The older woman sitting at my feet wraps mine in hot towels, too. Instead of just changing the subject, like I normally do when Livi brings up a tough subject like this, I actually let myself think about it. Maybe because those hot towels on freshly massaged feet are so relaxing.

For the first time possibly ever, I mentally acknowledge that a big part of it probably has to do with Dan, my ex. He was so dismissive of me and was a master of making me feel not seen, especially in public. And that was during the rare times when we went places where people could actually see us.

But he did it gradually enough that I hadn’t even noticed it was happening at first. Probably because he was so great when it was just the two of us, and he was so good at convincing me that I was incorrectly interpreting everything that happened when it wasn’t just the two of us.

But before I knew it, my self-confidence was shot, and I was convinced that I wouldn’t ever find someone who would be interested in me or treat me better. Luckily, I have a friend like Livi who understood what was truly happening and pulled me out. “I don’t know, Livi. Maybe I’m just skittish.”

“I get it. I do. But do you know the best way to get over being afraid of riding on that horse?”

I know she’s about to say, “Get back in that saddle,” but I’m pretty sure if I tried to get back in the saddle, I would get one foot in a stirrup and the other would slip on mud. Then I’d somehow bring the whole horse down on top of me, and neither I nor the horse would be happy about that. Even on a very lucky day.

But then, I think of Jace and how I might be willing to go on more than one date with him. There’s just something about him. He’s unbelievably attractive, for one. And he’s so much fun to be around. Plus, he just seems like a good guy. I haven’t dated enough truly good guys. Especially not ones that make my stomach flutter and send a rush of dopamine coursing through my body.

Instead of responding to Livi’s question, I lean to the side a bit and look at the two men on the opposite side of the hall from the salon that I noticed a few minutes ago and ask, “Don’t those two guys look like they could be the drivers of that black SUV that was following us?” Not that we saw who was driving the black SUV. It was probably a mom with most of a soccer team as passengers. But since we didn’t see inside, it’s easy to pretend it could be them.

Livi leans a bit and spies the men dressed in suits, and I swear that even from this far away, I see sunglasses hanging from their jacket pockets and the curly wire of earpieces in their ears. Maybe they’re private security and there’s someone famous in the mall that they are protecting.

But Livi buys into my distraction. “They’re totally dressed like FBI agents! Mac, we have to try to shake their tail.”

The woman at my feet is unwrapping the towel from my right foot when her eyebrows draw together. “You don’t want polish?”

“Not today,” Livi says to my tech, then turns and smiles at her own. “Thank you. My nails look so great they don’t even need polish.”

I am pretty sure it is a sentence that Livi has never uttered before in her life. While I am totally fine going without beautifully painted toenails, Livi thinks it's a crime against nature. It tells me that she's loving this game of "Lose the FBI" as much as I am.

Clearly, we don't have enough real excitement in our lives.

We both hurry to slip our shoes on and pay, giving the two women the size of tip we usually reserve for when Livi kicks something or someone, just to make sure they know that leaving without polish doesn't have anything to do with them. Then we slip into the hallway with a big crowd of middle school-aged girls.

When the big group goes straight, Livi and I turn down a hallway and duck into a Bed Bath & Beyond, taking a detour through the towels before slipping back out at the other end. Then we skip to the other side and look at some funny socks with a group of teenage boys, then head back the way we came. We go in and out of stores, trying to take a path that's the least logical.

Ten minutes later, we are both breathing heavily between an end cap of necklaces and a wall of mini backpacks in Claire's. The racing heart and the breathing heavy aren't bad, especially because the heavenly scent of a Cinnabon is drifting in from just outside of Claire's.

"Did we lose them?" Livi asks between panting breaths.

We both look around, but I see no sign of the two suit-clad men with the short-cropped hair.

I grin, exhilaration filling my whole body. "I think we did."

CHAPTER 8

CLAIMING THE ASSET

JACE

As I drive away from the chaos at the shopping center in the direction of the Clandestine Services Agency, things feel strange. Whenever I'm on a mission, especially one that goes sideways and has to be saved, I always leave with adrenaline coursing through me. And I definitely have that. But I am leaving with something else, too, that I don't quite expect.

Happiness? No, it can't be that. I'm always happy when a mission is successful.

Except this one wasn't entirely successful. We got the key, which is arguably the most important part, but we didn't capture the intended target, which means we don't know who we are up against. But I still feel the happiness mixed with adrenaline that I get when a mission goes really well.

Then it hits me. What I'm feeling came from the lunch with Mackenzie and her friend, not from the initial mission. I tell myself it's because getting her out of the area and off to safety became the mission and not because I'm feeling anything toward the woman herself. And it certainly doesn't have to do with how fun the conversation with her was. Or the way her face squinches when she laughs or how her shoulders seem to have a golden glow in the sunlight.

Nope. I'm feeling what I'm feeling because Mackenzie and Livi were safely extricated from the scene and handed off to the FBI for protection.

Which is great, aside from the fact that I don't actually believe this should be the end. And not just because I might've found the woman attractive. During the fifteen-minute drive back to the agency, I can't stop analyzing every detail and thinking through every scenario.

I turn off the access road onto the tree-lined street that leads to what appears to be a wealthy introvert's mansion. We work hard to keep up that facade, too. To the eye of any onlooker, the grounds are beautiful and meticulously cared for. Hidden from view are the scanners that tag any electronic, tracking, or explosive devices, along with all the offensive and defensive measures that keep this place more secure than the Pentagon. The only clue that it is anything other than a giant home is the small, tasteful sign at the gate that reads *Lancaster Business Solutions*—our cover business's name.

"Hello, Moss," I say as I stop at the gate.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Lancaster."

Moss holds out the scanner and I tap my badge on it, and then place my hand, palm down, on the reader so it can check my fingerprints. "Did your son win his game?"

Moss nods and grins as the screen turns green, allowing me access. "He even shot the game-winning field goal."

"Nice! Give him a high-five for me, will you?"

"Will do," Moss says as the gate starts to open.

Moss has worked at the gate for three years, and I still don't know if his actual name is Moss or if it's a cover. Rumor has it that he used to be Secret Service and that once, at a formal dinner, he had to take out a terrorist using a salad fork to save the president's daughter from a hostage situation. But if that happened, it never made the news, and not even Moss himself has ever confirmed nor denied the rumor.

I should look him up someday and see if his records are within my clearance level. Although, I suspect they probably aren't.

I follow the curving cobblestone drive toward the building, but instead of following it to the front of the building, I go to

the side and then turn toward it, where the road dips down into the cavernous parking garage below the building. There is more than just parking down here—the agency is so much larger than it appears from the surface. But down here isn't where I work.

I go to the elevator banks, scan my badge, open my eyes wide for the retinal scanner, and then exhale a full breath into the DNA scanner. A moment later, the light above the elevator turns green and the doors open. As it is taking me up to the main level, my watch buzzes and I glance at it to see a text from the FBI agent who is shadowing Mackenzie and Livi.

Agent Wright: We've been made by the subjects. They are currently trying to lose us.

Jace: Thank you for the update. Stay with them.

The elevator doors open and I step into an area filled with desks, analysts, operatives, and big screens at the front, with an area to stand for meetings just in front of it, the entire place a hive of activity. The director of the Clandestine Services Agency is standing at Emerson's desk, leaning in to look at something on his screen. The big screens at the front currently show a collage of still images of Hendrickson, the key we recovered from Mackenzie's purse, the intended buyer, Mackenzie, and the two guys who were searching the boutiques for Mackenzie, each image with what information we have about them listed beneath.

Director Lancaster straightens when she notices me walk in, and then starts moving toward the front of the room as she says to me, "Oh, good. You're back. Charlie has already briefed us on everything—we've just been waiting for you." Then, in a louder voice, so everyone in the room can hear, she says, "Okay, team, here's where we stand."

She moves to her customary spot in front of the bank of screens. She's wearing dark gray slacks, a light blue blouse, and a dark gray suit coat. It's an outfit so similar to what I've seen her wear my entire life. Because except for last-minute trips where even which continent she was on was top-secret to

me and my siblings, I really have seen her my entire life, because the director is also my mom.

Not that I would ever call her that within these walls. Just like I wouldn't call Emerson, Miles, or Ledger my brothers or call Charlie my sister while I'm here. Not that everyone at the agency doesn't know that we're family. They also know that each of us has more than earned our right to be here, and we daily earn our right to stay.

Because there is nothing like being trained from birth by parents who are also two of the best intelligence operatives this nation has seen to prepare you to become the next generation of the best intelligence operatives there are.

And there's nothing like spending a lifetime learning how to work together with your siblings as covert operatives to show the powers that be in the CSA how much more valuable your family is when working together than any of us would be spread throughout different agencies. We are definitely stronger together. And we are all nothing if not professional.

"Yeah," Ledger says. "Let's get this party started!"

Okay, most of us are professional.

Miles is in Maracaibo on a mission. But Emerson is at his desk, looking as studious as he always is, and Charlie is at her desk, looking alert and on top of everything, as usual. She grins at me and gives me two thumbs up as she says "Welcome back" into my earpiece. I forgot that I am still wearing it. I remove it and push it into my pocket. Ledger ambles over to stand next to me in the open space, and Gianna comes from her desk, all of us facing the director and looking up at the monitors.

"Thanks to Jace, Ledger, and Charlotte, we have recovered the 'key' that Hendrickson was handing off regarding the Eradication Project. We did not retrieve the buyer, and we've turned case ownership of Hendrickson over to the FBI. Which means we currently have two issues we need to work.

"The first that we need to figure out is who the brush pass was intended for— the buyer. They could be trying to use

alternate means to acquire the key. The second issue is finding the object that the key unlocks. We don't know if there are more keys out there—Hendrickson and his partner could've possibly sold to multiple buyers, so we need to get to that object before them.”

Emerson, who might possibly be the best analyst in the world—although I'd never say that to him—starts giving a rundown of what we already know, which mostly isn't new information and mostly doesn't interest me. What interests me is who needs to be taken down and who I need to protect. Then he says that they've been analyzing the key since Ledger returned with it and found out that the key is to a briefcase, and an image of the exact type of briefcase comes up on the screen. Emerson and his team are searching online for any chatter about it.

Once he finishes, I ask, “So what about the unintended recipient of the brush pass? They're going to keep searching for her.” And every protective instinct I have is telling me to go protect her.

Normally, it doesn't feel strange to refer to someone whose picture is up on the screen as the subject, the target, the seller, the buyer, the muscle, or any other descriptor. But for whatever reason, it feels strange to call Mackenzie by anything other than her name.

Director Lancaster gives a single nod. “We have asked the FBI to keep a protective detail on Ms. MacNeil until further notice. You're right—she could still be a target.”

Beside me, Ledger raises two fingers to get my mom's attention and asks, “Is the CIA going to try to take over this case?”

I lean in close and say, “Nice job. I barely detected bitterness in your voice.”

Ledger chuckles as we both look to the director for the answer. The FBI's purview is U.S. citizens who commit federal crimes on U.S. soil. The CIA's domain is foreign entities on foreign soil who are putting the U.S. at risk. Our agency, the CSA, handles those cases that fall in between the

scope of those two, like dealing with foreign agents working against the U.S. on U.S. soil. Or U.S. citizens working against us on foreign soil.

We are also much smaller than the FBI and CIA, which makes us much more agile and better equipped for some missions. And, I don't like to brag, but as our name suggests, we're very good at clandestine ops.

So we work closely with the FBI and, much to Ledger's chagrin, the CIA. We pass some things off to them and they pass some off to us, and sometimes— mostly for missions that Ledger is assigned to, coincidentally— we find ourselves on the same missions as the CIA and there is a bit of a power struggle.

Director Lancaster shakes her head. "This one is all ours. That could change, of course, once we find out who the buyer is, but for now, assume we are taking this one all the way to the finish line."

Still, all I can think about is the buyer going after Mackenzie, and every protective nerve in my body is activated and feeling the need to do something. I hold up a finger and the director nods at me, so I say, "I think there is a good chance that neither Hendrickson nor the buyer knows who the accidental recipient of the key is. Charlie said that the CCTV cameras in the area aren't great."

"They really aren't," my sister says.

"Either could've been wearing cameras, but I don't think they got her face. The fact that they haven't found Mackenzie — the accidental target—tells me they didn't.

"But that doesn't mean that they won't be able to figure it out eventually. And having a big black SUV follow her everywhere is only going to tip the buyer off to it being her because there's no better hint that they found the right person than a vehicle that screams FBI always shadowing her. Agent Wright texted me a few minutes ago to say that the subject and her friend already made them. And if civilians did, the professionals won't be far behind."

My mom is nodding as I am talking, and then she says, “We’ll request that they use a nondescript vehicle.”

“And I think that’s great for while she’s at work or sleeping,” I say, putting a voice to the concerns I have for her safety while trying to keep every bit of emotion out of my words. “But outside of those hours, I think *we* should have a protective detail on her.”

The director’s eyebrow rises, waiting for me to continue, so I do. “The buyer knows that Ms. MacNeil was the recipient of the brush pass, but they don’t know that she no longer has the key. If we stay close to her, it might help us to discover who the buyer is.”

“You want to use her as an asset?” Ledger asks. “As bait?”

I shake my head, hoping it doesn’t come across too vehemently. “I don’t think we’ll need to. We’ve been working on this case since I turned Carl six weeks ago. We know so much more about it than the FBI— I think we’ll be able to catch things that they won’t because of our closeness to the information we’ve already discovered.”

The director studies me for a long moment, and I can see her thinking through all the implications. Before she came to the CSA as an intelligence operative, she was first recruited at age twenty-one into the CIA. She quickly became one of the best operatives they had ever seen, possibly because she was so good at seeing the big picture. That skill has made her an even better director.

Eventually, she nods once. “Do you think you can do it without letting her know about this agency or your role here?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Now, I’m not saying it will be easy. In fact, if we let the FBI continue to do 24-hour protective detail themselves and keep us out of it, things will probably be much easier. Because if things get to the point where Mackenzie needs to know that people are after her, the FBI could tell her.

I can’t. After all, this agency hasn’t remained a well-kept secret for the past thirty-one years by agents being over-sharers.

“Okay, she’s your assignment then, Jace. Your asset, even if she doesn’t know she is. You’re the one with the connection, and you’re going to have to push that connection to succeed.”

I nod my acceptance. This won’t be the first time I’ve faked a relationship for the sake of a mission.

The director finishes up with the whole team, dispersing assignments and directions on which leads to follow for now. Once she ends the meeting, Ledger says, “Director,” and my mom walks over to the two of us.

Ledger shakes his head. “I don’t know that it should be Jace on this assignment.”

She puts a hand on Ledger’s shoulder and in a low voice, says, “Son, it’s Jace. Deal with it.”

She walks away, and I turn to Ledger with what I’m sure is a smirk on my face, even though I’m trying not to gloat too much. But I do a little, because he *is* my brother, so that makes it my job.

I feel the buzz of a text on my wrist, and I pull my phone from my pocket to look at it.

Agent Wright: We followed the subjects into a mall where we scanned for any dangers while they got pedicures. The two subjects once again made us and used evasive maneuvers to lose us.

Panic immediately grabs at my heart and I quickly type in a reply.

Jace: Did they succeed?

Agent Wright: No. But we let them think they did.

I smile down at the text. I like this woman.

“So,” Charlie says and I nearly jump. I hadn’t seen her coming from behind. “What’s your plan for getting close to Mackenzie?”

I slide the phone back into my pocket. “I can’t ‘randomly’ run into her at a third location in less than twenty-four hours.”

“Yeah,” Charlie says, “that would set off more alarm bells than Nana’s cooking in a smoke detector testing facility.”

“Exactly. So I’ll have to stay out of sight until tomorrow morning. Then, I think I’ll show up at her work.”

Charlie claps and says, “I’ll text you the address,” before skipping off to her desk.

Not that we need it. Charlie has the information on Mackenzie’s location from the tracker I put in her purse, and Charlie will likely be in my ear as I make contact tomorrow morning. But sharing information is Charlie’s love language, so I don’t even bring up the tracker today.

Then I head over to my desk and get to work because finding the buyer and that briefcase is what’s going to keep Mackenzie safe.

CHAPTER 9

A PLAN TO WOO

JACE

The floor at the Clandestine Services Agency has been a hive of action all morning, with nearly everyone working to find the buyer of the Eradication project and any information that we can about the location of the briefcase. From what we've heard so far, the FBI hasn't learned much from Hendrickson, and they haven't been able to track down his co-conspirator yet. They're worried he might have left the country.

I glance at my watch. I want to be at Mackenzie's work at a time a normal person might be taking their lunch break, yet not while Mackenzie is taking hers. Thanks to Charlie's always impressive surveillance skills, we know she doesn't take her lunch until one.

What I would most love to do is to suggest to Mackenzie that we go on a date somewhere safe, like staying in and watching a movie at my apartment, which I know is secure. But there are many reasons not to go with the safe choice, even beyond it being a first date that would probably raise warning flags for Mackenzie.

Instead of the safe choice, we need to go somewhere public where we can be seen. The best way to keep her safe is to capture the people who are trying to buy the Eradication project files because they might have no problem getting rid of someone standing in their way.

And Mackenzie isn't going to confine herself only to work and home all the time, which is where the FBI shadows her. So, if I can be with her at the times when she'll be out in the

world, then if the buyer knows where she is and are drawn to her, I can be there to assess the threat level and protect her. I decided a picnic in a park might be the perfect option. Plus, I think Mackenzie would like it.

Now that I am finally able to spend a moment on the *Mackenzie* part of the mission, Charlie has thrown the pertinent images up on the big screens at the front. She and I are standing in the open area, looking up at them, Charlie with her tablet in her hand. One of the pictures is of Mackenzie holding a baby that she's making faces at, the baby laughing. Below the image, it reads *Mackenzie MacNeil and niece Adelaide*.

I gesture at the picture. "I know what she looks like, you know."

"But we always have a picture of the subject up there."

"And her niece?"

"What? I know you want to be a dad someday, so I thought you might like seeing that she seems to love kids and is good with them. I mean, have you ever seen a happier baby?"

I throw her a look.

She glances at all the people at desks behind us. "You're right. Not so professional on the big screens." With a couple of swipes of her fingers on her tablet, the image is replaced with a blurry still taken from the crappy CCTV camera of Mackenzie and me standing in the courtyard right after I returned her purse. In a conspiratorial voice, Charlie says, "But don't worry, I'll email you the picture so you can look at it later. Or just check out her Instagram, because—"

"Charlie."

"Right. Okay, I know that you mentioned having the picnic at the park you drive past near your apartment, but what do you think of going to one in Cipher Springs instead?"

I nod. "Actually, that's a good idea. It might make Mackenzie feel more comfortable to be on her home turf. But I think I'll still pick up food from The Pesto Patio in Cloakwood."

I might not know Mackenzie super well yet, but I have seen her order food from restaurants twice in the past forty-eight hours. Plus, Charlie has given me a dossier of all the info she's been able to gather on Mackenzie, including all the restaurants and food items that Mackenzie has eaten and shared food pictures of on Instagram. The list is sizeable, but it didn't include The Pesto Patio. And The Pesto Patio has menu items I think Mackenzie will like.

Charlie sends a picture that is a bird's-eye view of Shadowridge Park to one of the screens. "I think this will be a good one. It's quiet enough to draw out the buyer if they are tracking her, yet has enough witnesses that they won't attempt anything."

"That's a great choice."

"It is. When Gianna lets me borrow Roxy, I take her there to play fetch." On her tablet, she draws a lima bean-shaped outline in red toward one end of the park, and it shows on the main screen. "This area is the perfect place for your picnic. You'll have a great vantage point of not only this big open grassy area but of the parking lot, too. At your back and on this side are those fences made of stones with shrubs in front of them. So that side will be naturally protected.

"And then down here," She draws a rectangle around the entire opposite end of the park, just past the grass fields, "is a miniature golf course. Have you driven by it since they put it in a few years ago?"

I shake my head. I am not really a frequent park-goer, and this particular park isn't on the way from my apartment in Cloakwood to my mom's, Charlie's, or Blake's places here.

"Well, if you want to lengthen the 'date,' it'd be a good place to take her."

"Nice plan," Abraham says, and Charlie and I both turn to look at the older man as he walks up to us and stands with feet apart, folding his arms as he looks at the screens. Abraham and my dad were both recruited to the CSA at the same time—the year the agency was formed. They were both twenty-two at the time and both became legendary in their own ways. My dad

for his bravery and unconventional problem-solving, and Abraham for being a master of disguises. When Abraham retired from covert work, he took on the role of providing disguises as needed for all operatives.

My dad passed away four years ago. I had only been an operative for two years at that point, but Charlie was still in college and was two years from being recruited. My dad and Abraham might've had very different personalities, but they both spent their entire careers here, so Charlie seems to have taken to him as a substitute dad. Abraham never had children, so I think he's more than happy to have a substitute daughter.

Abraham squints at the blurry image of me and Mackenzie on the screen, and I see the picture again through his eyes. It makes me relax a bit. If images like this are all that the buyer has to go on, they are never going to identify Mackenzie. "So is this a real date or a mission date?"

"Mission," I say quickly, because I know Charlie is probably dying to say "Real." As if I need anything blurring those lines any more than what I'm doing myself.

Charlie eyes me like she knows why I just answered so quickly, then says to Abraham, "Jace has to convince a woman to go on a date with him so he can protect her while possibly also drawing out a threat actor."

"Ahh," Abraham says. "Well, if she doesn't say yes, come to me—I can make you look like someone else to give you another go at it. Maybe a grandpa in need of her help? Oh! I could make you be *her* grandpa if she has one."

"I'll keep that in mind," I say, not taking my eyes off the screens.

"Or I can make you be a tired mom of young kids. She'll never know it's you."

Thankfully, I'm saved from responding by Emerson and the director coming over to join us. "We found something," Emerson says before he's even all the way to us.

My ears perk up and I can feel a bit of adrenaline rush through me, even though I don't even know yet if it's

something actionable.

“We’ve been searching for online chatter about the briefcase, and we found a message we think is from Hendrickson’s accomplice to who may be the buyer.” He glances at Charlie. “May I?” She nods, so he sends an image with a black background and gold lettering from his tablet to the screen that appears to be an invitation. “It looks like a third party will be passing along the briefcase that the key opens during a black tie gala just outside of Philadelphia this Saturday.”

A smile spreads wide across my face.

“Ooh!” Abraham says. “A ball with criminals! My favorite kind. I’ll get your tux ready.”

“We sent this info to the FBI,” the director says. “Hendrickson has lawyer-ed up, so they haven’t gotten much out of him, but we think this might help them get him to talk.”

Progress and a path forward are two things that make my day. I glance at my watch again. “Okay, I’m heading to Mackenzie’s work. I’ll check back in after.”

As I’m walking away, I hear Abraham say his standard goodbye expression, “Good luck, have fun, don’t die!”

Three things that are always part of my plan.

I get out of my vehicle in the parking lot of Mackenzie’s clinic and make sure my slacks and button-down shirt are straight and wrinkle-free. Then I grab the suit jacket from the passenger’s seat and put it on. I purposely leave the tie at the agency and choose the light blue shirt so I’ll be more approachable and not stuffy. Then I bend down to glance in the side-view mirror and check my hair. It’s not perfect, but it’s good enough. Besides, perfect is stuffy.

I turn and give a nod to the nondescript vehicle three parking spots down from me with Agent Wright inside, and he gives me a two-fingered salute back. I’m not sure it makes a

huge difference if the vehicle is nondescript if the agent himself isn't. He's wearing a black suit and tie, sunglasses, and is reading an actual paper magazine instead of looking down at his phone like a normal person. But the guy is protecting Mackenzie, and that's all that matters.

Then I take a deep breath and step inside the building.

CHAPTER 10

DEFINITELY NOT A PATIENT

MACKENZIE

When I finish testing the strength and mobility of Patty's injured knee, I tell her, "I'm going to give you a solid ten out of ten on your progress." Her wrinkles change into a beaming smile. "What are you most looking forward to doing again once you're one hundred percent? A little salsa dancing? A game of pickleball? Maybe some hiking?"

Patty doesn't seem the type to do any of those things, but the question does make her laugh. "Getting down on the floor with my great-grandson to play with dinosaurs. Ask me what I'm looking forward to the least."

Now I laugh as I get out the electrodes and start sticking them on the front of her thigh above her knee. "What are you looking forward to the least?"

"Cleaning the litter box. I tell you, I've been enjoying every single second that my injury has put that task on my dear hubby's list. Might've made the whole ordeal worthwhile."

Melissa, the receptionist, comes around the corner from the check-in area and walks up to me, a grin on her face that I can't quite name but instantly makes me wary. "Someone's here to see you."

"Enid?" My eyebrows draw together as I glance at my watch. "She's a little early."

"No, not Enid. *A guy*. Tall, dark, and gorgeous. Not like ruggedly handsome, but not exactly pretty boy, either. If those

two are on a scale, though,” she says, holding her palms up like they are scales, tipping from one side to the other, “I’d say he’s leaning toward pretty. Polished, suave, a little stoic, a lot hot. Like... closer to ‘secret billionaire’ than ‘cowboy on a ranch.’ Nice shoes. Great haircut.”

When she first said it was a guy, my mind immediately ran through possibilities. Patients, my brother-in-law, someone from the Outside the Bubble club. But as soon as she describes the man, there is definitely a specific someone who pops into my head. “I’m with a patient,” I say, hoping it doesn’t come out sounding as regretful as I feel, and I stick the last two electrodes on Patty’s leg.

“Go see who it is already!” Patty says. “The quicker you go, the quicker you can come back here and spill the tea with me.”

I bite my lip, then nod, definitely too curious to pass up the offer. I turn on the transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation machine and hand the controller to Patty, just like every other time she’s come in. “I’ll just be a moment. I know you’re a pro at this now, but”— I nod at my coworker, who’s at the next table, helping a patient with his Achilles tendinitis— “Jose’s right here if you need help.”

Melissa and I head past the line of padded tables on my right and the equipment and exercise space on the left toward the waiting area.

As soon as I round the corner to the reception area and chairs, I see Jace for the third time in three days. He’s leaning against the door frame that leads out to the building’s lobby, wearing a dark gray suit and a light blue dress shirt with no tie. I’m guessing he’s here on his lunch break.

Guys in suits are my Kryptonite. The chink in my armor. My catnip. If I had to work in an office with Jace and see him dressed like that all the time... well, let’s just say that whatever work I did would be riddled with mistakes and never finished by its deadline.

“I see we are making a habit of running into each other,” I say. “Let me guess— you need some physical therapy from

that tuck-and-roll you did when taking down my purse thief yesterday and just happened to choose this clinic.” It’s a little strange (okay, a lot strange), yet I’m not detecting any weird vibes from the guy. And I am a pro at detecting weird vibes.

He chuckles and rolls a shoulder just a bit like it’s an involuntary motion that happened just by his thinking about it. I hadn’t known that he’d done a tuck-and-roll— that had just been a guess. But based on his reaction, it was a correct guess.

“No physical therapy needed. I just really wanted to see you again and didn’t have your phone number. But I remember you mentioned physical therapy clients during your date, so I Googled ones in the area, and this one has your bio on its site.”

Oh, clever boy. That took a bit of initiative, too. I Googled his job to try to find him, but I was much less successful. Searching for *Business Solutions companies near me* returned one hundred sixty-nine million results. “Nice work,” I say. “I’ll give you bonus points for your spy skills.”

He gives me a smile that looks a bit like he’s smiling at an inside joke. “I came to ask if you’d like to go on a date with me.”

“Oh?”

I’ve been hoping the universe will bring us back together and now that it does, I respond with an *Oh?* I cover by tapping a finger on my lip, like I’m really considering it, and then I really do consider it. I don’t actually know much about this man— just that he makes me laugh and that he seems to be super protective.

And I am rather surprised that he hasn’t given off any colored flags. I’ve gone on a lot of dates, and there’s always a flag or two I’ve noticed by the end of the first date. Not that I’ve been on a date with Jace, but we have seen each other twice. Faced a couple of crazy situations together. I kind of thought he’d be showing one by now.

His eyebrow raises in question. Which is pretty adorable and makes me realize that he has great eyebrows. I’m not sure I’ve ever noticed that on a guy before.

“Hang on. I’m trying to decide.” It’s not that I’m not curious or interested. I just don’t want him thinking that I will say yes to anyone who comes in here sporting great hair and looking like that in a suit.

The sides of his lips pull up a bit. “What can I do to talk you into it?”

I like that he’s amused. I’m also impressed that he’s here, asking me on a date. Too many guys that I’ve been somewhat interested in over the years have just wanted to “hang out.” Of course, Jace’s idea of a date could be hanging out on his couch with a show on Netflix.

“Hmm. Let’s see,” I say, dragging out the word. “How about telling me what you have in mind for this date?”

“Well,” he says, stepping closer, which makes my heart rate kick up and makes me want to say yes without even hearing his answer, “a couple of days ago when we first met, you were on that blind date in the restaurant, and you left before getting the entree.

“And then yesterday at lunch, we had to leave right when we were getting started on our food. So I figured that for our date, we could shoot for actually finishing a meal together. But to increase our chances of that happening, I say we skip the commonality between both of those situations— the restaurant. How do you feel about a picnic in a park?”

I cock my head, interested.

“I was thinking that Shadowridge is a pretty great park, and there’s even that miniature golf course at one end. Plus, my mom gave me a genuine picnic basket for Christmas, and I feel like I should actually use it. What do you think?”

He smiles and dang if it isn’t the sexiest smile I’ve ever seen.

But just because he has a great smile, dresses nice, is asking me on a real date, the way he’s still leaning against that doorframe is rather delicious, and it’s pretty darn cute that he wants to use a picnic basket his mom gave him, doesn’t mean I’m going to fall for him.

It does mean I'm going to say yes to going on a date with him, though. I mean, how often do all those things happen together? The answer is never. I can't pass up the chance of experiencing it. "Hmm. Actually finishing a meal sounds pretty great. I'm free tonight— tell me there'll be a dessert in that basket, and I'm in."

"I promise dessert. Would you like me to pick you up?"

My eyebrow rises. "For a first date?"

He shakes his head, chuckling. "That's right— you drive yourself to first dates. When do you get off work?"

I'm not going to head straight from work to the date, so I answer with, "I could meet at seven."

His eyes are rather gorgeous, and I don't think it's solely because of the way he's looking at me like he fully sees me. I can't seem to look away, and he smiles like he notices. "Okay, see you tonight at seven at Shadowridge Park."

He turns to leave and I say, "Wait! Let's exchange cell phone numbers in case I can't find you." I am so glad I thought of that. I can't believe I almost let him leave for a third time without asking him.

We put our contact info in each other's phone, and I watch as he walks out into the building's lobby and toward the front doors.

"That is one hot guy," Melissa says in a breathy tone from behind me and I jump and let out an undignified mix of a squeal and a shout of terror that I'm sure both Jace and all our clients heard, having completely forgotten that Melissa— or anyone else, for that matter— was even around.

She gives me a pat on the shoulder, like she totally gets it, and we both watch Jace's backside as he exits the building.

CHAPTER 11

TASTY BITES AND OBJECTS TAKING FLIGHT

MACKENZIE

I am barely out of my car when I spot Jace with a blanket spread on the ground, a basket next to it. He's already caught sight of me and is standing. I can't help smiling as I walk toward him because how often does a date with a guy who's that good-looking and who packed a meal to eat in the park on a blanket just drop into your lap? It's rather refreshing.

My younger, less cynical self— so pre-Dan, at least— would've probably fallen for Jace pretty quickly. But current me has been burned more than my sister May's marshmallows every time we made s'mores as kids. I've dated enough guys to know that how things appear on the surface doesn't necessarily showcase how it's going to go.

But current me is absolutely going to enjoy this date for what it is. Because Jace does seem like a good guy, and based on that smile on his face, he's interested in me. But no matter how well this date goes, things will not progress beyond this one date. I know better than to let myself fall just to be burned. And from what I know of Jace, he could be very easy to fall for.

"Hi," Jace says as I near, and holds out his arm as if to welcome me onto the blanket, and we both sit. Which I appreciate, because I hate that first date awkwardness that invariably comes up as you first greet each other. Do you hug? Shake hands? Stand with your hands in your pockets like you don't know how to act in social situations? No one knows. We skipped right past all that, and now we are both sitting on the

blanket. Me with my legs crossed, facing him, and him with his legs outstretched, leaning on one arm. It's kind of nice.

We get the inevitable small talk out of the way first—asking how each other's day at work went and how our drive over was.

I swear I only glance at the basket Jace brought and my stomach growls its hunger. I'm sure it's loud enough for him to hear, too, so I take the opportunity to get to the point and ask, "So, what did you bring for us?"

(I really hope it's not something like peanut butter and jelly on white bread, with single-serving-sized bags of Cheetos, a container of applesauce, and a Capri Sun juice pouch, which I'm pretty sure is what I ate during my last picnic, which was likely back in elementary school, and probably during a field trip.)

Jace opens the flaps of the basket and starts pulling things out as he says what they are— Caprese pasta salad, pesto chicken salad sandwiches, strawberry lemonade pie, and sugar snap peas. Each item that is making my mouth water is packed in a plastic container that looks like it came with the basket. None of it is wrapped like I would expect from a restaurant. My eyes go to his. "Did you make all this?"

He chuckles. "I appreciate you assuming the best. But no. There's a great little place near my apartment in Cloakwood that I get takeout from frequently. I just took the basket into them, chose some things I love that I thought you might, too, and asked for their help packing it up."

With as smooth as Jace seems to always be, like everything he does is so well thought out and planned, it is only the way he rubs his hand on the back of his neck as he talks that tells me this particular date isn't one he has done before.

The little bit of vulnerability he's showing is endearing. It makes me smile. Probably because this date feels like it was planned for me, specifically, and isn't just a date he's done plenty of times before and found universally appealing.

“Oh!” I say, pulling out my phone. “I have to get a picture of everything while it’s still so pretty!” I snap a picture of the containers of food, and I’m already thinking about a caption and hashtags I’ll use. “He packed a picnic; I packed my appetite,” and “Ahh. A man who knows the way to my heart is through my stomach,” come to mind. So do the hashtags #PicnicPerfection, #BasketfulOfBliss, #FoodieFirstDate, and #PrinceCharming.

Then I touch the screen to turn the camera to selfie mode and lean in to Jace a bit, but instead of leaning in, too, like a normal person, he leans away, holding a hand up. “I’m not actually a big fan of being in pictures.”

I know that a lot of people don’t like the way they look in pictures. But Jace is “let me hire you as a model for high fashion” good-looking, so I kind of don’t think that’s the reason. And because I dated Dan for a year, my hackles are raised and I eye Jace, wondering if his reasons are the same as Dan’s.

He must see something in my expression that tells him that pictures are important to me, because he says, “It’s actually not the picture I have an issue with— it’s being posted on social media. With my type of work, clients tend to search for each of us on social media first, and I don’t want them to get a peek into my personal life. I had a bad experience once involving client crossover, a confidential meeting, and a pet llama named Larry, and everything went downhill quickly.”

I can’t help it— I laugh.

“It kind of soured me toward any online presence of my personal life.”

I get that. More than one of my patients has looked me up and mentioned things they saw on my social media. In my job, it can be embarrassing, but it ultimately doesn’t matter very much. I could see how it might be with Jace’s. Besides, Jace is not Dan, I remind myself, and it’s not fair to judge him based on Dan’s actions.

We eat as we talk. He asks me if I found what I was looking for at the outdoor mall the other day, and I tell him

about the incredible shoes I found and how I have nowhere to wear them. But I tell him that Livi assures me I can wear them to the post office or the grocery store or wherever my heart desires, and he agrees.

And then we talk about our favorite animal (fox for him, platypus for me), how long he's lived in Cloakwood (a couple of years, in an apartment by himself), and how long I've lived in Cipher Springs (nine months, in an apartment at my older sister Maggie's house). All in between me moaning in blissful delight with every food item he brought and trying to get out the words "This is so good" with every single bite.

I even ask my phone how to get from my work to the restaurant where he got this delicious food so she can tell me how long the drive is. I do the math out loud of how long it would take to drive over there on my lunch break, grab food, and drive back. Unless I spontaneously grow wings or gain super speed, it's not going to happen.

"Any other siblings?" Jace asks. "Or is Maggie your only one?"

"I have two more sisters. Hang on— I'll show you a picture." I get my phone back out and scroll through my photos until I come to the most recent picture I have of the four of us back in Leesburg, Virginia for my mom's birthday last month. "This is my oldest sister, Mari, then Maggie, then me, and that's my youngest sister, May."

The sun is getting lower in the sky, shining in our eyes and making it more difficult to see my phone screen, so Jace leans in very close. He has a musky but somehow clean scent, like he's fresh from a shower. It's as if the scent is connected directly to my nerve endings, because it sets off a cascade of nerves firing, making me lightheaded. Almost like I forgot how to breathe. Which is followed closely by a very happy fluttering in my stomach and a tingling up my spine.

Or maybe it is just because of his nearness. Maybe he just has an alluring aura that has nothing to do with his scent. If it wouldn't be awkward to grab a paper plate to fan myself, I totally would.

Woo!

It hits me hard.

And Jace's breathing is not entirely smooth, either. Maybe he can feel it, too. Both our eyes are still on my phone, and I'm wondering if either of us is actually seeing the picture when I spot a flash of something from the corner of my eye. Jace reaches an arm out as he turns his body, completely blocking me with his torso just as a football hits him square in the chest and he wraps an arm around it.

That football had been coming right for me. I hadn't even noticed, but my body seems to know how dangerously close it came to barreling into me at a high speed because my breaths are coming in fast, shocked gasps.

A scrawny kid, who looks to be about fifteen years old, shouts from the middle of the field as he's running in our direction, "Sorry! Sorry! I'm so sorry!"

Jace twists and tosses the football back to the kid in a tight spiral, and the kid leaps up and catches it. He lands a little unbalanced, like the speed of the football knocked him back a bit.

I'm still trying to catch my breath and recover from shock, but I manage to spurt, "How did you move quickly enough to block it from hitting me? I didn't even see it coming until it was almost here!"

Jace is glancing around the field, like another football might be lurking somewhere, about to be sent sailing in our direction. He shakes his head in disbelief. "I should've been paying more attention."

"Clearly, you were paying enough attention or you never would've been able to pull that off. That was seriously impressive, Jace."

"No. I let my guard down." I'm looking at him like he's maybe a little insane when he turns his attention back to me and clears his throat. "So, all the kids in your family have M-A names, huh?"

I try to pull myself out of the “you almost got hit by an object speeding through the air right toward you” zone. It takes a moment before I can even comprehend his change back to the pre-football attack conversation. “Oh, yeah. M-A names.”

I shake my head to get back in the moment, then pick up my fork and take a bite of the strawberry lemonade pie. I take time to fully chew and swallow, grounding me back in the present. “And that’s not even the worst of it. As if my parents weren’t going to have a hard enough time mixing up our names every time they called for one of us, they decided to further limit their choices in names by also giving us M-a names that are also a flower. So my sister Mari’s full name is Marigold. My sister Maggie is Magnolia, and my sister May is Maple.”

“I thought Maple was a tree.”

“It’s also a flower— completely unrelated— but yeah. Everyone thinks she is named after a tree. *If* she’s willing to tell anyone in the first place. She mostly just prefers people think her name is May.”

His smile is amused and quirks up at the side in an adorable way. “Last I checked, Mackenzie is not a flower.”

“You are correct. I think that by the time my parents got to the third child, they couldn’t come up with another ‘M-a’ flower name and skipped the tradition with me. Then by the time May was born, they’d thought of another one.”

Jace tilts his head to the side. “Is it a good thing or a bad thing that they skipped you?”

“A good thing, definitely. Because when I was a kid, I Googled, and the only other M-a flower name that one of my sisters didn’t already own was *Mayflower*. And no offense to the mayflower— it’s actually a pretty flower— but I don’t think I could’ve handled all the Pilgrim and ship jokes that were sure to have filled my elementary school experience if that had been my name.”

“You could’ve always gone by May for short.”

I laugh. “No, because if I had, it wouldn’t have been long before May would’ve stolen it, just like she stole my giant, adorable stuffed pig, Clancy, when she was born. Plus, as Mackenzie MacNeil, I am the only kid in my family who has ‘Mac’ for the first three letters of both my first and last name, making me the only MacMac. Or, as my dad likes to call me, Mac squared.”

Jace chuckles, which makes me smile. Then he glances around the rest of the park again, maybe looking for potential flying objects.

“How about you? Any siblings? How many kids are in your family?”

“There are six of us.”

“Six?!” I nearly choke on the swig of water I am taking a drink of. “And here I thought four was a lot.”

“Five of us in a row are boys. My sister is the youngest.”

“How did your parents handle six? Did they ever lose one of you, like leave one of you in a gas station’s restroom?”

Something strange flashes across his face. An emotion I can’t name. I only get a glimpse before it’s gone, and he chuckles and says, “Nope. All of us are accounted for.”

“Where are you in the lineup?”

“I am also third. I’ve got two older brothers, then twin brothers just younger than me, then my sister.”

I give him a sly smile. “Do they all have J-A names, like you do?”

“Nope— Blake, Emerson, me, Miles, Ledger, and Charlotte. Or Charlie. I think they went with the ‘wait until they’re born to choose a name that fits’ method.”

“Can you really tell what name fits a kid when they are fresh from the womb?”

Jace smiles in a way that tells me he’s laughing inside. “We have a picture in a family album of the twins not long after they were born, both swaddled up in their little hospital

blankets, lying next to each other. Ledger is about to either sneeze or yawn and has his face all scrunched up weirdly, while Miles is wearing an expression of utter contentment.

“We used to joke— probably because it got a reaction out of Ledger every time— that Miles had a foot on Ledger’s face in my mom’s stomach so that he could push off and be born first. So if my parents named them what they looked like at birth, instead of Miles and Ledger, they would’ve been named Victor and Victim.”

I laugh pretty heartily and not gracefully. And a part of me wants to meet those brothers. (Except the other part of me doesn’t and tries to be vocal about reminding me this is a one-date-only deal.)

We each take a bite of the gloriously delicious pie, and Jace looks around again. I can’t tell if he’s watching out for more wayward footballs or if he’s pulling a Dan and is looking for anyone he knows who he might not want witnessing that the two of us are together.

But Jace is the one who chose this location. If he is worried about someone seeing us, he would’ve chosen a different location, right? I tell myself that he’s only worried about the football kid’s aim. But a small part of me is whispering that not wanting pictures on social media and looking around to see who’s watching is behavior that has burned me before.

I tell that part to be quiet. This is one date only, and I’m here to enjoy it. I am full, but I still take one last bite of the pie on my plate— it’s so tasty I can’t resist— before pushing it away.

Jace nods toward the other end of the park. “See that down there? It’s a mini golf course. What do you say about playing a game?”

“I would love that.”

He starts putting the food that’s left in the basket and I fold the blanket and drape it over an arm. We decide to drop it off

at his car before heading to the other end of the park, and I find out that he's parked right next to the spot I pulled into.

Football kid is gone, but there are plenty of other people on the playground and enjoying the open space of the grassy area. I've been living here long enough that the people I don't ever interact with are starting to look familiar, which feels like I've leveled up in small-town living or something.

As we cross the grassy field toward Cotton Candy Greens, a large dog barks. Jace doesn't flinch, but he immediately shifts to position his body as a block between me and the dog, as if it's more of an instinct or reaction than a conscious thought, before seeing that the dog is on a leash and is perfectly harmless.

First, Jace saved me from the bad date. Then from the purse snatcher. Then from the football, and if the dog had been an actual threat, I'm sure he would've protected me from that, too, without even having consciously thought about it. This guy's protection instincts are top-notch.

CHAPTER 12

THE SWINGING SASQUATCH

JACE

The sun is getting lower in the sky as I walk with Mackenzie across the open field of grass between where we ate dinner at one end of the park and the mini golf course at the opposite end. It'll probably set in thirty minutes and be fully dark an hour after that. That means we've got about ten more minutes before we'll be all but blinded when looking west, which will make us vulnerable from that direction.

At least we won't be contending with any weather. As my Grandma Lancaster used to say, "It's so beautiful out that even the birds are tweeting about it."

In my earpiece, Charlie says, "You should hold her hand."

I glance at Mackenzie before I get a chance to think better of it. My jaw clenches at Charlie's suggestion, even knowing that my sister can't see the action through the camera in the top button of my shirt or from the CCTV cameras mounted to the light posts around the park.

"Come on," Charlie says. "I know you want to. I saw the vibes you both were giving off when you leaned in to look at her phone."

I growl softly enough that I know Mackenzie won't hear. I know my mic will pick it up, though.

Because Charlie has been my sister all twenty-four years of her life, and because she's been my handler for the past two years, she has a good sense of what I'm thinking at any given time. I don't even need to say any words and Charlie responds

with, “You’re right. You never let things get personal. I’m talking to a professional,” echoing my words from the courtyard of the outdoor mall.

This is not my first fake relationship. This is not new ground to me. Usually, though, if I’m faking a relationship with someone, it’s either because I need to get information out of them or because we determined in a meeting at the CSA that cozying up to a potential asset will be the best method. It’s never because I’m trying to protect someone.

I’m not sure how I feel about all of it right now. Especially because it doesn’t take *Attraction and Persuasion Techniques* training to sense the sparks that were igniting between Mackenzie and me when I leaned in to look at her phone. Or, really, during any of the times I’ve spent with her. I just feel drawn to her like a code-breaker to a cipher.

This might not be my first fake relationship, but it is my first fake relationship that has started to feel all too real. And that is *definitely* new ground for me. Why did I not listen to Charlie and Ledger at the outdoor mall? And how in the world did they manage to guess that it would become a problem for me when I couldn’t have even guessed myself?

In my earpiece, Charlie says, “I know you are hoping to draw the buyer out so this can all get wrapped up quickly, but I’ve been searching, and I see no signs of any threat actors here.”

In most cases, it’s best to resolve a situation as early and quickly as possible. But I am relieved that no one here is after Mackenzie. We had far too many unknowns coming into tonight’s mission that we hadn’t adequately prepared for. I can’t exactly have my head on a swivel and appear inconspicuous. But my own roving eyes have caught no signs of the buyer or their agents, either.

We walk through the opening in the waist-high fence that surrounds the Cotton Candy Greens mini golf course, where everything is outside, including the counter to check in. When we reach the counter, a lanky teenager wearing a light blue polo, khaki shorts, and a name tag that reads *Elliott* is

straightening the short pencils in the box. His sand-colored hair looks like mine did as a ten-year-old— completely untamable. But the kid’s got a good, solid grin, so he has that going for him.

Another teen, also wearing a light blue polo and khaki shorts, is manning a shaved ice and drink station to our right. Her dark braids are covering part of her name tag, but from what I can see, she’s Piper. Or possibly Pippen. Nope, it’s Piper.

Three groups of golfers are already on the course— a young couple with a son who looks about four and a daughter who’s probably two, a couple in their early twenties, and a group of four elderly ladies. I’m guessing the group of four elderly men sitting at the picnic tables near the exit, sipping ginger ales, are their significant others. Nobody here looks threatening.

Although I’m not convinced it was wise to give the two-year-old her own golf club.

There’s exactly one exit, but the fence is only waist-high, so really, everywhere is an exit. That’s good.

Elliot taps on a tablet and then holds the card reader on it out for me to pay. I use my own card since none of my agency-issued cards have my real name on them. I don’t want Mackenzie to see the names *Jason Langston* or *Jack Lawson* and ask questions. Elliott puts a bucket of balls on the counter and tells us each to pick a color.

Mackenzie peeks into the bucket, then grabs a Pepto Bismol pink one and holds it up, grinning. “I broke my arm falling out of a tree when I was ten, and my cast was this color.”

“Ahh. I see we are choosing colors based on memorable childhood experiences.” I look into the bucket, and instead of choosing the royal blue one that I might have, I choose a sickly green-colored one. “The summer between third and fourth grade, I was on a soccer team and our jerseys were this color. We lost every single game.”

“Because your jerseys made you so depressed that you couldn’t play well? Or did it do some kind of damage to your eyes when you were wearing them?”

I chuckle. “Probably both.”

We each grab golf clubs and walk toward the first hole. The entire course looks like a miniature town carnival— I spot a roller coaster, a Ferris wheel, a carousel, and is that a tunnel of love? This first one, though, is the bumper cars. A dozen colorful vehicles, each about the size of half a cantaloupe, are all moving erratically. Like they’re excited Chihuahuas on five-inch leashes. And all are between the tee-off and the hole at the end.

I motion for Mackenzie to go first, and as she’s placing her pink ball on the mark, I surveil the area again. The family with the two small kids is about three holes ahead of us. The young couple is a couple of holes ahead of them. The older ladies are whooping it up at hole 8— the tunnel of love. So we’ve got some space. I don’t see anyone suspicious in the park or in the parking lot outside of the course, either.

Mackenzie turns to me. “How good are you at mini golf? Because I need to know if I should bring my A-game to beat you or I’ll be fine with my B or C game.”

I smile. “You might have to bring that A-game. You should know that I scored the lowest out of every single person in my group”— I drag out each of the last few words for emphasis, then add— “when my class went for a field trip in the fourth grade.”

Mackenzie laughs.

“They called me the ‘Swinging Sasquatch’ after that.”

Mackenzie raises an eyebrow.

I shrug. “It fit. I had very unruly hair.”

As Mackenzie is lining up her shot, I glance toward the park and parking lot. We are at a disadvantage since we have to spend a lot of time looking down to golf, yet anyone will be able to easily see us from any direction. Mini golf probably

isn't the best choice ever. It sure isn't the covert operative in me that suggested we play.

And it definitely isn't the part of me that always wants to stay in control of the situation.

Charlie must sense my trepidation, because she says in my ear, "Don't worry. I'm keeping an eye on everything."

She always does. Yet it still makes me relax a bit to hear the words.

Mackenzie's strategy with this hole seems to be to just plow her way through it because she doesn't even seem to take the obstacles into consideration when she aims. Her ball hits a green car, bounces off and hits blue, then pings off it and hits yellow, then springs forward and hits a pink car before rolling to a stop not far from the hole.

She turns and gives me a wide smile. "Your turn, Swinging Sasquatch."

I aim my hit to send the ball to the side. It banks off the edge, like I had planned, and then goes into the fray of cars, also like I had planned. But it doesn't take nearly as many lucky turns as Mackenzie's ball did, and it comes to a stop right in the middle of the obstacles.

"Let's see what you've got, Queen of the Green," I tell Mackenzie.

I'm glad that the FBI is watching over her during the day because it allows me to keep working on finding the buyer. I spent the day shaking down all of my contacts, trying to find any information I could. What I found was minimal, but I passed it off to Emerson and his team. I'm hoping they can combine it with what they've found and get me a lead soon.

We are making progress, but it feels way too slow. Maybe just because Mackenzie is involved. The information we've found about the black-tie gala on Saturday, though, is that the buyer is getting skittish and might not show. If they plan a different meet, we might not get intel on it. We decided that having Mackenzie go to the gala might just draw the buyer to

it, which makes it our best chance at keeping the Eradication project out of enemy hands.

I voiced my worries about using Mackenzie as bait like that. But the director decided that the payoff will be well worth the risk and will keep her safer in the long run. And Miles is going to go to the gala with us so that the two of us together can keep her safe.

Now I just need to convince Mackenzie to join me.

As Mackenzie is taking her second shot, I try to get her to open up more, hoping it'll get me the chance to ask about the gala. "Did you always know you wanted to go into physical therapy?"

She is concentrating enough on it that she doesn't respond until her ball drops into the hole and she does a victory dance that I wish I had recorded. Then, as I'm attempting to get my ball out of the bumper car chaos, she says, "I always knew I wanted to help people be their best, but it wasn't until my senior year of high school that I decided that going into physical therapy would help me do that. After all, it's hard to be your best self when your body is stopping you."

She shrugs. "But there's so much more to it than that, and I just kept feeling like the job wasn't doing enough. I mean, yes, physical ailments can derail a lot of things, or at least make them extremely difficult, but a perfectly healthy person isn't necessarily a perfectly fulfilled person."

I look up from where I'm lining up my second attempt to get the ball out of the ping-ponging traffic jam just to study Mackenzie.

"I wanted to do more. I've always wanted to make a difference in people's lives, but I didn't know what to do, exactly, until nine months ago. In the neighborhood where Livi and I used to live, we had a big group of friends that we did everything with. It wasn't until I moved away from that support group that I realized how much people need to get out of the bubble of their own comfort zones and do activities that push them. The kinds of things that they're only likely to do with a friend or a group and not on their own."

It takes me two more shots. Mostly because that purple car at the end decided it was in a dance-off and really wanted to win just as my ball was coming at it. Once I hit my ball into the hole, I stand up straight and just look at Mackenzie.

“Anyway, I started a club— I call it the Outside the Bubble club— as a way to help people have a friend group who will push them to try new things. We meet to do something new together once a month. So between the club and the physical therapy, I feel like I’m finally doing what I had hoped to accomplish back when I was a seventeen-year-old with a vision for my future.”

It takes me a moment to realize that I am just staring at this woman in amazement that she has her purpose in life so figured out. I don’t really have words, but I manage to say, “Wow. I am impressed.”

CHAPTER 13

DEFENSES DANGEROUSLY DROPPED

JACE

As we head to the next obstacle in the course, Mackenzie says, “So how about you? Did you always know you wanted to go into business solutions?”

I don’t want to answer this question for so many reasons. But since I asked it first, I can’t exactly decline to answer. “Yes. I’ve always had a desire to help people with business problems to find a solution.”

It’s a stupidly vague answer. She knows it. I know it. But I’m hoping that she at least finds it humorously vague. I keep everything about my cover job pretty hazy. Sometimes cover companies, specifically, get questioned less when they are less clear. Other parts of cover stories require much more specificity.

“Okay,” she says, dragging out the word, “and what gave you that desire?”

“Some family trauma that happened when I was six.” I am shocked that I gave away so much in my answer. I hadn’t even thought about it first. I haven’t heard Charlie in my ear for several minutes, but I hear her quiet gasp, too.

“Related to a lack of business solutions?”

I smile, grateful that she’s going along with my vagueness. “Of course.” I can tell that she senses that the story is much bigger, and it is. She also seems to sense that it’s not really a discussion topic for a first date.

At the third hole, I manage to putt my ball so it lands perfectly in a seat on the Ferris wheel, and it takes it up and

around before dumping it out on the other side, rolling in the general direction of the hole.

I watch as Mackenzie lines up her feet and her club to get the perfect hit toward the Ferris wheel. My job is to protect her. And to find the guys trying to get hold of those weapon plans. But I find myself constantly wanting to know more and more about this woman.

“So, you broke your arm climbing a tree. Does that mean you’ve always been competitive? Were you trying to climb the highest or something?”

“Ha. No. ‘*Distractable*’ is a better word for it than ‘competitive.’ I was probably climbing the tree to see inside a bird’s nest or something. I was always running off, doing my own thing, so I was easy to forget.”

“You felt forgotten a lot?”

She looks up from where she’s lining up her next shot and shrugs. “You know how there’s a certain number of kids your parents can handle at one time?”

No... I can’t say I’ve ever known that is a thing.

“For my parents, it’s two kids. But they had four.” She hits her ball, but it skirts right past the hole.

“Ahh.”

She sizes up her next shot. “And I was such an oblivious kid. I never paid attention to the things I should’ve been paying attention to because I was distracted by everything else. Like a really interesting bug at the park. Or the cool shoes a worker at Disneyland was wearing. Or the way the package of Twinkies on the shelf at the grocery store has a logo that looks three-dimensional.

“When what I really should’ve been paying attention to was the kickball game that was forming, or that my family was getting in line to ride on the Matterhorn, or that my mom moved onto the cereal aisle.” She sinks her ball. “Yes!” she shouts before pulling it out of the hole.

I nod slowly as I line up to take my shot. “So when you mentioned being left at a gas station earlier, you were speaking from personal experience.”

She holds her ball out in my direction like she’s using it to make a point. “Yes, but in my defense, we were in the gas station, getting some road trip snacks on the way to Colonial Williamsburg, and I just really had to go to the bathroom. Okay, yeah, I was six and should’ve told someone first. I know.

“I came out of the bathroom, and I likely had toilet paper stuck to my shoe and was probably still tucking in my shirt as I came out, or I had an unzipped fly or something— I don’t know— I didn’t pay attention to details like that.”

As I tap my ball into the hole, I start to chuckle. Between the way she’s holding back her own laughter enough to tell the story and how animatedly she’s talking, I can’t help it. She has me captivated.

We walk to the next hole— one where we aim at flaps that look like the shooting targets in one of the fairway games, flanked by big fiberglass bears and bunnies painted to look like the stuffed ones you might win by playing, and I hit my ball, knocking over one flap, which drops my ball out toward the hole.

“Then I looked around and didn’t see my family. I went down all three mini aisles in the store with no luck, so I figured they went out to the car. But when I went out, I couldn’t see our car anywhere. I ran out to the road, looked in both directions, and still nothing.”

As Mackenzie is putting and telling her story, I notice that her lips quirk up at the sides when she’s remembering something amusing. Her left eyebrow rises just a bit, too. And when she smiles big, it makes her ears shift just a fraction, like they want to get in on the action.

“So I’m pretty panicked at this point, and I go back into the store and tell the lady behind the counter that my ship sailed and I wasn’t on it, and since I’m panicking, I can’t remember either of my parent’s phone numbers.” She pauses

for a moment. “Maybe because when my parents were trying to drill it into me, I was distracted by some lint on my pants that looked like a seahorse or something.

“About ten minutes down the road, my parents realized I wasn’t in the car and came back to get me.”

We both are laughing as we hit our balls in the hole, grab them out, and then start walking to the next hole as the sun starts to dip below the horizon. “I’m glad you were saved in the end.”

“Me, too. And in my parents’ defense, my cousin Lindsey was on the trip with us. She was seven, and she talked *a lot*. So it probably felt like there were plenty of kids in the car. And my parents felt bad enough that they didn’t even give me much grief for not telling anyone I was going into the bathroom.” She chuckles. “But after knowing they might leave me, you can bet money that I never made that mistake again.”

“As a fellow middle child, I totally get it.” And I totally do. There were plenty of times when one sibling or another needed a lot of extra attention and there was only so much parental attention to go around.

We step up to a hole with a six-foot-high building that looks like a booth where a carnival-goer would buy tickets to the ride. A skinny ramp for our golf balls to travel up leads to an opening that I assume will drop our balls on the other side of the booth. But the ticket taker has an arm that is turning in a circle, blocking the hole at times. I feel like it is this course’s classic windmill obstacle.

We each manage to get our balls to go up the ramp, but the swinging arm bats them away. The second try is the same.

As we play, I marvel at how *normal* everything feels being around Mackenzie. Like I’m a normal person on a normal date. I’m enjoying actual real life and not the life of a covert operative.

When Mackenzie places her ball on the divot made from many swinging putters over many months, determined to get

the ball in the hole this time, I ask, “So, do you think your parents should have stopped at two kids?”

She hits the ball, and we both hold our breath as it goes up the ramp. It looks like it might make it, but it’s knocked away. She turns to face me. “Absolutely not! Especially because I’m the third kid.”

She grabs her ball and I take a turn. And it gets sent back down the ramp.

“My sisters might drive me nuts at times, but I wouldn’t give them up for anything. Family is important.” She says it with such conviction that I swear it enters my own chest and touches my own conviction. “We didn’t have the biggest family ever, but I liked having multiple siblings, even when things got crazy. My life is better because of it.”

As she is trying again, she asks, “What about you? Do you want a big family? Or after having a big one, do you prefer keeping it small?”

The ticket-taker bats Mackenzie’s ball away again, and as if this is simply what we do now, I put my ball down and line up my shot. I have always seen myself having a big family. When I’m no longer using secret identities to chase international terrorists, that is. Knowing that Mackenzie wants the same thing I’ve always wanted makes me look at her differently. Something is going on in my chest that I can’t quite name.

“I don’t know about six,” I say, hitting my ball and sending it up the ramp. As soon as it’s denied, I add with a smile, “I wouldn’t want to have six and then have my kids think I should’ve stopped at four.”

Mackenzie smacks the top of my arm.

I glance around the course, then in a stage whisper, ask, “What would you say to just dropping our balls in the hole?”

She gives me a sly grin, and we walk right up to the ticket booth, wait for the rotating arm to be out of the way, then drop our balls into the hole. “Even though my siblings are pretty competitive,” I say, “I’m with you. I think my life is better

because of them. Even when there's a lot of roughhousing and things get really loud.”

Something hits the ticket booth, hard, with a resounding *thunk*. I grab Mackenzie's shoulders and press her back against the building, facing me, and I move in tight, blocking as much of her as possible from whatever assault is happening. My mind whirls. I glance down the length of her body, quickly checking for injuries. When I find nothing, I whip my head around, looking for the threat so I can determine the best escape route and how to keep her safe. The lights in this area of the park are bright, but with the sun nearly set, it's difficult to see beyond the borders of the mini golf course.

Only three or four seconds have passed— it's quick enough that the initial shock hasn't left Mackenzie's face yet — when I hear the four-year-old ahead of us talk.

“Dad, did you see that? I hit the ball so hard that it jumped clear over that spinny thing and hit that building! Can you believe how strong I am?”

The *thunk* that sent me into high-alert, protect-at-all-costs mode was a golf ball smacking a fake carnival booth. Hit by a four-year-old with a mini golf club.

I don't immediately move. My breaths are still coming fast and hard and my heart rate hasn't returned to normal. I'm embarrassed and immediately remorseful. I had stopped watching my surroundings— everything that wasn't Mackenzie— and had forgotten for a moment about being an intelligence operative. I never forget.

The best way to be a good covert operative is to be in control of the situation at all times. Part of it is also being adaptable, but adaptable in ways that are still conducive to getting the same carefully crafted outcome.

And right now, I'm not at all feeling in control of the situation or what's going on in my heart.

The shocked look has left Mackenzie's face, which I can see easily since my face is only about eight inches from hers. I'm still standing with my hands pressed against the building

on either side of her shoulders, the length of my body all but touching hers.

A slow grin spreads across her face. Then, in a voice of pure amusement, she says, “So... That fourth-grade field trip to the mini golf course... Did it come with some golf ball-related trauma? Is this a PTS response?”

“They didn’t call me Swinging Sasquatch for nothing.”

“You know,” Mackenzie says, and for some reason, I still haven’t moved, “mini golf can be rather dangerous. I appreciate you, once again, risking life and limb to protect me from a flying ball.”

“You never know when a mini golf course might turn into a battlefield. I like to be prepared,” I say, and step back so she can freely move. It takes a moment before she does, though, so I know I’m not the only one whose heart hasn’t entirely slowed to a normal rhythm.

After we finish the final hole, we walk back to our cars together. It’s fully dark now, except for the glow coming from the street lights surrounding the park and parking lot. Charlie hasn’t said anything for a while, but I know she’s still on the lookout for me. But right now, I kind of wish she wasn’t so connected.

When I was recruited to the agency and took a job as a field operative, I also accepted that a real relationship couldn’t coexist with the job. I knew from the start that finding love was something that would have to wait until I stopped being a covert operative. I have enough experience to know what can happen to a family when they try to make it work.

This mission is to fake a relationship with Mackenzie. The part of my heart that is squeezing in fear right now tells me that I am no longer faking it and maybe never was. That part is telling me to run right now.

But the elite operative in me dictates that I never run from a mission. And this one isn’t over yet.

We stop at her car, and I say, “We actually got to finish a meal this time.”

“Given our track record, that’s pretty impressive.”

“What do you say we tempt fate and try with an actual restaurant tomorrow? We can test whether our luck is tied only to outdoor meals or not.” I never found an opening to ask her about going with me to the gala and I’m not going to yet, because I’m sensing that asking about this one meal is still a big ask.

Mackenzie’s expression is conflicted, and my mind races through the reasons why she might want to say no to a second date after all that we experienced tonight. That list of reasons in my mind is quickly followed by a list of things I could possibly do to still protect her even if she doesn’t want me around.

Finally, she says, “Yes, but only if you let me pay this time. And I’m only saying yes because today was fun and you are rather charming.” She pokes my chest with a finger. “But don’t you try to make me fall for you because it isn’t going to happen.”

I try to keep the smile that’s threatening to overcome my face from doing exactly that. In my head, I hear the words, “Challenge accepted,” which leaves me feeling like I’m the conflicted one. This is not a challenge I should accept.

But I hold out a hand, shake hers, and say, “Deal.”

CHAPTER 14

MIDNIGHT WALKS AND RASH DECISIONS

MACKENZIE

The restaurant I chose for Jace's and my "in a restaurant" test meal was La Fonte di Cipher, which was a good choice because they served us some of the best Italian food I've ever had.

But it was also a bad choice because even if you don't ask for it, as soon as you finish off the breadsticks they brought out (and they are the tastiest breadsticks on the planet), they bring you more. And I apparently can't say no to eating my body weight in them. I rub my bloated belly as I drive back toward my apartment. Although I can't say I'm entirely sad about my choices—the breadsticks were worth it.

I am still marveling that I went on a *second* date with Jace, even though I swore I wouldn't go on any second dates. It was a good but also a very confusing date, and I need to talk it out. Which is why the string of texts from both my sister and my best friend that came in over the course of an hour during my date was a good thing and not an annoying thing.

Maggie: I don't care how late it is— come in and wake me up if you have to— but I want to hear about your date when you get home. (Just don't wake up Addi.)

Maggie: And be prepared to not hold back any details and to eat cheesecake!

Livi: Guess what? I just happen to be in Cipher Springs right now. I think I'm going to stop by your apartment and hang out until you get home so you can tell me about your date in person.

Livi: I can't find your key!

Livi: Do you not still keep it under that rock back by the corner of the house?

(I do not. A spider family moved in next to that rock. My key now lives where the mortar between two bricks used to be. Reminder to self: tell Livi.)

Livi: Don't worry about letting me know. You just enjoy your date. I texted Maggie, and she let me in.

Maggie: Hey, sis! Livi is here and the two of us are just hanging out on your couch, drooling over the cheesecake, so hurry back. It looks delicious!

Maggie: Oh, and we're watching the episode of Friends with all the cheesecakes because CHEESECAKE!

When I leave the restaurant, I make a group chat with both of them and text, *Eat the cheesecake before I get there, because if you want to chat, you have to come on my walk with me. It's getting late and I can't lose my streak!*

I enter the door into my apartment at the side of Maggie's house, close the door behind me, and then happily sigh against it. Then I straighten back up because Maggie and Livi have pushed the coffee table against my couch and are on their knees and elbows in my hallway, both looking up at me, forks in hands, guilty expressions on faces, eating cheesecake that is sitting on the floor. I can respect a TV show-inspired cheesecake devouring. I shrug. "At least you guys used a plate."

"Was it a good date?" Livi says as she stands and straightens her shirt. Maggie stays on the floor for two more bites before she gets up and moves the plate of cheesecake to the coffee table.

I hang my purse on the rack and drop my keys to the entry table. "Yes and no. I got so many mixed signals from him that it's hard to guess what he's thinking. All the mixed signals in

my own head aren't helping, either. Get your shoes on if you want to hear more.”

They both do and less than a minute later, I am out in the dark night, walking up the street flanked by two very curious women who are demanding information. So my mind starts running through everything that happened. Or at least the noteworthy parts.

“Since I made the reservation, I got to the restaurant a few minutes early to let them know I had arrived. Jace was already there.”

“Ooo,” Maggie says as she makes an air tally mark with her finger, “point for him for being early.”

“And he looked *amazing*. He was standing where the golden light from the sunset was hitting him like a professional movie set team had arranged the lighting to show him off perfectly. He was wearing a button-down with no tie, the top button undone, slacks, and a jacket.”

This time, Livi makes the air tally mark. “Another point for Jace for being spy movie poster-worthy. Did he pull out the chair for you?”

“It was a booth.”

Livi tilts her head. “Did he sit next to you or across from you?”

“Across.”

“Another point,” both Livi and Maggie say at the same time.

Maggie sighs. “If men only knew how sexy it is when they show they want to have a conversation with us instead of only snuggling up. I mean, Rowan knows I'm all for the snuggling, but it's the conversation that makes me want to.”

I nod. “Plus, it's hard to stare into his beautiful eyes if he's at my side. Anyway, I got the Shrimp Scampi and he got the Ravioli Carbonara and we got breadsticks to share.”

“Oh,” Livi says, “did you both reach for a breadstick at the same time and your hands brushed?”

“No, but I had him try a bite of my scampi, and as I held the fork across the table for him to eat, he also put his hand on the fork. And yes, there were sparks.” I feel them all over again, just mentioning it.

Maybe it’s because even though it feels like we’ve spent so much time together, we haven’t actually had a whole lot of physical contact yet. So when we do touch, it sends all kinds of zingers up my arm and makes my insides sing. I am a huge fan of kissing, but I like that Jace is taking things slowly. I am soaking in every single little touch of his and appreciating it more than I ever have.

Apparently feeling those sparks all over again must show on my face, too, because both my sister and my best friend cheer and hoot. But then a dog barks and we can hear a baby start to cry in the house we are passing. We all grimace, and Maggie holds a finger up to her lip and says, “Shh,” before waving her hands and whispering, “Yay.”

When we get past the house with the baby we just woke, I say, “Anyway, we just ate and talked for hours. Oh! And guess what? While we were talking, I asked what kind of vacation he would go on if he had to choose between going to the beach and going to the mountains.”

“Ooo,” Livi says, rubbing her hands together. “The test question.”

I ask every date this question. The beach is great, and I think it definitely has a place on vacation wish lists. But it’s a vacation you typically take to lie back and do nothing but soak up the sun. When I go on a vacation, I want it to be an adventure. The mountains or beach question is usually a no-fail way to find out how adventurous they are.

“And he chose the mountains?” Maggie asks. “The one you hope they’ll always choose?”

“Yes! And not only that, but he also said, ‘But only if it means I get to go hiking and canoeing.’”

Livi gives me a high-five, knowing those are two of my favorite things.

“And then, get this— he also said, ‘And if I can choose, I’d also include rock climbing.’ Rock climbing! So, not only did he choose the more adventurous option, but he also included something that wasn’t even on my mental list.”

Okay, really, I just want to someday marry a guy who doesn’t always choose the option that takes the least amount of effort. I want to have adventures in life, and I want someone who also wants that.

“Okay, he gets *all* the bonus points,” Livi says.

“Agreed. And then we talked about where we grew up and what our families are like. He was born out of the country while his parents were on a business trip, but he grew up right here in Cipher Springs.”

“For real?” Maggie asks.

“Yep. His dad passed away four years ago, but his mom and some of his siblings still live here. When he was a little kid, he played on Cipher Springs’s city league soccer and baseball teams. Can you just picture him as a cute little kid with the Cipher Springs jerseys?”

“Nope,” Maggie says. “I can’t picture him at all.”

“I wish I had a picture of him to show you.” And I really do. I’m so used to getting pictures of everything that I do that it feels strange to not have a single picture of Jace, especially when he’s spent so much time occupying my brain. Hopefully, I will soon. “It just felt like all the things that are important to me are also important to him.”

Maggie asks, “So why does it feel like there’s a ‘but?’”

“Because Jace is so difficult to read. At times, he seems so into me and I feel like we have an abundance of chemistry. At other times, it seems like he’s disinterested. Like maybe he wishes he hadn’t said yes to going on the date.”

“Huh,” Livi says. “Have you thought about asking him?”

“What? And just say, ‘So, Jace, are you into me?’ That’s weird. Plus, I kind of want his actions to show me. But I did get a second opinion from our waiter, who was a guy about

our age. At one point, Jace got a work phone call that he had to take, so he stepped outside to take it, and the waiter came over about the same time.

“So he’s asking me how the date is going and how long we’ve been dating, and I tell him that we just met last Saturday and that I wasn’t sure if he liked me or not, so it was hard to say how things were going.

“Then the waiter says, ‘He likes you; trust me. It’s more than a little obvious.’ I didn’t believe him, of course. We can see through the windows that Jace is ending the call and is heading back inside, so the waiter says, ‘I’ll prove it to you. Play along.’ Then he leans in close, like he would do if he was flirting with me, and he says things like ‘Right now, I’m telling you something really funny. And now, I’m complimenting you on your smile. Now, I’m revealing something about myself that shows vulnerability.’

“And I’m smiling and laughing a bit because it’s pretty hilarious. Then I catch the look on Jace’s face, and it’s definitely jealousy. Not in an angry way, but in an ‘I care’ way. When he gets to the table, Jace steps up to the waiter, standing tall like he’s ready to protect me from everything, his chest puffed out, and asks, ‘Do you need something?’

“The waiter just says, ‘Nope, not at all.’ And then he catches my eye, winks, and mouths ‘Told you.’”

Livi actually claps. “I hope you gave him a big tip.”

“Huge. And in that moment, I really did believe the waiter. But at other times, I’m not so sure.”

“Well, how do *you* feel about him?” my sister asks.

“That’s a very good question!” We reach the end of a road and I lead us left, on my normal path, as I mull the question around a bit. My plan was to not think about him again after this date. To not let him convince me to like him. But the truth is, I know I like him a lot. Otherwise, I wouldn’t care whether he was into me or not.

Maybe it’s the fact that we want the same things in life. Maybe it’s because I’ve seen him treat a bunch of different

people, no matter their station in life, with the same respect. Maybe it's because he makes me smile and laugh and that he is restoring my faith in men. Maybe it's that my heart does a fluttering jumping-jacks thing whenever I see him. Maybe it's a lot of things. "I am starting to wonder if maybe I would like dating Jace."

They both react loudly for a split second before remembering that it's late and the people in these homes are likely sleeping, so they quiet their enthusiasm. And, honestly, I can't believe that sentence came out of my mouth, either. I don't go on multiple dates with the same guy. It never ends well.

Then Maggie says, "I know Rowan isn't here, but we would both like to formally take credit for Jace."

"You... what?"

Maggie lifts a shoulder. "You never would've met Jace if we hadn't set you up on that blind date with Spencer."

"You mean that disastrous blind date?"

"She's got a point," Livi says. "If you hadn't been on a date with a creeper, you wouldn't even know Jace exists."

My head is still spinning from that logic when Maggie says, "Oh, speaking of creepers, I saw the same car hanging around outside that's been there for the last couple of nights, with the same guy in it, always reading a magazine. I called the cops on him and they made him leave. So keep an eye out for him if he comes back."

I nod, and then turn my attention to Livi when she asks, "So when are you going to see Jace again?"

The answer is supposed to be "Never." But somehow, it isn't. "I'm thinking of asking him to come to the Outside the Bubble event on Friday." Which is a huge step for me and something I never thought I would do. That event is where practically everyone I know in this town will be. So they'll all see I'm interested in Jace, and then it'll take about four seconds before the entire town knows. That's kind of a lot of

pressure. Yet, somehow waiting the three days until the event seems like a very long time to go without seeing him.

I turn to Livi. “So, if he says yes, we’ll both have dates this weekend. When was the last time that happened?”

She is quiet for a moment before saying, “I’m not going to the opera anymore. Felipe and I broke up.”

“When?”

“Earlier tonight.”

“And you didn’t say anything? Why did you let me go on and on about my date?”

“No, it’s okay because there was cheesecake.” She grins, but it’s not nearly as happy of a smile as it was when she wasn’t thinking about it.

“What happened?” Maggie asks.

“Well, we went to his parents’ house so I could meet them for the first time. And they are *rich*. And I’m not talking the ‘Oh, sure I’ll donate lots of money to your charity’ kind of rich, or the ‘I’m going to leave a one hundred dollar tip on a forty dollar bill’ kind. They’re ‘We’re better than everyone and everything’ rich.

“You guys should’ve seen their mansion! It’s the kind where the ceilings and doors are so tall that it makes you feel tiny. Anyway, I was stress-drinking Dr. Peppers before the date, and by the time we got to their house, I really had to pee. But they were so proper that it felt weird to ask for a restroom, so instead, I summoned my inner hoity-toity-ness and asked to be directed to the ‘powder room.’

“Did you know that a legit powder room doesn’t actually have a toilet? It only has a sink and a mirror. I think they knew what I was really asking for, by the way, and were just trying to make me uncomfortable by sending me to a room that wasn’t actually a restroom.

“But I decided I wasn’t going to let them win by asking for a bathroom.”

I shoot her a look.

“Okay, I was intimidated. Same thing. Well, that and I had to go so badly that I didn’t think I could traipse across the gigantic house to get to an actual restroom. So I decided I was just going sit on the sink and go there, then just wash it out with hand soap after.”

I put a hand on my mouth. “You did not.”

“Listen. I was desperate. I didn’t have another choice at that point. Anyway, it was a pedestal sink, and when I hoisted myself up on it, it... kind of broke.”

Maggie and I both gasp, and we all stop walking.

“And I kind of fell and hit my head and knocked myself unconscious. Apparently, Felipe and his parents heard the crash, so they came running and opened the door— since a powder room doesn’t have a lock!— to find me passed out on the floor with my fancy slacks around my knees. I gained consciousness just in time to see their shocked faces.”

I don’t think I’ve breathed since my gasp and my hand is still on my mouth. “Are you okay? Did you get a concussion?”

“Nope! No concussion,” Livi says, way too cheerfully. “I know because we went to the hospital to check. And, of course, when Felipe’s parents were telling the story to the doctor, they called me ‘the help’ and once were alone in the room, his mom turned to me and apologized for it by saying, ‘You understand that we couldn’t show more of a connection to someone who would be caught in such a compromising situation.’”

“She didn’t,” I say.

“She totally did. Felipe has always been such a great guy! So discovering that he has parents like that was completely unexpected. So I placed my hand on my bruised hip— which was at least covered with a hospital gown by then— and responded to his mom with, ‘It looks like we both got to see a side of each other today that we didn’t expect to see.’”

And then she starts laughing and it’s so contagious that Maggie and I start laughing, too. Luckily, we are in front of an empty lot, because they aren’t the quietest laughs.

When Livi manages to catch her breath, she says, “His mom stormed out of the room, followed closely by his dad, and then Felipe says, ‘You know we have to break up, right?’ So I responded with, ‘It’s okay. I’ve always wanted a dramatic exit story.’ And then I get up to dramatically exit and I remember that I’m still in the hospital gown and so my backside is, once again, exposed.” And then she starts laughing even harder and so do we.

When our laughing finally dies down, I rub a hand in a circle on her back. “So are you okay?”

“Yes. The head and hip feel fine, the doctor certified me A-okay physically, and although I really liked Felipe, I knew he wasn’t forever material. I knew that this day was coming—I just didn’t know yet that Felipe would be the one ending it. Oh, and there’s this cute guy I work with who I think I might be interested in...”

“Of course, there is,” I say and wrap my arms around her in a giant hug. I’ve been her best friend long enough to see her through dozens of breakups, so I know that tonight will suck, tomorrow and the next day she’ll be a little melancholy, but then she’ll bounce right back to normal quickly. She always does.

“But I’m happy for you that you’ll be seeing Jace again!” she says.

“Me, too,” I say, because I am. I just hope that it’s the right choice.

CHAPTER 15

THE TABLES HAVE TURNED

JACE

I crouch down in front of Roxy and rub the fur on the sides of her neck, just like she likes. “You’re such a patient girl. I swear we will go on a much longer walk in just a minute.”

Then, to Charlie, I say, “Will you tell Gianna thank you again for letting us borrow her dog?”

Gianna must be nearby because I hear some muffled talking through my earpiece before Charlie says, “Gianna told me to tell you that she guarantees that if Roxy could talk, she would be saying ‘Thank you for coming to get me, Uncle Jace. I love you *sooooo* much.’”

It’s faint, but I can hear Gianna say, “That’s not what I said.”

“Close enough,” Charlie says. “Different words; same sentiment.”

The brindle and white greyhound is a great dog, and I would take her anywhere, anytime. Well, anywhere that would be safe for her, at least. It’s hard to have a dog when you’ve got the kinds of unpredictable schedules we’ve got, but somehow, Gianna has found a way to make it work. Gianna is a friend and has let me hang out with Roxy lots of times before, but this is the first time I’ve used the dog for a mission.

When I showed up at Mackenzie’s work on Monday, she’d said she was free at seven, but I knew she got off earlier than that. So I checked with her FBI shadows, and they confirmed that she went on a walk right after work and that she likes to

take the exact same path each time. If I could tell her who I am and how I know that information, I would definitely tell her to vary her pattern. It's safer.

But her predictability is working in my favor today.

"How do you think Mackenzie is going to respond when she sees you?" Charlie asks through my earpiece.

"I don't know. I had such a hard time getting a read on her last night. There were times I thought things were going well and times when I was sure they weren't." But there were also times when I almost completely forgot that I was on a mission and just let myself be me, and then I would remember and try to pull back. I'm not sure I was in the clearest frame of mind to judge well.

The uncertainty about how she feels is why I wasn't willing to risk asking to see her again today— I was too worried that she'd say no, which would mean that I'd have to find another way to be around her, and awkwardness lies in that direction. So I opted for showing up randomly and hoping for the best.

"What was your take?"

Charlie heard the entire date through my earpiece and saw most of it through my button camera. I'm used to Charlie being with me on every mission and seeing any mistakes I make. But it's a different story when the mission is Mackenzie. Specifically, Mackenzie and me on a date. Especially since I'm developing some serious feelings for the woman. I feel like I'm being judged on my ability to woo a woman.

No, that's not it— I've been on plenty of missions where its success relies on me wooing a woman. It's more like I'm being judged on my ability to be a good date. It takes me right back to the time when I asked Melissa Worthington on a date to the movies, but I didn't have my driver's license yet, so my parents drove us and sat three rows behind us.

"I think she's going to tell you to leave," Charlie says.

Oh, no.

“Just kidding!” Charlie says. “I actually think she really likes you.”

“You do?” I’m embarrassed at how the words come out because they sound so full of hope. And I’m back to being in middle school and asking my friend, who is friends with a girl I like if he thinks that girl likes me. I stop scratching Roxy’s short fur and stand up, looking in the direction of Mackenzie’s street.

This is a covert mission. I need my head in the game.

Various missions have taken me all over the country and all over the world. It’s strange to be on a mission in the town I grew up in. The town where my mom, my sister, and one of my brothers still live. On the streets I walked many times as a kid. In fact, I think a kid in my fifth-grade class, Robert, lived just down this street.

“Abraham is here, too,” Charlie says through my earpiece. “He says, ‘Good luck, have fun, and don’t die.’”

Of course, he does.

“He also says that if the romance thing doesn’t work out, he can make you a great disguise so you can try again as a different person.”

“Tell him I said thanks for knowing how to boost a guy’s confidence.”

“Mackenzie’s door just opened,” Charlie says.

Mackenzie’s sister, Maggie, is too perceptive and called the police yesterday to report the FBI agent stationed to watch their home as a stalker. So having an agent close by— at least during waking hours— is no longer an option. So a tech team went in during the night to install cameras aimed at Mackenzie’s house and down both directions of her street. It’s actually pretty handy for Charlie to be able to watch those instead of having to coordinate with the FBI agent.

I start to stretch my leg muscles, like I’m about to go for a run. I don’t actually start walking, though, until Charlie says in my ear, “Okay, she’s nearing your street.”

“It’s go time,” I say to Roxy, and she seems to know exactly what I mean. We start walking down the street to where Mackenzie is about to turn from her street onto ours, and Roxy is walking like she’s in a dog show, showing off her beautiful self and her stately stroll.

I pull out my phone and keep my eyes looking down at it when Charlie tells me that Mackenzie is almost at the corner. It’s best for believability if Mackenzie notices me first.

“Jace?”

I look up when I hear my name said in a disbelieving tone.

“Mackenzie!” I look around, like seeing her in these surroundings is so surprising. “What are you doing here?”

She motions in the direction she just came from. “I live just down that street. What are you doing here?”

“Seriously? That close?” I gesture at the street leading to Charlie’s apartment. “My sister lives just around the corner. She is working late, so she asked me to take the dog she’s sitting on a walk for her.” Gianna lives in Cloakwood, so I couldn’t exactly say I picked Roxy up from her home. But it’s true that Charlie’s apartment really is that close to Mackenzie’s.

Becoming an intelligence agency field operative should come with an honorary acting degree because our lives often depend on our ability to do just that.

Mackenzie crouches down in front of the dog and starts scratching at the sides of her neck, just like I was a moment ago. “Well, aren’t you the most beautiful thing?” She glances up at me. “What’s its name?”

“Roxy.”

“You are such a good girl, Roxy.”

The greyhound knows she’s getting praise and it makes her pull out her best “Dog show” poses even more. This dog lives on praise.

“Do you walk her often?”

I nod. "Once a week or so." That's a lie. Sort of. I play with her at least once a week or I take her to the hills nearby to run on some trails. I rarely walk her in town.

Mackenzie stands up. "I can't believe we've never run into each other before!" As if she can't keep from petting the dog, she reaches a hand out to pet the top of Roxy's head. "Would you two like to join me?"

I look down. "What do you say, Roxy?"

As if she's one hundred percent dedicated to this mission going well, Roxy gives a happy yip.

I chuckle. "I think that's a yes from both of us."

I do remember that this is a mission, so I am excellent at keeping an eye out for anyone who might be following us. I see no one suspicious, though, so I honestly think that the buyer never figured out who Mackenzie is. Or if they did tap into the grainy CCTV feeds at the outdoor mall, they also saw Ledger steal her purse and assume that he's the one with the key.

It all makes me feel a lot better about the gala on Saturday.

As we walk, Mackenzie points out things along our way that make this her favorite walking path. Things like a cool-looking bush, some vibrant flowers, a kitty that's always in someone's window, a ball field where kids are playing soccer.

"Remember how I said that the ball I chose at mini golf was the color of our jerseys? This was where we played."

"Really?" Mackenzie asks and looks at me like she's seeing me in a different light and wants to be able to see it all.

I point out all the areas of significance for me growing up as we walk. Houses of kids I went to birthday parties at, the general area where I lived, places we used to go after school. And for a couple of them, she names people who live there now. She also points out the house of one person in her club.

"My mom still lives in the house we grew up in. Charlie lives in town, of course, and so does my brother Blake and his daughter."

“You have a niece?”

I nod. “She’s two and is the most adorable little girl on the planet.”

“Ahh, but see, you haven’t met my niece, yet.”

I don’t miss her use of the word *yet*. It makes me happier than it should. Everything about being with Mackenzie, in her world, makes me feel happy. And... normal.

The yards here are all well cared for. Some homes have beautiful landscaping, but most are pretty ordinary. Almost all have mowed yards and everything is clean and nice, though. I never really appreciated that enough as a kid.

I point at a street we are coming up to. “And that road right there leads to my elementary school. See that short picket fence on the right, three houses down? My older brother, Emerson, bet me that I couldn’t jump over that fence on the way to school once. I was probably in third grade, so he would’ve been in fourth. I wanted to prove to him that I could, so I started back a bit, then got running as fast as I could and jumped. I mostly made it.”

“Define ‘mostly.’”

“I made it over. My pants did not. One of the wood pieces had split, and my pants, just below the back pocket, caught on it. It tore a flap big enough to expose my underwear on my entire right cheek.”

Mackenzie laughs, and I can’t help laughing, either. “Even though it was embarrassing at the time,” I say, “we still found it funny. All my siblings were with me— it was the one year we were all in elementary school together— so I had help. Which was good, because we knew our parents had already left for work. And because Emerson is Emerson, he was prepared enough to have a roll of duct tape in his backpack, and they got my pants sealed up good.”

Mackenzie is laughing even more right now, and it does something to my chest.

She asks, “Did the duct tape at least match the color of your pants?”

I shake my head. “It was about the color of my soccer jersey that year.”

Mackenzie is wiping at her eyes, her shoulders shaking from laughter. Roxy knows something fun is happening, so she’s walking with an extra bounce in her step, trying to keep looking at us.

I can’t believe I’m telling her all of this. I am an expert at getting the other person to spill all their secrets without revealing any of my own. It’s like Mackenzie opened the floodgates to my life and I’m just letting it all spill out. I haven’t talked about any of this stuff for probably the last six years I’ve worked at the agency.

Honestly, I didn’t even know that I could. When you get so used to covering up all the details about your life, it’s hard to uncover them. Partly because it feels wrong to be so exposed and partly because of habit and ingrained protocols.

But there’s something about Mackenzie knowing this part of me that is exhilarating. It’s been so long since I’ve shared anything that isn’t part of my legend that I’ve forgotten how it feels to be so open. Untethered. Vulnerable.

Dangerous.

CHAPTER 16

OPENING THE FLOODGATES

JACE

“You’re about half a mile beyond where the subject normally ends her walk,” Charlie says in my ear and it makes me jump. I had somehow forgotten she was there. She must sense that I’m forgetting I’m on a mission and that’s why she refers to her as *the subject* instead of *Mackenzie*. “How’s that weather looking? Because from what I can see, it doesn’t look good.”

I look up, surprised I have somehow missed that, too. The skies are gray and storm clouds are definitely making their way in. I look at Mackenzie. “We should probably turn back.”

Mackenzie looks up, too, and seems just as surprised as me that the weather turned while we were paying attention to other things.

We are maybe a fourth of the way back when a raindrop hits my arm, and we pick up the pace. As we are nearing the halfway mark, lightning flashes, brightening an area that had somehow turned dark so fast. It’s close enough that the hairs on my arm stand on end and the cracking sound is almost immediate. Thunder rumbles through the skies as the rain starts really pouring down.

Roxy starts trembling at my feet, so I bend down, scoop her into my arms, and say over and over in a soothing voice, “Shh. It’s okay. Everything’s okay.”

Within a block, we are soaked through. I spot a tree that’s tall enough for us to stand under, with dense enough limbs and leaves to protect us somewhat from the rain, yet still much

shorter than all the other trees around, making it an unlikely target for the lightning. I point it out to Mackenzie and we run for it.

“Brr!” Mackenzie says as we huddle in under the tree, wiping the rain from our faces. “That sure livened things up!”

I set Roxy on the ground and squint out at the skies in the direction the clouds seem to be moving from. It doesn’t look like we are getting blue skies again anytime soon. Roxy doesn’t seem to mind the rain, but that lightning sure is spooking her.

When I stand back up, Mackenzie has her phone out, the camera on, and asks, “Should we get a picture?”

This time, I don’t tell her that I don’t want to be in the picture—I just scoot in close so she can get the image of us drenched in rain.

As she is doing something on her phone— probably going into an app to post it— I say, “I notice you like to document a lot of your life. Do you mind if I ask why?” It is very much the opposite of what I’m inclined to do, so I am genuinely curious about what the draw is for her.

Mackenzie looks down at her phone for several seconds, like she’s not really seeing it, then turns off the screen and slides it into the side pocket of her exercise pants.

“Remember how I said I was an easily distracted and kind of oblivious kid?” I nod, and she lifts one shoulder in a shrug. “I just wasn’t... there when my family got together to snap a picture when we were off somewhere having fun. And I never really sat still long enough to be in pictures.

“I hadn’t noticed that was happening— oblivious, remember?— until I was a sophomore in high school and my boyfriend, Jonas, came over to my house for the first time. He wanted to look at our family photo albums, which were filled with plenty of pictures of my parents and sisters, but only an occasional blurry picture of me as I was running somewhere else.

“It was like I hadn’t even been there. Like I wasn’t a part of any of the things we did growing up. After he went home, I asked my mom why I wasn’t in any of the pictures in our albums. She said, ‘Oh, honey, I tried. You just didn’t seem interested.’

“And since the albums were out, my sisters were looking through them, talking about all the things they remembered from every vacation, every trip to the park or the swimming pool, every family outing, every birthday, every silly face.

“And I realized that I didn’t have many of the memories that they did. I don’t know how, exactly, but it was like the memories were tied to the pictures.”

I nod. “Kind of like when you were a kid in school— if you took notes in class, you remembered those things more, even if you never referred back to the notes?”

“Yes! Exactly.” She looks at me like maybe I’m seeing her more deeply and she’s wondering if she can see the same in me. “By then, I had my own phone and was taking my own pictures, and I realized how much sharper those memories were for me.”

I nod, understanding so much more. “So, when you pull out your phone to take a picture, it means that this moment is one you want to remember.” Honestly, I kind of feel honored. Even if I am trying to hide the fact that I’m freaked out that she might post it on social media.

“Yes.” She looks up at the leaves above us for a long moment, just watching the few raindrops that are making their way down through the foliage. I just wait, hoping that she will continue. Eventually, she does.

“It’s also more than that. At the beginning of my junior year of high school, I decided I wanted to be a member of the National Honor Society. The application asked for a letter of recommendation from a faculty member. So I went to my very favorite teacher from my sophomore year— Ms. Strand. She taught my biology class and really changed how I look at the world. I asked her if she would write the letter, and she just stared at me with a blank expression for a bit before she said,

‘I’m sorry, can you tell me your name? I don’t remember you being in my class.’”

I suck a breath in through my teeth.

“Yeah. I was absolutely crushed that she didn’t remember me. And then, that very same year, I missed school picture day because I was sick. I don’t even know why I wasn’t there when they did retakes, and it never once occurred to me again that year that I missed it.

“So at the end of the school year, I got my yearbook and started looking through it, and realized I wasn’t even in it. Not in the part where everyone is listed alphabetically, and of course, I wasn’t even in any of the pictures of sports games and other activities throughout the school year. Somehow, I wasn’t even in the Key Club picture!”

I’m immediately transported back to my high school days. I may not have had any experiences in high school where I felt invisible or forgettable, but I’ve had plenty in my life as an intelligence operative since then. Most of those experiences were by design, but listening to her makes it feel as though there is now a string connecting the two of us. Pulling me closer. I’ve never felt anything like it before.

My heart breaks for Mackenzie and I step closer to her, wishing I could wrap my arms around her, yet knowing that it could stop her from telling the rest of the story, and I get the sense that she really needs to tell it.

“I just felt... small. Invisible. Like I didn’t matter and wouldn’t be remembered. It wasn’t just that I wasn’t in the yearbook or my family albums or that my favorite teacher didn’t remember me. I realized that I was living my life like the pictures. In a way where no one would remember me when I was gone. Like I was living my life with all the colors... muted. With everything muted.”

She pulls out her phone again and kind of tips it back and forth like she’s trying to gesture to everything it contains. “I just want to show that I was there, you know? Wherever I was. That I did things. That I mattered. And I want to keep the memories tied to them.” She shrugs. “I guess I just want to

know that I was a part of things. That I was seen.” She slides her phone back into her pocket.

This time, I follow the urge to comfort her and wrap my arms around her, pulling her in close. She tucks her arms in by her chest, and I can feel her shivering. She must be so cold. I wish my clothes weren’t soaking wet so I could offer her more warmth.

Roxy’s leash is still around my wrist, and she practically sits on Mackenzie’s feet, doing what she can to comfort her, too.

As I hold Mackenzie against my chest, I think about the slight tremor that was in her voice as she spoke and the earnestness in her eyes. I know that this isn’t something she shares often. And what she just shared was her being even more vulnerable with me than I had been with her. I feel the weight of the trust she’s placed in me by telling me, and it makes me want to take her confession and somehow hold it carefully and protect it from any harm.

“Is that why you started the Outside the Bubble club?”

She pulls back from me just enough to really look into my eyes without moving enough for my arms to drop from her back. “One of the reasons, definitely. Ever since yearbook day as a junior, I’ve tried to live life more boldly. Sometimes I succeed, and sometimes I really don’t. But if it’s been very long and I feel myself slipping back toward obscurity and a small life, I’m quick to get myself back on track. It was getting myself back on track that made me start the club.”

My respect for her has grown as I marvel at how she took something that caused her a lot of pain, stepped back, evaluated, and took action to make changes going forward. Big life changes are not easy to make.

“We are having a club activity on Friday.” She looks into my eyes, hers full of... hope, I think. Maybe a bit of uncertainty or cautiousness. “Would you like to come?”

I smile for so many reasons. For one, I now have an opening to protect her on Friday. Two, because I really want to

go. I want to see her in her element, doing something she's so passionate about. And three, because it gives me an opportunity to ask her about Saturday.

"I'll come on Friday if you'll be my date on Saturday for a black tie gala I have to go to for work."

A smile spreads across her face and she says, "I've already got the perfect shoes for it."

As the rain pours down all around us, Mackenzie's still looking into my eyes. Between that string connecting us and the fact that I swear she can now see into my soul, I'm feeling rather vulnerable myself. My first instinct is to pull away from that vulnerability. To run from it. But Mackenzie is facing it head-on, like a champ, and it makes me stay.

And then Mackenzie glances at my lips and that single minuscule shift of her eyes makes me not only glance at her lips but start thinking about how it would be to press my lips against hers. To feel that physical connection as strongly as I am feeling the emotional connection.

Maybe it isn't so bad if I kiss her. If I start a real relationship with her. I glance at her lips again. Only about five inches separate us. I'm just starting to move my face closer to Mackenzie when lightning cracks somewhere overhead and everything is blindingly bright for a moment.

Roxy yelps and tries pushing her body into the space between Mackenzie and my legs. "Shh," I say, removing one hand from Mackenzie's back to rub Roxy's head. "It's okay, girl. Nothing to be afraid of."

The absence of my hand on Mackenzie's back must make her colder because she involuntarily shivers. The action immediately makes me think of Fadila, an asset in Riyadh that I had developed. The last time I saw her, she'd been shivering, too, but from fear, not cold. She'd been feeding us some valuable intel. The people she worked for found out, and I couldn't protect her.

"You need to get her indoors or she's going to get hypothermia," Charlie says.

I manage not to flinch, even though I forgot again that she is in my ear.

Hearing Charlie's voice and seeing Fadila in Mackenzie so close together is a wake-up call. If I needed a reminder of why this is a dangerous business for anyone close to me, I just got two.

Mackenzie is wearing leggings and a tank top. I don't need the goosebumps on her arms to tell me that she has to be freezing cold. I run my hands down her arms quickly to create some friction and hopefully warm her enough to stop the shivering. "We need to get you home." I glance in the direction of Mackenzie's apartment. "We're only about two blocks away, right?"

She nods and then grins. "Want to make a run for it?"

I chuckle because her enthusiasm is punctuated by chattering teeth.

Then, with Roxy's leash in my left hand and Mackenzie's hand in my right, we take off running.

CHAPTER 17

ABS, GLITTER, FLAGS, AND FEAR

MACKENZIE

“**B**rruuuuggggghhhhuuuuhhh.” The sound of my full-body shiver isn’t even human to my own ears. But I can’t help it as I grab my spare key from the space between the two bricks and fumble with it as I get to my door.

Sebastian, the cat that sometimes claims me, sees me and runs across the backyard, probably just as anxious as I am to get indoors. But then he spots Roxy and just as quickly bolts away. He has a hard enough time being around humans he knows, let alone a new human and a dog.

I get the door open and Jace, Roxy, and I step inside to the warmth, shutting the door behind us. We both stand there, frozen, because a) we’re cold, b) I know Jace wanted to kiss me under that tree, c) I’m experiencing a bit of a vulnerability hangover from revealing so much about myself under said tree, and d) I’ve never had a date step foot into this place. Mostly because let’s face it: that’s not usually a first date thing and I’m not a second date and beyond kind of girl.

I shake myself out of my stupor. This is my home, after all. I need to summon my inner hostess.

“We need to get these wet clothes off,” I say and then immediately cringe. I’m not that kind of girl, either. “And we need to get Roxy dried off. Her coat isn’t very thick.”

I kick my shoes off just inside my bedroom doorway before going into my bathroom to grab some towels. Jace uses one to dry off Roxy— and the walls and floor around her because we weren’t fast enough to avoid her shake-off—

while I go get a throw blanket for her from my room. I can see Jace from my room, so I pause a moment to just watch the man take care of this dog that obviously loves him while trying not to become the moth to his very distracting flame.

I shiver. A flame sounds so good right now.

I emerge with the blanket, and the two of us make a soft little nest of a bed for Roxy to rest and warm up in. She immediately curls up in it, and Jace arranges the blanket over and around her. Then I go to the kitchen to get her a bowl of water, hoping that my shivering doesn't make me spill it. As I'm setting it down, Jace asks, "Do you have a clothes dryer?"

I stand and turn just as he is pulling his shirt over his head and I'm frozen, staring at a real, live six-pack, questioning for a second my "not that kind of girl" convictions.

"Um, yeah," I say as soon as his face is visible again and I can focus on his eyes instead of imagining what those muscles might look like when, say, he is chopping wood with an ax. Shirtless, of course. "I use my sister's, just past that door." I gesture vaguely toward the door leading to the house as he uses the other towel to dry his hair and torso. "Hang on a minute, and I'll grab some of my brother-in-law's clothes for you to wear while yours dry."

I hurry into my sister's house, calling out, "Maggie? Rowan?" I send all the thank yous heavenward when I realize that they aren't home. Because if I said to my sister right now, "Jace is in my apartment and needs a shirt to wear," there is no way she won't come out to meet him.

I hurry into their bedroom, not even bothering to turn on the light when I see they have a laundry basket of folded clothes sitting on their bed. Good. I know they both would have no problem lending Jace clothes, but I really don't want to rummage through my brother-in-law's drawers. I grab the t-shirt on top and a pair of gym shorts, and then hurry back to my apartment. With any luck, I'll have these returned before they even get home.

When I open the door to my apartment, Jace is standing in his dark jeans and socks in my hallway-ish living room, with

his nicely-toned and shirtless back to me, looking at the books and spy movie trinkets on my shelves next to my couch. For a moment, I just stand there, not really believing that this Adonis is here in my little apartment.

He turns as he hears me, and I put the small stack of clothes in his arms. “You can change in the bathroom.” I gesture to the door at the right. “I’ll just change in my bedroom,” I say and give a somewhat nod toward my room on the left.

We both head down the short hall at the same time— a hall, by the way, that is definitely not big enough for two people to walk side by side— and am I really to blame if, under the circumstances, my bare upper arm brushes against his bare back?

When I get into my room and shut my door, I realize I’ve pushed it shut as if it weighs fifty pounds, like I’m trying to close the door on what I’m feeling. It’s not like the door is extra shut now.

I start by rubbing my hands over my face and then actually mutter out loud, “I can’t believe I told him all of that under the tree.”

Then I peel my soaking wet clothes off, grab the towel from my shower last night, which still happens to be thrown over the only chair in my room, and dry myself off, including my hair, which somehow still has water droplets falling from it. I put on a gloriously warm, dry, t-shirt and sweats and rub my arms to try to get rid of the goosebumps covering them.

I hear the bathroom door open, and that’s when I start wondering how scary I look. And very shortly after, cursing the fact that my only mirrors are in the bathroom. Who doesn’t have a mirror in their bedroom? This girl. Because I’m apparently not the “have a long mirror to check my outfit” kind of girl, either. I’m more of a “when needed, stand on the edge of the bathtub to see more of my outfit in the mirror above my sink” kind of girl.

I work with what I’ve got and turn the camera on my phone to selfie mode. Okay, so I look like I’ve been dropped

into a freezing lake, but when this is all over, I'm going to leave a glowing 5-star review for the waterproofness of this mascara. I rub my cheeks a bit because an undertone of frostbite blue just isn't my color. Then I take out my ponytail band and run my fingers through my soaked hair. It's not pretty, but if Jace is no longer interested in me when I look like this, then it's better for both of us if we know that now.

I walk out to find Jace standing near the door to Maggie's, holding his stack of soaking wet yet perfectly folded clothes, wearing a dark gray shirt with glittery pink text that reads *Real Men Wear Pink... and Glitter*, and I laugh out loud. "Okay, I swear to you that I had no idea that was the shirt I was grabbing when I grabbed it. But my brother-in-law will be so happy to know that I did."

"I have always thought that glitter went with my complexion."

I tap a finger on my lip, considering. "You're right. It really does. You should think of buying a few glitter ties for work."

He chuckles as I add his clothes to mine. Then I go put them in Maggie's dryer along with a couple of dry towels so it won't take forty-seven years to dry them, and head back into my apartment. Jace is checking on Roxy, who is sound asleep in her makeshift bed.

"They should be ready before long," I say. (Lie. They are *very* wet.) "I can make us some tea in my coffee maker. Oh! And are you hungry? Because I've got some leftover taco meat and toppings— I can make us some cornbread tacos in my waffle maker."

He follows me into my kitchen and checks out my row of appliances at the back of my long counter. "No stove or oven?"

I sometimes forget how strange my apartment is until I see it through someone else's eyes. "Who needs a stove and an oven when you've got a rice cooker, a coffee maker, a waffle iron, and a slow cooker? I tell you, I can make anything with these four appliances."

I put the taco meat in the rice cooker to warm it up, and then I start mixing up the cornbread batter, which I don't even need a recipe for because I make it so often. I've had cornbread plenty of times in my life, but I don't think you can really gain a true appreciation for cornbread until you've had it cooked in a waffle iron.

Jace leans against my counter and asks, "So what's the story behind this place?"

I turn around, too, hugging the bowl against my middle as I stir it with my whisk. "Well, from the information Maggie and Rowan got from the previous owners, which she will undoubtedly pass along to the next owners, is that three owners ago, they wanted to turn their oversized garage into a party room slash family room. So, they added the kitchenette and bathroom so guests could mostly stay in that area.

I nod toward the wall we're facing. "Two owners ago, they decided to build the bedroom, which is basically three walls connected to that outside wall. Instead of removing the big garage door and replacing it with a wall, though, they just built a bedroom with walls that don't go all the way to the ceiling—which I'm sure is a building code violation—so that the garage door can still open.

"And then the owner right before Maggie added that massive amount of fabric to the inside of the garage door so it looks like I live in a quilt instead of a garage. They also added this faux wood flooring and the carpet in my bedroom."

Jace nods, and I can see that his lip is twitching up at the side. "So what is your contribution going to be?"

"You know, I've been pondering, and I think maybe a tile backsplash along this countertop." (Another lie. I haven't pondered that until this very moment.) "I'm not much of an artist, but I bet I could hand paint these four glorious appliances on them, each wearing a chef's hat."

"And if you've already got the paintbrushes out, you can paint the words *Making it gourmet, one plug-in appliance at a time.*"

He spreads his hands out like he's picturing the finished project in this space. I had said it as a joke, but now that I'm picturing him picture it, I get the urge to actually do it. Even though I know that my landlord (a.k.a. my sister) will never approve it.

His eyes rove around the room, and I know they've landed a time or two on my piles of bills next to my open laptop at my kitchen table, and the pile of kitchen towels that lay in a heap in the middle of the table, waiting for me to fold them. "So you could literally open the garage door and drive a car into your kitchen?"

"Well, I could, but then I'd have to move the table, and as you can see, just getting it cleaned off would be a lot of work. I prefer to spend my effort on making things like waffle-shaped brownies or waffle-shaped apple pie."

"I see that you've got your priorities straight."

The water in the coffee pot is ready, so I pour it into two mugs, each with a sugar cube and a mint tea bag, and hand one to Jace. It's still too hot to drink, which I know before I bring it to my lips, but I do it anyway because the warmth feels so good in my hands and steaming up onto my face. But that cornbread batter isn't going to pour itself into the waffle maker and my stomach is already growling just thinking about it.

I glance at Jace, who is still leaning his back against my counter, mug in hand, and a small voice in my head pops up and says, *Wouldn't it be nice to have this every day?* I'm so shocked by the thought that I smack it away. (Apparently, my brain's flight-or-fight response is fight.) I never let myself think of relationships continuing long-term. Only pain lies there.

"So," he says, "was that your cat at the door?"

"Sebastian? Kind of. When he's in the mood." I start pulling the containers of cut-up lettuce, tomatoes, grated cheese, sour cream, salsa, and guacamole from my little fridge. "A few months ago, Livi and I decided that for my birthday we should invite over a bunch of friends, open the garage door, set up a canopy tent thing just outside of it, and have a

big indoor/outdoor party. We put up strands of lights and had music and the weather was perfect. It was so much fun.” I’m getting giddy all over again just thinking about it.

“Anyway, sometime during the party, Sebastian came inside and went into my bedroom, and no one noticed. I didn’t have a clue I was sharing the place with a feline until he jumped onto my bed and planted himself on my chest in the middle of the night, right when I was having a dream about werewolves attacking while I was staying at the sketchy motel we’d stayed at when I was thirteen. So, I screamed.”

“As one is supposed to in a situation like that.”

“Right? Just like I told my sister— it was a totally justified reaction, even if it did wake up my baby niece. Anyway, my scream really scared Sebastian, so I felt bad and gave him some food. He was appreciative and claimed the place on an occasional basis, so I gave him a name. He sometimes comes inside, but he never stays the night on purpose. Oh, but he did bring me three dead mice, which had also apparently snuck in during the party, so he’s more than earned his keep.”

I’ve just got the last lid off the toppings when the waffle iron beeps. I’m like Pavlov’s dogs— when that beep sounds and I know it is cornbread inside, excitement immediately courses through me. I grab two plates and do a little happy dance as I use a fork to tip them from the iron onto the plates. Then I pour in more batter and close the lid.

I hand one plate to Jace, and see he’s got a grin spread across his face. “I see I should be excited to try this.”

I nod solemnly. “You should. You only get to experience this for the first time once.”

I open the lid to the rice cooker, where the meat is perfectly warmed, and we start loading our cornbread up with toppings. It isn’t until we are done, though, that I remember my kitchen table is unusable. I rush into Maggie’s laundry room, grab a laundry basket, and bring it back to the table. Then I use my arm to push the laundry off the table and into the basket in one swoop. I do the same thing for the bills because Jace doesn’t need to see that I owe \$147 to Target.

As we eat— and Jace is experiencing my cornbread and, I'm sure, being amazed at how his life will never again be the same— we talk about our families. Somehow, we get on the subject of how Maggie and I are only a year apart, and both are middle children, so we got lumped together as kids a lot. And that we were friends part of the time and grand annoyances to each other most of the time.

Then I tell him that it all changed when we were both in middle school and we went on a family vacation to Deep Creek Lake in Maryland. Our family didn't rent any water toys, though, and everyone else on the lake seemed to have, so I got bored and talked Maggie into going hiking with me. I told him about how we didn't take actual trails, ended up getting trapped in a gully, and thought we were going to die there. But we worked our way out of it together, never did tell our parents, have been close ever since, and now know we can always count on each other.

Then Jace tells me about his two competitive older brothers, Blake and Emerson. And that he very much wasn't growing out of the "annoying" part of the sibling relationship. Until a time when Blake and Emerson borrowed their dad's binoculars and broke them. Jace was there, so he helped his brothers come up with a sneaky plan to replace them, and that was how they bonded and he stopped being the annoying little brother. Most of the time. He said that brothers can be annoying even when you love them lots, no matter how old you are.

And we are laughing. A lot.

We're just sitting at my little table, and it all feels very domestic. Which part of me is thrilled about and part of me is completely freaking out about. This should not feel so natural with a guy I just met last week! The self-protection instincts I keep on high alert to ensure I don't date anyone long-term are all screaming for me to run.

We both go for seconds because apparently being caught in a rainstorm is hungry work. And while we are making our next cornbread tacos, we both reach for the guacamole spoon at the same time, and our hands brush. As happiness that rivals

eating cornbread from a waffle maker courses through me, all I can think about is how Jace wrapped his arms around me under that tree.

And the way he listened without judging. And when he could see that it brought back some tough emotions for me, he reached out to comfort me. And keep me warm. So, clearly, he doesn't have anything resembling a chartreuse flag.

The man is *still* relationship-flag-free.

And then I start thinking about that look in his eyes at that moment when I thought he might kiss me. Is what I'm seeing in his eyes right now that same look? Do I have that look in my eyes, too?

A part of me considers for a second entertaining that thought because I can bet that those lips of his would feel pretty amazing on mine. But I know that kissing Jace would be nothing like kissing any other guy. It would set me on a path I don't know that I can come back from.

The part of me that's not considering just taking his face in my hands and pressing my lips against his—the bigger part—starts voicing all the fears that I normally keep tamped down really well. And those fears shout very loudly that I lost who I was as a person when I dated Dan, and if I get into another relationship, I might lose myself the very same way again.

And if I do, then I won't ever live up to my full potential. I will live a small life when I feel like I should be living a big life. And if I live a small life, when I'm gone, it won't have mattered that I was here. I won't get a chance to leave my mark or make a difference. I won't impact anyone.

The more I think about it, the faster both my breathing and my heart rate get, and before long, I can no longer stand still in front of this gorgeous man wearing a shirt with pink, glittery text who will dry off the dog he's caring for before he dries off himself. I scoot around him and hurry to Maggie's door as I say, "I think I just heard the dryer beep." (Lies. The dryer is always set to silent so it doesn't accidentally wake the baby.)

I go into Maggie's house, shut the door to my apartment behind me, and collapse against the dryer, my breaths coming fast and heavy.

CHAPTER 18

**I'VE GOT MY (VERY SEVERE)
EYE ON YOU**

MACKENZIE

As I get my table and ultrasound therapy equipment set up for my next patient, I can't stop my mind from replaying my freak-out with Jace last night. Seriously, what is wrong with me? I am a twenty-six-year-old woman, and my relationship with Dan ended over two years ago. I should be able to have a relationship that goes beyond my one-date maximum without freaking out.

“There's my favorite therapist!”

I turn to see Hammy, one of my longer-term patients, and greet him with a big smile. I like Hammy. He's a sweet man in his sixties with white hair (and not a whole lot of it on top), bushy eyebrows, and the musculature and frame of someone more than a dozen years younger.

With most of my patients, I ask a lot of questions about them. It makes them more comfortable, distracts them from the pain, and gives me an insight into their lives outside of physical therapy. That helps me to get a good idea of either how they are contributing to their injuries or how well they are doing the exercises I assign them to do at home.

But not Hammy. Hammy never seems interested in talking about himself—he always wants to hear about me, and he can somehow always get me to share. So he knows much more about me than any other of my other patients do. But with Hammy, I'm surprisingly okay with that.

What I do know about him is that he was rather adventurous in his younger years and has a lot of old injuries

from extreme sports. Things like sky diving, snowmobiling, parkour, motorcycle racing, race car driving, rappelling, parasailing. You name it, he's done it, and he has the injuries to prove it. Today, we are working on an old shoulder injury.

I have him remove his shirt, and then I go to work, using the ultrasound to send deep heat into the tissue. He's had ultrasound therapy on plenty of other body parts, so, not needing any kind of explanation from me, he goes straight to the questions.

“So, how are things going with your ‘mystery man’?”

(For the record, I am not the one who told Hammy that I have a mystery man. It's just evidence of how connected Hammy is with the people of this small town. And how much they like “sharing good news” about each other.)

“I don't know,” I say honestly as I squirt some of the warmed gel on his shoulder before I start moving it around with the wand. “I kind of freaked out while he was at my apartment last night.”

“That doesn't sound good.”

“The thing is, I really like him, and I think we have a lot of chemistry. And I'm pretty sure he really likes me, too. But it always feels like one of us is pulling away. I know why I am, and I'm sure he has a good reason as to why he is, too. But I'm worried that I left him last night with the impression that I'm not really interested in him. But I am.”

Hammy nods for a minute, thinking, while I focus on moving the ultrasound wand along the area with the worst of his injuries. That's the thing about Hammy. He listens intently and doesn't just spout off the first thing that comes into his mind. He considers things first.

“Maybe we should talk about why you are pulling back.”

“Were you a psychologist in your past life?”

“Something like that.”

I don't know what he did for a living while he was off getting all these injuries, but the amused smile I see on his face

tells me it wasn't exactly psychology. I chuckle. "Do we have to talk about it?"

"Not at all," Hammy says in a jovial voice. "You are totally free to just keep pulling back when you're around him. I'm not going to force you to do anything."

I take a deep breath. He's right, and I know it. "Okay, um, let me think how I can make this story short. I dated a guy, Dan, for two years. Everything was mostly great, and I was hearing wedding bells in our future. Kids, too. The only relationship flag I noticed at the time was that he didn't like going anywhere public. He told me it was because he didn't care about others—he only cared about me and wanted to get as much alone time with me as possible.

"And when we did go out and I tried to get a picture of us, he never wanted to be in it, and he especially didn't want me posting a picture of the two of us on social media. There's a lot to the story, but the short of it is that I found out two years into our relationship that I was his 'side chick.' He'd been engaged to someone else nearly the entire time, and they were getting married four weeks after he and I broke up."

"Ouch," Hammy says as he shifts his shoulder a bit so I can better get at his supraspinatus tendon. He knows the drill so well.

"Yeah. He had been waving a black flag—the worst flag of them all—the whole time and I hadn't even realized it. It wasn't an easy thing to get over." *You still haven't gotten over it*, a voice in my head says.

I didn't ask for your opinion, I say back to the voice. Because really, I know this and don't need to be reminded.

"And this man I've been going on dates with doesn't seem to like me taking pictures of us or posting on social media, either."

"A lot of people don't, and their reasons aren't all because they're cheating."

"I know. And when I freaked out about that a couple of days ago when I was with him, I told myself that I don't need

to freak out because he isn't Dan, and I need to stop acting like he is and stop assuming that the outcome is going to be the same."

"That's some solid advice. I give it five stars."

"And then after he left last night, it hit me that I am acting as if *I* am the same person I was when I was with Dan, and I'm not. So the outcome isn't going to be the same because of that, either."

"Another piece of solid advice. I'll give you another five stars for that."

I tell him thanks and have him shift to his side so I can go around the backside of his shoulder. We are both quiet for a couple of minutes as I work before he says, "You're still nervous." It wasn't a question, just a statement.

"I am. Because how do I know that he's not like Dan? I have no evidence. I mean I hope I've learned enough by going through it not to pick a guy who has the same issues, but people do that all the time." I turn off the ultrasound, wipe the gel off the wand, then wipe it off his shoulder.

Hammy rolls and then sits with his legs off the side of the padded table, and I start moving his arm to stretch the different muscles in his shoulder.

"I have a plan," he announces triumphantly. And I grin because he never has a plan from the start— not until he asks more questions and really thinks about it. Then he tells me something brilliant. "Go visit him at his work. He came here to let you know he likes you and to ask you on your first date, right? So it's appropriate to do the same."

(This is also information that I haven't told Hammy directly. How it all gets around so quickly is beyond me.)

"Are you sure?" Because as much as I trust Hammy, I don't know about this plan.

He nods. "Don't let him know you're coming, though. Just show up and surprise him. Co-workers talk. They know about each other's significant others— their spouses or girlfriends or boyfriends. So if you are his 'side chick,' as you say, you'll

know because he won't want you there meeting those coworkers. He'll be afraid they'll say something to blow his cover. He'll try to shoo you on out, or he'll seem happy to see you but then act around his coworkers as if you haven't been dating."

I nod, getting more and more on board with this plan as he talks.

"And if he *is* happy to see you and is touched that you showed up and doesn't try to hide anything, then you'll know you're the only one."

"Hammy, you are brilliant!"

"Isn't that what I've been telling you all along?"

My mind races through everything. I always come in at six-thirty a.m. on Thursdays so I can help patients who need to come in before their work day starts, so today is the one day of the week I get off early. It's perfect. Jace gave me food from his favorite restaurant on our picnic— maybe I could get him a treat from my favorite restaurant as an excuse to show up.

"Okay," I say as I finish up with his stretching, "I'm going to do that after I get off today."

"Excellent. And, hey, if things go well, you should invite him to our Outside the Bubble meeting tomorrow at Beat on the Street. I'm an excellent judge of character, so if I can meet him, I'll have more opinions for you."

"I would love to hear those opinions. I've already invited him, so he'll be there unless things go poorly this afternoon."

He nods. "When you go to his work today, good luck, have fun, and don't die."

I laugh. "I'll do my best."



For a while, I think my phone's GPS is leading me to the middle of nowhere because I've been driving past farmlands and fields full of overgrown trees and weeds for a while. But I

finally see the *Lancaster Business Solutions* sign. “Thank you,” I say to my phone. Not that she is listening, but gratitude matters, and I’m grateful I’m not literally lost in the weeds.

This building wasn’t easy to find, and neither was the address for it. I remembered Jace saying the name of his family business, and their website wasn’t too difficult to find. But as professional and beautiful as their site is, it was extremely difficult to find anything useful in the menus.

I eventually gave up trying to find their address on their site and called Janae, a woman who comes to my Outside the Bubble club activities. She works with property records in the county and got the address from her. I should tell Jace that if their business isn’t getting as much business as they’d like, their website is to blame.

When I turn off the asphalt and gravel road, I’m facing a gorgeous building at the end of a very long tree and flower-lined cobblestone drive. The building itself is a mansion. I am marveling at it so much that I pull right up to the gate blocking the drive before it hits me that it’s strange that there’s a gate.

To a business? Really? Are they trying to make things as difficult for customers as possible?

A guard in a uniform steps up to my car and I unroll my window. He looks imposing. Like he could take out a room full of bad guys using only well-thrown punches and some nice leg sweeps and not even break a sweat. And he’s guarding a family business of tech geeks.

“Hello, miss. Do you have an appointment?”

“Oh, no. I, um, hoped I wouldn’t need one.” I gesture to the box of cream-filled, chocolate-frosted éclairs in the passenger’s seat. “I am just visiting someone who works here. Jace Lancaster?” His name comes out as a question, and I think the question I’m really asking is “Do you know him? I’m hoping that’s all you need to let me through because I’ve got nothing else. I’m not even good at flirting my way into things.”

“Can I see your driver’s license, please?”

“Of course.” I fumble with my purse and hand him my I.D. “I swear that’s me. The air conditioner in my car had just gone out, so I drove to the DMV that day with my windows down, so my hair was a little crazy. And then the woman taking the picture said something at the same time and I didn’t hear, so I said, ‘What?’ That’s why my face is making that weird expression.”

Before I’m even done rambling but not before my face starts burning from the embarrassment of my inability to stop rambling, he has my license scanned with the device in his hand and he’s handing it back. “Just drive ahead and park in one of the spots right in front of the building, Miss MacNeil. You’ll see the front door from there.”

I nod and raise my window as the gate opens.

Okay, these grounds are gorgeous. If I was an employee, I would talk them into letting me take a laptop out onto the grass to work. But who am I kidding? With my knowledge of computers and security and running businesses, I’m sure I’d be much more of a business problem than a business solution.

There are five parking spots in front of the business and all of them are empty. I pull into the one closest to the door, grab my box of éclairs, and get out of the car. I head up the stairs and raise a hand to knock on the front door, then pull my hand back and remind myself that this isn’t a mansion— it’s a business. Pushing the door open still feels wrong, though.

The lobby is just as fancy as everything else. It’s big, with marble and mahogany everywhere. As open as the space feels, it’s very much closed off from the rest of the business. A business that isn’t so much giving off “business solutions” vibes as it is “secret lair” vibes.

But what do I know about “business solutions” companies? I didn’t even know it was a thing before Jace said he works at one. Actually, I’m still not sure I know what they do. It all feels kind of vague. Maybe this type of lobby is normal.

There’s exactly one person in the room— a middle-aged woman with light brown hair pulled into a low bun, highly

arched eyebrows, a slim nose, and a severe expression that is making me question the wisdom in showing up here unannounced.

She's sitting behind a desk— no, I don't think it can be called that because it's huge and looks like it was built in place. A counter, maybe? The front of the monstrosity reads Lancaster Business Solutions, and a name card sitting on the desk reads Ms. Hinshaw.

“Can I help you?” Ms. Hinshaw asks in a pinched voice.

I summon all my confidence. “Yes. I am here to see Jace Lancaster. Is he available?”

“One moment, please.” She picks up a phone, presses a button, and then says, “Jace Lancaster? A woman is here to see you.” Then she sets the phone back down and says, “It'll be just a moment if you'd like to wait over there.”

I turn to see a couple of armchairs tucked in the corner. I won't be out of Miss Severe's field of vision, but maybe her gaze won't feel so intense from further away.

Nope— it feels just as intense. Hammy's advice this morning of “Good luck, have fun, don't die” had sounded like overkill, but now it's sounding like exactly the kind of well-wishes I need just to get past this lobby.

CHAPTER 19

BUSINESS AS UNUSUAL

JACE

I'm with Gianna in Sub-level One as Abraham is finishing up with her disguise. He has glued some facial pieces to her that have completely changed her appearance and is just now finishing up the makeup. She looks younger— maybe twenty-six years old instead of her actual thirty-two. With the facial pieces and the blond wig covering her dark hair, I barely recognize my fellow agent.

It's been a very intense day of tracking down leads, but we've managed to uncover some details about the gala on Saturday. Specifically, a player who plans to be there— Abineri. He works for an organization that has been on our radar for quite some time now, and if he's going to be there, well, that means things have heated up. Especially because we don't think he is tied to the buyer who was the intended target of the brush pass that Mackenzie accidentally intercepted, which means he is a second buyer. And we really don't want a second buyer there.

So, Gianna is heading into Abineri's New York base looking like a woman high up in the organization to get some information about his plans. It's a risky op. I'm going in as her backup, so I've asked the FBI to take over watching Mackenzie tonight.

We run through the mission again as Hammy glances between the picture of the woman on his computer screen and Gianna, trying to get her eyebrows just right.

“So, fingerprint scanner first,” I say, and Gianna moves the fingers on her hand as if testing the fastness of the fake

fingerprints she's wearing. "While it's scanning, keep your words to the guard simple."

"How's Adrianna?" Gianna clears her throat and then says with a slightly different cadence, "How's Adrianna?"

I nod. "Good. That sounds just like her. And then once you get past security, it's three lefts and a right to get to the records room."

"I think I've got it," Gianna says in her normal voice.

"I think you do, too," Abraham says. He finishes up her eyebrows with a flourish. "And you look just like her, too." He hands her a mirror and she studies herself, angling her face from side to side.

I turn when I hear the voice of the director, my mom, as she's walking down the aisle toward us, talking to someone in tech. She says something to him and he turns off in another direction while my mom heads toward us. She stops and takes a good look at Gianna. "Excellent work, Abraham. If I didn't know any better, I would think this is Mia Cardell right here in front of me."

The man blushes. "Thank you, ma'am. We just finished."

"Perfect," my mom says as both Gianna and I stand. "Just in time for a last-minute briefing before you two head off."

"Have a good mission," Abraham says. "Good luck, have fun, and don't die!"

Gianna nods. "Thank you."

We head toward the elevator with the director. As we walk, she says to Gianna, "I've been meaning to ask you about your boyfriend. Last we talked, you were trying to decide if you wanted to read him in on your actual job. What did you decide?"

My ears perk up. I didn't know that a part of me had contemplated the possibility of one day telling Mackenzie who I am until I realize how much I want to hear this answer.

"I still think I may have been wrong about never telling Ryan that I'm an intelligence operative. The secrecy probably

contributed more to our divorce than I've been willing to admit. And I really want this relationship with Luke to be completely honest.

"I thought a lot about what you told me about how telling a romantic partner can really take a load off *my* shoulders because then I no longer have to feel the burden of carrying around secrets, but how it can take that burden and shift it to *his* shoulders. And how much it can make him worry every time I go on a mission."

My mom nods. I find myself nodding, too.

"But the part that really made me pause is what you said about the weight of truth. That he might not be ready to hear it and that I might not be ready to tell it. And that there has to be a lot of trust in the relationship to risk that."

I know all of this somewhere in my core. But I've never thought of it before in the context of another actual person. I find myself filing it away for future use and wondering what decision I would make if I were in Gianna's shoes.

"I held off even submitting the papers to vet him because I wasn't sure our relationship was at the right point... And then we broke up a few days ago. Now I'm very glad I never told him."

The words feel like a punch to my gut.

My mom puts an arm around Gianna's shoulders and gives her a quick squeeze. "I am sorry to hear that. It sounds like your instincts were spot-on about feeling that something wasn't right."

The doors to the elevator are about to shut when Ledger calls out "Hold the doors!" as he races toward us.

He looks a little winded as he steps on, but more than that, he looks angry. And there is one thing I can always count on to make him angry like that. "Let me guess," I say. "Zoe Steele also showed up for the mission you went on today."

Ledger lets out a low growl.

"Oh, and she bested you."

“Now I have to add another tally under her name on the board.” I can tell by the way the muscles on his crossed arms are flexing and his nostrils are flaring that he’s pretty fueled up about it. Although I would’ve known that even without the tells— he’s never been okay with not winning.

“Second time this month, huh?” I ask.

“I’m starting to wonder if Langley is purposely sending her on missions they think I’m going to be on just to mess with me.”

“Well,” the director says, “you’re both good at the same things, so it makes sense she’d get assigned to the same types of missions as you.”

Ledger spins to face her. “Are you saying that Zoe and I are alike?”

My mom can usually get away with saying anything to Ledger, but I think that answering yes to that question will show that limit. It’s also the reason why I don’t say the teasing comment I want to, which is that maybe Langley is trying to play matchmaker with him and Zoe. But that remark will likely get me punched. And if Zoe was around, I’m guessing the comment would earn me a punch from her, too.

Instead of pushing it, my mom holds up her hands. “I would never say that.”

But then she gives me and Gianna a knowing look when Ledger turns back to stare at the elevator door.

My phone buzzes in my pocket and I pull it out at the same time my mom, Ledger, and Gianna pull out theirs as the elevator doors open. It’s a security alert that shows an image of Mackenzie’s driver’s license with the words *Mackenzie MacNeil here to see Jace Lancaster*. I haven’t fully taken it in when the lights start flashing red and a voice over the intercom sounds, “Code Fourteen. Code Fourteen. Code Fourteen.”

Mackenzie is *here*?

Adrenaline courses through my body and the bodies of every single person at the CSA.

Our company website is meant to be frustrating enough to ward away anyone who might actually be looking for a business solutions company. It appears professional, as if we are a very legitimate business that has probably been around for a long time, but if a company were to base our ability to help with their struggles based on the website alone... Well, let's just say that if our cover business were a business, it would fail. If someone actually wades through the site enough to find the *Contact Us* form, it returns an automatic message to them saying that we aren't open to new clients at this time.

I'm actually rather impressed that Mackenzie made it here.

I glance at the director. "Should I meet her in the lobby and tell her I'm too busy to talk?"

She shakes her head. "No. She must have suspicions, and we need to put those to rest. Invite her in."

We enter the main floor just as the big agency name and logo that is right above the main screens at the front of the room pulls back into the wall, the *Lancaster Business Solutions* name and logo lowering from the ceiling to take its place. A flurry of activity fills the area.

I rush over to my desk as "Desktops lowering in fifteen... fourteen..." sounds from the speakers. There is often sensitive information on each of our desks, so the desktops, which are set in the frame of the desk, lower into themselves during a Code 14. I set my water bottle and coffee mug on my chair since they're both over two inches high.

Then, along with everyone else, I put my mouse and mouse pad on top of my keyboard and pick it up. Luckily, our monitors are attached to the backs of the desk. We all hold them as our desktops sink two inches and an empty desktop rolls across in its place, and then we set our keyboards and mice back down.

I open my bottom desk drawer, grab out a nondescript notepad and pen and a family picture, and then put them on my now-empty desk, along with my water bottle and mug.

Ledger goes to the whiteboard on the side wall, angrily puts a tally mark under Zoe's name, then takes the whole thing off the wall and turns it around to the side that shows our cover company's business motto, "Your secrets are safe with us," and rehangs it.

All of us race through the room, looking for anything suspicious, as the clear glass fronts of the sound-proof conference rooms at the back darken enough that if there is anyone inside, they can no longer be seen. A line of framed photos along the east wall shows each of our directors since the Clandestine Services Agency was formed thirty-one years ago. All but the last two— my mother and my father— are set back in the wall enough that a false section of the wall can slide down, covering them. My parents' pictures stay since our current cover is the business of the Lancaster family and they are the founders.

We have maybe seconds left. All of the computer monitors and the four big screens at the front of the room switch from showing information about threat actors, informants, businesses, and individuals under surveillance, and current missions to a mix of business goals, projections, graphs, charts, spreadsheets, and boring screens that look like they are deep into security software menus.

"Jace Lancaster?" The voice of Ms. Hinshaw from the front desk sounds over the loudspeaker for all of us to hear. "A woman is here to see you."

I grab my suit coat from the back of my chair and put it on, buttoning it and smoothing the lapels as I take a slow, deep breath to dissipate the adrenaline and slow my heart rate. Then I head to the short hall at the back of the room leading to the front lobby door that is so rarely used that most of us forget it's even there.

As soon as I open the door, I spot Mackenzie sitting on a chair in the lobby, looking intimidated by the space, which, honestly, was by design. I smile big. Not just to make her feel more comfortable, but because I'm genuinely happy to see her in the middle of such an intense and stressful day. "Mackenzie.

I can't even tell you how good it is to see you today. And so unexpected."

"I get off earlier on Thursdays, and well, I was thinking about you, so I thought I'd pop in and say hello."

I gesture to the general area behind me. "Would you like to come in?"

She's holding a box in one hand, but I take her other hand and lead her back toward the door I came in through. Ms. Hinshaw has the sour look on her face that she's supposed to be wearing, but as we pass, Mackenzie isn't looking in her direction, so she gives me a wink that tells me she's been craving a little excitement at the front desk.

I lead Mackenzie through the equipment in the hall just beyond the doorway that I'm sure looks like it's a metal detector to Mackenzie but really is a device that scans for weapons, chemical agents, listening devices, trackers, and any other electrical, chemical, or otherwise dangerous substances. Mackenzie looks up at it as we walk through and says, "Wow. I did not expect there to be such intense security here."

"I told you we do cyber security, right?"

"Yes, but for other businesses."

"We host a lot of other companies' sensitive servers here, and they have to stay secure."

We round the end of the hall to the main area, and Mackenzie's eyes widen. "There are more people here than I thought, too. A *lot* more."

I glance around. There are maybe thirty people on the floor right now, but quite often, that number is closer to forty. And that's just here in fieldwork. If you count the people in the back half of the building or in any of the five sub-levels, it's many times that number. I never really thought of it as being a lot. Especially when comparing it to other U.S. intelligence agencies like the CIA or NSA.

Of course, I never think of this place as our cover business, either.

I lead her toward the middle of the area and say, “This is my desk.” I figure it’s best to start off with the easiest thing. Then I motion to the next desk, where Charlie is grinning from ear to ear on the surface but anxious just beneath. I know she’s feeling the conflict between getting to meet someone she’s been tracking for the past several days and having Mackenzie see an area never meant for visitors. “And this is my sister, Charlotte.”

Charlie thrusts out a hand and shakes Mackenzie’s a little too enthusiastically. “Call me Charlie. It’s so nice to meet you! You are every bit as beautiful as Jace said you are. I figured he was exaggerating, but he wasn’t. I don’t know if you know this, but you are very pretty.”

Mackenzie’s cheeks pink, and I can tell by her smile that she’s flattered, even if Charlie can be a little... much sometimes.

I spot a black portfolio with the CSA logo sitting on a table along the wall. I make eye contact with Ledger, who is closest to it, and then look at the portfolio. He subtly sidles up to it and flips it to the other side. Thankfully, Mackenzie doesn’t notice.

Then I lead her toward the front, where my mom is waiting patiently in the spot where she normally briefs us on missions. “And this is our CEO and my mother, Evelyn.”

“Lovely to meet you,” my mom says as she reaches out and doesn’t exactly shake Mackenzie’s hand— she sandwiches Mackenzie’s hand gently between hers in a move I’ve seen her do hundreds of times when she wants someone to either feel more comfortable or to drop their guard. It’s as effective at a parent-teacher conference or in welcoming new neighbors as it is when meeting a diplomat at a foreign embassy or trying to get information from a scientist working for a rogue dictator.

My mother is an expert at making people see her as a gracious host and not at all suspect that she once dismantled a covert surveillance system using a wristwatch and a ballpoint pen while hanging from a curtain in a top-floor boardroom of a prestigious bank in Morocco.

“It’s lovely to meet you, too,” Mackenzie says. “This is such a beautiful building.”

“Thank you. It’s such a surprise to see you here. Jace didn’t tell me you were coming today.”

“Oh, I just thought I would stop by and surprise him with these.” She looks down at the box like she forgot she is holding it and hands it to me. “There’s a dozen éclairs in there if you’d like to share. I kind of didn’t picture this many people working here.”

She glances around the room again, not seeming entirely comfortable. Probably because all thirty people are mostly watching her since they can’t do any work right now. But they are moving around a bit and writing things in their notebooks and trying to pretend that they’re doing something.

I thank her and put the box on my desk.

Ledger is one of the ones moving, and he passes near us on his way to his desk. Mackenzie cocks her head and says, “You look familiar. Have we met before?”

Ledger’s eyes widen just a fraction— not enough that anyone who hasn’t taken the CSA’s *Advanced Body Language Analysis* course would notice. “Nope, I’m sure we haven’t.” He hurries to skirt away to his desk.

I smile and think, *That disguise you wore when you stole her purse wasn’t as good as you thought it was, was it?*

I continue my tour so Mackenzie isn’t focusing too much on Ledger. “This is the desk of my brother, Miles. He’s on site today at one of our client’s businesses. And this is Emerson, my brother just older than me. Emerson, this is Mackenzie.”

Emerson has somehow found a way to continue working, based on how focused he seems on whatever he is writing. But he does manage to look up, wave, and say, “Hi. It’s so nice to meet you in person.”

Mackenzie waves back and says, “You, too.”

We turn and nearly bump into Gianna. “Oh, and this is my coworker,” I nearly say “Gianna,” but she looks nothing at all

like Gianna right now, and since she's a field agent, I don't want to give her real name, anyway. I could say her cover name, but since she is a dead-ringer right now for Mia Cardell, I finish with, "Mia."

Mia/Gianna gives Mackenzie a hug. Then she says, "Oh, I'm so glad to meet you! I've heard so much about you."

I don't exactly go around the office talking about Mackenzie in a non-work capacity, because in this environment, that would be weird. One-on-one with another agent or a family member, sure. To the group, though? No. Even still, everyone in this room has technically "heard so much" about her. But Mackenzie doesn't know that, and hearing Gianna say it makes her beam.

I can't remember the last time that someone I was interested in showed up to surprise me at work. It had to have been in college when I worked as a tutor in the science lab. It's not actually convenient for anyone here to have her show up, but I am touched by it. And it's giving me a boost that I really needed to make it through a day like today.

As I show her around, I say things like, "This is where we have brand marketing meetings," except we call them mission briefings, and "Those guys over there do market analysis." They're analysts, all right. Just not the kind that look at the position of a certain company within their market. Unless that company is doing some very sketchy things, of course.

And I tell her things like, "The server room is downstairs. I would show it to you, but it's dark and cold and Emerson swears there are spiders hiding in the corners." That's mostly true—we do have a server room in sub-level three. It's right next to the advanced propulsion labs. But I'm not keeping her from it because of something as crazy as there being spiders in a clean room. It's because she would need a security clearance level of three or higher to even open the elevator doors.

It has only taken a few minutes to show her literally everything I can legally and ethically show her. I can't even show her the restrooms because of the face-detection software in the mirrors. As much as I would really love to have

Mackenzie stay for a while and just hang out, not only would that never actually work, but my internal clock is ticking down to the start of my mission with Gianna, and is telling me to wrap this up quickly.

So I say, “I am so glad that you came today. I wish I could have you stay and hang out here for longer, maybe even show you the grounds, which are pretty incredible. But I have a security briefing with a client on-site in just a bit. And they’re our top client, so there’s no way we can be late.”

Mackenzie doesn’t look upset at all. “That’s okay,” she says. “I didn’t expect you to drop everything after I show up without warning. I know you have to work.” I think she’s liked seeing where I work, even if it doesn’t look like it does when I’m actually working. But I also think her subconscious is telling her that something here isn’t quite right, and it’s making her itchy to leave.

“Let me walk you to your car.”

We head out of the building the same way she came in, and when we are outside, I open her car door for her. She gets in, starts her car, and immediately lowers the window as she’s pulling the door shut. I lean over, resting my crossed arms at the base of her window. “Thank you again for coming. This was a nice surprise.” A problematic surprise, for sure, but I have to admit that it is nice.

For as much as I came into this mission with the full intention of faking my interest in Mackenzie, the emotions I’m feeling are nothing but authentic, and I’d be the worst operative ever at analyzing motives and unmasking hidden agendas if I couldn’t admit that about myself.

“Are you still planning to come to my Outside the Bubble club event tomorrow?”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world.” And by that, I mean that I wouldn’t voluntarily miss it for the world. There are plenty of things in this business that could cause me to miss it. But I plan to do everything I can to keep that from happening. All my feelings and desires to be there aside, she is my mission.

Entirely unbidden, I find myself glancing at her lips, which makes me think about how much I desperately want to kiss her. But not here. Not when she's feeling uncomfortable from visiting my work. Not when I'm minutes away from wheels up on a mission. I tell her goodbye, and then watch her car as she heads down the long cobblestone drive back toward Moss at the gate.

I get back inside to what feels like a collective sigh from everyone as the place transforms back to the agency we all know and love. Ledger claps me on the shoulder. "That was a close one, bro."

I nod. It really was.

CHAPTER 20

SKY FALL SPECULATIONS

JACE

For the record, changing clothes in a moving helicopter isn't easy. But I can't exactly show up at Mackenzie's Outside the Bubble event wearing my full black infiltration gear when she said to dress casually. I stand and steady myself in the swaying aircraft so that I can zip up my jeans.

I pull on an olive-colored T-shirt. I don't usually get compliments on the shirt itself, but I get plenty of compliments on my eyes whenever I wear it. Then I run my hands through my hair and, lacking a mirror of any sort, I ask Ledger, "Do I look okay?" I shout the question to be heard over the roaring of the helicopter's engine and the thumping of the rotor blades. I raise an eyebrow in question and hold two thumbs up with a shrug because he probably still can't hear me with the open side of the copter.

Ledger glances up from where he's preparing the nylon rope I'm going to rappel down and holds a hand out, palm down, tipping it side-to-side in a "so-so" gesture. Knowing Ledger, I take it to mean that I look fine.

I step into my rappel seat, secure the safety belt, and test the ring, and then Ledger hands me the rope. I thread it through the rappel ring and he hooks it to the anchor point. Everything feels good on my end, so I put on my helmet. As we get to the drop-off point— an empty lot about a block from the library with plenty of trees for cover— I glance toward the ground so I know what kind of terrain I'll be dropping into. It's mostly packed dirt with a few grasses poking through.

As soon as Ledger gives me the thumbs up, I toss my deployment bag away from the helicopter. I make sure it reaches the ground in an open area, then maneuver into position with the balls of my feet on the skid, the rope in my brake hand at the small of my back, and my guide hand in position.

Then I push off the skid and out into the air as I drop toward the space in the middle of a ring of trees. I start the braking process about halfway to the ground and continue my descent until my feet are on dirt. Then I continue pulling the rope until it's free of my rappel ring and give Ledger a thumbs up.

He drops the rope down to me, and I quickly gather it up and put it in the deployment bag along with the rest of my equipment as the helicopter flies away.

I stash the bag in the crook of a tree with lots of foliage where it'll be hidden until I can grab it later tonight. Then I run my hands through my hair again, straighten my shirt, and start walking toward the library before remembering that I still have my earpiece in. I remove it and push it into my pocket. This is technically a mission since I'm here to protect Mackenzie and to be near if any adversaries poke their heads out of hiding. But I'm really here because I want to see Mackenzie, and I want to do that without Charlie in my ear.

Besides, Charlie was my handler on the mission last night that stretched into the middle of the night and then into today. She's in need of some time away and definitely in need of sleep.

Yesterday evening's mission didn't exactly go according to plan. Gianna managed to get the information on Abineri's plans all right, but that led Ledger and me to jump on an agency plane to Cuba, where we had to parachute onto some farmland outside Havana, ride motorbikes into the city, and then infiltrate an enemy *guarida* and sabotage their plans to acquire the Eradication project.

We landed back on US soil at the Baltimore airport 24 minutes ago. We cut it close enough that the only way I could

make it here on time was to helo-rappel in.

If nothing else, the busyness has kept me from being able to worry excessively about taking Mackenzie to the gala tomorrow. If things had been less busy, I might have told the director that I was not willing to put her in that kind of danger, even if it would help keep her out of danger in the long run. As it is, I'm just left with worries I can do nothing constructive about.

And, surprisingly, it has also left me with a bit of excitement for the gala. I've gone to plenty of events like it, and thinking about attending one with Mackenzie is bringing a smile to my face. So is this event tonight.

Mackenzie told me some of the activities this group has done in the past— laser tag, roller coasters, archery. I can handle any of those things, even as tired as I am, and I'm grateful to be heading into something easier after how my previous forty-eight hours have gone.

I walk down the same tree-lined and aging sidewalks I remember from my childhood, with the strip of grass between them and the cracked asphalt pavement of the road, and cross to the other side of the street toward the library. For as close as this town is to urban centers, it doesn't feel big. It's nice and quiet and full of unique shops and places to eat.

And a whole lot of historic buildings. When I was a kid, the library was in one of those historic buildings, and it was teeny. This library now, though, looks more like a school than a library and is easily ten times the size of the historic library and probably twice as big as a town this size needs.

As soon as I enter the library, I spot Mackenzie and a group of a dozen people talking quietly but excitedly not too far from the doors. I recognize Mackenzie's friend Livi but no one else. As soon as I near, a woman in her early twenties with blonde hair so light it's almost white, and who's wearing a sticker name tag that reads Sophia, asks me in her best *I'm trying to be quiet because I'm in the library but I'm also kind of pumped up* voice, "Did you see a helicopter before you came in? I swear it was *right here*."

And that's the trouble with rappelling into places. The noise. "Yeah," I say, "I saw it— it was flying pretty low. I wonder where it was going."

A woman with honey brown hair in a bun and long nails with designs on them whose name, according to her name tag, is Eve says, "I'm going to text my friend, Randi, to see if there is any chatter about it on the police channels."

Great.

Then an older woman with wispy silvery hair and *Brenda* on her name tag shakes her head and says, "Just because you've got a fishing net doesn't mean you'll catch a mermaid." Her comment makes no sense, given the context, yet it somehow also makes perfect sense.

Through the group of whispering people, Mackenzie throws me a smile that tells me she's really glad I'm here and I can feel my smile in my ears. With as iffy as getting here seemed for a while, I'm extra glad I'm here, too.

Mackenzie gets everyone's attention by simply talking at a normal volume. We are in the lobby, not near the stacks, but still, her voice feels loud in this place. "Thank you all for coming. We have a couple of new people I'd like to introduce you to. First, we have Jace Lancaster. He's joining us from Cloakwood, but he grew up in Cipher Springs."

I may have gotten used to Mackenzie knowing my real name, but I'm suddenly very uncomfortable having everyone here know my name. Especially because one balding white-haired older gentleman is looking at me like he knows me. I don't remember everyone from when I lived here as a kid, and I don't recognize him. Everyone claps, but since we are in the library, they mostly do the motion without making the sound, which makes it feel like I've joined a mime convention.

"And another couple of first-timers are Isabella and Becky."

If they are anything other than identical twins, then I'm impressed at their parents' ability to create a direct copy of a

previous child. Everyone does the mime clap again, and this time, I join them.

The rest of the group is a mix of people between the ages of about twenty-one and sixty-eight, by my guess.

Eve, the woman who texted her friend to listen to the police channel, says, “Pardon the interruption, but Sally Waters says someone dropped down out of the helicopter like we are being invaded. But my husband says he heard that *The Bachelor* is filming nearby this season and that it was just them doing some kind of publicity stunt.”

How many people did she text? I shouldn’t have rappelled down so close to people. I’ve been away from living here just long enough to forget how small towns work.

Eve continues. “Ralph Thompson thinks it’s Amazon testing out a new delivery method. Oh, and the official word from Della in Dispatch is that it’s probably a weatherman from a local station.”

A man in his twenties— German, his name tag reads— says, “I’m betting it was just some kids making a TikTok video. It wouldn’t surprise me if it was one of the Barton teens.”

I rub my forehead. *Note to self: Don’t rappel into a small town ever again.*

Over the sound of everyone giving their opinions on the reason, Mackenzie says she’s going to call the Bartons to see if they are still coming, and then she steps out.

The gentleman in his sixties comes over to me, so he must really think he knows me. I try to not let myself go on high alert. He stops beside me and joins me looking in the direction of the door that Mackenzie just left through. “So, you’re Mackenzie’s ‘mystery man,’ huh?”

Wait. I recognize that voice. My eyebrows draw together and I squint as I study the man. It takes a moment, but it’s the eyes that end up giving him away. I look around to see if anyone is within hearing distance of us. They aren’t. In a quiet voice, I say, “Abraham? Is that seriously you?”

Abraham smiles.

“Wow. Great disguise.” The man looks a good ten years older. And there is very little about him that tipped me off that it was him. He really is good at his job.

“Thank you. This is my around-town disguise. I’m Hammy here, by the way.” He nods toward the door. “So, you and Mackenzie?”

I try to tamp down the heat rising to my face. I’ve been trained to withstand interrogation. I can keep myself from appearing... what is this I’m feeling? Rattled? Embarrassed that I let myself fall for someone I’m supposed to be shadowing? I’m not sure. Whatever it is, I wipe it clean off my face.

“She’s just your mark, huh? An asset? What is she to you?” For talking in a near whisper, he sure sounds accusatory.

“She’s not just my asset. I mean, yes, she *is* my asset, even though she doesn’t know it. But she’s not *only* that.” I don’t want to explain more, so I add, “She’s the one who took the accidental brush pass of the Eradication Project key.”

“Ahh. I see.”

“Why are you here? What is she to you?”

“I came for the event, just like I have been for months— as a normal person, not as an operative. Mackenzie has been doing my physical therapy for just as long. Since *long before she became your asset*,” he says a little defensively. He pauses a moment, then asks, “Do you like her?”

“I do.” I’m not sure why I admit it to him.

Abraham narrows his eyes. “I do, too. We *all* do. I don’t know where the mission is going to take this, but you better not hurt her, or you’ll have all of us to answer to.”

“Noted.”

Then Abraham’s eyes go wide and he smacks his hand on his forehead. “Oh. Oh! I can’t believe I did that. I was the cause of yesterday’s Code Fourteen! I didn’t know who her

‘mystery man’ was, and I suggested that she drop in at his work.”

“*You* did that?”

“Hey, in my defense, it’s not like I’m on the floor anymore and get filled in on those kinds of details. ‘Need to know’ and all that.”

I’m shooting Abraham a look when Mackenzie walks back through the door and says, “Okay, Janae and Marshall are going to be a little late, so they’ll meet us there. Let’s head out.”

“I hope you have fun tonight,” Abraham says. “It’s good to get Outside the Bubble now and then.”

Like I don’t already do that for a living.

Abraham slips away to talk to the sisters who look alike, and Mackenzie walks over to me with a big smile on her face. “I’m glad you came.”

“I am, too,” I say, and mean every word.

We walk as a group down the sidewalk, and I hear what I can only guess is a band doing a sound check, and it’s close. I’m guessing we are headed toward the sound, but as much as I try to think of things in that direction and within walking distance, I come up empty. So I ask Mackenzie where we are headed.

“To Beat on the Street. They close off a big section of Main Street, and we have an outdoor concert right smack in the middle of the road.”

It isn’t an event that was around when I lived here, so it must’ve started in the past few years. It’ll be nice to sit and enjoy a concert after the last two days I’ve had. Although I can’t really see it as a big stretch out of a comfort zone bubble.

Main Street is only a couple of blocks from the library, and as soon as we round the corner and buildings are no longer blocking us, the stage is in view and so are all the people gathered to watch. They really did close the entire street down, and it is currently filled from sidewalk to sidewalk with a few

hundred people, each seated on a camp chair. Strings of lights stretch overhead from the tops of buildings on one side of the street to the other. A few local vendors have snack, soda, and treat shops set up under portable awnings along the sides and at the back of the crowd.

“Oh,” I say. “We were supposed to bring our own chairs.” My mind starts running through how far it is from here to my mom’s house, Blake’s house, and Charlie’s house, adding up how many chairs each of them might have, and guessing how quickly I could borrow them.

But Mackenzie says, “We aren’t going to need chairs.” My brain hasn’t fully processed her words before she adds, “We are going to be right up front, dancing to the music.”

CHAPTER 21

**DANCING LIKE NOBODY IS
WATCHING WHEN
EVERYONE IS**

JACE

As if on cue, the male lead singer who is standing on the portable stage that is nearly as wide as the street, complete with a back and lighting, starts introducing their cover band. Then he says that they'd like to invite everyone to get up and dance to their music.

“Why...why...why are we going to be dancing?” I ask, sounding like I'm eleven and I was just asked to... well, get up and dance in front of my class.

It's not that I can't dance. I've been trained in social dances for many different cultures. I can hold my own on a ballroom floor. But dancing at something like this? Dancing in the street calls for moves I don't have. Not only do I not have the moves, but I don't even know what they are. “Why don't we just sit and watch?”

Brenda is apparently close, and she starts shaking her hips and says, “Because, if you're going to be up early, you might as well kiss the sun!”

The band is playing *Funky Town*, and there are lots of young kids in the street in the space between the stage and the first row of chairs who are already moving their bodies to the music. A few people from our group are entering the fray and dancing right along with them.

Then Mackenzie gives me her answer. “Because that's not going to get any of us out of our comfort zones.” She motions to some of the kids dancing with all they've got, really feeling the music. “Look at how much fun they are having! Now

notice how much emotion they are showing on their faces and in every move they make. As adults, we tend to be small with our emotions. We don't let ourselves really experience big emotions very often. We hold back. Bottle things in. It's good for the soul to let yourself dance big because it helps your body remember that it can experience big things."

That... is beautiful. And something I very much don't want to do right now.

Livi comes over, grabs my hand and Mackenzie's hand, and says, "Come on. Dance like no one is watching."

My feet are going nowhere. "But they *are* watching." Everyone who did actually bring chairs is sitting in them, watching not only the band but everyone who is dancing. So much of my job requires me to not be noticed. Not being noticed saves lives and makes missions successful. Mackenzie is asking me to bring a truckload of attention to myself.

Yet, I still somehow find myself dragged to the space in front of the stage, moving to the music. Even though I've had entire courses on resisting skilled persuasion tactics. Even though I was the one who once talked a Syrian diplomat into wearing a clown costume in order to smuggle sensitive documents.

I'm the one who talks people into doing things, not the other way around.

As the band plays *Party in the U.S.A.*, I am so uncomfortable that I have flashbacks to middle school dances. I feel so out of place and so uncoordinated. Mackenzie, on the other hand, seems so comfortable with it all. Or if she isn't, she's still all in. Me? I'm taking back those feelings of being glad I came.

By the time they start playing *Footloose*, I am feeling anything but footloose. More like foot rigid. But at least I'm a slight bit less rigid.

Brenda makes her way toward me, shaking those hips and raising her arms, and says, "Don't expect milk if you ain't feeding the cow!"

I get it, Brenda. I really do.

By the time the band plays *Shake It Off*, I'm actually managing to shake off some of my resistance. I still look and feel like a fool, but I care slightly less that I do. I can actually look outside of myself a bit now and see Abraham— Hammy, I correct myself mentally— really living it up as he dances. Everyone else, too. They all, Mackenzie included, look like they are experiencing big emotions and are really feeling the music with their whole bodies.

Come on, Jace. You BASE jumped off the Makkah Royal Clock Tower in Saudi Arabia wearing a wingsuit; you can do this.

I take a deep breath, try to shake off my fear about appearances and having eyes on me, give Mackenzie a big smile— which she returns with the force of the sun— and let myself feel the music deep in my bones.

When they start to play *I Love Rock and Roll*, I'm dancing like people are definitely watching but I am slightly okay with it. Mackenzie is looking at me like she's never been so proud, and that gets me in the chest like nothing else. I grab her hand and swing her around. There's even a part where we're both jumping in the air together while pumping our fists. We are living it up like this is what we do on the weekends.

So it shouldn't surprise me that when the band starts playing the opening notes to *Shut up and Dance with Me* and the lead female vocalist says, "For this next song, we need a couple to come up on stage and dance," she picks Mackenzie and me.

But not being surprised and being willing are two different things. I have made it through exactly one song of being okay with really feeling the music and moving to it in whatever way hits me. That amount of experience does not make me okay with going up on stage to dance with Mackenzie where everyone can see us even more easily.

Mackenzie is looking at me with one eyebrow raised, silently asking if I'm willing, and behind the look, I can tell

how much it means to her. She says, “It’s all about getting out of our comfort zones, right?”

And Abraham is looking at me with an “I know you can do this” look in his eyes. At least that’s what I think the look is saying. The eyebrows he’s wearing are extremely bushy, so it’s hard to tell.

Maybe it’s the lack of sleep combined with too much physical exertion. Whatever it is, I meet Mackenzie’s eyes. “Let’s do it.”

Mackenzie grabs my hand, and we both head up the stairs at the side of the stage and join the band as the audience claps. It’s a decently sized stage, so there’s room for us. The band switches from repeating the opening notes to getting into the song, and the two of us get into it, too. It isn’t exactly a ballroom-type song, and with how everyone else is dancing in front of the stage, it wouldn’t fit, anyway. So I just let myself feel the music.

There are parts where we just dance, facing each other, doing our own thing. Parts where we mimic each other’s moves. Parts where it feels like we are acting out the words to the song, which totally works because I feel like the lyrics of this song are perfectly me and Mackenzie here tonight. And parts where we really play off each other, like we had planned this ahead of time. These are my favorite parts. Honestly, I never knew I was capable of this.

The crowd is clapping along to the music. The longer we are on stage, the more my heart thrums in my chest along with a radiating heat, and I am fueled with adrenaline. I’m exhilarated in a way I haven’t experienced outside of agency work in... possibly ever.

As we dance, it washes away all the sneaking, chasing, and being chased from the last couple of days and leaves me... happy. But not the small kind of happy— it’s the big kind of emotion that Mackenzie promised would be easier to experience while dancing big. She was right.

The last notes come to a crescendo, and then we stop dancing. Mackenzie and I are looking at each other with grins

on our faces, breathing hard and fast. I grab hold of her hand and hold both of ours up in the air, and then we take a bow before exiting the stage.

Everyone in Mackenzie's club immediately surrounds us and tells us we did a good job. One of the probable twins hands us each a water bottle, which we gratefully guzzle. As soon as Mackenzie takes a breath from downing water, she says, "Did anyone get pictures of us up there?"

"I did!" Eve says. "I'll send them to you right now."

The band starts to play *Man! I Feel like a Woman!* and a line dance is forming, so it's not long before they all leave to join it and it's back to just me and Mackenzie.

I can't stop looking at Mackenzie's eyes and marveling at how good she is at getting people to live their lives more fully. At this moment, mine feels fuller than ever.

I nod my head toward the area in front of the stage. "Do you want to dance more?" The sun has set, and the glow from the strands of lights crisscrossing overhead from one side of the street to the other is just starting to be evident.

She shakes her head slightly, her eyes never leaving mine. Until they move from my eyes long enough to glance at my lips. Her hair is wild from dancing, a few strands are stuck in curls against her neck, her cheeks are flushed, and I've never wanted to kiss a woman more than I do at this moment.

I grab her hand in mine and lead her back behind the stage, where we are out of view of everyone except any cars that drive by on the cross street. But I'm pretty sure everyone in town is currently at Beat in the Street— on the other side of this portable wall— because the road is empty.

Every nerve ending in my body feels like it's on high alert, and I don't think it is from the dancing or being up on stage. It's from being with Mackenzie. Seeing her in her element, seeing her passion for helping other people to be more passionate. Just a short time ago at the library, I never would've guessed that she could work this kind of magic on me.

But she very much has.

I cup a hand at the base of her head, my fingers twining in the hair at her neck. I put my other hand on the small of her back to pull her closer, but before I do, she closes the gap between us and presses her lips against mine.

Her lips are so soft, yet she's kissing me with an urgency that tells me that she might still have some adrenaline coursing through her and that she needs and wants this every bit as much as I do. It isn't something I even knew I needed before meeting her. It feels like every bit of attraction that has been simmering between us is being channeled into this kiss. I slide my arm around her waist as she slides her hands up from my chest to rest just behind my neck, tickling my hair and sending a shiver down my spine.

The beat of the drums, the strumming of the guitars, the singing, and the sounds of the crowd fade away and it feels like Mackenzie and I are wrapped in our own little world, away from everything on the other side of the wall.

It's hard to tell if she's kissing me more or if I'm kissing her more, but I can tell that we both are feeling the need to be close. To feel connected to each other.

I don't know if the smell of strawberries is coming from Mackenzie or from the cotton candy booth further down the sidewalk, but it will forever be attached to this memory. So will the feel of her pressed against my chest, our racing heartbeats pounding out their own rhythm, her lips moving against mine, her hair tickling the back of my hand, and the way our breaths seem to be in sync.

And, oddly, a cover band singer belting out a song with some lyrics about a woman coloring her hair and feeling the way that she feels.

I could stand here forever, kissing Mackenzie, soaking in the exhilaration of this night, feeling connected to her in a way I don't remember ever experiencing before.

Eventually, though, she smiles against my lips and then pulls back just enough to say, "I knew it was a good idea to

have you come today.”

“And I knew I didn’t want to miss it for the world.” Yep.
She has definitely worked her magic on me.

CHAPTER 22

**WAY BETTER THAN A
PUMPKIN**

MACKENZIE

This time, as I am driving along the road that feels like it's heading into Nowhere Land, at least I know I'm heading in the right direction. I glance down at my incredibly fabulous heels and smile. I never thought when I found these beauties a week ago that I'd have an occasion to wear them so soon. And with the kickin' magenta dress that Livi helped me to find, they look even more amazing.

It's been a long time since I last let a guy pick me up for a date instead of driving myself, but I would've been fine with Jace picking me up. I had pictured it happening more than once, actually. But he texted an hour ago to say that even though it's a Saturday, he had to go to work because of an urgent project and asked if I could meet him at Lancaster Business Solutions instead.

He also asked if it is okay if we travel to the gala with his brother Miles, which I'm excited about— I haven't met him yet.

After how glorious last night was, I'm pretty sure I'd do anything to see Jace today. Even endure looks of disapproval from the receptionist at his work. (Please tell me she doesn't come in for urgent projects on Saturdays.) After a single kiss from Jace, I'm completely hooked.

In my defense, it was a very long kiss. And unlike anything I have ever experienced in my life. It was the kind of kiss that they base entire movie scripts around. Write songs about. Nations rise and fall because of kisses like that. I'm an

addict. Like a raccoon who has discovered where the camper's stash of Oreos is.

I've never related to a raccoon more.

I already got my walk in today before both Livi and Maggie helped me to get my makeup and hair perfect. And to argue over what flags Jace might have— red or otherwise. I still haven't found one, personally. (Although Livi thinks maybe yellow— incompatibilities that we just haven't come across yet, and Maggie thinks maybe pink— that one or both of us are wearing rose-colored glasses. Neither have any corroborating evidence to back those theories, though.)

I pull up to the gate, which I now realize I'd guessed would just be open on a Saturday, but nope. It makes sense that it isn't because if they have data to protect, they can't have people sneaking in on the weekends to steal it. The same guard from last time, Moss, is there to greet me. I dutifully hand him my license before he even asks.

He doesn't scan it this time— he just inspects it, goes to the back of my car where I'm sure he's taking down my license plate number, then returns to my window and hands me my license. "Just head down the drive, and take the fork to the right that leads to the side of the building. Go into the first level of underground parking and park in space A-twelve. Mr. Lancaster will come down to greet you." I swear there's a twinkle in his eye when he adds, "Enjoy your evening."

I grin as I thank him, fully planning to. I hold back offering to show him my shoes, even though I really want to.

I travel down the long, curving cobblestone drive to the side of the building, and then I panic when I see a gate blocking the underground parking. Only for a small moment, though, because it opens on its own. A-12 is the third spot in and is near the elevator. I get out of my car, but I don't see Jace and I don't know where I'm supposed to go.

I only wait about five seconds before I hear the elevator, and I spin around to face it. As the doors open, I see Jace, and I nearly lose my ability to speak. He's wearing a black tux that is perfectly tailored to his strong shoulders and every lean

muscle. His shirt is a crisp white, his hair wavy and neat, and he is striking. He's standing with one hand in his pocket, looking calm, confident, and suave. Every hero in every spy movie has nothing on this man.

As he steps off the elevator and strides to me, he says, "Wow. You are radiant." He lifts both of my hands with his, holding them out like he's trying to take all of me in. Then I turn in a circle so he can see how the back of the dress dips low, framing my loose waves, and how it all skims along my curves until it flares at my hips.

"And look at my shoes!" As if I'm a shoe model, I put my foot out and turn it side to side as the light catches the metal vines on the heel. These shoes go with this dress like they were always meant to be together.

His eyes widen and his eyebrows rise as he takes them in. "Those might be the most incredible shoes I've ever seen." I can't tell if he's being genuine or not, but the fact that he is in tune with me enough to know that's exactly what I wanted to hear earns him bonus points either way.

Then I think, *Of course, he's being genuine because facts are facts. These are the most incredible shoes, period.*

He lifts my hand with his and brings it to his lips, leaving a soft kiss on the back of my hand that sends tingles all the way up. It is so sweet that it makes my heart melt. (And I mentally give him more bonus points because he didn't go for the lips and mess up my gloss before the gala.)

"Are you ready?"

I nod, but then he leads me to the elevator, not to his car. Maybe he is planning to take me on that tour he didn't have time to give me a couple of days ago? Instead of a button to call the elevator, as most have, Jace scans his badge, then steps up to let some kind of laser thing scan his eyeball before exhaling into something that I'm guessing from all my spy movie knowledge is some kind of DNA tester. Wow. They *really* take their security seriously here.

As we step onto the elevator, I get a little nervous. “Are you sure it’s okay if I go up with you?”

Jace nods as the doors close and he presses a button. “I got clearance for you. But it’s for the elevator and the roof only—so don’t step off until we get there.” He’s smiling, so I can’t tell if he’s serious or not. And I guess this means there’s not going to be a tour.

“Why are we going to the roof? Do you need to grab something before we go to your car?”

“We aren’t driving to the gala.”

The doors open just then, and we step onto the roof of the building where a freaking helicopter is waiting. Its engine is whirring and the blades are slowly turning, so I know it’s not just parked there— it’s waiting for us.

Another man wearing a tux is on the roof, leaning against a railing. He has the same strong jawline and nose as Jace, but his shoulders are a little more rounded and his hair is a bit longer and wavier. It has to be his brother.

We walk to him and Jace says, “I’d like you to meet my brother, Miles. Miles, this is Mackenzie MacNeil.”

“Mackenzie MacNeil,” the man says in a smooth voice. “My big brother hasn’t stopped talking about you. And he didn’t exaggerate— you are absolutely divine.”

I can’t help it— I blush.

He doesn’t stop there. As he’s walking around me to take all of me in, he says, “Well done on the dress. Not only does it fit you perfectly, but it accentuates all the right things.”

“Miles,” Jace says in a warning tone.

Miles turns to his brother. “I’m sorry. I’ve been in Khartoum with drunk Sudanese... *businessmen* for the past several days. I’m out of practice here— I’ve got to get back into the swing of things before I head into the gala.” Then he turns to me. “In all honesty, Mackenzie, you truly do look divine.”

“Thank you.” I glance around. “Are you not bringing a date?”

Miles shakes his head. “There will be plenty of single women there. I like to keep my options open.”

“I hope you find an excellent option,” I say, mostly because what else do you say to that?

“I’m sure I will.”

We head to the helicopter, and Jace holds my hand as I step up into it. There’s a bench seat at the back of the small cabin and a single seat facing it, its back against the cockpit. I take a seat on the bench and scoot over for Jace to sit beside me, and Miles takes the single seat.

Jace pulls the door shut and the pilot turns around, holds a thumb up, and says, “All set?”

Jace returns the thumbs up, and the blades start moving faster, the thumping sound getting louder and louder. I cannot believe that not only am I going to a black tie gala, but I’m going there in a freaking helicopter. The helicopter shifts forward just a bit as the landing gear lifts from the roof, then I’m pulled back and then down a bit as it lifts up into the air.

I switch from watching the pilot to looking out the window, so I can see the building where Jace works get smaller and smaller as we soar away from it. I’ve flown in planes plenty of times before, but never a helicopter, and not right at sunset. Everything is so much closer and feels... so much more real in a helicopter. I’m seeing actual roads and buildings I recognize pass below us, yet everything feels like it’s a toy version of the real thing. Especially since it’s all bathed in the light of the golden sunset. It’s incredible.

I turn back to Jace. “Where are we headed?” I have to shout the question because of the noise, but he hears me fine.

“Just outside of Philadelphia. We should be in the air for just under thirty minutes.”

I’ll get nearly thirty minutes to soak all of this in. I take my phone out of my handbag. “Do you mind if I take a picture of us and send it to Livi and Maggie?”

“Not at all,” Jace says, and then scoots in close to me and smiles as I put the camera in selfie mode. I shift a bit to get the windows and the landscape beyond them in the frame with us and snap the picture.

Then I open a text to both Maggie and Livi.

Mackenzie: When Jace texted earlier “My carriage awaits us,” he meant a FREAKING HELICOPTER! If you need me, I’ll be just outside of Philadelphia for the evening. I’m sure we’ll be back before it turns into a pumpkin, but I wouldn’t wait up.

I spend every minute of the flight either snuggled up to Jace or pushing my face against the window. Mostly snuggled up to Jace. What’s outside the window is pretty amazing, even in the dark, but the beautiful man in the tux next to me wins out most of the time.

But I do look out the window as we descend and get a good overhead view of the mansion where the gala is, and I’m captivated by the sprawling location. It’s huge and lit by hundreds of lights on the building and on the expansive grounds. The landscaping is all immaculately manicured and filled with beds of vibrant flowers, perfectly trimmed emerald lawns, trees with broad canopies or stately or graceful shapes, beautiful ponds that reflect all the lighting, and meandering cobbled pathways. The grounds look like Mother Nature went to beauty school, aced her finals, and this is her showpiece.

The helicopter pilot sets us down remarkably gently on a helipad on the roof of the mansion. I don’t know how he even found this place from the air because it’s getting dark and I doubt the pilot can just ask Siri or Alexa how to get somewhere by helicopter.

He shuts down the engines pretty quickly, which I’m grateful for. I’ve seen the movies, and I don’t think my hairstyle would make it through that kind of wind.

Miles gets out of the helicopter first, and then Jace steps down and holds a hand out to me. I duck just a bit while also

using one hand to hold up my dress enough that I won't step on it, then take Jace's hand and step out.

Jace is looking at me in a way that tells me I am adored, and it trips me up enough that I don't move an inch for fear that I'll actually trip. Then he reaches a hand up and slowly tucks a curl back into its spot, letting the backs of his knuckles skim my cheek just in front of my ear and down to my jaw on his way back. The lightheadedness tells me I haven't been breathing.

Then, like he's 007 or something standing in the light of the moon, Jace adjusts his cufflinks and buttons his jacket, and even though I'm breathing now, I'm still getting more light-headed. He runs his hands down the front of his jacket to straighten it, then asks, "Ready?"

I nod, and he entwines his fingers with mine and we walk with Miles toward the roof access door.

CHAPTER 23

WHEN CINDERELLA TANGOS

MACKENZIE

“So what is this gala for?” I ask as we walk. “I assume it isn’t just for people you work with, like a work party, or it would’ve been a lot closer to home. Or there would’ve been a lot more helicopters leaving.”

He chuckles. “Very true. It’s for...” He glances at Miles, like maybe it’s not easy to explain to someone not in their line of work, “people in our industry who it’s good to have contact with. There are a lot of people here who make our jobs not only possible but necessary.”

Miles smiles at the description, then nods. “People here tend to put focus on amassing the greatest number of assets possible with the least expenditure.”

I laugh, partly because of their vagueness and partly because it’s just funny. “Have you seen those posts on social media where people describe their job badly? You could use that same description for either a businessman or a criminal.”

Miles chuckles. “At places like this, sometimes it can be hard to tell the difference.”

Jace opens the door of the small building on the roof that leads to an even smaller lobby with access to an elevator and a flight of stairs, and then he presses the call button on the elevator. “Speaking of which, the reason our work sent Miles and me here is because there’s one contact in particular that we need to have a quick meeting with.”

The way he says “one contact” sounds like he’s proud of himself that there’s only one. The look on Miles’s face tells me

he is, too. Maybe they usually meet with so many contacts that they can't enjoy the gala and this time they held back.

As the elevator doors open and we step on, Jace says, "So I may need to leave you alone for a few minutes for that meeting. Is that okay?"

"Oh, yes, of course. This is a work thing and work things have to happen. I get it."

The elevator ride is quick, and the doors open to an expansive ballroom bathed in soft, warm light. Chandeliers cascade from the ornate ceiling, gold-trimmed white pillars rim the outer edge, and a few dozen people in tuxes and beautiful gowns dance, gather at the circular bar in the middle of the floor, or chat in groups. I am mesmerized.

Is "business solutions" a lucrative business to be in? Or is it similar to being a lawyer or an actor, where some people make bank and others make peanuts? Because whoever owns this mansion is definitely on the making bank end of the spectrum.

I try to take all of it in as we step onto the ballroom floor. The windows are covered in lush, velvet drapes except in an area that looks like it leads to a balcony with a fountain. Oil paintings hang between each of the windows, and I'm pretty sure the floor is made of actual marble. The music is provided by a real, live orchestra that plays in one corner of the ballroom. Hushed conversations and quiet laughter, the clinking of glasses, and the soft rustle of silk and satin blend with the classical music, and I feel myself getting lightheaded again. "This place is incredible," I breathe to Jace.

He smiles and kisses my temple.

"I'm going to go socialize," Miles says and heads off toward a group of three women standing near a pillar.

Jace holds out a hand. "Would you like to dance?"

Why, yes, yes I would. I am here, dressed like Cinderella, at an actual ball, and a very stunning Prince Charming is asking me to dance. You better believe I'm going to dance.

But I am not leaving a shoe behind. I don't care how big of a hurry Cinderella was in— if she'd had shoes as fabulous as mine and one fell off while she was running, she would've gone back for it no matter what.

Jace clasps one of his hands in mine, holding it at shoulder height, the other hand on my upper back. I lay my arm on his, my hand on his shoulder. It has been a good long while since I've danced with someone like this.

This is nothing like dancing with him on stage at Beat in the Street last night. Here, he is confident, commanding, and so incredibly smooth. Combine that with how he looks in that tux he's wearing, and, well, let's just say I'm lucky I haven't taken us both down from any knee-buckling incidents.

Dance after dance, I move with him across the marble floor like we've been transported into a fairy tale. Jace is just so very good at this. Not only does he lead so well, but he keeps eye contact, like I'm the only one in the world that matters right now. And he's talking the perfect amount, too. Enough for us really to connect without stealing focus from the dancing.

“Can I ask you something?” Jace asks as we dance to a waltz. I nod, so he continues. “When I tackled that guy in the courtyard to get your purse back, a little jar of honey fell out of it. It looked like it has some significance and I've been wondering about it. Is it a story you want to share?”

As we continue to move across the floor rather gracefully (if I do say so myself), a bunch of emotions flash through me. First, a bit of embarrassment that he saw it. But then I'm touched and a little amused that he saw it days ago and he's still thinking about it, yet this is the first time he's asking. Then a bit of the negative emotions that precipitated the need for the honey jar sneak in, but only for a moment before love for a best friend who would give it to me takes its place.

“Well, after my boyfriend, Dan, and I broke up a couple of years ago after a long, not particularly uplifting relationship, I was feeling rather unmemorable. Kind of like how I felt after

noticing that I wasn't in any of our family pictures as a kid. I don't know. I just kind of felt like I didn't matter.

“So I was pretty bummed, and then Livi showed up at my house and presented me with the honeypot. Do you know what a ‘honeypot’ is? It’s a spy term that refers to a woman who uses her charm, allure, or other ‘feminine wiles’ to lure someone in and extract information from them.”

Jace smiles in amusement at the term. Maybe because it’s an amusing term, or maybe because he’s seen enough spy movies himself to know it.

“Anyway, she told me that the honeypot is to remind me that I have so much charm, allure, and charisma that I can never be forgotten. That’s why the label read, *You are memorable*. It’s to help me to never forget it.”

“You, Mackenzie,” he says as he spins me, then meets my eyes again, “are anything but forgettable.” The way he’s looking at me makes me believe it.

I lean in close and breathe into his ear, “So, you don’t need me to be charming, alluring, or exercise all of my ‘feminine wiles’ on you?”

Jace turns to breathe into my ear, tickling my neck as he does, “You have been all along.” Then he kisses my temple, and yeah— I definitely feel like I’m in a fairytale.

We stop for a moment between dances to grab a drink, and I notice Miles with yet another woman. If I’ve counted correctly, this is number six. I nod in Miles’s direction. “Your brother really is a player, isn’t he?”

Jace gives a single nod. “He is.”

As the music changes, Jace places his glass on one of the small standing tables throughout the ballroom and then gives me a playful smile. “Do you have any experience with the tango?”

I set my glass down by his and match his playful smile. “Some. In high school. I took a semester of ballroom to get out of taking a PE credit with Ms. Run-Until-You-Drop. I probably remember the Tango about as well as I remember

French from my sophomore year, but it was my favorite dance.”

“Ahh. So you remember the dance equivalent of swear words and how to ask where the restroom is.”

“Basically. Aren’t you excited to see how it goes?” I give him a smile that tells him I’m ready for whatever adventure this will bring.

He smiles back. “Very much so.”

He holds my hand at shoulder height as we walk to a spot in the middle of the area where most people are dancing. This music is perfect for a tango.

Jace starts by turning us both around in a circle. I remember my ballroom teacher telling my class that the tango is a dance where you get to be all dramatic and capitalize on emotions, so right after our spin, I bend my knees—dramatically— to lower myself into a bit of an elegant crouch. Okay, maybe it wasn’t elegant, but it did feel dramatic. Then, when I stand, I lean back on Jace’s arm, almost like a dip, but not so low to the ground.

As we start dancing, I am surprised at how well I remember the footwork. Things like basic to the cross, Ocho, giro and molinete, and... I’m pretty sure Baldosa. I am so impressed with myself! This is the equivalent of remembering how to say “I don’t know my size” in French. (Which I don’t remember.) (How to say it in French— I do remember my size.) Not that I am graceful about it or anything, but I remember. Enough that I even dare to give my leg a good high kick or raise now and then.

My teacher also told us that the tango is a physical language that you speak to your dance partner, so I try my best to say *I am a raccoon, which means I desperately need your lips on mine, and soon*. It is not hard to interpret that Jace is saying *I agree. Let’s make out post haste*. There’s a good reason why this is my favorite social dance.

It hits me how much dancing the tango is like that conversation Jace and I had when we first met when he came

to my rescue during my date with Spencer. We'd created a shared history together, writing the story as we went. It feels like we are creating a shared story now. Both of us are so in tune with each other that it's as if our movements are planned, yet we are making it up as we go. The backstory we are creating with this dance is complex and beautiful and something we could only create together.

Eventually, I pull myself out of my little bubble enough to notice that other couples have pulled back from the middle of the floor and all eyes are on us. On Jace in his well-fitted tux and me in my fun, flirty, and flowing fuchsia dress, with us speaking a language and telling a story that apparently everyone wants to listen to.

It might have made me nervous in a different situation, but Jace is leading us so well that even if I didn't know the tango, he would get me through it just fine and no one would even realize that it is my first time. But it isn't my first time, so I pour on the emotions and the drama. Mrs. Martinez would be so proud.

And Jace seems thrilled to be seen with me. It makes me feel like a queen. Like I'm adored. And seen. Not just by everyone watching, but by Jace. More so than I've ever felt in my life.

Jace and I just move so perfectly together. I don't know how, exactly, but he makes me feel confident, capable, and beautiful. I lift my leg so that my thigh is resting at his waist, and he walks backward, holding me in a way that's so well supported that my other foot just slides along the floor behind me.

And then he lifts me into the air, so I put my legs out like I'm trying to do mid-air splits. Except splits by someone who definitely didn't stretch first and who hasn't stretched those leg muscles for a good long while, so it probably looked more like I was trying to make a capital letter A.

The more we dance, the more the muscle memory of the footwork comes back to me, and we do some impressive foot

and legwork for a girl who is very unpracticed and a couple of people who've never done this together before.

We stride dramatically across the floor and I'm having so much fun I nearly laugh instead of wearing the serious expression that would feel more at home with our actions. Then Jace lifts me and spins me around while I tuck my knees in. When he sets me back on my feet, I wrap a leg around his leg and lean back.

Some more fancy legwork, then a quick lift, and I can tell that the music is coming to a close. Jace does, too, and ends the dance by lowering me into a deep dip. He stretches his back leg out behind him and brings his torso parallel with mine. Then he touches my lips with his in the sweetest kiss.

I blush as all the people in the ballroom clap for us in the polite way expected at a black-tie affair. Jace pulls me to standing, and we both take a little bow. I'm breathing heavily and my heart is racing and I am smiling with my entire face.

Instead of looking for colored relationship flags, I am metaphorically waving a white flag. I surrender. Jace has won, and to the victor goes my heart.

CHAPTER 24

RATING AND EVADING

MACKENZIE

Jace and I are still breathing fast as he leads me away from the middle of the dance floor. I don't know about him, but I am feeling such a high from that dance that my feet are barely touching the floor. Happiness is bubbling up from my insides like champagne.

Movement catches both of our eyes and we turn to look at Miles, who's standing maybe fifteen feet from us. He gives the barest nod toward the door leading into the rest of the mansion.

Jace turns to me and leans in close. The feel of his breath against my neck tickles me in the very best way. In a low voice I wish I could record and listen to on repeat, he says, "It looks like my contact is here in a meeting room. Do you mind if I leave for a moment?"

I breathe near his ear, "Not at all."

He kisses my cheek and then gives my hand a squeeze. He keeps holding on as he's backing away, as if he would rather do anything at this moment than walk away from my side, and the feeling is mutual.

I'm watching him as he turns and walks with Miles toward the door of the ballroom, so I notice when he nods to a guy near the wall who must be his friend. The guy looks like he'd be more at home flashing an FBI badge at a crime scene than holding the martini that's in his hand at this black-tie gala. But he's got kind eyes.

I look around the big area and decide to head for the bar in the middle of the ballroom with the counter that forms a complete circle around the bartenders. I scope out the people there, trying to determine who looks as if they'd most like someone to chat with, so I won't be sitting there alone and feeling stupid. I choose a spot right between two women, sit down, and order a club soda. I'm not about to drink anything that will make me remember this night any less than crystal clearly.

Almost immediately, Jace's friend also sits down at the bar, but with three seats between us. Did Jace send his friend over to look out for me while he isn't here? That's so sweet! I want to acknowledge that he came over and that we both know Jace. But every time I look at him, he looks away, like he's trying to not make it known that he's there if I need him.

So I go back to what I am doing, which is finding someone to talk to so I don't feel like I'm in middle school and no one is sitting by me in the lunchroom. So I turn to the woman to my right. She's standing beside the seat, waiting for her drink to be made. She's wearing a deep green, floor-length, long-sleeved dress with a neckline so adventurous it's almost in danger of discovering her navel. "Hi," I say. "Isn't it so beautiful here?"

She barely gives me a glance as she accepts her drink from the bartender. "You've seen one gala put on by an evil billionaire trying to show off his house, you've seen them all. Excuse me," she says and walks away.

Evil billionaire? Maybe "business solutions" companies are more like hedge fund managers and crime lords, where the shadier your dealings are the closer to billionaire status you get.

The woman to my left is wearing a light blue, off-the-shoulder dress that is all satin, lace, and embroidery, and she looks a little less like she invented the oxygen she's breathing. She's facing the bartenders and looking bored, so I hold out my hand and say, "Hi, I'm Mackenzie."

She gives me a nod, but no offer of her name or shake of my hand, so I let it drop and try to think of something to strike up a conversation about. Mentioning the ballroom was a swing and a miss, so, knowing that we are at some kind of business convention, I ask, “So, what do you do for a living?”

The woman actually looks at me this time, and says, “That’s not a question that gets asked often at these events.”

“Oh.”

Then she adds, “I am here with my husband. He always drags me to these, and I just have to sit around and wait for him.”

The man on the woman’s other side says, “Ahh. My wife drags me to these things, too, and I have to sit here while they go off and do whatever business in the back rooms.”

The woman looks animated for the first time— part of me guesses it’s the first time this entire night— and says, “He thinks that if he lets me dress up and takes me to fancy balls, it’ll make up for him being gone all the time, or for the sketchy people showing up at our home, or for the threats of legal action.”

“The same is true with my wife. And then there’s the unpredictability of not only our schedules but of where the future might take us.”

“And the secrecy.”

The guy nods his head.

It sounds like their spouses are definitely on the shady end of things. I hope they’re not who Jace is meeting with. I ask, “Do your spouses work for the same company?”

They both look at me like they didn’t realize I thought I was still part of this conversation and then the man looks at the woman and shrugs. “You never really know, do you?” Then they turn back to each other and continue their conversation, but this time clearly closing me out of it.

Oh... kay. The people here are not my people. Wait. Is this what *my* future holds if I continue to date Jace? Will I be

hanging out in ballrooms, wearing fancy dresses, complaining that I'm sitting at the bar alone as I wait for Jace?

A woman in a pewter-colored sequin dress steps up to the empty seat at my right and flicks a finger, signaling the bartender. One arm of her dress has a long sleeve and the other side shows her bare arm and shoulder. The dress is floor length with a slit to the top of her thigh. She orders a drink, and I'm considering striking up a conversation, but she's holding her head high and glancing around like she's a 6-karat diamond and the rest of us are cubic zirconias.

While she's waiting for her drink, though, she looks me up and down and says, "I'm surprised— the mighty Jason Langston brought a legitimate date."

First off, she noticed me? Second, she thinks I'm legitimate? And third, something about this woman makes the guy Jace sent over to look out for me raise his hackles and lean forward a bit like he's poised to leap into action. She's just a classic mean girl. She's likely to throw a few barbs, but it's nothing I can't handle. He's being just a bit paranoid.

I almost tell the woman that she's remembered his name wrong and that it's Jace Lancaster, not Jason Langston, but she's looking at me like she was just asked to lick a sucker that had fallen into the dirt, so I'm not about to make things worse. "What makes you say I'm a legitimate date?" I don't ask because I'm trying to challenge her— I just can't get that part of her sentence out of my head and I'm super curious as to why she said it.

The barkeep hands her a drink— a fruity thing that looks like it'd be at home in a tiki bar with an umbrella on top— and the woman studies me. Then she squinches up her nose like she's smelled something bad. In my defense, I only cracked a little bit of a sweat during that tango, so I doubt I smell that bad.

Then she says, "The eyes, I guess," then turns and walks off.

I keep watching her for a moment as she walks away. The eyes? Is she talking about my eyes or Jace's eyes? What about

the eyes made her come to the conclusion that we are legit? What does legit even mean in her mind?

And why do I care what she thinks?

Since I'm already turned in my chair, I grab my drink and turn a bit more to watch the dancing, completely giving up on chatting with anyone. That's okay. I can sit here and rate all the dresses on a scale from "I'd spend the equivalent of a week's worth of groceries on that" to "I would sell my car, my credit rating, and my dignity to own that."

After I've rated about a dozen dresses, I spot Jace in the hallway just outside of the ballroom. He strides up to Miles and holds a briefcase out to him. Miles takes it and ducks out of my line of sight, and then Jace turns to enter the ballroom. His eyes scan the area for a fraction of a second before they land on mine, and he strolls across the room to me.

He gives me a warm smile as he nears, but there's something behind it that I can't quite read. An urgency or stress. When he reaches me, he leans in closely, like he's about to tell me how those minutes away from me were excruciating, and says, "Things didn't go as well as we had hoped, and we need to leave right now."

I set my drink on the bar and glance in the direction of the elevator we'd entered through before my eyes are back on Jace. "Right now?"

Jace glances over his shoulder. "Right now."

"Oh. Okay."

I stand and he takes my hand, leading us toward the elevator. Jace doesn't really look concerned—he looks as smooth and suave as he has all night. I don't know if it's partly because of that or partly because of the excitement of him saying we need to hurry and leave, but I'm feeling exhilarated as we calmly walk toward the elevator.

Exhilarated and a bit apprehensive. How big is this problem? Or is this just Jace's way of making the night even more fun?

Someone steps in front of the elevator, facing us, and Jace immediately redirects us toward one of the side doors. Jace seems remarkably calm— even if there’s something else behind the calm that I can’t quite read— so I’m guessing this is his way of adding some excitement to an already 10/10 evening. A smile starts to spread across my face as I walk through the doorway. “Did you let Miles know?”

Jace glances in both directions and then says, “Yes. He’ll meet us at the helicopter. This way.”

We walk down a hallway. Not rushing, exactly, but walking more quickly than we might otherwise. We turn at a corner and see someone down the hall, so Jace spins us around to head back in the direction we came. Now we run down the hall.

At the end of that hall, Jace opens a door that leads to some stairs. It’s only one flight, and at the top, we open a door into another hall. We run down that one, too, until we reach an access door that Jace opens. It leads us to a stairwell, and these stairs aren’t fancy like the others we’d just climbed— these look like the stairs we’d seen next to the elevator when we’d first come through the door on the roof.

I lift my dress and we hurry up the stairs. We get to the top— which, in fact, is right next to the elevator at the roof— just as feet on stairs sound below us.

Jace opens the door and we step out onto the gravel of the roof. The helicopter already has its engines running and the blades are turning strong enough that it’s creating quite a bit of wind. Miles is standing in the open doorway of the helicopter, holding out a hand. With one hand above my eyes, trying to protect them from the wind, and the other hand holding up my dress, we run.

And holy honeypot, I have never run in heels before that have felt this comfortable! I’m not even worrying about them falling off, my ankle twisting, or a heel breaking off. These are amazing. They should make a commercial of some super spy wearing them as she is doing dangerous feats of athleticism

and say something like, “Look great no matter where life takes you.”

And really, I kind of feel like I’m in a spy movie right now. This is the life that my blind date, Spencer, had promised during our half a dinner date. I knew it wasn’t something he could deliver, but I hadn’t expected that Jace would.

When we reach the helicopter, I take Miles’s hand as I step up and he pulls me into the cabin. Jace gets in right behind me, and before he pulls the door shut, I can see that several men in suits are spilling out of the door to the lobby by the elevators and stairs that we’d just come through.

Okay, pretending that people are after us is one thing. Now that I can see actual people have been chasing after us, I think things must have really not gone according to plan in the meeting Jace was in. What kind of a meeting was it? And with what kind of people?

“Go!” Miles shouts to the helicopter pilot, and the sounds intensify just before I get pulled back into my seat as we lift off the roof.

Both Jace and Miles look out the windows, so I do, too. The men— five, by my count— are on the roof, gesturing up at us. And is that a gun one of them is holding? Probably not. That’s just my spy movie-loving brain interpreting what I’m seeing. People don’t bring guns to business meetings, especially not ones at fancy galas.

The helicopter banks and pulls away, taking the rooftop out of view, so I fall back into my seat as Jace and Miles do the same. I notice the briefcase right next to Miles’s seat, and my mind starts running through so many scenarios of what could’ve happened tonight while I was busy one-sided chatting and rating dresses. Most are not really plausible. But for whatever reason— call it the fault of the adventure-loving girl inside of me—all of them fill me with a wild kind of excitement.

Jace looks at me, concern etched in his eyebrows, and asks, “Are you okay?” over the sound of the helicopter’s engine whirring and blades thumping.

I am definitely okay. In fact, I can't stop smiling. "I am. This has been quite the date."

CHAPTER 25

I SPY WITH MY LITTLE EYE

JACE

blow into the folded leaf, but it just makes a sound like a two-year-old failing his attempt at blowing a raspberry.

Mackenzie laughs and says, “No, you’ve got to hold it more like this,” and demonstrates with the other leaf that fell onto our table in this outdoor café, making a perfect whistling sound. She even shows off by making it play a couple of different notes.

I try again with my leaf, but still— toddler not in control of his lips. I’m glad that Mackenzie already got a picture of us on this date so she isn’t as tempted to take one of us now, with me not being able to blow into a leaf properly.

Charlie is in my ear because of everything that has gone down over the past few days. And with how active the situation is, we have to be in contact. I hear her giggling before she says, “The man can disarm a bomb set to take out a bridge in Maribor using only a car key, a roll of duct tape, and a Taser, yet he can’t make a leaf whistle?”

I easily ignore her because all of my focus is on Mackenzie, who scoots her chair closer to me as we wait for our food to be brought out. Then she leans in, threading her arms in the space between mine. “These fingers need to lightly pinch it a bit further down. Yeah, right there. And then pinch this part. No, toward the outside of the leaf a bit.”

The feel of her fingers brushing over my skin sends currents of thrills up my arms and settles somewhere in my chest. I’m glad that Charlie can only hear what I say and not

what I think, because having Mackenzie near enough to smell her raspberry sorbet shampoo is taking me right back to last night at the gala. I've been to many black-tie events over the course of my years at the Clandestine Services Agency. I've danced at most of them. At one, I even used the cable in my belt to rappel down the side of a building.

But I've never enjoyed one of them like I did last night. Not even close. There was just something about being so close to Mackenzie all night, dancing with her, laughing with her, and just enjoying being with her that fired up more senses than I've ever experienced. Which is impressive, considering how many senses I normally have fired up on a mission.

I think it is because the connection between the two of us is so strong. I have strong connections in my life— like with my family and with some of my coworkers. But I never could've guessed how much I have actually been longing for... *this*. This person who makes me feel like everything in life is just more vibrant, more important.

“Now gently tug,” Mackenzie says, still so close that I can feel her breath on my arm, “but not enough to tear the leaf. All right, now blow into the gap between the two sides of the leaf.”

I blow, and it actually makes a sound. Not a pretty sound, but it is vaguely whistle-like. I'm grinning like I just decoded and translated a secret message written in Farsi without so much as using a pen and paper. Mackenzie is grinning, too.

I'm not quite sure when it happened, but I've fallen hard for Mackenzie. For a million reasons. One of them is how much she's helped me notice the beauty in regular things in life. It shouldn't take a genius to realize that only focusing on the craft of covert operations would cause one to not notice life outside of threat actors, yet there I've been.

Mackenzie sits up straight, but I'm glad she doesn't scoot her chair back to where it was. “I'm sorry your meeting last night didn't go according to plan. Were you able to get that resolved?”

Once we got on the helicopter last night, we didn't talk about what precipitated the need to leave quickly. It's always hard to hear over the sounds of the chopper, and when we did talk, we mostly talked about the ball. Which was good, because what was I supposed to tell her? *We were trying to intercept a package from Team Bad Guy A when Team Bad Guy B completely blindsided us.* I don't think so.

Everyone on my team has spent the past week tracking down all of the entities that Hendrickson sold the package to, eliminating each of the threats precisely so we wouldn't be blindsided last night by another party showing up. The best we can guess is that Hendrickson's still missing partner, Finley, lined up the surprise buyer after we captured Hendrickson because the FBI is convinced that Hendrickson told them about every buyer he knew of.

Finley may not have been smart enough to keep himself from selling to multiple buyers, but he did manage to get himself out of the country. We're pretty sure he's in Buenos Aires, though, and I'm sure he'll be caught before he drinks too many more margaritas on the beach.

We didn't capture the surprise buyer last night, but Charlie was able to get enough images through my camera of both the buyer we were trying to draw out and the surprise buyer for us to work with.

Trying to keep things vague, I say, "Yeah, we thought we were meeting with just one other company, but then a surprise third party showed up and kind of threw a monkey wrench in the negotiations. We were able to get things resolved with that third company this morning."

As it turns out, the surprise buyer, Augustus Bowden, was someone the CIA has already been trying to capture, so the director assigned both me and Ledger to work with the CIA on bringing him in this morning. And that, of course, skyrocketed the chances of the CIA assigning Zoe Steele to the same mission, because fate— for Ledger, at least— has a sense of humor.

There's a reason both Ledger and Zoe get assigned to missions like this. I don't know what Zoe is like outside of a mission with Ledger and me, but on a mission, she and Ledger could turn a game of Rock, Paper, Scissors into the Olympics. And the key to unlocking Ledger's full abilities is to trigger his competitiveness. We had Augustus Bowden captured by ten o'clock this morning.

This just leaves us with the original buyer still loose, who we now know is a company called CryptexEndeavor. They're the ones we've been after since Mackenzie accidentally got the brush pass. The ones we were trying to lure out at the gala.

As if Mackenzie is following my train of thought, she asks, "Did you get things worked out with the company you were supposed to meet with?"

"Not yet, but I'm sure we will soon. We've got all our best people on it."

And we definitely do. Charlie pulled some great images of a handful of people on their payroll, including the woman who was supposed to receive the brush pass. We know now that they are based in the U.S., so we've been working non-stop since I dropped Mackenzie off last night in a joint mission with the FBI to bring CryptexEndeavor down.

I hate that I had to turn over the responsibility of protecting Mackenzie to the FBI last night. There is just so much that needs to be done to get this fully wrapped up and to get her safe, and I'm running on such a small amount of sleep. Emerson and his team are the best there is, though, and they've been pulling on every thread they can. He's been getting us a lot of intel, but none of it is actionable yet.

Which is why I was able to tell Mackenzie yes when she asked if we could meet for a late lunch at this café. After everything that has gone down over the past few days, I had to see her. To verify with my own two eyes that she is still safe and okay and not traumatized by having to make a quick escape at the end of our date last night. If nothing else, sitting with her here is helping to calm my nerves and my heart.

Mackenzie is playing with the stem of her leaf, twisting it around and around absently as I memorize the way the sun is hitting the tops of her cheekbones, giving her face an almost golden glow. “You know,” she says, “it’s impressive how well you seem to know just what I need. And then, so quickly, you fill that need.”

I have no idea what she’s talking about, yet it still makes my chest puff out a bit. “Oh, yeah? Like what?”

“Like last night. It was as if you just knew I needed some adventure in my life. Livi and I watch spy movies all the time. And I don’t know— I’ve just been craving something exciting like that to happen in my life. You somehow sensed that and made it happen. Saying ‘We have to leave now,’ like we were being chased by bad guys was *perfect*. The way you ended our date put a cherry on top of an already impressive sundae.”

I... have no words to respond to that with. Actually, lots of things come to mind, but none of them are things I am okay with saying to her. Things like how I never want her to be in any kind of danger like that, ever. It was bad enough last night when I had to leave her in the watch of the FBI agent in the ballroom to go get the briefcase.

But also, Mackenzie is a smart woman, and I can see something behind her eyes that tells me that she didn’t completely buy my story last night, even if she did enjoy how much it livened up the night. I think she’s trying to see if she can nudge some more information out of me.

Luckily, I am spared having to give a response by the worker showing up with our food. He sets the tray down, and I transfer our sodas and sandwiches to the table. I turn, thank him, and hand the tray back, but suddenly something feels off. My senses are tingling, and I look around for the source. Something my subconscious saw is wrong.

This café doesn’t have waiters— just a counter where you order and pay— but they do bring the food out. The man delivering an order to another table is someone we didn’t see inside the building when we ordered. Of course, he could’ve just come on shift or he could’ve been in the back.

But then I start noticing other things that make my hair rise and put me on high alert. Seated at another table is a guy I saw in the crowd at the street concert when Mackenzie and I were up on stage. Of course, he could live in Cipher Springs and just happens to be at this same restaurant as us, ten miles from Cipher Springs, having lunch with a different woman. Maybe he was with his wife at the concert and this is a coworker. It could be a coincidence.

But I learned long ago not to dismiss things as coincidence.

A man comes out of the building and looks around for a seat. As he's sitting down, I see his face and recognize him as a guest at the gala. He wasn't one of the ones chasing after us, though, and he's not someone that we've flagged as working for CryptexEndeavor.

If this is them, how did they find us here? It isn't as if they could've followed us from the gala to see where we went—we left in a helicopter.

In my ear, Charlie says, "Jace, your heart rate is shooting up. What is it?"

"They're here," I say in a quiet mumble. I know she can understand my words, and I'm also sure that they weren't loud enough for Mackenzie to hear.

They have to be after me since I'm the one who took the briefcase intended for them. For a split second, I wonder if there is some way to draw them to me and away from Mackenzie so I can keep her safe. But almost as quickly, I know that they will go after her if only to get to me since they've seen us together here.

And they probably saw us together at the gala. I knew she would be seen—having her there was part of what drew them to the gala. But they probably didn't know her face before last night and were only looking for someone with her general description. I never should've brought so much attention to Mackenzie during that dance. I was just enjoying it so much, and I really hadn't guessed it would be so... memorable.

I pride myself on staying in control in volatile situations, yet somehow I never feel in control when she's around. And it's not even anything she is doing— it's that I am focusing less. Letting myself get distracted. But not now. Not when her safety is on the line.

I am surreptitiously looking for escape routes when I notice a white Hyundai parked on the side of the street that I remember seeing parked on the next street over from Mackenzie's house when we went on our walk.

Then I glance back at the man I'd seen in the audience at Beat on the Street. He's reaching into his jacket pocket for something, and suddenly the last puzzle piece of knowledge I've been gathering over weeks clicks into place. I know that not only is he a threat actor, but he's the leader of CryptexEndeavor.

The man didn't show up at the gala, but he comes here? That tells me we are in big trouble. And the fact that we first saw him at Mackenzie's club activity means it's her they want. Even more than me. "The guy in the navy jacket at the north table is the leader," I say, too concerned to even attempt to keep Mackenzie from hearing. I hear Charlie's faint gasp before a flurry of keyboard typing.

Only a few seconds have passed since the café worker brought our food— he isn't even all the way back to the restaurant door yet— and I think I'm being subtle. But they're all subtly watching me, too, and they have probably noticed that something is off.

Mackenzie pauses as she's pushing her straw into her soda lid. "Jace?"

I glance around. "We need to get out of here."

"Okay, when I said I enjoyed the adventure last night, I didn't mean we need to do it again right now. I mean, we can eat our food. Then we can prove that the time at the Italian restaurant wasn't a fluke and that we've broken the curse of not being able to finish a meal when it's at a restaurant."

“No, Mackenzie. There are actual bad guys here.” I grab her hand as I stand, looking around at all the threat actors, who are seeing me notice them and are reacting by standing, talking into watches, and making eye contact with each other. “They’re after us and we need to leave now.”

“Oh!”

They’ve got plenty of muscle blocking the logical exits, so I lead Mackenzie to the row of potted plants separating the café from the sidewalk and we scoot between two and make a beeline to my motorcycle.

As we run, Mackenzie asks, “Why are there actual bad guys after us?”

We reach my bike and I hand her the helmet. “It’s a long story—I’ll tell you when we are safe. Now get on and hold on tight.”

CHAPTER 26

FULL THROTTLE SECRETS

JACE

I glance behind us as I pull my motorcycle out into traffic. Two adversaries are heading for cars and one more to a motorcycle. “Charlie,” I hiss. “We need an extraction.”

“Already on it. I’ll let you know more as soon as I can. And Jace? You don’t have a helmet. Be extra careful.”

I have to strain to hear her voice over the sound of the wind blowing past us as I speed down the road. “That’s my plan.”

I glance behind me to see that both cars and the motorcycle are behind me, weaving between traffic. I head down Springwood Street for a block and a half, then wait until the last possible moment before turning right on Appleway, telling Charlie the names of each road I’m on, even though I know she’s tracking me.

I stay on Appleway for a distance, swerving in between cars as I go, trying to get some distance between us and our pursuers. I wish Mackenzie and I were just going on a leisurely drive down some country road because having her behind me with her hands on my torso feels pretty great.

Right after I make a daring left turn onto Woodland Avenue, hoping the cars I just turned in front of will slow our pursuers, Charlie says, “Okay, we are going to do a moving whale extraction. We have agents headed to your area in the Wheely Good Movers truck. In two blocks, take a right onto Baywood, then start watching for it near Scarlet Oak Street.”

I glance in my side view mirrors. We've lost one of the pursuing cars, but the other and the motorcycle are still behind us. I swerve between two cars. I know my heart is beating fast because I can hear it in my ears. Once I turn onto Baywood, I twist my head enough that I hope Mackenzie can hear me. Then I shout, "We are going to do something really dangerous."

"Okay?" It comes out as more of a question. When she says she loves adventure, I'm not sure this is exactly what she means.

"Whatever you do, don't freak out and grab my arms. Just keep hold of my torso and everything is going to be okay."

I feel her head against my back in what I think is a nod, just as her grip on me tightens. We've driven probably three-quarters of a mile down Baywood when I see the Wheely Good Movers truck pull out onto the road just a few blocks ahead of us. I take a chance and swerve between traffic even more so that our pursuers can't see us.

By the time I reach the box truck, they've accelerated to the same speed as me, the mechanical door is sliding up, and the ramp is lowering to the street. "Okay, hold on tight," I shout, and Mackenzie squeezes tightly enough that it knocks some of the air out of me.

I get us lined up perfectly, then give it extra gas and speed onto the ramp just as Mackenzie lets out a scream. The second both of my tires are on the ramp, I squeeze the brake on my grip at the same time as I push on the rear brake with my foot and slide sideways across the floor of the truck toward its back. We come to a stop just inches from slamming into the back end.

"I'm in!" I shout, and the ramp immediately starts pulling up as the door slides back down.

The moment it is down, blocking out the sounds of the street but not the sound of my heartbeat, I say, "I could use an update."

“I don’t think they saw you get in,” Charlie says. “From the street cameras, it looks like they aren’t quite sure where you went. All our agents in the area are swarming in. We are going to get them, Jace.”

Both Mackenzie and I are breathing hard and heavy. I hear her swallow, and then between heaving breaths, asks, “Who are you talking to?”

We both get off the motorcycle and I look her up and down, holding onto her shoulders as I check both sides. “Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine. Jace, what is going on?”

“We just needed to get away from some bad guys.”

“Why are bad guys following us?”

“Charlie, where are we headed?”

In my ear, she replies, “The agent driving has been instructed to use evasive techniques until he’s one hundred percent sure you’re not being followed. Then he’ll take you both to a safe house.”

“Not to home base?”

“Is that your sister Charlie?” Mackenzie asks.

“No,” Charlie says. “Definitely not to the agency. You’re too hot right now. We need to get you two safe while we finish the operation and get them captured. We’ve got a horde of FBI agents helping, too. With CryptexEndeavor’s leader showing his face, we’ve got *everyone* on it. I’m guessing it won’t be long.”

I shake my head, the need to help burning bright and hot.

Charlie must know what I’m thinking, because she immediately adds, “CryptexEndeavor wants Mackenzie. *The most important job* right now is keeping her safe while we capture their team and their leader. *That’s* how you can help the most. Your job is the most important one. Keep her safe.” She pauses for a moment before adding, “Because I really like her.”

“I do, too.”

“Tell me what is going on,” Mackenzie says. “Tell me why there are bad guys after you.” She crosses her arms and looks pretty angry. I don’t blame her, especially because she hasn’t been hearing anything that Charlie said.

I put my hands on my hips, my feet spread apart enough to keep me upright as the moving truck traverses traffic and look toward the corner of the box truck before meeting Mackenzie’s eyes. “They aren’t after me. They’re after you.”

All anger seems to fall from her as her arms drop and her shoulders sag, yet her eyes are wild and alarmed. “What? *Me*? Why would they be after me?”

She looks like she might pass out, so I glance around and spot a metal supply hutch underneath a shallow shelf that is big enough for both of us to sit on, and I pull it out. She sits on it like a bench, but I straddle it so I can better see her face as we talk. “Remember when I ran into you at that outdoor mall?”

“Yeah. It was the day after I first met you in that restaurant with my blind date.”

“Our meeting at the restaurant during your blind date was by chance. But I was at the outdoor mall to intercept a brush pass. A couple of employees with high-level clearance at a legitimate company made the phenomenally bad decision to sell information about a weapon to some bad actors. Some here, some abroad.” I don’t think it’ll help to mention that they are terrorists, assassins, and rogue nations, so I leave it out. “They mistook you for their contact and accidentally slipped the package into your purse.”

In my ear, Charlie, sounding a little panicked, says, “Are you sure you want to tell her all this?”

I do. She deserves to know. I’m sure Charlie gets it.

“So the guy who stole my purse was the bad guy?”

I shake my head. “That was us. We had to retrieve the package from your purse.”

“So they knew it was me that they accidentally gave it to?” She’s looking so bewildered, and I just want to wrap my arms around her and tell her that everything is going to be okay. But she deserves the chance to feel what she’s feeling without me trying to make it go away.

“Not at first, but eventually, yes. Maybe as early as that night we got caught in the rain.”

The chest slides a bit as the truck takes a fast turn, and I put my arms out to hold onto a shelf and to my bike, trying to keep us in place.

“So the bad guys could’ve gotten me at any point since then?”

I shake my head. “No. You were always safe. Whenever I wasn’t with you, the FBI was.”

She turns toward me, her hands in fists, and she pounds her forearms into my chest. “Why didn’t you tell me? I needed to know to be careful!”

I let her pound until she’s finished, and then I gently gather her hands into mine. “Because the best way to keep you safe was to keep you from knowing. There weren’t good cameras at the outdoor mall, so the bad guys didn’t have a good ID on you. They were only going to believe that you weren’t the person they were looking for and had nothing to do with it if you were acting normal. If you were hiding or being extra cautious, you would’ve been in more danger because that would’ve given them confirmation that they found the right person.”

She seems to understand because she leans into me, resting her side against my chest and her head against my shoulder. I wrap one arm around her, put the other hand on the side of her head, and kiss her hair. “They’re in the middle of catching the bad guys right now. You’re safe. We are heading to a secure location, and we’ll stay there while they get everything wrapped up.”

She’s still for a long moment, pressed against me, as the truck rumbles down the street toward the safe house.

When most people face something like Mackenzie just did, normal brain function slows as the body diverts all brainpower to actions that are going to aid in fighting or fleeing. Mackenzie must've gotten out all her fight because her brain seems to be churning a million miles an hour.

"That creeper my sister noticed in a car outside our house?"

I nod. "It was the FBI."

She cocks her head slowly. "But you're not with the FBI."

I shake my head.

She's quiet for another long moment, and then she pulls back and swings one of her legs over the chest, too, so she's facing me. "You're a spy!"

The sentence shocks me. Okay, yes, we are in a mobile covert unit and there is field equipment covering the walls and shelves, and I did just tell her that we intercepted a plot meant to get weapons in the hands of bad guys, but I'm still surprised she figured it out in the middle of a stressful situation like this.

"I'm just pretending to be one, like your blind date at that restaurant did."

She smacks me in the shoulder with the back of her hand. "No, you are not. You're a spy."

"I'm sorry to disappoint you—I don't have a badge."

"Of course, you don't— spies don't have badges." She closes her eyes for a moment before saying, "I can't believe you're lying to me. That you've been lying to me."

"I am not a spy," I say with all the conviction I have. "A spy is an asset that an intelligence operative has turned. The asset then goes and spies on their employer or boss or family member or whoever, then brings information to the intelligence operative."

"Are you seriously trying to get off on a technicality?"

I open my mouth to say something, but nothing comes out. She has a right to be angry. If I were in her shoes, I would be,

too. And her accusation is right— I've been lying to her.

She stands up, like she's too upset to remain seated, and then takes a few steps toward the side of the truck and away from me. She turns to face me, fists on her hips, swaying slightly with the movements of the truck. "What else have you been lying to me about?"

"Nothing that wasn't required by my job to lie about. I shouldn't even be telling you all of this now. There are things I haven't been able to say because they're classified, and things I couldn't say to protect you."

"To protect me, huh? That's a story I've heard before." She looks toward the corner of the truck, but I don't think she's looking at anything specifically. She stays quiet for a long moment, probably working through the implications of all I've told her, while I try to decipher the meaning behind her words. Then she meets my eyes again. "You don't have a fiancée waiting for you at home?"

"What? No!" I'm offended for half a second that she'd even think I might be a cheater before I realize that it's because her old boyfriend, Dan, must've been cheating on her. The jerk probably told her that he hid things from her to protect her, too, when he was really trying to protect himself. No wonder she's especially upset about lying. And the guy had a fiancée at the same time as he was dating Mackenzie? If I ever meet him, I might have some real trouble remaining civil.

"No gambling problems? Hidden addictions? Skeletons in your closet?"

"No, no, and no."

"Not even one dressed up pretty enough that people might not notice that it's a skeleton?"

"No skeletons of any kind, whatsoever. Literal or figurative." I pause. "Unless you count anatidaephobia." When her eyebrows scrunch together, I shrug and add, "A fear that a duck is watching me. I had a traumatic experience as a kid involving a duck and a peanut butter sandwich. But I don't usually tell people about that."

She just stares at me for a moment before a laugh escapes her and she puts a hand over her mouth like she's attempting to keep it in. Then she just looks at me for a moment before she drops some of the tenseness in her shoulders and comes to take a seat again on the chest. I can tell she's still angry and a little wary. I get it.

She takes a few long, slow breaths before she asks, "Do you work for a government agency?"

"Yes," I say cautiously, finding myself so concerned about what emotions and thoughts she's experiencing to be able to come up with a cover story on the fly. Or maybe I am just unwilling to.

"Wow. I didn't think you'd actually answer that. Okay, then, do you try to discover the actions of bad guys?"

Another cautious "Yes."

"So you're a spy."

"I'm an intelligence operative or a field operative. Or a covert operative. *Not* a spy."

"Jace!" Charlie hisses in my ear.

Mackenzie folds her arms and lifts one shoulder in a small shrug. "I hate to break it to you, but you're a spy."

"I'm not a spy."

Mackenzie starts humming the *Mission Impossible* theme song, and I run a hand over my forehead and eyes as Charlie says in my ear, "I can't believe you just told her."

I can't quite believe it myself. But I'm thankful that she seems to want to lighten the mood a bit. Hopefully, that means she'll be willing to forgive me for lying about the things I had to lie about. The truck makes another sharp turn, and I put my arms out again to keep us from sliding.

"Are you CIA?"

"No."

"And you're not lying to me?"

“Let’s make a deal. If there’s something I can’t tell you, I will just say, ‘It’s classified.’ No lying.”

She gives a quick nod. “I like that plan. Okay... what agency do you work for, then?”

I stay quiet for a moment, and then decide that after telling her so much, what’s the harm in telling a bit more? We aren’t forbidden to tell anyone— it’s just a very bad idea in virtually every situation. “The Clandestine Services Agency. The CSA.”

In a disbelieving and shocked voice, Charlie says, “Miles is going to freak out. Ledger, too. And Emerson and Blake and Mom,” and I kind of wish I could turn my earpiece off for a minute.

“That’s not a real agency,” Mackenzie says.

I smile. “That’s exactly what we want you to think.”

CHAPTER 27

THE ASSET AND THE SPY

MACKENZIE

cross my arms. “So you’re telling me that the ‘Clandestine Services Agency’ is a real agency.”

Jace nods. “I am.”

“Then why have I never heard of it?”

I shift my weight as the truck we are traveling in slows down quite a bit, then goes over a small bump and then an incline before coming to a complete stop. There’s a small jerk that I’m sure is the vehicle being put into park. So we aren’t at a stop light or sign—we must have arrived. And we must be inside a garage because I can hear a big door closing.

“You’ll need to completely shut down your phone before going into the safe house,” Jace says. “It’s protocol.”

I nod and pull out my phone to turn it off.

“And you’ve never heard of it because it’s a *secret* agency. Just like the National Reconnaissance Office was at the beginning—it stayed a covert agency for thirty-one years.”

Okay, now I know he’s just making things up. “That’s not a real agency, either.”

Jace laughs as the back of the vehicle opens, and I see the two agents who must’ve been in the cab this whole time. One who has blond hair is taller than average; one has brown hair and is—well, not shorter than average, but shorter than the tall one. And we are definitely in the garage of a house.

“Thank you so much for the ride,” I say. “And thank you for your help in saving us from bad guys.”

They both look amused at my choice of words (but really, what do you call them other than “bad guys?”). The taller one says, “You’re welcome,” as he offers a hand to help me down.

The ramp we drove up on hasn’t materialized from under the truck like it had when we were on the motorcycle, so I accept his hand and jump down. Then I ask, “Is the...” I look at Jace as I try to remember the acronym for the agency he just mentioned, “NRO a real agency?”

The shorter one smiles. “It is.”

Oh. I am itching to Google it. I believe Jace when he says he has only ever lied about things he was required to. But there’s still a part of me that wants to verify.

Of course, this could be a thing that he’s required to lie about...

Jace jumps out of the truck, landing next to me, and says, “The National Security Agency used to be secret, too, and it’s now one of the largest intelligence agencies.” He looks at the shorter agent. “Tell her what they used to call the NSA before it became public knowledge.”

The agent throws Jace a look that seems to ask how much I know and if it’s okay if I know as much as I know before he turns to me and says, “No Such Agency.”

Huh. Okay. Maybe the CSA is real and I should accept that the woman so well versed in spy movies doesn’t actually know a lot about the spy world and its agencies. Or maybe Hollywood doesn’t. Or maybe they’re the “less sexy” agencies, so Hollywood doesn’t care.

You let me down, Hollywood.

“Wait. So is Jace even your real name? Or is that a cover name?”

He gives me one of my favorite smiles. Both sides rise equally and he looks pleased. “Apparently I was thinking ahead when I first introduced myself because I gave you my real name. I *never* do that.”

Okay, that makes me give a pleased smile, too. He naturally didn't lie to me at a time when it would've been natural to lie. I feel honored, like he found me worthy of something he carefully guards. I can't say I've ever felt so privileged to know someone's real name before.

But for the record: I'm still mad that Jace lied. Knowing the reasons helped, but it didn't make the anger go completely away.

The agents lead us through the door from the garage to inside the safe house, which is pretty much just like a regular house. It's small but neat and clean and well-lit. Before they head off to make sure every room in the house is secure, they introduce themselves. The tall one is Treyton and the shorter one is Vince.

As I'm looking around, I notice how utterly exhausted Jace looks now that the adrenaline from the chase is coming down. "Jace, when was the last time you ate?"

His eyebrows draw together like I just asked a hard question. "Probably before we got into the helicopter."

"*Before the gala?* Jace!" I can't believe we had to leave the restaurant before even taking a bite of our meal. When Treyton comes back into the room to let us know that everything is safe, I ask, "Is there food here?"

He nods. "The fridge and pantry should be stocked. You're welcome to anything you find."

I open the fridge and see some chicken salad sandwiches on some nice big, flaky croissants and my stomach starts growling. And I had breakfast! Jace must be starving. There's a cut-up melon, too, so it was stocked recently.

I ask Treyton and Vince if they are hungry, but they say they aren't. They also say that they're going to give us space but to not worry because they'll be standing guard. So I thank them and put my armful of food on the coffee table in the living room. Then I point at the couch and say to Jace, "Sit."

He does, and I sit right next to him. Then he says, "Charlie, I'm going to turn off my earpiece. When you have

any updates, either text or call my secure line.” Then he taps his ear and removes an earpiece that I hadn’t even noticed was there.

He sits it on the coffee table and I just stare at the tiny little thing. “Huh.” How many other times has that been in his ear and I haven’t noticed?

I glance at Jace, and he looks so tired that he’s just staring at the food, not touching it. “Jace, when was the last time you slept?”

This question seems even harder for him to answer than the food one. “Um... I don’t know. On the plane?”

“You mean the helicopter? Jace, you didn’t sleep on the helicopter.”

“No. On the plane home from Cuba.”

“When did you go to Cuba?”

“Thursday.”

That doesn’t make sense. “A week ago Thursday? Because this past Thursday was when I came to your office to see you. You were about to go to a meeting,” I remind him, in case he’s getting his days mixed up. Whenever I work a lot of hours, my days always blend together. Jokingly, I add, “Was the meeting in Cuba?”

He gives a tired chuckle. “No. The meeting was an op here that got us the info that led us to Cuba.” My mind is in the process of being blown that during a— I do the math in my head— twenty-six-hour stretch of time (where I slept for seven and a half hours)— Jace had a mission and then another mission *in a different country* and flew back home, when he adds, “Fast jet. Got what we needed quickly. Made it back in time to helicopter into the library for your event.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “The helicopter was you?”

“Yeah, sorry about that. Wouldn’t have made it in time otherwise. Anyway, I know I fell asleep on that flight because we were in the middle of a video mission debrief, and I woke up with a piece of notepaper stuck to my face.”

“So you’ve gotten almost no sleep in days. Okay, we’ve got to get food into you, and then you need to sleep.”

He dutifully picks up the sandwich and takes a bite. And then another. With every bite he takes, he seems to return to life a bit more. And then, as I am swallowing another bite of my sandwich (which is really quite good— my compliments to whoever’s job it is at the CSA to stock the safe house), two and two finally click together in my head to make four and I blurt out, “Your entire family is spies!”

Jace flinches, and I don’t know if it’s because of my volume or that I know something that is obviously supposed to be a secret. But I can’t help it— the realization is *huge*. I met his sister, his brother, and his mom at his work. And another brother at the gala.

Maddeningly calm, Jace says, “Blake isn’t.” And then he pops a piece of honeydew into his mouth.

“The building I went to when I visited your work isn’t your family’s business— it’s the agency. Which, I guess in your case, *is* the family business.” If Lancaster Business Solutions is a cover, then none of them work there. They all work at the CSA. I was right— they are all spies.

“That is top-secret information, and I’d appreciate it if you kept it that way.” His gaze is on me and it’s piercing. I can tell how important this is to him. Both the agency’s secrecy and the fact that he is part of a family of spies. (Except for Blake, apparently.)

“You have my word.” And I know that no matter how badly I want to talk to Maggie or Livi, I will never tell another living soul without Jace’s permission.

I stab a melon with my fork and turn it around like I’m studying it. “So what does the CSA do?”

Jace looks up at the ceiling like he’s trying to figure out how to explain. “Okay, so you know how the CIA operates on foreign soil and deals with threats to the U.S. from forces outside the U.S.?”

I nod. I've watched enough spy movies to know this. In fact, I've seen enough spy movies to know what the CIA's counterpart is in several other countries, too.

“And the FBI works on U.S. soil with U.S. citizens?”

I nod again.

“We are kind of the in-between of those two. We can operate on U.S. soil, dealing with foreign threats, and we can operate on foreign soil. In a few ways, we are similar to the CIA, but we are a much smaller agency, so we can often respond more quickly and with more agility, and with a lot less bureaucracy. Some ops require that. Sometimes there is overlap and we work closely with the FBI or the CIA.”

I keep nodding because I think I'm getting it. But at the same time, everything I know and thought I knew is trying to scoot aside to make room for this new information.

“We are also kind of a buffer between the FBI and CIA. They still clash often, but before us, they clashed a lot more.”

“So how did you start working there? How did almost your whole entire family start working there? If it's a secret agency, how do people know to apply?”

“That's a lot of questions.”

“Well, you dropped a lot of news on me.”

“Fair enough. We aren't like the FBI or CIA— we don't have a website with job openings. But that's okay because you can't actually apply. We hire agents, analysts, engineers, and specialists one hundred percent through recruiting. We also have agreements with other agencies to sometimes recruit from them as well.”

I've finished eating, so I turn on the couch, one leg bent, so I can see him better. “But... almost your whole family works there. How did they get away with so much nepotism?”

He chuckles again. “You would make a good reporter. You always ask the hard-hitting questions. Okay, I'll do my best to answer everything I feel like I can answer. Blake is my oldest sibling, and he doesn't work at the agency. Emerson is my

oldest brother who does, and my dad was already the director when he got hired.”

“Your dad was the director?” I nearly shout the question.

He nods. “He passed away four years ago.”

The words feel like a physical force, punching me. “Oh, Jace. I’m so sorry.”

“It was hard.” He swallows audibly. “Sometimes it still is.”

I give his hand a squeeze.

“When my dad died, my mom was named as the new director. Even though one of my parents was the director when each of us was hired, they never had any say in it. There is a committee that does the evaluating of potential agents and decides which people offers will be extended to. The process happens completely separate from the director. They are just out to find the best of the best.”

I smile. This confidence on him is so unbelievably attractive. If a) he wasn’t so tired and b) I didn’t have a strong burning need to have all of my questions answered, I would be planting my lips on his right at this second while running my hands over those strong arm and shoulder muscles. I tell my lips to chill out because I can’t help but tease him a bit about his last comment. “And your family is the best of the best?”

He shrugs. “We are. I mean, the six of us were raised by two elite spies. The best *in the world*. The reason why there is such a high percentage of my siblings being field operatives when it’s such a difficult position to get is not because my parents are agency directors. It’s because they’re the ones who raised us.

“While most kids were learning how to ride a bike or to share their toys, we were learning how to notice and memorize details of everything around us and to figure out when something is off.

“When other kids were learning not to take candy from strangers or get in a stranger’s van, we were learning effective methods for detecting and losing a tail. Instead of finding a

missing homework assignment, we learned how to check for listening devices, to be adaptable, and to use our intuition.

“Instead of using phrases like ‘being nosy’ or ‘eavesdropping,’ phrases like ‘intelligence gathering’ were part of our everyday vocabulary. At home, at least. We understood that these were things people outside our family didn’t do.

“On those long, boring nights in the winter, instead of playing Monopoly or Candy Land, we played games where we would create a cover story and come up with the pocket litter — that’s the stuff spies have in their pockets or purse that back up their cover— to support it. Or one of us would create a secret cipher and write a coded message, and the rest of us would team up to try to decode it.”

“Wow,” I say. “Your childhood was very different from mine.”

He smiles— the one I love where one side raises more than the other and it makes his eyes crinkle. “You mean to tell me that you didn’t grow up learning infiltration, persuasion, and deception techniques?”

“Nope. I mostly learned how to tie my shoes and throw a ball. Although the ball one didn’t really stick. Did you know you were being trained as spies?”

He chuckles as he shakes his head. “Well, for some things we did. For most of the rest, we just figured it was normal until we were a little older. I honestly thought that *all* parents talked in Morse code or Arabic or Mandarin when they didn’t want their kids to understand. And I don’t think my parents were necessarily training us as spies so much as preparing us to be safe in the world. They knew firsthand about the wrongs that happen in the world, and they didn’t want us to be vulnerable to them.”

“How old were you when you found out they were spies?” He still flinches when I use the word “spy” instead of... what was it again? Intelligence operative? Field agent? I’m pretty sure it isn’t secret agent, although that’s a good one, too.

“I was seven.” He chuckles. “At the age when most kids learned that Santa wasn’t real, I learned that my parents were intelligence operatives. Finding out that they were not only elite spies but the best in the world came later. And that was a much bigger shock.”

I shake my head. “No wonder you’re so good at this. Not many people in the world— outside of royal children in line for the crown, of course— are trained for their jobs since birth.”

“Especially not by two very different covert operative parents who had different ways of looking at things and were trained at different agencies. Both of whom were good enough to become directors of a national intelligence agency.”

“I imagine that makes for some incredibly talented and trained kids.” I tap a finger on my lip like I’m considering things deeply. “But still, if I were on the recruiting committee, I don’t think I would hire you.”

He can tell I’m teasing, so he’s trying to hold back a smile. “No?”

I shake my head. “Spies are supposed to be able to blend in with a crowd. Be nondescript. Look average. And you, Jace, are anything but average. I mean, come on. You look like”— I motion to all of him— “this. You stand out. You’re rather notable.” I lift a shoulder in an innocent shrug. “Some might even say you’re rather desirable. ‘Delicious’ and ‘thirst trap’ might be phrases thrown around. Not ‘subtle’ or ‘common.’”

“‘Thirst trap,’ huh?” His voice comes out low and husky, and I’m dying for him to say more words with that voice.

“I mean, how can *you* effectively blend into a crowd?” I shrug. “It can’t be done.”

“Does it make me extra impressive if I can?” It’s that low, husky voice again, and my hormones or neural transmitters— or whatever is responsible for this pattering heart, breathlessness, and tingling nerves I’m feeling— are standing up and clapping. More so, because he’s leaning in a bit closer to me.

“You do have some rather impressive traits,” I breathe.
“I’ll give you that.”

“Like what?”

I glance down at his mouth. “Like the way you use those lips.”

With his eyes still on mine, he says in a voice that sends thrills up my spine, “I feel like I haven’t used them nearly enough.”

“I’m going to have to agree with you on that. I am twenty-six, and you’ve only used them on me twice.”

“We should rectify that.”

He slides a hand around to my back, and then he shows me the ways he can magically use those lips. As his lips move against mine, I can tell how relieved he is that we are here and that I’m safe. It’s like he’s showing through a kiss how much I matter to him, and it is so very intoxicating.

CHAPTER 28

MY HISTORY: IT'S CLASSIFIED

MACKENZIE

I am leaning with my back against the couch, lightheaded from all the kissing, as Jace traces a finger from my jawline, down my neck, across my shoulders, down my arm, along every finger on my right hand, and then back up again, leaving a trail of electrifying tingles. And I am soaking it in like my entire being runs on electricity.

Now that my brain has all this new information about Jace, it's been rewriting everything I know about him and about everything I've experienced with him since that night on a disastrous blind date. And I'm left with so many questions. "You asked me once why I chose to work in physical therapy. Do you remember?"

He grimaces and scratches his forehead.

"Oh! You're embarrassed at the memory of your answer. Good! Because you gave about the vaguest one possible."

He goes back to skimming his fingers along my arm. "In my defense, no one has ever asked me that question before."

"You're a spy, Jace"—

"Intelligence operative."

— "you're trained to come up with responses on the fly."

"But you were so near me that I was struggling to think straight."

I chuckle. "Okay, I'll allow that defense. But only this one time. And only if you answer the question about your actual job— what made you want to be a spy?" He throws me a look,

so I amend. “*Intelligence operative.*” And I only can amend it because he recently said it. Do they ever actually call them that in movies?

“That’s a tough question.”

I can tell it is by the way the expression on his face changed. The change is slight, but it tells me there is a lot beneath the surface. “Do you want to tell me? It’s okay if you don’t.”

“No, I want you to know.” One side of his lips pulls up into a smile, and in a less serious voice, he says, “Plus, I hear that my defense of my earlier business solutions answer is only accepted if I tell you.”

I chuckle, but my eyes are back on him, and now I’m even more dying to know his answer since I get the impression that he doesn’t give it often. I feel honored that he’s willing to tell me.

He stays quiet for a long moment. Then he takes a long, slow breath as if preparing himself. When he lets it out, he says, “When we were kids, Charlie was kidnapped.”

I gasp. A part of me knew that his answer could go back to his childhood— a lot of people’s eventual careers are rooted in something that happened in childhood. But I definitely didn’t expect that answer.

“She was three; I was six. I know you hate vague answers”— he shoots me a look— “but the details are classified, so I’m going to have to be vague about some of it.” He pauses a moment, like he’s choosing his words carefully. “My dad was the director of the CSA, and our home address and information about our family was leaked to an extremist group. My siblings and I were at a park, just playing like normal kids and not paying that much attention when she was taken. It was the scariest twenty-four hours of any of our lives.”

I realize that my hand is still over my mouth from when I gasped, and I let it drop. “Oh, Jace. That must have been so hard. I’m so sorry.”

He reaches out and gives my hand a squeeze, then keeps holding it. “As you can imagine, a child of the director of one of our nation’s intelligence agencies getting kidnapped is kind of a big deal. A lot of agencies worked together with my dad and the CSA to get Charlie found and brought home safely.

“It had been a pretty stressful situation for all of us. My parents knew that we would *all* need to work through the trauma of that experience, and they had us— they included— work with therapists. Even though the therapy was really helpful for all of us, we all kind of came out the other side changed.”

I rub my thumb across the part of his hand that it’s touching. “I don’t think you can go through something like that and not be affected by it in one way or another and still be human.”

He nods in agreement. “It left me scared— of a lot of things, actually. My therapist helped me to realize that it was because my sense of control had just disappeared. As a kid, you kind of always feel like your life is in someone else’s hands, but after the kidnapping, it felt so much worse. As if I didn’t have any control. Like I couldn’t get attached to anything, because things could change in an instant and there wasn’t anything I could do about it.

“And it wasn’t because I worried that any one of us could be kidnapped at any time. I don’t know why, but that wasn’t what scared me. It came more from seeing how my family was changed by it. Because I now had the knowledge that things could change so drastically in an instant and in such a long-lasting way. I mean, it’s been over two decades now, and I think our family is still affected by it in ways maybe we don’t even recognize.”

He pauses for a moment, probably remembering something, so I stay quiet and just try to imagine what that must’ve been like and how it would probably still be affecting me if I had been in his shoes.

“That all happened during the summer. The next school year, I was much more timid. There was a kid in my class

named Anthony. He was scrawny and shy, and at recess, there was a group of about five kids with bucketloads of confidence and big egos who always picked on him. They never threw punches, but they would always corner the poor kid and make him feel awful.

“My first instinct was to do nothing. I didn’t think anyone would believe me that there was a problem if no one was physically hurt, and I didn’t want to get in the middle of it out of fear that they would then turn their bullying on me.

“Plus, I think I was still feeling too much like I couldn’t control anything. So I just stood back and watched for four days in a row as this happened.

“Apparently, four days was my limit. On the fifth day, as soon as the bullies cornered Anthony, I marched right over and stood between Anthony and them and let out all the fear, frustration, and anger that had been building up in me at the unfairness of it all.”

Jace puts a knuckle to his upper lip and lets out one breath of a chuckle at whatever he’s remembering. “I just let them have it. I yelled at them about how mean they were being and about how they were supposed to protect kids like Anthony, not attack him.

“I can’t remember what all I said, but they were so shocked at the whole thing that they immediately backed up. And by the time I finished yelling at them, their heads were hanging. They just stood there for a moment, silent, so I added, ‘Well, apologize,’ and they actually did. And it sounded like they meant it. Looking back, I don’t think they were bad kids. They’d just— gotten into a bad pattern, I guess.

“Anyway, that seemed to break them out of it, Anthony and I became friends, and it went a long way toward helping me feel like I had control again.”

I am watching him in awe of what he’s been through and what he’s become. I am in awe of the entire family. I can’t even fathom how I would feel if the same thing had happened to one of my sisters. My heart aches for all of what he— and the rest of them— must’ve gone through.

“My siblings and I eventually all had experiences that helped each of us get through the trauma in our own ways. For most of us, it left us wanting to do everything we could to protect others. To keep other people from having to go through what we went through.”

I nod, because it explains his protective nature. I’ve seen it so many times since we first met— everything from shielding me from the football, to pressing his body against mine when the golf ball hit into the ticket taker’s shack, to getting me away from actual danger at the gala and at the café today.

“My brother, Blake, though, was affected differently, maybe because he had been with Charlie when she was grabbed. He knew that it never would’ve happened if my parents weren’t elite operatives or if my dad didn’t run the CSA. And he’s right— I mean you can’t deny that. But it made him very bitter toward the agency, and he stays far from it. He’s still close with everyone in the family, but he doesn’t want anything to do with the agency.”

“And he’s the only one of your siblings who doesn’t work at the CSA?”

Jace nods.

There is so much more I want to know. I want to ask if his parents became overly protective of them after that. If things changed at the agency. If his parents tried to shield them from everything or just taught them more. Whether it brought them together as a family or pulled them apart.

But the story seems to have taken a lot out of Jace, and he’s back to looking as tired as he was before we ate. All of my questions seem like they would take a lot out of a person even when they hadn’t just gone days without much sleep.

And then he actually yawns.

“Jace, you are so tired. You should sleep for a bit.”

He shakes his head. “Can’t. Active mission.”

I am impressed at how strongly he feels responsibility. I also know that we are hidden away, that we have two agents... I mean *operatives* standing guard, and that Charlie is going to

call Jace's phone that's sitting on the coffee table with any updates. So I say, "Okay, no sleep. Just lay your head on my lap and rest for a minute."

Jace gives me a mischievous grin that makes my insides flutter. "Okay," he says, then gives me a kiss and situates himself so that his body is stretched out across the couch, his head in my lap. He reaches up, touches two fingers to my cheek, and breathes, "You're so beautiful."

He's smiling up at me like he's won this round, but I'm pretty sure that I did.

"Shh," I say. "Just rest your eyes for a moment." I brush my fingertips over his eyelids to close them. He actually keeps them closed, and I swear only five seconds pass before his breathing slows to the rhythm of sleep.

I take the opportunity to spend a few minutes just gazing at his beautiful face. He looks so peaceful. It's such a contrast from the expression that's been on his face since I first saw him at that fancy restaurant in Baltimore.

There's something else, too, that's grabbing my attention, and I realize it's that he looks so vulnerable. Jace isn't a large man, but one look at him leaves no question that he is strong, and not just physically. It's such a contrast to the serene expression on his face now.

His eyelashes are casting a soft shadow against his cheek and look so delicate that I want to reach out and brush my fingertip along them. His eyebrows have the perfect arch – somehow I've never noticed that before. The nose I have noticed. It's a strong nose, which feels weird to think, but it's just... chiseled and nice. I want to trace a finger down its contour.

As I'm imagining it, I stop as my imaginary finger hovers right over his lips, and now my lips are buzzing with the memory of the much too quick kiss he gave me just before lying down. I distract myself from wanting to kiss this man for hours by letting my eyes drift to his jaw. He is clean-shaven, like always, and it hits me that he said he worked all through

the night. When did he shave? Did he use an electric shaver on the way to meet me for lunch?

I laugh— thankfully quietly— as I remember that he arrived on a motorcycle, wearing a helmet. He's a pretty skilled guy, but I don't think he's *that* skilled.

His hair is the only part of him that belies his otherwise controlled appearance. We were chased through town on a motorcycle, and he wasn't wearing a helmet. His hair isn't long, but it definitely has a wind-blown look to it, just like the ends of mine that were hanging beneath the bottom of my helmet. I run my fingers through the hair at his temple, and he's fallen so deeply asleep that he doesn't even flinch.

The more I study his face, the more my mind wanders to all the questions I have. Of course, I've imagined Tom Cruise or Daniel Craig or Matt Damon showing up to rescue me from some nefarious bad guy and then sweeping me off my feet as they fall madly in love with me.

I mean, who hasn't?

It's just that until this moment, I haven't really thought through the implications of it.

Like the secrecy. As a person well-versed in spy movies and TV shows, I get it. National security and safety of the non-spy half of the relationship and all that. But Dan kept a whole other life from me. An entire relationship with a woman he was about to marry. He kind of ruined my ability to handle lies.

Can I handle being in the dark about an entire side of Jace's life? There will always be things he'll have to keep from me. Like just now, as he was telling me about his sister being kidnapped— there are details he can't tell. And there will be plenty more just like them every single day.

How much of his life will he not be able to share with me simply because it's classified?

Plus there's the part about him being gone a lot. And flying to places like Cuba with no notice. If I'd known he was going,

would I have been a mess from all the worrying about whether or not he was safe?

Jace shifts a bit and I hear him mumbling something. I hold my hair as I lean over, tilting my head to hear better, and I catch the last few words. "...keep her safe."

Aww! Is he talking about me? Is he dreaming about me right now? He was very recently trying to keep me safe, so it's possible. I shake my head. At least I wouldn't be alone in worrying.

But oh, does that need of his to protect others have a hold on my heart.

I am lightly combing the hair just above his right ear with my fingertips when a realization hits me. Jace doesn't actually work for a business solutions company, which means that the ball we went to wasn't for people in the business solutions arena. Were the people I tried to strike up conversations with spouses of criminals or spouses of spies? Would I have been able to tell which?

An even scarier thought hits me: is he actually falling for me like I'm falling for him?

When I was worried that the bad guys could've come after me, Jace had said, "No. You were always safe. Whenever I wasn't with you, the FBI was." It didn't hit me at the time but it's hitting me now— that means he was *assigned* to protect me. Which means it was part of his job to get close to me.

He hasn't really given me any reason to doubt that he likes me as much as I like him. But spies are excellent actors— they have to be. That's how they get what they need while on a mission. And not only is he on an active mission, but he's apparently one of the best spies out there.

I am pretty sure that what I've been seeing on Jace's face when his eyes first land on me in a crowd, when he's standing close and gazing into my eyes, or when he's smiling at me from across the room is all genuine.

But would I recognize if it wasn't? With Dan, I always believed that he loved me and that I was the only one. I

completely believed everything he was trying to sell me. I've believed it with Jace, too. But should I? Or am I blind to things like that?

I glance longingly at my powered-down phone that's sitting on the coffee table next to Jace's encrypted one. I wish I could text Livi or Maggie to help me make sense of all this. But not only can I not turn on my phone, I can't tell them.

So, it's up to me to give myself a pep talk. No big deal—I am a pro at positive reinforcement. I just need to use it in my thought process. Okay, anytime I worry that I'm falling into the old patterns that made me lose myself to a relationship, or not notice that I wasn't truly being seen, I'll just... what?

I know. Affirmations.

I'll say to myself, "Mackenzie MacNeil, you don't need to worry about being blind to the truth. You are good at seeing it. All that learning and growing you did after ending things with Dan has basically given you super-strength glasses to see the truth."

Yeah, that's pretty long. I'm going to forget it in about two seconds from now.

I've got it— my affirmation is, "You wear truth glasses now. You've got this."

I smile down at Jace's beautiful, peaceful face and try to feel that peace as I tell myself, *I've totally got this.*

CHAPTER 29

BLURRY LINES AND CLEAR INTENTIONS

JACE

I hear a voice as my brain is slowly easing out of sleep, and it's filling me with a happiness that seems to touch all of me. It takes a few seconds before I realize it's Mackenzie singing as she brushes a fingertip across my forehead and down my temple. I don't know if this is a dream or not, but I want to stay in this blissful moment forever.

And then I realize that the song she is singing is *Secret Agent Man* and my eyes fly open. The mission. Mackenzie. CryptexEndeavor. I immediately sit up, and the change from peaceful bliss to worry and shock that I fell asleep during a mission does not mix with the change in position, and my lightheadedness nearly makes me pass out.

But I do not pass out. That is not something I do.

Mackenzie runs a hand down my upper arm. "Shh. Everything's fine. You just got a message, probably from Charlie. I thought you'd want to know."

"I do, thank you." I run a hand over my face to wake myself up as I grab my phone. I can't believe I fell asleep during a mission. That is something that has never happened before. And I can tell by how long it is taking to pull myself out of the haze that it was a deep sleep.

As I'm entering the 8-digit password, I glance at Mackenzie from the corner of my eye. Crazy as it sounds, I know it is because I was using her lap as a pillow. It hits me that outside of family, I have never felt so safe in the presence

of another person before. Maybe that is why my body got confused and thought it was okay to sleep.

I open Charlie's text. It contains five words that turn my panic at falling asleep during a crisis to sheer relief: *We got them. Mackenzie's safe.*

I am grinning as I turn the phone to show Mackenzie.

Her face brightens. "That's it? No more threat?"

"No more threat."

Treyton and Vince come into the room from the hallway that leads to the two bedrooms— one facing the front of the house and one the back— where they'd been standing watch.

"Did you get the all-clear?" Vince asks.

I nod as I look down at the text that just came in on my phone.

Mackenzie turns to me, a look of uncertainty on her face. "So... What does that mean? What happens next?"

I respond to the text and then meet Mackenzie's eyes. "Next, the director would like you to come in for a debriefing."

Even though we just got the news that the threat to her has been eliminated, the look on her face now is closer to terror than uncertainty. She leans in close and says, "That's your mom, right?"

I chuckle. "It is."

The operatives who drove us here ask if we want to be driven back in the moving truck or if we want to take the motorcycle. I look to Mackenzie and she chooses the bike. This time, as we drive with Mackenzie behind me, wearing my helmet, arms wrapped around my middle, I *do* enjoy the ride. The feel of her arms wrapped around me, holding tightly to me. Her body pressed up against mine. Her head occasionally turned to the side, resting against my back.

When we are at a traffic light, I ask if she minds if we stop by my apartment on our way to the agency, and she doesn't

seem to mind. The jeans and thermal shirt I'm wearing are ones I keep at the agency in case I need to quickly leave for a mission that requires more casual clothes than my usual suit. I don't want to wear them for a debriefing, especially since I've been wearing them since last night, and the only other clothes I have at the office is the tux I wore to the gala.

The thought makes me realize just how long ago that feels like it was. If someone told me that the events that happened before the last twenty-one hours actually happened a week ago, I would believe them, no questions asked.

It didn't seem like a big deal to bring Mackenzie back to my apartment—I hadn't even thought twice before asking her. But as we step through the doorway and into my living space, and as Mackenzie starts looking around at my couches, artwork, and the state of my kitchen, it hits me how unusual it is for me to bring her here.

I don't let anyone in my place besides family or friends. And since all my friends work at the CSA, they've all been carefully vetted. No pest control, even though I saw a spider last week; not a housekeeper, even though I am sure that the dust bunnies under my furniture are multiplying; and not an electrician, HVAC repairman, or carpet cleaning company. No one who could possibly plant a bug or search for sensitive information or compromise me or any of my things.

And I definitely haven't ever brought a woman up here.

Inviting Mackenzie in, more than anything, shows how much I've fallen for her without even realizing how far. Well, okay, telling her that I work for the CSA as an intelligence operative showed it pretty well, too. Apparently, it's been a big day for me.

"Make yourself at home," I say. "I'll be quick."

I can shower in four minutes flat. I've timed myself. I decide to take the four minutes, mainly because it feels like it has been a week since I last showered, even though it has probably only been twelve hours.

But I do it in three because I know that Mackenzie is on the other side of my bedroom door, presumably looking at everything in sight in my apartment. I'm pretty sure she's noticing a few unwashed dishes, my one and only houseplant that is barely alive, and the candid shot of my family laughing between the actual professional shots of our family portraits—the one where I'm thirteen and am sporting braces, acne, and a less-than-flattering hairstyle.

I towel off, dress, and open my bedroom door six-and-a-half minutes after I closed it. My hairstyle is courtesy of my towel, and I'm still putting a tie around my neck as Mackenzie turns around from where she's studying a framed picture that sits on a shelf of me and Charlie, taken on the day she became my handler. Charlie's grin is so big that her entire face shows it.

Her eyes rake over me, and I don't miss the look of appreciation. She strides right over to me, runs her hands down the front of my white button-down, and says, "Looking mighty fine, Mr. Bond." I might have protested the reference, but then she pulls me even closer and plants a kiss on my lips, and I decide she can call me whatever she likes. Spy, agent, MI6, goon— whatever. She'll get no complaint from me.

I want to stay here, kissing her right in the middle of my apartment— in fact, in every room in my apartment— for hours. But I also know that we need to get to the agency for the debriefing, so I only indulge for a minute. Okay, maybe more than a minute. My shower was faster.

Mackenzie is the first to pull back, but she seems every bit as reluctant as me to end it. Really, we don't even have to stay here kissing. I just want to be with her. For more than just a moment. But I will take every moment I can get— every one of them matters. I am a miser, hoarding every moment I can.

"We probably should go," she says.

I nod. "I just need to comb my hair."

"Do you have a brush I can borrow?" She grimaces as she attempts to run her fingers through her hair. It works pretty well until she hits the part that wasn't covered by the helmet.

“The ride from the safe house to here wasn’t too bad, but that high-speed chase might have spelled the end to my hair. I’ll likely have to shave it off.”

I run my fingertips along the edge of one of her wavy strands. “I say we give the brush a chance first. If that fails, I have an attachment to my electric razor that might work.”

She laughs, and I lead her into my bathroom. And then, side by side, we both stand in front of my mirror, doing our hair. Like a married couple getting ready for work in the morning. It shocks me how much I don’t hate that idea.

Of course, if we were a married couple getting ready in the morning, Mackenzie’s hair wouldn’t be the tangled mess that it is. Unless we’d had a very adventurous night under the covers.

Ohhhkay. I need to get my mind somewhere else pronto. As I grab my suit coat and put it on, I say, “How about we drive my car to the briefing instead of my motorcycle?” I button the front of my suit, tug on my left cuff to adjust it, and then tug the one on the right.

I glance up to see that Mackenzie is watching my actions through the bathroom mirror, her mouth partly open, and I smile.

She sees my smile and seems to shake herself out of whatever she was thinking and says, “I’m sorry, what did you say? I couldn’t hear over the sound of you being the sexiest man alive.”

I chuckle. It hits me that no one at the CSA would’ve judged me for coming in wearing the same clothes as last night or for going to a debriefing not wearing a suit. Did I come back here to change because I’ve seen Mackenzie’s reaction to me in a suit and wanted her to have that reaction again?

Yeah, there’s a very good chance it was that.

As we are walking to my car, Mackenzie asks, “So where is this briefing?”

“At the agency. Normally, we would meet somewhere neutral, but since you’ve already been to the CSA, we’ll have

it there. It has the added advantage of bug-proof meeting rooms.” I open her door and she just nods as she gets in. I’ve been trained in reading and deciphering body language, so it isn’t hard to tell that she’s nervous.

Once we are on the freeway, she says, “When I was a kid and I saw a TV show or a movie where the character needed to be debriefed, I always wondered why the character wasn’t more terrified.”

I glance over at her as she chuckles, but I hear the nerves behind the laugh.

“Maybe it’s because I thought it was some kind of brain extraction procedure. Or maybe that it was more like when a bad guy captures a spy and interrogates them for information in ways that are outlawed by the Geneva Convention. So when it was an agent going back to their agency, I couldn’t understand why they would do that to their own people. It seemed like a mean thing to do to someone on your side.” She glances over at me. “They should rename it. The word ‘debriefing’ doesn’t really sound like it means ‘talking.’”

She laughs again but runs the palms of her hands across her pants. I reach over and give her hand a squeeze. “It really is just talking. Everything is going to be fine. The polygraph guy is very nice.”

In a high-pitched voice that rises even more at the end, she says, “There’s a polygraph?!”

I wasn’t expecting that extreme of a reaction. “No, there’s no polygraph.” I chuckle a bit, which seems to help lighten the mood. “Even if there was—which there isn’t—I get them all the time. They aren’t bad at all. But the only thing we’ll be doing is talking with my mom and my sister.”

I don’t say “my handler” and “the director,” because back at the safe house, Mackenzie seemed to be more comfortable with the thought of talking to my mom than talking with a high-ranking government official. My mom in either capacity can be very sweet and comforting or terrifyingly intimidating.

At the gate, I tap my badge on the scanner Moss is holding, and then I put my hand on it until the fingerprint scanner lights up green. Moss tips his head at me and then Mackenzie and says, "Good evening, Mr. Lancaster, Miss MacNeil." Then I drive around the building to access the underground lot, park in my spot, and lead Mackenzie to the elevator. I scan my badge again, let the retinal scanner do its thing, and then breathe into the DNA device. The doors open and we step inside.

CHAPTER 30

AWKWARD QUESTIONS AND SURPRISE EMOTIONS

JACE

It is rare to step onto this elevator with someone not employed by the CSA. It's even rarer— and by that, I mean unheard of— to be on this elevator with a civilian I'm falling in love with. I glance at Mackenzie as the elevator nears my floor. It's even more unheard of to be headed with her to a space that doesn't look like Lancaster Business Solutions. Right now, it's one hundred percent CSA.

I take a deep breath as the doors open and then hold out my hand toward the field mission floor. "Mackenzie MacNeil, welcome to the Clandestine Services Agency."

As she steps off the elevator and into the place where I spend a good portion of my waking hours, I feel like I am welcoming her into what she would call my "spy life." Do I really want that for her? I know the gravity of what inviting her in means. Yet I am so drawn to this woman that I can't seem to do anything else.

I watch her closely as she notices all the differences between how this place looks now and how it did when she was last here and thought it was a business solutions company. Her eyes fall on the big things first, like the CSA name and logo in the space where she'd seen Lancaster Business Solutions before, the row of directors' portraits along one wall that previously only showed my parents' portraits, and the big screens at the front.

Then her eyes go to the analysts and other intelligence officers. I'm sure they've been briefed that a civilian is coming

into the offices, but they are still glancing up like everything about this is so wrong.

And I get it. I'm feeling the same things that they are. But it is also kind of amazing to have Mackenzie here, at my work, the place that is my whole life, knowing this time what it is. It feels almost as though if she accepts this place, she's accepting me for who I am.

The director immediately walks over from an officer's desk to greet us. She shoots me a quick look that tells me she isn't thrilled that I shared with Mackenzie about my job or about the agency, and I hope Mackenzie didn't catch that bit of non-verbal communication. I don't think she did, because her eyes are everywhere, trying to take in too many things.

"Thank you so much for coming in," the director says in her soothing, *I want you to feel calm and at home because I'm about to ask you some questions* voice, and Mackenzie's shoulders instantly relax a bit. I see why Mackenzie wanted to make sure my mom would be debriefing her because my mom's presence does seem to make her more comfortable. It's one of the reasons why my mom is so legendary as an intelligence officer and as the CSA Director.

The director invites Mackenzie, Charlie, and me to one of the conference rooms at the back. As Mackenzie walks through the door into the small room, my mom points out that there's a scanner in the doorframe that checks for listening devices, that our device that suppresses signal transference is always active, and as she shuts the door and presses the button to darken the wall of windows that separate us from the main area of my department, says that no one can see us.

I don't know that Mackenzie finds all that comforting, though. From what I can see on her face, it mostly reminds her that things here are pretty serious and that she should've been worrying about those things all along. She meets my eyes, and I know she's looking for reassurance. I make sure that my voice and every action exude stability, security, care, and encouragement as I say, "It's all overkill for something like this, though."

I take off my suit coat, too, to show that this is more casual, and hang it on the back of my chair, then I loosen my tie and unfasten my top button. I don't miss the smile that pulls at the corners of Mackenzie's lips when I do. Good. It'll help her relax. And I can't say I mind being able to affect her that way.

We all sit in the rolling office chairs, but my mom has subtly maneuvered the four of us to form a small circle at the side of the room instead of sitting around the table. She must've thought it would be less intimidating for Mackenzie.

The director starts asking questions, mostly about what happened and what Mackenzie saw, and Charlie throws in questions as we go. But Charlie's are mostly questions based on curiosity about things she couldn't see or hear, like "What did you two do to pass the time while you were at the safe house?"

"That's a need-to-know question," I say, "and you don't need to know."

"I didn't say I *need* to know— I *want* to know." Charlie turns her focus back on Mackenzie. "Did you two kiss? My brother is treating you well, right?"

I flash Charlie a look just as my mom says, "Charlotte."

For a moment, I'm bugged at Charlie for asking. But then Mackenzie laughs, and I see a pleased look on Charlie's face. It hits me that Charlie isn't being a nosy sister right now—even though she's playing that part— she's being the elite operative that she is. She knew how Mackenzie would respond before she even asked.

And knowing, as I do, what question is coming next, Charlie probably guessed that Mackenzie would need a lighthearted question like that to pull her away from the ones about threat actors chasing her. Charlie is incredibly intuitive about stuff like this. I don't give her nearly enough credit.

"I know, I know," Charlie says. "Some questions are more appropriately asked outside of these walls. I withdraw." But

then she points between herself and Mackenzie and stage whispers, “You’ll tell me later, right?”

I’m grateful for Charlie, because my mom’s next question is, “Did you notice anything unusual on your street or around your house in the past week?”

Mackenzie tells about the FBI agent on her street, then as she starts to tell about not really noticing anything on her walks, she stops talking and bites her lip before she begins to cry. Not big or wailing. Just silent tears running down her face that she doesn’t seem to appreciate.

Honestly, today was physically and emotionally a *lot*— for anyone— and I’m surprised the crying didn’t come sooner. Not only was an evil corporation after her at high speeds, but she found out that she’d been in danger all week, that the danger was near the home that she shares with her sister, brother-in-law, and infant niece, and that the guy she is dating has been hiding information about who he is.

If we weren’t sitting in a conference room in the CSA offices, I would wrap my arms around Mackenzie and hold her tight until she has cried all she needs to. It feels very inappropriate here, though, and I get the sense that Mackenzie would not appreciate it.

The couple of tears that first escaped are turning into sobbing, and it’s all I can do to not pull her onto my lap and say something comforting into her ear as I run my hand down her hair. Instead, I grab a tissue from the side table and hand it to her.

She tries to stop crying almost instantly. “I’m so sorry that I’m crying. This is so embarrassing.” She waves a hand in front of her eyes like a little wind could dry up her tears.

My mom reaches out to take one of Mackenzie’s hands in hers, patting it with her other hand. “It’s okay. What you’re experiencing is belated shock. Oftentimes, we don’t process a situation at the time it’s happening because our brain is too busy dealing with everything else that is going on. So it isn’t until a quiet moment later that it all hits. This is completely normal and absolutely nothing to be embarrassed about.” She

leans over, grabs the entire tissue box, and places it on the table near Mackenzie. “We keep these in here for that very reason.”

We actually keep them in here because one of the analysts, Bert, has terrible seasonal allergies, not because we ever have assets in this room. But I approve of the comment. In debriefings I’ve had with assets, it’s always the questions like the one the director just asked— the ones that make people think about the danger beyond whatever situation just happened— that really gets them. My mom isn’t lying when she says it is normal.

Mackenzie dabs at her tears. “Thank you. I’m kind of surprised that my body is reacting this way because I really am fine. I’m not normally a crier at all. I mean, everything was quiet at the safe house when Jace was asleep on my lap, and I didn’t cry then. I don’t know why I am now.”

My mom and Charlie both look over at me, seeming uncharacteristically similar as both raise a curious eyebrow in question. I don’t even know how to respond— all I know is that I now have a tingling at the base of my neck and I’m very ready to have this debriefing end.

Mackenzie dabs at the last of her tears, then answers the original question by saying that she did notice a man in a car that was hanging around her work a lot, and there was a black SUV that kind of seemed like it was following her after leaving the outdoor mall. My mom assures her that those were all FBI agents and I’m assured that if anyone was watching her for any extended periods, she or her sister would’ve noticed.

My mom asks a few more questions, and then tells Mackenzie, “Well, I’m happy to assure you that the threat is gone now, so you don’t need to worry about it anymore. Thank you for being so accommodating by coming here to let us ask you questions.” She stands. “Jace will be able to take you home in just a minute, but first, do you mind if I steal him away for a moment?”

Mackenzie shakes her head. “Of course not.”

I know I'll only be on the other side of the door, but I still hate leaving Mackenzie right now. I take one last look at her, give her a smile, and then step out onto the floor with the director.

"You were right," she says, and it surprises me. "Including Mackenzie in on this mission was a good idea. We think that having Mackenzie attend the gala with you was what drew out CryptexEndeavor's leader today. We don't think he would've shown his face if he hadn't known you were both together at that café. Good work."

I say thank you, but her words don't thrill me the way I'm sure she thinks they will. I don't feel like I did a good job—I feel like I put a woman I care deeply about in harm's way. There were some very bad guys after us today. And not only that but high-speed chases on motorcycles always come with risks. And I'm the one who put her in that situation.

To lessen the pressure of the guilt just a bit, I ask the other thing I've been wondering about. "Since you requested that we come in together for this debriefing, I take it you heard that I told Mackenzie about the CSA and my role in it?" Protocol states that if you want to read in someone you're in a relationship with, you get clearance to do so first. The agency will then vet the person before granting permission. I didn't do any of that.

"Yes."

"And you're okay with it?"

Her lips purse slightly, the only tell that she gives away. "I wouldn't say that exactly." By the way she says it, I know that now isn't the time to talk about it, which is okay by me. She nods at the door. "Get her home and make sure she's okay. She's been through a lot today."

I nod. Experiencing your first high-speed chase by threat actors is a lot, and there's nothing more that I want right now than to get her home and make sure she's okay.

CHAPTER 31

CONFRONTATIONS AND CONFESSIONS

JACE

I pull into the big driveway at my mom's house—the house that I lived in for the bulk of my childhood—for our weekly family dinner. Based on the cars, at least Ledger, Miles, and Emerson are already here. Charlie lives close enough that she usually walks over. Blake often does, too.

I get out of the car, and as I'm walking toward the front door, I toss my keys into the air before catching them and sliding them into my pocket. Which is weird, because I'm not generally a key tosser. Maybe it's because I'm feeling such a strange mix of emotions in my gut right now.

The strongest emotion is elation because Mackenzie is safe. I wasn't one hundred percent convinced that the threat was gone after we left her debriefing two days ago. But our entire team has spent the past two days ensuring that it was, in fact, the leader that I had spotted at the café, and tracking down every one of his partners and lackeys. So, CryptexEndeavor no longer exists. The key is safe, the briefcase with the drive containing the weapon plans is safe, and all the threats related to the attempted selling of the Eradication Project have been neutralized.

Which means all loose ends involving anything to do with Mackenzie are tied up. The mission is closed, and Mackenzie is safe. And despite crying during the debriefing, she has seemed remarkably unshaken from the whole ordeal.

Plus, Mackenzie now knows that I'm an intelligence operative. She may have been pretty angry that I had kept so much from her, but she didn't run the other way when I told

her the truth. It's incredible to have that kind of honesty with her. It makes me feel lighter than I have in years.

But just below the elation surface, I worry that maybe I made the wrong choice in telling her. It's kind of a lot to place on a person. Although Mackenzie and I have spent enough time together and have gotten close enough that it feels like we've known each other for months, we haven't. And I chose to tell her this soon into our relationship?

Maybe telling her was inevitable, and had I set its eventuality into motion the moment I stood in the CSA offices and presented to the director the plan for me to protect Mackenzie so that we could figure out who the buyer is. Because if my plan was approved and I got assigned to her, I was always going to fall for her, and it was always going to lead us here. To her knowing about my real job and the real company I work for.

What would've happened if I had followed Charlie's and Ledger's advice not to get involved with Mackenzie that day at the outdoor mall when she'd accidentally received the brush pass? When she'd accidentally become my asset?

Maybe I would've only been able to heed their advice that day if I hadn't first met Mackenzie during her blind date when we'd pretended to know each other. Then maybe right now I wouldn't feel so conflicted about falling headfirst in love with a woman at a time in my life when I swore I wouldn't get involved with anyone, while simultaneously being so happy that I am involved with Mackenzie.

If I had only talked to my asset, Carl, at that restaurant and not Mackenzie, then right now I would be blissfully unaware of all that I am missing out on by not knowing her. Although, "blissfully" isn't the right word, because I've never felt as blissful as I've been since I met her.

Did I really just use the word "blissful" to describe myself? I shake my head but can't get the smile off my face as I open the front door.

What I expect to see is some action in the direction of the kitchen and dining room area with a lot of voices overlapping.

Maybe Blake's two-year-old daughter, Heidi, racing toward me to give me a hug and then dragging me by the hand toward everyone else.

What I actually see is all five of my siblings and my mom sitting in the living room, eyes on me, with less-than-happy expressions on their faces. I pause for a moment, hand still on the open door, as I assess the situation.

Then I slowly close the door and stand with my shoulders squared, my feet apart, ready for whatever they throw at me. "I take it this is an intervention?"

My oldest brother, Blake, crosses his arms and stares me down like I'm eleven and he's thirteen and we each are one hundred percent convinced that we deserve the last slice of pizza, but since he is older, he prevails. "No," he says. "This is an interrogation."

I get the sense that they might have a script or at least someone who is supposed to voice their issue— my money is on Emerson— but Ledger bursts out with, "I can't believe you told Mackenzie about the CSA!"

"What was I supposed to do in a situation where everything was so exposed?" Moments ago, I was feeling guilty about this very thing, so it feels hypocritical to be so defensive about it right now. But I am.

"Your *job* is to come up with cover stories," Ledger says. "You couldn't come up with one for that?"

"Okay, then tell me. How was I supposed to explain away us getting an extraction onto a moving truck?"

Miles shrugs. "You could've told her that you have a friend who rents moving trucks and that you asked him for help."

I shake my head. "She would buy that for less than two seconds before noticing all of the equipment inside."

"So," Miles says, "instead of saying that your friend rents moving trucks, you say he's a private detective and that the vehicle is how he can do his work without being detected."

Actually, that's pretty good. But there is so much more to it than that. "And the safe house?"

Blake is the one who pipes up this time, and he isn't even CSA. "You say it's your friend's house."

"And the lack of any personal effects in the house?"

"He just barely moved in and hasn't unpacked any boxes yet. All that's done is the furniture that the movers brought in. That's why you decided it was a good place to hide out." Blake might not be an intelligence operative, but he was still raised by two of them.

It only takes a second to see the flaw in that plan, though. "Okay, but I didn't wait for the threat actors at the café to come attack us. I saw them, then got Mackenzie out of there *before* they could act. How was I supposed to explain away the fact that I knew who they were just by seeing them if I wasn't an operative?"

"You could've told her that you have a friend in the FBI," Emerson says. "He sent you a text that you saw on your watch saying they are at the café for a sting, saw you, and suggested you get out quickly before they make a move so you don't get caught in the crosshairs. You didn't need to say it had anything to do with either of you."

"But then they chased *us*. So she'd have known that it *did* have to do with us."

Charlie meets my eyes. "Jace, one of your strengths is coming up with believable cover stories, even if there are a ton of constraints and the subject is a natural skeptic. Why not this time?"

I *am* good at coming up with strong cover stories, even on the fly. I came up with one once involving a covert cupcake convention, a three-tiered display stand, and a spatula signed by a famous baker that the subject completely believed. All the operatives and analysts listening back at the CSA retell the story as if it were legendary.

So why *didn't* I come up with one at that moment? Several plausible cover stories I could have told her are running

through my mind right now. And for a second, I imagine telling Mackenzie one of them. She's a smart girl, but I've had a lot of training—I'm skilled at convincing others. I could've pulled it off.

Then I imagine how I would feel at this moment if I had told Mackenzie a very believable cover story that she bought into. One where at this moment, she wouldn't know that I'm an intelligence operative and would have never heard the words "Clandestine Services Agency."

And I realize that I didn't tell her a cover story because I *want* her to know the truth about me. I also realize that my instincts had told me that she could be trusted with that secret because if they hadn't, I would've easily come up with a way to explain everything away. I've done it plenty of times before.

Charlie speaks again, her voice calm and at a normal volume. "I mean maybe it wouldn't be such a big deal if Mackenzie hadn't shown up at our work and met us all."

Blake stands so quickly that it pushes his armchair back a few inches. "She showed up at the agency?" His arms are in fists at his sides, and he's leaning slightly forward. I swear I can see a vein in his forehead bulge. "She knows that you work in the family business *with your mom and four of your siblings*? You blew everyone's cover? Now she not only knows that you work for an intelligence agency, but that everyone else does, too. You put all of us in danger."

"First off," I say, trying to keep my voice a lot calmer than Blake's, "in case you've forgotten, our cover story is a *family* business, so even if she hadn't surprised me by coming into Lancaster Business Solutions, she still would've known that most of us work for the same place. We use that cover because it's a good one, but it also comes with that little detail. And secondly, she's not going to tell anyone." I know how weak the reason sounds, and I can't explain how, but I have absolutely no doubt that it's true.

"She hasn't been vetted," Ledger says. "So do you *know* that?"

"I do."

“And if she’s not given the choice?” Miles’s voice is soft, and I flinch. Someone using force to get information is always a possibility when a good guy knows information that a bad guy wants.

Charlie holds up her hands. “Do you know what? What’s done is done. It might not have been a great decision”— she shoots me a look— “but it’s not like he can go back and change it now.”

A few of my siblings open their mouths like they’re about to say more, but my mom stands and speaks for the first time. “You’ve all had a chance to air your grievances. Now I’d like to remind everyone that Jace hasn’t told a soul about the CSA in the six years that he’s been with the agency or in all the years that your dad and I have. If he did now, it’s because he trusts Mackenzie, and we all know we can trust Jace.”

I’m not convinced that my mom fully believes what she just said, but I am exceptionally grateful that she said it and that she said it convincingly.

“Now up, everyone. Dinner’s ready and I want to eat it while it’s warm.”

Everyone rises and makes their way to the dining room, but my mom holds back and says, “You are going to submit the paperwork to have Mackenzie vetted.”

I nod. “I will follow protocol to the letter.” I pause a moment and add, “Starting now,” since I already ignored protocol by reading Mackenzie in before submitting her info.

“And maybe bring her for a family dinner?”

“After this?” I ask as we start walking toward the kitchen, spreading my hands wide to encompass all my siblings and what went on tonight.

“I think it’ll help the situation. I’ll be at the summit next week, so bring her in two weeks. That’ll give everyone plenty of time to get used to the idea of her knowing. She’s a lovely woman. How can they not love her if they meet her?”

The sentence gives me goosebumps. I don’t think I’ve ever loved a sentence more.

Everyone might be mad during dinner, as evidenced by Ledger “accidentally” flicking peas in my direction, the constant passing of the salt whenever I ask for anything else, and the absence of our usual lighthearted banter, but we are still a family, and our bonds are deep. Their anger will eventually pass— I just need to ride it out. My parents always said that we never give up on family, so I know we are in this together.

After dinner, I go out onto the patio and lean on the ledge, trying to relax after the tense meal. This backyard is perfect— a big grassy area in the middle bordered by enough trees and shrubs that the fences are barely visible— and holds so many memories. I don’t come out here nearly often enough.

When I hear the door to the patio open, I turn only enough to see that it’s Emerson. I ask the question that I didn’t want to broach during dinner. “Where’s Heidi?”

“Aunt Trudy’s.” Emerson joins me in leaning against the railing, staring into the moonlit backyard. “Blake was really mad and knew that he would likely yell at you but he didn’t want her to witness it.”

I could say a lot about Blake, especially after tonight, but one thing I could never say is that he’s a bad dad. Heidi being dropped in his lap as a six-month-old with no mother in the picture was a shock to all of us, but it has brought out the best in Blake. It doesn’t mean that he’s not still cranky toward the rest of the world, but Heidi’s effect has surprised us all.

Emerson chuckles as we look out at the backyard we spent so much time in as kids. “Do you remember that time it was just the two of us home one summer afternoon, and we used a rope to pull one of those round plastic snow sleds behind the riding lawn mower, then drove it in circles as we took turns giving each other rides on the sled?”

Now I’m chuckling, too. “And that was the one day that Dad came home from work early. I’ll never forget that look on his face as we both rounded the corner back there and saw him, arms crossed, leaning a shoulder against the side of the garage.”

“And I’ll never forget how we had to take turns mowing the lawn for the rest of that summer without going faster than the slowest speed it was capable of.”

“Man, that was slow,” I say. “We could’ve mowed the lawn in half the time using the push mower.”

We are both quiet for a moment, just listening to the crickets and watching the lightning bugs fly around the trees furthest from us. It was times like those that cemented Emerson as the brother I am the closest to. “I really miss Dad,” I say.

“I do, too.”

“I wish I could still talk to him.”

Emerson nods. “He was really good at giving advice.”

“Yeah.” I look across the backyard. “Sometimes I could really use that.” My dad was a giant of a man. Not physically. But he was just such a presence. Most of my friends outgrew the whole “My dad can beat up your dad” phase and went right onto the “I can’t believe I have to be seen in public with him” phase. I never did. I never stopped being proud to call him my dad. He still drove me nuts sometimes, and I still felt the need to really push back quite often, especially when I thought things were unfair, but I always respected him. I always wanted him around.

I still do.

We are quiet for another long moment before Emerson says, “I get why you told Mackenzie.” He shrugs. “Deep connections are important. As humans, we need to be vulnerable and share with one person a deeper part of ourselves than what we share with others. I think it helps us on a multitude of levels to know that they truly see the real us.”

I glance at my brother. That’s surprisingly deep, even for Emerson.

“What you need to ask yourself is why did you tell her? Is it because you really like this woman and can see a future with her? Or is it because you are craving that kind of connection

and the opportunity presented itself, but it didn't really matter if it was Mackenzie or someone else?"

My gut reaction to that is to punch Emerson. And if it were any other brother out here suggesting that, I might ignore my no-punching rule. But Emerson always delivers blows like this with an earnest face, and I know there are good intentions behind it. That's just Emerson for you.

So I match his earnest question with an earnest answer. "It's because I can see a future with her."

He nods. "Then that's a good enough reason for me."

Then I add something that surprises me I can actually voice aloud. "And it scares me."

Emerson nods again, for longer this time, before turning and patting me on the shoulder. "I think that comes with the territory." Then he walks back into the house, leaving me alone to dwell on my worries.

Thanks a bunch, Emerson.

CHAPTER 32

**SOCCER BALLS, TEXT
TONES, AND A FISHY
COMPLIMENT**

MACKENZIE

“I’m so nervous,” I say as I come out of my bathroom, where I’d been checking my hair one last time, and hurry to my kitchen table at the opposite side of my apartment where I’d mistakenly left my earrings.

My sister— who’s standing on my cement stairs, holding Addi and leaning against the door that leads to her house— has been watching me as I race around my garage apartment like a squirrel on a triple espresso.

Not that I’m nervous to see Jace. Over the past two weeks, we have seen each other every night that he’s not been on a mission.

One of those days, we rented bikes and biked on a fun trail not far from here that I’ve wanted to try. (I may not be good at sports, but I do love a good adventure and this one was the best. And not only because we pulled off into a cove of trees to catch our breath and drink some water and ended up taking off each other’s bike helmets and kissing for ages. His face was just looking all sun-kissed and the little band of redness on his forehead from the helmet somehow just looked so unbelievably adorable on him.)(But I have to admit that alone would’ve made that particular adventure one of the best.)

Early on a Saturday morning, we went to a farmer’s market, and a local beekeeper was selling honey straws of all different flavors. Since I had told Jace about the honeypot with the “You’re memorable” label on it that Livi gave me, he bought me fifty of the honey straws. Then he bought a handmade card from another vendor that had cute little bees

on it and wrote inside the card “I agree,” in his slanted writing, then tucked it into the bag with the honey straws. If I was a crier and prone to shed tears from overwhelming emotions (outside of debriefings in secret government agency buildings), that would’ve done it. As it was, I still nearly died from an exploding heart.

We also went to a couples cooking class (where I learned that Jace also looks irresistible with a bit of flour on his cheek and that together, we can make a mean pasta from scratch), curled up on his couch together to watch a movie (he even let me pick the movie!), and painted pottery together. (Where we learned that neither of us is good at working with glazes, but both of us can laugh at our mistakes until our guts hurt.) We each went home with the other person’s masterpiece as a reminder of how much fun we had. The bowl that Jace painted now graces my kitchen table. I keep the honey straws in it, right along with Jace’s note.

We also went on a double date with Charlie and a guy that she’s gone on two previous dates with and wanted Jace’s opinion about. (I thought the guy was great but a little bland. Jace thought he wasn’t good enough for Charlie. Based on how protective I’ve seen him be of his sister, this did not surprise me at all.)

We’ve copiously talked and laughed and shared hopes and dreams. And we’ve copiously kissed. I might have been worried that my relationship with Jace wasn’t entirely real for just a second once I found out that he’d been dating me as an assignment, but those kisses have made it obvious that his attraction is authentic.

And let’s just say that the man knows how to gently caress a face! I didn’t even know that I liked my face caressed until Jace came along. There’s something about it that just makes me feel seen and adored.

“Why are you so nervous?” Maggie asks. “You’ve already met most of his family.”

I fumble with an earring as I try to put it in. “I haven’t met Ledger or Blake. And today is different. It’s their whole family

together at a meal, with me as the only one who isn't a Lancaster. It's a lot of pressure." I stand, facing her, with my arms out, showing off my high-rise, straight-legged tan pants with my tucked-in short-sleeved silky indigo shirt that I think goes pretty fabulous with my skin tone. "How do I look?" I turn around to show her my backside.

"Like you should consider removing that toilet paper that's tucked into your pants."

I gasp and frantically run my hands along my waistband at the back.

"I'm kidding! You look great. And listen, just tell yourself that meeting them is probably going to go better than it did for Livi when she met Felipe's parents."

"Yes," I say, pointing at her. "That's good. I'll think of that."

A knock sounds at my door, and I yelp. I've got to calm down. "Seriously, though, I look okay?"

"You look like a million bucks."

I move in close to Addi, who is kicking her arms and legs in excitement, and let her wrap her little fists around my pointer fingers like she loves, then kiss her on the forehead and tell them both goodbye.

Jace and I are halfway from the driveway to his mom's front porch when he stops and wraps an arm around me, pulling me close. A lock of hair blows into my face and he ever so gently brushes a finger across my cheek, tucking the hair behind my ear. "Have I told you lately how much I love that you're no longer in danger and that I still get you in my life?"

"I *also* love that I am no longer in danger." I smile. "And I am also a huge fan of you being in my life."

He gives me a sweet but much too quick kiss on the lips, and then we walk up the steps onto the wrap-around porch and

open the front door. I hear voices coming from what I'm guessing is the direction of the kitchen, but no one is in the front room, so it gives me a chance to look around as we head back toward them.

I know this is the house that Jace lived in from age eleven until he left for college. It's big and it's nice, but it isn't overly fancy. It feels surprisingly... normal. It's a place I can totally picture Jace growing up in.

I imagine him, wearing a backpack, walking out this front door to go to school. Running down this hall, either chasing a sibling or having a sibling chase him as they play (or try to annoy each other). We pass a half-flight of stairs leading down to a family room, and I can picture him dropping a bag of soccer equipment after a long practice, too tired to take it to his room.

My mind immediately goes back to when my high school boyfriend came over and looked through our family photo albums, and I hope that at some point, I get that kind of peek into Jace's childhood.

We are almost to the kitchen when his little two-year-old niece, Heidi, notices us and comes running. She has blonde hair with a bit of a natural curl and strikingly wide blue eyes. "Uncle Jace," she shouts, but it sounds more like "Unco Jace." She comes to a stop at his feet, holding her arms up, and he immediately picks her up.

"How's my favorite niece in the whole world?"

"Good," she says. Then she points at me. "Who's that?"

"This is my girlfriend, Mackenzie."

This is the first time I've heard the word "girlfriend" from Jace's lips, and it does something to my stomach. Well, something *more*. My stomach was already busy feeling something akin to the glow of a campfire, which melted my heart into a puddle of goo at seeing Jace interact with a child.

Jace keeps Heidi in his arms as we walk into the kitchen where everyone else is standing around the kitchen island or in the space between the island and the table. Something cooking

smells great, but I can't sacrifice enough brainpower to even notice what it is because all of my attention is on the imposing family in the room.

We walk up to Emerson, Miles, and Charlie, who are standing closest to us. Since we've all met, I say hello and they say they're glad I could come. Then we walk to a brother who is broad-shouldered and looks like he's older than Jace and I immediately feel a bit more intimidated. Maybe it's because he looks like he's definitely *not* glad that I could come.

"And this is my brother, Blake," Jace says. Heidi immediately stretches her arms out toward Blake, and Blake gathers her into his arms. "He's Heidi's dad."

"It's so nice to finally meet you," I say. I realize that Jace and I haven't been dating *that* long, but it feels like ages since I met his mom, Emerson, and Charlie that day I surprised Jace at his work.

"Nice to meet you, too," he says, but not at all like he means it.

From the corner of my eye, I can see that Jace shoots him a look, and even though I turn my head quickly to see it, it's already gone. Jace puts a hand on the small of my back and guides me toward another brother, this one younger and with lighter hair who is taller than all of them and rather beefy, especially in the shoulders. From the process of elimination, I know it's Ledger before Jace introduces us.

My eyebrows draw together. "Hey, I saw you when I came into what I thought was Lancaster Business Solutions. Why didn't you say you were Jace's brother?" Then I turn to Jace. "Why didn't you introduce us?"

Jace holds out a hand toward Ledger like he's presenting him, and his mouth opens like he's going to say something but nothing comes out. So I look at Ledger. He's scratching the side of his jaw, looking down. Is he... embarrassed?

He looks up again and grimaces. "I was the one who stole your purse."

“What?”

“That day at the outdoor mall.”

“That was you?”

“You probably didn’t recognize me because I was in disguise.”

Jace rolls his eyes. “He was wearing a fake mustache and hat.”

“That was probably it.” That wasn’t it— he’d been running away from me, so I never saw his face (or his fake mustache). But I imagine it would take a lot to disguise someone who looks like Ledger.

Then Jace’s mom, who I’ve learned is Evelyn, comes over and takes my hand in both of hers. “Hello, dear. It’s so lovely to see you again.”

I thank her for inviting me into her home and compliment her on how pretty it is and she tells me how sweet I am. Then she announces that dinner is ready and goes over to the oven to take it out.

As soon as she’s out of earshot, I whisper to Jace, “Why do I always get the sense that your mom could charm a diplomat, escape from a top-secret facility undetected, and kill someone seventeen different ways using only a spork, and do it all before noon?”

Jace gives me a little smile.

My eyes go wide. “Oh, wow. I was only kidding. But she can actually do all those things, can’t she?”

He gives a little shrug.

“With a *spork*?” I hiss.

We all gather around the table and Evelyn places a pot roast in the middle, surrounded by potatoes and carrots, along with a salad and freshly baked rolls, and everyone dishes up. I have to say, the pot roast rivals any I’ve ever eaten.

The conversation during dinner includes a lot of questions about my family, where I grew up, college, my work—

basically a history of my life up until today. And then Jace's siblings tell embarrassing stories about him and I learn more about Jace than I ever thought I'd be able to learn today.

For instance, I learned that he cut his own hair in third grade in an attempt to impress his crush. (Yes, it was, of course, right before school pictures but no, it didn't actually backfire. The girl checked the *Yes* box on his "Do you like me?" note.)

I found out that he broke his leg when he fell out of a tree while trying to rescue a kitten from a tree. (Because this man's protectiveness started young and extends to all living things.)

And I discover that he may or may not sleepwalk. (Jace claims he went outside in the middle of the night to save the garden gnome— while fully awake— because he had a dream the little guy was in trouble. So, apparently, the protectiveness extends to non-living things, too.)

In turn, I tell about how my mom, despite my protests, thought I should channel my adventurous tendencies toward a sport, and she signed me up for soccer. And how my celebratory dance at actually kicking the ball where I aimed it turned into a slip and a wild recovery when the ball was kicked immediately back to me, resulting in my impressively fast and furious flailing arms and legs, a sprained ankle for me, and a black eye for the unfortunate opposing team member standing close to me.

As we are all laughing, I realize that it had totally worked for me to think about how meeting Jace's family couldn't be worse than when Livi met Felipe's parents because I am calm and totally enjoying myself.

Jace's younger brother, Miles, says, "Remember how Jace was taking German in high school but he had a crush on that girl who was taking Spanish?"

"It was Emma," Charlie says.

"Yes— Emma!" Emerson says. "He spent an afternoon learning Spanish so he could impress her by saying to her

‘You are beautiful,’ but instead of saying ‘*Eres preciosa*,’ he said... what was it, again?”

“*Eres pescado*,” Blake answers.

“So he called her a fish!” Ledger says.

I laugh so hard, especially since all five of Jace’s siblings got in on telling the story. Little Heidi seems to be a social laugher because she’s laughing just as hard as I am.

Jace pulls his phone from his pocket and types something, keeping it below the table, but I don’t realize he’s typing it to me until the sound I have set for his texts goes off. I pull it from my back pocket to see that he’s sent, *Thinking of you. You’re quite the catch!* With a little fish emoji after it. I don’t even come close to holding back the laugh that erupts when I read it. Then I freeze the second it hits me that the text sound I have set for Jace is the trilling first notes of the *Mission: Impossible* theme song.

And they all heard. Which wasn’t hard, because I have the volume turned up all the way from when I was listening to music in the shower earlier.

I look up to see every person around the table looking at me. Just blinking. I laugh nervously. “Just a little joke between me and”— I clear my throat as I push the phone back into my pocket. “Sorry, I forgot to turn the sound off before dinner.”

Blake is the first one to break the silence by saying, “Who’s up for some flag football?”

For a split second, I’m grateful to Blake for ending the awkwardness. But did he have to do it by suggesting we play a *sport*, after having just heard my soccer story?

Jace turns to me as he reaches under the table to place a hand on my knee. In a quiet voice, he says, “We don’t have to play football. We can do something else.”

But I get the sense that this is a common after-dinner activity here. And I also understand that Jace’s siblings are trying to see if I fit into the family. I love this family and I do want to show that I fit in.

So I find myself saying, “I’d love to play.”

CHAPTER 33

A SPIRALING SITUATION

MACKENZIE

The house is suddenly full of movement as everyone clears the table, puts away the remaining food, grabs the football and the waistbands with the flags, and we all head outside.

Jace clips the band of my flags around my waist, which is now comfortably full. I would eat Evelyn Lancaster's cooking every day of the week if I could. I take the moment that we're away from everyone to ask what I really wanted to do during dinner but worried it might come out sounding rude. "I can't believe your mom has a job as intense as being the CSA Director and still has time to cook a meal like that."

Jace looks up at me from where he's crouched at my waist. "Oh, she didn't cook dinner." He stands. "She's just every bit as good at directing her personal assistant as she is everyone at work. Meals like this are always catered." He laughs. "Sometimes when we were growing up, she would cook for us. But it was things like corn dogs, tater tots, and frozen vegetable medley, and they were usually under- or over-cooked. She may be good at a lot of things, but cooking isn't one of them."

For some reason, this makes me rather relieved. Maybe it's because I'm starting to picture a life with Jace, and I'm more than a little intimidated by how amazing his mom is. I read something once that said a man will often judge his wife by the standards set by his mom, which can either be a good thing or a bad thing, depending on the mom.

(When I first heard that, all I could think of was how bad I felt for any daughter-in-law of Martha Stewart. Well, except for the going to prison part. Maybe that brought the bar down just a bit.)

I glance over at Evelyn, who is clipping her own flags on, and I realize that knowing she didn't cook the meal makes me respect her even more. Not because she can do it all, but because she knows she can't and is willing to ask for help.

My phone (which I now have silenced) buzzes in my pocket, and I pull it out to see that it's my mom. Again. She called right as we were pulling into the driveway, too, and if I don't answer soon, she'll probably alert the National Guard. The game doesn't look quite ready to start yet, so I answer just as Blake walks past and pauses to say something to Jace in a low voice.

"Hi, Mom."

I listen for a minute, and then pull the phone away from my mouth a bit and say to Jace, "She's just calling to verify that we are going to be there Friday night for my Dad's birthday party."

When Jace asked me to come join his family for dinner, my dad's birthday get-together had already been planned, so I immediately asked if he wanted to come to my family thing. I'm thrilled he said yes. Since they live further away, it's not like we get together for a family dinner once a week or anything.

"Oh, yeah," Jace says as he's clipping the strap of his flags around his waist. "Of course." But he says it like he's faking... not enthusiasm, exactly, because the way he says it doesn't resemble anything close to enthusiasm. Acceptance, maybe? It sounds like he's just confirming that he agreed to go and nothing more.

"We'll be there, Mom. I've got to run, but I'll see you Friday."

I hang up the phone and then ask Jace, "Do you not want to go?"

“No, of course, I want to meet your family.”

But something is off. I try to study his expression more, but he just pastes on a smile and turns toward the middle of his backyard where everyone is gathering. Worry starts to worm its way in. Something is definitely weird if Jace is having trouble planning anything with me in the future, especially when that future is only four days away.

Last night, I had an awful dream where Jace and I meet for gelatos and he tells me that he doesn't actually want to be with me. That I am only an assignment. He hadn't wanted it to seem like that, though, so he chose to not break it off with me immediately after the mission ended but now feels like it is time. Jace's words just now say we are still on for Friday, but something about his reaction made me think of a dream I might not have ever remembered otherwise.

Everyone is wearing flags and lining up to play, even Heidi. She's wearing the cutest little toddler version of flags at her hips and she has already pulled off three people's flags. And not only has the game not started, but they were the flags of her own teammates! At least with her in the game, I know it won't be a hard-played one.

Charlie, Ledger, Jace, and I line up in the middle of the backyard facing Blake, his daughter, Emerson, Miles, and Evelyn, and Jace hikes the ball to Ledger.

Seven plays in, I'm breathing hard and have already had my flags pulled seven times. Half of them by Heidi. (The girl is relentless!) We lose the ball quickly, and the other team scores just as quickly. A dozen plays in, and I've lost my flags a dozen times and the other team has scored twice.

It's true that our team has a complete newbie who's sports-challenged (me), but the other team has a two-year-old. Out of me and Heidi, I'm pretty sure she has contributed more. Especially because they've had her run the ball a few times, and we let her get pretty far with it.

Jace calls us in for a huddle. So far, the things I love about this game are: 1) When we huddle, Jace and I get to put our arms over each other's shoulders, and even though we are both

very hot and we each also have another person's arm over our shoulders, it's pretty great. I love it anytime I feel like we are on the same team and 2) Actually, I think there was only one. No, wait— it's seeing the competitiveness come out in Jace. That's pretty sexy, not going to lie.

“Okay,” Jace says. “Our score right now is a big ole goose egg, and we need to change that. Any ideas?”

Charlie nods. “I've got one. After Jace hikes the ball to Ledger, the three of us will run as far downfield as we can, and then we all turn and look at Ledger like we're expecting him to pass to us. Mackenzie, you go center and stop just in front of the end zone. I'll go right, Jace, you go left. Then, Ledger, you throw the football to Mackenzie because they'll never expect that.”

Okay, that's a good plan because I've been playing poorly enough that they really will never expect it. I turn to look at the end zone, which is the space between the fence and the cement curbing three feet out from it that separates the grass from the shrubs and flowers. But as per the rules, it only counts as a touchdown if you enter the end zone in a place with no growing things.

But it's also a bad plan. When I look back, I say, “I don't know how to catch a football.”

“When it comes to you,” Ledger says, just wrap your arms around it like you're catching a baby.”

I nod. Like catching a baby.

Ledger raises his head to see the opposing team over our huddle. “I know that'll leave me exposed to getting my flags pulled, but they're getting cocky over there. My guess is they will look to intercept the pass.”

Jace looks at me and asks, “Are you okay with that plan?”

I really don't want them pinning their hopes on me. But I do love an adventure, so I nod yes.

Jace hikes the ball and I somehow manage to get around the defensive line. (Okay, it's entirely because they have Heidi guarding me. Normally, that would've meant my flags being

pulled in about point-two seconds, but she bent down because she saw a ladybug in the grass just as the ball was hiked. I'm still counting a win as a win here.) I race down the field.

Just like in Charlie's plan, all three of us get downfield, and just like Ledger guessed, Blake, Emerson, Miles, and Evelyn split up and double-cover Jace and Charlie, ready to intercept the ball, leaving me wide open. I lock eyes with Ledger, and he pulls his arm back and then throws it forward, sending the football in a tight spiral directly at me.

For the record, I have never had a football sailing straight at me before. (At least not while I was looking.) It is *terrifying*. First off, it looks like it's traveling at about one hundred miles per hour. And second, it's coming right at my face.

But what do I know? I've never played football. It's something that neither I nor any of my sisters were interested in. And neither of my parents. But my team is behind and they are turning to me for the crunch-time play, and I'm not going to let them down. So even though I want to turn and run or duck and cover, I stay strong, facing my fear, my arms out, waiting for the ball with the most steely, unflinching gaze I've ever mustered.

Except it doesn't come into my waiting arms; it hits me square on the nose.

The pain is immediate and explosive. I might scream—I don't know. I can't see through the stars in my vision. All I know is that I am on my knees, my hands are over my nose, and they're slippery wet. I tip over onto the grass.

Jace is at my side in a second, asking me if I'm okay. I have no idea what I am right now and I don't seem to remember how to form words. There's only sharp pain and everything else is hazy.

Then I feel soft fabric pressed against my nose followed quickly by Jace's arms sliding underneath me and picking me up. I hear him say over and over, "I'm so sorry I didn't protect you." Which is weird, because he wasn't supposed to.

By the time we are in the house and I'm lying in a bed that must be in a guest room, I'm getting my senses back. Enough that I feel the bed shift as Jace sits down beside me, and I can now make my mouth form words. All I can think about is how things went with Livi when she went to Felipe's parents' house, so the first (understandably slurred) words out of my rapidly swelling mouth are, "Well, at least I didn't break the sink and pass out."

And then everyone starts discussing the possibility that I have a concussion.

I open my eyes, but I can't see around the soft thing on my nose. It feels like everyone is in here, though. "I'm not concussed." What I *am* is embarrassed. And what I'd most like is for everyone to forget this happened, not fawn over me.

"Is there a ringing in your ears?" someone asks.

"Headache? Nausea?" someone else asks.

"No," I answer simply.

"I have some ice," Ledger says. "Has it stopped bleeding yet?"

Jace pulls the soft thing off my nose to check, and that's when I notice that the soft thing is his shirt. Now, as much as I love being cared for by a shirtless Jace, I say (still slurred), "Jace! I probably just ruined your shirt!"

He shakes his head. "It's totally fine." He looks up at Ledger. "I think the bleeding has stopped."

I must be a mess because Charlie's face is pale as she says, "I'll go get a cloth," and races out of the room.

A moment later, it's Evelyn who comes in with a cloth, and she sits on the opposite side of me and starts wiping off one side of my face. Then Jace takes it and wipes off the other. Then he puts the ice pack on my nose and the cold is shocking.

After a moment, Jace says, "Let's give her some space," and I'm eternally grateful that a) they're no longer all staring at the girl who can't catch a football and b) that Jace gets that the space I need doesn't include space from him.

“I am so sorry,” Jace says, and the pain in his eyes looks worse than what I can imagine mine is showing.

“It’s not your fault,” I say, and I notice that the words also come out nasally, like I’m talking with my nose plugged, which I guess I pretty much am.

“No, I shouldn’t have”—

But I put a hand on his arm to stop him. “*It is not your fault,*” I say slowly and more forcefully.

He picks up the wet cloth and gently wipes at a spot on my neck that he must’ve missed the first time around.

“Blake doesn’t like me much, does he?”

Jace’s eyebrows crease and he leans in as if he’s checking my pupils to see if they are dilated. When he straightens, he says, “It wasn’t Blake who threw the ball; it was Ledger. Do you remember?”

“Yes, I remember, because *I’m not concussed*. Ledger likes me fine. It’s Blake who doesn’t.”

Jace stops looking at me like maybe he should scoop me up and take me to the hospital and says, “That has nothing to do with you and everything to do with me spilling the family secret.”

“Oh?” I say and try to sit up so I can see Jace better. He helps me to adjust the pillows under my back. “He doesn’t even work there, right?”

“He doesn’t. Which, in a way, is part of the same issue.” Even without a concussion, I don’t understand what he means, so I stay quiet, waiting for him to continue. Eventually, he lets out a long breath and does. “He was supposed to be with Charlie when she got kidnapped, but he got distracted by a dog.”

Oh. It’s jarring to be taken back in time that far, and it takes a moment for the implications of it to sink in. “That must’ve been such a weight on him.” I can’t even imagine what that would do to a kid.

Jace nods. “We suspect that the dog was actually planted by the kidnapers as a way to distract Blake while they grabbed Charlie. He had just always wanted a dog and was so drawn to them.”

“They must’ve known that.”

Jace nods again. “Even though Charlie was only gone for twenty-two hours, it was hard. And it left Blake mad at the agency that had put her at risk by having our dad as its director.”

“Why does that make him mad at me, though?” I may not have a concussion, but my nose does still hurt an awful lot. That must be why I can’t seem to connect the dots. Or maybe this ice pack is freezing my brain and slowing down my thinking. Or maybe I’m just distracted because Jace is sitting on the bed, facing me, and he’s shirtless.

Then, suddenly, I do connect the dots. “Oh. Because he thinks I’m putting you all at risk by knowing.”

“You’re not,” Jace says in a firm voice. “And Blake will get over it.”

I’m quiet for a long moment. Then I ask, “So did he ever get his dog?”

“No. He kind of always saw that want of his as the reason why he wasn’t there for Charlie.”

“But he could’ve used the excuse that if he’d had a dog, he wouldn’t have gotten distracted by one. Or that maybe the dog would’ve been with you guys at the park and would’ve helped to stop the kidnapers.”

“Yeah, Blake’s mind doesn’t work like that. He would still think his love of dogs was a problem.”

“Even after all these years?”

Jace shrugs. “I don’t think he’s ever gotten over blaming himself after all these years, either.” He studies me for a long moment. “Are you sure you’re not concussed?”

“Jace, *I’m sure.*”

“Okay, I think maybe I should go put on a shirt, then.”

“Wait. If I say I’m concussed, does that mean you’ll leave it off?”

The corner of his mouth lifts and it’s so cute I want to reach out and touch it.

CHAPTER 34

SHATTERED SURETIES

JACE

When I walk onto the floor at the CSA, there are already maps and profiles and pages of text up on the screens in the front, and the director and Ledger are looking up at it, talking through things as they wait for me.

As soon as my mom sees me, she says, “The tracker is just arriving at the airport in Cincinnati.”

That tracker is on my asset, Shanna. We know that her boss, Merkley, had put feelers out for data brokers— the shady kind— who were willing to sell some very specific, very personal information on very specific people. Namely, some very powerful people in government positions. We haven’t uncovered their plan completely, but we have enough to know that it will be very dangerous for them to get it.

We evaluated the people close to Merkley in his organization and decided that we wanted to develop Shanna as an asset. Since she has a brother who recently racked up a lot of medical bills, we guessed that her motivation for helping us might be money, and we were right. It took a little work, but I was able to turn her. She’s been feeding us information over the past few weeks, but it hasn’t been a lot to go on.

This morning, though, she called me in a panic and said she had info but wasn’t willing to say it over the phone. So I hopped on a plane, met her in a literal dark alley, and she told me that they set up a buy with a data broker. Her boss insisted they not transfer the information to him digitally because he doesn’t want it to be traced back to him. So they are meeting in Tel Aviv, tonight, for the handoff.

Shanna is going with him, so she knows the when and the general plans, but she doesn't have the specifics. That's why I gave her the tracker— so she can put it in her purse or her shoe and we can get the info even if she can't contact us. Having the tracker didn't calm her as much as I thought it would— she was still so afraid. I assured her that I was going to keep her safe. Then I hopped on a plane back here.

"I've contacted Mossad," my mom says. "They've assigned Agent Peretz to work with you."

I nod. "That's good." I've worked with Peretz and the Mossad—Israel's Institute for Intelligence and Special Operations— before. Peretz is a skilled operative and our agencies work well together.

We hash out the details, with Emerson and his team giving me all the information they've been able to dig up, including which airport Merkley's plane is scheduled to land in and how extensive they believe the list of personal information is that they plan to buy from the broker. Except for the exact location, which we won't know until we are on the ground in Tel Aviv, there is a clear path for this mission.

My mom steps up to me as I look up at all the information on the screens, memorizing it. "You don't have to go."

My eyes fly to her.

"I know you have plans to meet Mackenzie's family tonight. I can send Ledger or Miles or Gianna."

"You only know I have plans because you're my mother, not because you're my director."

"I know. And as your mother, I'm saying we can send someone else."

I shake my head. "Shanna is my asset. I developed her. And she is very freaked out right now. If someone else shows up instead of me, it's going to make things worse. It needs to be me."

"Are you sure?"

I give a single nod.

I've replenished my stash of spare clothes that I keep in my locker, and I use them to quickly pack a bag, along with the equipment I think I'll need. Then, just before I head up to the roof and the helicopter that's waiting to take me to the airport, I give Mackenzie a call.

She answers with, "Hello, my international man of mystery."

I chuckle, even though I don't feel it. Then I tell her that an important mission came up and apologize profusely that I can't go with her to her dad's fifty-fifth birthday party.

"You're going on a mission *now*? But it's the end of the workday, heading into a weekend."

"And yet the bad guys don't care at all."

"They're so inconsiderate."

"Yes, they are."

I can hear the sadness and disappointment in her voice, and it's killing me. I apologize again that I'm canceling plans at the last minute.

"Where will you be going?"

"I can't tell you that."

"Classified?"

"Yeah."

"Can you tell me if you'll be in the country or outside of it?"

"I can tell you that I flew somewhere in the U.S. already today. But this one is out of the country."

"Oh!" she says, surprised. "Two in one day. Okay. Well, um, have a good trip."

"I really am sorry, Mackenzie."

"I know."

I almost end the call with "I love you." Even though I haven't said it to her yet, it feels like such a natural goodbye, which surprises me. But I don't want the first time that I tell

her how I feel— how I've been feeling for quite a while now — to be over the phone.

Instead, I just tell her goodbye. I want to keep talking to her. I want to see her in person. And when we hang up, I want to keep her in my head constantly. But I know how quickly a mission can go south if my head isn't in the game, so as much as I don't want to, I force my mind away from Mackenzie and head up to the roof and the waiting helicopter.

I am concealed behind some garbage cans on the sidewalk of the dark street, watching Merkley as he stands at the meeting spot on a street corner in the outskirts of the business district. The nearest streetlight illuminates him just enough as he waits for his contact to show up with the drive and make the exchange.

From my vantage point, I'll be able to get to him fairly quickly. I can also see Peretz, the Mossad agent who is my counterpart and who is currently blending into the shadows at the corner of the building, and my asset, Shanna. She's standing against the nearest building, looking like she's trying to become part of it.

Shanna is Merkley's assistant and is part of everything that they do. And we also know that this isn't his first illegal activity. Based on her body language— the way she's hunched in on herself, rigid except for the way her eyes are darting around everywhere— she's terrified. I'm hoping that her boss is attributing her nerves to the situation and not to the fact that she's sold him out.

She turns to look behind her, shifting her body just enough that the streetlight catches part of her, and I see that she's carrying a bag over her shoulder that is the same dark pink that Mackenzie's purse was when she received the accidental brush pass that day at the outdoor mall. The same color as her dress at the gala we went to. And suddenly, I picture Mackenzie as the one standing against that building, afraid.

Get your head in the game, I tell myself.

And I do.

Footsteps sound on the quiet street, and all four of us turn our attention toward the data broker. Agent Peretz and I didn't know which direction the contact would approach from, so we had to guess, and we guessed wrong. We knew we might be wrong, though, so we chose positions that would be decent enough regardless.

We have to wait for the exchange to take place before we can apprehend Merkley, so I watch, barely breathing, my body tense and poised to take off running toward him. My eyes drift for a fraction of a second toward my asset that is now inextricably tied to Mackenzie in my head.

The men only talk for a small moment before the exchange takes place. My body wants to act the moment the drive is in Merkley's hand, but I force myself to stay put as the data broker exits in the same direction as he came.

Since the data broker is presumably Israeli, the Mossad has a team concealed nearby who will apprehend him. But apprehending Merkley is down to me and Agent Peretz. We don't need the data broker to be out of sight— we just need him out of the way. So we wait a full five seconds, then we move.

Both Agent Perez and I converge on Merkley, guns drawn, me from the south and Peretz from the east. "Put your hands up," I shout.

Merkley gapes at each of us, standing less than a dozen feet away, a shocked expression on his face. It's only there for a split second before it morphs to understanding and he turns slightly to see Shanna against the building.

He knows. "Hands up!" I shout again, this time with more force as I close in.

The street light glints on a gun in his hand that I didn't see in the darkness, and my body immediately springs forward, pouncing on him, tackling him to the ground as he fires off a shot. Agent Peretz is at my side, kicking the gun away from

Merkley's hand as I grab his wrists behind his back. As soon as Peretz starts to put the cuffs on him, I run straight to Shanna, who is now lying in a heap at the base of the building.

I help her to lay flat on the sidewalk and see that she took a bullet just between her shoulder and her clavicle. It won't kill her, but she needs medical attention right away. Agent Peretz calls for an ambulance as I move the dark pink purse out of the way and put pressure on the wound, saying to her over and over, "I'm so sorry I didn't protect you."

CHAPTER 35

BRACED FOR IMPACT

MACKENZIE

I would've been sitting in the front seat of Jace's car— or he would've been sitting in the front seat of mine— as we drove the hour from Cipher Springs to my parents' house in Leesburg, Virginia. Instead, I'm sitting in the back seat of Maggie's and Rowan's car, playing with my niece.

Which, to be fair, is fun. I'm playing peek-a-book with her and she's playing try-to-grab-Aunt-Mackenzie's-shiny-silver-nose-splint. So far, Addi hasn't won, and I'm hoping her record doesn't improve because the thing is still a little too sore for grabby baby hands.

As fun as Addi is, and as great of a distraction as she is, I'm sad that I'm not in a car with Jace right now. Especially because I've been hoping for more time with him so I can figure out if things between us are okay.

But on the bright side, with Jace absent, it's that much less time that he has to see me wearing this nose brace. He seems to feel personally responsible for my un-sports-like tendencies, no matter how much I assure him he is not.

"How about some music to rock out to?" I say in the direction of the front seat. I could really use something to drown out the Jace-related melancholy.

"Good idea," Rowan says from the passenger's seat and starts looking for a song on his phone.

A moment later, *Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes* comes through the car's speakers. I should have seen this coming and

asked for adult songs. There is only so much rocking out you can do to songs written for little kids.

Maggie and Rowan both join in singing, “Eyes, ears, mouth and *nose*,” putting heavy emphasis on “nose.”

Okay, *that* I should’ve seen coming.

“Ha ha, funny, guys. Can we maybe get some different music?”

That request first gets me *Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer*, then *If You’re Happy and You Know It Touch Your Nose*, then another kids’ song— one I haven’t heard before— called *Where Is My Nose*. And since I broke the nose while with Jace, it doesn’t really help the whole not thinking about him thing.

I assure my sister and her partner-in-crime that they are indeed funny but wouldn’t it be great to hear some music meant for us? I am rewarded with some music for adults.

Specifically, the songs titled *Bloody Nose*, *Nose Dive*, and *Under My Nose*. Which I also should’ve seen coming. And beyond the “nose” theme, they just happen to be songs about 1) a breakup, 2) a relationship on the rocks, and 3) trying to figure out what’s wrong with a relationship. Not exactly what I’m hoping for at this moment. Plus, they are all rap and R&B, and since I share a wall with Maggie and Rowan’s house, I know for a fact that those aren’t genres of music they generally listen to.

I am saved by Adelaide, thankfully. She’s apparently not a fan of rap and R&B and shows her displeasure by wailing until they change the music back to her favorites.

I lean in close to my niece to thank her, and she grabs my nose.

We step out of the car at my parents’ house— the house that my sisters and I grew up in— and there are two green balloons

(my dad's favorite color) tied to the old wood railing, and each of them has the number 5 written on them in black sharpie.

We don't make it all the way to the door before my oldest sister Mari's three- and five-year-old boys come bursting out of the house. I'm pretty sure the word "rambunctious" was invented for their sake.

Inside, my mom is bustling around the kitchen, where a string of letters spelling "Happy birthday" is taped just above the door to the deck. I'm guessing my mom had my dad help because one side of the banner is six inches lower than the other side, which is just about the difference between their heights.

Mari's husband, Silas, is heading past us to go wrangle his boys back into the house, and my younger sister, May is standing by her boyfriend, Braxton. So I'm officially the only one here without a significant other. The door to the deck is open, and I beeline it outside to tell my dad hello and happy birthday.

"Hey, it's my MacSquared!" He gives me a hug, being mercifully careful not to bump my nose when he does, and says, "It's so nice to see that you're embracing your dream of becoming a rhinoceros."

"Ha, ha, Dad," I say. "It's good to see you're not too over the hill to make jokes."

"Hey, that's what I'm here for— to be supportive of my girls and show interest in their lives. So tell me, have you been able to pick up radio signals with that thing yet?"

My brother-in-law, Silas comes around the back with a son under each arm and sets them on the deck just in time to hear my dad's comment.

"Don't make fun of her nose," Silas says. "There aren't many noses that famous enough to require their own bodyguard."

I give them a courtesy laugh, then say, "I'm going in to say hi to Mom."

My mom is at the kitchen counter, pulling lettuce pieces off a head of iceberg lettuce for the burgers my dad is grilling. “So, where is the boy you were going to bring?”

“Mom, I texted you. He can’t come.”

“I know you did, but I want to hear about it in person. Kind of like how I want to see that nose in person. How does it feel?”

“Good enough. And Jace had to work.”

“On a Friday night?”

I nod and pick up a piece of lettuce. “He has some high-end business clients with an urgent problem that had to be dealt with right away, but he wanted to come.”

I take a bite of the lettuce and marvel at how easily the lie came. Probably partly because I know how important it is that I keep the covert agency and its covert operatives actually covert. And probably partly because it’s not that far from the truth. The government is the high-end client and that mission he’s on is obviously an urgent problem. Plus, their cover is the business solutions company, so it’s fine.

She glances at me. “Will this always be the case? Will he always be the one who has to drop everything to deal with problematic clients? Or will he move up in the company and they’ll have the new guy take the less desirable jobs?”

My mom assumes that Jace is the newbie at the company. If she only knew that he is one of the top spies in the country. “He actually worked his way up in the company so he could get to the position of taking these jobs. But it won’t be forever. We talked about it once, and he said he plans on taking on the urgent jobs until he’s about thirty-five, then he’ll move to a different position in the company.”

“Oh, that’s good. How old is he now?”

“Twenty-seven.”

“Oof. That’s still a lot of years.”

At times like this, it really does seem like it.

Mari has made her way back into the kitchen and says, “Oh! I like the ‘under construction’ look. When do you plan to have the grand re-opening?”

“And here I was sad for so many years that I didn’t have brothers.”

“Who needs brothers,” my little sister May says as she grabs a mini carrot. “We can run with the best of them. Oh, and I should probably tell you that when Dad told us as kids that we should ‘put our noses to the grindstone,’ he didn’t mean literally.”

Her boyfriend shakes his head. “No, she’s just doing Voldemort cosplay.”

Mari’s husband walks back inside with his boys just then and comes up to me, putting a hand on my shoulder. “Listen, I’m sorry about making fun of your nose earlier.”

“Thank you!” I say.

He nods. “I’m actually really proud of you for your bravery in finally deciding to get that nose job. We’ve all been meaning to suggest it, but I’m impressed that you did it without any of us having to bring it up.”

“I’ve heard of nose jobs,” my not-so-innocent 5-year-old nephew says. “But I thought your nose would still be nose-colored after, not silver with blue padding.”

My brother-in-law high-fives his son.

“Say all you want.” I put my arm around my mom’s shoulders as my dad comes into the kitchen with the plate of cooked burgers, putting all twelve of us in the small kitchen. “At least I have Mom on my side.”

“That’s right, honey,” she says, squeezing me back. “I am always on your side. Remember that Rudolph was *the most famous* reindeer of all, so you rock that shiny nose of yours!”

I may be the butt of all these jokes, but I can’t complain—this is the most action our family get-togethers have seen in a while. It continues through dinner, too. Even my three-year-old nephew gets in on the action with one he came up with all

on his own— “Is your nose going on a space trip? Or did it turn into a robot?”

We eat, sing happy birthday, and my dad blows out the candles while everyone jokes that we have the fire department standing by, and then my dad has had all the excitement and socializing and craziness he can handle.

“Thanks for coming everyone. As always, it’s great to see you. Now if you don’t mind, I’m going to go watch some TV.”

“But it’s your birthday and your daughters are here,” my mom says.

He nods. “Yep, it’s my birthday. So, if I want to go watch TV, shouldn’t I be able to?”

My mom must’ve not really been feeling her protest, because it isn’t five minutes before she announces that she, too, is tired and is going to watch a bit of TV.

Five minutes after that, the rest of us are all outside. My three sisters and I are leaning against the railing of the deck, watching the guys and the little boys on the grass, having an all-out battle with the Nerf guns that Silas brought. I think about how much our parties have livened up since he joined the family.

Which, of course, makes me picture Jace down on the grass with the guys, and it surprises me how natural it seems like it would be to have him here. What would he think about everyone? What would he bring to the family that isn’t already here?

I wish he had come. I pull out my phone to make sure I haven’t missed any texts from him. Of course, I haven’t— it’s way too soon for that— but it doesn’t stop me from checking just in case.

My nephew squeals in the way that only three-year-olds can, and it starts me thinking about how things were before my nephews, Addi, and my brothers-in-law came into our lives. My sisters and I had kind of gotten used to my parents retreating to the front room to watch TV, my dad armchair

quarterbacking news stories while the rest of us tried not to die of boredom.

Every time I'm here, that same feeling washes over me again, and I wonder if my sisters feel it, too. "When we come here, do you all get antsy, too? Like you suddenly need to go do something more epic with your life? To live larger?"

May nods and Maggie shrugs, but Mari says, "I used to. But getting married gave me a 'larger life.'"

"It did?" Okay, that gives me hope.

She nods. "It's a gift of Silas's— the thing I've always found most attractive about him. It lasted until we started having kids." I must have a horrified look on my face because it makes her laugh. "Then you start a brand new adventure with them."

A life with Jace definitely feels adventurous. Epic. But how much will he be gone? Will I be sitting home alone a lot?

"So," Mari says, "Maggie told us that you started dating someone."

I shoot Maggie a look.

"What? We're supposed to keep family updated, and since you haven't..."

I updated my parents since I thought they should have a heads-up that Jace was coming, and I really didn't think the others would find out. I shrug. "It's still very new. And I'm a little unsure about how things are going."

Maggie turns to look at me. "You are?"

"I mean, things are also going great. For our first date, we had a picnic at Shadowridge Park, and he got takeout from a restaurant by his house. It was *so* good! He had to work last night. Since we wouldn't be able to see each other, he had some of the things that I love from that restaurant delivered to my work for lunch."

I pause for the collective *AwWs* from my sisters.

“Right? It was so sweet. But I don’t know— things have also been... off between us.”

I haven’t had many long-term relationships in my life. Except for several college boyfriends that each lasted a month or two, my only real one has been Dan. Not since high school have I dated someone who wanted to come to a family thing with me. And right now, there’s a nagging fear down deep that’s telling me Jace didn’t *want* to be here. I try to silence it. But it’s deep and deep things are pretty hard to silence.

I pull my phone out again, even though it’s only been three minutes since I last checked. Not knowing when he’ll be back is the worst. If I knew he’d be gone for a week, I wouldn’t check at all. But I have no idea what kind of time frame we’re talking about. Is he going to be gone for a day? A month?

Maybe the mission he has to do is like some I’ve seen in spy movies that are done in an hour and they can immediately hop back on a plane home. But since I don’t know what country he’s in, I have no idea how long of a flight it will be to get back, so I don’t know what the minimum time gone is. And we haven’t been dating long enough to know how frequent trips like these are likely to be. I’ll know nothing until he’s back.

Okay, I do know something, and it’s that I’m worried about him. How dangerous of a mission is this?

“What do you mean,” May asks, “that things have been *off*?”

The ~~dream~~ nightmare where he told me he wasn’t actually interested resurfaces. I shrug, like it’s not a big deal. “I’m just not sure he likes me.”

Maggie shakes her head. “I’ve seen him with you. He likes you. In fact, I might even say he loves you.”

The feelings that statement causes in me are a mix of elation and disbelief. It seems like the two emotions would basically cancel each other out, like negative numbers and positive numbers. Cookies and exercise. Fast cars and traffic

jams. But instead, it's more like a cold front hitting a warm front and causing a tornado.

I can't even tell them that Jace is a spy— which makes him a master at faking things— to explain that what Maggie has seen isn't necessarily truth. Instead, I say, "I thought so, too. But he's been acting a little weird lately, so I don't know. And since he's out of town, I can't even talk to him about it."

"Can you call him while he's there?" Maggie asks.

I look out at the men and the boys as the sun is getting low in the sky. "No. The client he's helping is in a high-security facility, so there's no communication in or out until he leaves. And I don't know how long it's going to take or when he'll be back."

My drama-loving sister, May, says, "Ooo! Maybe he's a cheater and just doesn't want you to contact him." Like she's about to pop popcorn to eat as she watches the chaos of a breakup ensue.

I shake my head. "If there's one thing that I'm confident about with Jace, it's that he's not a cheater."

My comforting sister, Mari, says, "Keep your chin up, sis. If it's meant to work out, it'll work out."

At my core, I believe that. But it's not like that makes things easier. If things with Jace aren't meant to work out, it's still going to gut me.

My sometimes-supportive, sometimes-teasing sister, Maggie, nods. "I agree— keep that chin up. Even if it is more difficult with that extra weight on your nose."

I can see that she's not standing in the most balanced way, so I bump her hip with mine, nearly knocking her over.

CHAPTER 36

SHADOWS IN BROAD DAYLIGHT

JACE

The pilot already radioed ahead that we will be exiting the plane with an injured woman on a gurney, so when we come to a stop on the tarmac, they roll a ramp up to the door instead of the usual stairs. I help the nurse that has traveled with us from Tel Aviv to wheel Shanna's bed down to the waiting ambulance. Shanna already had emergency surgery on the ground in Tel Aviv and was anxious to get back to the U.S., but she still needs a bit of medical attention.

I run my hands over my face as the ambulance pulls away, and then I grab my bag. I had way too much time to think on the flight home as I traveled next to the woman I didn't protect, and I am exhausted. I pull out my phone and text Mackenzie to let her know that I am back.

Mackenzie: Where are you?

Jace: At the airport.

Mackenzie: BWI? Because if you are, I'm at a spinal cord injury rehabilitation seminar not too far from you. I'm moments away from a ninety-minute lunch break. Do you want to get together? Or do you need to hurry back to the agency?

I shouldn't meet with her. Not after all the realizations I've had during this mission. I actually don't need to go to the agency—I need to go home and sleep for days. But even the thought of seeing Mackenzie makes me feel more alive. As if I've been stranded in the desert for days and she appears with

a glorious smile on her face, offering me a glass of ice cold water. I am weak, so I say yes and ask her to send me a pin of her location.

When I make my way out of the airport and to her location, I spot her on the sidewalk looking into a shop window, and I call out, “Mackenzie.”

She turns and gives me that glorious smile that I’ve been dreaming of. As I stride the last few steps toward her, she starts singing the title words of *Secret Agent Man*. I smile as she wraps her arms around my neck, and then I breathe into her ear, “You are seriously compromising the ‘secret’ part of ‘secret agent.’”

Then we kiss, and I want to sink so deep into the kiss. I want to pull her tight against me, tangle my hands in her hair, and just soak in everything that is Mackenzie. To let her heal everything in me that feels broken after Tel Aviv. But I hold back because I now get how irresponsible it would be of me to continue dating Mackenzie. And if I care about her at all, I won’t.

When we end the kiss, I can tell by the look on her face that she knows something’s not right. But she still takes my hand in hers and we start walking down the street. We stop at the window in front of a framed art shop, and she says, “So, how was the... meeting with your client? Was it full of ‘business solutions?’”

I smile at her use of my cover story. “It didn’t go as well as I had hoped, but we were still able to solve the client’s problem.” Because on the books, the mission was a success. We intercepted the drive with the information that would be dangerous to have in enemy hands, and we captured both the buyer and the seller. The CSA is working with Mossad on extraditing Merkley to the United States, and Mossad will deal with the data broker. Shanna was just a casualty, and missions sometimes have casualties.

On paper, “just a casualty” sounds insignificant, especially if it’s only one and if the mission was still a success. But it’s never “just” a casualty. A casualty is *always* a big deal.

Casualties are what haunt my thoughts as I try to fall asleep at night.

“I’m sorry it was a rough trip,” Mackenzie says, and when I look at her, I see the sincerity and concern on her face. It means more than I can say that she doesn’t just ignore that part and applaud me for “solving the client’s problem.”

“Thank you,” I tell her. “And congratulations on getting your nose brace off.” It’s an immense relief to know that it’s at least healed enough for that.

“Thanks!” she says as she gestures at it like it’s the prize in a game show. “It’s still a bit swollen and a little sore, but I’m so glad to no longer be sporting that particular piece of facial adornment. Whenever I stepped outside, it harnessed the power of the sun in its efforts to blind me.”

I chuckle, even though I’m still wrecked that it happened in the first place. We start walking down the sidewalk again, and as the crowd shifts a bit, I see a stately woman named Octavia Vale strolling in our direction, with two guys who are definitely her muscle following close behind. Octavia is wearing a “look at me, I’m untouchable” yellow business suit and heels. We know she is responsible for running a vast network of hackers for hire.

I am not the operative assigned to her, although I have helped on several missions related to capturing her. One where we got fairly close. Close enough to see individual hairs on each other’s heads. We, as an agency, probably know that she’s on U.S. soil again and that she’s here in Baltimore, since we’ve been tracking her, but *I* didn’t know.

I don’t think she’s close enough to have noticed or recognized me yet. Probably because I am not currently wearing a suit, and certainly not one that begs for the kind of attention that her yellow one does. I immediately drop Mackenzie’s hand and mumble, “You don’t know me.” Then I turn away from Mackenzie and continue down the sidewalk without her as if I’m just going about my business.

As I near Octavia, her eyes fall on me and recognition crosses her face, along with a smirk of a smile that says, *Hello*.

And just in case you forgot, this is your reminder that I won.

I give her a slight nod like we're just two random people passing on the sidewalk, and I keep going. Once I am a few feet past her, I whip around to check on Mackenzie, my heart beating fast, the hairs on the back of my neck raised, and my muscles tense and ready. I want to stand as a shield between Octavia and Mackenzie, but I also know I can't do anything to tip off Octavia that Mackenzie is anything other than a random person on the street.

I hold my breath as I watch Octavia and her goons. The moment they pass right on by Mackenzie, I exhale in immense relief.

Then my eyes fall on Mackenzie, who is looking at me with an expression of hurt all over her face, and I want to crumple. Mackenzie has told me enough about her previous relationship for me to know that acting in public as if I don't know her or that I am not with her would especially hurt her.

I don't want to hurt her. Ever. I don't want to ever be the reason that look is on her face. But I worry that by us staying together while I'm still a field operative, I'll hurt her even more.

I know I need to stop seeing her to keep her safe. But I also know that it's going to cause her pain and heartache, too, and the realization of that is destroying me. But isn't it better to cause her heartbreak one time than expose her to the possibility of many more hurts? I don't want to ever again have to tell her, "I'm so sorry I didn't protect you."

What if next time, it's something much more serious than a football to the nose? What if it's something closer to what happened to Shanna just barely? Or like Fadila, my asset in Riyadh that I wasn't able to save a few years ago? The thought of anything happening to Mackenzie makes my stomach churn, my heart race, and my chest constrict in pain.

It's hard for me to walk the dozen steps toward her because I can see on her face that she knows I'm about to tell her something she doesn't want to hear. When I stop in front of her, I decide that, as much as I want to procrastinate this

moment forever, delaying things isn't going to make it any easier. While I still have the fortitude to act, I say, "I think we should end this relationship."

Mackenzie puts her hands on her hips and demands, "Why?"

I run through a long list of explanations I can give her. But for every reason that comes cascading down in my mind, piling on top of each other, I know that Mackenzie will push back. She'll challenge every single one of them. We've been amazing together, and I think we both know it. She'll come up with so many good reasons as to why we should stay together, and every single one of those reasons is going to weaken my resolve until I have no strength to do what I know I should.

I love her so much that it scares me, and I know how much power she has to talk me out of this. But my sense of right and wrong is telling me that it isn't right for me to put her in the path of danger. She never chose this life, and she shouldn't have to deal with all the baggage that accompanies it.

So instead of explaining anything, I shake my head and simply say, "I can't do this anymore."

"Jace, I don't understand."

It takes all my willpower to resist reaching a hand out to the side of her neck for her to lean into, pulling her into a hug, or grasping her hand— anything to comfort her right now. Instead, I swallow hard and say, "I'm sorry, Mackenzie."

"Wait. You want us to stop dating?"

"I do," I say, and then I force myself to turn and leave.

When she calls out, "Don't I get a say in this?" I somehow manage to keep walking.

CHAPTER 37

**SHAKEN, STIRRED, AND
SPILLED EVERYWHERE**

MACKENZIE

I open my apartment door and head to my bedroom to kick off my shoes. People are always saying that exercise—especially outdoors—is great for their emotions. It helps them to pound out stress.

Yeah, I'm not getting that at all. Maybe it takes running instead of walking? I open the app on my phone and record my daily walk. My streak is now on day one thousand two hundred and sixty-two.

I change into sweatpants and a T-shirt and head out toward my kitchen. I'm almost there when Livi video chats me, and I answer. Excitement is written in every line on her face as she says, "Are you ready for a classic? Sean Connery, the OG Bond, *James Bond*. Coming up on our medium-sized screens, we've got metallic-handed maniacs, a nuclear menace, tropical nightmares, and martinis 'Shaken, not stirred.'" She says that last part in her best Sean Connery impersonation. (He is probably rolling over in his grave at how much she butchered it. Rest in peace, Mr. Connery.) "I have a watch party link coming up right now, and I'm just about to send it to you."

"Can we watch something different tonight?" I grimace, knowing what a big ask that is.

Livi gasps. "Who are you and what did you do with Mackenzie?"

I shrug, trying to act normal. "I'm just not feeling the intelligence operative vibe tonight."

“Intelligence operative? Mackenzie, are you okay? What’s up?”

“I’m hangry. I just need to grab dinner.”

I made macaroni and cheese in my rice cooker before my walk, throwing in every kind of cheese that was in my fridge. Which, okay, wasn’t that many and I have no idea if it’ll even taste okay, but I want nothing more right now than a bunch of creamy cheeses over carby goodness. I don’t even care if it tastes weird; I just want it in my belly.

I place the phone standing upright against my blender and push down the button on the lid handle of my rice cooker to release the lid, but it doesn’t release. Pressing it again does nothing. I press with both thumbs at the same time, with all the force I can summon, and it also does nothing. Probably because the button is already pushed down— it’s just not releasing its thing on the inside.

I grab a butter knife and work the side of it into the space between the base and the lid, trying to pry it open, but it doesn’t even have the decency to make me feel like I’m making progress by budging a bit. “What is wrong with you?” I say to the machine in a voice that is every bit as frustrated as I feel.

“Wow,” Livi says, “you must be really hangry.”

I ignore her and lay the cooker on its side so I can put one hand on the lid and one on the base and use the maximum strength possible to push them in opposite directions.

Nothing.

I pause a moment and rub my forehead with the back of my hand because this is exhausting. Then I spy the olive oil. Once, when I was a teenager, I spilled an entire Costco-sized bottle of olive oil on our kitchen floor. It took a metric ton of baking soda, a whole lot of soapy water, and a ridiculous amount of time to clean up, but I can fully attest to its slipperiness. I pour some all along the teeny gap between the lid and the base. It will find its way to the seal and make it loosen its grip, I’m sure of it.

Once I'm convinced it has soaked in all the way around, I stand the cooker back upright and try to open the lid again. "Why," I pound my fist on the side of the lid, hoping to loosen whatever is catching it. "Won't." Another fist pound, this time on the side. "You." Pound. "Open!" I pound one last time, but nothing.

Livi's head is tilted, and she's looking at me like she's really concerned for my well-being. I am also concerned about my well-being if I don't get some macaroni and cheese in my belly soon.

"Did you have a rough day at work? Was one of your patients a pain? Oh! Did you see that one creepy guy who always says, 'So, when do I get my rub down'? Or that woman who puts in zero effort during the week and then says that you must be a bad therapist because she's not getting better?"

"Work was fine." I decide to push down on the release button with every bit of energy I can muster one last time. When it doesn't open, I look down at the kitchen floor, exhaustion filling me, and want nothing more than to sit right there on the cold tile.

I grab my phone first. As my arm is coming back from that and I'm already sinking to the floor, my arm somehow gets tangled in the cord and yanks it out of the wall socket, then the whole rice cooker comes to the floor with me, crashing onto the tile. The lid *finally* opens—this time on its own—and all my gloriously cheesy macaroni spills everywhere.

And by "everywhere," I mean all over the floor, all over me, and all over my cabinets, but not in my mouth. I close my eyes. "Don't you hate it when you plan for something to go one way and then it just doesn't work out? Then it makes you really mad and you want to throttle something. Then you get sad and want to cry, so you do, but then you get mad again?"

Livi is quiet for a moment before she asks, "This isn't about the rice cooker, is it?"

I shake my head.

"Oh, no. It's about Jace."

I nod. “We broke up.”

“You what?! When?”

“Yesterday. I met him during my lunch break from that spinal cord injury rehabilitation seminar in Baltimore and he told me he wants to end things. He gave me no say in the matter at all and didn’t want to try to work anything out together. And then I had to go back to the second half of that seminar, but I was so stunned, and I’m pretty sure I didn’t even hear the words ‘spinal cord’ a single time. I’m not even sure people were there talking.”

“Oh, Mackenzie, I’m so sorry.” She’s quiet for a longer moment this time, and then she says, “You broke up *yesterday during lunch* and you’re just now telling me?!”

I can’t even meet her eyes in the phone screen. “I knew you would have emotions about it, and my emotions were already more than I could handle. I couldn’t be around anyone who also had emotions about it.”

Livi nods. “Okay, I will try my best to not have emotions about this.”

“It’s all right. I think I can handle it now.”

Her eyes rove around the evidence in the form of macaroni and cheese covering me and my surroundings which show I am clearly *not* handling things yet. But she still says, “Good, because I have a lot of emotions about it.”

Then I realize that I can’t actually handle that, so I say, “It’s movie night. We should just watch a movie. How about a romantic comedy? Like...” I say the first one that comes to mind. “*He’s Just Not That Into You?*” But just saying those words makes me start crying.

And I am not a crier.

“I’m going to come over.”

I shake my head. “You don’t need to come over.”

“No, I’m coming. It’ll take me...” Livi pauses, and I can hear her mumbling things like “Put on a bra, find socks and shoes, figure out where I left my keys, get to the parking lot,

drive, grab macaroni and cheese from that one restaurant...” Then she says, “It’ll take me forty-seven minutes to get there, but I will be there!”

I say, “Okay,” in a small voice, and then we end the video chat. Knowing Livi, it will be exactly forty-seven minutes before she walks through my door. The woman might not ever remember where she put her keys, but she is a pro at knowing exactly how long things will take.

I will admit this to no one, but I spend thirty-seven of those minutes not even moving. Just sitting on my kitchen floor, surrounded by macaroni and cheese, deciding that bleu cheese, brie, and pepper jack do not, in fact, go together, even if one is desperate for cheesy pasta. Then I force myself to get off the floor and clean up my mess.

Livi arrives at forty-seven minutes on the dot. She doesn’t even knock— she just comes right inside and wraps me in an enveloping hug for a good long time. Then she pushes a container of baked macaroni and cheese into my hands, and if I hadn’t already used all my tears, its scent of deliciously creamy, slightly crispy on the edges blend of carbs and fats might’ve made me cry.

She brought some for herself, too, and we both sit on my couch, legs crossed and facing each other, eating with plastic forks right from the containers. “I just thought I’d found my person, you know? The person I can spend all day every day with doing everything or nothing, and never get sick of being with them.”

“And he didn’t give you any reason why he wanted to end things?”

“Nope. He just said he can’t do it anymore.” I stab some pasta. “Maybe the magic just wore off for him. Everything was so good, and then it just suddenly wasn’t. I knew that something was off the last couple of times I saw him.”

“I think you should tell him that you want to meet with him so you can demand answers.”

Part of me would love to demand answers. But a bigger part of me has felt too much and can't feel any more right now. "I'm just mad at myself for falling for someone when I already decided I wasn't going to get into a relationship. And I'm mad that it takes two people to be in a relationship but only one to end it. And I don't think that's right! He should've let me in on the decision, too.

"But then, it doesn't take long before mad leaves the building and I'm sad because I miss him. And I start thinking about all the time we spent together and how great it all was. I really love him, Livi. And I never even told him."

"Wow, that's... rather unfortunate right now."

I nod. "Yep. And that's when the fear comes and I worry that I'm going to spend my life alone." I've got a lot of other fears, but they take too much emotion to voice, and all I've got the capacity to deal with right now is being alone. "Sebastian is going to move in full-time. Maybe another stray cat will join him. Maybe I'll get a bird. Like a parrot or a cockatiel, so I'll have someone to talk to. And every day, I'll tell the bird that I wish Jace was there with me."

"You're not going to spend your life alone. And you're not going to spend it without Jace."

Oh, how I want her words to be true. Even though my plan before ever meeting Jace was to be alone.

"Come here," she says, and I lean forward to lay my head on her shoulder, which is pretty awkward since we've got our crossed legs between us, and our macaroni and cheese containers are still in our hands. She sets hers in her lap and wraps her arms around my head like she's giving it a hug. After all the emotions I've had, it feels like it really needs a hug.

"Ow, my nose," I say, muffled into her shirt sleeve.

She says, "Sorry," as she releases my head, and I rub my still sore nose.

CHAPTER 38

BLACK TIE MEMORIES IN A NO-STAR MOTEL

JACE

Sometimes an intelligence operative's life is glamorous, and as part of your job, you go to a black-tie event with a beautiful and intriguing woman in a dark pink dress.

And sometimes you're alone in a sketchy motel in Jakarta, staring up at the ceiling and trying not to think about the state of the mattress you're laying on, breathing in the scent of burnt fish and stinky socks, rethinking your life choices. And desperately missing that woman in the dark pink dress.

Sometimes, to torture yourself further, you set on replay in your mind a constant stream of all the things you and that woman did together. Which is exactly what I'm doing right now. And there are a lot of things in that stream.

When I think back to when we first met, I realize that it isn't a hugely long time ago if you're looking at a calendar. It feels like it's easily six times longer than the calendar says, though. Maybe because we were together daily, except when missions pulled me away for an entire day here and there. And not only daily, but for quite some time each of those days.

And since Mackenzie is always so diligent about taking pictures of dates and sharing them with me, I have on my phone a picture of nearly every single date we've gone on. She's even sent me ones that I hadn't realized she took, like one where we were watching kettle corn being made at the farmer's market and one while we were glazing pottery.

So I also have pictures I can cycle through to make it feel like that knife in my gut is being pushed in further. Why did I

have to find someone who is so perfect for me, and so fun, and so enjoyable to be around, and so exactly what I want, yet find her at a time in my life when it can't work?

I roll onto my side. The walls here are paper thin, which makes it easy to hear the rhythmic knocking sound coming from the wall I share with the room to my right that I don't want to think about and the sound of a baby crying from the room to my left. I don't know what kind of poor planning they did on the intersection just outside of this motel, but it must not be logical because people have been honking their horns at each other all night. Not to mention how many sirens I've heard in the past hour alone.

Between all the noises in this motel and on the street and all the noise inside my head, I'm never going to be able to sleep.

Instead, I think back to when I fell asleep in Mackenzie's lap at the safe house. I still can't believe I did it for so many reasons. Sure, there's the part where I don't fall asleep during an active mission. But more than that is the trust factor.

My entire career is built on trust and truth. Gaining the trust of assets when they have few reasons to trust me. Hiding so much of the truth. Hiding personal details about myself. Knowing when to reveal nuggets of truth. Doing everything I can to find the truth. Trusting the people I work with at the CSA. Trusting that the information we find will lead to a successful mission.

Relationships are built on trust, and that kind of trust isn't easy to gain and it doesn't come quickly. The relationships I have with my family and fellow officers and operatives are dependent on trust that has taken *years* to build.

And yet, I quickly gained trust in Mackenzie. I don't think I've ever fully realized just how significant that is. Or how surprising. Or how vital it feels. I never would've guessed that I could feel so safe around her after knowing her for such a relatively small amount of time. It's not a physical safety that I feel. It's more that... my heart feels safe in her care.

Getting into a relationship takes a huge leap of faith and it definitely did with Mackenzie, especially since I wasn't even looking for a relationship. From the start, it has felt so freeing to be open and honest and to share so much of my life with her.

I wish I hadn't had to tell Mackenzie to keep her phone off while we were at the safe house, because I am sure if she could have, she would've gotten a picture of me asleep in her lap. And as weird as it would be, I'm suddenly curious what that picture would look like. Would I be surprised by how calm my face looks? Since I only see my face while I'm awake, would I recognize myself looking so peaceful?

I swipe through some more pictures and come across the one she took while we were in the helicopter on our way to the gala, and I zoom in on my face. The expression I wear is elation. I can't see a single stressed or worried line on my face, even though we were headed to a mission. I scroll through some more photos of the two of us. Maybe I don't need to see what expression I wore while asleep in Mackenzie's lap. My face seems to always be full of joy and hope when I'm with her.

Did I completely mess up by ending things?

Even though I'm in a dark room and no one else is here, I shake my head and say "No" out loud.

Wanting to have a relationship with Mackenzie is selfish of me. She gave me so much every single day. She opened up my world to a side I had been missing and gave me a more fulfilled life. She let me experience what it's like to love someone so incredible and to be loved by someone so incredible.

I repay her by inviting her into danger, introducing her to worries about whether or not I'm safe, having me be gone frequently and without notice, and experiencing me not being able to tell her everything. Not to mention the possibility of her being targeted like Charlie was.

No, I didn't completely mess up by ending things with her. Okay, I might've *really* messed things up, but I did the right

thing.

A loud, angry horn blares in the distance, followed by the distinct crunch from a car crash. I wrap my arms around my pillow, squeezing it tight against my ears, trying to drown out the sounds.

It helps a little.

If only it could help to silence what's going on in my head.

CHAPTER 39

SERENDIPITY'S THIRD ACT

MACKENZIE

I am just finishing getting the padded table in my physical therapy area ready when Hammy comes around the corner from the reception area and heads toward me, a smile spread across his face that shows exactly how he earned those wrinkles. They make little parenthesis around his smile.

As he nears, I say, “Oh, how I needed your smile today, Hammy!”

“It’s hard to go two weeks without me, isn’t it?”

“Definitely.”

“You were away at a seminar in Baltimore last Monday, right?”

I nod and pat the table, so Hammy gets up on it. In my head, I don’t think of it as “the day I went to that seminar” as much as “the day Jace stopped being in my life.” To say that it’s been a rough week is like saying that the James Bond movie franchise has done “okay” at the box office. I have been miserable. I haven’t been a fan of going on anything past a first or second date since I stopped seeing Dan two years ago so I don’t have any recent heartbreak experience, but I’ve had it in my life enough to know that this time, it’s different.

When past relationships have ended, I’ve been sad that things ended. Or felt unworthy or unloved. I’ve grieved for the future I thought would happen that no longer will... Until a week or three passed and I realized that it wasn’t actually a future I wanted— I had only thought that I did. And I’ve been

sad for the loss of side relationships, like ones with his family or friends that would no longer continue.

But with Jace, it has gone so far beyond sadness. Sorrow, grief, and loss, definitely. I have also missed him intensely. I miss bantering with him. Talking with him about anything. Laughing with him about everything.

I miss the way the man is open to eating food from every country and culture in the world, yet still picks the olives off his pizza. The way I can tell when he has a stressful day at work by the subtle shift in his shoulders and the set of his jaw. The way the features of his face soften the moment his eyes fall on me. How he seems to know exactly where to rub my head when I haven't even said out loud that I have a headache.

The way he always sits at a spot in a restaurant where he can face the doors, his eyes scanning everything. The way he's hyper-aware of where I am and where any threats— a golf ball, a kid on a bike not paying attention to his surroundings, an angry cat on a dark street, actual bad guys chasing us— are at every moment. The way his protective nature extends to everyone.

I want to sit with him on the couch, rest my head on his shoulder, and breathe in the scent of him. Feel his strong arm wrapped around me. Feel the warmth of his breath against my skin as he skims his lips along my jaw before bringing those lips to meet mine. The way the muscles of his arms make me feel like I'm safe and home whenever they're wrapped around me.

I even miss all we haven't experienced yet, like holidays and vacations and seeing how he'll be around my family. I want to watch spy movies with him and laugh together as he tells me all the things that they got wrong. I want to experience everything with him. Getting married. Seeing the look on his face when a pregnancy test comes back positive. Watching him with our future kids and debating which of our features which kids got. Supporting each other through moves and careers and hardships and celebrations. I want it all.

I want him.

I want to feel the way I do when he's around. I never fully realized exactly how strong a need I have to be seen. To not be forgotten or dismissed or go unnoticed. And it didn't fully hit me how much Jace has filled that need for me until that moment on the street in Baltimore when he acted like he didn't know me when that woman walked past.

In that small moment, past hurts had come flooding in. Hurts that had been constant companions for so long that they had become part of my landscape. Until that moment, I hadn't realized that from the start, Jace had completely banished those hurts from me. All I'd known was that around him, I'd felt cherished.

I don't know what the story is with that woman and I don't need to know. All I know is the moment she passed by me and Jace's eyes flew back to mine, those past hurts completely vanished again, possibly for good. And I knew without a doubt that Jace would always "see" me. That I would never feel forgotten, dismissed, or unnoticed by him.

And then, only a small moment later, he said we should stop seeing each other.

As strange as it seems, I haven't felt unloved or unworthy or unwanted or deficient in some way like any other time when I wasn't the one to end a relationship. Somewhere along the way, Jace gave me the gift of understanding and believing in my own worth, even separate from him. And even though I haven't seen or heard from Jace in a full week, I somehow still feel cherished by him.

Which is great, except that it's also horrible. If I felt unloved, then maybe he'd be easier to get over. But it's *Jace*. He's not the kind of man you can ever get over. He's my person, and I will always long for him.

Everything has been running on a loop in my head and I'm getting nowhere. All I know is that I want him near me. I want to tell him when a patient frustrates me or accomplishes something huge. I want to share a funny meme that Melissa at the reception desk shared with me. I want to ask him what he

thinks about current events and movies and where we should eat.

I want to tell him that I'm sorry I was so angry that he had lied to me. Since Dan, I had kind of been lumping every type of secret into one big lying bucket that I believed should be condemned to a fiery grave. But Dan and Jace are as different as two men can be. Dan flat-out lied to me, and he did it to keep me from finding out how deceitful a person he was. Jace never tries to hide who he is as a person. And the things he keeps secret are things that affect national security— things he's made an oath to protect. And I wear truth glasses now, so I've got no problem seeing the big difference between the two.

I want to hum the theme songs to *Mission: Impossible*, *Austin Powers*, *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*, any James Bond movie, or even *Spy Kids* whenever I am around him. And then I want to watch the way his eyebrows crease ever so slightly or the way he rubs the back of his neck, all while he fights to keep his lips from quirking up.

I want him in my life.

In the past week, I've been relieved that my patients have only talked about their lives, never about mine, and have seemed oblivious to the state of my broken heart. But I've also been sad that Hammy wouldn't be in until today. He's my one patient who can tell if something is off with me and will always ask about it. And for some reason, I'm almost always willing to talk to him about it.

Or at least about some of it. Hammy doesn't need to know how many days in the past week I've had ice cream for dinner (three), how many sleepless nights I've endured (four), or how many times I've tapped on Jace's name in my texting app before swiping out of it (countless).

I give Hammy the rundown of what we're doing today— our final round of ultrasound therapy on his shoulder, then stretching, and then some exercises on the machines. He takes off his shirt and lies down on the paper-covered padded table and I get to work and try to keep my mind off Jace. I've gotten

really good at redirecting my thoughts whenever he pops into my head.

How did I get really good at it? Practice. Because I get a chance to practice about every thirty seconds since that's about as long as my brain can go without thinking about him.

I redirect my brain by telling Hammy that it's hard to believe that he's sixty-four. I've done physical therapy with people of all ages, and I'm usually pretty good at guessing ages. "Seriously," I say, "if I had to guess based on your muscle and bone structure, I wouldn't put you at a day over fifty-two, *max*."

Hammy chuckles, thanks me for the compliment, and then says, "So, are you excited about our Outside the Bubble event on Friday?"

"I don't know. I don't really want to get out of my comfort zone right now. I kind of want to crawl into my comfort zone with a nice, fuzzy, warm blanket, curl into a ball, and never leave it again."

"Oh, no. I'm guessing things aren't going well with you and Jace?"

When Livi found out I was having a hard time, she thought it was because of work. How did Hammy immediately know it was because of me and Jace? "Yeah. And I just really miss him. Before he ended things, I just wanted to be with him all the time, which is something I'd never experienced before. I just figured I was one of those people who couldn't handle being around the same person all the time. He's left a huge hole."

"So you didn't want it to end?"

I shake my head and say "No," without even having to think about it, but then I freeze. Is that totally true? Based on how sad I've been, I would think it is true. But I've been starting to wonder more if there's more to it.

I think Hammy can tell I'm having a realization as I move the sonogram wand over his injured shoulder, and he just patiently waits for me.

Eventually, I say, “I think that I’ve had some of my own worries. Some fears that I haven’t been willing to acknowledge. I think that Jace showing a lack of faith in our relationship has made me evaluate it more.”

“Oh, yeah?” Hammy nudges.

I can feel the fear brewing from somewhere inside me, and I decide to take a flashlight and go looking for it in the deep dark recesses for maybe the first time ever as I finish up Hammy’s sonogram and wipe the gel off his shoulder. It isn’t until I’m only a couple of minutes from finishing his stretches that my mind has fully shone a light on them instead of just seeing the surface.

“I guess that one of my worries,” I tell Hammy, “is that Jace travels a lot for work. Will I be able to handle that? Or will I sit at home whenever he’s gone and live a boring life just like my parents are?”

I’ve realized just how huge that fear is for me— that I will lose myself and live a life with no excitement and with nothing driving me. “Because what will happen if my friend Livi gets married? She dates a ton, so it’s probably not too far off. Or what if Jace and I start hanging out with couple friends a lot? That doesn’t work well when one person is gone. What if I end up getting used to doing nothing and living a small life that doesn’t matter?”

He chuckles and shakes his head. I’m done stretching his arm, so he’s just sitting on the edge of the padded table, facing me. This all probably sounds ridiculous to him. I get it. It sounds ridiculous to my own ears.

“No, you’re not going to end up living a life with no excitement and no purpose, because you’re not drawn to a life of no excitement and purpose. I knew that from my first visit here. Do you remember?”

I chuckle as so many different emotions course through me that I can’t name them all. “I do. That was about, what? Five injuries ago?”

“Six. But who’s counting? And if I didn’t think you were a woman who sought out adventure, connection, and purpose then, I would’ve known it solely by the fact that you started the Outside the Bubble club. You’ve engineered your life so that you aren’t sitting home alone, being bored and unhappy with life, no matter what else you’ve got going on. It’s part of who you are in here.”

He puts a finger to my sternum, and I swear my heart itself can feel it.

“That part of you is not going to change with Jace in your life any more than it’s going to change without him in your life. So the question you need to ask yourself is, are the times you spend with Jace going to make you feel happier and more fulfilled in life?”

Without a doubt whatsoever, yes. His words send a freight train of emotion barreling at me. I rub my nose and then wince. The injury is better enough now that I hardly think about it anymore, but it still hurts if I rub it.

It hits me that even though Jace has become my everything, it hasn’t only been him pulling back from our relationship. I have been letting my own fears pull me back, too. If Jace hadn’t ended things when he did, my own fears would’ve had more time to work in me and I might have been the one doing the breaking up. “Sometimes love is scary, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is,” Hammy says, and he stands and wraps me in a hug that I desperately need.

I pull away and wipe at my bottom eyelid and try to end the awkwardness of just hugging one of my patients by saying, “Okay, it’s time to stop trying to get out of your exercises.”

Hammy laughs and says, “Guilty,” but gives me a smile that tells me he thinks I’m going to be okay. And I believe him.

By the end of my work day, my mind has had a lot of opportunities to work through everything, and I call Livi as I walk out to my car to tell her.

“Hi,” she says as she answers, and I can tell that she’s in her car, probably driving home from work.

“I had an epiphany.”

“Ooh! Do share.”

“I don’t think Jace ended things because he actually wanted things to end.”

Livi doesn’t say anything. Probably because she’s confused. Or she thinks I’ve lost it. Honestly, either one would be valid.

I unlock my car, get inside, and turn it on, letting my Bluetooth grab our call. “When I think back through everything from the start, I realize that I have so much evidence that proves otherwise. I think he loves me as much as I love him. He’s probably been just as miserable as I have.”

“Yes!” Livi shouts. “That’s what I’ve been thinking, too! So what are you going to do about it?”

“Nothing.” I back out of my parking spot and head for the road.

“What.” Livi’s voice is flat and full of disbelief. “*Nothing?*”

“I’m going to let him work through his scary things, just like I’m working through mine.”

“Okay, listen, Mac. I think right now is a time for action! Grand gestures and all that. You go convince him that he doesn’t need to worry about those things he’s scared about.”

I shake my head even though she can’t see. “That doesn’t work. Fears need to be worked through, not ignored. There’s a time for grand gestures, and this isn’t it. Do you know what it all comes down to? Trust. And I trust Jace to work through his fears. When he does, he’ll find me.”

“That sounds *very* risky.”

“I don’t think it is. Jace and I didn’t exchange phone numbers when we first met, remember? I let serendipity bring us together. Why not let it be what brings us back together?”

As I pull out on the road that will take me home, I realize that this feels good. This feels right. I am still going to keep missing Jace and longing for him every minute of every day, but I am going to trust that things will work out.

CHAPTER 40

THE FAMILY BUSINESS

JACE

I try not to think about Mackenzie as I sit at my desk at work, going through emails, and responding to one from Finance about expenses from my last few international missions. But not thinking about her is a task that has proven rather impossible.

Ledger walks past my desk to the chart on the wall that has his name at the top of one column and *ZOE in the CIA* on the other— with her name in all caps, just like the CIA is— and marks a tally on his side. Ledger turns back in my direction, and I can see that he is grinning. He’s even got a bounce in his step. I don’t have to see him mark the chart to know that he’s just gotten back from a mission and whether Zoe Steele had also been there, competing with him for “successful mission” bragging rights, to know the outcome.

Ledger thrives on competition. Competition with Zoe? Well, let’s just say that he thrives when he competes with her *and wins*. I hold out my fist and as he walks past, and he hits his fist into mine. Ledger never really understood that it’s a fist *bump* and not a fist *punch*.

I shake out my hand as I glance over at Ledger’s chart again. It seems oddly motivating for him. Maybe I need a chart like that. I can put a tally mark in my column every time I go an hour without thinking about Mackenzie.

Yeah, I’d never have any marks. Maybe I could mark it every time I can go ten minutes without thinking about her. I pause a moment. Okay, maybe every five minutes.

Am I supposed to ever be able to stop thinking about her? Because I don't think I ever will, no matter how much motivation I have.

On this past mission, I spent a full six days in Jakarta. Worse, a full six *nights*. Each night, I stared up at that same sketchy motel room's ceiling, everything to do with Mackenzie running through my mind. Like how I didn't even tell her why I was ending things. At the time, it felt like I was sparing her pain by not getting into the details.

But I keep replaying the part where she said, "Don't I get a say in this?" It dawns on me that by not telling her, it probably made things even worse. Maybe she has been lying in her own bed at night, running through all of the possibilities as to why I would've said we should stop seeing each other, and probably every single thing she thought of caused her more pain.

I am an idiot.

Especially because eventually, I realized that I didn't keep the details from her to spare her pain—I did it to spare *myself* pain, which makes me feel even worse.

I've wanted to call her since that afternoon in Baltimore. But the information we'd gotten not only from my asset in Tel Aviv but from Mossad after questioning the data broker led to much bigger things. Enough that I'd managed to fully bury myself in work for the next twenty-four hours. And then not long after, I'd hopped on a plane and went halfway around the world for nearly a week, and it was a sensitive enough mission that I couldn't risk a phone call.

Since I've been back, the need to call her has grown so great that I've picked up my phone and hovered my finger over her name in my contacts dozens of times. But what am I supposed to say to her? I had so many conversations with her in my head during all those miserable nights in Jakarta, and none of them turned out well.

Hi, Mackenzie. I'd like to apologize for not telling you why I broke up with you. Let me lay out the details for you now.

Yeah. If she somehow miraculously doesn't hang up immediately, anything I say will only hurt her further. It isn't exactly like I can tell her, *I miss you. My life was so much better with you in it, and I want nothing more than to go back to that life. I want to do everything I can to make up for the pain I've caused you.*

Because as much as I desperately want it, I can't do that to her. It would never be fair to her. Hopefully, she is already well on her way to bouncing back from our breakup. Anything more from me now will make things worse.

The thought of her getting over our relationship and moving on with her life simultaneously relieves me and stabs me in the heart.

A meeting notification pops up on my screen, so I click on it. It's from the director, it lists the location as conference room three, and the time for the meeting says now. If there's ever a meeting that needs to happen right away, it happens right here, on the floor, and everyone is involved. Meetings scheduled for one of the conference rooms are *scheduled. As in, at a future time.*

I twist in my chair to see if my mom is already in the conference room, and I see that not only is she in the glass-front room, but so is Emerson, Miles, Ledger, and Charlie, all seated around the conference table. *Great.* I take a slow, deep breath, and then run both my hands over my face before pushing myself up from my desk.

I walk to the conference room and open the door, but I don't take a step past the doorway. "If this is an intervention, shouldn't Blake be here, too?"

Charlie gestures to the other end of the table, and I see that Blake is up on a laptop screen, sitting at one of the empty seats, facing us. His head on the screen looks life-size. Someone even put a box under the laptop so his head is at about the same height as everyone else's.

I walk fully into the room and close the door behind me. "This is a clean room. There isn't supposed to be outside communication."

“Except in circumstances when outside communication is needed for the meeting,” my mom says. “That’s exactly why I have override codes.” She then presses the controls to darken the glass so that no one on the floor can see in. So we’re getting serious here.

I stay standing for a moment but decide I might as well sit down. They aren’t likely to stop before I’ve heard them out, and I am too bone tired to stand for it. So I take the one empty seat at the end of the oval table.

Blake is the first to speak, which surprises me. I figured it would be either my mom or Charlie. “First off,” he says, “I’d like to apologize for giving Mackenzie such a cold reception at the house. I was upset and shouldn’t have let that affect the way I acted toward her. I’ve seen the difference she’s made in you.”

I sit up straighter in my chair, then look around at my family before my eyes go back to Blake on the laptop’s screen. “Wait. Is that an actual apology coming from Blake? I don’t think I’ve ever experienced this before.”

Blake grabs a stress ball from his desk and tosses it at the camera of his laptop. I hold up an arm to protect my face as if he’s actually in the room throwing it at me. Everyone chuckles — including me— and I’m grateful for the way it cuts the tension in the room.

Then I look at my brother again. “Seriously, though, Blake. Thank you.”

“We’ve all noticed the change in you,” Emerson says.

Ledger adds, “True story, bro.”

As far as interventions go, this isn’t as bad as I thought it would be. Although knowing that the change I’ve felt in me since Mackenzie has been in my life is noticeable to my family is validating, it still strikes me hard in the heart.

“I’ve noticed it too,” I say. “But it doesn’t matter because Mackenzie never chose this life.”

“Not true,” Ledger says, and my eyes immediately fly to him. “She chose it the moment she decided she wanted to

continue dating you after finding out that you're an intelligence operative."

"Now, if you don't want to continue dating her," Charlie says, "that's fine. Well, it's not actually fine with me, but don't you go making that decision for her. That's hers. Don't be a decision thief."

"I'm not trying to be a decision thief. I just feel like I'm asking so much from her when I'm the one benefitting from the relationship. It's not fair to her."

Charlie shakes her head. Not like she's telling me no, but like she's disappointed in my answer. "And now you're discounting everything that she's been getting from the relationship."

"You mean things like having a boyfriend who frequently leaves for work trips without warning, living a life of secrets, and being chased by terrorists?"

Charlie opens her mouth to say something, but then reconsiders and rolls her eyes instead, like I'm beyond help. Now *this* is what I expect from an intervention. I just guessed that Charlie's and Blake's roles would be reversed.

"What do you like about Mackenzie?" Emerson asks.

"Do you want me to make a list for you?"

"Yeah. I mean you haven't been in a relationship with anyone since college. I think before we go on, it's important to know if, after so long without, you're in love with *the experience* of having a serious relationship or if you're in love with *the woman*."

I'm annoyed that he's even asking this. It's probably a valid question, but I'm still annoyed. I close my eyes, take a slow, deep breath, try to wash away the annoyance, and let all the warm thoughts of Mackenzie wash over me instead. It's amazing even to me how quickly everything inside me transforms just by thinking about her.

I open my eyes and start to talk. Not really to Emerson and not really to the rest of my family. I just let what I'm feeling have an actual voice for the very first time, and I try to keep

any thoughts about what everyone else might think far from me as I speak.

“Mackenzie is the most amazing woman— I wish I could explain exactly how amazing so you would get it. She’s fun. She’s funny. We have laughed together so much, and the sound of her laugh makes me feel like Christmas morning. She’s smart and bold and speaks her mind. She makes me see the world in a whole new way.

“She looks out for people. And people love her. I mean, I get it— she just has a way of bringing out the best in people. It’s probably why she’s so good at her job. And if she sees something that she wishes was different, she makes it different. She doesn’t just complain about it or wait for things to change; she changes it. Did you know she started a club for people in Cipher Springs where they go do things that will bring them more joy and fulfillment in their lives and have friends to do it with?”

I shake my head. “She’s so good at that kind of stuff. I swear, if she were an intelligence operative, she’d be able to turn any asset. She just genuinely likes people and wants to help them, and they know it and love her for it.

“And not having her in my life sucks. I like who I have become because of her. I like how I feel when I’m around her. She makes me feel...” I pause to think how to explain those feelings in words, “hopeful. Excited about the future. About all the possibilities out there. She finds joy in the smallest things and it just makes life... better. It makes me better.

“When I’m with her, I try to soak in every single moment because each one matters. Like it’s a gift that is filling up my soul. And it doesn’t matter what else is going on that’s tough, because she is there. Even when I’m not with her, just thinking about her makes everything better. It makes everything... right.”

I stop talking. Not because I’ve come anywhere close to explaining all that I love about Mackenzie, but because I don’t think I ever could do it justice.

Everyone around the table is silent for a long moment. I realize that I never would've been able to open up to my family like I just did if it weren't for all the practice I've gotten opening up to Mackenzie.

Eventually, Blake breaks the silence by saying, "I think it's safe to say he's in love with the woman."

Charlie looks like she might be trying to wipe a tear from her eye.

"It scares you," Miles says, and my eyes flash to him because I assume he's calling me weak. In a voice free of any kind of brotherly teasing, he adds, "It scares you how much you love her when you have a job like you do."

I pause a moment and then nod. The way he said it makes me wonder if he's speaking from experience, but he's Miles. He doesn't fall in love. In a breath that comes out as a croaking whisper, I say, "It's terrifying."

For the very first time since she started the meeting, my mom speaks. "Tell me about when you saw Octavia Vale on that sidewalk in Baltimore."

My thoughts are wrenched back to that moment right before I ended things with Mackenzie. I swallow, then say, "I've been near Octavia several times before. That was the first time I was afraid. I could barely breathe as she walked past Mackenzie."

"Why? Did you think she was going to grab Mackenzie and threaten her to get you to do what she wanted?"

"No. But she could've seen Mackenzie, found out who she was, and then used her as leverage later."

My mom is quiet for a moment. Then she says in a quiet voice, "You mean like those men did when they kidnapped Charlie?"

I flinch right along with everyone else in the room.

"Son, I know that you think you need to wait until you stop being an intelligence operative in the field to have a serious relationship. But just because you're dating while being an

operative doesn't mean Mackenzie is in danger. Don't let what happened with your sister more than twenty years ago affect whether or not you stay in a relationship that is really important to you. We are better at hiding our personal information now than we ever were back then."

Have I been basing a lot of my life around that? Probably more than I've been willing to admit. Are my current fears logical? Or are they past fears still at play? Or is there something more that I keep ignoring because the fears surrounding Charlie's kidnapping do a pretty good job of hiding it?

I don't know how to voice what's going on in my head. It's a cyclone, and I'm not sure that I can grab all the pieces and lay them out in any kind of logical way.

It isn't until my mom starts talking again that it hits me that not only has she been my mom for my entire life and my boss for the past six years, and therefore knows me in ways that few people ever will, but she is also an intelligence operative who met someone and fell in love. She has already been through everything I'm facing.

"You have a job, Jace, where failure is not an option. And a natural by-product of that is a fear of failure. Most successful companies adopt a 'Fail early, fail often' approach with their employees because it helps people to more quickly find what works. Here, we can't do that. Here, if we fail, people may die, so failing isn't on the table."

I sit back in my chair, feeling pretty mind-blown. *A fear of failure*. I didn't even realize that it's something that is affecting me, but it's all ringing true. I'm not sure I ever could've pinpointed that on my own.

"And if you do fail," Miles says, "it's not the same cost of failure as it is here. You can fail and get back up again."

Ledger has his arms on the table like he always does since that's the best way to show off his impressive guns, and he leans forward. "Bro. It's time to stop worrying and start taking action! Being an intelligence operative is all about being

daring and fearless, right? So just start being daring and fearless and everything will be fine.”

Miles rolls his eyes. “You can’t just bulldoze your way through every situation, Ledger. Being an *effective* intelligence operative is all about making connections with people. And that’s what Jace is trying to do— making a solid, lasting connection with Mackenzie.”

I’m opening my mouth to say thank you when Emerson says, “No, being an intelligence operative is about *data*. You can’t accomplish anything if you don’t have the right information.”

Ledger leans back in his chair, grabs a piece of paper from the printer on the small table by the wall, crumples it into a ball, and throws it across the table at Emerson.

“What?” Emerson says, holding his hands out like stop signs. “I’m just saying that on paper, Jace and Mackenzie as a couple make sense. And that’s important if you want things to work out. That’s what we all came together to talk about, right? How they make sense, so he should get working on getting back together with her already.”

From his screen at the end of the table, Blake shakes his head. “You’re all idiots. Being an intelligence operative is about glory at the expense of those you love. You love this woman? Quit the agency. Then you can show her you love her every day for the rest of your life.”

My mom is watching all of this with her mouth slightly quirked up in amusement. Unlike Charlie, who’s had her arms crossed the whole time each of our brothers has weighed in on my love life. “You’re all wrong,” she says. Then she turns to me. “Don’t listen to them, Jace. And don’t quit the CSA.” She tosses a glare at Blake before turning back to me. “Being an intelligence operative is all about being adaptive. And being adaptive means not letting a fear of failure make you sabotage things.”

“I didn’t— ”

“So that’s why you went on that mission to Tel Aviv when Mom said she could send me!” Ledger says. “You did it to get out of meeting Mackenzie’s family.” He jabs a pointed finger in my direction. “You were sabotaging things with her.”

“I wasn’t— ”

“I could’ve gone, too,” Miles says. “My guess is, you didn’t *want* to end things with Mackenzie, so you were almost forcing it to happen in a way that was out of your control.”

Ledger nods. “Because if you went on that mission, either Mackenzie would be super upset that you missed her family thing and end your relationship— ”

“— Or you would convince yourself that you were putting Mackenzie in danger by going on a mission where another woman would likely be in danger,” Miles continues. “Either way, you could end things without it feeling like there was another option you could take that you were just choosing not to.”

“Sounds about right,” Ledger says, folding his arms and leaning back in his chair as if he figured everything out. “You got scared and became a big, fat saboteur.”

It’s been a good long while since the twins have been in agreement on anything enough that they could finish each other’s sentences without one of them steering the conversation wildly off course. It figures that they would finally come together over evaluating my motives.

“I didn’t become a...” Or did I? I’m not sure. Right now, my mind is swirling so much that I am no longer sure of anything beyond my feelings for Mackenzie. I stand up. I need to think, and I can’t do that here.

“Thank you all for being excessively blunt and insightful and, well, caring. But I’ve got to...” I hike a thumb toward the door. “Not be here.”

Then I turn and leave.

CHAPTER 41

WAITING IN THE WINGS

JACE

I walk into my apartment and drop my bag and cooler just inside my door before heading to my bedroom to strip off my dirty clothes.

By the time I got home after my family's intervention, my mom had already left a message on my phone saying I should take a day or two off. That's pretty common when one of us has been on as many away missions as I've been on lately—I've just never taken her up on it before now.

As soon as I got her message, I let her know I was taking both days. Then I packed a bag of clothes and a cooler of groceries before heading over to my storage unit to grab my tent and sleeping bag that haven't seen enough use lately. Then I drove to a camping area in the woods that I love.

I spent those two days with nothing but me, my thoughts, a couple of curious squirrels, far too many bugs, some food, and the family of raccoons that were constantly trying to relieve me of that food. For the record, the ending score was me: 10, raccoons: 1. I gave them the bag of Doritos because they seemed to really want them. And, honestly, it wasn't the food item that was going to keep me alive up there.

Okay, the score was actually me: 7, raccoons: 4, because I eventually decided that they should also have the protein bars, granola, and pasta salad. Mostly because the battle just wasn't worth it.

When I wasn't defending against raccoons, I spent my time thinking about everything my family brought up. So

much of what they said about Charlie's kidnapping and about the fear of failure rang true. I also realized that they hadn't got all the way to the root of things. To what failure it is that I am most fearing.

When I let myself get still and quiet under the maple, pine, and oak trees, something kept coming to the surface: my dad. I started thinking about how much I miss him and how I wish I could go to him right now and ask for his advice.

Then I came up with the wise idea to just have a conversation with him. I've spent enough time with him—including enough time camping with him in these very woods—that I could guess what he would say. So I did, with me voicing both my dad's side of our dialogue and mine since he wasn't there to actually voice it himself.

It felt weird at first, speaking as if I were him, picturing him in a camp chair next to me like he had been so many times before. I wasn't quite sure how to start, either. Then, I realized that he probably would've just brought it up directly and said something like, "You're afraid to lose her."

Which is true. But I answered back, "You're saying I don't want to lose her, but I chose to end things with her, which was purposely losing her. So, that doesn't make any sense."

"Does it not?" I could almost hear my dad saying it. He was so good at asking questions to get me thinking more deeply and letting me come to the conclusion myself instead of just handing me the conclusion on a silver platter.

So I told him what I knew. "I feel like I need to protect Mackenzie at all costs, but I worry that I might fail at it. I think it probably has to do with Charlie getting kidnapped as a child."

After a pause, I imagined my dad saying, "We got Charlie back."

I nod.

"But you lost me, and you didn't get me back."

I broke down then. I felt the pain of losing my dad all over again. The pain of not having had him around for the past four

years. Of not being able to have conversations like this with him. Of not having him wrap his arms around me in a hug afterward and tell me that he knows I can do whatever hard thing I'm facing.

Then I said, "Every day, I am more in love with Mackenzie than I was the day before. If she and I stay together, that will keep happening. Losing her right now has been awful, and that didn't even have anything to do with whether or not I could protect her. How would it be to lose her a year from now? Or five or ten or fifty years from now when I'll love her so much more? I barely survived you dying. If something ever happened to her, it'll be more than I can handle. It will break me. I don't think I can face that."

I sat in silence for a long moment, letting myself feel all the thoughts and emotions I was experiencing instead of trying to push them away. Then I looked over to where I imagined my dad was sitting next to me, and I said, "Are you going to tell me the whole 'It's better to have loved and lost' thing?"

I imagined he replied with, "Do you want me to?"

"A little bit, yeah."

"I think you know it is. Have you imagined your future without her?"

I nodded. "And the conclusion I came to is that I love Mackenzie and I'm never going to stop loving her. If we don't get back together, someday I'll be a seventy-five-year-old man and I'll still be missing her, and I'll still be wishing I would've made different choices so I wouldn't have had to live a lifetime without her. And I don't want to have those kinds of serious, life-altering regrets. I can't imagine a life as terrible as spending it without Mackenzie now that I know what it's like to spend it with her."

"And there's your answer."

"And you think I can handle whatever comes my way?"

"I do. But also, son, I think that any time it matters, you'll be there to protect her. You are one of the most elite intelligence operatives in the world. You can trust your

abilities to protect her. And the Clandestine Services Agency is one of the top intelligence agencies in the world. Not only did we, as a family, learn a lot since Charlie's kidnapping, but the agency learned a lot, too. Trust in that and in all of your training. You'll keep her safe. Don't spend your whole life worrying and not living."

I know my dad wasn't there with me in the woods. But the memory of him was, strongly. I am grateful that he was the kind of dad who gave me enough advice in life that I could guess what he would say even after death. "Thank you, Dad," I'd whispered into the crisp night air.

He'd gotten me through an incredibly tough night, and I woke up this morning feeling hope again. Like I had shed chains that had been holding me back for so long that I no longer even realized they were there.

I turn on the shower, let it run for a few seconds, and then step in before it finishes heating up because being in the woods for two days has a way of making me too uncomfortable to stay in my own dirt-dusted skin. I tilt my face toward the shower head, just letting the water run over me before I start washing my hair.

I've had many realizations about Mackenzie over the past two days, and one of them is that maybe she feels the same about me that I do about her. My job is to look for truths, and there have been so many truths about how Mackenzie feels right in front of me.

Couples are supposed to figure things out together. Yet, I made the huge decision to end things without talking it through with Mackenzie. It was all me. I didn't take her opinions or thoughts or desires into consideration at all. So the weight and responsibility of the consequences are all on me, too. It seems like such a stupid choice now that I can't believe I ever thought it was the right one.

Maybe I thought it was the right decision because I haven't had any recent experience with relationships. Or maybe it's because my dad has been gone for four years now, so I haven't

been seeing my parents interact. None of my siblings are in serious relationships, either.

Or maybe I just really am that big of an idiot to not recognize what I was doing.

But as Miles said, when relationships fail, we can get back up and try again. And that's exactly what I'm going to do. I don't know if the damage I did is repairable, but I am going to do my best to repair it.

I also spent some time thinking about Mackenzie's ex and about how she was the guy's second choice. Which is unfathomable to me and makes no sense whatsoever. Mackenzie is the kind of woman that you thank your lucky stars that you know. And if she falls in love with you, you consider yourself the luckiest man on earth, and you do whatever it takes to stay worthy of that love.

"Says the guy who pushed her away," I mutter as I rinse the shampoo from my hair.

I also know that the jerk never wanted people to think that he and Mackenzie were together when they were in public. So I bet that when I declare my love for her and let her know that I'm all in— and that I hope she is too— it will be extra meaningful to her if I do it in a more public setting. The people who I think will be most meaningful to her to have present are the ones who attend her Outside the Bubble events. Those are the relationships she's nurtured and the people she really cares about.

And it just so happens that there's a club meeting tonight that I'm already late for. I get out of the shower and towel off quickly before getting dressed in jeans and a t-shirt that Mackenzie once told me that she loves. Then I text Charlie. After I went to the last club meeting and told Charlie all about it, she seemed determined to attend this one.

Jace: Are you at the Outside the Bubble event?

Charlie: I am. I'm sorry— maybe I should've asked you if that was okay first.

Jace: Of course it's fine. I'm glad you're there.
I'm coming. Don't tell Mackenzie.

She replies with a string of Emojis that I don't think quite go together, but I get the gist that she is happy about it. She texts that they're at the old community center building and which door to enter through so she can meet me before going in.

By the time I've driven to Cipher Springs, parked, and walked inside, it's forty minutes after the activity began. Charlie is waiting for me in the hallway, pacing, and rushes to me the second she sees me.

"Okay," she says, her voice coming out in a rush, "it's improv night, and there's a drama instructor here. She taught us some basics at the beginning, and now we are using them."

I glance toward a door down the hallway that I can hear muffled voices coming from. I feel pulled toward that room, so I'm glad that Charlie is speaking fast.

"We are doing a game right now— it's a mix of reverse tag and the ABC game. There are two people up at the front and they're making up a scene as they go, but the first word of whatever they say has to go in alphabetical order. So the first person says something that starts with the letter A, then the next person has to respond by starting with the letter B, and so on. Anyone can go up and tap the shoulder of one of the people at the front to take their place."

I nod. "I can work with that."

Charlie leads me to a big activity room that has two floor-to-ceiling curtains drawn together in the middle that divide the room in half. We are in the empty half and the activity is in the other half. I remember coming to a rock painting class here when I was a kid. The curtain didn't do much to muffle the sound or to divide the room well, but after all these years, they're still here and looking just about as dusty.

I go to where the two curtains come together and peek through a crack. Two people are walking to the front to do an improv scene just as two others are sitting down. Beside me,

Charlie whispers, “The woman at the front with the silvery hair is Brenda, and the guy doing the scene with her is German.” I met both at the last activity, so they are familiar.

German rubs his hands together. “Alrighty then, it looks like we have a case on our hands.”

Brenda raises an eyebrow. “Bloody footprints give that away? Or was it the broken window?”

“Criminals always leave clues, don’t they?” German says.

From where I’m standing, I’m looking at the backs of a curved line of chairs that face Brenda and German, and that’s where everyone else is seated. There are several more people at this event than the last one, so Mackenzie’s recruitment efforts are paying off. She is probably thrilled.

I spot the back of her hair and a bit of her left cheek. She is such a sight for sore eyes, and I find myself barely breathing even as my chest is filled with elation and trepidation, hope and anxiety, longing and peace. It feels like a lifetime has passed since I last saw her, and I take a long moment to just drink her in.

Then, I start to feel the same rush of adrenaline I always feel as I am about to head into a high-stakes mission. And this is definitely a high-stakes mission. I try to remind myself not to be afraid of failure, though. This is Mackenzie. She is worth whatever it takes.

Brenda uses the back of her hand to sweep her hair away from her face. “Leaving the axe they used to break the window hidden behind the shrubs is about as subtle as a rooster in a henhouse at sunrise.”

“Mackenzie’s doing okay,” Charlie whispers in my ear. “I mean, you can tell that under the surface she isn’t so much, but she’s pasted on a pretty good smile for this. Several regulars seem to know her enough to know that something is up, but they aren’t being as intrusive about it as I thought they’d be. Or maybe they’re saving it for after the event.”

Most people don’t whisper discreetly, so the sound of their whispering can be heard by people for quite a distance, even if

they can't make out the words. My siblings and I learned as kids how to share information without being detected, and Charlie is as good as they come. Especially when it comes to breathing quietly and speaking softly. Not a soul on the other side of the room has given the slightest indication that they hear us.

I can't see much of Mackenzie's face, but as the scene goes on, I try to see if I can tell for myself how she's doing and what she might be thinking.

"Maybe the culprit is the gardener," German says. "I think this is his axe."

Brenda shakes her head. "No point in counting your eggs before the chicken's even clucked; we need to look around more."

"Okay, open minds then..." German takes a look around. "Maybe the axe was a red herring and the perpetrator actually used that innocent-looking log!"

With her hands on her hips, Brenda makes a *tsking* sound. "Painted stripes on a mule and called it a zebra. That's what they did here."

Mackenzie's friend, Livi, is sitting next to her and starts nudging her to go up to the front. It doesn't take long for several other people around her to add their own nudges.

Charlie whispers to me, "Oh, Mackenzie has put her hands on her knees and is taking a deep breath— I think she's going to go up. And she is! Who do you think she's going to tap in for?"

I turn and whisper to my sister, "Charlie, you've been in my ear for enough dates with Mackenzie while she was my asset. I don't need you to be in my ear here, too."

Charlie chuckles quietly. "Got it."

Mackenzie taps Brenda on the shoulder, and the older woman takes a seat as Mackenzie stands in her place. "We're on Q, right? Okay." She gives her shoulders a shake like she's shaking herself into the scene. "Quick thinking, German! We might just crack this case yet."

I almost take a step forward, but then I turn back to Charlie. “Feel free to take pictures, though— Mackenzie would like that.”

“You’ve got it. Oh, and Jace? Good luck.”

I nod, take a deep breath, and then split the curtains enough to walk between them and into the other side of the room.

CHAPTER 42

CODEBREAKER

MACKENZIE

Livi came to my apartment just before tonight's club activity, and I told her that I changed my mind about giving Jace space to work through his fears. That I can no longer wait patiently for him to find his way back to me. He's my everything. I'm miserable without him. This is how it went down.

Livi: "No. Stay strong and just wait. You knew it was the right thing to do before and you know it's the right thing now. Just give him time."

Me: "No, I was wrong. If we are together, we can work things out. I know we can. I just need to see him. I'm going over to his apartment right now." (The withdrawals are hitting me hard.)

Livi, in a very firm voice: "No." And then she takes my keys.

Me: "I'm going to call him."

Livi: "Mackenzie, you are not going to call him."

Me: "I'm going to text him."

Livi, after taking my phone: "Just go to the club meeting. It's the one thing that's going to take your mind off him for a bit."

For the record, Livi was wrong. Jace hasn't left my mind the whole time we've been here. But there are people present who haven't been to a club meeting before— a few are people I've met through the clinic, a couple others had seen my fliers

around town, and three are people who saw the note about it in with their city bill. So that's exciting. I chatted with all of them, and I think they'll add a lot to the group.

Do you know who else would add a lot to this group? Jace.

I remember my addicted raccoon thoughts. Okay, so I'm an addict. But today, specifically, my need to see Jace is also because a) it's been far too long since I last saw him and the missing him has just continued to build, and b) because things still feel so unsettled between us. If Jace had been away on a mission this whole time but things between us were great, I would be handling him being gone just fine.

Probably. I really miss him.

I explained all of that to Livi earlier, then tried to get my phone back, and she said, "No. Stay strong. Serendipity!"

Me: "Forget serendipity! I'm not strong enough for serendipity! I was only strong enough after the first time we met because I didn't know yet how much I would love having him in my life."

Maybe when in the middle of desperately missing your ex is not the best time to call him, so I should probably thank Livi for stopping me. The desperation has faded now, but the missing him is still strong.

Also, thinking of him as "my ex" is downright painful and I don't ever want to think that thought again. I force my focus to be back on the game before I make a fool of myself up here.

"Really," German says, "it's teamwork. Together we will solve this mystery."

S... S... Come on, Mackenzie, think of something that starts with S. "Surely, we will. Should we start by measuring the size of the shoe print?"

The row of people watching starts to murmur, and I know it's not because my line was particularly clever. I haven't even turned to see the reason why before I see Jace step up to German and tap him on the shoulder. Am I hallucinating? Did I manifest him here?

German takes a seat and Jace is standing in front of me, looking like he brought the sun with him. He's smiling and beautiful and looking very much not like a hallucination. His eyes are warm and it feels like he can see right into me. "Tonight," he says, "I would like to tell you that I made a big mistake."

I shake myself out of just staring at him and having a lot of emotions at hearing the words "made a mistake" enough to realize that he started his sentence with a T. And that means he is continuing the game, so I need to start my next sentence with a U. "Unusual. Does this mean you're here to tell me that I was right?"

"Very much so."

"What was I right about? Please, tell me more."

He pauses, and I take the moment to thank my lucky stars that I wasn't the one who got the letter X because I can think of nothing. He, though, says, "Ex is a terrible word."

Oh, good one. And did he read my thoughts? I nod. "You're right. It's a terrible, terrible word."

"Zero is the number of times that I ever want to use it again."

Z. Another letter I'm glad didn't fall to me. I'm not sure if we are continuing the game now that we got to Z, but I start my next sentence with A, just in case. "All right. So, how are we going to accomplish the task of never using that word again?"

"By telling the truth. Which is what I did *not* do that day on the sidewalk in Baltimore."

My chest fills with emotion. Everything Jace said that day on the sidewalk had felt so wrong in the moment and has felt so wrong every moment since. There have been several times over the past couple of weeks that I thought maybe it was just me— maybe it had felt just as right to him as it had felt wrong to me. Hearing him say those words nearly bowls me over with relief and hope.

There's another emotion at work in my chest, too. Appreciation. I thought he would probably stop the game after we got to Z, but I love that he's continuing with it. It can't be the easiest way to say what wants to tell me, but he's putting in the effort to do it, and I know it's because he knows it matters to me.

Emotion comes out in my voice as I say, “‘Can’t do this anymore.’ That’s what you said. And you didn’t let me disagree.”

Jace nods. “Definitely a lie. The truth is, I don’t ever want my life to not have you in it. Or to not have you tell me when I’m wrong.”

My voice is even more shaky as I verify, “Ever?”

“Forever with you in my life. That’s what I want.”

“Good, because that’s exactly what I want, too. You in my life. And us sharing the decision-making.”

“Honestly,” he says, and takes a step closer to me, kicking my heart rate up a notch. “I never wanted you out of my life. I just got scared that the... *spreadsheet jockey* part of my life was going to cause problems.”

I let out an emotion-filled chuckle. “I see we are calling it ‘spreadsheet jockey’ now.” I can’t help but notice that the phrase he chose as a “business solutions” descriptor for his job starts with “sp” and ends with “y.” He didn’t choose something like “opportunity to innovative,” which kind of combines its beginning and end to make the word “operative.” He chose “spy,” which is my word for his job.

I want to say something out loud to tell him that I noticed what he did, but obviously, I can’t, so I just grin widely. By the look in his eyes when he returns the smile, he knows I got it and that it tickles me. “I wonder... Are you still scared?”

Jace shakes his head with a very decisive *no*, then pauses a moment, probably thinking of how to start his sentence with a J. Then he says, “Joy and hope is what I feel now. ‘Joy’ because I’m here with you and it feels so good after going so

long without seeing you. ‘Hope,’ because I hope I can talk you into us being together again.”

I keep myself from being too eager and just shouting, “Yes!” Especially because we aren’t on the letter Y. I pause to consider for a moment, tapping my finger on my lips, trying to fight a smile. “Knowing why you want to might help me to make the decision.”

“Love is why. Would you like me to get specific? Because I can name plenty of things I love about you.”

I nod.

“I love that you always speak your mind. I love that you stand up for yourself and others. I love that you would take in a stray cat on his terms. I love that you bring out the best in me. That you make me laugh. That your eyes twinkle when we banter.

“I love that you easily adapt to anything thrown at you. That you’re accepting of my ‘spreadsheet jockey’ life. That you can beat me at mini golf. That you’re always up for an adventure.

“I love that I can share anything with you. And I love that I can hand you my heart and know you’ll always keep it safe. I love you, Mackenzie MacNeil.”

Everyone in the chairs watching us lets out a collective *Aww*, and I am a mix of laughing and wiping at tears that are threatening to spill over and smiling and feeling so very seen. Like there’s nothing that matters more to Jace than I do. I know I will always matter to him.

I don’t peel my eyes away from Jace, but I turn my head slightly toward the others and ask, “What letter are we on?”

Everyone shouts the letter “M,” but none of them do at the same time, making a collective sound that’s a bit like a flock of confused sheep. Then Hammy calls out, “Keep going—you’ve got to get back to the letter *T*!”

I compose myself and say, “My, that is quite the list.”

“Never-ending, actually. Want me to keep going?”

“Obviously. But I have my own list about you.”

“Please share.”

“Quite the suave charmer, you are. You’re also quite the protector. I love that you’re protective of everyone from me, to your family, to someone on the street, to a stranger halfway across the world. You’re always aware of what I need and always look out for me. I love that you would bring me lunch from my favorite place, buy me honey, and write me thoughtful cards.

“And you’re quite dashing in a tuxedo.”

He chuckles, and I continue. “I love that life is an adventure with you. That you joke with me. Make up fake histories with me. Comfort me. Make badly painted pottery with me. Support me in the things that are important to me. Sacrifice one of your favorite shirts to take care of my nose.

“I love that you opened your world to me and welcomed me in. I love that you truly see me. I am very much in love with you, too, Jace Lancaster.”

“Reuniting is a beautiful thing, isn’t it?” Jace steps even closer to me and reaches a hand out to ever so lightly skim his knuckles along my jaw from my ear to my chin, sending a happy cascade of tingles throughout my body. “You are one remarkable, radiant, refreshing woman, Mackenzie. And I just want you to know that I am all in.”

He’s all in. I feel myself getting emotional again and I fan my eyes with my hand, trying to keep them from being teary. “S... S...” Why can’t I think of a response? “Speechless! Swoony!”

From the crowd, Livi yells out, “Serendipity!”

Charlie, who I notice has been taking pictures, shouts “So sweet!”

I laugh through the emotion and fix my eyes on Jace. “Thank you.”

He glances at my lips, then back to my eyes, and breathes, “The letter T was mine.”

I chuckle, and then close the gap between us and plant my lips on his. He wraps an arm around me and pulls me close. His kiss is breathtakingly perfect. There is nothing as incredible as a confident, protective man showing his depth of commitment through a kiss, and I respond by melting into him, relishing every second of it.

CHAPTER 43

THE COUPLE THAT SPIES TOGETHER

JACE

“It has been so great to meet you both,” Mackenzie says as she shakes the hand of the logistics coordinator, Grayson, and his doctor wife, Kennedy.

Grayson and Kennedy return the sentiment, and as I shake Grayson’s hand, I say, “And just remember, if Chase down in the warehouse gives you any guff about how organizing goods takes precedence over being able to move goods quickly, just remind him of the Great Pallet Collapse of twenty twenty-two.”

The man laughs and I laugh along with him. Mackenzie places her hand on Kennedy’s arm and says, “And I wish you all the best with your ‘*But WebMD says...*’ patient,” and the four of us laugh some more.

Then Mackenzie and I walk away from the couple to socialize with others at this company party— preferably a person standing in a spot that will allow me to keep an eye on the company’s finance manager, who is currently chatting with someone near the front center of the room.

“We’re very good at this,” Mackenzie says in a soft voice, grinning at me.

We very much are.

This is the first mission that Mackenzie has accompanied me on. As my date, not as an operative. I could’ve stealthily crashed this cocktail party for TransGlobalExchange’s New York office in several ways, but strolling right on in with Mackenzie at my side turned out to be rather enjoyable and

very effective. And now, we are sporting peel-and-stick name tags and socializing with the employees.

TransGlobalExchange is a legit company, and it's likely that nearly everyone here— except for the finance manager and a few others— isn't involved in any illegal activities. But while the ones doing illegal things are tied up at this party where I can keep an eye on them, Miles is getting into the finance manager's office through much stealthier means. We have good intel that it contains documents that show evidence of their involvement in money laundering and organized crime on an international level.

Being back together with Mackenzie over this past week has been amazing. All the weeks with her before were, too, but I hadn't realized how much my worries about being an intelligence operative and being with Mackenzie at the same time were holding me back from really enjoying the relationship.

Now that I've gotten past those worries, everything is even more incredible than it ever was. I can't believe how lucky I am to have found a woman who is everything that Mackenzie is and everything that I never knew I needed.

I glance around the big room with the standing cocktail tables. Before coming on this mission, I memorized the name, picture, and job title of every employee attending. Being a good intelligence operative means controlling the situation, and coming prepared is the best way to make people believe that you belong.

“Over there,” Mackenzie says, motioning subtly with her virgin mojito.

I follow her gesture to a woman in her late thirties with shoulder-length brown hair and stylish glasses who was recently chatting with another couple. That couple just walked away, leaving her alone at one of the tall tables. She looks just like her picture, so I know that it's Christine, an employee in human resources who is over health insurance.

When we reach Christine, Mackenzie moves her hair away from the name tag that's stuck to her deep purple fitted

cocktail dress that has the name *Kim* written with a Sharpie. She told me she does that because it's easier for people if they can see the name instead of just hearing it. It's just one of the ways she looks out for people.

"Hi," Mackenzie says. "I'm Kim."

I had tried to talk her into using "Mayflower" as her cover name, but she gave it a hard pass. She had a hard time choosing between the cover name "Claire," as an homage to *Mission: Impossible*, the first field operative movie she saw with Livi, and "Kim" from *Kim Possible*, the titular character in a spy series she loved as a kid.

In the end, she chose the animated teenage hero. Most intelligence operatives have a go-to cover name along with a few others they use as the situation calls for it. I don't know how many missions like this Mackenzie will join me on as my date, but it won't surprise me if she chooses a different cover name each time.

"Christine," the woman says, reaching a hand out to shake ours.

We make small talk with her as I surreptitiously keep an eye on the finance manager, ensuring that he's staying in the room. Eventually, the woman asks us how "Kim" and I met.

"I started working here as a temp in the marketing department... what was it?" Mackenzie looks at me. "About a year or a year-and-a-half ago?"

"Fifteen months and nine days ago."

"That is so sweet you remember the exact day!" Christine says.

"It would be hard to forget. I had gone into the break room for a mid-morning coffee—"

"— and I was there making myself a cup of mint tea," Mackenzie says, finishing my sentence.

"She turned and smiled at me," I say, smiling right now, because this backstory that we are making up as we go is taking me right back to the day I first laid eyes on Mackenzie

when we made up a different joint backstory for her blind date's benefit.

"It might have been more of a grimace," Mackenzie says.

I nod. "It was a grimace, for sure. Kim had a jar of honey that she was trying to open so she could put some in her tea."

Mackenzie gives me a smile that tells me that it means something to her that I am bringing up the honey. "And the lid was stuck like NASA scientists had made glue to keep it closed."

I shrug. "Well, if you're going to carry around a jar of honey in your purse, I guess it's good to have it sealed tightly."

Mackenzie nods. "So Jason, being the chivalrous man that he is, came over to help."

"Except it didn't exactly go so well."

Christine is looking back and forth between us, very invested in the story. "What happened?"

Mackenzie reaches out and squeezes my bicep. "He used a bit too much muscle and honey splattered all over my blouse."

"Luckily," I tell her, "I had a spare shirt at my desk."

"Unluckily, it was a *t-shirt* in a sickly green color that reminded me of a soccer team from when I was a kid, and across the chest, it read *Hold on. Let me overthink this.*"

"Which paired very well with your pencil skirt and heels."

"I'm not sure your boss thought so."

I smile at her like she's the sun rising in the morning. "That was the first day of many where you showed just how memorable you are."

She gives me a look like she wants to curl up in my arms somewhere and I want to give her just that. I know this is our first mission together, but I'm already a huge fan of bringing her with me. But then Charlie says in my ear, "Okay, Miles is in place. Are you ready?"

I glance at my watch, and then say to Mackenzie, “Speaking of my boss, I need to go send that information to him. Do you mind if I leave you for a minute?”

“Not at all. You go be a spreadsheet jockey.” She gestures at the cat brooch on Christine’s lapel. “It looks like me and my new friend, Christine, both have an affection for feline companions, so we’ve got a lot to discuss.”

Mackenzie turns to face me and uses both hands to straighten my collar, and then she leans in close, her breath tickling my ear as she breathes, “Who says we can’t successfully combine your spy life and regular life? We seem to be doing it just fine.”

I grin as she pulls back, fully in agreement, and then I give her a peck on the lips.

I’m still grinning as I head out of the meeting room and toward the finance manager’s office to go be a spy.

EPILOGUE 1

HIGH-ALTITUDE HAPPILY EVER AFTER

Mackenzie

I'm standing next to Jace, looking up at the cliff we're about to climb when I hear, "There's my MacSquared!"

I turn to see my parents walking toward me from where they parked their car by some trees not too far away, and I run over to them and give them both a hug. "Thank you for coming to see my first outdoor climb!" Jace thought I should invite them, but I didn't think they'd want to drive more than an hour just to watch me climb a cliff. They surprised me by saying yes.

My mom is looking up at the cliff like it's a rope bridge over a pit of snapping crocodiles and definitely not to be trusted as we walk back toward it. "This rock climbing thing is safe, right?"

"Don't worry, Mom. I've been taught by the best." I toss a smile at Jace as we near him. "I've also gotten pretty good at it."

"Pretty good?" she asks.

"She's practically a pro now," Jace says as he shakes my dad's hand. "I chose this spot because Mackenzie and I can climb up side by side, and it's not too high for a first-time outdoor climb. And we've got my friends Treyton and Vince here, who are going to be holding onto the other end of the rope from down here, making sure we don't fall."

One of my favorite things over the past few months has been rock climbing. I let Jace know once that it was something I'd always wanted to do, and he's taken me to an indoor climbing facility every week since. Even on the week when he'd gotten off an eight-hour flight from Vienna just an hour before, he was there. It's one of the most fun things I've ever done.

My dad studies the cliff, the harnesses that both Jace and I are wearing, the ropes and gear that we are preparing, and the two operatives who are also climbing enthusiasts that are going to belay us. Then he looks back at me and says, "So, now that you two have been together for several months, I've got to ask— how are things going?"

"Gloriously," I say without hesitation.

I mean, sure. It's been a bit of an adjustment getting used to Jace sometimes heading out of town with no warning at all. Or him going out of town *with* advance warning. And sometimes I really want to know details, but it's classified, so I've had to work on keeping my curiosity at bay.

And there are times when I can tell that Jace worries for my safety. His tells are usually along the lines of pulling me out of the way if a bike takes a corner too quickly while we are on my daily walk or shielding me whenever a car backfires. But I've found that if he ever starts to worry, all I have to do is remind him that he's one of the most capable spies in the world, so with him is about the safest place I can be.

But those are teeny hiccups and are minuscule compared to how great it is to have Jace in my life. I wasn't exaggerating when I said it's glorious.

Like we always do, Jace and I check each other's harnesses, that our helmets are secure, and that our figure 8 knot is tied into both hard points. We check our ropes, too. Treyton and Vince are doing the same. They've gone with us to the climbing facility enough times that we've really gotten used to working together.

"We got here early," my mom says, "so your dad and I already drove around and found the road that leads to the top

of the cliff. There's a big, open space up there, so that's where we'll be." She squeezes my shoulders in a quasi-hug. "We'll see you at the top!"

At first, I am doing great. I am climbing on the left, Jace is on my right, and he is going up at the same speed as me, pointing out hand holds or where the bolts are to clip my quick draw into when I can't see them. With Jace at my side and Treyton and Vince below, I feel completely safe.

And completely exhilarated and free.

About halfway up the cliff, I shout down, "Take!" Jace does the same right after.

"I've got you," Vince says, and a second later, Treyton calls up, "I've got you, too, Jace."

The slack in my rope disappears and stretches tight as from the ground below, Vince uses his body weight to hold my body weight. It keeps me from falling even while I'm not holding on. I set my feet against the cliff face and shake out my hands.

"Doing okay?" Jace asks.

I nod and smile as I look around, taking in my view. I'm on the side of a freaking mountain! This is the life I have always dreamed of but never thought I would get. Jace is looking at me like he's never before been more proud of a human. I look back like I've never before been so in love because I haven't. Not even yesterday. Every day, I love this man more than I did the day before. I can't imagine how it's going to be when I'm ninety and he's ninety-one.

"Thank you," I say, hoping all that I'm feeling comes out in those two words. By his return smile, I'm guessing it did.

I call back down to Vince, "Climbing!"

"Climb on!" he shouts up, and I feel my own weight being transferred back to me.

As I'm searching for my next handhold, I ask Jace, "So did you ever scale the side of a building like Ethan Hunt climbed that one in Dubai in *Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol*?"

“You know that my job isn’t like the *Mission: Impossible* movies.”

I chuckle, because I’ll never tire of bringing up spy movies with Jace. Or whistling, humming, or singing secret agent songs.

After a beat, Jace adds, “But yeah, I did. It wasn’t with suction cups, though. It was a stone building and I scaled it pretty much like we are scaling this.”

My foot nearly slips. “For real?” I glance over and see his nod. I doubt this man will ever cease to blow my mind.

By the time we near the top, every muscle in my body aches— the ones in my fingers, especially— but I am on a high unlike anything I have ever done before and I can’t stop grinning. Jace warned me that rounding the cliff to the top is one of the hardest parts, so I’ve tried to save some energy for it. But really, rock climbing is *hard*, and there’s not a lot of energy that can be saved.

We both connect top ropes to the bolts for Vince and Treyton to climb. Then Jace crests the cliff first so he can be at the top with a hand to help me as I crest it. But he knows it’s important to me that I do it myself, so he lets me struggle without stepping in. Really, seeing his encouraging face and knowing that I’ve got a hand to help me if needed is more than enough.

He was right— cresting the top *is* the hardest, and I am grasping at every handhold on the ground that I can get while trying to figure out how to find footholds when it feels like my knees need to be able to bend the opposite direction to do it.

By using the last bit of arm strength that I’ve got, I manage to scramble up onto the top of the cliff and immediately roll onto my back, exhausted, breathing heavily, and feeling the most elated sense of accomplishment I’ve ever felt. When we first started indoor climbing a few months ago, there was no way I could’ve come close to making it up this high of a climb. I’ve gained so much strength since then. Jace plops down on his back next to me, and we both just stare at the clouds as we catch our breaths.

“We did it,” I say. “We lead-climbed outdoors. Up a sheer cliff face.”

“We did.” Jace sounds just as happy as I am.

“We are pretty great together, aren’t we?”

“Yes, we are.”

A few moments later, a shadow falls over me, and I raise an arm that is so tired it’s almost shaking to shield my eyes from the sun to see who it is. “Livi?” I grab her proffered hand. “What are you doing here?”

She pulls me to stand as Jace’s brother, Blake, pulls him up. Then I notice Charlie, Jace’s mom, more of his brothers, my parents, and my sisters and their husbands. “Is everyone here?”

“Everyone but Ledger,” Miles says. “He had to make a last-minute trip to Cairo and is on a plane right now.”

“And there’s no cell service up here,” Emerson adds, “so we can’t video chat him.”

“I mean, it’s cool that I climbed this cliff and all, but you can’t all have come just to see that. Why are you here?”

No one says anything— they’re just smiling. Charlie and Livi are at either end of the group, and both have their cell phone cameras up, looking like they’re either taking pictures or filming. I turn to Jace to see if he knows what’s going on, and as soon as I do, he drops to one knee.

I gasp, and even though my arms are exhausted, my hands still fly to my face and I press my fingers against my lips.

“Mackenzie MacNeil, you’re everything I never knew I needed. My life is infinitely better because of you, and *I* am better because of you. You bring out the best in everything.”

A couple of tears escape my eyes and roll down my cheeks, wetting my fingers, and I don’t even care. I just climbed a mountain. I’ve heard that the payoff of reaching the top of your target climb makes it all worthwhile, but I never guessed it would be like this.

“You’re right— we *are* pretty great together.” Jace reaches into his pocket, pulls out a ring box, and opens it. The ring catches the afternoon sun and shines brightly. “What do you say to making it a permanent, official thing?”

I fall to my knees, too, and gaze into the eyes of this suave, confident spy who has become my thoughtful, protective boyfriend and say, “I’d say that’s the best plan I’ve ever heard.” Because there is nothing I’d love more than to be able to call him my fiancé, and later, my husband.

I take his face in my hands and press my lips against his. He wraps his arms around me, pulling me close, and we kiss as all the people who matter most to us are loudly cheering us on, their voices echoing off the nearby cliffs.

When I am finally ready to release his beautiful, slightly sun-kissed, and wind-blown face, he releases his arms from around me, bringing the ring box back around to between us. During that kiss, I’d completely forgotten it was still in his hand.

Now that I’m closer and not blinded by the sun reflecting off it, I can see that it’s platinum and has a beautiful center diamond with pink sapphire gems swirling around it, and it’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. For not being a crier, there sure are a lot of tears wetting my face.

I hold out my hand, and he slips it on my tired (but now super strong) finger, and everything feels right. I tip my hand left and right, letting the sun catch different facets of the diamond and gems, just admiring it.

Then I meet Jace’s eyes. “I have to say that on top of a cliff that we just lead-climbed, with all our family present, is a very impressive way to propose. And for a man who pulls off impressive feats for a living, that’s saying something. I crown this day the winner of everything.”

Jace gives me a kiss on the lips, then leans in close and breathes into my ear, “For now. Just wait to see what I have in store for the rest of our lives.”

I raise an eyebrow in curious anticipation, a smile spread clean across my face. As all of our family closes in to congratulate us, I take a moment first to take his hands and say, “You’ve got my heart, Jace. All of it.

EPILOGUE 2

THIEVES IN THE NIGHT

Zoe

It's a calm night, yet the wind from my speed rushes across my face and whips my ponytail that's sticking out from the bottom of my helmet as I lean right in my paraglider, putting in just enough brake as I soar through the sky in the direction of the target building. It's a very dark night here in Cairo, and with my black glider, gear, and outfit, I am invisible.

There's an object that the CIA has been closely monitoring — a device that can be used to hack into secure government sites— and it's on the move. It's now finished and operational, and the seller has a buyer. The handoff to the buyer is going through a third party, and tonight is the one night that it's in the third party's hands.

Obviously, we want it in our possession instead of in the possession of some very bad people. Which means tonight is the best chance for us to acquire it.

When my director asked for a volunteer for this mission, I was the first to raise a very eager hand. This device is worth a lot, and we aren't the only agency that wants the accolades from bringing it home. The CSA does, too. And I am all for a little friendly competition.

Knowing that the CSA would likely choose Ledger Lancaster for a mission like this makes it all the sweeter.

As I lean left to pull in tight toward the five-story building that I need to land atop, the faint light catches a small object in the air. A drone. I let my focus slide from my path long

enough to see that the drone is depositing a grappling hook at the top of my building, with a rope trailing from the hook down to the ground.

I come in fast toward the building's roof, but I spare a glance down at the last second to see a man beginning to ascend the rope. It's dark, but I would recognize that hulking body barely lit by the sliver of the moon anywhere, and I smile.

Ledger.

I've got a nice pendulum going as I steer in, a good round out, and then I touch down gently, taking only a few running steps across the roof, barely making a sound. My kill technique is among the best, so my canopy is down in seconds, not dragging me at all from where I landed.

Normally, I would secure the canopy well, but Ledger is a formidable competitor, so I need to move quickly. The lack of wind here helps. I step out of my harness and toss it, along with my helmet and goggles, onto the canopy to help weigh it down from any breeze that might come along as I say to my handler, "Are the sensors and camera disabled?"

"Affirmative," I hear through my earpiece. "You're good for approach."

We determined that the object is in a case on the top floor of this building, and if we want to avoid most of the security measures, coming in from above is the best course of action. This left me with two infiltration options— landing on the roof, and scaling up the building along a narrow strip on the backside that none of the cameras can see.

I will always choose the option that lets me paraglide. It seems that Ledger chose to climb.

I hurry to the roof access door. My handler remotely disabled the motion sensor and camera, but the lock is all me. If I wasn't racing against Ledger, I'd use an auto-dialer, but speed is now more important than maintaining the integrity of the lock. So, I pull out my snap gun and have the lock open in a second.

Then I slide inside and go down the stairs, my feet not making a sound, verifying with my handler that the cameras are off on the fifth floor before silently slipping into the hallway and then into the office where we know the safe is kept.

It takes a moment to find the safe— it's on a bookshelf behind a false panel that appears like it really is just books. Movement catches my eye, and I glance at the window to see Ledger hanging from a rope, his feet pressed against the frame of the window.

And then, the man waves at me. All full of calm confidence, like he's going to somehow win. Yeah, I don't think so.

As he is cutting the window glass so he can gain entry to the office, I focus on the safe. It's a ProLock Elite SGX-35, so it won't be as easy to bypass as the lock on the roof door, but it's also no real challenge. I pull out a targeted EMP device and disable the digital locking mechanism. But this model also has a hidden tumbler lock. I clear the random accessories from the shelf to the side of the safe so I can access the skinny panel along the side of the door and expose the key lock.

Then I pull out my lock picks and get to work, trying to focus on nudging each pin into place with the pick and not on Ledger's progress on the window. Just as he finishes the circle cut and uses the handled suction cup stuck to the window to set it down inside the room, I get the last pin in place, and the tension wrench shifts. I turn it, then pull on the door, and it opens.

Ledger steps into the room as I tug the black canvas case out of the safe and sling its strap over my shoulder.

"Zoe," he says, not exactly in a happy voice, but I still think there might be a slight hint of enjoyment that the two of us are running into each other in the land of pyramids and pharaohs. Or maybe I just really like hearing him say my name. "Fancy meeting you in a place like this."

He's standing there with his tousled sand-colored hair, black gear, and harness, narrowing his eyes as he glances to

the safe for a small moment before his eyes are back on me. Holy deniable operations, he is one very hot man. I wonder for a second if competing against him would be nearly as much fun if he wasn't.

Don't get me wrong— few people match my skill enough to be true competition, and I'll take them all on.

But Ledger? Maybe it's his looks that make competing with him all the sweeter.

“You're quick,” he says. “I'll give you that.”

“Or maybe I just chose the better way in.” I shrug with my shoulder that's holding the bag, which lifts it just enough to call attention to it. Then I add, “Keep trying. One day, you might actually be a challenge.”

Maybe how much fun it is to compete with him has something to do with the look he gets on his face anytime he realizes that he just lost, and I won.

I smile as I stroll out of the room and back up to the roof.

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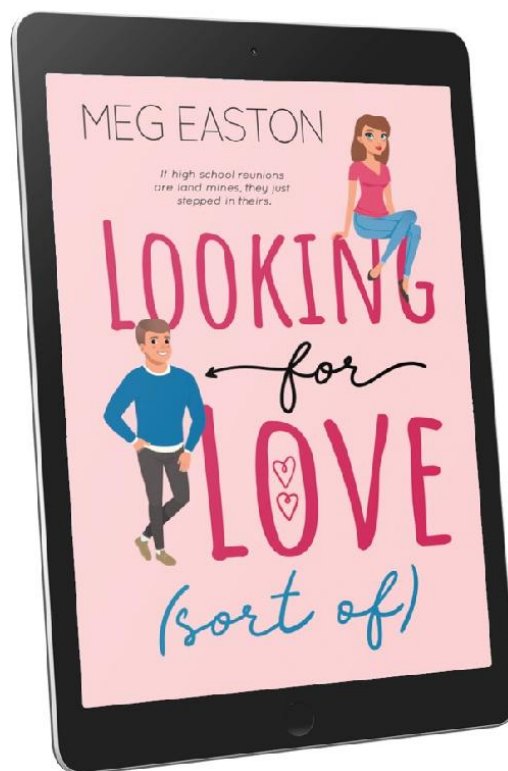
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Meg Easton is the *USA Today* bestselling author of contemporary romances and romantic comedies with fun, memorable, swoon-worthy characters, and settings you'll want to pack up and move to. She lives at the foot of a mountain with her name on it (or at least one letter of her name) in Utah. She loves gardening, bike riding, baking, swimming before the sun rises, and spending time with her husband and three kids.

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