



The
**HOTEL
MANAGER**

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

C. HALLMAN



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Bleeding Heart Press

Cover by Dark Heart Designs

Cover Image by Wander Aguiar

Edits: Kelly Allenby

Proofread: Jenny Sims

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THE HOTEL MANAGER

What kind of hotel doesn't have a name?

Everything about this place is off.

The odd location. The weird staff. The elite clientele.

All I'm certain of is that I have to get out of here.

Until I meet him.

The hotel manager.

Mason Grant is not what I expected.

He is grumpy, impatient, and never ever leaves the hotel.

It's clear from the look in his eyes that he hates me.

Beautiful, raw, demanding. I'm drawn to him like a helpless moth to an all-consuming flame.

TEAGAN



I'M GOING TO PEE MY PANTS. ANY MOMENT NOW, I'M GOING to feel these too-tight black slacks getting warm and wet, and the pungent smell of urine is going to fill the car.

“Are you okay?” my brother whispers from beside me. I can barely hear him over my heart rapidly slamming against my rib cage.

Tilting my head to look into his muddy-brown eyes, I catch the same nervous anxiety I'm feeling reflected back at me. I know Jase didn't mean to rope me into this. He's tried everything to keep me away from the mess he created, but the loan shark he borrowed money from didn't care. They needed an innocent-looking woman without a criminal history for this job, and unfortunately, I fit that bill.

“I'm fine.”

I'm not fine.

Not even close, but I owe him this.

Yes, he fucked up royally. Nevertheless, he is my brother, the only family I have left, and the reason I didn't end up in foster care when our parents died ten years ago.

“If you would worry about paying back your debt as much as you worry about her, you wouldn't be in this mess in the first place.” The driver chuckles from the front seat.

Jase runs his hand nervously through his unruly brown hair, and I wish this day would be over already. I hate being in this situation, but seeing Jase like this is the worst part.

“Shut up, Dave,” the guy in the passenger seat warns, “the girl looks like she is about to pass out, and we need her to get in there and do what the boss asks her to do or else...” He glances over his shoulder to scan my face. His dark, slightly unhinged look makes my skin crawl.

“I’ll get it done.” I keep my voice even, trying to convince everyone, including myself, that I can actually do this. “Like you said, he’s not dangerous, right?” He’s a hotel manager, after all. How dangerous can a man with that job be?

“Not to you.” He nods and digs something out of his pocket. “Remember what we told you. All you have to do is pin this to his clothes.”

“Got it.” I nod and hold out my hand. He drops the tiny device in my palm before turning to face the road once more.

“We’ll be out here waiting for you,” Jase assures me, as if him being out here while I’m in there will make me feel better. What’s he going to do from the car?

“Time to go. Grant hates when someone makes him wait.” The driver whispers something under his breath that sounds a whole lot like, “Grant hates everyone and everything.”

Choosing to ignore that comment, I climb out of the car and shove the device in my pocket.

An image of a pudgy, middle-aged man with a mustache rapping his index finger on his Rolex pops into my head. I don’t know why this is how I imagine this hotel manager to look, but I do.

I give Jase a tiny reassuring smile through the window before heading for the lobby of the hotel. I didn’t even know it was a hotel. It kind of just blends in with the rest. There is no sign anywhere, no valet either. From the outside, the building is pristine but gives no indication that it’s a place to rent a room.

Most hotels are on the other side of town, closer to the stadium and harbor. There is really nothing in this street. The only thing close by are a few high-end boutiques and

restaurants a few blocks down, which makes this location seem a bit odd.

Dave gave me a little rundown and mentioned this is some kind of hot spot for the upper class. A members-only hotel. Maybe that's why it's a bit hidden. To keep the city's riffraff out?

Wait, maybe it's for famous people? That thought piques my curiosity, and I shamelessly use the thought of my favorite movie star sitting in the lobby to distract myself from the nervous anxiety swirling in my gut. My mom used to say that everything has a bright side, you just have to find it. Well, I found my bright side. Meeting a celebrity is on my bucket list.

The entrance doors are heavy glass but the kind you can only see through from the inside. As I push them open, I only see my reflection looking back at me. My long brown hair is pulled in a tight ponytail, which means there is no hiding my bewildered expression with a curtain of hair as I step into the lobby.

Whoa. That's my first thought.

Huh? Is my second.

The lobby itself looks just like you would expect a fancy hotel lobby to look like. A large open space, sleek and shiny, with a ceiling so high, you have to crane your neck painfully. A large modern chandelier is in the center of the space, with multiple smaller ones spread out. The walls are silver, while the floors and columns are covered in intricate black tiles. The reception desk is centered, and two separate seating areas are on either side. All of the furniture is designed in various tones of black, gray, and silver.

The place looks legit. What's out of place are the people.

Three men lounge in one of the sitting areas, and none of them are wearing a suit like I would expect in a place like this. Two of the men are wearing dark jeans and black hoodies, and the other is wearing shorts and a shirt. All three men stare at me as if I am the one out of place.

I guess I am.

When I realize I've been standing here like a deer in headlights, I force my legs to carry me toward the front desk. A man and a woman stand behind the large wooden desk. Neither one of them greets me in any way. I'm guessing their customer service smile is reserved for their guests only.

"Hi, I have a massage session scheduled with the hotel manager, Mr. Grant." I'm impressed with myself for keeping my voice even and strong.

Without a word, the woman nods and waves her hand toward the very back of the large space. She proceeds to walk me to a lone elevator close to the hotel bar. She types in a code on the panel, and the door slides open.

"Thank you," I say as I step into the elevator on shaky legs. She spins around, still not talking to me, the clicking of her high heels against the tile floors fading away.

The doors slide shut, and once again, I feel like I'm about to wet myself. I'm not cut out for this at all. I'm a twenty-six-year-old grocery store cashier, not a secret agent on a mission to bug some manager of a fancy hotel.

Again, no music plays in the elevator like I would expect, and the smell is off too. What is that? I wrinkle my nose. It's faint, but it's nasty. Almost like rotten eggs. The scent disappears as the elevator moves up, and I quickly forget about it being there at all.

Closing my eyes, I lean against the glass panel, resting my forehead against the cool, smooth surface. *I can't do this.*

The thought doesn't have time to take hold. The elevator slides open with a ding. My spine straightens, and I ready myself to face whoever waits on the other side.

My eyes go wide.

I'm not sure what I expected, but a seven-foot bodybuilder in a black suit wasn't it. His arms are folded across his massive chest, black ink tattoos peeking out from under his clothes.

This can't be him!

I'm in so much trouble.

"Hi," I whisper so quietly I'm certain he can't hear me. "I'm the massage therapist."

His lips press into a thin line, and his eyes move up and down my body like he's looking for a threat. Then he simply nods as if to give me his approval to come in.

I don't move. Frozen in place, I remain in the elevator, waiting for the floor to open up and drop me thirty stories to my death.

Mystery giant frowns before motioning for me to follow him. Fighting the urge to press all the buttons on the panel to make my way back downstairs, I force my feet to move forward instead.

I follow him through the spacious apartment, wishing I could appreciate being in a beautiful place like this. Unfortunately, appreciation is the last thing on my mind. Fear and uncertainty are taking up too much room.

The giant man leading me to what feels like my execution stops so suddenly that my brain doesn't have time to catch up. I run smack into his back, although it feels more like a stone wall.

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry," I yelp out.

Giant guy turns around slowly, a deep scowl on his face. He still doesn't say anything, but the angry daggers shooting from his eyes tell me all I need to know.

"Everything okay?" a female voice asks out of nowhere. "Don't scare the poor girl away, Tank. Mason is tense as it is." A young blond woman steps out from behind Tank's overwhelming silhouette. "Excuse the big guy. He isn't used to company."

My heart slows down just a little. At least now I know the giant's name, and I'm guessing Mason must be Grant's first name.

The woman seems to be about my age and height, but one look at her lets me know we couldn't be any more different.

Her light blond hair is perfectly styled, her fingers manicured, and her clothes straight out of a fashion magazine. She could walk down a runway in a few minutes and would be the star of the show.

“No, it’s my fault. I didn’t watch what I was doing. I’m sorry.”

Tank takes that as his cue to walk off, leaving me with the woman who is just as intimidating in her own way.

“No apologies needed.” Her red-painted lips turn into a courteous smile. “Mr. Grant is waiting for you in this room. Everything you need is already laid out.” She waves her hand toward the door we’re stopped in front of. I catch a whiff of her floral perfume, letting the pleasant scent calm me further.

“Got it. Thank you.” I lower my head, looking at the ground as I open the door and step inside the dimly lit room. It smells of expensive leather and earthy wood. I suck in a deep breath letting it fill my lungs. This is definitely a man’s room. Maybe an office or a bedroom.

It only takes my eyes a few seconds to adjust, and then all I see is him. My gaze is glued to the man on the massage table in the center of the room. He is face down, his bare muscular back fully exposed, while a large fluffy towel covers his bottom half.

He is a far cry from the pudgy middle-aged man I imagined as the manager of this hotel. Even though I don’t see his face, he has a commanding energy about him—an aura of confidence and power.

I have no clue why those guys want me to plant a bug on his clothes. I was too chicken to ask. Plus, I don’t think they would have told me anyway.

“I don’t pay you to stand around.” His deep baritone voice fills the room, and every muscle in my body tenses. My mouth goes dry. Even if I wanted to say something, I couldn’t. My entire body tells me to turn around and run away as fast as I can, but my brain forces my legs to move.

I have to do this. I have to get my shit together and finish this job. Repeating that mantra in my head, I approach Mr. Grant. With each step I take, my breathing becomes more erratic, and my pulse speeds up to new heights.

Next to the massage table is a small side table holding an array of expensive-looking oils, lotions, and a stack of small hand towels.

My hands shake when I reach for one of the bottles of massage oil. I have no idea if this is the right kind of oil or how much to use. The instructional YouTube video *Massage for Beginners* I watched on the way over here didn't specify any of that. Flipping the cap open, I pour a generous amount into my palm.

“Are you going to start before lunch, or do I need to cancel my afternoon appointments?” Annoyance drips from his sharp voice, making my hand shake even more. It's not just his tone that has me nervous. It's everything about him.

Setting the bottle aside, I rub my palms together before placing them on his shoulder blades. His skin is warm and soft, but his muscles are tense and hard under my touch. I run my fingers down his spine, gulping when his taut muscles flex wherever I go.

Just like his friend outside, his body is covered in intricate tattoos. A large black snake is wrapped around his arm, and the head sits on the back of his hand while the tail is coming up his neck. I'm so enthralled by the beauty of the artwork that I don't realize how I've been getting my face closer to his skin so I can see all the tiny details. I'm so close now that I can feel his body heat seeping into my chest.

Suddenly, I become very aware of my own body and how it's reaching to the half-naked man lying in front of me. My core tightens at the realization. Not only am I here to plant a bug onto this very dangerous-looking guy, but now I'm touching and looking at him inappropriately too. Even worse, his friend and what I assume is his girlfriend are right outside this door. I remember her well-manicured nails and imagine her slapping me across the face before kicking me out.

Get it together, Teagan.

My mind is running wild. None of this is actually going to happen. No one knows who I am and that I'm not a massage therapist. I'm here to do one little thing, and then I'm out of here for good. The small surveillance device in my pocket suddenly feels like it weighs a million pounds.

While absentmindedly massaging his back, I look around the room to find his discarded clothes. I need to plant the device on them. The only problem is... I don't see his clothes anywhere. My eyes bounce from the made bed to the dresser, the desk, the chair in the corner, and back to the massage table. Nothing.

Panic slithers up my spine like a hissing snake.

Fuck. Where the hell am I going to plant this bug if his clothes are not here?

Could this day get any worse?

Who am I kidding? Yes, it could get much worse... and it probably will.

MASON



WHAT THE FUCK IS THIS CHICK DOING? THIS HAS TO BE A joke. Either that or this is her very first day on the job. A job she forgot to train for. Instead of relaxing, I'm more tense and annoyed than I was this morning.

Her fingers run awkwardly over my back, poking me more than giving me a massage. Her feet shovel nervously around me, and I take notice of how old and worn out her sneakers are. Something is off here. The company we hire is a luxury brand with highly qualified and well-paid massage therapists.

Alarm bells go off in my head. I act before thinking about it more. My body moves on its own. Flipping over, I sit up. Grabbing her wrist with my left, I give it a hard tug toward me. She gasps and stumbles forward. Quickly, I wrap my free hand around her slender throat, holding her in place right in front of me. Her fingers circle my hand on her neck, trying to loosen the pressure I put on her airway.

“Who sent you?” I grit through my teeth.

Her chocolate-brown eyes are wide in fear. Her smooth, blemish-free skin pales, and her full pink lips are slightly parted. The only color on her face is the hue of red over her high cheekbones and the tiny freckles scattered over her small button nose.

She is as beautiful as she is annoying. Annoying because I was looking forward to a relaxing massage, and now, I have to deal with this intruder.

I normally don't let my guard down so quickly, but there is an innocence in her eyes that has me loosening my fingers around her neck. She isn't a threat. There is no darkness in her eyes, no deceiving thoughts hiding behind those long dark lashes, only fear and confusion.

Frozen in place, she doesn't move an inch, doesn't try to get away from me. Yet I keep a tight grip on her wrist, not wanting to let her go.

She might not be dangerous, but she can't be trusted. Even though she wears the same Elite Massage shirt the other massage therapists usually wear, there is no way she was sent by the company.

“What's your name?”

“Teagan Bennett,” she whispers softly.

I glance at the name stitched on the breast pocket of her shirt. “I didn't know Teagan is short for Denise.”

She winces, squeezing her eyes shut with a frown as if to curse herself for telling me her real name. I, on the other hand, love it. I love that she is a bad liar and that she told me her real name instead of her fake one. Less work for me.

It's clear that she has never done anything like this before. She is completely untrained. One of my enemies most likely paid her to pose as a massage therapist to get close to me. Now, I only need to figure out who and why.

“Who sent you?”

Her eyes fly open. “Elite Massage. I'm new, but I promise I'll try my best.” She recites the obviously rehearsed line.

Throwing my legs over the side of the table, I stand. The towel slides down my legs as I move, leaving me completely naked a moment later.

Flustered, Teagan tries to step back, but I keep my grip on her wrist, pulling her close. She is much shorter than me, and being so near forces her to tilt her face to see me.

“Try again, *Teagan*,” I say her name slowly, really letting it roll off my tongue. “Tell me who sent you.”

She scans my face like she's trying to figure out how dangerous I am and if she can trust me.

"I-I don't know... I really don't know his name." She straightens her back as if she just caught herself being weak and hates it. She wants to be brave, but her bottom lip quivers. "I'm sorry, okay? If you just let me leave, I won't tell anyone about this place."

"What do I care if you tell someone about a hotel?" It's only half a lie. I don't care as long as she doesn't know too much.

This poor girl has no idea what she's gotten herself into. I'm not planning on hurting her, but I can't just let her walk out of here, either. "Tell me what you know, and you won't get hurt."

She swallows slowly, probably buying herself some time to think. A few seconds later, she finally speaks. "My brother borrowed money from the guy. He couldn't pay it back, so they made me do this instead. He sent two guys, and they told us if I didn't they were going to hurt him."

"What do they want you to do?"

"You believe me?" She sounds surprised, her voice going too high at the end of the sentence.

"Yes, I believe you." I've always been naturally good at spotting a lie, but my training in Coronado honed that skill. Reading her facial expressions and body language, along with changes in her tone has me 100 percent certain that she is telling the truth. "I need to know what they want you to do."

"Put a bug on your clothes."

Motherfucker. "Where is it?"

"In my pocket." She glances down at her right side. I see the exact moment she catches sight of my semi-hard dick. There is a mixture of shock and shyness on her face. The way she squeezes her eyes shut before turning a shade of bright red.

“Don’t get the wrong idea. I just get very excited when I get the chance to interrogate someone.”

Her eyes go impossibly wide, and I can feel her pulse spiking under my touch. She moves her lips like she’s about to say something, but only a desperate whimper comes out. I could tell her the truth, that I won’t hurt her, but a little fear never hurt anyone.

The corner of my mouth pulls up into a smirk as I slide my fingers into her pants pocket. She lets out a high-pitched squeal that has me releasing her wrist. Her palms come up to press against my chest, making my skin tingle under her touch.

My hand is still in her pants pocket when the door flies open. Tank and Natalie pile into the room like a small cavalry. From their vantage point, it probably looks like my hand is down her pants.

“What the fuck?” Nat throws up her arms while Tank scans the room for any threat.

Teagan stays completely still; her face has gone ghostly pale, and her eyes brim with fear. An unfamiliar feeling erupts in my chest. Something close to compassion. I hate these kinds of feelings. They are nothing but a distraction. So I do what I always do with unwanted emotions. I shove them down.

“Everything is fine. You can go,” I order out loud, but then I look at Tank and mouth the next part. *She has a bug on her; make sure it’s not turned on.* People have always told me I’m crazy for having a second-in-command who is non-verbal. They don’t realize the perks. Reading lips is at the very top of that list. *I’ll take care of her. You make sure this thing is destroyed.*

Pinching the tiny device between my fingertips, I pull it out of her pocket and hold it out on my palm for him. He closes the distance between us and grabs the bug before exiting the room. Natalie remains in the doorway, squinting her eyes at me like she is waiting for a detailed explanation.

“Get out,” I order, firmer this time. Nat gives me one final eye roll before joining Tank in the living room. The door

closes behind her, leaving me alone with Teagan once more.

Only then does she drop her hands from my chest. “I’m sorry.” She lowers her head again, her eyes closed this time. “I’m really sorry.” She looks so young, like a misbehaving child about to get grounded. She wraps her slender arms around her torso, which makes me notice the slight trembling. “Can I go now?”

“No,” I blurt out a little too aggressively. She flinches, and I curse myself for not keeping my anger under control. I’m not angry with her. I’m angry with my staff for letting her get through. “The hour is not over. If you leave now, the people who sent you will know something is off.” It’s not a lie, but it’s not quite the truth, either.

“Oh... okay.” She keeps her eyes shut, and I take the opportunity to give her a once-over. Her light brown hair is neatly pulled into a ponytail at the top of her head. The white Elite Massage shirt is a size too big on her.

“Don’t move.” I have no issues being naked, but it clearly makes her uncomfortable, so I decide to grab some shorts from my dresser. “You can open your eyes now.”

She slowly opens one eye at first, then the other, carefully scanning her surroundings. Once she realizes my dick is covered up, she sighs softly in relief.

“I need you to tell me more about yourself.” At my request, her eyebrows pull together, and she presses her lips into a firm line.

Interesting. She barely hesitated when telling me about her brother and the people who sent her, but talking about herself is off-limits.

“Why? I’m nobody, and I’m not involved with these people.” She takes a tiny step back, crossing her arms in front of her chest defensively. She is building a physical and mental wall. If I’m not careful, she won’t tell me a thing, at least not without me breaking the rules.

“Lie down on the massage table.” I nod toward the table.

“What? No!” She shakes her head, swinging her ponytail from side to side.

“Fine.” I shrug. “I guess I can just call the cops and have them deal with you.” I spin around, pretending to walk to the door.

“Wait! No cops!” she yells after me. “Whatever. I’ll do it.”

I grin with pure satisfaction. By the time I turn back around, she’s already halfway on the table. She stretches out on her stomach, putting her face into the half-round cradle at the end of the table. Her body is stiff, her hands balled into tight fists.

“Relax. I’m just going to show you what a real massage feels like since you’ve clearly never had one.”

She mumbles something under her breath. I can’t make it out, but I don’t have to hear what she’s saying for my grin to widen. She isn’t the kind of criminal I usually deal with, but she isn’t a Goody Two-shoes either. Something has her scared of the cops, and that’s a fact I gladly store for later.

Stepping closer to the massage table, I lift my arms to place my hands on her back, only to stop a few inches from her shirt-covered skin. Even with her fully dressed, giving a stranger a massage feels odd.

Before I can change my mind, I lower my hands and place them on her rigid shoulders. She jerks away from my touch but quickly stills when I massage her tight muscles.

“Now, let’s try this again.” I keep my voice soft and calming while gently rubbing my thumbs along her shoulder blades. “What do you know about the guys who sent you?”

“Mmh... Not much...” she says after a moment. “One called the other one Dave. That’s the only name I have.”

Dave. I try to rack my brain to put a face to the name Dave, but I come up empty.

“How did they get here?” Cameras surround the building, so I can easily figure it out myself. However, knowing what to look for will shorten the work.

“They drove here in a black SUV. I don’t know what kind. I’m sorry, I don’t usually pay attention to that kind of stuff.”

“It’s okay. We’ll figure it out.” I’ll have Tank and Griffin figure it out. One way or another, we will eliminate the threat; we always do.

“Tell me about yourself.”

There is a long pause. I’m about to repeat myself when she finally responds.

“There’s really not much to tell. After finishing high school, I wanted to go to college, but I needed to save money first. I’ve been working different jobs since.”

I let that information sink in, already thinking about double-checking everything during the thorough background check I’ll be doing on her later. “What about your family?”

“It’s just my brother and me.” There is a deep-rooted sadness in her voice that bleeds through each word. “My parents died in a car crash ten years ago. My brother had just turned seventeen at the time. He still managed to get custody of me.”

“Even though he wasn’t an adult himself?”

“He had to become one. The foster care system was all too glad not to have an extra teenager to worry about.”

“That must have been tough.” I can’t imagine what she must have gone through. Natalie and I lost our parents as well, but we were both adults when it happened.

“I can’t believe I’m telling you all of this.”

“I’m glad you are.” Less I have to dig up later.

“What’s going to happen now?”

“You’re going to stay here and relax until the hour is over. Then you’ll walk out of here like everything went as planned. Can you do that?”

“Mmhhhh...” she moans softly when I find an extra tight spot on her lower back.

“What about your girlfriend?” Her question catches me off guard.

“Girlfriend? I don’t have one.”

“Oh, I assumed... the blond woman.”

I can’t help but chuckle. Nat is probably in the bathroom right now, washing her eyes out with bleach after seeing my junk.

“That’s Natalie. She’s my assistant.” I don’t tell her Nat is also my sister. No need for her to know more than she already does.

“Sorry, I just—”

“You apologize too much.” It’s a learned behavior. A habit she needs to break.

“Sorr—” She catches herself halfway through yet another apology.

God, this woman is annoying. I’ve known her for five minutes, and already know exactly what kind of person she is—a pushover. Someone who lets other people use her, and then she’s the one who apologizes for it.

“I’m just worried, that’s all,” she whispers.

“What is it you’re worried about?”

“What if those guys know I’m lying? I’m scared they’ll hurt my brother.”

“You don’t have to think about that. No one’s going to hurt you or your brother. I promise, and I don’t make promises lightly.” I’ll send Griffin out to shadow her until I know they are safe. I don’t need a civilian’s life on my conscience. Not another one.

“How can you be sure? Those guys were really scary.”

I suppress a scoff. She really has no idea who I am. If she did, she wouldn’t question my promise. She would know that there’s no one scarier in the city than me.

TEAGAN



“I SHOULD REALLY GO; THEY’RE WAITING FOR ME.” HIS HANDS stop moving as soon as the words fall from my lips.

I’m not sure how long I’ve been lying here, letting this man I barely know massage me, but I’m pretty certain an hour has passed.

Suddenly, his hands disappear. “Stay here while I get dressed,” he orders.

Turning around, I sit up so I can watch him move through the room. For such a big man, he is light-footed and moves rather quickly. His muscles are huge, but a grace about him makes me think he’s trained in martial arts.

He briefly disappears into what I assume is his walk-in closet. When he returns, he is fully dressed in an expensive-looking suit. He doesn’t wear a tie, and his gray button-up shirt is not all the way done. This would look casual on anyone else, but nothing about this man is casual. His facial expression is so serious that I wonder if he even knows how to laugh.

I glance down at my black slacks and worn sneakers, feeling even more out of place than I did before. Swinging my legs off the table, I let my feet dangle.

He moves through the room swiftly and with purpose, demanding every ounce of my attention. Coming to a halt inches away from me, I have the chance to really look at him. His eyes bore into mine with an intensity that has my mouth going dry.

I want to ask him a million questions, but I only manage to get one out. “Can I go now?”

With his eyes slightly squinted, he inspects my face closely. I feel like an ant under a magnifying glass who is about to get burned alive.

“Of course you can go,” he finally says, like I’m crazy for asking. He takes a step back, and I suck in a breath I didn’t realize I was holding. “Go downstairs, tell your brother and those guys that you did exactly what they asked. Then go home and forget you were ever here.”

Forget? I wish I could. Something tells me that’s going to be difficult. How do I wipe a day like this from my memory?

“Off you go,” he dismisses me, shooing me away with a wave of his hands like I’m nothing but an annoyance.

What a prick.

“Gladly,” I mumble as I jump off the table to make my way out of the room. I don’t have to look around to know he follows me. I can feel his presence behind me, sense the way he watches every step I take.

Opening the door leading back into the living room, I quickly realize everyone else has left. Knowing that I’m alone with this man has the fear from earlier returning with a vengeance. A ball of anxiety forms in my gut.

“Do you need directions?”

His voice startles me. It’s much closer than I expected. I don’t turn around to check, but he must be less than a foot away.

Keeping my shoulders straight and my head high, I walk back toward the elevator doors. Grant comes up beside me and punches a number in the panel on the wall. The elevator door slides open.

Not wasting any time, I scurry inside the small space and spin around to face him one last time.

“Goodbye, Mr. Grant.”

“Goodbye, Ms. Bennett.” Right before the elevator doors meet in the middle, he adds, “Don’t come back.”

I wasn’t planning on it.

I sigh once I’m alone.

As soon as the elevator doors open again, I speed walk out through the lobby and into the street. My heart races, my mind too. I’m still trying to wrap my head around everything when I spot the black SUV that brought me here parked a few feet away.

Pulling the back door open, I slide inside, realizing too late that my brother is no longer in the back seat. My hand is still on the handle, but before I get the chance to push the door open again, Dave drives off, and my stomach sinks.

“What’s going on?” I look between Dave and his goon. “Where is Jase?”

“Don’t worry about your brother, sweet cheeks,” Dave sneers. “He had an errand to run for us. Did you plant the bug?”

“I did.” Even I hear how wobbly my voice is.

“That doesn’t sound very confident.”

“I’m sorry I’m not very calm right now,” I snap. “I had a hell of a day, and now I’m in a car with two guys I barely know driving me who knows where.”

“No reason to get sassy with us,” Dave warns before turning to his friend. “Can you believe this chick, Karl? We’re just being nice and driving her home. She should say thank you for doing this.”

Thank you, my ass. He’s lying. There is no way he is driving me home. I would know even if they were driving in the right direction. At least I know the other guy’s name now. *Karl.*

“This isn’t the way to my house.”

“Relax, we’re just taking a little detour.”

I'm the opposite of relaxed. I'm freaking out. Jase has my phone and my wallet, not that either would save me from these two guys, who are clearly up to no good.

"Just let me out here. My friend lives a few blocks from here."

"Don't be silly, we'll take good care of you," Karl coos.

"I don't need anyone to take care of me."

Both goons chuckle, the sound sending creepy shivers down my spine.

I don't buckle up, planning to jump out of the car as soon as we slow down enough. When we approach a traffic light, I say a silent prayer for it to turn red. I stare at the green light, using my willpower alone to turn it red.

Green.

Still green.

Come on, come on...

Yellow.

Yes!

Red.

"Slow down. It's red!" I yell from the back seat, but Dave runs the red light as if he didn't see it at all.

Slumping down in my seat, I cross my arms in front of my chest, trying my best to hold myself together—both physically and mentally.

I run the city map through my mind, trying to think of places where they would be forced to stop. When I come up empty, I get more worried.

We're almost out of the city, and my chances of escaping dwindle dramatically. I play around with the idea of jumping out while the car is moving. How bad could I hurt myself?

My hand is already on the handle, just waiting for the right time when the unmistakable sound of a police siren wails behind us.

“Fucking shit!”

Turning my head, I look over my shoulder at the silver Challenger with a single red siren on the roof. The sun is hitting the windshield to where I can't look inside. I wish I could see the person behind the wheel. I could make eye contact and convey that I'm in trouble. With the glare in the way, I can't even tell if the person can see me at all.

“Why is he pulling us over?” Karl questions.

“I don't fucking know,” Dave spits. His eyes meet mine in the rearview mirror. “I do know that if you don't play along, I'm going to kill you and your brother. Understood?”

“Loud and clear.” I nod.

“Don't even look at the cop,” he orders, slowing the car down before pulling into the closest parking lot. The cop follows, taking the spot behind us. I've never been so relieved to be pulled over.

I keep my head facing forward, but in the rearview mirror, I watch the cop get out of the car. He is a tall, well-built guy in civilian clothes with a gun and a badge visible on his belt.

Dave rolls down his window, greeting the cop casually as he approaches with his hand resting on his gun. “Good day, officer. How are you doing today?”

“It would be better if I didn't have to pull your sorry ass over for running a red light.”

“R-red light? What? I must have completely missed that,” Dave exaggerates everything he says. “I'm so sorry, officer. It will never happen again.”

“Why don't you get out of the car and put your hands behind your back?”

“Officer, none of that will be necessary. I have my license and registration right here.”

“Get out of the fucking car, *Dave*.”

My brain is still processing the fact that the cop knows Dave's name when all hell breaks loose.

Dave pulls a gun from his lap, and at the same time, the cop pulls a gun from his holster. Karl shoves his door open and throws himself onto the ground.

Bang.

A shot is fired. I have no idea who pulled the trigger or where the bullet went. All I know is that I'm scared out of my fucking mind. I act on pure instinct, throwing myself down on the seat and making myself as flat as I can.

Bang.

Another shot rings through the air, drowning out the guys yelling. I wrap my arms around my head as if that could protect me from bullets.

Everything happens so fast, my brain can't keep up. There is a ringing in my ears, but other sounds still filter through. Shouting, doors opening and closing, more police sirens approaching.

"Are you okay?" a man's voice asks. At the same time, a large, warm hand settles on my upper arm.

Blinking my eyes open, I pull my arms away and turn my head to scan the inside of the car. Neither Dave nor Karl are anywhere to be found. The front doors are both open and so is the one closest to my head.

The cop who pulled us over kneels next to me, his hand still resting on my arm as he waits for an answer.

"I'm okay. I think." Honestly, I'm not sure what I am right now. I feel mostly numb.

"Why don't you sit up and let me look at you; make sure you're not injured."

Slowly, I push up to sit and take a bewildered look around. Two white police cars have pulled up behind the car. Three cops in uniform surround us, while another has Dave pinned to the car with his hands cuffed behind his back.

"The other one went that way," the cop in front of me tells his colleague, who nods and takes off after Karl.

“It doesn’t look like you’re hurt. Are you feeling okay?”

I nod even though I’m pretty sure I’m in shock.

“All right, then. Let me drive you home,” he suggests. Standing, he holds out his hand for me to take.

I stare at it for a moment before taking it. He gently pulls me to my feet, making sure I don’t hit my head on the roof of the car.

“Can you tell me your address?” he asks while leading me to the same car he followed us in. When I don’t get an answer passed the lump in my throat, he follows up with, “Let’s start with your name.”

By the time he’s walked me to the passenger door of his car, I’m still unable to get a single word out.

The cops in uniform barely look at us; they are more worried about Dave in custody and Karl on the run.

“Karl,” I blurt out, realizing they don’t have his name.

“Your name is Karl?” the cop asks, confused.

“No.” I shake my head. “The guy who ran into the woods. His name is Karl,” I explain, loud enough for the nearby cops to hear.

They exchange a knowing look. One of them writes something down on a notepad before the guy in front of me gives his fellow officers a nod.

“Thank you for sharing that with us. Now, what’s your name?”

“Teagan.” I watch his eyes move down to the stitched name on my shirt. “I’m new, and my shirt wasn’t in yet. I borrowed this from Denise,” I explain before he gets a chance to ask.

“All right, Teagan. I’m Griffin. It’s nice to meet you. Now, let’s get you home.” He opens the passenger door of his car for me, and I slide into the comfortable leather seat.

Griffin walks around to the driver’s seat, where he gets behind the wheel and starts the engine. “Do you think you can

type your address in for me?” He pulls up a navigation app and hands me his phone. I punch in my address and push the start button.

“Starting route,” the electronic voice announces.

Griffin pulls out of the parking spot and follows the directions to my house. The car falls into an uncomfortable silence. Now that my adrenaline has worn off and I can think clearly again, an eerie feeling crawls up my spine.

I’ve never been involved with the police myself, but I know enough from Jase and reality TV to know that this isn’t right.

“Don’t you have to take my statement or something?”

“Nah.” Griffin waves me off. “You’ve been through enough today. We’ll get it later.”

That doesn’t seem right. If there wasn’t a police scanner on the dash and if he wasn’t actually driving toward my place, I would freak out right now. Still, the uneasy feeling in my gut doesn’t leave.

The more I think, the weirder this gets. How did he know Dave’s name? And how does he know I’m not involved with them? He didn’t even ask for my ID! And his explanation about why he isn’t taking my statement is just odd.

All these questions burn in my mind, but I’m too chicken to ask any of them. I don’t want to open that can of worms. For all I care, those worms can stay inside of that can forever.

TEAGAN



TEAGN

“WE’LL REACH OUT TO YOU IF WE NEED ANYTHING ELSE,” Griffin says before rolling up the window and driving off.

What a day.

And the day isn’t even over yet.

I speed walk up to the second floor, where I share my apartment with my friend, Chelsea. She is still at work, but luckily, we have a key hidden under the mailbox.

Once I’m in my apartment, I double-check the locks three times before I let myself breathe.

I need to call my brother.

Making my way to my room, I grab the phone from my desk and dial his number. He answers on the first ring.

“Teagan!” Jase yells into the phone so loud I have to pull my cell an inch away from my ear.

“Yes, it’s me.”

“Thank fuck! I was so worried. While you were inside the hotel, those fuckers drove me to the other side of town and left me there. What happened? Where are you?”

“I’m home now. When I got in the car, I realized too late you weren’t in there. They drove off but ran a red light, and we got pulled over. One of the cops drove me home.”

“You didn’t tell them anything, did you?”

“I never had the chance to say anything. The cop didn’t even take a statement. It was almost like he couldn’t get me away from there quick enough.”

“Less people means less paperwork. You were lucky and got a lazy cop.” My brother doesn’t seem to be impressed. He acts like this is normal. Maybe I’m just overreacting?

“And he knew Dave’s name when he pulled us over. It was weird.”

“Dave is a known criminal in the city. I’m pretty sure every cop knows his name.”

“Someone fired a gun, but I’m not sure if it was the cop or Dave.”

“Wait! What?!”

“Yeah, Dave pulled a gun on the cop who pulled us over. I laid down flat on the back seat and covered my head. So I didn’t see exactly what happened, but Karl got away, and Dave ended up arrested.”

“And they didn’t take a statement?” Now Jase finally sounds as shocked as I feel.

“No. Isn’t that weird?”

The phone goes silent for a moment as he mulls over the situation. “Not really. I’m guessing the cop did something wrong and didn’t want a witness. He was probably the one who shot the gun, and he doesn’t want it on the record.” I hate to admit it, but that’s a pretty good explanation. “I wouldn’t worry too much about it. You’re home, you’re safe, and the cops are taking care of Dave and Karl.”

“I guess you’re right.”

“Just take a shower, eat something, relax, and go to sleep. Tomorrow, everything will be back to normal,” my brother assures me.

“All right,” I agree. A shower does sound amazing right now.

“Before you go, how did it go inside the hotel?”

I don't have the energy or mental capacity to tell him about that mess. "I left the bug and walked out after the hour was over."

I'll tell him the full story another time. Right now, I just need this day to be over.



TWELVE HOURS LATER, THE SUN IS COMING UP. BRIGHT golden rays filter through my light blue curtains. I'm in bed, wearing my comfortable pajamas while watching reruns of *Storage Wars*. Mindless reality TV somehow always makes me feel better or, at the very least, will put me to sleep. Not today.

Even though I'm physically in my comfort zone, my mind is anything but. Yesterday could have turned out very differently if that cop hadn't shown up. Or if Dave hadn't run that red light. Where would they have taken me? More importantly, what would they have done with me?

I just can't help thinking I dodged a huge, devastating bullet. And the craziest part is that I still don't understand how I did it.

Jase made it seem like it wasn't a big deal. He acted like it was normal for a cop not to take a statement and personally drive me home. I know I have never really been involved with the police, but I just can't imagine that this is usual.

The few moments I can stop thinking about being trapped in the car, my mind wanders back to the hotel.

A part of me is still stuck back in that hotel. There's something about this whole thing I just can't let go of—a buzzing inside me that I can't turn off. Almost like I'm supposed to figure it out.

Why have I never heard of that place? Why doesn't the building have a sign? I guess it's the whole idea of the elite club, but why keep it a secret? If they don't want the riffraff to come in there, put bouncers at the front or lock the fucking

door. There's just something so off about it. I grab my laptop from the side of the bed and prop it on my lap, slipping it open carefully so the huge crack on my screen doesn't grow any larger. I type in my very secure password—**Password123**—and watch the screen slowly come to life. Most times, I'm not sure what causes my computer to run so slow. Is it the discounted internet, or the fact that my laptop is twelve years old? And by discounted internet, I mean I use the free Wi-Fi from the coffee shop under our apartment.

Once my web browser has determined I am worthy of using it. I pull up Google and type in hotels near me before clicking the search button. When my first attempt brings up about two hundred hotels, I try again with a more specific search. Fancy hotel near me comes up with about fifty results, none of which resemble the place I went to yesterday. After I scroll down the search results for ten minutes, my dumbass realizes I actually have the address. Maybe the reality TV makes me dumber?

I search for the remote on the bed, patting around until I feel it between my sheets, and turn the TV off.

“Teagan!” My door flies open, and my heart practically stops. I suck in a rapid breath, getting ready to let out an ear-piercing scream when it gets stuck in my throat. “Teagan, you will not believe what happened to me today.”

“Chelsea,” I let my roommate's name out with the breath that was designated for my scream. “For fuck's sake, don't do that again.”

“Not Chelsea, it's Ainsley. How many times do I need to tell you?”

“How many times do I need to tell you not to burst into my room? Especially not at six in the morning. Most people are asleep.”

“I saw the light under the door.”

“I'm sorry I keep forgetting you changed your name. I've called you Chelsea my whole life, so forgive me for calling you a different name. It's gonna take me a hot minute.”

“It’s not my fault my parents chose a stupid name. All the Chelseas I know are bitches. Total stuck-up bitches.”

I hold my tongue on what I really want to say but can’t suppress the eye roll. Chelsea—sorry, Ainsley has been my friend since middle school, and most days, I wonder why. She doesn’t respect my boundaries, she lies constantly, and she is overall a terrible roommate.

“All right... Ainsley, what happened to you today?”

I listen to her story, like I always do, knowing most likely none of it ever happened. See, this is what I meant when I said she constantly lies. Making up stories or ridiculous facts about herself is kind of Ainsley’s thing. When we were in middle school, she told everyone that her great-great-grandfather invented the pencil. Then in high school, she had everyone believing she was going to Harvard, which was somehow a little bit more believable because Ainsley is actually really fucking smart. Still, it was just a lie.

I don’t know why she keeps doing it, but sometimes I do wonder. Does she even know herself, or is she so caught up in the picture she has painted of herself that she’s lost sight of who she really is?

“Are you even listening?”

“No,” I answer honestly. “I stopped listening about ten minutes ago.”

“What’s wrong? What did your dumbass brother do this time?” Ainsley props her hands on her hips like an angry teacher, ready to hand out some detention slips. And then I remember why she’s been my friend for so long. She is the only person who always looks out for me, who always sees my struggles when no one else does. And she is the only one who doesn’t judge me for still sticking with him even after all the shit he put me through. She understands why I do the things I do, and I do the same for her. I guess you could say we’re fucked up together.

“He borrowed some money from the wrong people. A lot of money, and he could not pay it back.”

“Shocker. He’s such an idiot. And how exactly did he get you roped into it?”

I don’t want to tell her the whole thing, so I give her the washed-down version of what happened yesterday.

“Wow. What a shit show. At least you made it out of there all right. If I were you, I would forget about it and be glad the cop let you go without interrogating you for hours. God, Teagan, he could have thought you were involved.”

“Yeah, I know. I got lucky.” Either that, or there is way more going on than I imagine.

“So what now?” Ainsley asks, flopping down on the mattress next to me.

“I was about to search the address and try to find out more about that hotel.”

“Well, get typing! Now I want to know more as well.” Excitement fills Ainsley’s voice. Her lighthearted joy about this new task is infectious. For a moment, I forget all about my worries and enjoy playing a seasoned detective.

Grabbing my laptop, I put my fingers to the keyboard, type in the address, and wait for the search results to show.

“Well, that’s weird. Nothing is coming up,” I state the obvious. At least not on the first page; I scroll down, skimming through all the results not connected to anything remotely like a hotel. Out of desperation, I let the second page load.

“That could be it!” Ainsley points at one of the listings.

The Hotel; luxurious stay for members only.

I can’t click on it fast enough. That has to be the place. After an excruciating twenty seconds of loading, the website finally pulls up.

“That’s it!” There is a picture of the inside of the lobby. I recognize it right away.

“Wow, you weren’t joking. It’s fancy as fuck.” Ainsley puts her face so close to the screen I have to push her head out

of the way to see for myself.

“There isn’t much,” I point out. The website looks professional, but there isn’t a lot of information. No sub-pages. No member login or room reservation option. No contact phone number or email.

“What kind of hotel is this?” Ainsley asks, confused.

“I have no freaking idea.” I really have no clue what I’ve got myself into, but something tells me this isn’t the last of it.

MASON



I LOOK THROUGH THE FLOOR-TO-CEILING WINDOW IN MY living room, watching the people below on the street. From up here, they look like tiny ants. I like to think of them as outsiders. They are people who live their lives in ignorance, in a dream world. Oblivious to the reality around them. Society has this idea of good and bad, black and white, but there's no such thing.

Everything eventually turns gray. Life is a ledger. Sometimes in order to do good, a huge amount of bad must be done. There's a ton of red in my ledger, all in the name of keeping others green.

Being a SEAL was everything to me. One decision took that away from me forever.

A *bing* sound coming from the elevator pulls me from my inner turmoil.

Nat's heels striking the ground is oddly comforting. Other than the brothers I served with, she is the only person who stuck by me during my discharge. Loyalty means everything to me.

"We need to talk, Mason," she states abruptly.

"I'm good, Nat. How are you? How has your day been?" Sarcasm drips from my voice. I give her a hard time about her nothing-but-business attitude. But honestly, it makes her one of my most important assets. I can count on her to have her head in the game when it matters.

“Fuck off, Mason,” she quips, annoyed. She’s certainly in a mood.

“What’s up, Nat?”

“We need to discuss what happened yesterday. There is much about that situation unresolved.”

I nod. Sloppy work is the bane of my existence.

“I know. Griffin ran into some trouble following the girl home.”

Nat’s eyebrows arch, and her mouth twists. “What kind of trouble?”

I narrow my eyes at her and press my lips together. “Apparently, they were not taking the girl home as planned. The police got involved. Shots were fired, and one of the guys got away. I want him found.” I don’t leave room in my voice for debate. “Incompetence isn’t tolerated here. You know that.”

She shrugs and opens the black planner she carries around with her. She thumbs through the pages until she finds what she’s looking for. “I have two guys perfect for the job. Let’s get some air,” Nat announces. She doesn’t wait for me to agree or disagree. She simply walks toward the balcony, expecting me to follow. She is the only person in the world that gets to do that with me.

“The CIA wants to know where we are on the Jackson case,” she says once we are outside. I slide the door shut behind me and suck in a breath of fresh air. When was the last time I came out here? I don’t even remember.

“Hello? Are you even listening?”

I exhale, annoyed. I hate working with the government. Bureaucrats are all the same. The one thing no one in the government wants to say is I don’t know. So the lower-level minions want constant updates on anything they’re involved with.

“Tell them, once again, that as soon as something develops, they will know that instant.”

Nat goes through several more agencies, essentially wanting the same thing. Like I said, all the same.

“There’s a Darius Green inquiring about having an extended stay at the hotel.”

My eyes narrow at the name. I’ve heard of him before. He has fingers in basically anything illegal in the Chicago area. He could be a wealth of potential favors. He must have someone after him if he’s trying to lie low here.

“You looked into him?”

“Yes.” Nat nods. “I approve.”

“Then he is staying. Put him in the Nixon suite. But I’d like to know what he does in private.”

Nat nods as she jots down my instructions. A buzz in my pocket grabs my attention. I pull my phone out and wait until it unlocks. Griffin’s sent me an update on my little intruder.

“Did you handle that massage therapist chick?”

Not looking up, I smirk. “Of course, she is safe and sound at her apartment. Surveillance is being set up as we speak, and the background check should be coming at any moment.”

Laughing, she heads back inside. “Sorry, I should have known you’d be all over that.”

I want to ask her what she means by that, but the glass door slides shut before I get a chance. Turning my attention back to the phone, I read Griffin’s notes. He already filled me in on what happened after she left here, but I had him do a little background check to ensure she won’t be a threat after all.

Griffin: Parents died in a car wreck. Brother adopted her when she was 16. Never went through the foster system.

Good, she didn’t lie.

Griffin: Lives in an apartment in a shitty neighborhood with a chick named Ainsley Fisher. Other than that, she doesn’t seem to have a lot of friends.

Neither do I. So I won't hold that against her.

Griffin: She works in a grocery store five days a week and at a dive bar on the weekends. She gets around by bus usually. No car. She doesn't even have a driver's license.

Her life is so boring, it would make my accountant yawn. Yet I can't seem to stop reading about her insignificant, simple existence.

Griffin: According to her Facebook status, she is single and has been for a while.

Me: Good work.

I shove my phone into my jacket, but my mind is still hung up on what happened yesterday. I have to do something to get this situation out of my head. Digging in my pocket for my key card, I make my way back inside and through my suite. I'll blow off some rounds. That usually makes me feel better. I grab my earbuds and head toward the elevator.

Stepping inside, I place my card on the reader. It beeps green and a screen pops out with hidden selections that aren't on the wall. I press the Sub-Basement for the gun range and lean back. The elevator starts to move silently toward our destination.

The opposite door opens into a huge indoor gun range. Stepping out, I nearly knock Pete, our range master, over.

"Fuck, Mason, you nearly spilled my coffee."

"You'll live, Pete. Got anything interesting today?"

A brightness comes to Pete's eyes, and I know he has something for me. Pete was a SEAL in the '80s "When men were men!" as Pete likes to say.

"I've got something just for you, Mason. I figured if you want to walk around all jacked and shit, you might as well have a handgun that matches."

My eyes close, and I exhale. Pete tries to sell me on a different gun every week. Some oddity he finds in the dark corners of the internet. I brace for whatever he's going to bring out this time.

His hand reaches into his bag, and all I can see is chrome and a black handle.

“Pete, I’ve told you a hundred times, I don’t want some huge piece of metal I have to lug around.” I grunt, irritated.

“Just wait a second, Mason. This isn’t just some piece of metal.”

“Fine. What is it? I came here to shoot.”

Pete looks at me sideways. Almost to say, who the fuck are you? My response is I’m the one who pays your fucking salary. He must have come to the same conclusion because he moves on.

I take hold of the gun and look it over as he gives me a rundown of the specs. “This is called a Raging Judge. It shoots a shotgun round or a .454 Casull round.”

“A .454? Isn’t that a bear round?” My mouth opens.

“Hell yes, it is. Go right through a grizzly. But I have had one installed in all your vehicles, and I’m about to have one in your office.”

Walking away from him, I keep the gun in my hand. “Hey, bring more ammo for it to my lane,” I say over my shoulder.

“No problem.”

He’s probably grinning like an idiot that he finally found one that interests me. A broken clock is right twice a day.

As I get situated in my booth, Pete’s assistant, Ginger, brings over my rounds. She is a short, skinny thing, who looks more like a college freshman but knows her way around guns almost as well as Pete.

I pick up the revolver and open the cylinder. I pause and exhale, catching the girl out of the corner of my eye, still standing there.

“Is there something you want?” I’m already irritated.

“I wanted to make sure you have everything you need. Is there anything I can do or bring you to help you relax?”

“Do?” I raise an eyebrow.

She gets close enough that I feel her tits against my arm.
“You name it.”

I actually consider it for a moment. This woman seems like she could handle an unattached fuck, but if I’m wrong, I’d have to deal with her constantly.

I lean down to her face. “You can go get me a beer.”

Her shoulders drop, and her customer service face comes back on.

“Of course, Mr. Grant.”

I don’t bother watching her scurry away. Going back to the weapon in my hand, I take one of the bear rounds and load it. This range was equipped with the best tech to simulate real human anatomy.

I aim the hand cannon at the head of a dummy and press the trigger. The resulting fireball leaves my ears ringing and the head of the dummy completely gone. I vaguely hear Pete yell, “Hell yeah!”

That’s when the pain hits my hand. It’s that feeling when you hit metal against metal. The vibration spreads through my hand like a wildfire. I love it.

“Pete, this fucking thing is awesome.”

Opening the cylinder, I tip the gun up to let the empty casing fall out. I grab one of the shotgun rounds off the table and load it in.

“This is a small shotgun round, Pete. .410 is for squirrels.”

“Imagine you’re in a car, and a guy is trying to kill you through your window.”

Genius. That close of range, this thing would take anyone’s head off. I get close to one of the dummies and shoot like I would out of my window. The head explodes, throwing debris all over me.

“Yep. I’d say that works.”

The girl from earlier brings me a towel and the beer I ordered. Doing my best to clean off my face, I take a deep draw from the beer. I load the gun up with six bear rounds and decide to make Pete earn his paycheck today.

There are now six more headless dummies, and I feel a million times better.

“Thanks for the gun, Pete,” I say in passing.

“You could have at least cleaned up after yourself,” he quips.

“I could have.” I give him a grin as the door closes. Pete is the kind of employee who needs to be reminded who’s in charge every now and again.

Honestly, if it wasn’t for the fact that he’s a living encyclopedia on guns, I would have fired him long ago. He knows that. It is what it is.

Phone buzzing, I take it out of my pocket.

Griffin: The package you wanted was delivered to the basement.

This day just keeps getting better and better. A smile creeps on my face at the thought of getting him to talk. It’s been a while since I’ve gotten to crack someone. I’m going to let him stew a little.

Me: Put him in the white room. Leave him there until I see him.

The white room is a special type of torture. It is devoid of all colors. Everything is white. Down to the spoons you eat with, and the toothpaste you brush your teeth with.

I’m going to leave him there for a bit while I go to the gym and take a long shower. I wouldn’t want to be sweaty before the interrogation even starts.

TEAGAN



“THANKS FOR DRIVING ME.” I SMILE AT AINSLEY AS SHE PULLS out of the parking spot in front of our apartment building. I just can’t sit at home anymore. My obsession over what happened three days ago as well as the hotel I should forget about is driving me to distraction.

“I don’t like when you take the bus to your brother’s house. This part of the city is bad news.” I want to point out that we live in the same neighborhood, but I decided not to start that discussion. It’s only a five-minute drive, and I’d rather spend it thinking about how I’ll get my brother to take me seriously. Knowing him, he’ll brush me off.

As if Ainsley can read my mind, she says, “Don’t let your brother push you around. Your concerns are valid, and if he doesn’t take you seriously, I’ll punch him right in the nose.”

A burst of laughter bubbles up my throat. Ainsley is all bark and no bite. She likes talking about punching people all the time, but in reality, she’s never hit anyone. Still, my chest warms at her protective manner. She always has my back.

Not long after, we pull into the driveway of my brother’s home. I try not to frown at the way he’s let the front yard get overgrown, the windows are dirty, and the storm door dangles on one hinge. I know he doesn’t have a lot of money, but it doesn’t take cash to take pride in your home.

This is one of the few instances I’m almost glad we didn’t get to keep the house we grew up in. I don’t think I could’ve

handled seeing Mom's beautiful garden withering away due to neglect.

"Are you coming inside?" I ask my best friend as she shuts off the engine.

Ainsley answers with a snort. "As if I'll let you deal with this cock waffle by yourself."

Giggling, I open the car door and climb out. "Hey, that's my brother you're talking about. Only I get to call him names."

"I'll stop calling him a cock waffle when he stops being a cock waffle."

"I don't think that's going to happen anytime soon." I shake my head, my laughter dying out. Ainsley locks up the car, and together we walk to the front door.

I knock twice, but no one opens the door. There isn't any noise coming from the inside either, which has me a little worried. Reaching for the doorknob, I twist it, and then push the door open with ease.

Why would he leave his door unlocked?

An eerie feeling spreads through my veins as I slowly step into the house. Ainsley is right behind me, her body pressed against mine like she's using me as a shield. Together, we tiptoe into the house.

"I think I heard something coming from the kitchen," Ainsley whispers in my ear. I nod and steer our connected bodies toward the kitchen.

The unnerving feeling in my gut spreads through my body. My steps slow as my bravery dwindles. "Maybe we should just leave. Or at least go find a weapon," I say under my breath.

"Don't be a scaredy-cat," Ainsley whispers back.

"Says the girl using me as a human shield."

Ainsley doesn't answer, but she stays close behind me, almost pushing me toward the kitchen. It's almost like she's

fighting a war between curiosity and fear. Curiosity is clearly winning.

Right before we are able to see around the corner into the kitchen, a rustling sound comes from the inside. My pulse quickens, and I suck in a quick breath before holding it all together. Bracing myself for whatever we're about to face, my whole body tenses up.

Ainsley gives me a final push, making me stumble into the room with a gasp.

“What the fuck?” Jase blurts out, dropping his fork onto the kitchen table.

I straighten up, clutching my chest, where my heart races so fast I'm getting lightheaded. Forcing myself to take a deep breath, I look at my brother sitting at the kitchen table in his underwear. His hair is uncombed, and ketchup is smeared on his chin. I look down at his plate.

“Are you eating crunched-up potato chips, smothered in ketchup, with a fork?”

For a few moments, Jase looks at me with his mouth hanging wide open, and his bloodshot eyes still round with shock. When he finally does find his voice, he says, “I couldn't find a spoon.”

Ainsley bursts into laughter while my brain takes a few more seconds to process and understand that there is no danger.

“You couldn't find a spoon?” I roll my eyes as if the fork was the weirdest thing in this situation. Jase shrugs and picks up the fork to continue eating.

“How high are you?” Ainsley shakes her head as she sits down next to my brother.

“Pretty high,” Jase admits shamelessly. “I took an edible earlier... and smoked a blunt.” He takes another bite, chewing slowly.

“I need to talk to you.” I close the short distance between us, taking a seat across from him and Ainsley. “Are you too

high to listen?” Now that I’m closer, I can smell the unmistakable scent of cold smoke on him.

“Never.” Jase shakes his head. “Hit me with it.”

“I have a really bad feeling about what happened the other day. There haven’t been any reports about an arrest or search for a suspect,” I explain. My brother seems unimpressed, chewing his soggy potato chips in slow motion.

“Also, what if they did get arrested, and their boss doesn’t know we held up our end of the bargain?” Jase listens but doesn’t chime in, so I continue. “And that hotel I went into, something is really odd about that place too. I can’t find anything online, and...”

“Teagan.” Jase holds up his hand. His words come out slow like molasses. “Chill out. You did what they asked and placed the bug. Even with Dave and Karl being arrested, their boss will be satisfied.”

“Yeah...” Only I didn’t do exactly what I was supposed to.

Now I’m even more conflicted than before.

“But what if he found it? Or washes his clothes before ever wearing them?” There are so many scenarios that would end terribly for us.

“You are thinking way too much into this. If something was wrong, we would’ve known about it by now. Everything is fine. You just need to relax.” Jase brushes my concerns off like always. Sometimes, I almost wish I could be more like him and not care or worry all the time.

“Stop minimizing your sister’s feelings, asshat,” Ainsley speaks up. “Teagan’s concerns are more than justified, and you shouldn’t just wave her off.”

“I’m trying not to worry her,” Jase snaps. “How will it help if we sit here scared, not knowing about the future? If the guys I borrowed money from are not satisfied, they’re gonna come knocking on my door no matter what. If the cops want to reach out for a statement, they’ll do so. And that hotel is going to be run however they’re going to run it, whether you like it or not.”

The room falls into an uncomfortable silence. Dammit, he has a point. Even Ainsley doesn't have anything to add.

"Look, I know you're worried. I'm sorry I dragged you into my bullshit again."

Ainsley throws in an accusing *mmmhhh* sound.

Jase gives her a side-eye. "As I was saying. Sorry I got you involved. And I'm sorry you're concerned. But right now, there's nothing we can do. And worrying yourself to death will not do us any good."

"All I'm saying is we should be cautious. I just have a bad feeling." I let my shoulders sag in defeat. I don't want to seem even more dramatic than I already am, but I'm worried about losing my brother more than I'd like to admit.

Jase lays down his fork and holds up his hand. "I swear on Scout's honor, I will be careful."

"One, you were never a Scout. Two, I don't think that's how it goes. And three, promise you won't smoke too much weed."

"I promise I won't smoke too much weed." He puts his hand down before he adds, "I will only smoke the correct amount of weed."

That comment has all three of us laughing. I wish it could always be like this. Us being carefree, having fun like normal people in their late twenties. We missed out on so much when our parents died. We couldn't be normal teenagers, and for some reason, we could never catch up.

We stay for a little while longer. Ainsley tells us one of her outrageous stories, and Jase complains about working at the garage. I don't have much to talk or complain about, so I just listen.

"I have to work later today. Do you want me to drive you home, or do you want to stay?"

"I'll head out now with you if that's okay?" I'm off today, but some reality TV is calling my name.

We say our goodbyes, and I make Jase promise one more time that he will be careful.

“Stay out of trouble!” Ainsley yells before shutting the front door behind us. “So I totally lied,” she admits as we get into her car.

Color me curious.

“About?”

“I don’t have to work today.” Ainsley starts the engine, twisting her head to look out the back, and reverses the car out of the driveway.

“Why did you lie?”

“Because I didn’t want your brother to know what we’re really doing.”

We?

“And that would be...?”

“We’re going to check out that mysterious hotel.”

My first thought is hell no, but the words don’t actually leave my mouth. The truth is, I’ve been thinking about going there myself. Yes, I just made my brother swear to be careful, and that might make me a bit of a hypocrite. On the other hand, I do have Ainsley with me, and she can talk her way out of literally anything.

“All right, I’m in.” A grin spreads across my face.

“Really?” Ainsley sounds shocked. “I thought it was gonna take much more to convince you.”

I shrug. “I guess I’m just full of surprises today.”

I type the address into my phone’s GPS and turn up the volume so Ainsley can hear over the top 100 playing on the radio.

As we get closer to the hotel, my vigor about going fades slightly, but I swallow my fears down and force the corners of my lips up.

Ainsley parks a block away. It's the only parking spot we could find. We get out of the car and walk up to the nondescript building.

A small part of me wonders if the hotel is there at all or if I'm going crazy and making everything up. Or maybe it's like the movies, and the place will have been cleaned out when we get there.

"I think we might be a little underdressed," Ainsley points out as we get closer to the hotel. "I mean, if this is a fancy hotel, worn-out sneakers and old jeans might be noticeable." Before I can agree with her, she continues. "On the other hand, vintage is totally hot right now. So as long as we act like we belong there, we should be good."

"If you say so." It's too late to turn around since we've reached the entrance. Ainsley pushes open the large door, and we walk into the lobby together.

The place is just as I remembered. Good. At least I'm not going crazy after all.

Ainsley walks toward the seating area on the right with nothing but confidence. I follow her closely, but my eyes keep bouncing over to the registration, where the receptionist is staring at us suspiciously. He squints his eyes at me. It's the same guy from when I was here the other day, and I'm pretty sure he remembers me.

Crap.

Now there's only one thing left to do. Follow Ainsley's lead and act like I belong here. I straighten my spine, puff my chest, and put one foot in front of the other.

I let my body sink into the plush leather seat. Crossing my legs, I lean back and try my best to look relaxed. Or at least not as tense as I really am.

"Wow, that picture online didn't do it justice." Ainsley looks around like a kid in a candy shop. "Oooh, here comes a server. I bet they have super fancy cocktails here."

"Yeah, cocktails we can't afford," I say under my breath as a woman in a pencil skirt suit walks up to us, her high heels

clicking against the tile floor.

“Hello, ladies,” she greets us with a friendly smile. “I’m afraid this establishment is for members only. I have to ask you to leave.”

“Excuse me?” Ainsley flips her hair back like she’s outraged. “It’s not my fault I have never received an invite for the membership. My family is one of the most influential families in the state, and I’ve never been turned down at any establishment before.” She speaks with such confidence, even I believe it.

The server, who I think is no server at all, doesn’t seem fazed. Her megawatt smile remains plastered on her face. “My apologies. We are currently at full capacity, but I can assure you if a spot opens up, we will reach out to you about a membership. However, right now, you will have to leave.”

“We have an appointment with Mr. Grant,” Ainsley blurts out, making me almost choke on my own spit.

“Is that so?” Pencil skirt lady raises one eyebrow.

“Yes, it is so, and we both know Mr. Grant doesn’t like to be kept waiting. Now scurry along and tell him we’re here.” Ainsley dismisses her like she’s sitting on a throne, and the woman in front of her is nothing but a peasant.

“I see,” she responds. She spins around and walks away in the same direction she came from.

I turn to Ainsley and scowl at her. “Are you crazy? Wait, don’t answer that. I already know you are. Although, this might be a new kind of crazy.”

“I hate to say this, but I actually agree with Jase for once. You need to chill out a bit. Don’t tell him I said that, though.”

“What if she calls him? And he asks us to come upstairs. Then what?”

“Then I get to see what he looks like.”

Sometimes I just want to slap her, and this is one of those times.

“Oh my God, is that him?” Ainsley looks at something—or someone—behind me. “Oh my, you didn’t tell me he was that hot!” If it wasn’t for the flustered look on her face, I would think she’s joking. But her wide eyes, red cheeks, and slightly open mouth make it all too real.

“Ms. Bennett?” His deep, rumbling voice startles me. He is way closer than I expected him to be.

Sitting up a little straighter, I try to swallow past the giant lump in my throat, but my tongue getting stuck to the roof of my mouth is all that happens. I sit perfectly still, looking straight ahead at Ainsley. As if ignoring him will just make him go away.

He moves out of my peripheral vision into my line of sight, making it impossible to pretend he isn’t there anymore. “Oh, hi,” I say with an awkward smile, giving him an even more awkward wave. Who waves at somebody who’s standing right in front of them?

“I’m afraid I wasn’t aware we had an appointment today... or any other day.” He adds the last part with a hint of annoyance in his voice. Today, he’s wearing a suit again. “As a matter of fact, I distinctly remember telling you not to come back here.”

My mouth opens, but no words come out. Not because my mouth is dry but because I don’t know what to say. I sit there with my mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water, hoping for a freak earthquake to crack the floor wide open and the earth to swallow me.

“Actually, it’s me you have an appointment with.” Ainsley to the fucking rescue. “I was recently made aware of the mistake you made by not inviting me to be a member here. See my family—”

“Cut the crap, Ainsley,” Mason orders, achieving something that very few people before him have managed, making Ainsley speechless.

“How did you know her name?” I manage to say.

“After you left the other day, I took it upon myself to look into you. I had to make sure your story was true, and you weren’t a real threat. It was either that or go to the police and press charges. Of course, we can still arrange that.”

“No, there is no need to involve the police.” I jump up from my seat so fast I almost tip over. Steadying myself, I wipe my hands down the front of my jeans. “We were actually just about to leave.”

“That’s right,” Ainsley agrees, getting on her feet. “I think this is all just a big misunderstanding. I’ll just put in my application for the membership online.”

“I’m afraid we’re not taking any new members right now,” Mason explains as I reach for my friend and grab her wrist to pull her away.

“Got it! Bye, Mr. Sex on a Stick,” Ainsley yells over her shoulder as I drag her toward the exit. I don’t turn back around to look at Mason or anyone else.

“You didn’t tell me he looks like a lead in the next *Magic Mike* movie,” Ainsley says as soon as we’re back outside.

“That’s your takeaway? He knew your name!”

Ainsley rolls her eyes like it’s no big deal. “You know we both have social media, right? It doesn’t take a genius to figure out my name. Like you said, be glad he didn’t call the cops on you. We probably shouldn’t have come here.”

“IT WAS YOUR IDEA! You basically dragged me here.”

“Well, at least I got to go inside this mysterious hotel. And meeting hot stuff was just a bonus.” Ainsley beams like she just spent the day at Disney World.

I’m not going to say this out loud. But I kind of enjoyed seeing him again myself.

MASON



I CAN'T BELIEVE SHE JUST SHOWED UP HERE. I FIGURED AFTER the ordeal the other day she would stay away as far as she could. I guess I underestimated my little fake massage therapist, which is something I rarely do. Something about her has me intrigued, but I already know I can't let those pesky feelings influence me. I have to forget about her, but not before I make sure she's safe, and that starts by eliminating the threat.

I think I've let my visitor marinate long enough. Like a hunk of meat, soaking in the juices he's been submerged in these past few days. In the end, that's all he is. Useless meat. A bag of organs.

But he might be useful, hence the reason for keeping him around. I have no doubt he considers himself a tough guy. Thugs like him always do. They're all bluff and bluster, throwing their weight around, taking pleasure in terrorizing those smaller and weaker than they are. And it's never their idea, these terrible things they do. It's always at the bidding of someone higher up, someone with true power and influence. They're nothing but tools.

Though typically, tools don't enjoy the work they do. Far too many men like the one I'm about to visit take genuine enjoyment from their work. I haven't met this Dave person yet, but I would not be surprised if he falls into the latter category.

No judgment from me. I've enjoyed my work more than once. I'm going to enjoy this, for example.

Griffin stopped him miles from Teagan's apartment building. They were

in enough of a hurry that he ran a red light. They weren't taking her out for something to eat. This was not a happy little afternoon out for these guys.

From what I've gleaned these past few days, good old Dave isn't such a tough guy once he's been stripped of everything he's accustomed to. The absence of color, sunlight, human contact, and the simple privilege of using a bathroom rather than a bucket in the corner of the room make even the toughest, most disciplined soldiers lose their grip before long, and Dave is not in their league.

My lips twitch in anticipation as the elevator descends to the eleventh floor. A soft chime signals my arrival, and I step out into the hall once the doors glide open with a soft *woosh*.

Tank stands outside the locked door and nods in greeting when I approach. "He been fed this morning?" I ask. He nods again, then steps aside so I can see the tray Dave slid through the opening at the bottom of the door. The white plate looks like he licked it clean, and the white utensils might easily have come out of a dishwasher. I guess when you have nothing else to do, you make a big deal of the few tasks you're allowed. "I won't be long."

Tank slides the key into the lock, and I bite back a grin when I imagine the way my guest's heart must leap at the sound. Something different. Something new.

I open the door, and the first thing that hits me is the smell of what's coming from the white bucket in the far corner of the room. Tank follows me inside, takes the bucket, and leaves to empty it so I can turn my full attention to the man crouched in the corner. The thin, rough hospital gown he wears is stained with sweat at the neck and under the arms, turning the stark white to a muted gray.

"My, it's bright in here, isn't it?" I look around, whistling softly, as Tank closes the door and leaves us in the pure white room. There's no furniture in the space, which measures fifteen feet on all sides and was painted so expertly, that there

isn't so much as a scratch or a crack to break the effect of floating in nothingness after enough hours spent staring at the walls. "I can't imagine it's easy to sleep with all this light."

He lifts his head, and I savor the absolute desperation radiating from his bloodshot eyes. "Please..." He licks his chapped lips and swallows, grimacing as he does. He's had enough water to stay alive, but no more than that.

"Please? What are you pleading for?" I stand in the center of the room beneath one of the fluorescent lights that glares around the clock, leaving not so much as a shadow in the blinding white room. My dark blue suit is the only color he's seen since being deposited here.

It takes a moment or two for him to pull himself together enough to answer me. I wait silently, content to witness his misery. "Please, I want to go home." He lowers his head, and a clump of greasy dark hair falls over his forehead. His shoulders shake and begin to heave in silent sobs. "I just want to go home." Pathetic. But the sight and sound of it makes my blood sing. This is what happens to men who terrorize young women while trying to get to me. He thought it would be so easy, I bet. As if I've gotten this far by being careless.

"I'll let you go home, David." My training comes back to me in an instant, the memories flooding my brain before I've bothered trying to reach for them. My voice is soft and gentle. Almost tender. Like we're in this together, and all I want to do is help. "That's all anybody wants. For you to go home."

"Then let me go!" he bawls, covering his face with shaking hands.

"First, you're going to tell me what I need to know."

"I don't know nothing!"

I bet. "Fair enough. You have everything you need here—food, shelter, somewhere to deposit your waste. Clearly, you are comfortable enough that you aren't in any hurry to leave. I'll be on my way now."

I've barely taken a quarter turn away from him when he fills the room with an ear-splitting howl that could come from

the depths of hell. “No! No, don’t leave, please, don’t leave me here again!”

It’s too easy. “Fine, then. You’re in a sharing mood. That’s a good thing.” I face him again, hands clasped behind my back. The picture of a man without a care in the world and nowhere else to be.

“What do you want to know?” He lowers his hands, sniffing, but manages to lift his chin and look me in the eye. He’s still trembling, but he’s trying to pull it together.

“I want to know who sent you to me. I want to know their name and where I can find them.” Heat flares to life in my chest and sets my teeth on edge, meaning I have to grit out the rest. “I want to know how the girl fits into everything. And what you were planning on doing with her.”

His tongue darts over his lips while hope lights up his eyes. “We sent her in to plant a bug in your clothes. That’s all she was supposed to do.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know why. I was only following orders, you know? That’s it. It wasn’t anything personal.”

Right. And I’m sure he has a bridge for sale if I’m interested. I have to tamp down the bitterness his empty words stir to life. Nothing personal. It’s my goddamn life, but that’s the sort of thing men like him have to tell themselves if they expect to get the job done and still be able to look at themselves in the mirror the next morning. Though if I looked anything like this piece of shit, I would break every mirror in the house to keep from having to look at myself. His pockmarked face and yellow teeth don’t exactly tell the story of a healthy lifestyle.

I shift my weight from the balls of my feet to my heels, parting my lips to release a sigh that hints at my boredom. “You’re going to have to give me more than that.”

“What else do you want to know? I’m telling you, they don’t tell guys like me all the details. The boss gave me a job, and I did what he told me.”

“What’s your boss’s name?”

“I don’t know.” At his response, I roll my eyes with another sigh. “I swear to God! I don’t know his name. I’ve never even met him. Me and Karl, we only ever heard his voice on the phone. We call him Boss. He never told us his name. I figured he wanted to keep it a secret, you know?”

I do know, and while it irritates me, I believe him. Frustration translates to the rapid beating of my heart, to the way it thuds against my rib cage. Anybody. This asshole could be anybody I’ve ever crossed. I wouldn’t know where to begin putting a list of names together after all this time.

“Can you tell me anything else about him? Does he have an office somewhere? Have you ever been there?”

“No way. We only ever talk on the phone.”

And I’m sure this guy, whoever he is, uses a burner. Something untraceable.

“Why were you in such a hurry when you were pulled over? If I were doing a job like this and had a girl in the back seat who just finished planting a bug on an unsuspecting target, I would go out of my way to drive like I was going through the road test for my license.”

That got him. A simple question, and suddenly, he can’t look at me anymore. *Be careful how you answer.*

He clears his throat before shrugging his thin shoulders. “I was only doing what I was told. The boss... he’s not the kind of guy you disappoint.”

“That’s not an answer, Dave.” Another heavy sigh follows the folding of my arms. What I wouldn’t give to snap his bones like toothpicks. One at a time. Slowly. And if he lost consciousness, I’d inject him with some epinephrine to wake him up and start again. Nobody fucks with me and escapes unscathed.

“The kid needed to learn a lesson.”

“And you were the one to teach it to her?”

“Not her. The other one. Her brother. He needed a message.”

Something tells me I know what that message was going to be, but I want to hear it from him. “And that message was?”

“We were gonna, you know....”

I’ve had enough. “Say it before I rip your throat out.”

His head snaps back, eyes widening. “Kill her. We were going to kill her and leave her. He needed to know not to fuck with us.”

But she’s still alive because Griffin caught them in time. “And you didn’t get a chance to do that. Tell me the truth. Once this boss of yours finds out you didn’t complete your mission, what will he do? Do you think he’ll send someone else after her?”

“I don’t know. Probably. He doesn’t leave loose ends hanging.” No, he wouldn’t, because a man in his position can’t afford to be lazy. No doubt he’ll send somebody else to her home or her job. He might make it look like a random crime. A mugging gone wrong, maybe, or a drive-by. The possibilities make my head spin.

“Thank you very much for telling me what I wanted to know.” I take a moment to savor the way his eyes light up with fresh hope. I’m sure he imagines himself at home in no time. He thinks he’ll spend tonight in his own bed, in whatever shithole he calls home.

Which is why he lets out a pained, almost feral noise when I head for the door without another word hinting at his release. “Wait!” I glance over my shoulder and can’t help but snort at the sight of him crawling across the floor like the animal he is. “I’m supposed to go home! I told you everything I know! Please, please!”

I only step through the door, then lock it behind me. The opening at the bottom of the door allows me the pleasure of hearing his agonized wails. Let him wail. He was going to kill her and dump her body like she was nothing, all because some nameless, faceless voice over a telephone told him to do it. I

know what it means to follow orders, but I can't find a crumb of sympathy. Not when Griffin told me how terrified she was when he caught up to the car.

Tank lifts his eyebrows, waiting for his orders. "Give him another couple of days," I decide. "Then implant a tracking device and let him go. Knock him out, do what you have to do, so long as he doesn't know it's there." He nods, wearing a grim expression, and I set off for the elevator, going through a list in my head of the men who would benefit from having me bugged.

Was Dave telling the truth when he said he'd never met his boss and didn't know where he worked? We'll soon find out. Because if that crazy, screaming waste of life has the first clue where to find the man pulling his strings, that's where he'll go as soon as he's set free. He'll go running back to his master, pleading for mercy after being captured and held captive.

And I'll be able to watch his every move.

But I'm not in any hurry. He can think it over a little while longer.

TEAGAN



I'VE NEVER BEEN WHAT YOU WOULD CALL A PARANOID PERSON. I don't believe in conspiracy theories and all that. I don't go looking for hidden meaning in random events. Sometimes, there is no hidden meaning. Maybe it was losing Mom and Dad that cleared a lot of things up for me. Life is what it is, and that's it. Looking for anything else is the same as asking to lose your mind because that's exactly what happens.

But no matter how many times I tell myself to stop making things up, the hairs on the nape of my neck have stood straight up pretty much all day. Something's wrong. Somebody's watching me. Crazy, I know. I keep telling myself that, but it doesn't help. Throughout my shift at the grocery store, while I've been stocking canned goods and checking out shoppers, there's been no shaking the feeling that if I turn around fast enough, I'll catch whoever has observed my every move all day.

Maybe I need to, I don't know, process trauma or something like that. That's what I went through in that car when gunshots rang out, and I didn't know if I was going to live or die. And only seconds before that, I was sure I was heading to something awful. Something terrible would have happened if the cops hadn't stopped us. Maybe I need to process all of that or something. All I know is I can't shake this feeling.

“Excuse me? Hello?”

My eyelids flutter, and I force myself to stand a little straighter when I turn to face a woman glaring at me from the

other side of the conveyor belt. “Yes, ma’am?”

“My change? I gave you a fifty. You put it in the drawer and didn’t give me my change.”

Dammit. I have to check her receipt to remind myself what I owe her, then open the drawer and quickly count out a few bills and some change, which I hastily hand over along with a mumbled apology. She ignores it, rolling her eyes and pushing her cart toward the door.

Clearly, I shouldn’t be facing the public in this mood. Especially when it feels like everybody is staring at me a beat too long. That, I know, is in my head. Nobody actually cares about me. I might as well be invisible most of the time—just another underpaid worker.

“Teagan?” The store manager notices me as he passes by. “Go back to the loading dock. Check over the boxes and make sure everything’s there, then sign for it.” He’s already way past me by the time he finishes giving me the order. I wonder why he’s too busy to do it himself. At least it’s an excuse to get a little air. Hopefully, it will help clear my head because I can’t spend the rest of my day like this.

It’s not a big shipment, just a few dozen cases of cereal and oatmeal, which I check against the invoice before signing off and watching the driver pull away in his truck. The strangest feeling comes over me, like I want to ask him to take me with him. I don’t care where we’re going, so long as we go away from here. Everything’s all wrong lately, and it all started when I walked into that hotel. It’s like I don’t know what’s real anymore. I don’t know who to trust.

“Excuse me. Teagan?”

Speak of the devil. I recognize Griffin immediately. He’s not the kind of guy you can miss. I was too upset and freaked out to pay much attention to his looks when we met before. Now, I take in his dark crew cut and muscular physique and wonder exactly how many hours a day the man spends at the gym.

“Griffin, right?” What is he doing back here? “Is there a problem? I need to get back inside before my manager has a fit.”

“No problem.” His smile is brief, almost like an afterthought. It disappears before I can get a good look at it. “I only have a few questions for you. I hope you don’t mind answering them for me now.”

Red flag. What is he doing tracking me down here? I didn’t tell him where I work, did I? I might have, for all I know. I wasn’t in what you’d call a good headspace when he drove me home. Everything’s a blur. Either way, he could have called me... But did I give him my number? Did he even ask for it?

Is he really a cop at all?

I haven’t agreed to be questioned, but it doesn’t seem to matter. He looks down at a little notepad, which is almost comically small in his big hand, like he’s playing with a kid’s toy. “Had you ever met either of those men before that day?”

“No.”

“And exactly why were you with them at the time, and where were you going?”

Shit. I should have known better than to think I’d get out of this without answering uncomfortable questions. “I was doing a favor for my brother. I don’t know where they were driving to.”

“They didn’t tell you where they were taking you?”

“They were supposed to drive me home. But they told me they had to run another errand.” My skin is crawling, and the sweat that only started beading on my skin now rolls down the back of my neck. It’s warm and sunny out here, but might as well be the dead of winter as I fight the urge to shiver.

“This brother of yours. Where was he at the time?”

“I’m not sure. I really don’t know. That’s why I had to do it for him because he was unavailable.”

“Where is he now? How could I reach him if I need to speak to him?”

“What does he have to do with this? He wasn’t there at the time. He didn’t do anything wrong.” Then why am I babbling like this? Why am I sweating? I wait for him to ask those completely natural questions, but he doesn’t. He only makes another note on his pad.

“Relax. I’m only trying to get a full picture of what happened.” He looks up from his notes, and I get the sense he’s sizing me up. Studying me. “Do you have a security system at home? An alarm, maybe?”

The idea makes me snort. “No. Nothing like that.” The words are barely out of my mouth before I wish I could take them back. He’s asking weird, personal questions. He wants to know about Jase. Where he can reach him.

What if he’s not a cop at all? What if he’s one of the bad guys? For all I know, the whole situation with Dave and Karl could have been an act. A way of making me feel secure before they strike.

He could be one of them. I could be standing out here with a very dangerous person. “I, uh, need to go back in before I get fired.”

He hesitates a heartbeat like he wants to keep me here but nods instead. “Fair enough. Thank you for speaking with me. And if I need anything else...” He starts backing away while I inch closer to the door leading inside.

“You know where to find me.” Obviously. I’m not sure how, but he found me here. He looks over his notes, and I don’t know what gives me the idea, but I pull out my phone and take a quick picture of him when he’s not looking. Then I practically flee inside and wonder when this will ever end.

I’m glad to spend the rest of my shift stocking shelves. I don’t have to interact with anybody and can go over my memories. I only assumed Griffin was a cop since he had that flashing light in his car. But now that I think about it, he never gave me any proof. And Jase was right. It’s strange that he

never took me in for a statement, but I was so glad to be out of danger, I didn't care.

I'm so deep in my thoughts that a sudden touch on my shoulder makes me jump a mile. I hold up a cereal box like that's going to do anything to protect me.

"What, are you going to attack me with cornflakes?" Jase rolls his eyes while I try to catch my breath. "It's just me."

And he's worried. His eyes keep shifting back and forth, and he shifts his weight from one foot to the other while glancing over his shoulder, and his teeth keep digging into his bottom lip. If I hadn't already spent the day wrestling with paranoia, I might assume he took an edible and is having a bad reaction.

Instead, dread clenches my insides before I ask, "What's wrong?"

"I think somebody's following me. I can't shake it."

I wish I could tell him he's imagining things the way I kept trying to tell myself before coming face-to-face with someone who could be very dangerous. "I've been feeling the same way. Have you seen anybody trailing you?"

His brows draw together over troubled eyes. "Not sure. Maybe, but it could've been a random person."

"Is it this guy?" I pull out my phone, open the photo app, and hold it out for him to see.

His dark eyes widen and somehow have the power to make my heart stutter. "I've seen this guy before."

Normally, I like being right. Not this time. "Has he been following you?"

"No." What little color was left in his face drains as he lifts his gaze to me. "But he walked into the hotel just after you did that day."

Somehow, I manage to slide the phone into my pocket before it falls from my shaking hand. I assumed he was one of the bad guys, but I didn't consider he might be involved with the hotel. Why didn't I think of that?

When is this ever going to end?

“He was asking questions,” I whisper, huddled close to him in the cereal aisle. I used to feel safe here—at least, I never felt like I was in any danger. Now, I don’t know where to go. I don’t know if anywhere is safe.

“We’ve got to figure out what to do. I don’t like the idea of you going home after your shift.”

“He knows where I live. And he was asking whether I have an alarm system in the apartment.”

“Fuck. That settles it. You’re coming home with me.”

“But what about Ainsley? I can’t leave her at the apartment and not tell her what’s happening.”

“You’ll probably be safer the less she knows. So will she.” That’s a good point. And knowing her, she’d only make things worse somehow.

I’m only a few minutes from the end of my shift, anyway, so I clock out before ducking through the back door, where Jase meets me. It’s a quick, tense walk to his house, the two of us cutting through the night that fell between my visit from Griffin and now. Neither of us says anything, and it’s probably safer that way. Once we get to the house, we can try to make sense of all of this.

Except when we get to the house, it’s clear something is off before we reach the front door. Namely, because the front door is wide open. “I hope you forgot to lock up,” I murmur, staring from the sidewalk. It’s a last-ditch effort to come up with a reasonable explanation for what I’m looking at.

“Shit,” he whispers, then holds out an arm to block my way. Like he doesn’t want me to get any closer to the house. He could save himself the trouble since fear has me frozen in place. Fear that turns to terror when I notice the broken window next to the door.

“I’m going to go in and see if anyone’s still inside.”

He must have lost his mind. “No! Don’t do that!”

“What else am I supposed to do? Leave and pretend I don’t live here? And it’s not like we can involve the cops.” I see his point, but all it does is nauseate me. We can’t go to the police. It would mean answering too many uncomfortable and possibly incriminating questions.

“Then let me go in with you.”

“No way.” He barely sounds like the Jase I know when he squares his shoulders and starts off toward the house. I hate feeling like I’m watching him march to his doom, and there’s nothing I can do about it.

At first, my phone’s buzzing is more of an annoyance than anything else. I pull it out of my pocket on reflex, and it takes a second for the text from an unknown number to filter through my awareness.

Unknown: If you want to keep your brother safe, come to the hotel. Alone.

TEAGAN



MY THUMBS ARE POISED OVER THE KEYBOARD, PREPARED TO type a message back to whoever's texting me. Only what do I say? *Who is this?* Right, because I'm sure they'll come straight out and tell me. Somebody texting from an unknown number to send a cryptic message is going to offer that kind of information.

What do I do? I open my mouth, ready to call out to my brother, but something stops me. If I show him the message, there is no way he's going to let me leave on my own. If I don't leave and do what this mystery person tells me, I could be putting him at risk. I have no idea who I'm dealing with, and I have never felt so lost and scared.

Get a grip. Whoever sent this will be waiting for me. They might also be waiting to hurt me. Is it worth it, though, if it keeps Jase safe? Could I live with myself if something bad happened to him, and I could have stopped it?

That's what settles it and gets me moving while my head spins, and I try to come up with a way to get to the hotel. There's a bus stop at the next corner whose route comes close enough that I could easily walk the extra couple of blocks after reaching my stop. I've already made up my mind by the time I make it to the metal and glass shelter and sit down on the cold, hard metal bench to wait. The buses usually run every ten minutes or so—I shouldn't have to wait long.

I only wonder how long it will be before Jase realizes I'm gone. The thought of how he'll react makes guilt twist my

guts. I should've told him. *No, dummy, he would have stopped you.* There is just no way of winning, is there?

That's the question on my mind when a car I shouldn't recognize but do pulls up in front of me. My heart lodges itself in my throat, and I'm on my feet as soon as I make out the hulking man behind the wheel. He couldn't have been far away when I got that text. Did it come from him? It's almost like he was waiting for me to show up here.

The passenger window rolls down, and Griffin leans over a little, calling out the window. "Hop in. I'll give you a ride."

"How do you know where I'm going?" The humorless smile that passes over his lips tells me what a stupid question that was. So I go for another one, instead. "How do I know you're not going to hurt me?"

"I'm not going to hurt you. That's not what I do. I'm here to help, and I suggest you get in the car and let me take you where you need to be."

He could have hurt me if that was his plan, right? I have to believe that because otherwise, getting off this bench and into his car is the stupidest thing I've ever done.

But it's for Jase. I have to believe I'm doing the right thing.

He waits until I fasten my seat belt before pulling away from the corner. "I guess I don't need to tell you where I'm going," I murmur.

"Your guess is correct." All I can do after that is stare out the window, chewing my lip, hoping this isn't the biggest mistake I've ever made. Maybe even worse than going to the hotel in the first place. I did that for my brother, too, didn't I?

And there it is, just as unremarkable as it was when I first visited. Instead of stopping out in front and letting me out of the car, Griffin pulls around the corner and steers the car into an underground garage that empties onto an alley just wide enough for a car to turn left or right when it pulls out. I wouldn't know it was here otherwise—there's no evidence of it from the street. My heart hammers loud enough that I

wonder if he can hear it as we roll down a short ramp and come to a stop in the first empty space. The handful of used spots are inhabited by cars that probably cost more than a small house.

It shouldn't surprise me to find a familiar figure standing next to our space, hands clasped behind his back like he was waiting for us all this time. And I thought my heart pounded hard before this? It beats so loud I can barely hear the click of my belt when I unlock it.

"Thank you, Griffin," Mason murmurs as we approach, but his attention is focused on me. His expression is unreadable, so I can't tell if the sight of me is a good thing or not. I wish he would give me a clue. It's pretty unnerving not knowing if he hates me or not. Or why I'm here in the first place. Or who gave him permission to fill out a pair of slacks the way he does.

"Did that text come from you?" I don't know where this sudden bravado is coming from or what gives me the nerve to come out and ask him like that. The man towers over me and could probably snap me in half without hardly trying. I should probably watch what I say.

I guess there's something about being pushed around that gives me an attitude.

The only response I get is the slight tic of his jaw. He raises an eyebrow ever so slightly but says nothing, only nodding toward a pair of doors embedded in the concrete wall before walking that way. I guess I'm supposed to follow him. I'm too afraid to do anything else. It's an elevator, and within moments, the doors open again on a dark, sleek hallway that reminds me of the lobby with its black walls and gold trim. Something about it makes me walk softly, like I'm afraid to make too much noise. We pass one door, then another. There's no sound coming from behind them.

I'm so busy taking in my surroundings that I don't notice Mason coming to a stop until it's too late to avoid bumping into his arm. Or is that a steel beam inside his sleeve? Either way, I rebound off it like a tennis ball. "Sorry," I mumble.

He doesn't react. He only opens the door in front of us and steps inside a beautiful suite before motioning for me to follow him. Everything about it screams wealth and opulence—from the shining floors to the sleek furniture and the impressive view on the other side of the floor-to-ceiling windows lining the outer wall. And here I am, in the jeans and sneakers I wore to work. *One of these things doesn't belong.*

I've barely had time to take it all in before Mason clears his throat. "You'll be safe here."

He's already on his way back to the hall before I've turned away from the window to gape at him in shock. "Wait a second. That's it? You're leaving me here? Why?"

"For your safety."

Because that answers my question, it's not like it doesn't set off another ten questions that I know will also go unanswered. "What about my brother? That's the only reason I'm here. What are you going to do to him?"

Mason pauses in the doorway, turning slowly to face me. His wide shoulders practically fill the doorframe. "Jase is safe. That's all you need to know. Stay here. I'll be back in a while." The door is closed before I have the chance to ask exactly how long a while is, along with roughly a hundred other issues he's causing. Does Jase know where I am? Was it one of Mason's people who broke into the house? If Griffin could find me at work and just happened to know I'd be on my way to the hotel, it wouldn't surprise me. At this point, nothing will surprise me again.

What am I thinking? I'm alone. And I have my phone. I pull it from my pocket, sighing with relief—it's almost fully charged since I can't really use it while I'm working. I don't have to worry about it dying while I'm here. I pull up Jase's number first since he's probably going out of his mind worrying over my sudden disappearance.

It only takes two pointless attempts for me to realize there's no signal. "Are you freaking kidding me?" I whisper before I start walking from one end of the suite to the other, holding the phone up and staring at the screen, almost willing

it to show me a signal. “Come on, come on, don’t do this to me.” No luck.

Finally, I have to give up. I throw the phone onto the leather sofa in the living room, growling in helpless frustration. Nobody knows I’m here. I can’t call Jase. I can’t call Ainsley. The only way out of this hotel is through the door and down the elevator, and something tells me it won’t work if I try to use it. Or if I do and somehow manage to make it to the lobby, I won’t get far. The man has eyes and ears everywhere, obviously.

It’s a comfortable suite. Nothing seems out of the ordinary. I mean, it’s not like I’ve spent a lot of time in luxury hotel suites, but there are no immediate red flags as I look around, sizing up my situation. The bedroom is downright opulent, though still not as nice as Mason’s. But I can imagine it costs a lot of money to stay here. Probably more money than I’ve ever seen in my life. I wonder about the clientele. Who are they that they can spend all this money on suites and flashy cars? I still haven’t set eyes on anyone who looks like a guest.

Time slows down until each minute feels like an hour. How long is he going to leave me in here with no answers? I shouldn’t complain. I know it could be much worse. But a gilded cage is still a cage. It doesn’t take long for curiosity and dread to win over fear of disobeying the rules. The large, soundproof door is a symbol of my captivity. I can’t help testing the limits by closing my hand around the knob and turning it. He didn’t lock it from the outside or anything. I guess it’s a safety hazard.

Jase will be furious. If I don’t get hurt inside this place, he’s probably going to kill me later.

I stick my head out slowly, waiting for an alarm to sound. It doesn’t. There’s nothing but silence in the dark, almost ominous passage. Do I leave? What would happen if I did?

It’s not an alarm, but it might as well be. A phone rings inside the suite, and I jump, my face flushing with guilt and dread. The phone sits on an end table in the living room, and

somehow, it manages to look menacing as it rings again and again. Something tells me I shouldn't ignore it.

“What did I tell you?” Mason demands, and he sounds... disappointed? Not surprised, that's for sure. “Please remain in your suite.”

Is he watching me? Or did he get an alert when I opened the door? Either way, it makes my skin crawl. “But what am I supposed to be doing here?”

“Until I come back to pick you up for dinner in a few hours, you are supposed to stay put. Watch TV. You'll find all of the streaming services at your disposal. All I ask is that you stay where you are until I come for you. Do not make me call again.”

With that, he hangs up, and I don't know what bothers me more: the fact that he's keeping tabs on me, or the fact that I don't have a choice but to obey.

On impulse, I grab my phone and pull up Jase's contact, then type the number into the hotel phone. I don't know why I didn't think about this before. I was too overwhelmed.

My hand clutches the receiver tighter, and hopeless tears sting behind my eyes when I hear nothing but silence. There's not even a dial tone. I might as well be using a toy even though it worked seconds ago. I probably need a special code to call out. Otherwise, why have a phone in the room at all?

With every passing minute, the sense of the entire situation being set up against me gets heavier. It just might crush me by the time Mason comes to pick me up for dinner.

As I sink into the sofa and stare at the blank TV screen, I can't decide whether or not I hope it does.

MASON



“ARE YOU SURE THIS IS A GOOD IDEA?”

“And to what could you be referring?”

Griffin knows me well enough to choke back a growl—barely. “You know what I mean. Having her here. Do you think it’s safe?”

“Since when does that matter?”

He blinks hard. Did I suddenly lapse into another language? “It always matters. We don’t take chances around here.”

I almost enjoy the fact that he feels he has to remind me of that. As if I’m not the one who set the rules in the first place. “I’ve assessed the situation. I’ve weighed the options. It’s much safer having her here than allowing her to walk free. For now, at least.”

“You’re sure about that? She’s already tried to get out once.”

I turn away from the screen where footage from various security cameras plays. The moment I got the alert that she opened the door, I pulled up the feed from the camera in that hallway. I almost laughed when the ringing phone made her jump. “Is this what I pay you for? To tell me things I already know?”

He lowers his brow, and it reminds me of a bull preparing to charge. He knows better. That doesn’t make him immune to frustration, however. “She’s a wild card.”

“Not so wild. She has no way of communicating with the outside world. She can’t use the elevator without the code. And if she leaves the room, I know immediately. She’s no risk.” He grunts, setting off a flicker of irritation that I’m barely able to control. “Refresh my memory. Was it you who told me today that she seems completely clueless?”

“How much longer will she be clueless when you keep her around here?”

“Are you telling me there’s a flaw in security? Is that the problem?”

His jaw ticks, but he’s smart enough to bite back whatever else is going on in his mind. I have him cornered, and he knows it. He also knows better than to push me any further. At least, he should keep his mouth shut if he knows what’s good for him. I’m not in the mood to discuss this already baffling situation.

It’s baffling because I don’t know why the hell she matters so much. Since when do I go out of my way for anyone aside from the people closest to me? I learned a long time ago to limit the amount of concern I expend. It’s an investment at the end of the day. I invest in the people who are worthy of my time and skills. Life is a lot clearer and less complicated once a man makes that decision.

So why is she here? I can’t imagine a return even remotely worth the amount of effort I’ve put into keeping tabs on her. She certainly has no money to offer. She’s a nobody—no contacts, nobody in her life who could possibly benefit my own. She’s a girl on her way nowhere, with nothing to show for herself.

Yet there she is, lounging in a luxury suite. And somehow, that isn’t good enough for her. She has to test the boundaries I’ve put in place.

Normally, her actions would inspire nothing but bitterness. Resentment. If she were anyone else, I might throw her out on the street and let her find her way home on her own. She could take a bus, the way she was about to when Griffin picked her up. The girl is too easy to predict.

Which is exactly the problem. She thought she was helping her brother, and now she's wearing a target on her back. At least, she is if this boss Dave spoke of thinks along the lines I do. I can't see why he wouldn't. Whoever he is, he is hardly the first cold-hearted criminal I've come up against. Men like him aren't complicated. Nothing matters more than getting what they want. It doesn't matter who they mow down like tall grass in order to reach their goal.

A girl as predictable as Teagan is an easy kill—end of story.

It seems unfair, the idea of her being one of the innocents who gets cut down. And there I was, imagining myself beyond caring about details like this. I must have turned over a new leaf.

The idea makes me laugh wryly while I change into a dark gray suit for dinner. Considering she's dressed in jeans, it would be overkill to put on a tie, so I leave the top two buttons of my white shirt open before pulling on my jacket and adjusting my cuffs. I take a cursory glance at myself in the full-length mirror mounted on the inside of my closet door and rake my fingers through my hair before heaving a sigh. Might as well get this over with.

As soon as I open the bedroom door, a soft whistle draws my attention. "Where are you going so dressed up?" Natalie watches me from her spot on the sofa, where she was typing furiously on her laptop before I caught her attention.

"Dressed up? I wear a suit every day."

She arches an eyebrow, her lips pursed like she doesn't believe me. "Sure, but that's your nice suit."

"I'm not dressed up. And I'm not doing anything special."

"Okaaaay," she draws out the word. "Have fun doing nothing."

Sisters. It doesn't matter how old we get. She insists on poking at me whenever she has the chance.

If I felt like getting into it, I would tell her I'm not looking forward to this meal, and I'm only going to keep a closer eye

on our guest. I would tell her I've kept Teagan waiting longer than promised. Not because any urgent work needed my attention but because I was searching for anything to put off the inevitable. I don't feel like gritting my teeth through a boring—or contentious—meal.

However, the more I think about the girl in question as I ride the elevator down to the tenth floor, where the Kennedy suite is, in which I deposited her, the more convinced I am the meal will be anything but boring. She's going to have questions, and quite a few of them.

If I have any hope of making it through this without jamming a fork through my eyeball, I'll have to manage her. That's what's on my mind when I reach the door to the suite and use my master key card to open it.

“Finally.” She jumps up from the sofa and uses the remote to turn off the TV. “I thought you forgot about me. Weren't we supposed to be having dinner?” Her demanding attitude slaps me in the face the second I step through the door.

“That's why I've come to pick you up. I'm going to take you downstairs to the restaurant.”

She may as well hold up a sign with her thoughts scrawled across it. It's that easy to read her when she looks down at herself, and then gives me an appraising look. “Worried you'll be judged for not meeting the dress code? Don't worry,” I continue before she can answer. “We'll have our privacy. And you have to eat, right?”

“I guess.”

“You're more than welcome to stay in here without any food. Your choice.”

Her cheeks flush in a way that would be cute if she wasn't determined to rub my nerves raw. “I don't even know why I'm here. I don't have any choices, remember?”

That's not true. She made the choice to start for the hotel within moments of receiving that message earlier. She could have chosen to stay where she was. She didn't because it meant helping her brother. That could be why I'm able to fight

back my irritation at her ceaseless questions, not to mention the attitude she's giving me.

We walk to the elevator together. Pushing for the third floor, where the restaurant is located, it only takes a few seconds to arrive.

I requested one of the private rooms be prepared for us, and I'm pleased to find the table set and waiting when we arrive. From the corner of my eye, I watch her take in our surroundings. There isn't much to see. Naturally, she has to point this out like I don't know. "You're really into black and metal, aren't you?" she murmurs, eyeing the gold sconces mounted on the black walls. Their light is muted, leaving the room cast in shadow. Only the candle that flickers between us once we're seated gives me a clear view of her expression.

"It unifies the general theme," I explain as a door opens behind where she's seated. "At least, that's what the decorator told me. Our clientele seems to appreciate it."

She jumps when a staff member appears at her side. I have to fight back a smirk as I order a bottle of wine. "Did you hire ninjas?" she hisses. "Because I did not hear him come in."

"Not ninjas, but they understand the value of discretion. Our guests appreciate discretion above nearly everything else."

"Who are your guests?" Hunger drips from the question. She even leans in, eyes gleaming like she expects to unlock a mystery.

"I'm afraid that's confidential."

"And what is it you do? Or is that confidential as well?"

"I send Griffin around town to pick up random girls at bus stops."

She rolls her eyes, which would irritate the hell out of me but somehow leaves me fighting off another smirk. She'll be easier to manage once she has a little wine in her.

"How about instead of you asking a bunch of questions we both know I'll never answer, you answer a few questions of

mine?” A platter of bread, cheese, and cured meat comes with the wine and sits between us on the table as the bottle is uncorked. I wave a hand toward it. “And you must be hungry. Please, help yourself.”

She can pretend all she wants to have her act together, but it falls apart once her hand shoots out, and she snatches a slice of aged cheddar off the board. Her eyes widen at the first bite, and she quickly takes another piece before she’s finished the first. When was the last time she had a decent meal?

“So tell me.” I sip my wine—a rich, full-bodied red that will pair nicely with the beef I’ve ordered in advance. “How did you come to work at a grocery store?”

She snorts softly, staring at me like she doesn’t believe the question at first. When it’s obvious I’m not joking, she lifts a shoulder. “I guess it was always my dream. Stocking shelves. Getting bitched at by customers who try to use expired coupons. It’s such a thrill. A dream job, really.”

I cough to cover up the laugh that bubbles in my chest. Note to self: don’t have anything in your mouth after asking her a question. I would’ve sprayed her with wine otherwise. “I’m sure plenty of little girls dream about a glamorous life stocking produce.”

“But I’m one of the lucky ones who gets to live it.” She tests a slice of salami, and a soft grunt shows her approval. “The electric company likes it when I pay my bill. The store pays me to work. It’s pretty simple.”

“What is it you want to do?”

She eyes me over the rim of her glass as she takes a sip of her wine that quickly turns to her downing half the glass at once. I doubt she’s ever had anything so fine. “Is that a serious question?”

“I don’t ask anything but serious questions.”

“It’s just... you seem to know so much about my life, and you assume what I want to do plays any part in it. Make it make sense.”

“Point taken.” I hadn’t expected this from her. This sassy attitude that only seems to intensify the more she drinks. That’s by design. I want her loose, willing to share. I also want her to obey my commands.

“What about you?”

“Why don’t you eat, instead?” I nod over her shoulder, where a pair of staff members carry our prime rib along with a handful of side dishes—potatoes au gratin, creamed spinach, and macaroni and cheese studded with chunks of lobster and shrimp. Her eyes might very well fall out of her skull if she’s not careful. “Please, help yourself.” There’s something oddly satisfying about watching her dig in with abandon. She doesn’t hesitate to accept another large glass of wine, either. This is going well. Better than I’d hoped, anyway.

Or so I want to believe until she meets my gaze. “How did you know I left the room?”

I should have known it wouldn’t be that easy. “I just did. I make it my business to know what goes on under this roof.”

“How did Griffin know where to find me? He just like showed up at the store. I never told him where I work.”

“You would have to ask Griffin about that.”

“So he went on his own? Without any orders from you?”

“Like I said. He would be the one to ask. My business is knowing everything here at the hotel.”

The way she saws her knife through the perfectly tender meat tells me she would rather use that knife on me.

“Are you in the habit of following orders when you have no idea who gave the order?”

She barely glances up from the plate, making me wait until she’s chewed a bite of steak before answering. “It depends. Do those random orders basically threaten my brother’s life?”

“I don’t think anyone threatened your brother’s life. It was just the opposite.”

Her eyes twinkle, and I know she has me trapped before she swallows her potatoes and opens her mouth. “How would you know if you didn’t send the message?”

Most people become slower when they drink. This girl only gets sharper. I need to learn to expect the unexpected. “Did you send it?” she challenges.

“What difference does it make? You’re here, and it’s because you want to help your brother.”

“And am I helping my brother?”

Her gaze is clear. She doesn’t back down from my penetrating stare the way most people do. Am I wrong to assume she needs help? She seems fairly on top of things. Or is that bravado brought on by alcohol? I’m overthinking this. The girl I met when she faked her way into my room is the real Teagan. Wide-eyed, innocent, naive. Well-meaning but harmless.

“Where are the guys who got arrested?” she asks before accepting a fresh glass of wine. “The guys from the car? Dave and Karl.”

I wonder how she’d react if I told her where she could find Dave this very minute. The idea is almost tempting enough to make me go ahead and shock her. She would learn to stop asking questions. “You assume I would know.”

“Come on.” Her amused snort tells me the wine is starting to work its magic. “Don’t tell me you didn’t find out all about them just like you did about me.”

“How is your food?”

She looks down at her plate, which is now mostly empty, thanks to the way she’s plowed through everything in front of us. “Obviously, inedible. I’ve been forcing my way through to protect your feelings. I might puke later.”

“If you ever decide to abandon the glamour of the grocery store, stand-up comedy might be a good fallback.”

Her lips twitch before she lifts her glass. “Everything was delicious.”

“You should be grateful for that rather than asking a lot of questions you know I’m not going to answer.”

Something inside me rears up in recognition of the grim determination that flashes across her lovely face. Something that’s always there but usually sleeping, like a dormant volcano that decides to show signs of life all of a sudden. She’s a challenge. I have enough of them in my life already. I shouldn’t welcome yet another one.

And I don’t. I do not welcome her. She’s a burden I can’t cut loose. There’s enough blood on my hands already. I don’t need her grisly murder on my conscience.

I can tell once she starts slowing down that she’s had enough. She also managed to drink most of the bottle and is a little clumsy when she gets up from the table. “What now?”

I can see through the false bravado. She’s still scared. That shows she has good sense. What a shame she didn’t have enough sense to tell her loser brother to get fucked when he needed her help. I have half a mind to tell her he isn’t worth the risks she takes, but I don’t enjoy banging my head against the wall.

“Now, I’m taking you back to the room, where you will spend the night behaving yourself like a good girl.”

“You make me sound like a pet.” She hiccups softly. “Are you sure I shouldn’t be in a cage?”

You are in a cage.

But that cage is in place to protect you, not hold you hostage. Keeping that thought to myself, I wait until we’re back in the elevator to answer. “Are you going to behave, or aren’t you? Because I could easily assign a guard to your suite if you need a little motivation.”

She leans against the wall and blows out a heavy sigh. “Sure. I’ll be a good girl.”

I hope she plans on sticking to her word as I punch in the code to unlock the elevator panel. When I look her way again, she has pushed away from the wall and taken a step toward me. “Do you like good girls, Mr. Grant?” she asks in a tone I

haven't heard from her before. There is a seductive note in her voice that has blood rushing straight to my dick.

She takes another step, eating up the distance between us. Her flowery scent fills my nose as she lifts her hand to run a finger down my collar. Her gaze falls to my lips before she pushes up on her tippy-toes.

I'm certain she's about to kiss me. But I'm uncertain about what to do.

The elevator stops, taking the decision away from me. The door slides open, and Teagan steps away.

"That's me," she beams. "Thanks for dinner." And with that, she's gone. Speed walking down the hall to her suite like she didn't just try to kiss me. Maybe I'm just so rusty that I misread the situation?

Or it could be I've underestimated her.

TEAGAN



THERE ARE SOME POSITIVES ABOUT BEING FORCED TO STAY IN A fancy hotel suite.

Like the bed. The very big, extremely comfortable bed that must have cost a fortune. A bed that feels more like a cloud that adjusted itself to every curve and contour of my body. When I first wake up, I don't want to open my eyes. I don't want anything to break into the total comfort I'm wrapped in. Every inch of my body is relaxed, soothed.

Except my brain. My brain is about a million miles away from relaxed.

3-5-1-8. That was the code for the elevator. Mason needs to be more careful if he wants to keep certain secrets. Sure, by the time we finished dinner last night, I was pretty seriously buzzed, but my eyes were still working. My head was a little fuzzy, but I could still think. I don't know when I will get the chance to try the code for myself. I only know I'm going to.

But not just yet. I've never slept in a bed like this, even back before my parents died. No way could we ever have afforded it or the unbelievably soft sheets that caress my skin like a lover's touch, and the chance is even lower now with what my life turned into. And Mason asked why I work at a grocery store. How out of touch can he be? What do I want to do with my life? Since when does that matter?

I would have told him the whole truth if I had been just a little more buzzed. What do I want to do with my life? I want a life where I don't have to feel guilty that my brother gave up

his chance at a future to raise me. A life where I can have a career—one I actually enjoy. That’s what I want. I want a life free of that burden. But that’s not going to happen, and that’s okay. I can still be happy. I don’t need a fancy house, fast cars, and a cloud-like bed. Sure, those things are nice, but they’re not necessary to enjoy your life.

Mason has everything I don’t have, yet he doesn’t act any happier than I am. As a matter of fact, he is a little bit of a grumpy pants. Yes, Mr. Grumpy Pants fits him better than Mr. Grant.

I close my eyes as tight as I can and bury my face in the pillow in hopes of going back to sleep. I don’t have to think when I’m asleep. Even with my lids closed, I can see light coming through the narrow gap in the heavy curtains, but it’s not very bright. It’s still early. And it’s not like I have anywhere to be.

At least that’s what I think until the door to the suite opens in the other room.

I freeze solid, a deer in headlights. My heart starts racing sickeningly fast, and it only gets worse when footsteps ring out. Mason? Maybe Griffin, since I doubt Mason has the time to pay a visit. He’s much too important for that.

“Room service.” There’s a soft knock on the closed door between the living room and the bedroom. “I’ve left your tray on the coffee table.” I don’t recognize the voice as belonging to either of the men I expected.

“Thank you.” I wait for their footsteps to fade away and for the outer door to click shut, then count to thirty in my head before venturing out of the bed. I can’t lie: the idea of breakfast is enough to drag me out of my cocoon, especially when I remember how fantastic dinner was. Whoever they have working in their kitchen knows what they’re doing.

After a quick trip to the bathroom, I risk peeking into the living room. Sure enough, there’s a tray on the coffee table and two dishes with silver domes on top. I lift them and groan happily at the sight of thick, fluffy French toast, bacon, and sausage. The second plate holds scrambled eggs and luscious

fresh fruit. There's also a carafe of coffee and a plastic bottle of juice. They thought of everything.

I've never seen strawberries so red and ripe before—I can't help but snatch one from the plate and pop it into my mouth. My eyes close at the explosion of flavor that coats my tongue. I didn't know a simple strawberry could be so delicious. It's like living in a whole different world.

I've barely sat down to make a pig of myself when the lock clicks again. And again, I freeze, this time halfway through chewing a mouthful of bacon. I can't swallow, though. My throat's too tight.

The door opens slowly, and I forget to breathe until a familiar blond head pokes through the opening.

And right away, I want to wither and die in the clothes I wore to work yesterday. They're nothing when compared to Natalie's designer suit and the mile-high stiletto heels that click across the floor when she steps into the suite. "Hi," she ventures in a soft voice. "I just found out you're staying with us, and I thought you might like some fresh clothes." She crosses the room and leaves a small pile of black fabric on the arm of the sofa. "I figured leggings might be a little more forgiving than jeans since I don't know your exact size. Although, I think we all know you can't go by sizes, anyway. At least not when you're a woman, right? Men can walk into a store, find their size, and off they go."

Is her little small talk supposed to make her seem more human? Because from where I'm sitting, she is a goddess, and I am merely a slug who hasn't brushed her hair today. Natalie's hair is perfectly coiffed the way it was when we first met. Not a strand is out of place. She's the kind of woman I've always wanted to be and knew I could never even imitate.

"Could you use a little company?" She eyes one of the armchairs positioned at opposite ends of the coffee table. My mouth is too full to speak so I lift a shoulder. I mean, she belongs here more than I do. She's... whatever she is to Mason. His assistant, he called her. I have to wonder if that's code for something else he didn't want to admit at the time.

If she's his assistant, it's interesting that he didn't tell her I was staying here. "Thank you for the clothes. I'm starting to feel a little... gross."

Her crimson lips twitch as she gracefully arranges herself in the chair. Or maybe I'm making that up in my head. Maybe she just plopped down like any other person, but I'm so awestruck by her that everything seems more interesting than it is. "No problem. Sorry, Mason doesn't think about things like that."

They say curiosity killed the cat. That's never stopped me. My curiosity is going to eat me alive if I don't ask. "I guess it can't be easy, working for a man like him. He's pretty important and everything. I'm sure he's got a lot on his mind."

"He usually does, yes."

"I guess it keeps you on your toes." God, I would marry these eggs if I could. They're so buttery and light, rich and fluffy. Would it be rude if I asked for more?

"That's the thing about brothers. They can drive you crazy, but you love them, so you bite your tongue and go along with it."

I'm so surprised I almost spit my food all over the place. "He's your brother?"

"Yes, and we work together somehow. Some days, I'm pretty sure I made the biggest mistake of my life. But for the most part, it's a very rewarding job."

I don't know why it matters. I don't know why finding out she's his sister and not his girlfriend makes me feel a little more relaxed. It shouldn't. It doesn't change anything, really.

"Did your brother tell you whether I'll be able to leave today?"

Her lips twitch again. "Certain things, he keeps to himself. That's one of them. I wish I could tell you more."

I believe her. Some people say things like that but don't really mean it. She seems sincere. "I'm just a little worried. I'm not complaining, really. But I didn't tell my brother where

I was going or why. As far as he knows, I disappeared. It's got to be worrying him sick. But I can't get a signal around here."

"I see. Yes, that would worry me, too." She taps her nails on the arm of the chair, pursing her lips while I gulp down some juice.

By the time I've emptied the bottle, she's made up her mind. "Let's keep this between us, okay?" She reaches into the inner pocket of her black blazer and pulls out a phone. "Make it quick. What's his number?"

My pulse takes off at once, and even though I'd rather be able to call him on my phone, this is the next best thing. She hands it over once I've recited his number. *Please, answer. This isn't the time to start screening your calls.*

For once, Jase does what I need him to do. "Hello?" I cringe when I hear the strain in his voice like he dreads what he might hear.

"It's me. I'm okay. I'm safe, I'm fine."

"Jesus Christ." Now his voice is shaking. "You almost killed me, do you know that?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't have a choice. But I really am okay. You don't have anything to worry about." I have to resist the impulse to look at Natalie, like I'm checking with her to see whether that's true.

"Where are you calling from? Why can't you answer your phone when I call you?"

"It's a long story. Just trust me."

"Sure." He's not a fan of the idea, but he has to know there's no point in arguing. "Be careful, okay?"

"You, too." I don't feel comfortable saying more than that with an audience, so I end the call and hold the phone out to its owner. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Then she stands and straightens out nonexistent wrinkles in her skirt. "I'm sure my brother has already told you to make yourself at home, but let me reiterate. Whatever you need, just let us know."

Considering the phone on the table didn't work when I picked up the receiver, I have to wonder how I could get in touch with anybody, but I nod and force a smile anyway. She's trying. She's definitely more of a people person than her brother.

Now that I have some food in me, it's easier to think. That's what I need to do. I need to think. I need to figure out a way out of this. It's so easy for Natalie to tell me to make myself comfortable and all that, but I'd bet anything she's never been in a situation like this. Where all she has is questions, and she's surrounded by a bunch of people who won't give her any answers.

I spend a few more hours in the suit, weighing all my options. Someone brings me lunch, but I barely touch it, still being full from breakfast.

By the afternoon, I can't take being cooped up here any longer. I am not going to sit here all day like somebody's pet, waiting for the door to open and a visitor to walk in. No way. After I've practically licked the plates clean, I take a quick shower and dry off on ridiculously thick towels before trying on the clothes Natalie brought. The leggings are nice and stretchy, and they fit me well, while the T-shirt and hoodie are just oversized enough to make me feel cozy and warm. Maybe that was what she was going for. A way to offer a little comfort.

Once I've tied my shoes, I go straight to the door. My heart races, and I seriously wonder whether this is a good idea. Maybe I should hang back, watch some TV, and play it safe.

Where has playing it safe ever gotten me? Then again, I'm only here because I took a chance in the first place. Not like I had a choice. This time, the choice is mine, and I'm going to make it. My hand closes around the knob, and I take a deep breath through my nose and release it through my parted lips. Here goes nothing.

Just like last night, there's no alarm or anything when I open the door. I look back over my shoulder toward the phone, then extend one leg and step out into the hallway. Silence.

Nobody is waiting for me out here. No guard. No bogeyman ready to jump out at me.

I decide to take another step, then another. Every step I take away from the room leaves me feeling more confident than before, and before I know it, I'm in the elevator. I feel like I just got away with murder or something, and my trembling hand somehow manages to punch in the code I committed to memory. 3-5-1-8. Then I push the button for the lobby. Maybe I can make it out of here, after all.

When the car starts moving, I want to jump, scream, and cheer. It worked. Even if I can't make it out of this strange hotel, I can at least look around and get a feel for where I am and what goes on around here. I descend one floor. Then another. Suddenly, the elevator stops, and so does my heart. What the fuck?

When it finally moves again, I'm going the wrong way, back up, dread slams into me. Ninth floor, tenth is where I came from, but the elevator goes up one more. The doors begin to slide open even though I didn't tell them, and I press myself against the back corner of the car, expecting to see Mason glaring at me.

But nobody is there. The dimly lit hallway is empty. I don't even know why I stopped if nobody pressed the button in the hall.

I'm still wondering what to do when out of nowhere, a scream pierces the silence, loud and blood-curdling, coming from down the hall. The sort of scream that makes all the hair on my body stand on end while my stomach clenches in horror. It sounded... pained. Terrified.

I reach out and jam my finger against the button to close the doors. I don't want to hear that again. And I don't want to know why I heard it. Who it came from or why. I stab the button over and over, frantic. *Come on, come on, close!*

I shudder in relief when the doors start to slide shut, then press the button for the lobby once again. Forget looking around. I need to move, now. Maybe I can bolt out of this place before anybody catches me.

But instead of moving, the low hum from the motor cuts out, and I only have a split second to absorb the sudden silence before I'm plunged into darkness.

TEAGAN



EVEN AFTER THE DIM ELEVATOR EMERGENCY LIGHT COMES ON, I can barely see my hand in front of me. It's so quiet in here. I can hear my heart rapidly beating in my chest. My breathing becomes erratic as I drag my hands along the side of the wall, like I'm trying to search for an exit I know is not there.

I'm so fucked.

So fucking fucked!

Cursing myself for coming here in the first place, I try my best to calm down and get my breathing under control before I hyperventilate.

Inhale, exhale. Slow and steady.

A few moments later, the panic becomes slightly less crippling, and I take a seat on the floor, pressing my back against the elevator wall.

How the hell am I going to get out of here?

I barely have time to think about it when the light suddenly flickers back on. I squint my eyes against the harsh fluorescent light.

The elevator starts moving again, descending toward the lobby, only to stop short three levels. The door slides open, and I scramble to my feet, getting ready to fight whoever is on the other side.

“Ms. Bennett.” Mason’s deep voice catches me off guard. I’m not sure why I didn’t expect him here, but I didn’t. “I thought I had asked you to stay in your room.”

“Fuck you!” I spit out. “I’m not a prisoner. I didn’t do anything wrong. You need to tell me why I’m here and what the hell this place is. Why did I hear somebody scream?”

“I don’t know what you heard, but I’m sure it was a misunderstanding.”

“Cut the crap, Mason. I want answers. This is not a normal hotel, and I want to know what’s going on. And then I want to leave; you can’t just keep me here.”

“Let’s go to my place and talk.” Mason steps into the elevator, positioning himself in front of the pad, so I can’t see him type in the code.

The elevator door closes, and we are whisked up to the same place I first met him. He walks me to the kitchen table, pulling out a chair for me to sit. “Would you like a drink? Maybe a glass of wine.”

“Do you have something stronger?”

The ghost of a smile appears on his lips as he nods. Opening the freezer, he pulls out a bottle of tequila and pours a shot into a glass he grabbed from the cabinet.

“Salt and lime?” he asks when placing the glass in front of me.

Instead of answering, I simply take the glass and bring it to my lips. Tipping it, I let the cold liquid flow down my throat until it settles into my stomach with a heat only tequila can provide.

“Now talk,” I order.

“Booze makes you bossy. I’ll have to remember that.”

“No, you don’t because after you tell me what is going on, I’m going to leave and never come back.”

“I advise against it.”

“Are you saying you’re holding me against my will?”

“No, I’m saying I’m trying to protect you.”

“By keeping me prisoner?”

“Did someone drag you here against your will? Has your door been locked? Have you been cuffed, starved, or hurt in any way?”

Dammit, he has a point.

My burning anger simmers down to a low flame. “Are you saying I can walk out of here right now?”

“If that’s really what you want, I’ll walk you downstairs myself. I’ll even call you a cab if you like... but I strongly advise against leaving.”

“Is that a threat?”

“There is a threat, yes, but it’s not me. It’s the people your brother borrowed money from. They still want to teach him a lesson, and that lesson is you.”

“How do you know all of that, and why did they want me to plant a bug in the first place?”

“Look, I know you want answers, but I just can’t give them to you. You already know way more than you should. You’ll just have to trust me. I’m trying to help you.”

“Why? I mean, why are you trying to help me?” If he doesn’t answer anything else, he should at least be able to reveal this.

“Because I know you’re innocent. You got caught up in all of this because of your brother. You don’t deserve what those people have planned for you.” A shudder runs down my spine at his words. I don’t dare to ask what that plan is.

I’m not sure if it’s the alcohol or his words that calm my nerves. “Let’s say I believe you. That doesn’t explain this hotel and what I heard on the eleventh floor. Someone screaming like they were being tortured or something.”

Mason doesn’t acknowledge my concerns. Without a word, he pours me another shot and pushes the glass toward me.

“Why doesn’t the hotel have a name? And why is no one allowed to stay here?”

“People stay here all the time,” Mason quips. You just have to be a member to get a room.”

“I’m not a member.”

“Indeed. As a matter of fact, you are the first person who’s ever stayed at the hotel without being a member.”

“Yay me,” I huff sarcastically, pumping a fist into the air.

“I know this doesn’t make sense to you. You’ll just have to trust me. I am not the bad guy. I’m trying to protect you and your brother, whether you believe me or not.”

I believe you.

I’m not sure why I don’t say the words out loud. And I definitely don’t know why I believe him, but I do. At least for now.

“Come on, I’ll take you back to your room.”

“I’d rather stay here for a bit longer. I’m bored out of my mind downstairs.” *And I don’t want to be alone.*

Mason hardly ever shows emotion on his face, but he can’t hide the shocked look in his eyes from me this time. It takes him a few more moments to gather his thoughts before he speaks. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

“Why not? Are you scared I’ll get drunk and try to kiss you again?” My cheeks heat when I think of my lips brushing against his.

He snorts. “I didn’t even know that you tried to kiss me. You need to work on your flirting game.” Puffing out his chest as if he is offended. “I’ve not been scared of anything in a really long time.”

“Great!” I take the second shot, slamming the glass on the counter once it’s empty. “How about a movie?”

“A movie.” He says it like it’s the most absurd thing he’s ever heard.

“Yeah, a movie. You know, pictures and sound on a TV. You sit down and watch it, maybe eat some popcorn. Have you heard of it?”

“Bossy and a smart-ass. Have you heard of that?”

“Many times. Two of the many services I offer free of charge. Add sarcasm, and you’re rounding out my top three.” I stand from my chair, the tequila making my legs slightly shaky, but I play it off. “Are we going to do this movie thing or what?”

He studies my face for another minute, as if he is waiting for me to take it back or tell him I was joking. When he realizes I wasn’t, he finally answers. “I haven’t sat down and watched a movie in forever. But why not? Let’s do the *movie thing*.”

Mason waves his hands toward the large sectional in front of the oversized flat-screen TV. I’m not sure why he needs it if he doesn’t watch movies.

I flop down on the far-left side of the three-seater, sinking into the soft leather. It’s deeper than I expected. The cushions are so soft; it feels like the couch is trying to swallow me whole.

Mason sits down on the same side but leaves enough space for two more people between us. He grabs the remote from the coffee table in front of us and presses a few buttons. The huge screen comes to life, and I lean back to get comfortable.

“Any preference on movies?”

“I’ll watch anything besides horror movies. They are all stupid and predictable.”

“Agreed.”

Oh my God, did we just agree on something?

He doesn’t flip through the channels long before he sees a movie he likes. “How about *The Book of Eli*?”

“Oh yes, I love Denzel Washington.” Pushing off my shoes, I pull my legs up on the couch to get more comfortable.

Mason side-eyes my move like I’m planning a sneak attack or something. I get the feeling he isn’t used to anything so domesticated.

The movie plays for about ten minutes, but I can barely concentrate. There are too many questions burning in my brain. I have to get a few out. “If you don’t normally watch movies, what do you do? For fun, I mean.” I already know he won’t answer any questions about the hotel, but this seems innocent enough.

“Running this place is my life,” he answers quickly, his gaze glued to the TV screen.

“You can’t be working all the time.”

“I can, and I do,” he says, all matter of fact.

I look around the apartment, taking in the luxurious space and high-end furniture. He’s clearly not lacking any money. He could do anything he wanted. Instead, he chooses to work all the time. “What a waste.”

“Huh?” He turns toward me.

“I mean, you do all this work, make all this money, but then you don’t let yourself have fun spending it?”

“I have fun.”

“Doing what?”

He turns back to look at the TV. His lips are pressed into a thin line. I look at his profile, waiting for his explanation, but it never comes. I guess that’s the end of our conversation.

I try to get into the movie, but I just can’t get out of my head that Mason doesn’t know how to relax or enjoy himself. Jase and I never had any money. We’ve always lived paycheck to paycheck, barely able to pay our bills. We don’t have much, but at least I know how to have a good time. I can’t count the times I’ve laughed so hard I couldn’t breathe. Something tells me Mason’s never laughed that hard in his life.

For the first time in my life, the phrase ‘money can’t buy happiness’ makes sense to me.

MASON



ONE THING TEQUILA IS GOOD FOR: TAKING A SMART-ASS WITH endless questions and putting her to sleep before I can threaten to strangle her if she doesn't leave me alone.

All right, maybe it's not quite that bad—but it's close. There is no satisfying her curiosity. And what's with the questions about my personal life and how I choose to spend my time? I didn't realize I'd signed on to be the featured guest on a talk show. She's going to get herself into a lot of trouble if she's not careful.

Hell, she already has gotten herself into trouble. More than she knows. She happened to get lucky when she ended up on my doorstep. I'm sure there are other men in positions similar to mine who wouldn't be so forgiving or patient. They wouldn't have to answer questions about their free time since they wouldn't allow themselves to end up in this position. There would be no personal talks. No shared movies.

She might not be alive now if it wasn't for me. *Down, boy. Let's not get the idea we're a hero.*

She fell asleep halfway into the movie. At first, her head lolled against the back of the sofa. Slowly, as I watched from the corner of my eye, she began sliding farther and farther down until finally, her head ended up on my lap, her body curled up in a protective ball. If she wasn't snoring softly, I might think she did it on purpose. To annoy me, of course. Not to get close to me.

That's fine. I would still rather feel the weight of her head on my leg than protect myself from a barrage of probing questions. It isn't half bad, really. She's at peace, and her already beautiful face turns into something closer to ethereal. Like a peaceful angel who for some reason trusts me enough to sleep this way. Utterly at my mercy. She's lucky what little conscience I have left is still intact, or she might be in trouble.

I didn't notice before, but she has a light scattering of freckles across her cheeks and the bridge of her nose, and a tiny mole next to her right eye. She isn't perfect, but when everything is added together, she's damn close. Right down to the soft, thick hair that now drapes over my leg and begs to be touched.

Do I dare? She's out cold. She won't know.

I take a strand between my fingers and let it slide through, enjoying how silky it feels against my rough skin. My attention drifts back to the movie, but I twirl her hair around my fingers as I watch. There's something nice about this. Almost natural, though it should be anything but.

Teagan doesn't belong here, and I have to figure out what to do with her. She can't stay, for one. I can't leave her alone for very long, and I have too much to do. I can't spend every day like this.

Hell, I can't trust her enough to leave her out here once the movie is over. I stifle a yawn so as not to wake her. What do I do now? Wake her up and risk more of her probing questions? I don't know how much more I can take before making her wish in no uncertain terms that she'd kept her mouth shut. It's safer to let her sleep.

Slowly, carefully, I work my way out from under her head, cradling it in my hand before lowering it to the cushion once I've escaped. She doesn't notice, only sighing softly and curling into a tighter ball once I drape a blanket over her.

No, this isn't going to work. What happens if I go to bed and leave her out here alone? I shudder to think. Would I be able to get any sleep, always wondering what she's doing?

Fuck. I scrub my hands over my face and groan softly when the only obvious answer reveals itself.

She better hope she doesn't get any big ideas over this.

Her snoring doesn't skip a beat when I gather her in my arms and lift her gently from the couch. She's out cold, thank God. I don't need her waking up halfway through me carrying her to bed and getting the wrong idea. I can imagine her clawing my face in a panic, forcing me to come up with excuses for the scratches in the morning.

Instead, she rests in my arms without stirring until I lower her to the bed. She rolls onto her side and whimpers in her sleep. Is she having a nightmare? If she did, who could blame her? The girl has faced some bleak shit in her time.

The oddest impulse sweeps over me. I want to reach out and stroke her hair and tell her everything will be all right. It's a good thing my phone vibrates when it does, or else I might do something stupid. Instead, I fish the cell from my pocket to find a message from my sister.

Natalie: Status check.

Working with her has its ups and downs. I appreciate her being on top of things—I need people I can trust, and she's one of the few who fit the bill. Then there are moments like this when her persistent check-ins make me grind my molars. I can't shake the feeling she's checking on me rather than the situation.

Me: Everything's under control. Not to worry.

Natalie: And where is she? Her door hasn't been opened.

My dentist must love the money she inadvertently puts in his pockets. If I don't stop clenching my jaw so hard, I won't have teeth left to grind. They'll simply shatter.

Me: She's with me. Asleep. I'll keep an eye on her tonight.

There is a long pause between the time the "seen" check comes on and her typing the next message. I can only imagine

what's going through her head right now.

Natalie: Are you sure? I could take her off your hands.

Me: No need. See you in the morning.

And that's the end of the conversation. I'm not in the mood for more questions—and while I know she's trying to be helpful, I don't appreciate having to explain my decisions. I can barely explain them to myself as it is. The girl has no business here. We can all agree on that. The alternative, though, is difficult to swallow. She doesn't stand a chance on her own.

I can't blame Nat for her concern—and confusion. I don't make a habit of this sort of thing. I can't remember the last time I had an overnight guest, much less one with a complicated backstory. I still haven't decided what to do with her—and considering the sight of her sleeping peacefully in my bed does things it shouldn't, it doesn't look like I'm any closer to reaching that decision. Rather than going to the side of the bed Teagan is closest to, I head for the bathroom, locking the door as if I have anything to worry about. If anything, it's for her sake that I'm placing a barrier between us.

When was the last time I got laid, anyway? I search my memory while peeling off my clothes and can't come up with a clear answer by the time I turn on the shower. It's easy to let my needs fade into the background when there's always so much on my plate. I'm a grown man. I can handle my hungers.

At least that's what I tell myself when I'm not in a situation like this. With a sleeping, innocent thing snoring away under the covers. It doesn't help that once she's awake, she lights up part of my brain few people ever have. The way she challenges me keeps me on my toes, her little quips—I shouldn't enjoy her the way I do.

And considering the raging hard-on that refuses to quit as I soap up, there's a part of me that would like to enjoy her a lot more. It's dangerous to let myself think along these lines. I'm normally more disciplined than this. I need to get to sleep so I'll have the capacity to figure out what to do with her in the

morning. It's clear I can't spend my days hovering over her. None of us can. There's work to be done, work she cannot witness or even know about.

Yet even with these concerns running across my mind like a stock ticker, I'm still hard as a rock by the time I rinse off. How am I supposed to sleep with blue balls threatening to fuck up the rest of my night? Women will never understand—they treat it like a joke. They don't know how painful it can be to wait it out until the pressure eases. It can take hours sometimes. No, it won't kill me, but I don't do well when I've lost sleep. She doesn't want to see me in that mood.

When I close my eyes, I see hers in front of me. How wide and fear-filled they'd be if I walked into the bedroom and pulled the blankets back. Her chest would heave with every ragged breath, and her plump lips would part, and dammit, this is no good. Precum oozes from my tip, and my body is one large, stress-filled knot, no matter how much hot water hammers down on my muscles. There isn't enough to soothe the tension—no way I'm making it through this night feeling the way I do.

Without thinking, I take myself in hand and give my cock a single stroke that leaves me gritting my teeth against a groan. She's out cold, but still. I can't risk her hearing me like this and getting the wrong idea... Which would be the right idea, come to think of it.

Instinct takes over, and I sigh, giving myself over to the sensation building in my core. Like a coiled snake beginning to unfurl. Something that could be dangerous if I leave it unchecked.

She would be so easy to claim, too. I'm not going to forget that clumsy attempt of flirting in the elevator. It isn't easy acting like I wasn't tempted. I'm tempted now, every minute I spend with her. And she's here, and she trusts me. What other choice does she have? I can't break that trust.

Yet here I am, stroking myself faster, imagining every step of stripping her bare. Worshipping her body, indulging myself in her smell and her taste. I bet anything she's sweet.

Addictive. And I have no doubt I could make her body sing while she screams my name.

“Fuck...” I whisper, my head falling back as the familiar rush consumes me. There’s no going back now, not with a porno playing in my mind like a movie. Having her body pinned beneath mine, watching desire swirl in her eyes while she arches her back to give me her body. *Say my name. Tell me what you need.* And she would, too. She wouldn’t be able to stop herself once I got started. She’s a fiery girl. I wonder how hot she would burn.

The sudden rush comes over me all at once, and I give myself over to it, painting the tiled wall with one spurt of hot seed after another until my ears ring, and I go weak in the knees. That was necessary. I needed to get that out of my system. No way could I leave this shower and keep my hands to myself otherwise.

Although... once I’m dried off, and I open the bathroom door wide enough to see her still sleeping soundly, I wonder if I should play it safe and sleep on the couch. It can’t hurt to have a wall between us. Then again, what happens if she pulls another one of her bullshit stunts? I can just imagine being startled awake by an alarm or a sudden phone call saying she managed to sneak past me to wreak havoc on another floor.

No, it’s better to stay in here with her. My heart sinks a little when I consider how she’ll react once she’s awake, but I’ll deal with that when the time comes. I’m too damn tired and conflicted to care—and if she gives me shit, I’ll remind her it’s not my fault she can’t be trusted on her own.

All hint of desire is long gone by the time I’ve pulled on a pair of shorts and a T-shirt. I’m too busy resenting her for the pain in the ass she’s turned out to be.

I’m careful to keep plenty of space between us as I settle in on my customary side of the king-size bed. For her sake. Not for mine. I know better than to complicate things by laying a hand on her. She’s already trouble enough.

TEAGAN



MY APARTMENT WAS BUILT IN THE '80s, AND THE FURNACE hasn't been updated in many years. It works, but not all the time, so I'm used to waking up in the middle of the night and freezing my ass off. I'm not used to waking up feeling warm, comfortable, and safe.

For some reason, that's exactly how I feel right now. I don't remember the last time I felt so cozy. Burying my face into the firm pillow, I'm ready to let sleep pull me under once more when I notice something is off. Although this is very comfortable, and I don't want to wake up, this bed doesn't feel like my own. It doesn't smell like cheap laundry detergent or my brother's cigarette stench. It smells... nice, clean, and so damn inviting.

"It's time to wake up." A low, rumbling voice meets my ear, pulling me from the place where sleep and wakefulness meet reality.

My eyes fly open, and I lift my head to find my face only inches away from Mason's handsome face.

What the hell?

Sitting up quickly, I wrestle with the blanket wrapped around my body while trying my damndest to remember how I ended up in his bed. Patting myself down, I realize I'm still completely dressed. Well, that's a plus.

"You fell asleep on the couch. I carried you to the bed," he answers the question in my head.

"Oh... thanks. And sorry for using you as a pillow."

I'm not sure why he didn't leave me on the couch, but I'm not mad about sleeping in his bed with him. Even though I still don't really know much about him. Other than he has the most kissable-looking lips and deep green eyes, reminding me of an ocean during a storm.

"What time is it?" I ask while I watch him get out of bed.

"Almost eight. I'm surprised Nat hasn't sent out a search party for me."

"So what's on the itinerary for today?"

Mason raises his eyebrow. "Work for me. Going back to your room for you."

"How about you take today off?"

"I don't take days off."

I push the blanket off my body and let my legs dangle from the bed. "Yeah, I got that from our conversation yesterday, which is exactly why you should do it."

"Mason!" Natalie's voice booms through the door. "Are you alive?"

"Here comes the search party." Mason walks toward the bedroom door, opening it before his sister kicks it down.

"Are you okay?" Natalie seems seriously worried. She looks past her brother, her gaze landing on me.

"Hi," I greet awkwardly.

A huge smile spreads across her face. "Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt," she says with a hint of sarcasm.

"You didn't," Mason declares. "We were—"

"Just getting up to get dressed to go out for breakfast," I finish his sentence.

Natalie's jaw literally drops. "Go out, as in outside the hotel?"

Mason shuts me down immediately. "No, we were not."

"So you *are* scared," I tease.

“I’m not scared,” he says, a little too defensively. Crossing his arms in front of his chest, he glares at me.

Mirroring his stance, I cross my arms over my chest. “Prove it. Let’s go get breakfast somewhere. I’m sure this hotel will survive without you for a few hours.”

“It sure would,” Natalie chimes in with excitement in her voice. “Nothing going on today. Take the day off.”

Mason shoots his sister a glare that would make a grown man quiver in his boots. Natalie, on the other hand, laughs.

“Seriously, Mason, when was the last time you even left the hotel?”

“There’s never a reason for me to leave.”

“Until today!” I exclaim.

“Good thing I brought you a fresh set of clothes.” Natalie points at the light pink dress hanging over the back of the couch.

Yes! Finally, something colorful.

With the biggest smile on my face, I grab the dress and scurry into Mason’s bathroom. I close and lock the door behind me, taking in the luxurious space. His bathroom is about the same size as my bedroom. Sleek matte tiles cover the walls, while textured tiles cover the floor. As I take a few steps, I realize they are heated as well. Fancy.

I strip out of my borrowed clothes quickly, discarding them into a laundry basket next to the double-headed shower. If I wasn’t so hungry, I would definitely rinse off. Maybe he’ll let me shower when we get back... maybe he’ll join me.

My lips curl up into a smile of their own accord at my naughty thought. Would he? He let me sleep in his bed and didn’t seem to mind my cuddle attack, but he also hasn’t made a clear move, and not for lack of opportunity. Does he like me that way, or does he feel obligated in some way? Ugh, I wish I could read him better. Mason is like a high-security vault with mile-thick walls protecting him. Could I ever tear those down? Maybe not, or maybe I just need to climb over them instead.

MASON



“DON’T LOOK AT ME LIKE THAT.”

Griffin blinks rapidly while his head snaps back in surprise. “Like what?”

“Like the way you were looking at me just now. Like you can’t believe what you heard.”

“That’s because I can’t.” He glances toward the closed door my sister disappeared through seconds ago, just before he entered. “Now I get it.”

“Now you get what?” Do I sound offended? No doubt. Can I help it? I’m not so sure of that. I wish I could. Everything about this situation has me in self-defense mode. Fight or flight, on a smaller scale. I know my life isn’t inherently in danger.

It only feels like it is.

He jerks a thumb toward the door and smirks. “Nat was grinning from ear to ear. I was wondering why.”

Yes, she would. We might need to have a talk about putting me on the spot and how I’ve never appreciated it.

“So what brought this on?” he asks while I check my pockets to make sure I have my wallet, keys, and everything I need. I wish this didn’t feel so foreign. I also wish it didn’t seem like so much is hanging on what, for most people, would be an everyday occurrence. Going out for a little while, nothing more. I’ve gotten too comfortable around here. These

walls have a way of making a man feel comfortable and safe in a world he knows is anything but.

“Just going out for breakfast, that’s all.”

“Sure.” Griffin doesn’t seem convinced. “I came up here to let you know we found Karl. He’s dead.”

I’m not terribly shocked at that. Death has been a daily part of my life. “Do we know who killed him?”

“Not yet. But I’m looking into it.”

I expect nothing less from Griffin.

“I trust you can keep from burning the place down while I’m gone?”

“As usual, I’m humbled by the faith you have in me.” He grins when I shoot a look his way. “It’ll be fine. You need this. Get outside, breathe some air, be around people.”

He makes being around people sound so easy. So many people, so many potential threats. I know my head will be on a swivel the entire time. How could I possibly enjoy this?

More importantly, how can she? She’s still in the bathroom, getting ready. I can practically feel her excitement radiating through the closed door. Why? Why is she hell-bent on shaking me out of my routine? What can it possibly matter to her what I do, how often I leave, or what I do for fun? Does she feel like she owes me something?

None of my questions are answered by the time the lock clicks and the door opens, and Teagan steps out wearing the dress my sister brought in.

At first, it takes a second for my brain to catch up with what I’m seeing. The soft pink of the dress makes her skin glow. It could be the excitement of going out, too, the way she smiles, the way her eyes sparkle. She’s happy. It takes so little to make her happy. Yet another mystery.

“How do I look?” She does a little spin, her arms held out to the sides.

When I can't find the words, Griffin clears his throat. "Very nice. Where are you two headed?"

Good question. I have to think like a so-called normal person who isn't filled with anxiety at the idea of stepping foot outside. Fuck, am I really this bad?

No. No, I'm not. This is just a hurdle. One more hurdle in a string of hurdles I've already overcome. This one will be no different.

"You are the one with big plans." I lift a shoulder, looking her way. "What do you think? Pancake Castle?"

"Shit, bring me back an order." Griffin follows us out the door and down to the elevator.

"Who said anything about you?"

I could fall over in shock when he looks at Teagan and sticks out his bottom lip. "Can you believe this? He would let me go hungry." It seems like she has a strange effect on all of us because I can't remember the last time he was this lighthearted. I can relate.

She's still giggling once we get on the elevator, practically buzzing with excited energy the entire way down to the lobby. We're going out for pancakes. Nothing special. But for some reason, it is to her.

What am I talking about, for some reason? I know enough about her now to understand this is a big deal because she probably doesn't have the money to go out on a whim. I doubt a job stocking shelves and bagging groceries pays a lot, and she'd make up the difference with her tips from the bar. Going out to breakfast might be a treat for her.

Otherwise, she's just excited because she's going out with me, and I can't fathom that.

Nat was kind enough—or pushy enough—to alert one of our drivers to be ready. He's waiting for us in the garage, holding open the back door of the SUV. "Pancake Castle," I murmur to him while Teagan climbs into the vehicle and leaves me staring at her lean legs. *Easy, now.* I climb in behind her and deliberately keep my attention away from her body.

This situation is complicated enough without me adding an embarrassing erection.

“Do you really spend all your time in the hotel?” She turns to me, eyes glowing with curiosity. “Be real.”

“Not all of my time, per se. But a lot of it, yes.”

“Why is it so strange for you to get out and do something different?”

It’s a normal question, even if it does raise my hackles. There’s a line between curiosity and being nosy. “Let me guess,” she fills in when I don’t answer immediately. “You’re a workaholic. You’re afraid everything will fall apart without you.”

She’s not wrong. “Are you trying to add *control freak* to my list of qualities?”

“I don’t have to try,” she teases with a playful grin. It should irk the hell out of me, but instead, I have to fight off a grin of my own.

“Touché.” I chose the Pancake Castle because it isn’t far from the hotel, and we come to a stop in front of the restaurant that can only be described as whimsical... and that’s if I’m feeling generous. There’s a big sign out front with a huge stack of pancakes dripping with butter and syrup beneath a rendering of a medieval castle. Flanking either side of the double doors leading into the restaurant stands a pair of what I guess are supposed to be guards in metal breastplates and helmets. I can only imagine how many people have taken their picture standing with the plaster sentries.

“Relax.” I don’t realize I’m clenching my jaw so tightly until I hear Teagan’s whispered advice. “It’s just pancakes. And even though it’s not like your fancy hotel restaurant, I’ve always heard they’re pretty good.”

They’re also pretty busy, though there’s plenty of seating left for us. Once we make it to the host stand, a young girl wearing a plastic crown takes us to a booth near the window overlooking the street. I hesitate rather than sliding in the way Teagan does without thinking. “Could we get something closer

to the back corner?” There’s an empty booth back there, and the girl shrugs like she couldn’t care less before leading us in that direction. I would rather see the entire room if possible.

Soon, we settle in with our laminated menus, and it’s another minute until the girl comes back with a carafe of coffee and two mugs. “Yes, please,” Teagan murmurs, reaching for the coffee like it’s a lifeline and pouring a cup for both of us. I notice she didn’t ask if she should, and something about her casual thoughtfulness loosens the worst of the tightness in my chest. This is fine. We will be fine. It’s just breakfast.

“This lumberjack breakfast looks pretty good.”

I scan the menu until I find the dish she’s talking about. “You’re kidding me.”

“What?”

“Three pancakes, three eggs, ham, sausage, bacon, and home fries? How many people are you planning on feeding?”

“Trust me. I can put it away.”

“Where do you put it?” She has to lower her coffee and cover her mouth with her other hand to stifle her giggles. I’m not really joking, though. The girl looks like she eats air and not much else, and I’ve carried her. I can testify to how light she is.

“Maybe I’ll just stick to pancakes and a side of bacon.”

“I was going to say. Three different types of pork in the same dish? I like pork as much as the next guy, but that seems a little extreme.”

“Hey, go big or go home, right?” The impish grin she wears unlocks another grin from me. What is it about her that makes it so easy to smile? Even surrounded by strangers whose mingled conversations make me want to cover my ears with both hands, I can smile.

And when our food arrives—surprisingly fast for such a busy place—I laugh at her wide-eyed reaction. Pancakes? More like slipcovers. They’re so big the edges hang off the

plate. “I might have made a mistake,” she admits, and that’s before the server plops down the plate of bacon. I’m fairly sure they cooked up half the pig.

“What was that about going big or going home?”

She rolls her eyes. “At this rate, you’ll have to roll me home because I won’t fit into the car after eating this.” That doesn’t stop her from digging in, though, and I do the same with my omelet. When she offers me some of her pancakes, I feel like I have to say yes, if only to help her plow through them. They’re surprisingly light and flavorful, but it’s her reaction as she enjoys one bite after another that’s really enjoyable.

I can almost believe this is something I could do regularly—that we could do since her presence is what makes it bearable. Better than bearable. Fun, or as close to fun as I have experienced in way too long.

Her sudden scowl comes as a surprise, at least until she reaches into her purse and pulls out her phone. “I have to take this. It’s my brother.”

Immediately, I’m on guard, but I keep a neutral expression as she answers the call. “Hello? Wait a second. Slow down.”

This guy. It’s always something with him.

Our eyes meet, and the fear in hers snaps me back into reality. This is not a fun little outing. I don’t take fun little outings. I solve problems. I get shit done. When I gesture for the phone, she hands it over willingly. “There’s trouble,” she whispers to me.

When isn’t there? “Jase? What’s happening?”

“I don’t know, man. Something’s all wrong.” He sounds vague, overly excited, but unfocused.

“How? What’s happening?”

“I don’t know. I just woke up, and it feels like... like somebody’s been here. Everything’s off. There’s a weird feeling.”

Whatever is happening, it's real for him. That alone is enough to make me take him seriously. That, and the fact that he didn't think to ask who he's speaking to. He's too worked up. "Listen to me. I have guys outside your house as we speak. Stay put. I'll have them take care of it. All right? Just stay where you are."

I end the call and hand the phone over before taking a wad of bills from my wallet and leaving them on the table. "You're going to go back to the hotel. I'll handle this."

"Like hell!" A few nearby patrons turn and glare, but she ignores them. She's much too concerned with glaring at me.

"This is not up for discussion, understood? That's where you'll be safest."

She shakes her head hard like an obstinate child. "I'm going to the house. No way am I going to sit back and not know what's happening."

"I'll fill you in."

"Right." She shimmies out of the booth in an instant. "I'll get there on my own."

"You've got to be kidding me." I follow her close but hold my tongue until we're outside. Sure enough, she's got her phone in her hand, and she's pulling up the Uber app.

"Would you stop being reckless for once?"

"It's reckless to care what happens to my brother?" She turns her back on me, searching for a ride.

What are my choices here? There isn't one. "Fine. But you're going to listen to what I say." Her head bobs up and down, and I could kick myself, I really could. She's already bullied me into coming along. Who am I kidding, pretending she'll listen once we get there? I would rather have her with me than in some stranger's car, that's for sure. Who's to say they would get her there in one piece?

While on the way, I dial one of the guys guarding Jase. "We didn't get an alert," he reports. "Nobody's been in or out."

We were just saying how quiet everything seems. The street's empty."

"Stay where you are. It could be nothing." And sending my men to the door with their guns drawn, ready to search the place, might take a paranoid kid and turn him into a feral animal trying to survive. You can never tell how someone's going to react in that type of situation. It's safer for them to stay where they are until we arrive.

It doesn't take long. And I'm not surprised when Teagan bolts from the SUV within moments of it coming to a stop. "I'm just going to go in and check on him," she insists like the headstrong pain in the ass she can be. I wait with the guys at the curb, the three of us watching closely.

She doesn't get halfway to the front door when an explosion rips through the quiet house and knocks her to the ground.

TEAGAN



AT FIRST, THERE'S NOTHING BUT A RINGING IN MY EARS. A few seconds later, I can hear people yelling, but it only sounds like background noise. My body is numb, yet somehow, I manage to push myself up on all fours. I look around disoriented, trying to make sense of what just happened.

One minute, I was in front of my brother's house, ready to knock, and the next, I'm on the ground. I barely had enough time to turn away from the blast. Now there's glass everywhere; the windows are shattered across the front yard. Some of the frames are even blown out.

Turning my head toward the road, I see Mason running in my direction. The concern on his face is apparent, and it makes me feel even more confused. As soon as he is by my side, he hooks his hands under my arms, pulling me gently to my feet.

"Are you okay? Take it easy," he orders while wrapping one of his arms around me and tucking me to his side.

I looked down at myself and find my knees scuffed up and red. My palms are roughed up as well, blood and dirt smeared over my skin. I don't feel pain, but my hands tremble, and my legs feel like they're about to give out. Leaning against Mason, I let him hold some of my weight.

Two men rush past us toward the house. I catch sight of something shiny in their hands. The sun reflecting on something metal. Guns. They have guns.

One of them knocks on my brother's front door, which seems to be one of the few things still intact. "Jase," I croak, trying to push Mason off, but he holds me tight. His arm is wrapped around my torso like an iron bar.

"Don't worry, they know what they're doing. We need to get out of here."

"What? No. I need to make sure Jase is okay. They have guns." I point my trembling fingers toward the men at the door.

"They're with me. Don't worry, they're going to make sure your brother is unharmed." Mason starts to pull me away. I'm too weak to fight him, but my gaze remains glued to the house, hoping my brother will walk out any minute now.

As if my silent prayers were heard, the door flies open, and Jase appears out of a cloud of smoke. He's hunched over, coughing like he can't breathe. The two men grab either side of him, helping him to get away from the house. The knot of fear inside my chest loosens up.

Police sirens approach, and I'm not sure if that's a good or bad thing. It must be the latter since Mason picks up speed as he ushers me toward a car across the street. Jase and the other two men follow us.

Neighbors have come out of their houses, scanning the area. One of them steps in front of us. "Whoa, where do you think you're going? You should wait until the police arrive."

Before I can even think about a response, a police car appears at the end of the road, heading straight toward us.

Glancing up at Mason, I expect him to look as nervous about the cops as I am. If he is, his face doesn't give it away. "Don't worry, I just have to talk to them for a minute, and then we can leave."

The more time I spend with Mason, the more confusing it gets. I always feel like I'm missing something, and today is no different. The police car parks a few feet away from us. More sirens approach in the background as two police officers get out of their cruiser.

“What’s going on here? Is there anyone else inside the house?” one of them asks.

“No one else is inside the house, and we were about to leave,” Mason explains calmly.

“They were out here when something exploded in the house,” the neighbor accuses, “and he was inside.” He points at Jase. “He lives there. They must know what happened.”

“I’m going to need you all to stay here until I take your statement,” the cop says firmly while inspecting my scuffed-up knees from afar. “We’ll have an ambulance come and get you checked out as well.”

“I’m fine, just some scrapes.” Nervous anxiety swirls around my gut. Mason doesn’t seem fazed the least bit.

“Officer, I can assure you we didn’t see anything. My girlfriend and I were just going to grab a cup of coffee at the downtown café.”

Girlfriend? Coffee? What the fuck is going on?

The cop straightens up before looking at his colleague, then toward the neighbor, and back at the other cop. Clearly, they’re having a silent conversation I can’t keep up with.

“Sir, could you please step to the side with me so I can take your statement,” the second cop addresses the neighbor before ushering him away and out of earshot.

Once it’s just the three of us, the first police officer starts asking questions again. “Downtown café? You don’t happen to have a number for them.”

“I sure do.” Mason grabs his wallet from his pants. He flips it open and pulls out what looks like a business card. He hands it to the cop.

“Hang tight. I’ll make a quick call.”

He steps away for a few minutes, making a call on his cell phone. When he returns, his demeanor has changed from suspicious to somehow friendly. “Sorry about that. You’re good to go.”

Good to go? How hard did I hit my head?

“I’ll have one of my guys stay behind to help,” Mason explains. The cop thanks him and dismisses us.

A weird feeling of déjà vu overcomes me. This is just like when Griffin pulled us over. Although these are real cops, and Griffin isn’t, is he? Dammit. There’s so much I still don’t know, and it’s driving me insane. I have to know more. As soon as I get the chance, I’m demanding answers from Mason. I’m not letting him give me the runaround any longer.

Right now, on the other hand, all I care about is getting out of here. Mason opens the back door of the black SUV we came in and helps me inside. My brother gets in on the other side of the car while the two men get in the front.

“Where to, boss?” the guy in the driver’s seat asks.

“Back to the hotel,” Mason orders, with an angry bite in his voice. He slides in beside me and slams the door shut.

I have no idea what’s got him so angry all of a sudden, but before I deal with him, I turn to my brother. “Are you okay? What happened?”

“I’m not sure to be honest. After we hung up the phone, I didn’t hear anything else. I figured I had just freaked myself out. I was watching TV when the explosion came out of nowhere.”

“How the fuck did you guys miss this?” Mason yells at the guys up front.

Oh. That’s why he’s pissed.

“Sir, there is no excuse for what happened; I’m not sure how they got past our security, but I take full responsibility,” the guy in the passenger seat explains.

“We’ll talk more about this later. Right now, send a message to medical, tell them I have a patient coming in with smoke inhalation.”

“Yes, sir,” both of the guys say at the same time, reminding me of the military. Now that I think of it, they both have military haircuts as well—shaved to the skin except at the top.

“You should see a doctor as well.” Mason’s fingers gently circle my wrist. He lifts my hand closer to his face to inspect my skin.

“It’s not deep, and it doesn’t even hurt. I don’t need to see anyone for this.”

Mason frowns, placing my hand in my lap carefully. “We’ll see.”

I’m too overwhelmed to fight him on it at the moment. So I take a deep breath and sink into the leather seat to let my body calm down for a minute. My heart continues to race, and the fear I felt for my brother’s life still lingers.

The car falls into an uncomfortable silence. Luckily, the hotel isn’t that far away. The driver pulls the car into the same alley leading to the underground garage Griffin used.

When I glance at Jase, confusion and worry are written all over his face. I reach for his hand and give it a reassuring squeeze. One corner of his mouth lifts up into a crooked smile, but it doesn’t reach his sad eyes.

“Take him to medical and send me updates as soon as you get them. I’ll take Teagan upstairs to get her cleaned up,” Mason orders as we pull into a parking spot close to the elevator.

“Yes, sir.”

Both guys and Mason open their doors to climb out of the car. Mason turns back and holds his hand out to me while the guy from the front opens my brother’s door and helps him out.

“I thought Jase was supposed to go see the doctor?”

“He is. We have a doctor on staff here,” Mason explains.

Of course, they do. Why wouldn’t this hotel have a medical department and doctors on staff? I’m adding this to my long list of things that don’t add up as I follow Mason into the elevator.

My brother leans against the wall for support.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

Jase nods. “Just a bit shook up, and tired. I’ll be fine. I promise.”

“You better be,” I warn, forcing a smile. “I’ll check on you later.”

My brother exits on the first floor and the two men follow him, leaving Mason and myself alone in the small space.

“I’ll let you clean me up, but you owe me some answers.”

“I think we should wait until tomorrow.”

“Then I’m going back down to be with my brother. The only reason I came up here now is so you can explain. I’m done playing this game in the dark.”

Mason sighs heavily. He doesn’t answer right away, but I can see his resolve crumbling. He knows he’s out of time. He has to tell me something, or I’m no longer cooperating.

“We’ll talk while I’m cleaning you up,” he offers, just as the elevator door opens into his apartment.

“All right, let’s do this.” I waltz into his apartment as if I know where to go, only to come to a sudden halt in the living room.

“Go sit on my bed. I’ll get the first-aid kit,” he says before I have a chance to ask.

I do as he says, climbing on his bed that’s now made. We didn’t leave it this way, which means Mason must have daily housekeeping coming through. I can definitely get used to that.

He disappears into the bathroom, only to appear a few moments later, carrying a white box with a Red Cross painted over the top. Putting the box next to me on the mattress, he opens it and takes out some alcohol wipes and a tube of Neosporin. He goes down on one knee to inspect my scratched-up legs, and I can’t help smiling about him kneeling in front of me like he is about to propose.

Holding out my hand, as if he is about to put a ring on it, I blurt out with fake excitement, “I do.”

Mason looks up at me, his eyes wide, and his mouth hanging open. Apparently, he doesn't get the humor in it.

"It's a joke, Mr. Grumpy Pants."

"I am not in a joking mood," he murmurs while unwrapping the alcohol wipe.

"Are you ever?" I tease, not expecting him to answer at all.

His warm hand wraps around the back of my leg, holding it still while he gently wipes the dirt off the scratches. I hiss at the burning sting when he swipes over the open skin.

"I haven't been in a long time," he answers. His voice somber, with a hint of longing. Almost as if he's missing that part of himself.

"What changed?"

"Life... death. A lot of death, actually." He moves to my other leg, repeating everything without looking at me once. "I joined the Navy when I was eighteen and became a SEAL when I was nineteen. My brother was a SEAL, and like every younger brother, I wanted to be just like him."

"I didn't know you had a brother." As soon as the words leave my lips, I regret them because I realize he only talked about him after mentioning death.

"Jonathan and I served together in the same unit. We thought we were indestructible. Turns out we weren't."

"I'm sorry."

"My parents died in a car crash thirteen months after my brother passed." The sadness in his voice carries through the room. I can feel it as my own. "Sometimes I think that was a blessing in disguise, at least for my mother. Jonathan's death was hard on all of us, but my mom... she was never the same. Heartbroken and so lost."

I know I can't say anything to make him feel better. The pain that loved ones leave when they die is unfixable; they leave a hole that nothing and no one will ever fill. It never goes away, no matter how many years pass. All I can do is be

here with him, letting him know he doesn't have to go through this alone.

"It's not fair that life goes on, but it does, and we have to keep living it. Not without them, but *for* them."

His fingers stop moving, hovering inches from my skin, but I can still feel him. The heat radiating off his body, the electricity between us like an invisible tether connecting us.

For a long moment, we just stare at each other. Saying so many things without saying anything at all.

A knock on the door breaks the silence that has settled over us. Mason clears his throat. "Yeah."

The door opens just enough for Natalie to stick her head through. "Mason, do you have a minute to talk? It's important."

"Of course. I'll be right there."

Natalie closes the door quietly behind her, and Mason makes quick work of finishing up cleaning my knees. "I'll be right back." He gets up and leaves the room without looking back.

Whatever weird moment just happened between us is over, though I don't want it to be. That connection we felt was special, and if he thinks I'll forget about it, he is mistaken.

MASON



WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH ME? I DON'T LEAVE THE hotel. I don't trust anyone. And I definitely do not talk about my brother. Fuck, I don't even allow myself to think about him. Yet here I am, opening up to the tiny woman in my bedroom. She came into my life like a storm, stirring up things I've been trying to bury for years, ripping out secrets like a tornado rips out trees.

I've got to get my head on straight and remember that this hotel comes first. This is my life, and there is no room for error.

Walking through my apartment, I pay close attention to any sounds behind me. I wouldn't put it past Teagan to follow even now. When I don't hear anything, I open the hidden panel on the wall and place my hand on the biometric scanner. The console turns green, unlocking the thick titanium door and sliding it open.

I step inside the panic room that doubles as a secure command center with a high-tech security and defense system for the hotel. My team waits, sitting around the conference table in the center of the space.

Natalie, Tank, Griffin, and... "Dallas?"

Shit.

I almost didn't recognize him with his hair gone all the way gray now, and his face covered in a beard. Only his icy stare remains the same. A stare that could kill.

"Happy to see you too," he jokes.

I'm actually happy to see him. Dallas is not only one of my best friends, he's also been my mentor for many years. There are not many people I trust. As a matter of fact, most of them sit in this room right now.

"I just didn't expect you, old man." I take a seat at the head of the table.

"Hey, gray is the new black." He runs a hand through his hair. "I've been called gray fox more than once now."

"I'm sure you have. Is that why you came here, to show off your new hairdo?"

"No, old friend, I came here to warn you." The lightheartedness in his voice is gone.

Of course, he did.

Leaning back in my chair, I get ready for the lecture about letting civilians into the hotel, letting my guard down, and risking this whole operation for some girl and her brother.

Surprisingly, that lecture never comes.

"The people who hired those lowlife criminals to plant a bug on you are more dangerous than you think. This isn't just a random operative pissed he didn't get into the hotel."

Alarm bells go off in my head, and I straighten up. "What do you know?"

"I've filled him in on everything we've dug up so far," Natalie cuts in. "I sent everything to him yesterday, and he's been looking into it."

Dallas leans forward, propping one of his elbows on the table. "The more I look, the deeper it goes. Even with all our tools, including the FBI and CIA database, I haven't been able to pinpoint who's behind this."

"That's..." I struggle to process what he's telling me.

"A huge pile of dog shit? Yeah, I thought so too. That's why I came. You need all hands on deck."

"Thank you for coming so quickly. Sorry to drag you out of retirement."

“Nah.” He waves me off like it’s no big deal. “Retirement is overrated.”

“All right, what’s the game plan?” Griffin asks.

“If we can’t find anything out using the system, we have to go old-school on those fools.” Dallas seems way too excited about this. “Whoever it is, they know how to stay off the grid, not to leave a paper trail or come up in any database. The phone numbers we do have are all untraceable.”

“We have to set a trap,” Griffin suggests.

“That’s exactly what I was thinking,” Dallas agrees. “We know they’re trying to get to you, and they are not above using civilians to do so. They don’t care about casualties either. We use that knowledge to our advantage. Set a trap and get those assholes.”

We all agree and start brainstorming immediately. Once we have a couple of plans set, Natalie, Tank, and Griffin clear out, giving me a minute alone with Dallas.

“I heard you left the hotel earlier.”

“Yes, it ended in an explosion and a run-in with the cops.”

“Sounds like my kind of party.”

We both chuckle. There was a time when explosions and life-and-death situations were the norm. Dallas always did enjoy working more than me.

We get up from our chairs, and I slap my hand on Dallas’s shoulder. “Glad to have you back.”

“Glad to be home. Don’t worry about those fuckers. We’ll get them,” he promises. “Now, tell me about the girl in your room.”

“Her name is Teagan.” Dallas’s eyebrows raise at the defensive tone in my voice.” I clear my throat. “And there’s not much to tell. I’m just letting her stay here until this is resolved.”

“All right, buddy, whatever you say.” He grins at me before walking out of the room.

I follow him into the hallway, giving him a final goodbye as he steps into the elevator.

After he's gone, I head straight back to my bedroom. I open the door, and my gaze falls onto the now-empty bed. The only proof she was here is the open first-aid kit on the mattress.

Fucking Christ.

Did she really sneak out again?

I'm about to turn around and search the apartment when I see the bathroom door opening in my peripheral vision.

Teagan comes into view, wearing nothing but a fluffy white towel wrapped around her body. Her hair is down, blond locks cascading around her bare shoulders.

Innocently, she leans against the doorframe. "I was just about to take a shower." She sinks her teeth into her bottom lip like she's nervous about saying the next part. "I've noticed there are two showerheads. Would you care to join me?"

My mouth goes so dry I'm scared to answer. I can't get the words past my throat, but my feet carry me across the room until I'm only inches away from her. Lifting my arm, I brush her hair off her shoulder, drawing a shiver out of her.

Teagan's chest rises and falls quickly. I'm sure her heart races as fast as mine. She tilts her head up, and our eyes connect. There is a fire in her baby blues I haven't seen before. Lifting my hand higher, I cup her face, running my thumb along her jaw.

Closing her eyes, she leans her face into my hand, and I take that moment to press my lips against hers. Teagan places her hands on my chest, and for a split second, I think she is going to push me away. Instead, her slender arms snake around my neck to pull me closer to deepen the kiss.

Her lips part slightly, and I mirror the motion, letting our tongues meet. She tastes like mint and something forbidden. If it's a sin to kiss her, then call me a sinner.

She moans into my mouth and pulls me even closer, pushing her breasts flush against my chest. I wrap my arms around her back before letting my hands run down the length of the towel until I feel her smooth skin against my fingers.

Holding on to her firm globes, I lift her. She squeals but wraps her legs around my torso. I groan when her hot center presses against my groin. Knowing not much is between us now has my dick pressing against my slacks, begging to be freed.

I carry Teagan into the bathroom and set her on the sink before breaking the kiss to let us both come up for air.

She smiles at me sweetly. “I’m taking that as a yes.”

“I’ve never had a chance to take advantage of the dual showerhead,” I admit as Teagan starts unbuttoning my shirt.

Her eyes sparkle with mischief. “Are you saying I’m the first woman you’ve brought to your room, Mr. Grumpy Pants?”

“I’m saying you’re the first one I’ve invited to my shower... but also yes, you are the first woman I’ve brought up here, Ms. Sunshine.”

“I like that.” Once she has unfastened the last button, she slowly slides my shirt off my shoulders. Her gaze falls to my chest, where she inspects my many tattoos. She runs her finger over one, tracing the black lines with her fingertip.

“You can map those out another time.”

“Very confident, assuming there is going to be another time.”

“Well, I know what my shower has to offer,” I joke, and Teagan makes quick work of unzipping my slacks. I’m so hard, my cock points straight at her through my boxers.

We are both breathing heavily now. My lips find hers once more, and I pull my pants and underwear down my legs. As I step out of my shoes, I feel her undoing her towel, letting it fall onto the counter. Her bare tits feel amazing against my skin.

Once we're both naked, I pick her up and carry her to the shower stall, where I turn on the water between kisses.

While waiting for the water to turn hot, Teagan dips her head into the crook of my neck, peppering open-mouthed kisses down my shoulders. It feels so damn good I almost don't want to step into the spray. The only reason I move is the thought of holding Teagan against the wall while sinking deep into her.

She gasps when I position us under the now hot water, then shudders when I press her back against the cool tiled wall. Lining up my cock, I press the tip to her soaked pussy. Her moan echoes through my bathroom as I slowly sink into her waiting cunt.

Her nails rake across my shoulders, and I bury my face into her thick hair, enjoying every sensation.

Teagan holds me like her life depends on it while I slowly push in and out of her. We're both moaning, and her legs tighten around me as her heels dig into my ass.

Fuck, I didn't even put a condom on. Shock fills my veins, but I can't stop pumping into her warm depth. "Are you on birth control?" I ask between thrusts.

"Yes! Please don't stop."

I don't think I could even if I wanted to. She is heaven. Warm and soft, perfectly fitting to my body. I don't remember the last time I had sex, but I do remember I've never felt like this before. I don't want this to end.

I fuck her slow and steady, drawing out my release as long as possible. Her hands roam my body, every touch igniting me over and over again.

Our tongues dance in a passionate kiss, as her pussy tightens around my cock. She moans into my mouth when she comes, digging her sharp nails into my skin.

Something about that bite of pain sets my own orgasm off. My balls tighten, and the tingling in my spine spreads through my veins. For a moment, I don't know where my body ends, and hers begins.

I wish we could stay like this forever, but before I know it, we're both coming down from our high.

The hot water beats on my back as I set Teagan down on her feet gently. Her legs shake, and her hands grip my arms like she's scared of falling over. I keep my grip around her waist, holding her steady.

"Wow," she breathes heavily. "That was... something."

I can't help but chuckle. "That it was."

TEAGAN



THERE'S NOTHING LIKE WAKING UP IN THE MORNING AFTER A hot night and realizing I'm alone.

What should I expect? A cuddle session? I should know better. Mason is not the kind of guy who stays in one place for very long. And he doesn't strike me as a big cuddler, anyway.

Still... he could have left a note. Something to let me know where he will be and what I should do. I don't think that's too much to ask. It's common courtesy when you think about it. I feel a little bit cheap and disregarded as I reach over and touch his pillow, finding it cool, like he got up a while ago. Either he's deadly silent when he puts his mind to it or I was seriously out cold.

I guess after the night we had, it makes sense. My face warms, and I giggle softly before I can help myself.

But what happens now? That's the question taking up most of my mental bandwidth as I get out of bed and wonder what I'm supposed to do. What does he want from me?

I'm not going to find out by hanging around the bedroom. He left his shirt hanging over the back of a chair near the bed, and I grab it, holding it to my nose to inhale his sexy, musky cologne. I wonder what he uses. Whatever it is, it has the power to curl my toes—I will always associate it with memories of him, us.

What a shame I couldn't afford it. The idea makes me smirk at myself as I slide my arms through the sleeves. It would be nice to buy a little bottle to have as a memory, but I

get the feeling anything he could afford would require me to donate at least one bodily organ. Maybe more.

The shirt looks more like a sail on me, so I roll up the sleeves until my hands aren't covered anymore and head out of the room. He's probably working. I'm surprised he takes time to sleep. Somebody really should look after him. And I want to, strangely enough. I mean, he's taken care of Jase and me. Who takes care of him?

I'm still pondering that when footsteps ring out down the hall. I'm not exactly unaware of how cute I probably look wearing nothing but his shirt, which I only buttoned halfway up my chest. I turn in that direction, ready to surprise him.

But I'm the one who ends up surprised when I find Mason isn't alone. He's walking alongside yet another big, well-built man. Not nearly as huge as Tank but nobody I'd want to get into a fight with.

Where does he find these guys? Does he hang around the gym and wait for them to show up?

Mason stops short, blinking rapidly, while the man with him offers a tiny smile. I'm not smiling. I'm sizzling with humiliation as I grab the open part of the shirt and clutch it tightly closed. "I didn't know anybody else was here. I'm sorry."

Mason's voice is a little strained when he gestures toward me with one hand. "Dallas, this is Teagan."

I wish I could go back in time and stay in bed. "Did you ever have one of those dreams where you show up to school with only half your clothes on?"

Dallas—older, with a gray hair and fine lines that show up around his eyes when he smiles—laughs gently. "Now that you mention it, I have. Terrible dreams, aren't they?"

"Especially when you find out it's not a dream."

"Not to worry. I was on my way out, anyway." His lips twitch like he's trying to hold back a smile before he heads for the front door, followed by Mason. They murmur their

goodbyes before Dallas leaves, and Mason closes the door behind him.

I can hardly wait until it clicks shut before everything pours out. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t even know you were still in the apartment, much less—”

Mason holds up a hand and shakes his head. “It’s all right. You’re not in any trouble or anything.” His gaze rakes over my body, and his nostrils flare as he takes a deep breath. “I would never scold you for looking like that.”

I’ve barely recovered from the full-body tingle of his approval before he heads for the kitchen. “You hungry?”

“Starved.”

“Since our pancake breakfast was cut short, let me make it up to you.”

It wasn’t his fault that the meal ended prematurely, but considering he’s pulling a griddle pan from beneath the granite counter, I’m not going to correct him. Not when it will be much more fun to watch him cook. Nothing is sexier than a man who knows his way around the kitchen. I will die on this hill.

First, though, he prepares a pot of coffee. “I hope you don’t mind plain caffeine. I enjoy espresso drinks, but it’s too fussy to make them every day.”

“I don’t mind.” Really, I just like being with him. I’m not brave enough to say that, though, so I settle for perching on a stool at the island and watching him get things together. “Can I help?”

“No, I’ve got it under control.” And he does. He moves around the sparkling kitchen with more grace and fluidity than I would’ve expected. He’s not fumbling around, muttering to himself, wondering where the ingredients are. He knows what he’s doing, and in no time, he’s mixed a batter, which he begins spooning onto a sizzling skillet.

“Can I ask you something?”

His shoulders hunch a little. I can't see his face, but that alone tells me he's on guard. "You're pretty good at asking questions."

"Okay. Let me rephrase. If I ask a question, will you answer?"

"Depends on the question."

This guy. Always has to make things more difficult. "Well, I've been wondering ever since I first came here what this place is all about."

He pauses in the act of flipping a pancake. "I know. And you've pestered me about it."

Pestered? I'll let that pass. "I'm curious, that's all. Can you blame me? This is unlike any hotel I've ever seen."

"You stay in a lot of hotels?"

"Stop avoiding the question, please. What's it really about? I know this isn't a normal place."

His shoulders rise and fall in a deep breath before he looks at me over his shoulder. He doesn't seem too irritated, so I'll take it as a good sign. "What if you end up finding out something you can't unlearn, and it gets you in trouble?"

"Gee. I have no idea what it's like to be in trouble."

"You're not going to let this go, are you?"

"I wasn't planning on it."

Another deep breath. "The people who stay here aren't typical guests." That, I pretty much figured out by myself. "When they stay here, it's because they need protection."

"What kind of protection?"

He hesitates for a second, then raises an eyebrow. "Government protection." He says it like it's a challenge. "What do you think about that? Glad you asked?"

Goose bumps pebble my arms. I had a feeling it had to be something like that, but hearing it out loud is another story. "Like witness protection type stuff?"

“Sure. If it makes you feel better to put a label on it, be my guest.” He turns away from the stove with a small stack of pancakes on a plate, which he places in front of me. He then plates his own and sits down on the other side of the island. There’s not much space between us, but right now, it might as well be miles. He runs a hotel to protect people. This is next level.

“It’s more than that?”

“Teagan.” His voice is heavy with what sounds like disapproval. “You’re not a stupid girl. You have to know I can’t go into detail.”

“Why not?”

“Because knowing too much could put you in danger.”

And I believe him. That’s the thing. He’s not making it up to get me off his back. It feels like I should change the subject, so I point at the pancakes with my fork before swallowing a mouthful. “These are delicious. Better than Pancake Castle.”

“I don’t know. They were pretty good.” But he looks pleased. It’s funny, being able to please him with such a simple compliment. He’s a mystery I can’t help wanting to solve.

This is nice. Sitting together, eating breakfast, like two ordinary people. So domesticated. I can almost forget the strange circumstances surrounding us. And that we’re sitting in a hotel for people who need protection. I wonder why they do. I need to deal with my curiosity problem because I’m sure he won’t tell me. If I beg, he’ll only clam up tighter.

He scowls when his phone rings. “It’s always something.” Why do I get the feeling he likes it, though? I’m not that naive. He holds the phone to his ear and listens, and while I can’t hear what the other person says, I get the feeling when his jaw ticks that it’s not good news.

“I’ll be down. Keep her quiet if you can—and in one place.”

“What’s the matter?”

“That friend of yours.” He’s already on his way to the bedroom while the rest of his pancakes sit on his plate. “She’s down there, raising hell in the lobby. Demanding to see me.”

“Oh, Ainsley...” There goes the rest of my meal, though I’ve managed to eat most of it already. Pancakes have always been a weakness. Especially when they’re as delicious as these are. I quickly pull on the borrowed clothes Natalie gave me a couple of days ago while Mason gets dressed in slacks and a button-down, and we’re on our way downstairs in record time. Something tells me this is not the kind of thing he’ll be able to handle on his own.

After all, she might be here to see him, but it’s me she’s worried about. “I’m sorry. She goes over the top all the time.” His clenched jaw is all the answer I get.

I can hear her before the elevator doors even open. “I’m telling you here and now that I will not leave this building until I get answers from that manager guy! You can’t hold my friend hostage! I know she’s here. She would never just leave without letting me know and this place is weird as fuck. Who do you think you are? Do I need to call the authorities? I need to speak to the manager now!”

I could shrivel up and die from embarrassment as she waves her arms around. “Ainsley!”

When she hears me coming, she stops ranting like I flipped a switch and turned her off. “Thank God!” She throws her hands into the air before blowing out a dramatic sigh. “Is that what it takes to get answers around here?”

Mason does not seem amused, and I can’t blame him. “As you can see, your friend is fine,” he murmurs. “So all of this was for nothing.”

Her mouth falls open, and she sucks in a breath like she’s ready to tell him off, so I scramble to cut her off before she makes things even worse. “Relax, okay? I’m fine. You don’t have anything to worry about.”

“You know what? I’ll be the judge of that.”

I have to take her by the arm when it looks like she's about to get in his face. "How about you listen and trust me, instead?"

"You should listen to her," Mason advises, and I register the warning under his words. She is pushing things a little too far. And now that I know the sort of secrets kept inside these walls, I can understand why he would be less than thrilled over this scene.

"I mean it." I hold her by the shoulders as gently as I can and make it a point to look her in the eye so she understands I'm serious. "I am fine. There is nothing to worry about. Mason's keeping an eye on Jase, too. He's not the bad guy," I add in a whisper. All I can do is hope she believes me.

And she seems to. The tension in her shoulders loosens before she sighs. "What do you expect me to do? You fall off the face of the earth, and you don't get in contact with me."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to worry you, I swear."

"And now, it would be better if you left." Mason is not exactly rude, but he's not cordial, either. After all, he's the manager around here. He doesn't have to be cordial.

"You really should go," I whisper. "And remember. If anybody's looking for me because they want to get to Jase, they might follow you to see if you'll lead them to me. Right?"

"I didn't think about it that way." Her worried gaze moves from me to Mason and back again. "Just, you know, keep me informed. Okay?"

"I will. I promise." I even walk her to the door but stay inside as she leaves. She is too much. Now, I'm too embarrassed to look Mason in the eye. But when I finally get up the courage to turn toward him, he doesn't seem angry. Concerned, maybe.

"Don't even bother," he says with a sigh as we head back to the elevator. "You didn't make that happen."

"I guess I should make it a point to keep her posted."

“If that’s what happens when you don’t, I’ll remind you.” I’m surprised by how it seems to roll off his back—until I notice from the corner of my eye when he pulls out his phone and begins typing something.

I shouldn’t look. I know I shouldn’t. But I can’t help it.

He’s sending a message to Tank. It’s short and sweet.

Keep an eye on that Ainsley girl. Teagan’s roommate.

I can’t tell whether he thinks she’s a threat or that she might be threatened. When he tucks his phone away and looks at me, there isn’t a hint of what’s going on behind his captivating eyes.

MASON



IF EVER THERE WAS A PERFECT STORM OF COMPLETE AND UTTER bullshit, this situation would qualify.

She is a constant distraction. Not that it's entirely her fault. She lingers in my thoughts no matter how I try to distract myself by focusing on work. It's no use. She's always there, lingering on the edges, making me impatient and frustrated since I can't be with her. Because I want to be with her in the first place. It's unfortunate, but there's no pretending I don't have a weakness for her. Which is all the more reason for me to steer clear.

What a shame it's not that easy. Good thing I'm used to being busy and working for hours at a stretch, sometimes surviving with next to no sleep. I can wait her out. I can bury myself in work until the apartment is silent, and I know she's asleep in my bed.

I don't have to pretend to be fixated on work, either. Two days later, I'm still no closer to knowing who is threatening Jase's life and Teagan's by association. If I could put the puzzle together, this would all be over. I could go back to something resembling my normal routine. I crave it. I crave the consistency and the discipline. It's one of the reasons I became a SEAL. It's one thing to want to serve your country and all that, but it takes a certain breed of maniac to put themselves through what a SEAL does. But I loved it. I thrived in that environment. And now, everything is up in the air. I don't like that. It makes me irritable and jumpy, which is only worsened by the lack of sleep. Because it's not bad enough I

have to wait for Teagan to fall asleep. I also have to be out of bed before she wakes up.

I can't help but laugh at myself as I sit behind my desk, waiting her out. She's not the Big Bad Wolf. She's no threat. The way I'm bending over backward to avoid her, however, tells a different story. I don't dare tell Griffin about the new routine my life has settled into—he would laugh himself sick if he knew I was basically hiding from the girl.

What's the alternative? Facing her never-ending stream of questions? Questions I can't answer since I'm no closer than before to identifying the threat and neutralizing it. I'm supposed to be good at that, too, but all my training is failing me now.

It's past midnight by the time I slowly open the door, lifting it slightly to make sure the hinges don't squeal and give me away. *You pussy.* Yes, that's what I am, a pussy with his heart in his throat, hoping the defenseless girl I can't trust on her own is sleeping. The lights are out, and there's no glow coming from the bedroom door. I'm goddamn exhausted to the point where I'm craving sleep like a drug, and that's what propels me into the bedroom.

She's curled up in her customary ball, the blankets pulled up to her shoulder. I take one careful step after another, holding my breath like the coward I am when it comes to her while I tiptoe around, getting undressed, not bothering to find pajamas since I'm not in the habit of wearing them, anyway. No need to be modest. Once I'm down to my shorts, I slide into bed. There's an ocean between us, but that's how it has to be. I've already gotten too close to her. I can't risk getting closer.

“So that's how you do it.”

Son of a bitch.

I haven't even closed my eyes, and there she is, hurling what is probably supposed to be an accusation in a fully awake, clear voice. She was faking.

“How I do what?” I mutter, staring into the darkened room, my back to her.

“How you manage to come and go without me ever seeing you. Because you creep around like a thief or something.”

“I know how to be quiet when I need to. Sue me for caring whether or not you get your rest.”

“Oh, that is bullshit, and we both know it.” I hear her behind me, rolling over, punching the pillow while she’s at it. “You’re avoiding me. Why don’t we just call it what it is?”

“If it makes you feel better, go ahead. I’m avoiding you. Happy?”

“Is that what you’re actually doing?”

“You tell me, Teagan,” I murmur with a sigh. “It seems like you already have all the answers.”

“Sure. Be a dick. Turn this all around on me. You’re good at that.”

“It is much too late to have this discussion, so I suggest—”

“To hell with you and your suggestions. It’s too late to have this conversation? Well, then why don’t you try showing your face around here during normal hours? How about you don’t leave me on my own all day and all night with no explanation, no hint of what’s going on, no idea when this is going to end.”

And this is why it’s easier to avoid her. “What do you want me to say? I’ll say it if you’ll just let me sleep.”

“Don’t do that. Don’t act like you’re a victim. All I want is a clue. What is happening? And why can’t you talk to me? What happened with us?”

So that’s it. “I thought you were worried about your brother, and now you’re asking about us?”

“News flash: it’s possible to care about more than one thing at a time.”

“I’m learning so much from you.”

“Asshole.” She punctuates that with a pillow thrown at the back of my head.

“Congratulations.” I roll over, growling, and thrust the pillow at her. “You’ve got my attention. Like a toddler throwing a tantrum. Are you satisfied?”

My eyes have adjusted to the darkness, so I have the distinct displeasure of watching confusion wash over her face. She’s like a wounded puppy, searching in vain for understanding. “Why are you treating me like this?” The anger has drained from her voice, replaced by hurt. I think I would rather she be angry. I’d rather take a dozen pillows to the back of the head than one second of her pained expression.

“How am I treating you?” Because, in the end, I can’t afford to give in. I want to—and that alone is concerning. But I can’t. There’s too much riding on this. I need to stay clear-headed and get my priorities straight. She can’t be one of them.

“Like I’m nobody. Like it’s okay for me to just hang around here without anybody to talk to or anything to do. I’m going out of my skull—and so is Jase,” she quickly adds, like it’s not enough for her to complain about herself. He’s always on her mind.

“And somehow, that’s my problem?”

Her forehead creases, and she sputters for a second. “Don’t you care? I mean, if you want me to keep staying here, things will have to change. I can’t live like this. Why doesn’t it matter?”

“Let’s get something straight.” If anything, she’s making it easy on me. I’m too tired to be kind, so in a way, she chose the best time to push me like this. “You can leave at any time. Don’t act like you’re doing me any favors by being here, all right? If you’re so unhappy, go, and good luck.”

Her head snaps back like she’s been hit. “Is that how you really feel?” Like she can’t believe it... or doesn’t want to.

“And what if it is? So what? You don’t think this is fun for me, do you?”

“I... I mean...” She looks down at the pillow she’s holding and chews her lip. “I don’t know. I thought we... Like, we had a moment...”

“Are you sure about that?”

“We didn’t? Do you mean you really don’t... You know, feel anything for me at all?”

“Right now, I feel irritation. Resentment, too, since I need my sleep, and you’re getting in the way of that.”

“I’m not tired.”

I roll over, determined to shut her out because, dammit, it’s what needs to be done. She’s already got the wrong idea. “So go watch TV. Better yet, do it in your own suite.”

One endless second after another passes with no sound or movement from her side of the bed. I don’t have to look at her to see the pain I’ve caused, but this needs to be done. Things have already gone too far.

That doesn’t stop my heart from sinking when I feel her get out of bed. She doesn’t say a word. She only gets her things together, then leaves, and somehow, the way she quietly closes the door behind her is the worst part of this. There isn’t even a dramatic slam.

It’s better this way. I’m not sure how I could make it any clearer that she’s much safer here than she would be anywhere else. And I think she has a healthy fear of digging too deep into what goes on in the hotel to do anything stupid like exploring again.

Somehow, it gives me no peace. And even though I know I’d be unconscious by now if she hadn’t started a fight, sleep is miles away. My thoughts won’t stop churning. There’s no end to the guilt.

None of this is her fault. I’m the one who’s already let things go too far, and I’m punishing her for it.

And now, she’ll go to sleep alone, maybe crying and wondering what she did to make me change so suddenly. Two days ago, we were enjoying each other’s company. I was

making pancakes and even giving her a little insight into the hotel and what we do.

Now, I'm pushing her away with no explanation—being cruel on purpose.

“Fuck me.” With a groan, I rise to pull on a pair of sweats before leaving the apartment and heading downstairs to her suite. No way am I getting a minute's sleep until this is at least partly settled.

Either she was lying when she said she wasn't tired or she weighed her options and decided going to bed was the better bet. That's where I find her, and there's a trace of faint sniffing until I reach the bedroom door. She still has too much pride to let me hear her cry. It only makes me like her more.

I don't say a word at first. I settle for climbing into bed. Her body goes still, but she does nothing to stop me. It's obvious from her lack of reaction that she's waiting for me to start things off.

“I'm sorry.” The words hang in the air, sounding almost foreign. It doesn't come naturally, being the first to apologize. Can't say I like it much. “I was needlessly cruel. I don't want you getting the idea that's who I am normally.”

“That's what you care about?” Her voice is thick with the tears she won't let herself shed.

“I need you to understand something.” This is painful. I've witnessed torture that went better than this is going. Every word is like a burning coal getting lodged in my chest. “Do you think it's a joke that I'm here all the time, working, making this hotel my life? I guess from an outsider's perspective, it is funny in a way. But it's also how I've lived my life for a long time. This is all new for me. Having you here, knowing I need to keep you safe, but also trying to balance my responsibilities with that. And to answer your question, I don't know how much longer this will go on. That's not easy for me, either. The not knowing. I don't do well with the unknown. When it comes to you, that's all I have. Unanswered questions.”

“It’s not any easier for me, either.”

“I know. And it was wrong for me to act like it doesn’t matter that you’re as mixed up by all of this as I am.”

“We can agree on that.”

She rolls over to face me. I almost wish she wouldn’t. It’s hard enough talking to her back. I might as well be trying to navigate in the dark. I’m that clueless about how to handle her and what she does to me. “And there’s something else.” Because why not? I’m already making a damn fool of myself by spilling my guts. I might as well go all the way. “What you talked about before? A connection? Of course, I feel it, too.”

Her breath hitches, so I keep going before she can get all excited about my admission. “But it would never work. You’re a smart girl. I know you have to see that.”

“Don’t tell me what I have to see.”

Stubborn, determined little thing. “Then I’ll tell you what I need you to see. Think about everything you’ve seen since you’ve been here. Think about what you know. Now multiply that by, oh, a million. That’s how much you don’t know. We come from two different worlds. It would be a waste of time to even think there could be a future for us. And I’m not going to be cruel by encouraging what I know can only have an unhappy ending. That’s the way it has to be.”

Whether we like it or not. I won’t add that since it might give her unnecessary hope, like she can change my mind if she tries hard enough. Knowing her, it’s exactly what she’d do.

She’s quiet for a long time, wearing a pensive expression. I won’t bother to ask what she’s thinking. She’ll tell me.

And she does. “Can you at least stop avoiding me? It really is so boring and lonely.”

“I can do that. But you have to promise to let me do my work without asking questions or getting in the way. Can you do that?”

“I’m not a child.”

“That’s not an answer. Yes or no?”

“Yes, I won’t get in your way.”

“Thank you. Now, why don’t we both try to get some sleep?” There are still too many unspoken words and unanswered questions between us, but right now, it’s enough for us to settle in together. I roll onto my back, and she creeps over without a word, resting her head on my shoulder. I don’t have the heart to brush her off—and I don’t want to either.

TEAGAN



I'M THE FIRST ONE AWAKE FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE I started sharing a bed with Mason. The blackout curtains are drawn shut, only letting a few rays of sun peek through the sides. It's enough light to let me take a closer look at Mason's pristine body.

The hotel must have a fully stocked gym because each one of his muscles seems to be well-defined. He somehow kept up with the training regimen of the military. Or maybe he is just carved out of stone.

I take my time inspecting every tattoo I can see. Most of them seem random and meaningless, but a few between look different, more defined. For example, the medallion on his shoulder with an anchor or the lettering on his chest that reads **Death Before Dishonor**.

Just like the other day, I can't resist touching him. Using my index finger, I softly trace the outline of his tattoos. He did tell me to map them out another day. Well, today is another day.

Mason takes in a sharp breath, stretching his arms above his head as he blinks his eyes open.

"Morning," I greet when our eyes connect.

Feeling bold, I lift the blanket to climb on top of him. Straddling his torso with my bare legs, I place my palm on his chest.

One of his eyebrows raises. "What are you doing, Teagan?"

“I thought about what you said last night,” I explain, “and I’ve decided I’m rejecting your rejection.”

“You’re rejecting my rejection?” he repeats slowly, his eyebrows drawn together like he is trying to make sense of the words. “I don’t think you can do that.”

“I can, and I do.” I grin at him, and using my index finger, I tap him on the top of his nose. “Your argument about us being so different, and you having to work all the time is stupid.”

“My argument is stupid?” He looks up at me dumbfounded.

“Are you just going to repeat everything I say?”

“Are you just going to repeat everything I say?” Mason asks the same question before the corners of his mouth turn into a huge grin.

Now I’m the dumbfounded one. “Mr. Mason Grumpy Pants Grant, did you just make a joke?” Clutching my chest, I gasp dramatically.

Mason laughs even more, his whole body shaking as his face lights up like I haven’t seen before. “It’s just that the face you made was the same expression Nat used to make when I repeated everything back to her.”

“See, we do have stuff in common. Jase used to do that to me all the time. It’s fucking annoying... but also funny.”

“I’m pretty sure every sibling has done it. That doesn’t make us compatible.” And just like that, he’s back to being serious.

I frown, still straddling him, and lower myself onto my elbows until our faces are only inches apart. “So what if we have different jobs and grew up differently? Ever heard of opposites attract? Tons of people who come from different countries or backgrounds have wonderful, long-lasting relationships. Whether it’s a friendship, a romance, or maybe just something casual. I’m not asking you to make a commitment here. I’m just asking you to give us a chance.”

He stares at me for a while. I can almost see him thinking and weighing his options while coming up with arguments against it. He surprises me when he does finally answer. “I get the feeling you won’t take no for an answer.”

“Damn straight, I’m not. Not unless you actually have a reason. You have not presented anything valid to me so far. Clearly, you like me. I like you. And right now, we’re stuck here together. So why not have a little fun? Like I said, this doesn’t have to be anything serious.”

“Have you had a lot of serious relationships?” His question catches me off guard. For a man who likes to keep everything a secret, he’s asking some pretty personal questions.

“No. I thought I was in a serious relationship once, but apparently, my ex didn’t. It took me a few months to figure out he was sleeping with three other girls.”

“Asshole.”

I shrug. “You live and learn. I was very upset at first, but I decided he wasn’t worth my energy. Plus, I’m a firm believer in karma. Last I heard, he gave twin sisters an STD, and when they found out he was sleeping with both of them, they keyed his car and spray painted PIG on his front door.”

“What goes around comes around,” Mason agrees.

“What about you? Any serious relationships in your past?” At my question, Mason’s hands find my hips. His touch sends a heat wave through my core.

“The only serious commitment I’ve ever made was to the military. I had a few girlfriends when I was younger, but most of it was *casual*, as you put it.” His grip tightens as he pulls me even closer, making me well aware of his very hard cock between my legs.

“Just sex, got it. Nothing wrong with that as long as you were honest with everyone.”

“I didn’t cheat if that’s what you are asking.”

“Good, and yes, I was,” I admit shamelessly. “Now, would you like me to take care of that morning wood for you, or do

we have other breakfast plans?”

Mason groans. “Fuck yes.”

Before I disappear under the blanket, I place my lips against his. Mason immediately wraps his arms around me to pull me closer. He deepens the kiss with a moan that sends shivers down my spine.

I break the kiss and let us both catch our breath before slowly moving south, running the tip of my tongue along his neck, collarbone, and chest. He shudders at the sensation, and his hands run over my back and shoulders as I go.

“That feels amazing,” Mason groans.

“If you like this, just wait until I reach my final destination,” I murmur from under the blanket. He chuckles, making the whole bed shake slightly.

By the time I nestle between Mason’s legs to free his cock from his boxers, he is so hard I imagine it must be painful. I wrap my fingers around him, making him groan, and his hips jerk. Placing my lips around the swollen tip, I taste salty precum on my tongue. I don’t particularly like the taste, but I like how erotic it feels, how intimate.

Mason’s fingers find their way into my hair. He cradles my head with shaking hands as if he’s holding back what he really wants to do. Yet, despite his own burning desire, he lets me be in full control of the situation.

I show my appreciation by taking him as deep as I can, all the way, until he bumps into the back of my throat, making me gag slightly. Not the most delicate sound, but he doesn’t seem to mind. I get into a rhythm, bobbing my head up and down until I feel his legs quiver and his hips thrust to meet my mouth.

“If you don’t want me to come in your mouth, you need to stop now.” His voice is strained, like he’s only holding on by a thread.

Instead of pulling away, I moan around his dick, and the vibration sends him over the edge. His hands tighten in my hair, tugging on my scalp in a deliciously painful way. Cum

fills my mouth as his cock throbs on my tongue until he fully empties himself. I quickly swallow before the taste lingers.

His grip loosens, and I crawl up his body until my head lies on his chest, my ear pressed against his smooth skin. I listen to the steady beat of his heart and his ragged breath as it slows down. Mason runs his fingertips over my back, massaging my shoulders as he calms down from his high.

I'm just about to get up when he suddenly shifts, rolling us over so that I'm lying on my back, and he is on top.

"What are you—" I don't even get to finish my question before he answers by removing the blanket from my body.

"My turn."

Who am I to argue with a man on a mission?

Mason helps me shimmy out of my shirt and underwear, leaving me completely bare in front of him. He kisses my lips once before sliding down my body until his mouth finds my right nipple. His hot, wet tongue circles around it, making my back arch to push my boobs even closer. He must have gotten the memo of me needing more because next, he sucks on my nipple in earnest. I moan so loud I'm a little worried half the hotel will hear me. Too bad I don't care.

He releases my right nipple and moves to the left, giving it equal attention. I bury my fingers in his thick hair, running my nails over his scalp. When Mason is satisfied with my boobs, and I'm so horny, I'll probably come in five seconds flat, he finally moves farther down my body.

Getting on his elbows, he drapes one of my legs over his shoulder, making me glad I shaved last night. I don't want him getting up close and personal while I have an ungroomed carpet down there.

I feel his hot breath against my wet folds and momentarily forget how to breathe. Then he presses his tongue against the little bundle of nerves, and I forget everything else too.

What am I doing here? Where am I?

No one cares!

All that matters is his hot mouth on my center, his tongue swirling around my clit, and his fingers digging into my upper thigh. The pressure in my core builds, and I have to remember not to squeeze his head with my thighs. Apparently, they want to keep him trapped down there forever.

As expected, it doesn't take me long before I'm ready to burst, hanging off a cliff's edge, as I grind my pussy into his mouth shamelessly. Mason sucks one last time, and I come apart. My whole body arches, and every muscle contracts before relaxing back into the bed as euphoria overcomes me. I close my eyes and see stars dancing in the darkness.

I'm vaguely aware of Mason crawling back up the bed to lie down next to me.

"Wow, I don't think I've ever come this hard before," I admit once I find my voice again.

"I'll take that as a compliment." His seriousness makes me giggle.

"You should. Those were some expert skills to demonstrate it."

"Right back at you. I do have a meeting I can't miss at lunchtime. I could really use a shower. Want to join me?"

"Yes, but I have to brush my teeth first. I have cum breath."

Mason is still chuckling about my cum breath comment when we climb out of bed to make our way into the bathroom. I don't have a dual head in my shower, but there's still plenty of room for both of us.

Picking up my toothbrush, I turn on the water and wet the bristles. Taking the tube of toothpaste, I unscrew it, smile into the mirror, and squeeze some toothpaste directly onto my front teeth.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Mason appears next to me, a bewildered expression on his face.

I pull my eyebrows together, giving him a what does it look like face before I continue to brush my teeth.

“You do know you’re supposed to put the toothpaste on the toothbrush, not directly on your teeth, right?”

Pulling the toothbrush from my mouth, I try to talk without spitting all over him. “Who says? The toothbrush police?”

I fail miserably. Foam and spit drip from my bottom lip with each mumbled word, making Mason laugh out loud. His whole face lights up, and I really wish he would do it more often.

I’ll make it my new goal to make him laugh like that every day.

TEAGAN



“I COULD GET USED TO THIS.”

I take a break from my chicken Caesar salad to look around the suite. My brother has already made himself at home by the looks of it. There are empty bottles on pretty much every flat surface—soda, iced tea, water, dirty plates, and crumpled-up napkins. A pizza box on the kitchen counter holds a couple of pieces of crust and nothing else. “It looks like you have already gotten used to this,” I say before shaking my head. “You should really pick up after yourself.”

His face falls like a kid who just found out he has to go to summer school. “Why?” He gestures around vaguely with a french fry before popping it into his mouth. “There are people who do that stuff.”

“It doesn’t look like those people have been around lately.”

He chews a little more slowly, like he’s thinking about it. I love my brother. I would do anything for him. But there are times I wonder how he can possibly be so clueless. “That’s true. Nobody came by yesterday.”

“You’re not the only person staying here. They probably have lots of other rooms to clean... of paying customers. You can at least throw your trash in the can.”

“Oh, come on.” He flops back in his chair with a groan. “You’re taking all the fun out of it.”

Really, he amazes me. “Fun? This is fun for you?”

“Uh, yeah.” You would think we’ve never met, the way he looks at me. He’s staring the way he would at a stranger who randomly started speaking in tongues. “I don’t have to think about money. I don’t have to work. I don’t have to worry about anything. I want something to eat, I call downstairs, and they bring it to me. No threat from bad guys. I mean, what’s not to like?”

“I guess you’re right. We’ll probably never have the opportunity to live like this again.” Why wouldn’t everything turn out okay? In the end, it always does, even if there are close calls and a few scares along the way.

“Well, even with all this luxury, I’m about ready to lose it,” I continue. I wish I could relax the way he does. I really do. Instead, my nerves are ready to shred pretty much all the time, with no straight answers to my endless questions and nothing to do. I have no control over my life and no chance to make my own decisions. For someone who’s used to being busy, it’s torture. “You’re telling me you aren’t bored out of your mind around here?”

“Bored?” He waves to the TV, where some random show plays. The volume is turned down so we can hear each other, but from the frantic way people are gesturing, it seems pretty intense. “I can watch whatever I want. I can sleep all day if I feel like it. It’s like being on vacation. Why can’t you relax and enjoy it? I mean, what other choice do you have?”

“Sometimes I wonder how we’re related,” I say gently, without any bitterness or resentment. “We are so different. I can’t stop worrying that I’ve lost my job since I haven’t shown up for my shifts or called anybody. I doubt they’ll let me come back when this is over. What am I supposed to do? How do I live?”

He polishes off what’s left of his burger and takes his time draining the rest of his soda before smacking his lips and then sighing. “Tell me something.” He hits me with his penetrating gaze, reminding me he knows me better than anyone. “When’s the last time you had a job where you weren’t living paycheck to paycheck?”

He has a way of surprising me with probing questions like that, the kind that sort of knock me off balance for a second while I try to get my thoughts together. “How about never?”

“Right. That’s what I thought.”

“What’s your point?”

“My point is...” He gets up and makes a big deal about moving around the space, picking up empty bottles and taking them to the trash can under the kitchen sink. “Maybe stop worrying about your latest shitty job that you only took because they were willing to give you enough hours to make ends meet and look at this as an opportunity.”

“An opportunity for what?”

“To figure out what you actually want to do.” There’s a faint growl in his voice like he’s frustrated. “You’ve got nothing else to do but make a plan for how you want your life to look after this. All of your needs are taken care of.”

“I’m practically being held hostage, or did you forget about that? I can’t even convince Mason to let me go out.” And forget getting him to come with me. He’s too busy and important for that. If I had known our trip out to get pancakes would be our big outing, I might have thought twice about answering Jase’s call.

“Boo-hoo,” Jase quips. I swear, I’m going to strangle him. “Poor you, living in the lap of luxury with plenty of time to stop panicking and start planning. What a damn shame.”

“You make it sound so easy.” I jab my fork through a piece of grilled chicken like it’s the chicken that’s on my last nerve and not my brother.

“I don’t see why it has to be complicated. You’re stuck in that mindset.” He taps his fingers to his temple. “You need to get out of it. Or else all you’ll ever be good for is stocking groceries and pouring drinks. And I know you want more than that.”

Sometimes, he comes up with something so logical that it’s almost infuriating. “I don’t even know what I want to do,” I admit.

“I know, and that’s okay. Nobody’s pressuring you to figure anything out right away. I’m just saying, think about it.”

So I try to think about it while he straightens up the suite. I don’t know whether he’s doing it because he knows he has to or trying to prove a point. Either way, it will be nice not having to be embarrassed by my brother’s sloppiness. I know he isn’t my responsibility, but I can’t help feeling like he is sometimes. He’s a reflection of me. You would think I was the older sibling.

What do I want to do? What do I like to do? It’s probably pretty sad, the way I can’t come up with anything even when I give it a sincere try. When life is all about survival, there’s no room for like or want. There’s only need, such as the need for food and clothing, electricity, and bus fare. When you’re in the habit of scrambling to keep your head above water, you tend to forget there was ever a time you did the things you wanted to do. Like being a kid, having that freedom. When it’s all stripped away, it’s easy to lose parts of yourself, too. To forget who you are—or were—before life took away your options.

And here I am, with the chance to get myself back on track. Could it be that simple?

“What am I even good at?” It’s such a stupid question that it makes me laugh.

“Are you serious? You’re brave. Braver than most people.”

“Shut up.”

“You don’t know that about yourself?” He cocks his head to the side after dropping a fistful of balled-up napkins into the trash. “Really? You walked into this hotel for me. You didn’t have the first clue what was gonna happen once you were inside. But you went anyway. That’s brave.”

“So what? I’m supposed to look for a job that requires bravery? This isn’t making me feel very good.”

“There’s more to you than that. I’m just saying that’s the first thing that came to mind.” He rests his folded arms on the counter and blows out a sigh before his brows lift. “You’re smart.”

Lately, I have to wonder about that. If I were smart, I wouldn't make it so easy for Mason to hurt and confuse me. I wouldn't want more from him than he's willing to give. "I don't know."

"And you're funny. You're quick, you know?" He snaps his fingers. "You always like, come up with smart comebacks."

"That's still not much of a job skill. Unless somebody wants to hire a smart-ass to keep them in line all day. I could bully them into getting their work done." I can think of one person in particular who I'd love to bully a little.

"Give it some time. You don't have to figure it out right this minute." But that's the thing. I feel like I do. At any minute, this could all come to an end. It would surprise me that he doesn't see that if I didn't know him as well as I do. He's never been good at thinking too far into the future, while there are times when I feel like that's all I do. I look ahead and worry. "I usually find the bright side of everything. A silver lining, but the last few days, I keep thinking of the worst way something could turn out."

"I mean, I think about the worst-case scenario, too," he muses thoughtfully. "But I want to believe it'll all be okay."

"I would like to believe that, but it's hard for me."

"Why, do you think?"

"So I can be ready for the worst, just in case."

It's interesting how the same event can affect two people so differently. I learned at an early age how suddenly the bottom can drop out, and all your plans can go to hell in the blink of an eye. And that changed me. I guess if I had everything in order and nothing to ever worry about, I would still wake up in the middle of the night with my heart in my throat and my pulse banging in my ears. I have to be ready.

And now, somebody's asking me to consider what I want my life to look like? It's irrational, the anger that rushes through me out of nowhere. I know what I owe my brother for making sure I had everything I needed—he could've gotten rid

of me and moved ahead with his life, but he didn't, and that's why I'll never desert him. But it doesn't exclude me from getting pretty annoyed with him, the way I am now. It's not even his fault. He just happens to be the other person in the room.

"Hey, I remembered something!" Jase suddenly shouts. "When you were younger, you wanted to write a children's book. You came up with a story and everything."

My eyebrows pull together as I rack my brain for the memory. "Are you sure about that?"

"Yes! I remember you wanted to call it the Dragonslayer Club or something like that. It was about a girl who accidentally joined the club, thinking it was just to learn how to sword fight."

Like a light bulb going on in my head, the memory rushes back. "Oh my God, I do remember it now. The girl bought a sword and didn't realize it came with a purpose." Excitement fills my veins just thinking about that time.

"You had a whole story written down, even drew pictures."

"Yes..." The excitement fades away quickly as I realize what happened to the story and my pictures. "All of that got left in the old house."

"Oh." My brother's face falls. "Maybe we can remember it together."

"Yeah, maybe," I tell him because I know that's what he wants to hear. I don't have the heart to tell him that I would rather forget since thinking about the past reminds me of everything I've lost. I'd rather look toward the future.

"I'm going to head back to my place." My place. There's a laugh. It's not my place, and I need to remind myself of that. I'm getting too comfortable. Mason could kick us out this very day, and then where would I be?

"You could hang out here. We'll find a movie to watch or something."

"Maybe later."

He shrugs it off in his usual way before I get up and leave. “Whatever.”

“Just do me a favor and keep the place looking decent?” I ask as I open the door. “I don’t want Mason thinking we’re taking advantage.”

“You care a lot about what Mason thinks, don’t you?”

“We are not having this conversation.” I wiggle my fingers in a wave and try to ignore his knowing laughter that’s quickly cut off once I close the door. It’s incredible how these doors block out all sound. Anything could be happening behind them, and the person walking down the hall would never know.

It isn’t my suite I’m headed for, even if that’s what I told Jase. I’m going to Mason’s as usual. It just makes sense. I feel at home with him.

I’m halfway there when suddenly, the elevator comes to a stop. Not this again. I jam my finger against the button, hoping it’ll start moving again, but for some reason, the doors open instead.

I’ve never been on this floor before. It’s ominously quiet. Something about the profound silence sends goose bumps racing along my arms, and I’m a little frantic as I pound my finger against the button that’s supposed to close the doors. No luck.

Wonderful. I wonder if Mason will find a way to blame this on me, even if this time I really wasn’t trying to snoop around. I stick my head out and look both ways, but the hall is just as empty as the others I’ve seen. Except...

Something is different, and it takes me a second to figure out what it is once I step out of the elevator car and begin moving slowly away from it. Light. There are faint, tight squares of light dotting the walls. Finally, it hits me: the doors aren’t solid the way they are everywhere else. There are windows in them that let whatever light is on behind the door shine into the hallway. Now, nothing can stop me from figuring out what the heck I just discovered, and my feet carry

me before I've had time to think. What do they do on this floor?

Once I reach the nearest door, I figure it out—and what I see freezes me on the spot.

Somebody is in there. Somebody in filthy clothes, sitting on the floor with his back to the wall. His knees are pulled close to his chest. His forehead rests on them while his arms wrap around his legs. I don't know if he realizes I'm watching him. I don't know if he'd care.

I only know he is the most pitiful thing I've ever seen, and there's no way he's here because he wants to be. Not in an empty room—no furniture, no TV, nothing except for a bright light in the center of the ceiling and a bucket on the floor.

He's a prisoner. They keep prisoners here. And they treat them like animals. While on another floor, my brother talks about it being a vacation.

There's a sensation in my belly like a fist closing around my stomach, and it's enough to shake me out of my shock and get me moving. Running. I run for the elevator and throw myself inside, and this time, when I press the button for Mason's floor, the doors close, and the car begins to move.

How much has Mason not told me?

Is there anybody around here who has it even worse?

MASON



“NO. ABSOLUTELY NOT.”

“She won’t be in any danger.” Griffin glances at Dallas, who nods. “Not with us there.”

“Having her along with you would make it much more likely to draw them out.” As usual, Dallas is the one with the answers.

But this time, he doesn’t know what he’s talking about. It’s unusual for me to go against him, but this is one of those times when I know better than he does. “I’m not exposing Teagan to any threats. I don’t care if having her with me would put anybody at ease or whatever you’re thinking. It’s not going to happen.”

“If we’re setting a trap, we need to make sure it works. We’ll have Teagan post a picture on Facebook with her location.”

“We’re not putting a civilian’s life in danger.”

Dallas doesn’t back down from my irritated glare, not that I would expect him to.

“If she’s there,” Griffin insists, “that could double the chance of whoever is behind this coming after us and leaving themselves vulnerable. Don’t you see?”

“They already want me, whoever they are. I’m going to have to be enough.”

I don’t like it when they exchange another look. I know them both too well to mistake what they’re silently

communicating. She means too much. I care too much. They could be right. I do, but that's not for them to decide.

"Think," I insist. "How many people do you think will be at this fundraiser? Hundreds. Hundreds of people and countless opportunities to make Teagan disappear in the crowd. We'll already be on the lookout for any possible threats, guys trailing us, all of that. How am I supposed to stay focused when I have to worry about her safety as well?"

"We will all be there," Dallas reminds me. His calm, measured explanation shouldn't set my teeth on edge the way it does. He's talking sense—at least, as far as he sees it. But he doesn't see the whole picture, and that's what has me fighting the urge to tell him how wrong he is.

"Sure, and they'll be watching you, too. We'll all have targets on our backs." Folding my arms, I shake my head. "I'm not interested in discussing this any further. Teagan is not coming with us. She'll stay here, where I'll know she's safe, and the three of us can draw out whoever is behind this at the event. That's all there is to it."

Something passes over Griffin's face. Something sly and knowing. Something that doesn't put me in a better mood. "Do you have something to say?" I ask.

"No, sir. Your word is law."

"Don't be a smart-ass." An alert comes through on my phone—the door to my apartment was used. That means she's back from visiting Jase in his suite. "Now, if you'll excuse me. I have to explain this to her, so she doesn't get the wrong idea about me disappearing tomorrow night."

"I still think it would be a good idea for her to come along." Dallas's voice follows me out the door, but I don't bother responding. We'll only end up talking in circles again, and my position won't change.

Nobody knows better than I do how crucial it is to draw out whoever has decided to throw away their life by fucking with mine. I will not sacrifice her. And I won't spend the night constantly looking after her when I need to be watching my

back. The idea of having eyes in the back of my head is cute and everything, but that's not how it is.

And while I trust them with my life, do I trust them with hers? Especially when I know damn well she'll probably end up wandering off. She's that predictable.

Predictable enough that the sight of her curled up in one corner of the sofa doesn't come as a surprise. What is surprising, though, is the dark TV. "What are you doing?" I ask as I approach. "Just sitting here in the dark? Is everything all right with Jase?"

"We had lunch. It was good." Her response is short and sweet. No eye contact. Something is definitely up.

She pulls the sleeves of her hoodie over her hands before wrapping her arms around herself like she needs protection.

"You don't look or sound like it was so good. Did something happen?"

Her head swings back and forth. She still won't look me in the eye. "No. I'm just bored. I'm tired of watching TV. But you know that already."

Is that all it is? "Am I going to regret having him stay here? Because if he's upsetting you—"

"He's not, okay?"

At times, I would swear she's doing her best impression of a moody teenager. This is one of those times. And all at once, my temper threatens to flare up. Nobody speaks to me that way.

But fighting isn't the answer. I have to be the bigger person. "All right, then. Have it your way. Sit here in a silent room by yourself."

She lifts her gaze, studying me from beneath her thick lashes. Suspicious. "Why? Where will you be?"

"There's a fundraiser for disabled veterans and their families," I explain. "Dallas and Griffin will be coming with me. We were hoping..."

Wait. What am I doing? She doesn't need to know. Why is it my impulse to open up and tell her information she doesn't need to know?

"Hoping what?" Dammit. If I open up even a crack, she'll push her way through. I know better by now, or I should. "What's the plan?"

I could lie. I could calm down and deny everything. I could also hit myself over the head repeatedly with a hammer. It would get me as far with her and give me the same splitting headache.

"We were hoping to draw out whoever is behind all of this."

She sits up straighter, gripping the cushion under her like she's using it to keep herself steady. "You're going to put yourself out there like that? What happens if whoever's after you is there?"

"Then we get rid of them. We wait for them to show themselves, and we take care of business. That's what it has always been about."

"And what happens if you don't come back?"

"I'm going to come back."

"And if you don't? I'll just be sitting here waiting forever for somebody who never comes back? No way." She leaps to her feet, teeth gritted, jaw jutting out. "I'm coming with you. I'm not letting you do this alone."

"Do you hear yourself? Absolutely not. I would never expose you to that."

"News flash: I've already been exposed to plenty of danger. Did you ever think that maybe I would like to set eyes on whoever is doing this? They're kind of screwing with my life, too, or did you forget about that part? They were going to kill me. They tried to blow up my brother. I think I at least deserve to get a look at them before you... do whatever it is you're going to do."

I notice that takes a little of the fire out of her. Imagining the truth of what this situation is inevitably leading toward.

“Right. And I’m sure you would stay by my side and listen to every word I said.”

“I would!”

“With all due respect, you’ve already set a track record for doing whatever the hell comes into your head at any given moment.”

“I would do everything you said. This is serious. It’s important to me. I won’t fuck it up.”

How does she leave me torn between admiration and exasperation? It’s like a gift she has. “How do you plan on protecting yourself if someone ambushes you?”

She blinks rapidly while flailing around silently, trying to come up with a defense. “If I’m by your side, I won’t have to worry about that, right?”

Touché. “Still. What if we were outnumbered? What would you do?”

“Kick them in the balls.”

The worst thing I could possibly do right now is laugh. She’s not making it easy to keep a straight face... or to keep from touching her. Her flushed cheeks and flashing eyes threaten to draw me in no matter how I try to fight it. “I need you to prove you can protect yourself if you’re going to go through with this insane plan.”

“What do you need me to do?” Her eyes are sparkling when she lifts her chin, squaring her shoulders like she’s ready for battle. If she’s not careful, I’ll have no choice but to throw her on the floor here and now, and by the time I’m finished, she won’t be worried about attending the gala. She’ll be too busy with simple things like walking.

“I need you to learn how to fire a gun.”

That knocks her back half a step, but she recovers quickly. “Okay. Are there like last-minute lessons I can take?”

“We can do better than that.”

Hopefully, I don't end up regretting this.

She follows me to the elevator. I type in the code before pushing the subbasement for the gun range.

“Hey, Mas....” Pete's sentence gets cut short as he notices Teagan entering the range behind me.

“Pete, get some targets ready for some up-close situations.”

I don't have time to explain all of this to him. Nor do I have to. The truth is, I hope Teagan has at least a bit of natural talent in her. The smell of gunpowder in the air calms me. This is how I blow off steam. Or, as Teagan puts it, “Have fun.”

“Now listen, shooting is easy once you get over the initial shock of the weapon's recoil.”

From the corner of my eye, I see the same range girl who flirted with me the last time I was here. The smile on her face disappears when she sees Teagan.

“Mr. Grant,” she says flatly. “Will your guest be shooting as well?”

“I am,” Teagan answers for me. Something I usually hate, but today, I'm simply amused by it. “Mason and I will be shooting *together*.”

A small grin reaches my lips. She's like a wild animal staking her claim.

“Go get me a .380 with 300 rounds.”

“Oh, you mean the gun we give to older people who can't rack a gun?” Ginger tries to joke, but neither Teagan nor I are laughing.

“Listen, Georgia.” I call her by the wrong name on purpose.

“It's Ginger,” she says with a wounded expression on her face.

“Yes, Ginger. Do you like working here?”

She takes a step back and clasps her hands in front of her.

“Of course, Mr. Grant. I love my job.”

“If you’d like to keep it, I suggest you treat my guest the way you treat me. With respect. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Mr. Grant.”

She leaves quickly to get what I asked for. Can anyone just do their job around here? I almost think out loud. A moment later, she returns with an M&P Shield with an EZ slide. I clear the weapon and set it down on the bench along with the magazines.

“Now listen, this first mag, I just want you to grab ahold of the gun and fire anywhere down range. Don’t worry about aiming. Just get used to how the gun feels when it fires.”

I load a mag of six and hand it to her. To my surprise, she puts the magazine in and pulls the slide back, racking a round—albeit awkwardly.

“Have you shot a pistol before?”

“No. But Jase plays *Call of Duty* all the time. So I picked up some stuff watching him.”

“*Call of Duty*.” I huff. “Of course.”

She shrugs. “Was what I did wrong?”

“No, but that’s not the point. People act like *Call of Duty* is real life.”

“Sounds to me like you’re just hating.”

Before I can come up with a witty remark, she lifts the gun and fires. A high-pitched squeal rips from her throat, but to her credit, her grip on the gun never wavers.

“I wasn’t done explaining what to do.” I almost roll my eyes at her.

“Oops.” She grins up at me shyly. “I didn’t realize it was going to be this loud.”

“Lay the weapon back on the bench,” I order.

She puts it down with her lips pursed as she bobs her head up and down as if to say now what?

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. *Patience*. “Listen, your ability to aim comes from how you grip a pistol.”

Grabbing her hands, I put the gun in her palm, showing her how to hold it correctly. I stand behind her, correcting her posture when she starts to rub her ass into my cock. It springs to life, ready for another round.

“You have to stop that. I can’t concentrate on teaching you if I want to be inside you.”

“What do you mean?” she asks coyly.

I look at her with narrowed eyes and tight lips. “You know exactly what I mean.” I almost hiss.

Rolling her eyes, she looks back down range. “Fine! Be a party pooper.”

She follows my lead well and even fires a few rounds independently after a short lesson. I’m actually impressed with how well she does.

After we try out a few handheld guns, I let her shoot a rifle just for fun.

“I always thought those military rifles would kick more!”

“Yeah, everyone does. Honestly, they are basically glorified .22s.”

“I don’t know what that means. But sure.” She shrugs her shoulders, unimpressed. “Is my shooting satisfactory enough for me to go with you?”

“Not really, but I know I can’t change your mind so it will have to do.” The only reason I’m letting this happen at all is knowing I’ll be there to protect her.

TEAGAN



I'VE NEVER BEEN TO A GALA FUNDRAISER, SO I HAVE NO IDEA what to wear tonight. I should probably be worried about it, but more pressing matters are eating up my thoughts. For one, what I saw on floor fifteen.

I didn't tell Mason about it, and he didn't mention anything, so I'm guessing he doesn't know about my little trip downstairs. That alone is odd. He always seems to know where I am, but somehow, he doesn't know about my little side visit. Did someone send me there on purpose? Was I supposed to see that prison-like part of the hotel?

Ugh. I just don't know what to trust or who. Mason is such an enigma. There's so much mystery surrounding that man, but when I'm with him, I seem to forget it all. When he is close, I feel safe. I just don't know if I can trust this feeling or if he is a master manipulator. For right now, I'm going to keep my little trip to the fifteenth floor to myself.

Mason got up early this morning, as always. However, today he actually did leave me a note. *Will leave for the fundraiser at six. -M.* It's not much, but it's better than waking up not knowing anything.

I opted to go downstairs to my own suite. There isn't much to do here, but it's not like Mason's suite is any different. For someone who spends all his time at home, his place really isn't that homey.

Turning on the TV, I try to take my mind off my reality by watching reality TV. Usually, that works, but not today.

I want to call Ainsley and tell her everything, but my phone doesn't work here, and if I ask Natalie, she would be here listening to me talk. What a clusterfuck.

Lying down on the couch, I look up at the ceiling, thinking about what Jase said about getting a job I actually like. I also keep thinking about the children's book I dreamed about writing one day. I haven't thought about it for years, but now that it has entered my mind again, it won't leave.

When I was younger, that character lived inside my head for months. I called her Maddie, and I imagined all the adventures she'd go on as an accidental dragon slayer. I even drew pictures of her—just as I imagined her in my head.

The more I try to forget about it, the more I end up thinking about it. It's like images and voices in my head that won't leave until I write it down. If I hadn't experienced it before, I would think I'm going crazy.

Finally, I give in to the urge. Rolling off the couch, I get up and find some paper. There's a large notepad on the desk, along with pens and pencils. I get to work. I write down everything I remember from before, plus new ideas that pop up. I crudely sketch Maddie on one piece of paper and some side characters on others.

I don't know how long I work on it, but by the time someone knocks on my door, my stomach growls, demanding food.

Oh crap. I hope it's not time to leave.

On my way to the door, I catch my reflection in the mirror. I look like a scarecrow. Maybe I should skip the gala after all.

"Who is it?" I ask through the door.

"It's me," Natalie's cheerful voice filters through, "your fairy godmother getting you ready for the ball."

I pull the door open, full of excitement and anticipation. Natalie is on the other side, pulling a rolling rack of dresses behind her.

“Holy smokes.” I gasp, stepping aside for her to roll everything in.

“I wasn’t sure what you would like, so I just got one of everything,” she chirps like it’s no big deal.

“I can see that.” My excitement fades, and guilt creeps up my spine. “You know you don’t have to do all of this, right? I’m already staying here without paying, eating for free—”

“Who said any of this was free?”

My jaw drops as panic fills my veins.

“Oh my God, it was a joke!” Natalie says quickly. “You look like you’re about to puke. I’m sorry, it was a bad joke.”

“No, you’re right. I shouldn’t have just assumed. I never even offer to pay for anything.”

“Seriously, don’t worry about it. And if you knew where all of this money came from, you definitely wouldn’t fret it.” She winces at the end of the sentence as if she caught herself saying too much, which is why I’m not pressing the topic further. I do, however, make a mental note of that comment.

“So are you going to let me try on some dresses or what?” At my question, Natalie perks up, a wide smile spreading across her face like I haven’t seen before. She is definitely more excited about this than I am. And I’m pretty damn excited.

“I brought a bunch of different colors, as you can see.” She pulls the rack closer and starts going through each of the dresses. “Honestly, my favorites are these two, but of course, you’re wearing it, so please try on whichever you like!”

She holds up a bordeaux-red halter top gown with a front dip down to what I assume will be my belly button. Although the dress looks stunning, the royal-blue backless gown she holds in her other hand catches my eye immediately.

“The blue one, the blue one!” I clap my hands in excitement at the princess treatment I’m getting. “I’m sorry. I’m so giddy.”

“Oh my God, please don’t apologize!” Natalie waves me off. “I’m thrilled you like this dress, and I can’t wait to see you in it.” She hands it to me, but not before ripping off the price tag, which I’m more than thankful for. I can only imagine what this dress costs. If I knew, I might not even put it on.

I carefully drape it over my arm and take it into the bathroom, where I try it on. It’s backless, so there’s no way I can wear a bra. Luckily, my B-cup boobs don’t need a lot of support.

The dress fits perfectly, almost like it was made for my body. I run my palms down the silky, smooth material as I turn around to look into the full-length mirror.

Christ. This dress is everything. It’s perfect, and I never want to take it off.

“Is it on? Can I come in?” Natalie’s getting antsy in front of the door. Her excitement radiates through the walls.

“Yes, come in!” The words have barely left my mouth when the door bursts open, and Natalie scurries into the bathroom.

“I fucking knew it! I knew this was going to be it. I only held up the red one to give you a choice, but really, I knew this was the one.”

I laugh, wondering why she brought a whole rack if she knew I was going to choose this one.

“Were you a stylist before you took the job here?” I imagine Natalie making a killing picking out dresses for clueless girls like me.

“No, I worked for the CIA,” she says nonchalantly. For a moment, I think she must be joking, but when I notice her serious expression, I know it’s true.

Damn, is everyone around here a certified badass?

I’m just about to ask her what I should do with my hair and makeup when a knock on the door echoes through the suite.

“Here comes the pampering team,” Natalie announces, before she spins around and heads to the door.

I carefully follow her into the living room, making sure not to step on the hem of the dress. I take a seat on one of the armchairs and watch two women carrying caddies filled with beauty products enter the space.

After a quick consultation, they waste no time getting me ready. One of them starts on my nails, filing them and applying gel nail polish, while the second one starts on my hair, curling up each strand before pinning them up in an artful manner at the top of my head.

Natalie disappears for twenty minutes, only to reappear, holding a black velvet box in her hand.

“No.” I shake my head, making Natalie giggle in glee.

“Yes,” she disagrees. “You can’t wear a dress like this without any jewelry.”

“Nat!” I groan. “I can’t ever make all of this up to you.”

“Good thing no one is asking you to. Now hush, and let me put these earrings on you.”

I don’t fight her on it, knowing she won’t take no for an answer anyway. After she fastens the hooks in my ear, she holds up a hand mirror for me to see.

“Nat...” I take in the beautiful silver teardrop earrings, each of them holding a small sparkly diamond in its center. “Please tell me these are not real.”

“These are not real,” she repeats in a robotic voice. I look at her face and see her forced, awkward smile. She’s lying.

“Is that true, or are you just saying that because I asked you to?”

A smile remains plastered on Natalie’s face. “Is that my phone ringing?” She looks away, pretending to look for her iPhone that’s definitely not ringing.

I sigh, deciding to take Jase’s advice and just enjoy the moment. Putting down the mirror, I close my eyes and let my pamper squad finish my hair and makeup without complaining. Natalie brings me some shoes to try on, and

together, we decide on silver pumps with crisscross straps around the ankles.

“Mason is on his way to pick you up,” Natalie announces. “Perfect timing. Cinderella, you are done!”

A mixture of anxiety and excitement swirls around my stomach as I rise from my chair and carefully walk toward the hallway mirror. Part of me is afraid I won't like what I see, while the other, more prominent part, thinks I'll love this too much.

The moment I catch sight of my reflection, I know I was right. I love this way too much. Crap, I don't even look like myself. I look like some otherworldly goddess gracing the earth with her presence.

Lifting my freshly manicured hand, I bring my fingers to my face, making sure this is not an optical illusion. “I know you called me Cinderella as a joke, but I do 100 percent feel like her right now.”

“You do look stunning,” Mason's deep, rumbling voice meets my ear.

I twist my head to look at him, standing only a few feet away. “Right back at you.” He is wearing a fitted tux, his face is freshly shaved, and his hair is styled back.

He gives me a million-dollar smile before walking toward me and reaching for my hand. Bewildered, I take it, letting his fingers interlace with mine. He gently tugs me along with him as we walk from the hallway through the luxurious apartment.

Natalie comes and hugs us both on our way out. “Have fun and be safe.”

Outside my door, Dallas and Griffin are already waiting. Both casually leaning against the wall in their dapper suits, only to straighten when we enter the hallway.

Mason never lets go of my hand as we ride down the elevator to the parking garage. I'm more than happy he does. I think if he didn't, I would be nothing but a puddle of nerves right now as I stand in this small, enclosed space with three large, dangerous-looking men, going to a gala where people

may or may not try to kill us. Having him hold my hand, his warm, strong fingers wrapped around mine protectively, gives me a much-needed confidence boost.

Ninety percent of that newfound confidence vanishes the moment the elevator doors slide open with a bing, and I see the limousine waiting a few feet away. The driver stands by its side, holding the door open for us. A limo? Really?

Mason must feel my appreciation because he gives my hand a reassuring squeeze while running his thumb over the back of my hand.

This whole situation is so freaking absurd. As I get into the luxurious cab of the limo, the only thing I can think about is that this is a dream. A very weird dream.

MASON



I KNOW NAT KNOWS WHAT SHE'S DOING WHEN IT COMES TO things like this. Her sense of style is unmatched. I expected Teagan to be in good hands today.

But I didn't expect her to be this stunning. Dangerously stunning. Breathtaking—she could render a man unconscious with a single look—it's probably safer to keep my eyes off her while we're in the limo.

But that means I can't see her, and I want to feast my eyes on her luscious body in a dress that looks like it was made for her. Every time she moves her head, the gleam from her diamond earrings grabs my attention. Her shining locks are piled high on her head and bring to mind a crown. Her long, slim neck practically begs to be touched by my lips. And I'm supposed to concentrate tonight?

“Should we have like code words?”

It takes a lot of effort to keep from wincing when she asks that. Griffin sounds like he's choking on his tongue as he shoots Dallas a look that screams help.

Dallas clears his throat and glances my way for an instant before turning a tight smile toward her. “What did you have in mind?”

Her eyelashes flutter, and her throat works. The flush on her cheeks isn't makeup. “Oh, I don't know. I just figured maybe we would need a way to communicate without coming right out and, you know, maybe being overheard by the wrong people.”

Dallas's mouth opens, and I jump in before he has a chance to ask what the hell she thinks she's talking about. "You don't have to worry about that. If you see anything out of the ordinary, you can just let me know." I don't want to hurt her feelings by mentioning we will most likely see something way before she does since we are the highly trained operatives here, and she is basically just bait. Just thinking about her like this has my stomach in knots. I hate this.

"Okay. If you're sure."

"You won't be required to do anything but post a selfie to social media," Dallas explains. "Otherwise, we will need you to stay close to Mason and do as you're told without asking questions."

I suppress a snort. He may as well ask her to breathe underwater with no equipment. She even looks openly confused and insulted now. "I only want to help."

"I know, and you are, trust me." I turn to Dallas. "Did you get the EZ rack .380 I asked for?"

"Sure did." He grabs a small black case from under the seat and hands it to me.

I open it and get the small gun out to load it with a high-capacity mag. I hand her the gun. She wraps her small fingers around the handle and pulls it from my grip a little too fast, making her fumble and almost drop it. Good thing it has two safeties on it.

"Oopsie." She giggles while Dallas and Griffin groan quietly.

"You got a safety on the handle and one on the barrel," I explain, showing her how to work both.

"Are you sure you want her to carry it?"

"You think I'll do anything I'm not sure about?" I growl. His mouth snaps shut at the sharpness in my voice. "She's new to all of this. She is trying her best." He arches an eyebrow, giving me a curious look while taking a deep breath. Either he knows better than to retort or he figures his expression is enough to tell me how he feels about my outburst.

“Teagan, only use the gun when you absolutely need to. Any other time, keep it in your purse and listen to everything we say. We’re trying to keep you safe. If I tell you we’re going, we’re going. If I tell you to crawl under a table, you find the nearest table and get under it.”

And before she can make a big deal about that, I add, “That was just an example off the top of my head. I don’t predict you crawling around on the floor tonight.”

“Okay.” She seems to draw herself closer together like she’s shrinking.

All of that changes when the limo comes to a stop in front of the venue. Floodlights positioned along the structure’s exterior cast beams of light onto massive banners extending from the roof to the ground, featuring images of soldiers from all branches of the military. It’s a dramatic look, and between that and the well-dressed guests walking a red carpet leading inside, Teagan is awestruck once she’s out of the car.

“Think you can handle this?” I squeeze her hand, and it seems to bring her back to the present moment and away from whatever childhood fantasy she thinks is coming true.

“I don’t know.”

I wasn’t expecting that, though I should have. I did chastise Dallas minutes ago. “You can handle it. We aren’t going to ask you to do anything dangerous, and I’ll be by your side at all times.”

“I didn’t mean it that way.” She bites her glossy lip. “I don’t belong here. This isn’t me. Look at these people!”

“I have, and I’m not impressed.”

“Easy for you to say.”

“Would it help if I said you’re the most beautiful woman on this red carpet?”

Her nose wrinkles as if she smells something bad. “No.”

She has the unique ability to make me laugh at the least likely times. “Too bad. You are. And you’re brave. Think you can be brave for me tonight?”

“I think so.” She gulps, and her wide eyes reflect the glowing lights we pass on our way beneath a marble archway leading inside. “It really is incredible, isn’t it?”

It’s not fair for her to be this gorgeous and alluring. It’s not fair I can’t spend my evening drinking in her presence and her simple joy.

But there are plenty of reasons I can’t. Not only because I need to keep her safe—which means I can’t afford to ogle her like a teenager with a crush—I need to cover my own ass, as well, and somehow deal with the people talking and drinking in clusters around the interior of a large, marble-floored lobby. Once the ballroom opens, there will be a little more room to breathe.

“Be natural.” I lean down to speak into her ear and regret it when the scent of her shampoo threatens to knock me on my ass. “Enjoy yourself if you can. At least make it look like you are.”

“I’ll try.” When a uniformed server approaches with a tray full of champagne flutes, she accepts one with a bright smile. This time, when she gazes around the room, she doesn’t look quite so much like her eyes are going to pop out.

I take a flute of my own but treat it as a prop rather than a beverage. I can’t let myself get fuzzy. It’s bad enough I’m so distracted by the beautiful girl at my side. Dallas stands at the wall to my left, scanning the room. I catch his eye, and he shakes his head slightly. Griffin is posted near the entry, where I know he’s in contact with our people on the outside of the building. He, too, shakes his head when our eyes meet.

“This is amazing!” Teagan can’t help but be awestruck by our impressive surroundings. I wish I could share her amazement. The best I can do is smile down at her, then lift my hand to acknowledge a vaguely familiar-looking guy by the bar.

“Wow,” Teagan breathes. It’s only when she nudges me that I realize she is trying to get my attention. She’s been muttering things like that since we walked in.

I follow the direction of her gaze, and it lands on the man I just acknowledged. “You actually looked friendly for a second there.”

“I can put on a show when I need to.”

She giggles, but I can’t allow myself to indulge in her. There could be eyes watching me right now—watching her.

“I think it’s time for a selfie.” I hold her flute while she takes her phone from her purse, then hand it back so she can include the champagne in the shot. “Do me a favor and don’t pout your lips like a duck.”

“I wasn’t going to, but now I think I might. You’ve inspired me.” She doesn’t, but does manage to capture a large group of well-dressed people behind her in a wide shot while she raises her glass and smiles brilliantly.

“Don’t forget to tag the organization,” I remind her as she types up a post.

“Done.” She blows out a shaky breath before draining her flute. “No biggie. Now, I think I saw a tray of stuffed mushrooms I’d like to become acquainted with.” We make our way over to the food table. If she’s eating, she isn’t wandering off and getting into trouble. I go through the motions of sampling a few dishes while we explore the items up for grabs in the silent auction, but I’m always checking out the people nearby.

It’s another half hour before the ballroom opens, and the lobby clears out a little. I make a point of lingering near the displays set up for the event, keeping an eye on Teagan as she heads back for another puff pastry filled with something that made her moan when she tasted it.

In front of me are images of vets and their families, some of whom suffered permanent injuries in combat. A woman dripping with diamonds clicks her tongue as she walks past and shakes her head in sympathy. I wonder if she has any idea how many more vets walk through life with invisible wounds. Unfortunately, those are the ones who are often forgotten even though they need the most help.

It's safer to linger near the bar, pretending to nurse my champagne while Teagan delicately sips more of her own. She's playing it safe, I'm glad to see.

Dallas slows in passing. "Nothing out of the ordinary."

Was this a waste of time? I was so sure we would flush them out here. It could be all I did was force myself to be surrounded by people with nothing to show for it.

"Do you want to go inside and find our seats?" Teagan eyes the open doors leading to the ballroom. Dallas raises an eyebrow, waiting for my decision.

I'm not sure I could stand it, especially if there hasn't been a hint of a threat in close to two hours. Dallas has a nose for things like that. He would've sniffed out if there was any trouble here. It seems like it's time to cut our losses.

"Let me check in with Griffin and get the car back here," Dallas says before crossing the cavernous room.

My attention drifts away, and I observe people wandering in and out of the ballroom, returning for more drinks.

"Well, at least I got the chance to wear this gorgeous dress. And these hors d'oeuvres are so filling, I don't mind missing dinner. I'd probably split a seam if I tried to eat another bite."

I'm only vaguely aware of Teagan's voice now that my body has gone cold and my heart has momentarily stopped beating. There's no way. It can't be. Of all the times to be reminded of her... my mother. The familiar-looking woman disappears in the crowd faster than she appeared. Tricking me into seeing something that isn't there.

"Hey. What's up? I'm sorry this didn't work out."

I shake myself slightly. Teagan gazes up at me with sorrow in her eyes. "Oh, it's all right. We tried."

"You seem upset, though."

There's no harm in telling her what startled me. "I saw a woman who reminded me of my mother."

“Really?” Naturally, she looks around like she wants to catch a glimpse.

“She walked away. You can’t see her now.” I wave it off and wish I hadn’t said anything when I notice her staring at me with what looks a lot like pity. That’s the one thing I never want.

“I know how you feel.” Her hand slides against mine, and my fingers close around it as we begin to slowly cross the marble floor once Dallas lifts a hand by the door. “To this day, my heart will stop for a second whenever I see somebody who reminds me of my parents. The grocery store is the worst. So many people come in and out. One time, I dropped a carton of eggs on the floor because the lady at the register looked so much like Mom.”

“It’s not the sort of thing you get over.” I sigh.

“You never do. You just learn to live with it, that’s all.”

“One more thing to live with,” I muse as we make our way down the red carpet again. She might be young and infuriatingly curious at times, but she carries a deep wisdom I find comforting.

Dallas and Griffin join us in the limo, both of them looking as frustrated as I feel. We knew there was a chance this would end up going nowhere, but no one wants to go to all the trouble of putting a mission together with nothing to show for it.

The driver barely has time to close the door behind us before I reach for the alcohol stocked in the bar. Now that there’s no threat of someone coming along and taking Teagan away, I crack open a small airplane bottle of whiskey and raise it to my lips. I don’t pull it away until the bottle is empty. It takes the edge off the pounding anxiety threatening to split my skull in two—lingering anxiety since I’m no longer out in the open, surrounded by countless strangers. Unless I do something to unwind, this could turn into a very long, sleepless night.

Teagan says nothing, only watches as I take another bottle and uncap it before quickly tossing the contents down my throat. I would care what she's thinking if it wasn't much more important to rid myself of the unwanted stress still making my muscles clench.

The warmth that spreads through my chest is welcome. It loosens some of the tightness that makes it a chore to breathe. I'm safe. I'm fine.

"Well, we have to come up with another plan, is all." Griffin tries to sound positive even if his voice is flat. We both know we were counting on this being the perfect opportunity to lure this bastard into a trap, whoever he is.

And it was enough to use Teagan as bait this time around. I'm not sure I could go through putting her at risk again.

The very fact that the idea fills me with fresh anxiety makes me uncap a third bottle. At this rate, I don't know if there's enough in the limo to soothe my nerves.

By the time we are back at the hotel, heading up to the room, I'm certain there wasn't enough booze in the car to satisfy me. However, I'm glad I'm not three sheets to the wind either. Not when Teagan looks like this.

As soon as we enter my apartment, Teagan goes to slip out of her high heels. "Wait." I stop her. "Don't get undressed yet."

One of her eyebrows shoots up. "Why?" she questions but listens to me and pauses.

With a grin, I pull out my phone and find "The Way You Look Tonight" by Frank Sinatra on YouTube. I hit the play button before placing my phone on the side table.

Turning toward her, I hold out my hand. "I can't let that dress go to waste. You deserve to have at least one dance in it."

Her confused gaze turns soft, her eyes light up, and a bright smile spreads across her plump lips before she reaches for my waiting hand. When my rough palm envelops her soft skin, I pull her close until she presses against my chest. I place

my free hand on her hips, and she places hers on my upper arm, and we turn.

“I didn’t think you would be the kind of guy who knows how to dance,” she teases as we start moving.

“I will let you know that my moves were very well received at the Navy Ball.” I pull her even closer, though that’s hardly possible. I just can’t get close enough. She places her head on my chest, her cheek pressed right over my heart, and I wonder if she can hear how rapidly it beats.

We softly sway from side to side until the last note plays. “That was really nice,” she says, suddenly a little bashful. “But I do really want to get out of these shoes now.” She laughs, the innocent sound touching something deep in my soul. The feeling is so unexpected I almost gasp. How can a simple laugh have such an effect on me? It’s almost like her happiness is directly linked to mine.

“Let’s get you out of these shoes... and this dress. Only one thing is more stunning than this piece of fabric on you, and that’s when you’re wearing nothing at all.”

I think this is the first time in my life I’m actually glad a mission failed. Because if we did find the threat today, I might not be able to do what I’m doing next.

“I can say the same about you.” Teagan smiles. “Now let’s get naked, and have a little workout in bed. I need to burn off those pastry calories somehow.”

“I’m more than glad to help you with that.” Maybe even more than once or twice.

TEAGAN



“IT SHOULDN’T TAKE VERY LONG.” MASON’S BREATH SMELLS like sex and whiskey, but then I guess it would have to after he downed all those little bottles on the way back from the gala, like he made it his personal mission to empty the bar.

“That’s okay.” Though he did promise me multiple workout sessions. I guess one has to do for now. “Crap, I left my phone downstairs and promised Ainsley I would text her later.” After Mason confessed he put a signal jammer in my suite, I talked him into turning it off so I can message my best friend.

“I can have someone bring it up to you.”

“Nah, I don’t like the idea of someone touching my stuff. Plus, I kind of want my fuzzy pj’s, and they’re downstairs too.”

“Alright, I’ll walk you downstairs then.” Mason is already dressed in his go-to black slacks and black button-up shirt while I’m still naked on his bed.

Jumping up, I find and pull on a pair of leggings I have up here, along with one of Mason’s shirts. There is no way I’m getting back into that dress again, and definitely not the shoes either. I decide on a pair of Mason’s socks for the way downstairs. It’s not like anyone is going to see me, I don’t think there is another person staying on my floor, at least I haven’t seen anyone so far.

Laying the dress carefully over my arm to carry it downstairs, I make my way to the elevator with Mason by my

side. As expected, we make it to my apartment without seeing another soul.

“The whole time, I was worried I would ruin it somehow,” I tell him as I hang the dress up in my bedroom. I’ll have to get it cleaned before returning it.

“Even if you did, it wouldn’t be a big deal.” Mason brushes me off from the living room.

“It would to me. It had to cost a fortune, and I could never pay for it.”

Natalie’s joke about not paying for anything comes back to me, and I pause halfway through pulling out my pajamas, then abandon the idea and return to the living room.

His back is to me, and I notice he’s shuffling through papers. My body goes cold when I realize what he’s looking at. “Oh, that’s just a bunch of doodles. Nothing serious.”

He turns away from my notes and drawings. “You did this?”

“Yeah?” I’m still wearing clothes, but I might as well be completely naked. I’m that vulnerable. Having Jase see my ideas is one thing, but Mason... I can’t tell what he thinks about them.

That is until a wide smile spreads over his face. “You are really talented. I had no idea.”

“You don’t have to say that.”

His face scrunches up like he’s in pain before he rolls his eyes. “What is your problem with me telling the truth? First, I tell you that you’re the most beautiful woman I saw tonight, which is still true, and now I’m lying about this? I don’t have to compliment you. But I want to because you deserve it.”

I’m a little overwhelmed by the force of his reaction. It has to be all that whiskey. He can’t feel so strongly about my drawings... or me. “Thanks,” I whisper. “It’s an idea that’s been in my head for a long time. A children’s book. I’m sort of playing around with the idea again.”

“Go for it! You’ve got a lot of talent.” I can’t help but smile like a total nerd at his praise, even when I still don’t feel like I deserve it.

I’m too torn to bask in the moment. There’s still something on my mind, and I don’t know if I’ll be able to sleep tonight until I get it off. “Back to the dress for a second. Nat said something earlier that was a joke, but it kind of got me thinking.”

His brows draw together. “What did she say?”

“I mentioned how I feel bad that I’m not paying for any of this. The dress, everything that came with it, not to mention everything else you’ve already given me. She said it wouldn’t bother me if I knew where the money comes from.”

His nostrils flare, and his jaw ticks, but his voice is low and measured. “She would.”

“What could that possibly mean?”

“And if I told you it’s none of your business?”

“Give it a shot and see how it goes.”

It’s clear he’s fighting with himself, scowling and clenching his jaw. Is he going to tell me the truth? Is he going to come up with a lie? I think we’re beyond that point by now, but who knows?

His shoulders rise and fall before he says, “While I can’t get into specifics, I can tell you she’s right.”

“But how?”

“The money we use to keep this place running and arrange for events like tonight does not come from a good place. Believe me.”

“That still doesn’t answer my question!”

“Hypothetically. Let’s say there’s a mission the government doesn’t want to get involved in. So they give us a heads-up that a huge drug deal is about to go down, which they want stopped. Let’s say we’re involved in keeping it from

going through, and in the process, whoops, a few million dollars falls into our laps.”

“That happens?”

“Hypothetically.” He lowers his brow and stares at me with an intensity that makes me shiver. “This is all hypothetical. Now, if that kind of thing were to happen, all of it would be off the record. That’s how these things go. There’s no paper trail, no documentation. There’s no requirement to give the money to anyone. It might as well not exist.”

“Oh,” I breathe. “I see.”

“That answers your question?”

Sure, but not without unlocking a few dozen more. “I get it. Thank you for the explanation.”

He seems satisfied, even offering a quick grin before heading out the door. “I’d better get to work. Don’t stay up too late. You had a big night.” My head bobs up and down while I compare what he just revealed to what he told me before about the hotel, how it’s all about providing government protection to people who need help. Now he’s describing something that sounds like it came out of a military thriller. Anonymous mercenaries working for the government? What else is he into?

Once he’s gone, I go to work removing the eighty-five hairpins from my curly updo. Maybe not exactly that many, but it feels like it. Every time I try to run my fingers through my hair, there’s a pin I missed. Even though it takes what feels like forever, it’s not enough time to quiet my confused, conflicted thoughts.

What really takes place within these walls? What could be happening right this very minute while I remove my makeup before putting on pajamas?

What am I indirectly involved with here?

At the last second, I abandon the pajama idea and pull on jeans and a hoodie instead. I won’t be able to sleep a wink unless I get another look at the eleventh floor. I can’t erase the image of that miserable, broken man from my memory. I never

got to look at his face, and I don't know why he's here, but if anything, that only makes my curiosity that much harder to bear. I have to know. I can't live in the lap of luxury, all expenses paid, while someone else suffers.

Creeping out into the hall, I quickly make my way to the elevator. He'll be pissed if he finds out, but that just means he can't find out. He's busy working, probably trying to come up with another way to flush out his enemies, whoever they are. This won't take me long.

Goose bumps cover my arms by the time I step out of the elevator on the eleventh floor and gaze down the hall. It looks the same as it did when I arrived here by accident, with beams of light shining from behind the doors and crisscrossing in the darkness. My heart flutters like a hummingbird, and it feels colder down here for some reason, but I force myself to move, and soon I'm in front of the same door and staring at the same man.

His greasy hair hangs in front of his face. He's curled up in the corner with his chin tucked close to his chest like he's trying to hide from the light. It does look very bright in there.

I've never seen anybody so pathetic. He doesn't have to say a word. Just his posture and the grimy sweat stains on his white hospital gown are enough. He's been wearing it for a long time by the looks of those stains. How long has he been here?

Before I lose my nerve, I reach out and test the handle on the door. It turns freely, and my breath catches, but there's no turning back now. I need to know. Is this an innocent person? Is it a bad guy they captured on one of their secret missions? Even if it is, what does a person have to do to earn this kind of sentence? I briefly wonder why the door isn't locked, only to realize there is no door handle on the inside.

"Hey," I whisper so he doesn't get startled, but it hardly seems like he notices I've entered the room. He's that out of it. "Hey, who are you? Why are you here?"

He flinches a little, so I know he heard me, but he's probably too afraid to speak. "I'm not going to hurt you." I

creep a little closer, one small step at a time. There's a powerful stench rolling off him in waves—sweat, body odor, and something acrid I can't put my finger on. Does despair have a smell?

I take another step, and he groans, shakes his head, and laces his fingers behind his grimy neck. "I'm not going to hurt you, I swear. If I can, I want to help you. But I can't do that unless you talk to me. Can you do that?"

I'm not sure I can get much closer. As it is, his stench is about to turn my stomach. "Please. If I can help you, I will." I don't know how, but I want to try.

One second, he's cowering and terrified.

The next, his head snaps up, and his bulging eyes meet mine. His drawn, pale face suddenly goes red.

He's already springing to his feet by the time my shock wears off and frozen muscles loosen up. But it's too late. He's lunging for me before I even take a step back.

It's not even so much that he jumped up all of a sudden.

It's that I know him. I've seen this man before.

"Dave?" But it can't be. No, Dave was arrested. Wait. He was arrested by Griffin, who is not a cop. This is what they did with him?

He doesn't say a word. He only lets out an otherworldly howl before his filthy fingers grab my hoodie, and he yanks hard enough to make me slam against his chest. I can barely register his intense odor before his hands close around my neck.

He's so strong. I claw at his hands, but it only makes him tighten his grip while those sunken, haunted eyes of his fill my world. It's like being in the grasp of a rabid animal who can't think or reason. They can only attack.

The pressure in my head is unbearable, and the once bright light filling the room starts to go dim, and oh my God, it's because I'm going to pass out. I'm going to pass out, and he's going to hurt me even worse. *He's going to kill me.*

And I can do nothing but try to hold on to consciousness for as long as I can, even as darkness starts closing in around me.

MASON



I RUN DOWN THE HALL AS FAST AS MY LEGS CAN CARRY ME. My feet pound against the floor, but the sound is drowned out by Dave's guttural howl.

When I finally reach the open door, her scream has died down to a labored whimper. My eyes immediately fall onto her lifeless body. Dave hovers over her, both of his hands wrapped around her throat, squeezing the life out of her. I act without thinking, my body going into autopilot.

I'm across the room in no time, tackling Dave from behind. I wrap my arm around his throat, twisting it to the side so forcefully that his neck breaks with ease, and his body goes limp in my hold. I drop him to the ground and fall to my knees next to Teagan.

Her face is slightly blue, and angry red marks are painted on her neck. Her eyes are unfocused, and her breathing is labored and shallow. Carefully, I slide my arms underneath her and lift her off the ground. Teagan's head lulls to the side, and I shift her to stabilize her head against my shoulder.

Just as I turn to leave, the sound of heavy footfalls approaches. I exit the cell to find Tank and Natalie approaching.

"What the hell happened?" Natalie asks frantically while Tank draws his gun to clear the room.

"He's dead," I announce as I speed walk down the hall. "I'm taking her to medical."

“I’m coming with you.” Natalie follows close as I step into the elevator. She pushes for the first floor, where our medical unit is.

“How—”

“I don’t know!” I yell at my sister before she can ask the question. Nat presses her lips into a tight line. I know it’s not Natalie’s fault, but fuck, I’m angry. Angry with that slimy lowlife who put his hands on Teagan. Angry with her for snooping around and definitely angry with myself.

How did I let this happen? Did someone bring her here, or did she come down here on her own? How did she get in the cell?

I can’t think straight. Teagan whimpers in my arms, and her eyes flutter open. She looks around, confused, before her eyes find mine, and she relaxes a little.

“Everything is going to be okay. I’m taking you to see a doctor.”

A ghost of a smile appears on her blue lips. Then her eyes fall shut once again.

It feels like an eternity until we get to medical. When the door finally slides open, I swiftly take her to the emergency area. The doctors get paged as soon as someone calls for the second floor, so I’m not surprised when staff waits for us.

“What happened?” the doctor asks as I place Teagan on the gurney.

“Someone strangled her. There’s bruising to her throat and loss of consciousness for about a minute and a half. Since then, she has been in and out.”

“Get some oxygen going and start an IV just in case. We’ll run some scans and do a full checkup,” the doctor orders and starts working on her right away. The nurses join, all three of them working together like a well-oiled machine.

Stepping out of the way, I let them do their job. Leaving the room, I find a quiet spot in the hallway.

After a while, the doctor comes out. “She’s wide awake now if you wanna see her.”

I shake my head. “Tell her I already left.” There’s no way I can face her right now.

I stay outside her room for another hour or so. Ignoring my phone constantly buzzing in my pocket, I try to clear my head. Unfortunately, the more I try, the more I draw a blank. I’ve never felt so unsure about anything, so off balance.

“Mason,” Griffin’s concerned voice comes from beside me. “We need to talk upstairs.” Straight to the point, as always.

I push off the wall I’ve been leaning on and straighten my spine. “All right.”

We pass one of the nurses on our way out, and I order her to text me any updates. Griffin doesn’t say anything to me on the way up, but the tension between us tells me the talk upstairs won’t be pretty.

When we get to my office, Natalie, Tank, and Dallas are surrounding the conference table. Griffin and I take our designated seats.

Dallas speaks first. “This is going to be hard to hear, Mason, but we think Teagan and Jase are more of a threat than we thought.”

I grind my molars together painfully, not ready to speak, nor do I know what to say. Could I have been that wrong about her? Did I misread the situation that badly?

“Her friend Ainsley is actually Chelsea Fisher. She only recently changed her name, and somehow, that paper trail disappeared. Someone was covering up the name change and who knows what else.”

“What does that have to do with Teagan?”

“Teagan has been friends with Ainsley since they were kids. So when we looked up Ainsley’s birth name, we came across old social media accounts. One of them had this posted to it.” Dallas flips his laptop around to show me the screen.

It's a picture of a younger Teagan sitting on some guy's lap. Her arms are wrapped around his neck while his hand is sprawled on her ass. Irrational jealousy swirls around my chest.

"Is there a reason you're showing this to me?" *Other than trying to piss me off.*

"That guy she seems very close with happens to be Dave's younger brother," Dallas explains.

My heart stops. My body goes numb, but my mind races a million miles per second. Betrayal hits me like a freight train at full speed.

Dallas pulls up the guy's profile. Randy Tucker is his name. He doesn't have a resemblance to Dave, but when Dallas pulls up profile pictures, there are multiple images with his brother Dave.

"We checked it out, and this is true. They are brothers, and Teagan was in a relationship with Randy at one point. What are the chances that she didn't know Dave?" Griffin questions. "And why would Chelsea change her name and create new social media profiles?"

"I still don't understand how all of this is supposed to fit together? What were Teagan's and Chelsea's motives behind all of this?"

I glance over at Natalie. Her facial expression is blank, but her eyes give her away. The same betrayal and hurt I'm feeling reflects back at me.

Dallas closes his laptop and leans back in his chair. "We're not sure why or how yet, but this can't be a coincidence. My best bet is that Teagan is still involved with Randy, and he talked her into helping them get to you. Teagan probably tried to let Dave go, not realizing how out of it he was."

"But Dave is no one. I interrogated him myself. He himself had no reason to come after me; he didn't even know what this hotel was. Someone else hired him."

"And that someone seems to have a lot of money. Money that could be very useful and enticing to someone like

Teagan.”

“She asks a lot of questions.” Natalie speaks for the first time. Her voice is flat. She has always been an expert in compartmentalizing. The friendship she has built with Teagan was burned to a crisp the moment she found out about the betrayal.

My sister is right, though. Teagan’s questions never stop; her curiosity is endless. Why did that not raise any more red flags?

There’s still a lot to unpack here, but this is all I can handle for now. I need to process all of this, but that doesn’t mean my team isn’t looking for my directions.

“Griffin, question Jase, see if you can get anything else out of him.”

I turn to Tank. “As soon as Teagan is discharged from medical, escort her and her brother out of the hotel. Don’t let them take anything.”

“Dallas and Nat, dig a little deeper. Use the new information we have to find out more.”

“Already on it.” Natalie’s fingers fly over her keyboard.

“I’ll be back,” I announce as I push up to my feet. “I need a breather.”

I’m not sure where I’m going, but for once, I feel a pressing need to get out of this hotel.

TEAGAN



WHILE POKING IT WITH MY SPOON, I STARE AT THE OATMEAL-filled glass bowl, wondering if my life will ever feel whole again.

Sometimes, it's hard to believe that we used to be a happy family—my parents, Jase, and myself. We didn't have much, and like every teenager, I used to complain, and just like every other parent, mine used to tell me, "You don't know how good you have it." It took death to make me realize they were right. I didn't realize how great my life was until everything changed.

Like a bowl filled with happiness, contentment, and endless opportunity that crashes to the ground unexpectedly and shatters into a thousand pieces that can never be put together again.

Just when I thought I managed to get over the pain of losing my parents, that wound is ripped open once more. He broke my heart beyond repair. I know I should not feel that way. Shit, I barely knew the guy. Saying I will never love again sounds ridiculous, even in my head.

Love... I snort. I didn't even know I loved him until I realized he hated me.

I will never forget the moment I woke up in a hospital bed alone. He just left me there. Yes, he saved my life, but then he abandoned me. Discarded me like I was nothing to him. He kicked Jase and me out with no explanation. He didn't even let me pack up my stuff. My drawings are lost... again.

It's almost like the universe is telling me to give up on the book.

Message received, universe. Loud and clear.

The day after he threw us to the curb, someone dropped off an envelope with my cell, but nothing else. I check my phone for the twentieth time in the last hour. No calls. No texts. Yes, he broke my heart, and I shouldn't even hope for him to contact me, but what can I say, love makes you stupid. Part of me holds on to the dumb fantasy that it was all a big misunderstanding. Any minute now, my cell is going to go crazy, or even better, he'll show up at my door, falling on his knees, begging me for forgiveness.

Yeah right.

I'd like to think that his apology would be enough to mend the gaping wound in my chest, but deep down, I know that will never be enough.

"You know that oatmeal will fill you up better if you actually eat it." Ainsley scowls at me from the couch. "All you do is push it around with your spoon." I almost forgot she was here. She has been unusually quiet for the last few days. "Who eats oatmeal for dinner anyway?"

"I'm just not hungry." I shrug. "And there is really nothing else to push around my bowl."

"You gotta eat something," Ainsley presses on. Her phone rings. She picks it up and huffs when she reads the message. "I have to go to work for a few hours. Someone just called in sick. How about I bring you some Chinese takeout home for an actual dinner? I'll get your favorite."

"Sure, why not." I try to smile, but it feels so forced.

I watch as Ainsley gets ready for work in a hurry before rushing out. I look down at my cold oatmeal that's been sitting out so long it's starting to dry out and crust on the edge.

Getting up, I discard my bowl in the sink. My stomach feels empty, but every time I try putting something in my mouth, I just want to gag. I guess it's a good thing I'm not hungry since I don't have money to fill up the fridge again. I

lost my job at the grocery store, and I haven't even reached out to the bar I work at on the weekends.

Checking my phone yet again, I notice the time and realize I could go over there now and ask if I still have a job. Angela is pretty old-school. I know if I send her a text, there's no way she'll give me another shot, and she hates talking on the phone, especially when she's already open.

All righty, Teagan, you can do this.

I give myself a little pep talk before getting dressed, combing my hair for the first time today, and slipping into my sneakers. Making sure I have my phone, wallet, and keys on me, I walk outside, locking the door behind me.

It's not dark outside yet, but a chill in the air has me pulling my sweater jacket a bit tighter. I pick up my speed, walking at a fast pace down the sidewalk. Shooters—the bar I work at—is only four blocks away, but today, the distance seems farther than before.

I make it halfway there when doubts fill my mind. Maybe I should just go back home. Angela is not giving me back my job after two no-shows. Slowing down my step, I hover between turning back around or pushing on.

Just when I'm about to spin around and make my way back home, I notice a slow-moving car in my peripheral vision. That's not something I would have worried about before, but after the last few weeks I've had, it's enough to have me on high alert.

Reaching up to my neck, I run my fingertips over the still-tender skin around my throat. I've been so consumed with the pain of losing Mason that I haven't had time to process almost getting killed. Just thinking about that day sends an eerie feeling through my veins. Or maybe that's thanks to the ominous car slowing down beside me further.

The car suddenly stops, and the sound of a door opening fills the air. I don't waste time looking over my shoulder to see who it is. I simply start running, pounding my feet against the sidewalk as fast as I can.

“Teagan! Wait!” Griffin yells after me.

If I had any chance of outrunning him, I would. Now, I wish I had taken a few bites of that oatmeal. My empty stomach rumbles with displeasure as I slow down from a run into a jog.

By the time I come to a stop, Griffin has caught up to me. “You scared the shit out of me,” I snap.

Instead of apologizing, his words come out as a command. “I need you to answer a few more questions.”

Spinning around to face him, I cross my arms over my chest defensively. “Pass.”

“I wasn’t asking.”

“I don’t care.” I shove past him, purposely digging my shoulder into his arm as I do. I’m pretty sure I hurt myself more than I did him, but I’m still proud of myself.

Griffin easily catches up with my long strides. “How long were you dating Randy Tucker, and when was the last time you saw him?”

His question is so unexpected it takes me a second to realize who he’s talking about. “Why do you want to know about him? I have no idea when I saw him last. Three years ago, maybe.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“No, I literally said I don’t know.” I stop dead in my tracks, spinning around to face him. “He was some random guy I dated years ago. I don’t keep track of those. Now, tell me what do you really want? Or better yet, what does Mason want? Does he want me back in your weird-ass hotel so I can almost get killed again?”

“Cut the act. You were the one snooping around. We warned you not to wander. You lied.”

“I lied?!” I snort. “I didn’t lie. The elevator took me there. I didn’t even mean to go there the first time.”

“But the second time you did.”

“Yes, because I didn’t want to stay in a place knowing that someone is being tortured. I had to know what was going on.”

“Sure you did.”

“Your face looks super punchable right now, you know that?”

“Please try,” Griffin muses, holding out his arms like he is ready for me.

“I’m tempted, but I don’t hit girls.” I grin, giving him the finger instead.

I’m about to walk away when he tells me something that I didn’t see coming in a million years. “Randy Tucker is Dave Tucker’s younger brother. The same Dave who tried to kill you the other day. The same Dave who drove and picked you up from the hotel. Are you saying that’s all a coincidence? Or are you ready to come clean?”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I’m so confused. Dave and Randy are brothers? There is no way... or is there? Dread creeps up my spine like cancer. I would hate being associated with someone like Dave in any way.

Griffin scans my face. “You should really be getting an Oscar for this performance.”

“This isn’t an act. I had no idea they were related.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“That’s rich coming from you. Mason told me the hotel *protects* people.”

“We do.”

“But only who you feel like protecting.” The rest are discarded.

“Only those who *deserve* to be protected,” he corrects me.

“What is that supposed to mean?” I want to wipe the smug grin off his face with my fist.

“What do you think it means?”

“Ugh! Whatever.”

“Why did Ainsley change her name and cover it up?”

“Ainsley changed her name because she always hated her given name, and she didn’t cover it up. I don’t know why you assume we’re some kind of secret agents who have the ability to cover shit up. We’re community college dropouts who get paid in dollar bills at the local bar.”

Griffin goes quiet, and I continue stomping in the direction of my apartment, sighing in relief when I don’t hear him following me. What a prick. Who does he think he is, following me around town and asking questions like he is the next Sherlock Holmes?

One thing I’m grateful for is that his visit has turned my sadness into anger, and since I’m done being depressed, I welcome the fury brewing inside me with open arms. Adding fuel to that anger, I think about all the times Mason kept things from me.

When I’m almost back to my apartment door, I dig out my keys to find the right one. Only when I get to my door do I realize it’s slightly ajar. *Did I forget to close it?* I take a step back, assessing the situation. Did Griffin stop me so someone else could go through my apartment? I wouldn’t put it past them.

Staying quiet, I listen to any sounds coming from my apartment, but there is nothing. I pull out my phone and dial Jase. He answers on the second ring.

“What’s up, sis?” He is high. I can tell right away from his slightly slurred speech.

“I think Mason sent someone to snoop around my apartment.”

“That does sound like something he would do,” Jase agrees.

“Just stay on the phone with me while I go inside and check.” Using my foot, I nudge the door open softly, just enough for me to get through.

“Wait, what do you mean?”

“I just got home, and the door is open,” I explain while poking my head inside my apartment.

“Teagan, don’t go in there on your own,” Jase tries to tell me, but I’m already halfway in. “Where is Ainsley?”

“She got called into work.” I keep my voice down, just in case. “It’s fine. I’m sure it was him. Griffin was totally buying time, asking me stupid questions on my way home.”

“Still, I don’t like this. What was he asking about?”

“Do you remember a guy named Randy who I dated a few years ago?”

“Yeah... Now that you mention it. Griffin asked me about him as well.”

“Well, I have no idea why he—” The phone slips out of my hand, crashing onto the floor with a smash as someone grabs me from behind. Something covers my mouth before the scream in my throat can pass my lips.

I barely have time for panic to set in when a sharp prick on my neck has me frozen in place. I stare down at my broken phone screen as my vision becomes blurry. A moment later, everything goes black.

MASON



IF MY TRAINING TAUGHT ME ANYTHING, IT'S THE VALUE OF logic. Facts. Once you let emotion leak in, you're finished. You might as well stand back with your arms open wide and let the enemy blow you apart.

Case in point, I let Teagan get too close. I stopped relying on logic. Now, logic tells me I did the right thing by cutting her out of my life. She betrayed me. All evidence points to that. There's no other scenario where she's innocent.

I wish someone would explain that to my gut, which has been churning ever since I made the decision to kick her out. Something's not right. I've always been sure of myself. If there's anyone I can trust, it's me.

For the first time ever, my judgment is in doubt.

I don't know what to do with this uncertainty. Every time I think of her—which is more than I should—the sense of something being very wrong kicks me in the chest all over again. Unless she's the most gifted actress ever born, she's not the kind of girl who'd date a lowlife like Randy for long. That's not her. Or did she have me fooled? And how did I let it happen?

I'm almost glad for the message from Tank that interrupts my dark, brooding train of thought. I might sit around and blame myself for the rest of the day, otherwise.

Tank: Kent missed his hourly check-in. Can't get ahold of him.

I grip the phone tighter when the message sinks in. I've had Kent watching her building since part of me still can't let her go. She's been safe. More importantly, there's been no suspicious visitors, either. No proof that she's involved with anyone.

Before I can text him back, the phone rings with a call from Griffin. I answer the call, saying, "We might have a situation. Kent didn't—"

"There's a situation in the lobby, too. I'm on my way down there now. It's the kid. Jase."

I'm out the door and jogging down the hall already. "What's he doing? Why would he come here?"

"Apparently, he's out of his mind, begging for help. Saying somebody took his sister."

A wave washes over me, knocking me flat and submerging me in water so icy cold, I'd swear needles are piercing me all over. At least, that's how it feels as I race to the lobby with the image of Teagan's face hovering in front of me.

By the time I find Jase, he is no closer to calming down than he was before. "You've gotta help me!" He's shaking, sweating, lunging at me. Griffin makes a move like he wants to get between us, but I shake my head. This isn't an act. My gut tells me so, and I haven't done enough following it lately.

"What happened?" I demand, taking him by the arms and holding him still.

"I was on the phone with her, and all of a sudden, she was gone." He gulps in air before the rest pours out. "She said her front door was open. I told her not to go in!"

Which guaranteed she would. She'll never learn.

"You're coming with me." I take Jase by the back of his neck and push him in front of me.

"But we have to help her!" The words tumble out in a breathless heap—practically a sob.

"Where do you think we're going?" I steer him toward the SUV and shove him in the back while Griffin gets behind the

wheel. That's probably for the best. I don't know if I could get us there in one piece.

Along the way, I manage to get the full story out of Jase. They were talking on the phone. "She thought you had somebody break in," he snarls behind me. "And Griffin here was asking questions to keep her out of there while they were doing it."

"That's not true," Griffin says in a tight, grim voice while weaving in and out of traffic. "Dammit, I should've followed her. I should've made sure she was safe. I came back to the hotel instead."

"And then she dropped the phone or something, and there was all this banging and voices I didn't know." I watch over my shoulder as he takes his head in his hands. "I couldn't do anything about it. I had to sit there and listen, and there was nothing. I could. Do!"

I can't comfort him when I'm so close to combusting—and I only get closer once we roll past Kent's car to find him slumped over the wheel with a bullet hole in the side of his head. Countless ugly scenarios run through my head all at once, and they all feature a dead Teagan. It's my fault. I should never have abandoned her.

"Wait out here," Griffin tells Jase, which I'd point out as a waste of time if I were more than vaguely aware of what's going on around me as I run into the building and up to the apartment with the others on my heels. There's no way he's staying outside when it's clear he's on the verge of falling apart.

And he's too much like his sister to listen to reason.

The door is open. Is she inside? Dread builds in my head, more intense with every heartbeat until it's almost crippling. What if I find her in there?

"Teagan?" I step into a ruined space. Either she fought them or they trashed her place to make it look like a robbery. A lamp shattered on the floor, and a handful of small plants

spilled soil everywhere when they were knocked over. The coffee table is on its side.

“Oh shit. Teagan. Where is she?” Jase stumbles around, stricken and hyperventilating. “No, man, not like this. She doesn’t deserve this. Fuck, where could she be?”

“Breathe.” Griffin goes to him and grips his shoulders tight, holding him up. “You’re not doing her any favors by losing your shit.”

I wish he could get that through to me while I walk through the aftermath of Teagan’s fight to survive. There we were, so sure she betrayed us. Natalie closed her heart. I tried to.

It’s all my fault. We could’ve avoided this if I’d heard her out instead of reacting. Griffin wouldn’t be talking Jase out of breaking down while I walk through the apartment.

Teagan’s scent hangs heavy in one of the bedrooms. I step inside and inhale deeply before spotting a sheet of paper resting on the pillows at the head of the neatly made bed. Certainty fills my mind before I reach out to take hold of the handwritten note.

COME TO THE TREE YOU USED TO CLIMB.

ALONE, OR SHE DIES.

I did this. It may as well be my handwriting I’m staring at. Strangely, it does look familiar. Or does it? My mind’s playing tricks on me. The room is spinning, and the words seem to swim in front of my face before I let the note drop to the bed.

I can’t think, but that’s the one skill I need now. Who could be behind this? And what the hell are they talking about? A tree I used to climb. She needs me. I have to remember. *Focus, dammit!*

It hits me all at once. A clear memory of climbing a sprawling oak, scraping my hands and knees, and scrambling higher, feeling like I could see everything from that high up. I’m sure it wasn’t that high, but to a kid, it felt like I might touch the clouds.

And it grew behind my childhood home.

Griffin has called in backup, and they're arriving when I slowly walk out of Teagan's bedroom. I know what I have to do. I know it has to be done alone. I can't risk her safety by going against the instructions.

It's easy to slip out unnoticed with all the bodies moving around. I use my spare keys to the SUV and pull away from the building. I can't remember the last time I visited the house. I can't imagine the significance. Who would know about the tree? Who would care?

Is Teagan there? Waiting for me, terrified, hating me for leaving her vulnerable? I need her to make it through this. I need the chance to tell her how wrong I was. I jumped to conclusions and sacrificed her in the process. She must have been so hurt and confused while I sat back and tried to convince myself I was doing the right thing.

I turn off my headlights once I've turned onto the old street. Now is not the time for memories to come knocking, but there's no blocking them out as I roll slowly past houses that used to be as familiar to me as my own. It was a long time ago. Another life. It's unreal how long a man can go without ever thinking about certain things, yet those locked-up memories can still feel as fresh and vivid as if they were made yesterday.

My breath catches once I recognize the old house up ahead. Rather than driving all the way to the front curb, I park a few houses down and kill the engine. There isn't a moment to lose, but I can't make the mistake of rushing headlong into this, either.

The two-story house is dark. Empty-looking. The windows are blank eyes staring out at me. Judging. Observing what's to come while an evening breeze makes the tree branches sway and sends a chill up my spine once I've stepped out of the car.

Everything looks clear so far. There are no threats lurking in the shadows between the amber streetlights. Yet behind the old privacy fence separating the property from the one beside

it, the branches of the oak tree stretch up past the roof. It's grown. Life has moved on.

Still, nothing seems out of the ordinary as I walk along the fence, peering through the thin gaps in the planks. A three-quarter moon spills silver light on the yard and the woods beyond it, but I can't get a clear look. Not yet.

Not until I round the corner and dart across the lawn to press myself against the side of the house, almost hugging the wall, crouching to pass under the windows.

Finally, I reach the rear of the house, crouched in the darkness and straining my eyes to get a better look at the limp girl tied to the thick tree trunk not fifty feet away. Moonlight paints her dark hair platinum and makes her pale skin glow like a pearl. The breeze blows, and she shivers—my heart can beat now. I can breathe. She's alive.

And tied, gagged, and under the control of... who?

The impulse to run to her is almost too much to fight. All I can do is remind myself what will happen if I do it before I have an idea of the situation. I scan the area, watching and listening. No flash of moonlight off the steel of a rifle. No footsteps. No breathing once I hold my own.

No sound at all, in fact, until a voice floats my way.

"It's about time. I thought you forgot."

This isn't happening. I can't hear that voice because it belongs to someone I know is dead.

Someone who's emerging from the woods beyond the yard. I saw her at the gala. Somehow, I knew it was her, even when it shouldn't have been possible.

This has to be a nightmare. A cruel and twisted dream. I'm going to wake up any moment now. Only I'm not.

"Mom?" I barely recognize my own voice. The sound is more fitting for a small, frightened boy than a grown man.

I take a step toward her, needing to get closer, yearning to touch her just to make sure she is real. As I move, four men step out from the forest edge, guns drawn and pointing at me.

“I thought you were...” Memories of standing in front of her grave, placing flowers on the headstones as Natalie cried by my side assault me.

“Dead?” She finishes my sentence. “Sometimes I wish I was, but unfortunately, I have to live with the pain you’ve caused every day.”

I’m so fucking confused. I have no idea what she means by that or how we got here. “What are you talking about? I don’t understand.”

“Cut the shit, Mason!” She suddenly yells, an unhinged tone in her voice. Her hands ball into fists, and her body shakes with anger. “I know what you did! I know about Operation Black Orchid. I know it was your fault!”

“Mom.” Her name falls off my lips like a desperate prayer, pleading with her to explain what’s going on.

“Don’t call me that,” she snaps, “You stopped being my son the day you killed my baby boy!”

I’m speechless. Shocked and confused beyond anything I’ve ever experienced. My training in the SEALs prepared me for a lot of things, but not this.

TEAGAN



“KILL HIM!” MASON’S MOM SNEERS, POINTING HER FINGER AT her son.

My heart stops. Using every last ounce of strength, I fight against the restraints until the ropes dig into my skin painfully. This can’t be it. I can’t watch him die.

Mason stares at his mother in disbelief. I scream, but thanks to the gag in my mouth, it’s nothing but a muffled groan. It’s enough to get Mason’s attention. He looks over at me once more. I’ve never seen so much pain and anguish in one person’s eyes.

Bang. A shot is fired.

“Nooooo!” I scream against the gag. *No, no, no! Please no.*

Lowering my gaze, I immediately find his white shirt turning red at an alarming rate. Blood soaks his shirt as his body starts to sway. My vision goes blurry, tears running down my face uncontrollably.

Another shot is fire. Then another.

Everything happens so fast that I don’t know where to look. Someone comes seemingly out of nowhere and tackles Mason to the ground. Two... no, three, or five men dressed in SWAT gear come running from behind the house to storm the backyard.

One of the men runs toward me, blocking my view while shielding me from harm. He is wearing a black mask, but I’m pretty sure it’s Tank, judging by his size. I keep wiggling in

the restraints, desperate to get free, but nothing gives. Blood trickles down my hands where the rope has rubbed my skin raw. At this point, I don't even feel any pain anymore, at least not physically.

The gunfire suddenly stops, and the area goes eerily quiet. The man in front of me turns around and starts to untie me. He takes the gag out of my mouth first.

“Tank?” I rasp, my throat raw and dry.

He nods while carefully cutting my restraints with a knife he pulls from his boot. The moment I'm free, I almost collapse on the floor. I get back up quickly, thanks to Tank's help. My knees shake uncontrollably, but somehow, I manage to stumble past Tank and run toward Mason.

He is flat on the ground now. Griffin kneels beside him, putting pressure on Mason's chest. I fall back onto the ground, my hands and knees digging into the grass.

Griffin calls for Tank to help him get Mason in the SUV that one of the other guys pulls around the house. The team of men moves like a well-rehearsed stage production. Almost like an invisible force directs them to move in a precise order. One opens the back door while Tank and Griffin lift Mason into the back seat. I'm the only person awkwardly standing on the sidelines, unsure what to do.

If it wasn't for Tank coming back for me to scoop me off the ground, I would probably just sit here until the morning.

“Is he going to be okay?” I ask, knowing damn well he can't answer me.

The car Mason is in takes off in a hurry while Tank walks me to a similar-looking car up front. Sirens approach from afar as we get into the car, but neither Tank nor the driver seem concerned.

I sit in the back seat and buckle up, noticing how terrible my wrists look. They are swollen, raw, and bloody. I don't feel any pain yet; my guess is that's due to the adrenaline rushing through my veins. That will soon run out, and if I'm being honest, I'm looking forward to it. Physical pain is always

easier to handle than the emotional kind, and right now, I'm not sure how much more of that I can take.

The drive to the hotel passes in a blur. We pull into the parking garage, where the second car is parked in front of the elevator, the back door still wide open.

"They rushed him to medical." The driver breaks the silence just as he kills the engine. "You should get checked out as well."

"I'm fine." I open the door to climb out of the car, not realizing how weak my knees still are. I have to grab the top of the door so I don't fall flat on my face. "But I'm going up there anyway, I guess."

I take another moment to gather my strength before slowly walking around the car. Tank meets me halfway, and I gladly hook my arm into his for support.

"I really am fine," I promise. "Physically, at least. I mean, yeah, I'm a little shaken up, and I haven't really eaten a lot the past few days. So that's probably not helping. What I mean is I didn't get shot."

We ride the elevator to the first floor. The familiar setting of the hotel's medical wing greets me when the doors slide open. The sterile smell of disinfectant fills my nose. The hall is empty, but many voices come from one of the rooms and the waiting area.

I glance up at Tank, who gives me a reassuring nod. He keeps his strides small, letting my short legs set the pace as we walk down the hallway to the waiting area.

Griffin, Dallas, and two more guys I don't know are in a heated argument that comes to an abrupt end when they see me approaching. The only words I caught before the silence was "possible inside job."

"Hi," Griffin greets me with a sad look in his eyes.

"Is he okay?"

"He is alive," Griffin replies, his voice raspy like he has been yelling. He stares at me like he wants to say more, but

something holds him back.

“Teagan?” Natalie’s voice draws my attention away from him. I look over my shoulder to find her approaching us. Her eyes are a little red and puffy. Her usual well-put-together look is slightly off. She closes the distance between us and wraps her arms around me.

“I am so sorry,” she whispers into my hair. “We should have never kicked you out like that. We should have believed you. I can’t believe they did that to you... to him.”

As soon as she mentions “they,” I realize nobody has told her about her mom yet. Letting go of Tank’s arm, I hug her back as hard as I can. I have no idea how we can tell her without breaking her heart. Tears form in my eyes again, knowing that I can’t save her from the crushing pain she’s about to experience. The same anguish I saw written all over Mason’s face.

“I’m just glad it’s over.” At least, I hope it is. I don’t even know what happened to their mother. Did she get shot or get away? I was too worried about Mason that I wasn’t paying attention to her.

“Mason just went into surgery, but he was awake when he came in,” Nat explains. “He was asking for you.”

I straighten up. My chest suddenly aches. I want to see him as well, but part of me is scared. Worried about what he’s going to say.

“Hey, Nat.” Dallas comes up to us. “Mind taking a walk with me?”

Her eyebrows draw together in confusion, but she quickly covers it up with a smile before nodding. An uneasy feeling spreads out in my chest as I watch them walk away together. Is he trying to get her away from me, or is he telling her about her mom?

“Come, sit down before you fall over,” Griffin calls from the waiting area. I’m all too happy to oblige. My body goes limp with exhaustion as I flop down on the white leather sofa.

“Where is Dallas taking Natalie? Is he telling her about their mom?” I don’t know why, but I’m whispering the last few words.

“You never stop asking questions, do you?”

“I’m just curious.” I shrug.

He seems to be mulling it over like he’s thinking about telling me, which is more than his usual cutthroat attitude.

“We are not sure if Natalie was involved.”

It takes me a second to process what he’s saying. I shake my head. “No, that can’t be. She loves Mason. She would never do that to him.”

“She also loves her mom.” Sighing, Griffin leans forward and props his elbows on his knees. “I’ve known Mason and Natalie for a very long time. Nat was really close to her mom.”

I stare at him in shock, remembering them talking about an inside job earlier. Still, I can’t wrap my mind around Natalie betraying Mason. I just can’t imagine it.

“You need to see a doctor.” Griffin changes the subject, his voice firm.

Before I can muster up a no, Tank signs something to Griffin that makes him sigh in annoyance. He gets up quickly and disappears down the hall.

“What was that about?” I ask Tank, who answers with a shrug.

A moment later, Griffin returns with a nurse in tow. As they get closer, I recognize her as one of the people who took care of me the last time I was here. She’s pulling a cart behind her with medical equipment and a pole for an IV.

“Hello, Teagan,” Nurse Carina greets me. “I heard you haven’t been eating or drinking.”

“Snitch.” I give Tank an accusatory glare. He doesn’t seem bothered one bit. As a matter of fact, he has a little bit of a smug grin on his face.

“I got something special for you.” Carina beams. “You’ll feel so much better after this IV nutrition.”

I don’t feel like fighting her, so I agree to the stupid IV. She does it right here in the waiting area. Carina also cleans the marks on my wrists and bandages them up. I’m glad I don’t have to look at them. Right now, I just want to forget what happened today, though I know I never will.

MASON



THE FIRST THING I NOTICE WHEN I COME TO IS THE HEAVY smell of disinfectant and harsh cleaning solution in the air. The second is the low but consistent beeping from the heart rate machine. I'm definitely in the hospital. It takes me another few moments to open my eyes to be greeted by the bright overhead fluorescent lamps.

"Who put these annoying lights in?" My voice is raspy, and my throat is raw.

"You did," Natalie says.

Squinting my eyes, I search for my sister. I find her sitting next to my bed, looking like shit.

"What happened to you?"

"Me?" She laughs humorlessly. "I'm not the one who got shot."

It only takes a second for all the memories to rush back to my mind. Teagan kidnapped and tied to a tree. My mother alive... our mother ordered to kill me.

"Nat..." I stumble over her name, trying to find the words to tell her.

"Dallas already told me," she explains flatly, her eyes trained at a random spot on my blanket. "She got away, but we will find her and eliminate the threat."

I wince at the thought. "You talk like she's just a random person."

“At this point, she is. Wouldn’t you agree? From what Griffin told me, the woman we used to call Mom is gone.”

“Where is Teagan?”

Natalie still can’t look me in the eyes. “She let the nurse check her out and push fluids, but she left when you came out of surgery.”

I try to sit up. Stupid idea. Pain shoots from my chest, radiating out to my limbs. Fuck, my whole body hurts.

“Don’t try to get up, idiot.” Nat rolls her eyes at me. “You’re lucky you’re even alive. The bullet missed all your organs. Went straight through you.”

Still hurts like hell. “Did someone—”

“Tank took her home, and he’s currently parked outside her apartment.”

“Good, I want a whole team—”

“Already happening. Griffin picked them out himself.”

I relax a little. “How long do I have to stay here?”

“Until the doctor says you’re good to go. Don’t push yourself, Mason. We’ve got everything under control.”

I snort. Nothing is under control. My mother has gone crazy and wants me dead because she thinks I killed my brother. I accused Teagan of lying and kicked her out. It’s my fault she got kidnapped and almost killed. She will never forgive me for this, and I can’t blame her. There’s only one person to blame, and that’s me.

This is all my fault.

One week later...

“I’M LEAVING, AND THAT’S IT.” I HOLD MY GROUND NO matter how much my team tries to change my mind.

“You are still recovering from surgery.” Griffin huffs. “Why do you have to be so stubborn?”

“She hasn’t answered any of my calls or messages. I just need to talk to her.” I look at my phone again, never losing hope of seeing a message pop up. If I could just talk to her face-to-face and make her understand how sorry I am, maybe she would give me another shot.

Wishful thinking.

“Teagan doesn’t wanna talk to you right now. Give her some space.”

“Whose side are you on?”

“I’m on the side that doesn’t want you to get killed.”

If I could just see her once... or maybe it’s just my selfish need to see her face. Either way, the urge to see her is too overwhelming. “I have to try to make this right.”

“And you can, but not today. Plus, you still look like shit. She’ll never take you back looking like a bum. Eat a burger or something. Your cheeks are all sunk in; you look like a fucking ghost.”

Tank nods in agreement. Count on your best friends to give you an honest opinion. “Fine, I won’t go today. Give me an update on my mother.”

“We haven’t found much more. All we know is that she’s working with someone who has a lot of power. Highly skilled and with a vendetta against you.”

“Since she mentioned Operation Black Orchid, our best bet is it’s an inside job,” Griffin offers, though he knows I hate him bringing it up. “Unless... someone else from that mission survived.”

“Impossible. That building was completely gone.” The memory of that day invades my mind—the sudden explosion, the building caving in on itself. I can almost smell burning flesh just by thinking of it. “And there was nothing besides desert in a hundred-mile radius.”

“Black Orchid was a highly classified mission; only a handful of people knew about it, and most of those people are already dead. You know that the government doesn’t keep records of those.”

Of course, I know all of that. It just doesn’t make sense. “What about my father?” This has been a question on my mind since I saw my mom alive.

“We sent a team to check the gravesite. Your mother’s coffin was empty. Your dad’s wasn’t.”

I’m not sure how to feel. Disappointed or relieved?

That’s not the only question remaining. What really happened that day? Was my dad’s death really an accident, or did my mom kill him?

One month later...

SOMEHOW, I CAN STILL SMELL HER IN THE SUITE SHE STAYED in. Her unique flowery scent lingers in the air, clinging to the room the same way I’m holding on to the memory of her. I haven’t let anyone inside, not even the cleaning crew.

I’ve tried to contact her to no avail. At first, I was dead set on seeing her, but as time passed, I became set in my old ways. I haven’t left the hotel, and Teagan clearly doesn’t want to see me. So like the creep I am, I go to the place she used to sleep when she didn’t spend the night with me upstairs.

The blanket is in a heap at the foot of the bed. I imagine her kicking it off sleepily before stumbling to the bathroom to brush her teeth like a weirdo. God, I miss her. I miss everything about her, including watching her smear toothpaste directly onto her front teeth. I feel the corner of my mouth lift into a smile, a feeling I haven’t experienced in the last four weeks. I didn’t even realize how much joy she brought me until she was gone.

With a heavy heart, I make my way through her suite until the stacked notes and drawings on the desk catch my attention.

I pick up one of the pictures she drew of Maddie, wondering why she would leave something that was so important to her.

Jesus Christ. I told Tank not to let them take anything. Just when I thought I couldn't be a bigger asshole. Dammit, I don't deserve her. The very least I can do is return these to her.

Gathering every piece of paper I can find, I stack it in a neat pile and put it in the inside of my suit jacket. Using my newfound vigor, I leave her suite and speed walk to the elevator. I go directly to the underground garage, calling one of my guys to meet me down there with my car keys.

I haven't driven my car in so long; I'm surprised it starts right away. Pulling out of the parking garage and into the busy city roads is a bit overwhelming. I quickly get used to it, swerving through traffic to get to Teagan faster.

Driving into her neighborhood, seeing the old beat-up cars, bars in front of windows, and trash scattered, reminds me of how bad of an area she lives in. I really hate this. I wish she would return to the hotel with me, where she is safe and comfortable.

I park in front of her apartment and kill the engine. Her papers feel heavy in my pocket as I get out of the car and walk to her front door. Lifting my hand, I rap my knuckles against the wood and wait. I don't realize I'm holding my breath until I hear the click of the door unlocking and exhale.

The moment she appears, the tightening in my chest loosens, and I can breathe easier than I have in weeks. "Hi." That's the only word I can muster up. What the fuck is wrong with me? I'm a goddamn Navy SEAL, and I'm not afraid of anything. How am I so fucking nervous talking to this tiny woman.

"Hi," she responds, her hand still on the knob as if she wants to stay ready to close the door in my face.

"I came here to give you this." I dig her notes out of my pocket and hand them to her.

She doesn't move, doesn't reach out for them. Instead, she stares at the papers for a few moments, her eyes wide as tears

build up in them. She blinks the tears away before one can escape. "I don't want them."

"What? Why?"

"I don't care about them," she lies. "It was a stupid idea. Just throw them in the trash." And with that, she shuts the door, leaving me standing outside, confused and angry with myself.

How the fuck am I going to fix this mess I created?

Six months later...

I AM A LOT OF THINGS, BUT I NEVER THOUGHT I WOULD ADD stalker to that list. Yet here I am, sitting in the car in front of Teagan's apartment, waiting for her to leave to go to work just to catch a glimpse of her. She hasn't returned any of my calls, emails, or text messages. I stopped trying a few weeks ago, but I still can't let go completely.

Everyone tells me to give up, but as my boot camp instructor used to say, there isn't an ounce of quit in me. No matter how long it takes, I will do anything to win her back.

TEAGAN



“HEY, SWEETHEART!”

I know the burly, drunk man at the other end of the bar is calling for me, but the last I checked, my name isn't sweetheart, so I continue polishing glasses like I didn't hear him. Some people get the hint right away.

Others? Not so much.

“Hello? I'm talking to you.” When I still don't answer, he bangs the bottom of his pint glass on the bar. “Hey!”

“Excuse me.” I turn around with a hand on my hip. The handful of customers who bother hanging around this late at night chuckle knowingly. Sure, none of them will stick up for me, but they'll laugh at the free entertainment. “I'm wearing a name tag that says Teagan. Now, you've been in here enough to know my name.”

“Oh, one of those.” He rolls his eyes and groans, and since I really need this job, I won't ask him what the hell he thinks he means by that. Besides, I know what he means. God forbid a woman ask for a little respect.

“I want you to pour me one more.”

“I already announced last call.” I look at the clock on the wall, then look at him. “And I'm going to be locking the door in two minutes.”

“I can drink it in two minutes.”

“I'm sorry, but no. You had almost fifteen minutes to ask me for another beer. I'm getting ready to close up now.” I

really wish he would go. One of the cooks is still in the kitchen, closing up, so I'm not alone. But I don't feel like having to call for help, either.

“Why do you have to be such a bitch?”

The handful of guys still hanging around start to get up and wander away, leaving their glasses on the bar for me. I kind of want to ask them to take him along with them, but instead, I collect the glasses on a tray and carry them over to the sink.

“Did you hear my question?” The slob stands and leans against the bar for support. “I asked you why you have to be such a bitch.”

“It would be a good idea for you to go.”

Instead, he reaches out as soon as I'm close enough and grabs my arm. “Get off me!” I shout as I try to pull away.

All at once, the front door flies open, and a tall blur darts across the room. Once Griffin closes a hand around the back of the man's neck, the hand around my arm disappears. “Get your sorry ass out of here,” Griffin growls before practically picking the man up and carrying him to the door.

I'm relieved, sure, but that doesn't keep me from being annoyed, too. “Don't you have anything better to do than stalk me?”

“Stalk you? Last I checked, I helped you out.”

“And like I keep telling you, I don't need you watching me all the time.”

“Sure. You have everything under control. It was obvious from outside that you were handling things.”

“I don't need this, all right? Please. Just let me live my life.” When he doesn't move, I look up from the glasses I'm washing. “I sort of need this job, you know? It's bad enough I got fired from the grocery store. I'll get fired from here, too, if you keep handling the customers like that.”

“You're right.” He folds his arms over his broad chest. “Next time you're being assaulted, I'll settle for watching from a distance.”

“You can go now. I’m locking up.”

“If it’s all the same to you, I’ll give you a ride home.”

“It is not all the same to me.”

“Stop wasting your breath.” Because obviously, what I want doesn’t matter and never has. Since Mason refuses to take a hint and get out of my life, I’m forced to put up with this.

It’s not like it’s worth fighting. I know it. I’ve sort of become resigned to being watched all the time. But I won’t let them know that. I’m at least going to put on a good show. The second Mason figures out I’ve gotten used to his interfering, he’ll start doing more of it.

I’m exhausted by the time I lock the door behind me. It’s late enough that the street is pretty quiet, but I’m glad for the ride. My feet hurt after working a double, and I don’t feel like waiting for the bus. Griffin isn’t much of a conversationalist, but that’s not a bad thing. I don’t have much to say to him, anyway. I want to know how Mason is, but I guess pride won’t let me ask. I need to believe I made the right choice by walking away from his dangerous and secretive life.

And the more I talk about him, the harder it will be to convince myself I’m doing the right thing.

“I hope you don’t tell him about what happened back there.” It’s a relief to sit down in the comfortable car and take a breath.

“Him?” I roll my eyes at Griffin’s question.

“You know who I mean. I don’t need to go in for my next shift and get chewed out because Mason made a phone call or something. I really do need this job.”

“Nobody is trying to get you fired.” I want to ask how well he actually knows his boss, but I’m too tired to fight. Guys like Griffin tell themselves they’re doing the right thing, and they think that makes it okay to tune out what everybody else says and feels and wants.

“Taking the long way?” I ask once I notice we’re driving through town rather than heading straight for my building. I really hope he doesn’t plan on taking me someplace else. I just want to go to bed.

“I passed something on the way to the bar that I thought you might be interested in.” I have to wonder what interests a man like him and why we’d be interested in the same thing.

It doesn’t take long before I find out. “The bookstore?” I murmur when he slows, then stops in front of a plate glass window with books displayed behind it.

“Yeah. Take a look.”

“What am I looking at?” I’m annoyed but also curious now, swiveling in the seat and rolling down the window so I can lean out a little. There’s a sign in the window advertising new releases. Beneath it, a handful of books are spread out, including a book that looks familiar but shouldn’t.

I must be seeing things. “What is that?”

I wasn’t really talking to Griffin, but he answers anyway. “Why don’t you go and see?”

I will because now my skin tingles, and my heart flutters, and I need to know I’m not dreaming this. That I’m not imagining a familiar-looking dragon slayer on the cover of one of the books.

At first, it’s like I got hit in the stomach hard enough to knock all the air out of me. Somebody stole my idea! Because that is Maddie on the cover, my Maddie. That is exactly how I drew her, and the dragon flying above her head confirms this is not a coincidence. Somebody took my idea and made a book out of it!

A book... with my name on the cover.

I take a giant step back from the window like I’m afraid the book will burst through the glass and attack or something. When I turn around to look at Griffin for answers, he’s grinning. “Go in.”

“They’re closed!”

“Are you sure about that?” He makes a shooing motion with his hand and seems very sure of himself. I don’t know what any of this means, but now there’s no turning back. I have to figure out what’s going on here.

The door opens, but the store is as quiet as I guessed. “Hello?” I whisper, feeling like a complete idiot.

Soft footsteps sound out nearby before someone rounds a row of bookshelves. “Hello,” Mason murmurs. “Surprise.”

He looks incredible, but then he always does. I forgot how the sight of him makes my heart swell, and my pulse race. I forgot how hard it is to breathe sometimes when I look into his eyes. It’s all coming back to me now, though, just like in the old song.

I have to fight to get even a few words out when my brain is on overdrive. “My book. My drawings.”

He nods slowly. The beginning of a smile tugs at the corners of his mouth. “You didn’t really think I would throw it away?”

“You never honor any of my wishes, do you?” I snap at him.

He flinches slightly at my sharp response. “That’s fair. But let’s face it. Would you have gone through with getting published otherwise?”

He makes a point, but... “I don’t have the resources you do.”

“You did all of this yourself. All I did was show this to the right people. And I hope the publisher did your book justice. They told me there was enough material there to publish the first in the series.”

“Series?”

“Why not? I’m sure Maddie has plenty of adventures ahead of her, so long as you give her the chance.”

I can’t grasp any of this. “Am I dreaming?”

“No, you’re not dreaming. This is very real, and it’s the least I can do for you. I wanted to,” he insists when I’m ready to protest. “You deserve this chance. And there are plenty of people in the world with half your talent but far more resources. Why don’t you deserve a little help, too?”

My book. My book is real. And it’s all thanks to him. “I don’t know what to say. I’m grateful. I am. But I’m overwhelmed, too.”

“Of course you are. You don’t have to sound apologetic.” His eyes move over my face like he’s hungry. For what? For me? Or for forgiveness? Maybe they’re the same thing, I don’t know. I only know being in his presence again has me feeling weaker than ever. It would be so easy to give in. I can almost forget why it was so important for us to stay apart in the first place.

“I only want you to be happy,” he murmurs before taking one slow step after another in my direction. Is it possible for a heart to sink and soar at the same time? Because I want him, I do, but there’s still so many questions. So many lingering doubts. “This is just one example of everything you can have. I want to give you the world. You’ve already worked so hard for so long. Let me take care of you now. Give your dreams a chance.”

God, is it tempting? And every sweet whispered word strips a little more of my resolve away until I can barely remember why I keep turning him down. He only wants to take care of me. This is something I should be grateful for.

Wait. What am I thinking?

“This is an incredible gift.” I start backing away and notice how his face falls. “But you can’t buy me.”

“Buy you? Why do you have to turn it into something like that? Who said anything about buying you?”

“It’s what you’re doing right now. You can do anything if you have enough money. And you do. That doesn’t change anything, not really. Not where it matters.”

“It doesn’t matter that I want you? That I’m sorry for everything?”

“I know you’re sorry. But no. This can’t change anything. I’m grateful. I’m so grateful. But I can’t do this. I can’t be with you. And for your information, I don’t want to be taken care of, not in this way. I want a partner, an equal. Someone who doesn’t keep secrets from me.”

“I don’t keep secrets to hurt you.”

“I know that, and I know that some people would be more understanding and okay with your job, but I just can’t do it. I can’t live in a hotel, knowing there is so much stuff going on inside I just don’t know about. I just can’t. So unless you are willing to tell me everything, it’ll never work between us.”

This isn’t what he expected, obviously. I don’t want to hurt him, but it’s either that or betray myself. I won’t do that anymore.

Griffin doesn’t call out to me when I leave the store, determined to walk the rest of the way. I notice he still follows me, though. Let him. I don’t have it in me to care.

Not when I finally have what I wanted, but my heart is still in pieces.

TEAGAN



IT'S THE SCENT I NOTICE FIRST. EVEN BEFORE I OPEN THE door to my apartment after a long shift, I pick up a sweet, floral scent that's completely out of place. I've smelled a lot of things in this hallway, yet it's never been flowers.

I'm pretty sure what I'll find before I swing the door open onto what can only be described as something out of a dream. Roses. Daisies. Carnations and lilies and peonies and other blooms I can't identify. Every color imaginable, in enormous arrangements that cover every flat surface. There are even a few vases on the floor. Everywhere I look, there they are.

My apartment has been turned into a florist shop while I was at work.

"I wasn't sure which was your favorite."

Mason's voice comes as no surprise. Only one person could've come up with something like this. He couldn't buy me with my book, so he bought out a flower shop. I don't even want to think about how much it cost.

I look up from a gorgeous bunch of red roses to find him coming out of my bedroom. As always, he looks hot enough to melt my panties in one of his tailored suits. I've missed looking at him. I've missed everything about him, in fact. So much that I've spent the past week coming up with new reasons to stay away from the hotel. It hasn't been easy, but I keep telling myself it's the right thing.

I'm not feeling too confident in my decision right now. It's a lot easier to resist him when we're not breathing the same air

—and it was already hard as hell. “You really can’t take no for an answer, can you?” I ask.

“You don’t get where I am by accepting rejection.”

“And where did you get?” As much as I want to fall into his arms, I fold mine because I refuse to make it this easy for him. Anybody can spend a bunch of money. And I know he has it—he talked about millions of dollars when he explained it to me. He actually used the word millions.

His calm, confident expression slips a little. “I don’t understand.”

“Where did you end up? Living in a hotel? Making it your entire world?”

“It’s not that simple.”

“You live a life I would always have to be apart from. Don’t you get that?”

I can tell he wants to dismiss my worries. It’s written all over his face—the way he frowns and his already sharp jaw goes tight. It’s his instinct to brush all of that aside. He’s slowing himself down and giving me the benefit of taking me seriously. Almost like he’s trying to meet me halfway.

“The life I live is complicated. And yes, it’s dangerous. And because of that, I haven’t been able to share it with anyone. Even now, standing here in a garden, a part of me still wants to close off before I tell you too much. Not for my sake, but for yours. You have me hanging between what I know is right and what I want. And that’s a challenge. But I want to work through it. I want to because I want you. It’s no use telling myself to leave you alone and keep you safe from the sort of people I come into contact with. You worked your way into my heart when I wasn’t looking, and I can’t get you out.”

How am I supposed to stand up for myself when he says that? I feel my determination softening with every beat of my heart. Since it’s racing, I’m in trouble.

I have to remember what’s real. The flowers are gorgeous, and his words are sweet and overwhelming, but I walked away

for a damn good reason. “I can’t stand all the lies and shadowy stuff. I never know if you’re telling me the truth.”

“What do you want to know?” He slides his hands into his pockets and lifts his brows. “I’ll tell you if that’s what it takes to get you back. I’m ready to talk.”

It can’t be that easy. He looks and sounds sincere, but I spent too much time in that hotel to take what he’s saying at face value.

Let’s see how honest he’s willing to be. “The hotel isn’t all about protecting people, is it?”

His lips pull together in a tight line, and again, I know he’s fighting with himself. It might not even be that he wants to lie to me. It’s a habit now. He’s been dealing in secrets for so long; lying and deflecting are as natural as breathing.

“No. Not entirely.”

“The people who need government protection. Why? I don’t need specifics. I only want to understand.”

“The hotel is a shadow government black site.”

I search my brain for any movies or books I might have heard of before but come up empty. “What does that mean?”

“It means that the hotel is run by me and my team, but we are backed by the government and all their agencies, including the FBI, CIA, and the military. We have access to all their resources, but we are not restricted by any of their laws or regulations. The people who come to the hotel are freelancers, most of them former military or retired government agents and such.”

My jaw drops. I let his words run through my head a few times, letting each sink in slowly.

“Wow. A lot of things make sense now.”

“Yeah. It’s still in the government’s best interest to keep them safe, or else they risk dangerous secrets getting out.”

“And sometimes, people need to be detained, I guess?”

“What you saw on that floor, in that room...” He lifts his shoulders in an almost defeated shrug. “That was both business and personal. I might have kept Dave around a little longer than necessary, I admit. He tried to get to me, and I think we both know what he would have done to you if nobody had stopped him.”

I can’t pretend to agree with his methods, and he must understand that because he keeps talking as he slowly crosses the living room. “When it comes to you, I’m afraid there’s no holding back. I’m never going to be able to think rationally if there’s a chance you’re in danger or if somebody hurts you. I’m going to want to hurt them back. It’s who I am. I protect what’s mine.”

“And you think I’m yours?”

The corners of his mouth twitch. “Would I be here if I didn’t?”

I’m about three seconds from melting into a puddle, but I need to know one more thing while he’s in such an honest mood and all. “Do you love me?”

“Yes.” There is no hesitation. He reaches out to take my face in his hands, and let’s face it, I never stood a chance. Not when his touch makes me feel whole for the first time since I walked out of the hotel. I was kidding myself when I thought I could spend the rest of my life without him.

He’s telling the truth. I see it in his eyes. I could drown in them—in him. “I love you, too,” I confess in a whisper. “I really do. And I missed you.”

“You never have to miss me again because I’m not letting you go. Not ever.” He presses a gentle kiss against my forehead before sighing like he’s relieved. “I know what life is like without you, and I’m not about to go through it again. I can’t.”

I’ve never been as sure of anything as I am of the love burning in my heart while Mason tips my head back and lines my mouth up with his. Anticipation makes me forget to breathe at the moment before his lips touch mine, and the

world stops turning. There's nothing in the world but the two of us, anyway. And a lot of flowers that sort of give us nowhere to go once our kiss deepens, and it's clear kissing won't be enough.

He's thinking along the same lines I am. Before I know it, he literally sweeps me off my feet, and I squeal in surprise. "What are you doing?"

"Do you honestly have to ask that question?" The growl in his voice takes the heat that was already pooling in my core and turns it into a full-on blaze. By the time he lowers me onto my bed, I reach for him, stripping away one piece of clothing after another so my eyes and hands can feast on his body.

And my body? I'm on fire, writhing and arching to meet his touch. I'll die if I can't give myself to him so he can cure the ache I've been dealing with every day we've been apart. "Kiss me," I rasp, and he thrusts his tongue into my mouth while his hands slide over my bare skin once he's stripped me down.

I love the feel of his muscles moving under my hands as I run them up his back and across his shoulders. My nails dig into his skin, and I moan when his mouth trails over my chest and closes around one of my nipples. It's not just the way his tongue swirls over my sensitive peak. It's the way he grunts and growls like a starving animal having its first meal. Like he'll eat me alive.

I want him to.

I'm dripping wet and grinding my pussy against his thigh by the time he nudges my legs farther apart to settle between them. "I've missed this." His fingers slide up and down my swollen seam like he's testing to make sure I'm ready, like there's any doubt.

"You're so wet." He parts my lips, and I gasp when a delicious sensation rolls through me. I'm so wet and throbbing that the slightest touch makes me gasp and grind helplessly. My body knows what it needs, and only he can give it to me.

“Yes... just like that...” He chuckles against my skin when I beg but gives me what I want, teasing my entrance with the tip of his finger while working my clit with his thumb. It’s the purest, most intense pleasure I’ve ever felt, and it will consume me if it goes on much longer.

My hips jerk fast when I sense the end coming. I’m close, so close, caught in a frenzy while Mason whispers in my ear. “Come for me. Give it to me.”

How could I say no? Everything shatters around me like crystal and sets off rainbows of pure light that fill my head. I’m laughing and crying all at once by the time Mason replaces his fingers with the wide head of his dick, pushing against my quivering hole.

When he doesn’t sink inside me right away, confusion makes me open my eyes. He’s staring down at me, smiling a little. “I do love you,” he whispers as he lowers his body onto mine. “And I’m going to spend every day of the rest of my life showing you.”

“You can start now.” I link my legs around his back before stretching upward to kiss him hard, deep, and with everything I have. Fresh heat explodes its way through my core when he rolls his hips and pushes forward, filling me.

It’s like flying. Every stroke takes me higher until I’m soaring and clutching him tight to keep from falling back to earth. He would never let me fall. My nails run down his back while I touch my lips to his throat, his shoulders, anything I can reach. I have to soak in every bit of his scent, the taste of his skin, and the sweat that’s starting to bead there.

“Teagan...” His helpless groan is a match touching my fuse. Knowing he’s in this with me. That he needs this as much as I do. He needs me and won’t let anything get in the way of us.

And he’s close, too, the way I am. The springs shriek under us, faster and louder, as he loses his rhythm and gives in to the need for relief. We both need it.

“Harder! Harder!” My nails break the skin between his shoulder blades, but I barely hear his hiss of pained pleasure over my own cries. “Yes! Yes, Mason!”

My body goes stiff against his one more time before bliss rolls over me like a wave and pulls me under, where I float in darkness until Mason falls to the side with one arm draped over my stomach.

“I would say that was worth spending so much time apart...” He’s wearing a dazed smile when he lifts his head. “But it wasn’t. Nothing ever could be.”

I know what he means. Still... “It was pretty fantastic, though.”

“And it’ll be fantastic again.” His head drops to the mattress. “Which will be as soon as I recover. You damn near killed me.”

I’m actually sort of proud. “But what a way to go, right?”

He chuckles before pulling me closer and nuzzling my neck. “You read my mind.”

EPILOGUE



TEAGAN

IF YOU HAD TOLD ME A YEAR AGO THAT I WOULD BE WORKING for the shadow government in a hotel, which was really a black site for operatives, I would've laughed so hard I'd pee my pants. Yet here I am, living my best life, helping a team of highly trained former military, CIA, and FBI agents make the world a less scary place. In the beginning, I felt a bit useless, like a fish out of water. But as time has gone by, I've become comfortable, and the guys' team has not only put their trust in me, they actually started relying on me. I mostly come up with ideas. My most successful one was to add a division of high priced escorts to the hotel for the purpose of gathering information. As it turns out, men are likely to have their guard down and blah about some pretty important information when they think they'll get laid.

"Don't forget you have a book signing tomorrow," Mason reminds me. He comes up behind me, wrapping his arms around my torso, and buries his face in the crook of my neck.

"Are you coming to be my assistant?" I lean into him as I look out of the window and into the sidewalk where Mr. Walters is taking his dog Toto on his daily morning walk.

I talked Mason into getting a small house right outside the city. During the week, we stay at the hotel, but almost every weekend, we drive out to our house to get away. Of course, the house is equipped with state-of-the-art security. Mason even posts a small SWAT team a few blocks from us, but this is still better than being confined to one city high-rise.

"Wouldn't miss it," he mumbles into my hair.

My second book just published, and I couldn't be happier about it. Seeing Maddie and her adventures come to life just like I imagined them in my head for so many years is a dream come true. Literally.

Even better, people actually like to read my books. Which means I've been making a pretty good amount of money. Nothing like the luxury Mason can provide, but it was enough to buy my very own first car. Jase and Mason took turns teaching me how to drive, and I got my driver's license on my first try even though Jase was sure I would fail based on my driving skills.

"You know my signing is at an elementary school, right?" These are my favorite events. Seeing kids' faces light up when I tell them about Maddie and her sword fighting club is just the best thing ever.

"Yeah. Are you worried I'm gonna scare the kids?"

"I was more worried the kids were going to scare you." I realized we never had this conversation before. Man, I really hope he wants to be a father one day.

"I love kids," he blurts out, and I softly sigh in relief.

"You surprise me every day, Mr. Grumpy Pants." For a moment, I was seriously worried.

"What about you? Do you like kids?"

"Love them! I wanna have like five or six." I almost bite my tongue, wondering if I should have said this much.

"Only five or six? You can't even make up a SEAL team with that."

I laugh. If I remember right, a SEAL team has fifteen to twenty people. "How about we start with one and go from there?"

"Wait, now we're going backward. You said five or six."

Mason's phone buzzes in his pocket, interrupting the moment. He ignores whoever is calling. It's something we had to work on. His life was his work for so long, I have to remind

him daily that his life is his own, and now he shares it with me.

It has been a year since his mom kidnapped me, and we haven't heard or seen of her since. Mason is convinced that she is going to come back soon, and he stays on high alert because of it. I wish I could promise him that she won't return.

"Want to get some breakfast at the Pancake Castle?" Mason asks while his phone keeps buzzing in his pocket.

"You can answer it," I offer. "It must be something important."

Mason places a kiss on the side of my head before straightening up. I spin around and cuddle up next to him so I can look at his phone too. He unlocks it, and five missed calls from unknown numbers pop up along with one unread text message.

UNKNOWN: YOUR DECISION-MAKER HAS BEEN COMPROMISED.

Mason's whole body tenses beside me.

"Who is this from? And who is your decision-maker?" I remember him talking about it, but he never told me who it is. I glanced up at Mason's suddenly pale face, his eyes full of terror and a lingering sadness. "Mason?"

"It's... Natalie," he finally answers, his voice flat and void of any emotions. "Natalie is the decision-maker."



Thank you for reading *The Hotel Manager*. Mason and Teagan's story is over but Natalie's story is up next! Find out what happens next in [*The Decision Maker*](#).

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ABOUT THE C. HALLMAN

C. Hallman is a *USA Today* Bestselling Author who wrote her debut novel in 2018 and has since published over 100 books in various romance subgenres. Her works have been on numerous bestseller lists and have been translated into 8 languages around the world.

Born and raised in Germany, Cassandra attended business school in her hometown before immigrating to America when she was only eighteen. At nineteen, she married her husband, who was active duty military at that time. Together, they traveled the country for years, before finally settling down. Now, she lives in the mountains of North Carolina with her husband of sixteen years, their three children, two dogs, and one hairless cat.

With a love for reading, that love slowly transpired into writing she put her fingers to the keyboard and started writing about the dark side of romance.





ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BORN AND RAISED IN GERMANY, CASSANDRA ATTENDED BUSINESS SCHOOL IN HER HOMETOWN BEFORE IMMIGRATING TO AMERICA WHEN SHE WAS ONLY EIGHTEEN. AT NINETEEN, SHE MARRIED HER HUSBAND WHO WAS ACTIVE DUTY MILITARY AT THAT TIME. TOGETHER, THEY TRAVELED THE COUNTRY FOR YEARS, BEFORE FINALLY SETTLING DOWN. NOW, SHE LIVES IN THE MOUNTAINS OF NORTH CAROLINA WITH HER HUSBAND OF SIXTEEN YEARS, THEIR THREE CHILDREN, TWO DOGS, AND ONE HAIRLESS CAT.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

At the beginning of this year, I was not sure if I was ever going to write again, and honestly, I couldn't have without all the unwavering love and support I have been given by the people around me.

I want to thank everyone who held my hand and cheered me on while writing this book. My husband Jordan, the rest of my family, my PA Paige, my fairy plot mother Becca, my editor Kelly, and all my friends, but especially Jennifer for sticking by me.



HOTEL MAP



SUBBASEMENT
BASEMENT.
LOBBY
1ST FLOOR
2ND FLOOR
3RD FLOOR
4TH FLOOR
5TH FLOOR
6TH FLOOR
7TH FLOOR
8TH FLOOR
9TH FLOOR
10TH FLOOR
11TH FLOOR
12TH FLOOR
13TH FLOOR
14TH FLOOR
15TH FLOOR
16TH FLOOR
17TH FLOOR
18TH FLOOR

GUN RANGE
PARKING GARAGE
RECEPTION
MEDICAL
GYM
RESTAURANT
TECH AND SUPPLIES
GUEST SUITES
GUEST SUITES
GUEST SUITES
GUEST SUITES
GUEST SUITES
GUEST SUITES
INTERROGATION
HOLDING CELLS
DOESN'T EXISTS... OR DOES IT
LIVING QUARTERS
LIVING QUARTERS
LIVING QUARTERS
NATALIE'S SUITE
MASON'S SUITE

