



THE SEAL AND THE

SAVIOR

JESSE SLADE

The SEAL and the Savior

No Easy Day Book 4

Jesse Slade

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THE SEAL AND THE SURVIVOR

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For Ziva. You left an indelible mark on my heart.



“Every Saint has a past. Every Sinner has a future.”

Oscar Wilde

Terms Used In This Book

AAR: After Action Report

Black Op: covert or clandestine operation

Boots on the Ground: physically present somewhere on an operation

Charlie Mike: Continue Mission

Comms: communication device

Deuce and a Half: a two-and-a-half-ton truck

Frag: fragmentation grenade

Frogman: another name for a Navy SEAL

FUBAR: Fucked Up Beyond All Repair/Recognition

Ghillie Suit: camouflage to resemble the environment

Goatfuck: an *extremely* disagreeable turn of events

Green Team: training and selection for SEALs wanting to become a Tier One SEAL team Operator

Head: bathroom

Helo: helicopter

HVT: High-Value Target

Kitted Out: wearing full gear

Klick: kilometer

MRE: Meal, Ready-to-Eat (self-contained individual field ration)

OP: operation (mission)

Oscar Mike: On the Move

Overwatch: a vantage position (usually high ground) where enemy positions or movements can be seen and effective fire (or information) can be provided

PID: Positive Identification

Pipe Hitter: someone willing to go to the extreme to get the job done

RPG: Rocket Propelled Grenade

Rucksack or Ruck: backpack

Scuttlebutt: rumor/gossip

SERE Training: Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape

Sitrep: situation report

Spun up: sent on a mission

Squid: slang nickname for Navy sailors

Squirter: a person, assumed to be an enemy, running away from a military attack

Stand Fast: stay put/don't move

Tango: terrorist or enemy combatant

TOC: Tactical Operations Center

Watch/Got Your Six: watch/got your back

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Chapter 1

Patrick

For some reason, I was feeling nostalgic. Sentimental. Or maybe I was just being reflective as I drove to a get together with the rest of my team and their women at Midas and Vivian's place.

I loved being a SEAL. There was nothing better than the adrenaline rush of kicking ass and taking names for my country with my team. My closest friends. My brothers. As far as I was concerned, there wasn't a better group of men on the planet.

Our team leader, Reaper, our stoic voice of calm and reason. Smoke, our medic and resident language specialist. Midas, our computer expert and official nerd. Boomer, a superstitious giant who swam like a fish and almost always wore a smile. And Bruiser, who could fight like no one I'd ever seen outside a professional boxing ring and almost always sported a scowl. Then there was me, the team's explosives expert.

For almost seven years we'd been together as a team and, in that time the six of us had forged a bond few could understand,

and no one could break. It came from spilling the same blood in the same mud, always having each other's backs. Saving each other's lives.

Over the past several years, our found family had grown. Reaper, Smoke, and Midas had fallen in love and gotten married, and I'd come to love their wives like sisters. Reaper's wife, Alex, was a gorgeous, famous singer slash rancher. Smoke's wife, Hali—a bubbly, curly-haired blonde—was an amazing artist, and Vivian, Midas' wife, was a real-life cowgirl.

I pulled in and parked, and, seeing everyone's cars, realized I was the last to arrive. When I strolled in, I noticed Smoke and Midas seemed unusually happy tonight. It was hard to miss. The two of them had their heads together, smiling wide, having a conversation about something.

As I approached them, I heard Smoke ask Midas, “After the Syria op?”

“After the Syria op,” Midas confirmed with a nod, the two of them clinking the necks of their beer bottles together.

“What's going on with you two?” I wondered. “What happened after the Syria op?”

Their smiles nearly split their faces before Midas answered, “Hali and Vivian are pregnant.”

I smiled back at them, congratulating each of them with a backslapping hug as we moved to sit on the big couch. Alex,

Vivian, and Hali came to join us, Alex smiling like the cat who swallowed the canary.

“What are you smiling about?” Hali questioned Alex.

“I’m just really happy I’m not the one who’s pregnant.”

Hali seemed genuinely distressed, telling Vivian, “I saw Alex in all her pregnant glory the day she had Conner. That kid weighed more than ten friggin’ pounds. I’m scared I’ll end up like that.”

“Hey!” Alex protested.

“C’mon, you were enormous, it looked like you had a toddler in there,” Hali said with a shudder. “I can’t have a ten-pound baby. My vajayjay won’t be able to handle that.”

“No one’s vajayjay should have to do that,” Vivian responded, seriously.

With that little gem hanging in the air, I moved away, tuning out women talking about babies and vajayjays and what should or should not come out of them. I loved these women. I did. But when the three of them got together, you never knew what was going to come out of their mouths. Although odds were, it would probably be indecent.

I headed into the kitchen to get a beer and stood leaning against the counter watching the room. Reaper joined everyone on the couch, pulling Alex into his lap. Vivian was sitting next to Midas, his arm around her shoulders, and Smoke was absently rubbing Hali’s belly.

Bruiser and Boomer sat on the floor playing with all five of Reaper and Alex's kids. They were growing up so fast. It was hard to believe Gabby and Cade were five, Connor was four, and Chase and Colby were already two.

Until Alex and Reaper started having kids, I hadn't had a lot of experience with children. But Alex and Reaper's kids were all great. It was an awesome experience to watch them grow up, learn how to walk and talk, and see their personalities emerge. They were turning into cool, little mini humans. I loved them all and enjoyed my role as their Uncle Jax. But I liked knowing I could spend time with the kids, then leave them with their parents.

During our years as teammates, I'd watched Reaper, Smoke, and Midas meet their women and fall in love. I'd been there as five Montgomerys came into the world, and now Smoke and Midas were going to have children too.

I wasn't interested in any of that. I didn't want kids and wasn't searching for a wife. I didn't even want a steady girlfriend. I liked my life exactly the way it was. I enjoyed the freedom of living alone, not having to answer to anyone, and being able to play the field. I couldn't imagine getting tied down to one woman or taking on the responsibility of kids. An involuntary shudder ran through me just thinking about it. No thank you.

The 'found my soulmate kind of love,' wasn't in the cards for me. Sure, I'd had a few, brief relationships over the years, but, if things started feeling like she was getting serious, I

didn't stick around. There had only been one relationship in my life that could be considered long-term and that was more than a decade ago. When I was twenty—a little over a year after I joined the Navy—I met a girl during my first deployment.

Juliette. She was a sweet, shy girl. Not at all the type of woman I was attracted to now. I liked my women to have some fire and fight in them and to give as good as they got. Juliette was...docile.

She'd wanted promises, a commitment. A husband, a house with the picket fence, and the standard two point five kids. Things I didn't have in me to give. That was when I realized I didn't *ever* want to be tied down to one woman. I broke up with her, became a SEAL, and hadn't seen Juliette since.

From time to time, I did wonder where she was and what she was doing with her life. I assumed she'd found what she'd been looking for and hoped she was happy. She was a nice girl and deserved it.

My mind wandered away from the past to our upcoming mission. We were being spun up the day after tomorrow, headed to Afghanistan. This would be our fourth mission trying to capture the terrorist known as the Messenger. His following had steadily grown over the years, even gaining support from the tribes. He had hundreds of true believers following him who were willing to lay down their lives for him, and it was past time for his reign of terror to end.

But my Spidey SEAL sense had been going haywire ever since we got the details of the mission and started planning. Something about this op didn't feel right, but I couldn't put my finger on what it was.

Maybe it was because over the past three years, the Messenger continually managed to evade us and escape capture. He always seemed to be one step ahead of us, as if he knew when and where we'd come for him. It was like we were hunting a ghost.

We'd gone through all the intel we had for this op. We'd planned and contingency planned. Nothing stood out as concerning, but it still felt...off.

Several minutes later, Reaper ambled across the room to grab a beer, coming to stand next to me. "What's up with you tonight?"

I shook my head. "I've got a weird feeling about this op."

"Weird how?"

"That's the problem, I can't point to anything and say, it's this or that. I don't know, maybe it's because this asshole keeps slipping through our fingers."

"Our intel seems solid, but you and I both know you have to listen to that voice in your head. We'll make sure we're extra careful on this one. But Jax, he's not getting away from us again."

I nodded, taking a pull off my beer, hoping Reaper was right.

Chapter 2

Jett

My name is Jett Donovan. Call sign Shooter. It's not unique, or glamorous, or even cool...but it is accurate. I work for Shadowhawk Security, the biggest private global defense contractor in the world.

Most Shadowhawk operatives have military backgrounds ranging from Delta Force, Army Rangers, Green Berets, Force RECON, or Navy SEALs. But they also recruited civilians and trained them if they had the skills and potential needed to do the job.

Shadowhawk was top of the line: weapons, equipment, transportation, cyber experts, and operatives. Everything was high tech and state of the art. We were highly trained, highly skilled, and highly sought-after—the best of the best—and people paid top dollar for our services.

I was recruited by Shadowhawk when I was almost twenty-one, not long after my Navy career imploded. I wasn't sure why they chose me—I was nobody special—but they made me

an offer I couldn't refuse, and it came at the perfect time when I not only needed a change—I'd welcomed it.

Besides, they let me do things the military thought were too dangerous for women, and they had better toys, less rules, and paid me a lot of money, which didn't hurt.

We worked jobs all over the world, from hostage extraction, high value target protection, eliminating enemies of the state, to top secret black ops for the government when they couldn't send in the military or other federal agencies.

That's usually where I came in. I'm a skilled operative, but I'm also one of the best snipers on the planet.

That wasn't ego, it was a fact.

I'd been working almost non-stop for the last eleven years, my life one dangerous mission after another. I was tired and had too many injuries to count. Sometimes when I moved, it sounded like my bones were made of bubble wrap and, these days, it took some body parts longer than others to wake up in the morning.

At thirty-two, I was too young to feel this way, and I knew it would only get worse the older I got. I wanted to have a life before I couldn't move at all...or I got killed on an op. With a job as dangerous as mine, being killed was a possibility every time I went on a mission and, one day, my luck just might run out.

I was tired of constantly going into one shitty hotspot after another. Tired of tracking, stalking, infiltrating, and killing or

capturing terrorists and enemy combatants. Tired of sleeping in the dirt or doing worse things in the dirt. I still had a few body parts that hadn't been cut, shot, or broken, and I wanted out while that was still true.

I was never home. Lived in a tiny, shoebox apartment and owned very few possessions because I was never there to need or use them. I rarely went anywhere or did anything that wasn't for work. Basically, I slept when I was home, and, if I was lucky, I surfed a few waves until I was sent somewhere else, and it started all over again.

That's why this was my last mission. I'd recently bought a house on the beach and, when I was done here, I'd be retired and moving in to give normal life a try. All I needed to do was stay focused, complete this op, and get my ass home in one piece. And I would. I hadn't worked this hard or this long not to make it home after the final mission of my career.

My job meant I spent a lot of time alone, sometimes not speaking to another human for a week or more at a time and, somewhere along the line, I started having conversations with myself in my head.

That's what happens when you live a lot of your life alone, roaming in the shadows on the fringe. Sometimes I talked to myself just to hear a human voice, not that I would ever admit that to anyone. I don't know if it kept me sane or made me a crazy person, but it was pretty commonplace now.

I also talked to myself when I thought about *him*. Him being the boy I fell in love with when I was nineteen—a boy whose

name I refuse to speak. The boy I gave my virginity and my heart to. My first love.

First love is different from every other love that follows it—not that I had personal knowledge of that—since I refused to fall in love again and couldn't make a comparison. But people that know these things say your first love takes and keeps a piece of your heart forever. It's the one you never forget, the one that shapes what comes after. In my case, first love was the one that hollowed me out and destroyed me.

On the day we made port with a week of shore leave, he broke up with me. We hadn't had a fight, had been getting along, and nothing seemed wrong when it happened. All I got from him was a text message saying he cared about me but decided he was too young to be pinned down by one girl. He wanted to experience life and we needed to move on. Coming completely out of the blue, it blindsided me.

That text started a domino effect on my life. One I could never have seen coming. While *I* was thinking about how we'd spend our leave, and our future, together...*he* was busy running away.

He'd been in the Navy a year longer than me and had planned on reenlisting. I didn't know if he reenlisted or not. Maybe he requested a transfer to another assignment to get as far away from me as he could. All I knew was he disappeared after that text, and I never saw or heard from him again. I didn't know where he was, what he was doing, or if he was alive. I told myself I didn't care, but, even after all these years,

I still wanted to ask him why he'd done it like that. He'd broken my heart in the most callous way possible, and I wasn't able to see myself the same again.

Part of the problem with being young is thinking you know things, but you don't. You think you know what love is because you see the world through happy, rose-colored glasses. Back then, I thought I knew what love was—but I found out the hard way I was wrong. Very wrong.

He left me when I needed him most, betraying me and shattering my heart.

I wasn't good enough for a conversation or even a Dear Jane letter. Only that fucking short text message out of the blue and his unexplained vanishing act. He'd made it so obvious he never cared about me. He talked a good game, but the words of love that had come out of his mouth had been bullshit. Total, complete, utter bullshit. It took a long time to stop thinking there was something so defective about me I must have deserved it.

Even though I hated him and refused to say his name, there were times in the dark I couldn't keep myself from reminiscing about him. Times when the memory of him beat against the walls I'd built and slipped in, like vapor floating through my brain or a ghost haunting me. An echo of the past. My mind would wander to the one place it had no business going—to the secret place in my mind where the beautiful boy with hazel and gold flecked eyes lived.

After him, I was no longer innocent or naïve. He taught me a valuable lesson and now, I don't do 'love' or 'relationships.' I don't dream of, wish for, or even believe in happily ever after. I gave my heart away once and it was thrown back, battered and broken. I'd never give it away again. Single was safer.

Don't get me wrong, I was *capable* of caring about someone else, I just wasn't going to allow it to happen. My heart was firmly encased in ice, dipped in concrete, and surrounded by razor wire. No one would ever penetrate the fortress I'd built around it.

I'm not saying I don't ever go out and have any fun, because I do. If I have an itch, I scratch it. But those are always one offs with strangers. Sex without emotions because that was all I was willing to give these days. We'd meet, have a few drinks, maybe dance a little, hook up, have a good time, and I'd go on my merry way. No muss, no fuss. No pesky feelings getting in the way and complicating things.

For the better part of twelve years, I'd lived a mostly solitary life. I worked alone, lived alone, slept alone, and that's exactly how I liked it. The only one who's penetrated my armor is my best friend—well, my only friend—a thirty-six-year-old, retired Navy SEAL who is the best man I've ever known.

Originally from Texas, he has a sexy, southern drawl that gets thicker when he's angry or when shit hits the fan. But, when he turned on the charm, that accent swept over you like a warm caress and had the power to turn you into a puddle of

goo. It was highly effective, even on someone as cynical as me.

He was still in great shape, built like a brick wall, and handsome as all get out. I'm talking seriously, gorgeously, smokin' hot. Wherever we went, women—and men—threw themselves at him.

Even though he was retired, he was still asked to work certain missions because he had a serious skill set. Sort of a freelance, black ops contractor, usually requested by the highest levels. Sometimes he said yes, sometimes he said no.

That was how we met. We were thrown together on an undercover op. At the last minute, his partner was injured in a car accident. Some higher-up called my boss, my boss called me, and I took her place.

I'd barely entered our hotel suite when he informed me he was in charge. He explained—like I was a four-year-old—that the only thing he expected me to do was look pretty, keep my mouth shut, and take orders. Needless to say, that didn't go over well. As if I'd let anyone, especially a man I didn't know, order me around like I was his hired help. Plus, we were supposed to be playing an extremely rich, *happily* married couple. We couldn't accomplish that with him acting like a domineering jerk.

He introduced himself as Augustine Wilding, informing me my name for the op was Francine, then had the audacity to ask if I'd be able to remember that. I made sure he understood *I'd* be the one in charge and he'd be taking his orders from me. I

might as well have lit a stick of dynamite, it probably would have caused less of an explosion.

To say we didn't like each other was an epic understatement. We instantly hated each other. Our first night, he played his role, acting like a stuck-up, uber-rich asshole. Although I was convinced being a stuck-up asshole wasn't an act. I played my part as his love-struck wife, hanging on his arm, a smile plastered on my face, batting my eyes at him. Calling him Augie the entire time for the sole purpose of making him mad. I refused to call him anything else once I noticed how much it pissed him off. He'd flare his nostrils and literally growl at me every time I referred to him as Augie. Which, I admit, seriously amused me.

It wasn't a big surprise our first few days on the job were a complete disaster. We finally concluded we were going to get ourselves killed if we didn't come to some sort of compromise. So, we did the only reasonable thing we *could* do—we got drunk and started talking to each other.

It turned out we had a lot in common.

We managed to pull our heads out of our asses and put our trust in each other. The next day, more hungover than either of us had ever been, we completed the op as a team, and we've been friends ever since.

It wasn't until the end of the mission that he told me his real name was Raphael Gonzales. But, by then, I couldn't think of him as Raphael. He's always been Augie to me. Luckily, he considered the nickname an endearment now, but, even if he

didn't, I'd still call him Augie. Over the years, we've worked a lot of jobs together and have been undercover as husband and wife nine times.

Augie wasn't just the best partner I'd ever worked with, he was my best friend, my rock, and the finest man I'd ever known.

Chapter 3

Jett

I was currently on a hill in Afghanistan, lying on my belly in the mud, where I'd been for the last four hours. My target was attending some sort of big, terrorist pow wow and I was waiting for him to exit the building.

I didn't want to be sprawled in the muck, but it had rained last night, so it was unavoidable. Besides, this was the perfect spot. The only one with a clear view of the area below me. So, I couldn't move, even if a less muddy location had been nearby.

I was wearing a ghillie suit and, while the camouflage kept me well hidden, it was hot. Sweat was dripping off me everywhere. It was trickling down my face, collecting in the small of my back, and sliding between my breasts. I was doing my best to ignore it since there wasn't anything I could do about it, but it was still annoying as hell.

I'd seen my target enter the building with his entourage and was watching the area below through the scope of my sniper rifle...waiting. I had a clear view of both the two-story

building where my target was located and his convoy of black SUVs lined up and parked, waiting for him on the far side of the building.

The building had an alley behind it that separated it from another row of buildings. Next to the building, on the left, was a big lot, empty except for three rusted-out cars sitting in the center that might have been there since the day the car had been invented.

On the other side of the lot was another two-story building that was almost an exact replica of the one my target was in. Same size, color, alley, and row of buildings behind it.

Straight ahead, at the far end of the lot, was another row of buildings that resembled all the others. In this part of the world there wasn't much variety or color. Everything was quiet. The entire time I'd been here, there had been no activity—no one lurking, nobody on patrol, no movement at all.

It wasn't a surprise I'd been sent to eliminate this particular target. He was high-value—a warlord and terrorist—by the name of Fazal Habibullah.

Some said he was the next Osama Bin Laden. Others said he was worse. Along with his other crimes against humanity, he'd been wreaking havoc on military forces—both American and others. Where Fazal went, blood and death followed. But for years he'd managed to stay one step ahead of being captured or eliminated.

Until now.

Fazal's crimes had placed him in the top spot on the most wanted list in every American alphabet agency and in more than one country. He'd been smart and careful and, until recently, there hadn't been a single current photograph of him. Somehow, every American operative who ever got close enough to try and snap a picture of him ended up dead.

But, several weeks ago, a CIA asset had finally succeeded in getting the first recent and confirmed photograph of Fazal and sent it prior to his brutal murder.

It was the Pentagon that brought this op to Shadowhawk. During my briefing, I'd been informed there was evidence Counterterrorist intel had been repeatedly jeopardized and there were suspicions of a mole. A traitor somewhere within the government.

The Pentagon was concerned Fazal was receiving that classified information, and had used it to avoid the American forces trying to find him. So, they came to Shadowhawk for complete discretion outside normal channels.

That was usually how it worked. The president or the CIA, DOD, DIA, JSOC, the NSA, or some other alphabet agency couldn't trust their own people, needed deniability, or couldn't risk an international incident by sending in regular military to do the job. Plus, we were able to bypass all the red tape the military and government had to deal with, which allowed us to move faster.

That was how jobs like this landed in my lap. Eliminating global security threats was my specialty. A lot of times my

orders were to get in, take out the target, and get out without anyone ever seeing me. Which is what I was doing lying on my belly in the mud in nowhere-ville Afghanistan.

Movement on my left caught my eye, and I swung my rifle in that direction, glad for the distraction from my boredom. There, moving discreetly along the front of the buildings on the far side of the empty lot were six soldiers.

“What the hell are they doing here?”

They were fully kitted out, their hand signals and the way the six of them moved together indicated they were a team. If I had to guess, I’d say special forces of some kind.

I watched them flatten themselves against the front of the building and have a short conversation before entering the empty lot and quickly fanning out. That’s when the unexpected gunfire started, the team instantly going on the defensive. The strange thing was it didn’t appear they were trying to kill them. From my position, it seemed more like it was meant to scatter them.

The men shooting at them were most likely Fazal’s men. But where had they come from? They’d been very well-hidden until the moment the soldiers made an appearance. I’d been surveying this area for hours watching for any hostiles that might cause a problem and hadn’t seen a single person in that time, let alone a group of men with weapons.

And yet, this team was being ambushed in a well-coordinated attack. That was the simple answer, but it felt like

there was a more complicated one. Although I didn't have time to ponder that at the moment.

I wished I could communicate with them, but that wasn't happening. At least the soldiers weren't panicking, but they clearly understood they were in trouble.

“Well, this is a shitload of shit.”

When the bullets started flying, two of the team were separated from the rest of them. One of them dove into the alley behind the building Fazal was in. The other, who had been bringing up the rear, hauled ass back to the front of the building where I first saw them, but he was shot right as he made it there and went down. Now, the two of them were separated from both their team and each other.

The other four managed to stay together but were pinned down and taking heavy fire, their only protection was the three rusted-out, abandoned cars that sat in a U shape in the middle of the lot. But they didn't offer much safety with men in elevated positions on top of the buildings on either side of them. In fact, while shooting back, they were trying to wedge themselves under the cars to keep from being shot, but there were too many of them and they were simply too big to do it.

Watching the scene unfold below me, I was certain all of this had been a set up. They were targeted, forced to use the cars for cover, and were now sitting smack in the middle of a kill zone.

My choices were simple. I could either ignore this, continue my mission, and go home...or I could help these guys. I knew

if I didn't help them, they were dead because they were the proverbial sitting ducks. I only had a few moments to decide because their op, whatever it was, was quickly going sideways.

“Fucking hell.”

I knew what I was going to do as soon as I saw them in trouble. Code of Honor and all that. It wasn't like I could leave them hanging, watch them die, and have that on my conscience for all eternity.

Screw it. If Fazal managed to get away, I'd track him down again. The delay didn't matter much to me, it was only an inconvenience. But it *did* matter to the soldiers below me.

“I got your overwatch, boys.”

I shifted around and started lining up shots. Just me, my rifle, and the tangos...exactly the way I liked it.

I started with the man on the roof of the building on my left. He had a clear shot and could pick off the soldiers in between the cars one by one. I wondered why he hadn't done that yet but didn't have the time to analyze it. I relaxed and focused, controlling the rhythm of my breathing and lowering my heart rate. After adjusting for humidity, distance, and wind speed, I squeezed my trigger, and, a moment later, my bullet slammed through my target's forehead.

One second he was standing there firing near the soldiers below him, and the next, his head was snapping back, his brain flying out the back of his head. The sound my shot made was

minimal, since my rifle had a suppressor, but with all the gunfire going on, it's doubtful anyone would have heard it anyway.

“Uh-oh, is that a sniper on the field?” I muttered, amusing myself.

I swung the barrel of my rifle to the man on the roof of the building on the right side. He had the same opportunity as the other tango—elevated position with the soldiers trapped between the abandoned cars below him.

Again, I made the proper adjustments, put him square in my crosshairs, squeezed my trigger, and watched his head jerk sideways as he crumpled to the ground like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

“Like shootin’ fish in a barrel,” I gloated.

Unfortunately, that was when everyone realized I was here. It was obvious they didn't know exactly where I was, but the bad guys still started shooting in my general direction.

That wasn't surprising and wasn't the worst news, because it told me they didn't have a sniper of their own. If they had, he would have waited for me to fire again, using my muzzle flash to pinpoint my exact location so he could put a bullet in me. At least that's what I would have done.

But, even firing aimlessly in my general direction, some of their bullets were coming way too close for comfort.

About the same time the tangos started shooting at me, I heard someone yell, “Sniper!” and watched two of the soldiers

turn and aim their weapons my way. But, after I dropped another of Fazal's men, they seemed to understand I wasn't there to shoot *them*. Of course, if I had been, they'd already be dead.

That was a good thing because they could have started shooting at me too, and, while it happened more often than I liked, I really didn't enjoy being shot at.

With the two elevated shooters out, it gave the team the opportunity to get in the game and start returning fire while the bad guys were distracted trying to figure out where I was located.

That was when a tango with a rocket launcher appeared on the roof of one of the buildings at the very far end of the vacant lot. Even one close hit with that thing and it was game over for the soldiers, or me, depending on who he decided to fire at.

I could have aimed for the man holding it, but I opted for the much more difficult target and shot the rocket, causing it to blow up, destroying the launcher so no one else could use it. It also blew up the bad guy and triggered a distraction the team used to their advantage to take the upper hand.

Using the building for cover, the soldier who'd been shot and isolated was concentrating on firing at anyone shooting at the rest of his team and didn't notice the tango sneaking up behind him. By the time I saw him, the terrorist was way too close for comfort. This shot was tricky. If I missed, or the good

guy moved the wrong way, I could easily, accidentally shoot him.

Lucky for him I was in the zone. Despite what was going on around me, I was calm, laser focused, and I was damn good at what I do. The soldier must have sensed the danger and, the moment he turned around to face the threat, I took my shot, hitting the tango in the right temple. His brain painted the wall of the building and he fell forward, collapsing at the soldier's feet. He wasn't expecting it and startled, stepping away from the body and whipping around, his gun pointed in my direction.

I couldn't understand why that tango hadn't shot the soldier when he had a clear, close-range shot. Why sneak up on him?

That question was answered when I saw the other separated soldier being taken. It was also when it occurred to me their intention wasn't to kill any of the soldiers—they'd had ample opportunity to do that—I had the distinct and uneasy feeling they wanted to capture them.

Unfortunately, I didn't have a viable shot. I could only watch helplessly as the soldier's legs disappeared behind the building as he was dragged away. He had to be unconscious because he wasn't fighting or moving at all.

The remaining soldiers and I continued shooting, taking out five more tangos between us. Finally, everything went silent, the only sound was the ringing in my ears. I used my scope to scan the area and didn't see anyone else hiding. The soldiers

were doing the same thing, one of them already moving across the lot to their injured man.

When I shifted my scope back to the building Fazal was in, I was just in time to see him and his entourage rushing into one of the waiting SUVs and racing away.

Shit.

Some of Fazal's thugs tossed the captured soldier into the back of another SUV. I didn't have the opportunity to get any of them in my crosshairs, seeing as they all jumped in the vehicles and sped away from the building. The entourage of goons tailing Fazal's SUV in a cloud of dust.

It was time for me to go. I had a target to track and, since the other soldier was with Fazal, maybe I could rescue him while I was at it. Very bad things were about to happen to him, and no one deserved that, especially not one of the good guys.

One of the soldiers joined the other who was assisting their injured man. Two headed for where the abducted soldier had been. All of them kept their rifles up and ready, surveying the area, on the alert for any new danger.

I didn't have a reason to stay hidden anymore. Standing, I saw two of the soldiers turn and look up at me. I raised my arm straight up over my head and gave them the shaka sign by fisting my hand and holding up my thumb and pinky. The sign for hang loose or take it easy.

In my ghillie suit I'm sure I looked like some weird, shaggy, camouflaged Yeti, but I knew that wasn't anything they hadn't

seen before. One of the soldiers returned the gesture as if he were saying thanks for the assist.

“You’re welcome, guys. I’ll try to find your friend for you,” I promised them, even though they couldn’t hear me.

With that, I turned, disappearing into the trees, heading out to track down my target again.

Chapter 4

Patrick

I wasn't sure exactly what had happened, the details were hazy. Our mission was to capture the terrorist known as the Messenger. Our intel said he was hiding in an abandoned village. But, as we entered an empty lot and were about to approach the target building and breach, all hell broke loose. Gunfire erupted, we all ran for cover, and Bruiser and I ended up getting separated from the rest of the team *and* each other.

I saw Bruiser get shot just as he reached the cover of a building. I watched as Reaper, Smoke, Midas, and Boomer dove behind the three old, clunker cars in the middle of the lot. Under attack, we returned fire, but were pinned down, outnumbered, outgunned, a hail of bullets flying around us. The situation had quickly erupted into a clusterfuck.

Despite the thunderous sound of gunfire, I heard Reaper over my comms shouting for a sitrep from both me and Bruiser. I didn't have the chance to respond, because I was slammed from behind, ending up face down in the dirt. I didn't have time to flip over and shoot whoever hit me, because I was held

down, my helmet was stripped off, and I was cracked over the head so hard I blacked out.

Now I was here—wherever here was.

I had no idea how they got the jump on me, but when I woke up, my shirt and boots had been stripped off and I was tied to a chair that was bolted to the floor. I was in a room that had a small, rickety table with two chairs in one corner. My weapons, ruck, and boots had been thrown haphazardly onto it, my comms unit smashed to smithereens on the floor.

There was also what I was sure was a torture table with restraints on each of the four corners. I jerked and pulled against the ties that bound me but, try as I might, I couldn't get myself free. It didn't take a genius to know I was in a lot of trouble.

After some time had gone by, three men entered the room. One of them picked up my pack, weapons, and boots and disappeared again, while the other two spent some time relentlessly beating me. The first one, the bigger one, stood in front of me and started punching me in the face. The fucker had a fist like a hammer. With every hit, my head rocked back, and pain exploded in my face, especially my left eye. It wasn't long until I tasted blood and felt it dripping down my face. In between blows, I alternated between staring straight ahead and glaring at them. I'd be damned if these guys thought they could force me to give up or give in. As far as I was concerned, they could go screw themselves.

When punchy got tired, the other one took his place, swinging a baseball bat at my body again and again like he was trying out for the Yankees. The pain was unimaginable—he may have cracked a couple of ribs, but with the searing pain shooting through me, I couldn't be sure. I was relying on my SERE training but wasn't sure how much more I could take. If they kept this up, they were either going to knock me out or kill me.

They stayed completely silent while they worked me over. All they seemed to want was to beat the shit out of me. The only sounds echoing off the walls were the grunts of the men exerting themselves, our heavy breathing, my body being assaulted, and my bellows of pain.

When they finally finished using me as a punching bag, they released my restraints. Unfortunately, as hard as I tried, I was too weak and in too much pain to effectively fight back. Hoisting me between them, they dragged me to the menacing table in the center of the room. Before they left me, I was thrown on my back and tied down with my arms stretched painfully over my head. Again, I tried to get myself free, but I didn't have much strength and, even if I had, I was bound too tightly.

I'd lost the concept of time and didn't know how long I'd been laying here, but it felt like at least a couple of hours. My whole body hurt from the beating I'd taken. My muscles burned and ached from being tied in the same position for too long.

When the door finally opened again, the two men who'd beaten me strolled back in. I expected to be tortured or beaten some more, but instead, they cut me loose. The two of them grabbed me under the arms and dragged me out of the room. They hauled me through a maze of hallways and downstairs to a basement with two jail cells on one side of the room and two more on the other. They threw me into the first cell on the right, locked me in, and left.

My ears were ringing. My shoulders burned from my arms being tied over my head for an extended period of time. My ribs ached, my head was pounding, my face throbbing from the beating I'd taken. I could taste blood and couldn't see out of my left eye. But the worst of it was my torso. My entire left side was already a mass of black, blue, and purple and it was difficult to take a decent breath. My whole body thumped in a painful rhythm in time with my heartbeat. I had a feeling I looked exactly like I felt.

I couldn't stop thinking about my team. What happened in that empty lot? Was the rest of the team here somewhere? Had they made it out alive? How bad was Bruiser's injury? Reaper, Smoke, and Midas had wives. Reaper had kids. Smoke and Midas were about to become fathers. If the rest of the team had been taken, what would Alex, Hali, and Vivian be told? What would Alex tell the kids?

If the rest of the team had been captured, would they be bringing them in here? If they did, I knew that together—even if all of us were battered—we'd find a way to get out of this hellhole.

I'd been trained for this, but the reality of it was different. I knew it would only get worse until they finally got around to telling me what they wanted from me, and when I refused to cooperate, there wasn't a doubt they were going to kill me. SEALs lived by the code No Man Left Behind. I knew if the team made it out, they'd search for me, but I wasn't about to sit around waiting. I was going to do whatever it took to escape.

Chapter 5

Jett

It was approaching dusk when the firefight ended. Darkness worked in my favor. A woman in this area, especially one alone, got noticed, and right now I needed to be invisible. I stripped off my ghillie suit and shoved it into my pack, glad to get it off me, enjoying the slight breeze that cooled my sweaty body.

I'd put real-time GPS trackers on Fazal's vehicles when I first located him. I learned that lesson the hard way on my third job when I lost my target, and it took me four, hell-filled days to find him again. Now, no matter what the circumstances were, I put trackers on all my target's vehicles.

When I arrived in Afghanistan, I'd tracked Fazal to a busy café and tagged his SUVs, because I couldn't shoot him in broad daylight in a public place. Well, I *could*, but it wouldn't go over well. So, for the past four days, I'd been his shadow waiting for the perfect opening.

I had that opportunity not long ago and, if I hadn't helped that team, Fazal would be dead, I'd be officially retired and on

my way home. Of course, if I hadn't helped that team, they'd be dead.

According to my GPS receiver, Fazal's vehicles were headed for the middle of nowhere right now. So, I did the only reasonable thing I could, I 'borrowed' a car and headed out after them.

Leaving the car about a klick away from where the tracker signal had stopped, I went the rest of the way on foot. The signal was coming from some sort of ranch. There were multiple buildings and a lot of wide-open space. Wide-open space where I could easily be spotted if I wasn't careful.

Watching from a distance behind a rusted-out tractor, it was impossible to miss the four armed guards in front of one of the buildings, a big, three-story house. It didn't appear any of the other buildings were being guarded, so it was a safe bet the big house was where the action was. Four bullets later, I was racing across the yard and sneaking inside.

My rifle was good at distance, but at almost four feet long, could be a little bulky up close. So, when I approached the house, I slung it over my back and pulled my handguns from the holsters on my hips.

The Glock or Sig Sauer were more popular handguns, but I preferred the FN-45 semi-automatic tactical as my gun of choice. Like most of my guns, these were modified. They had a light trigger pull, fifteen round mags, suppressors, and night sights.

I felt like I was entering the belly of the beast, the familiar rush of adrenaline flowing through my veins as I entered the house. All my senses instantly on high alert.

I got in unseen, and everything was going well. I was shooting anyone I saw, then dragging them into the closest empty room to hide the bodies. It was risky and time consuming, but necessary to stay undetected for as long as possible. Nothing says intruder like dead bodies lying around.

I'd just dragged a dead dirtbag into a room when my GPS receiver vibrated against my wrist. Checking it, I saw Fazal's vehicle was on the move again. Dammit. Slippery son of a bitch. Well, I was here, I might as well see if I could find that soldier. If he was here, I had to help him. My conscience wouldn't let me live with myself if I was this close and left him behind.

I painstakingly cleared several more rooms, moving more bodies, but the place was huge. It was going to take forever to clear the house and find that soldier—if he was even here. I could keep this up, waste more time, or I could come up with a new plan. So, when two men came into the hall, instead of shooting them, I let them capture me, hoping they'd take me wherever the soldier was being held.

Sure, getting myself captured was a risk—a big one—but one I was willing to take. However, if they didn't take me to him, I'd have to fight them. No way was I letting them get me in a position to torture me. But in this big house with three floors of hallways and doors—and who knows how many

dirtbags—it could take forever to figure out where they were holding him. Time was of the essence. The longer they had him, the more danger he was in.

I'd like to say this was the craziest thing I'd ever done, but it wasn't. Shadowhawk consistently put us in impossible situations during training to see how we'd get out of them. What I'd learned from that training was, sometimes, the best thing you could do was think outside the box. While it might be nuts, it seemed easier to get captured and cross my fingers they'd take me right to the soldier.

They stripped me down to my bra and underwear. I had a feeling it was because of the number of weapons I was carrying, or maybe they were trying to scare me, make me feel weak. Then, carrying my gear, two of them ushered me through the labyrinth of a house and downstairs.

Clearly, they weren't professionals. The way they were holding my gear, some of my weapons were within my reach. I thought about snatching one of my guns, slipping out of their hold, and questioning them instead. But I couldn't be sure they wouldn't have time to alert the entire house of my presence and there was no guarantee they'd tell me anything. It seemed better to let this crazy plan play out...at least for now.

All things considered, it wasn't as bad as it could have been, but it was only a matter of time until they stepped up their game or found the bodies I'd left, and I had a feeling the shit would really hit the fan when they did. I was hoping I'd be

able to find the man they took hostage and get out of here before they found the carnage I'd left.

For now, I was playing the fearful damsel. Faking tears, begging, and keeping my head down, but mentally mapping everything I could see without being conspicuous about it. It was contradictory, since I'd been armed to the teeth, but I'd always found it was the best way to handle this sort of situation. Begging and crying is what men expected a woman to do. And the weaker they thought I was, the more they'd underestimate me.

I was hauled between the two of them to a basement—if you could call it a basement. It was big and damp with bare light bulbs hanging from the ceiling and a dirt floor. It stunk of old gym socks, blood, body odor, and urine. Trapped in the enclosed space, the smell was overwhelming, and it took a few moments to stop feeling like I was going to gag from the stench. The good news was I got a quick glimpse of the captured soldier as I was thrown into the cell next to his. He even tried to come to my defense, yelling, “Hey, what are you doing? Let her go!”

Not surprisingly, both my captors ignored him.

After locking me in, the two men went past the cells with my clothes, rucksack, and weapons. Listening, it sounded like they went into another room and shut the door behind them. I was hoping they wouldn't be staying long, I needed them to leave before I could do anything to get myself and the soldier out of here.

Moving to the front corner of the cell closest to the soldier's, I heard him stage whisper, "Are you okay, ma'am?"

Ma'am? What am I, eighty?

"Don't panic. Just calm down. I'm going to get us out of here," he assured me.

Calm down? I was perfectly calm. Men. They couldn't get it through their heads that a woman could be as skilled as they were. Sometimes, more skilled. Or maybe he'd fallen for my fake, damsel in distress act.

I could hear him shuffling and grunting softly, and could tell he wasn't moving fast.

"Are *you* okay?" I whispered.

"Yeah, I'm alright." He whispered back when he was closer.

"What's your name?"

"Jax. What's yours?"

"Jett. Is Jax short for something like Jackson?"

"No, it's a nickname. Did you see any other soldiers? I'm worried about my team. Last time I saw them, we were pinned down and things were not going well. One of my teammates was shot. I need to know if they were taken too."

"I saw all that. Last time I had eyes on them, they seemed okay. I saw your friend was on his feet, he was alive, and the rest of your team was with him. If they didn't run into any more trouble, they should be okay."

Understandably, he sounded surprised, "You were there?"

“I was there. I saw your team stumble into that unfortunate mess and gave you all a little help.”

“Who are you? Are you a soldier?” he asked.

“I’m nobody.”

“You must be somebody.”

“I’m a classified nobody.”

“They’re going to kill us,” he confessed quietly.

Even though he couldn’t see me, I shook my head. “No, they’re not. This isn’t a *Hotel California* situation. We’re getting out of here.”

He chuckled and grunted. “Then we’ll need to go out and celebrate when we do.”

“I don’t think so. I don’t do relationships.” It really wasn’t the time or place but making that clear was best to make sure he didn’t get the wrong idea.

“Whoa, slow your roll. Who said anything about a relationship? That’s the *last* thing I want. I have no interest in settling down,” he told me.

I sat down before I responded, my back against the wall separating us. “I hear that. The thought of it gives me the heebie-jeebies.”

I heard him chuckle and moan. “The heebie-jeebies?”

I rested my head against the wall and smiled. “Yes. It’s a highly technical term we steadfast singles use. I’m surprised you haven’t heard of it.”

He laughed and another, louder groan came out of him. “Well, just because we don’t do relationships doesn’t mean we can’t go out and have some fun. A girl’s gotta eat, right?”

I rolled my eyes and shook my head but found myself grinning. I wasn’t sure if he was serious or attempting to lighten the situation. When I didn’t respond or agree, he thankfully changed the subject. “You know, for someone locked in a cell, you’re taking this pretty well.”

“Not my first time, and I don’t plan on being here much longer,” I informed him. “Or maybe I’m a sociopath and lack self-preservation. Besides, you seem to be handling it pretty well yourself.”

“Not my first time either. How did they capture you?”

“I got myself caught on purpose.”

“*What?* Why would you do that?”

“I saw you get taken and figured you might need rescuing. This place is pretty big, so I took a chance that if I let them catch me, they’d bring me right to you. And they did.”

“Do you have any idea how dangerous that was? And now you’re locked up so how are you going to rescue me? You don’t even know me, why the hell would you do something like that?”

Luckily, I didn’t have to explain my reasoning because we were interrupted by the men returning from wherever they’d been. I admit, I was also questioning my reasoning—and my

sanity—and wasn't in the mood to discuss it. Maybe I really did lack self-preservation.

Jax and I went silent.

Finally.

I scrambled to the back corner of the cell as soon as I heard the door open and played my part, cowering and curling into a ball.

The two men stopped in front of our cells, barking at us in Pashtu, then left, closing the door behind them. Although, while they were standing there, I noticed one of them was wearing my knife on his hip.

I'll be getting that back.

“I wish I knew what they were saying,” Jax muttered when I made it back to the front of my cell.

“The condensed version is they'll be back and they're going to do very bad, painful things to us, then they're going to chop off our heads.”

“You speak Pashtu?”

“It would appear so, Jax.”

I heard his small laugh and the grunt that followed.

“Hang in there, I've got a plan.”

“What kind of plan?”

“The kind that gets us out of here.”

I had titanium lock picks in a special slot sewn in my bra. Even if I was well searched, it was doubtful they'd be found because they'd appear to be part of the underwire. Of course, even if I didn't have lock picks, I could rip out the underwire and pick the lock if I had to.

I pulled the lock picks out and went to work. There was a scraping noise of metal on metal and Jax must have heard it.

“What are you doing?”

“Picking the lock. I told you we're getting out of here.”

“Where'd you get a lock pick?”

“Spy bra.”

I could hear the smile in his voice, “Spy bra, huh? Sounds sexy.”

I found myself grinning back. I kind of liked this Jax guy. “Now you know Victoria's secret.”

He laughed and let out a whine. I was starting to worry about that. Something was obviously causing him pain.

“I'm a regular freakin' Boy Scout, Jax, always be prepared,” I said, just as the lock disengaged.

The hinges on the door were extremely creaky, I'd heard them when the two men locked me in here. There was nothing I could do about that, and the squeaky wail of rusty metal was loud in the silence when I swung the cell door open.

As I moved to pick the lock on the door of Jax's cell, I heard heavy footfalls stomping from outside the door, and I knew I

didn't have much time.

I pointed at Jax and whisper-yelled as I hurried to the door, "Make yourself as small as possible."

I sprinted into the corner behind the door a split second before it swung open, and the two men who brought me in came through it.

From behind, like a stealthy pickpocket, I silently pulled my own knife from the sheath on the hip of the man closest to me. In a quick move, I grabbed him by the hair, yanked his head sideways, sunk my knife into the side of his neck, and twisted it.

Despite what people think from movies and TV, slitting someone's throat isn't the best way to kill someone. You're better off sinking your knife into their neck. It's more efficient and much more effective with little to no chance they'll survive even with immediate medical attention.

The man was gurgling, his hands frantically pressing against his neck, blood flooding out between his fingers.

"This is mine," I whispered in his ear. I let him go and he dropped to the floor.

I moved fast. Fast enough, the other man didn't have time to react when he whirled around and saw me standing in front of him. Grasping the barrel of his rifle with my left hand, I shoved it toward the ceiling, making sure it wasn't pointed at me or Jax. Before he knew what was happening, I stuck my knife deep into the side of his neck and pulled it out.

His eyes wide, he clutched at his neck, which was spurting a geyser of blood with every beat of his heart. I wrenched the rifle from him, slamming the butt of it into his face, and he fell backward onto the floor. I stood glaring at the two bodies, the rifle in one hand, my bloody knife in the other.

“Amateurs.”

Dropping the rifle, I quickly and quietly closed the door and bent down, wiping the blade of my knife on the pants of the dead man closest to the door. I also unfastened my knife sheath from his waist and fished in his pocket for his keys.

Turning around, I shook the keys at Jax with a big smile on my face while he gaped back at me like I’d sprouted a second head.

“What the *fuck* just happened?” he exclaimed.

I smiled while I figured out which key would unlock his cell door. “Well, Jax, these two losers didn’t seem to have good intentions toward us. So, I thought it was a good idea to make them see the error of their ways.” I glanced up at him. “Plus, that one stole my favorite knife, and I wanted it back.”

He stared at me, shaking his head. “Yeah, that’s what I thought I saw. Who *are* you?”

“I told you, I’m nobody.”

After finding the right key, I unlocked his cell door, getting my first decent view of him. He was shirtless and barefoot, leaning against the wall, and I wondered if that was because he

couldn't stand upright on his own. If that was the case, it was going to seriously complicate our escape.

His face had ugly, black and blue bruising covering most of it. Both his eyes were swollen, his left eye completely swollen shut. When he looked at me, he kept his head tilted back, my guess was because it was the only way he could see me.

He had cuts trickling trails of blood down his face, one over his left eye, another on his right cheek. His bottom lip was split, there was a gash across the bridge of his nose, and the right side of his jaw was slightly swollen. Some of those cuts probably needed stitches.

His left side was a solid mass of dark purple and maroon, running from right below his pec to his belly button, wrapping around his side toward his back. He was also filthy, like he'd been dragged through dirt. He looked like he'd run face first into a speeding train.

I'd been hit a few times and my own face and body were a little bruised and sore, but whatever I was feeling could not come close to the pain he must be feeling now. I knew that because I'd been in the same shape more than once.

I smiled at him. "Hi. I'm Jett, nice to finally meet you."

He smiled back the best he could and held his hand out. "Jax."

I shook his hand, not expecting the spark of electricity that hit me when I touched him and, for a moment, I didn't want to let go. That was curious. "Wow, you look like shit, Jax," I

declared with a teasing smirk as I reluctantly let go of his hand.

He laughed and let out a loud moan. “Don’t make me laugh.”

“What do you think? Ready to get out of here?”

“Absolutely.”

“Let me help you. Can you walk?”

“Yeah.”

It was hard to tell what his face looked like, but, even with the bruising, his body was very nice. He was big, broad, solid, with perfect washboard abs. Very nice indeed.

I took hold of his arm to keep him steady, again surprised by my body’s reaction to him. He felt like he was slightly electrically charged, a pleasant hum flowing through him and into me.

Trying to ignore that feeling, I cleared my throat. “So, Jax, what’s your real name?”

“Patrick.”

I froze. Everything went stiff. Every muscle and tendon in my body suddenly felt as if it had been strung too tight and was about to snap.

He’d just said the name that shall not be spoken.

Obviously, there was more than one Patrick on the planet. Lots of them in fact. That had to be it. This was nothing more than an unfortunate coincidence.

Of course, it's a coincidence, there's no possible way it could be anything else.

We were standing directly under one of the bare lightbulbs, and I studied him, trying to figure out what he looked like under all the swelling and bruising. Blonde hair—check. Even though the one eye I could see was swollen and bloodshot, it was hazel with flecks of gold—check. While slightly swollen, I could see he had that sexy cupid's bow and full lips—check, check, and double check. But it was the distinctive half-moon birthmark on his right bicep that confirmed it.

“No,” I breathed.

Talk about being blindsided.

It felt like a ton of bricks had dropped on me. My knees wanted to give out. Something was so horribly wrong in my chest, I wondered if it was possible for a heart to explode, because that's what I thought might be happening.

I dropped his arm like it was on fire and stumbled backward, my body's immediate reaction to get as far away from him as possible.

He took a step forward, and I took a step back. His eyebrows furrowed, and he sounded concerned, “Hey, are you alright?”

It had been years, more than a decade. He was beaten to shit, and he'd filled out and grown up, so it was no wonder I didn't recognize him right away. All the images I had in my head were of a lanky twenty-year-old boy, not a shredded thirty-two-year-old man.

My mouth had gone too dry, and it felt like my lungs forgot how to work, but I had to know for sure. My voice was a barely audible rasp when I spoke the cursed name I hadn't spoken in twelve years, "Patrick? Patrick Morgan?"

It had been a long time—and with his swollen eyes he probably wasn't seeing that well—so it wasn't a surprise he stared at me with a confused, questioning expression on his face. I saw the instant recognition hit and he broke into a smile so big it reopened the split on his bottom lip. "Juliette? Juliette Donovan? Is it you? It's really you, isn't it?"

"Oh, god *no*," I managed to choke out. "You have *got* to be kidding me," I said, more to myself than to him.

The jackass had the nerve to look happy and reached out to hug me with that stupid smile on his battered face.

As soon as he reached for me, my brain started to function again. I pushed my palm flat against his chest, my arm outstretched, my elbow locked to keep him away from me. "Are you insane? And don't call me Juliette."

Hello, left field. Of all the people on the planet, it had to be Patrick fucking Morgan, heartbreaker, and captain of the USS douche canoe.

Memories of the pain I'd felt after he broke up with me slammed into me. We'd made love the night before. He must have known what he was going to do. Had to know he was going to disappear when we made port, but he slept with me anyway. The next day, he broke up with me in a text—a fucking *text*—and then he was gone.

Who tore out someone's heart with a text message after dating almost a year? Fucking coward. And now the asshole was smiling at me like we were having a happy reunion and he hadn't been a thoughtless prick.

Fuckballs, this is not good.

Anger rampaged through me. I was pissed about all of it. Pissed it was him. Pissed I was stuck babysitting him and had to help him. And *seriously* pissed he was smiling at me like it was just another day and he hadn't ripped my heart out, destroyed me, and altered the course and destiny of my life.

Of course, *he* was happy. None of it affected *his* life. He got what he wanted from me and went on his merry way without a care in the world. I seriously considered punching him and, if his face wasn't already mangled, I'm pretty sure I would have.

"Of all the hellholes in all the world, you had to stroll into mine. If I'd known it was you, I would have completed my op and left you to rot," I gritted out through clenched teeth.

His grin faded and his brow furrowed in confusion as comprehension I wasn't happy to see him set in.

Standing around wondering how it was possible Patrick Morgan was right in front of me wasn't accomplishing anything. Besides, we still needed to get out of this shit hole, and I needed to get away from him. The sooner the better.

I wanted to know what was in the room the two dead men had disappeared into. They'd gone in there with my clothes, shoes, weapons, and rucksack, and I wasn't leaving without

them. Not giving him time to react, I spun around, marching out of Patrick's cell, leaving him standing there confused as hell.

“Where are you going?”

“Away,” I called over my shoulder.

Chapter 6

Jett

This is not happening.

All the walls and barriers I'd built—the ice, concrete, and razor wire I'd wrapped around my heart—shattered the millisecond it registered in my brain Patrick Morgan was standing only an arm's length away from me. Closer than he'd been in twelve years.

I'd spent countless hours trying to keep him out of my head, wishing there was a way to destroy my memories of him. Now he was here—without warning—live and in person.

My options were either help him or leave him. Both choices sucked. If I left him, he was a dead man. While that wasn't the worst thing I could think of, if anyone was going to torture and kill the bastard, it was going to be me and not a bunch of terrorists.

If I helped him...well, the problems and pitfalls of that were too numerous for my brain to calculate right now. How much time would I have to spend with him? How long would it take

to get him back to his people? How would I keep myself from putting a bullet in his head?

I took a deep breath, then another and another. I needed to get my head on straight. I'd been faced with worse situations. Situations more volatile and more dangerous and survived. I could endure this. I could survive being face to face with *him* again...couldn't I?

I still had a mission to complete, and now I was wondering how I was going to do that with him tagging along. No. No way was he coming with me. Which meant I couldn't finish the job until I got him out of here and back to his people...or at least to some sort of civilization where he could contact someone to come get him.

Fuck.

I should be done here and on my way home to my new life. I'd been in country a while already, and now I was being delayed even longer because of Patrick Morgan.

I knew what I was going to do, but I *really* didn't want to do it. I just wasn't the kind of person who could leave someone to be tortured and killed by terrorists, even if that someone was Patrick fricken Morgan.

Well, one thing's for sure, nothing's ever easy in this job.

I swung open the door to the room next to the cells and all thoughts of Patrick Morgan flew out of my head. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I don't know what I expected, but it wasn't this.

It was a huge supply room, well organized, with shelves lining the walls and a large table in the center. This was where they stored food, clothes, weapons, and ammunition. It didn't take long to locate my pants and boots. After pulling on my pants, I sat on the table to put on my socks and boots.

Once that was done, I hopped off, quickly laying anything I thought we'd need on the big table. A couple of bedrolls. A black Burqa, that might come in handy. There were several kinds of grenades—smoke, flashbangs, frags—I set a variety of those on the table. A satellite phone that could get Patrick away from me faster, so I *definitely* wanted that.

I found my GPS receiver. Luckily, it had been locked so at least they didn't know I'd been tracking their boss. I opened it, checking Fazal's location. If he wasn't far away, I could take care of him, get Patrick out of here, let him call the cavalry, and be on my way. But Fazal's vehicle was no longer in the area. I released a heavy sigh and laid the device on the table with everything else.

Fuck. Once I got rid of Patrick, I'd have to track Fazal down all over again.

Once we got away, Patrick's wounds would need tending. So, I searched until I located the medical supplies. I had supplies in my medical pack, but, with his injuries, he'd probably exhaust most of those. I took what I thought he'd need—pain killers, ibuprofen, antibiotics, antibiotic cream, antiseptic, and bandages. I shoved everything into my med

pack, stuffing it full and tossing it on the table with the other supplies.

I couldn't believe with everything else, I was going to have to tend his wounds. How was I supposed to help him when all I wanted to do was kill him?

This is a cosmic joke. I'm literally living in my worst freaking nightmare.

Well, suck it up buttercup, because this is your new craptastic reality.

Chapter 7

Patrick

Juliette Donovan. What were the odds? What the hell was she doing here? I could only assume she was here on a mission. Everything she'd said pointed to her being some sort of secret operative, *a classified nobody* she'd said. But how did *that* happen?

What the hell is going on?

Everything was going fine, we were getting along and joking around. Then she realized it was me and it was like a switch being flipped. She remembered me—obviously—but, apparently, she was pissed off about it. She'd marched out of my cell mumbling something about a disaster of epic proportions. I was fairly certain the last thing I heard her grumble was 'not today, Satan.'

I wasn't moving quickly, but finally made my way into the room next to the cells. By the time I got there, Juliette had already put on tactical pants and boots, and was collecting things off shelves and setting them on the big table in the middle of the room.

“What just happened?” I demanded. I probably should have asked a little more patiently, but I was more than a little shocked and confused over all of this and wanted some answers.

She didn’t acknowledge or answer me.

I took a deep breath, calmed myself down, and tried again. “Are we going to talk about this? What are you doing here? How did all this happen?”

She didn’t stop what she was doing and, based on her tone of voice, she was angry, “There’s nothing to talk about. You made yourself pretty fucking clear in your *text* message.”

“Juliette...”

She spun around so fast, it almost startled me. Stabbing her finger across the table in my direction, she hissed, “Do *not* call me that. Juliette is dead. My name is Jett.”

Her hostility was disconcerting. Juliette had always been so easy going and mild-mannered...agreeable.

“Can we at least talk about how all this happened?” I asked, calmly.

She didn’t bother looking up from what she was doing. “How all *what* happened?”

I waved my arm around the room. “This. You being some sort of super-secret classified operative and somehow ending up here in Afghanistan, helping me and my team.”

“Shit happened. I changed occupations. The end. Now you’re all caught up.” She raised her eyes and held mine, “Do you see your pack?” Clearly, she was trying to change the subject.

I frowned, but glanced around until I saw it, and pointed out my rucksack.

She picked it up and dropped it on the table, tossing a regular backpack next to it. “Take what you need out of it and put it in here.”

My expression must have conveyed my confusion. “You can barely move, there’s no way you can carry your full rucksack. You can keep your ruck if you want, but you’re going to have to lighten it up.”

She wasn’t wrong about that. I wouldn’t be able to carry it if it was full. I started removing things because I wasn’t about to leave my rucksack behind.

While I removed the unnecessary things out of my pack, I watched her. She was standing with her back to me collecting things off the shelves, giving me the opportunity to let my eyes lazily wander over her. The first thing I noticed was the eight-inch fire-breathing dragon tattoo on the right side of her upper back. That was new. It was intricate, colored in reds, oranges, and greens, its spread wings shifting with the flex of her muscles making it appear as if its wings were moving. The scars I could see were new too.

Twisting, she reached up to grab a shirt off one of the racks and that’s when I saw it—an ugly gash, low on the back, right

side of her waist. A trickle of blood oozing from it and disappearing into the waistband of her pants.

“Jesus, you’re shot. When did that happen?”

“Not the first time, it’s only a graze,” she responded casually without looking at me or stopping what she was doing.

“What do you mean not the first time? How many times have you been shot?”

“I don’t know, three...no, four.”

“You’ve been shot four times now?”

“This is a graze, it doesn’t count as being shot,” she informed me as she pulled a long-sleeved, black shirt over her head.

I couldn’t help but shake my head. What the fuck was going on with her?

Before I could give it further thought, she surprised me by smiling. “Yahtzee!” she exclaimed, moving across the room to pick up a very serious sniper rifle with a suppressor. “Hello, beautiful.”

“What is that?”

She held the rifle away from her, making a show of examining it. “Well, it appears to be a gun, *Jax*.”

She says my name like a curse.

“You know, I remember you being smarter,” she sniped.

“I remember *you* being nicer,” I threw back.

“Oh, ouch,” she deadpanned. “You burned me good. I might need days to recover.”

I ignored her sarcasm. “That gun is pretty big for you. Maybe you should pick something a little smaller, there’s plenty to choose from.”

She snorted and rolled her eyes. “I’ve had Roxy for a long time, we’ve seen a lot together. There’s no way I’m giving her up because you think I need a little, girly gun.”

That monster was *her* gun? “Roxy?”

She narrowed her eyes at me. “Yeah, Roxy. You got a problem with that?”

I held up my hands. “No. No problem.”

She laid the rifle on the table, making sure she had my full attention. “And FYI, this is the same gun that saved your friends.”

All I could do was stare back at her.

Standing up straight, crossing her arms over her chest, she glared back at me. “What?”

I had a lot of questions, but instead of asking them, I shook my head. “Nothing.”

What the hell happened to her in the last twelve years? What had transformed her so drastically? Juliette didn’t even like guns, which was one of the things that made me question why she’d joined the Navy. “You’ve changed, Juliette.”

She glared across the table at me, visibly pissed off. “Stop. Calling. Me. That. And what did you expect? That’s what happens when someone...” She snapped her mouth shut, shook her head, and started shoving things into her pack.

I waited, but she didn’t continue. “When someone what?”

“Never mind. This isn’t the time or place. In fact, there is no time or place for you and me to have a conversation. You’re about twelve years too late for that.” Lifting her head, she scowled at me. “Gear the fuck up, Jax, so we can get the hell out of here.”

I was absently checking my pack while I watched her buckle double holsters on her hips and shove tactical handguns fitted with suppressors and night sights into them. The knife she took off the guard in front of the cells went on the back of her right hip, she strapped a second knife sheath with a much bigger knife—more like a machete—to the outside of her right calf.

She attached a small electronic device—about the size of a cell phone—to her wrist before putting on a flak jacket that she loaded with extra ammo, some grenades, a pair of scissors, and a small knife with a fixed blade. Then she shoved extra mags into a couple of her pockets.

She topped it all off with what appeared to be custom-fitted, double holsters that held two 9mm handguns without suppressors at the small of her back right below her body armor.

“Think you have enough weapons?” I joked, trying to lighten the thick tension hanging between us.

“You can never have enough weapons,” she responded, seriously. “Do you see your boots?”

She hates me.

I pointed them out when I saw them. She tossed a pair of socks and my boots on the table but, when I bent to put them on, pain shot through me that stopped me with a groan and a rushing hiss of breath.

Juliette moved around the table, taking the socks from me. “Here, let me help you.” She sounded annoyed. I heard her take a deep breath and slowly release it. “Can you lean on the table?”

At least that sounded less angry.

I nodded and leaned back, resting my ass against the edge of the table. Kneeling on the floor in front of me, Juliette put on my socks then moved on to help me with my boots.

“Thank you.”

When she’d finished, she stood up, picked a shirt up off the table, and helped me put it on. She even did it gently, trying not to cause me any additional pain.

“Are you sure you’re going to be able to carry a pack?” She asked, after the shirt was on.

“I’m sure,” I told her, but I could see she wasn’t convinced and, honestly, neither was I. Every movement felt like hot

knives slicing through me. I was doing my best to ignore the pain, but it just wasn't possible. After the shirt, Juliette slipped a flak jacket over my head.

“Can you carry a weapon? Use it if you have to?” She asked while she adjusted the body armor.

“Yeah.”

“Do you see your weapons? If not, what do you like?”

I pointed out my rifle, handgun, and knife. She collected the weapons, setting them on the table in front of me. Then she added extra mags from the shelves, laying them on the table, and I loaded up my flak jacket.

When we were done loading our packs, she helped me put on my lightened-up ruck and adjusted it. She was standing directly in front of me again. So close. She was concentrating on what she was doing, giving me the opportunity to study her.

Juliette had heterochromia—two different colored eyes—one brown the other blue. With my fucked up vision and the dim lighting, I hadn't noticed her eyes when she first came into my cell, or I might have recognized her sooner. I'd forgotten how striking they were. She looked similar to when I'd seen her last, but so different. She wasn't a girl anymore—she was a woman with a woman's face and body.

The last time I saw her, her tawny, brown hair was in a pixie cut. Now, it was long, drawn back in a sleek ponytail, and there were highlights in her hair I didn't remember, as if she spent plenty of time in the sun.

After she'd finished helping me, she tugged on black, fingerless gloves, shrugged on her own ruck, and slung the big rifle over her shoulder, adjusting it so it hung at her side. Her pack seemed significantly heavier than mine and I felt guilty as hell about that knowing she was carrying what we needed because I couldn't. She didn't complain about it, and that made me feel even worse.

“Are you ready?” she asked me.

“Yes.”

“Are you sure you're okay?”

“I'll be alright,” I lied.

I was extremely concerned about my ability to move or walk any distance, and I'd be screwed if I had to fight or run. But I'd do whatever it took to get the hell out of here and try not to slow us down too much.

With Juliette leading the way, we left the supply room, skirting by the two dead men on the floor.

She stopped at the door and cracked it open.

“Stay behind me and be ready for anything, okay?”

I nodded.

She reached for the doorknob but turned back before she opened the door. “If you need to stop or have a problem moving, let me know and we'll figure something out.”

“I'll be okay. Don't worry about me.”

Juliette pulled one of the guns from her holster, opened the door, and peeked out. “There’s a guard in the hallway,” she whispered over her shoulder.

She swung the door all the way open, silently moving through it. Over her shoulder, she used hand signals to indicate we were moving forward.

Moving quietly in step behind her, I could see the guard sitting in a chair next to the wall in the long hallway. Luckily, his back was to us, his head down. Not the smartest way to stand guard, but it worked out for us.

Juliette held up a fist, the signal for stop, then, taking a couple of steps toward the guard alone, she shot him in the head.

His body went slack, his phone dropping into his lap. Juliette grabbed him by the back of the shirt and yanked him upright, leaning him against the wall to keep him from falling out of the chair and onto the floor.

She’d killed two men in the basement quickly, efficiently, and let’s be honest, brutally, and killed this guard like she did it every day. She also handled that rifle—Roxy—and her other guns like they were a part of her.

The way she walked, the way she stood, the way she talked, the woman radiated confidence with everything she did. Watching her, knowing what she was doing for me, my admiration and respect for her clicked up a notch. But, if I didn’t know better, I would have *never* guessed this was the same, sweet, innocent Juliette Donovan I’d once known.

Apparently, a lot can happen in twelve years.

What I did know was she risked her mission, whatever it was, to help my team. We all might've been captured or killed without her. And now she was risking her life for me, even though it was clear she hated me. A lot.

What was she even doing on missions? How did that happen? Mild-mannered, sweet Juliette hadn't fit the mold of an operator, but here she was, as badass as they come and, honestly, she was sexy as hell kitted up with that big ass gun.

This isn't the time or place for thoughts like that. I might want to think about having my head examined.

As we continued down the hallway, Juliette pulled her second gun, both now up and ready for whatever threat we came across. It was then we heard men talking and laughing somewhere nearby. We turned left, heading down a short hallway, the men's voices getting louder. It sounded like they were in some sort of basement man cave. I couldn't understand what they were saying, but based on the laughter and tone of their voices, I assumed they were sitting around shooting the shit. When we got to the end of the hall, Juliette moved to the left of the door, and I moved right. Our eyes met, both of us nodded, and we stepped into the room and opened fire.

Juliette spun around me until we were back-to-back. Both of us were shooting, and when I moved, she moved with me. I had her back and she had mine. Even with our packs, we seemed to sense which way the other would turn with only the

slightest shift in shoulders or hips. We were in sync as if connected. As one. Like poetry. Together, it didn't take long to eliminate the men and we were on the move again. Without slowing down, we reloaded our guns, releasing spent magazines, slamming new mags home as we crossed the room, heading for a set of stairs.

When we were halfway up, two men appeared, coming out of a room at the top of the stairs. Without hesitation, Juliette fired four shots in quick succession—snick, snick—snick, snick—and both men collapsed so fast, I doubted it registered we were there when they hit the floor.

Then we were headed up the stairs and down the hallway. As we passed the two men, I noticed each had bullet holes almost dead center in their foreheads, another in their hearts, and my admiration increased ten-fold. When we got to the end of the hallway, we went through the door, quietly closing it behind us. Shoving her guns into her holster, she lifted her rifle. Like everything else I'd seen her do, she'd led us outside smoothly and competently.

When I was taken, we'd been in an abandoned village, or what passed as a village in this part of the world, but when Juliette and I got outside we were in the middle of nowhere on some sort of farm.

We were lucky, the moon was out, the inky, midnight-black sky was clear and full of billions of twinkling stars, giving us enough light to see our way in the dark.

“Follow me. I left transportation about a klick from here,” Juliette said softly over her shoulder.

I’d been thinking about it. How could I not? Based on her reactions and everything she’d said, I had a pretty good idea why she was so hostile toward me. It was the chickenshit way I broke up with her. Not that I could blame her. I fucked that up and I knew it.

After making our way to the car in silence, we got in and she started driving us away. I shifted in my seat to face her before blurting, “The way I broke up with you was wrong, I admit it. I was young and stupid. Self-centered. It wasn’t you. After I realized what a dick move it was, I wanted to talk to you, but your phone was disconnected. I tried a few different ways over the next couple of months, but I couldn’t find you. I’m so sorry.”

“Whatever, Jax. We’re not talking about that. I found a satellite phone in that supply room, do you want to call someone?”

“Fuck yes.”

She reached for the pack sitting on the seat between us and handed me the SAT phone from one of the pockets. I’d call Reaper and hope he was able to answer his phone. Worst case scenario, I’d leave a message. Juliette had the latitude and longitude of our position on her fancy wrist device, so I could tell him exactly where we were. I dialed his number, and Juliette held her arm out so I could read our coordinates.

“Montgomery.”

“Reaper?”

“Jax!? Is...you, brother?”

“Yeah, it’s me.” I read off our longitude and latitude and repeated it. “We’re on the run, in the middle of nowhere.”

“Repeat...last...where...you?”

I repeated the coordinates, telling him, “You’re breaking up.”

“We’ve...for...disappeared...are you?...copy?”

“Bad copy. Say again your last.” All I could hear was static. “Reaper, say again your last.” But there was no response.

“Fuck. I lost him. We’ll keep trying though. At least now they know we’re out here. Hopefully their connection was better than ours. If he got the coordinates, they’ll come for us,” I informed Juliette, shoving the phone back into the pocket of her pack. “What about your back-up? Can we contact them? Or just head for your exfil?”

“Don’t have any back-up.”

“What do you mean you don’t have back-up?”

“Which part didn’t you understand? No one’s waiting for me. No one’s coming for me. No back-up.”

Who was sent on a mission with no back-up? What the hell kind of operative was she?

“I’m a classified nobody.”

“What about your phone? Can I use it?”

“I don’t travel with a phone,” she said, simply.

“Well, shit. You know what, it’s fine. The SAT phone will work eventually.”

I was grateful to be putting distance between us and that compound, even with the bumpy road jarring my aching body. Sadly, we’d only driven for about fifteen miles when the car unexpectedly sputtered and the engine died.

“Crap, we’re out of gas,” Juliette explained as we coasted to the side of the road. Unfortunately, we were in the middle of nowhere with no other vehicle we could steal.

“Looks like we’re walkin’,” she said as she put the car in park and moved to get out.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you,” I apologized softly.

She snorted, angry again. “You mean when you threw me away?”

“Is that what you think? That I threw you away?”

She turned, glaring at me, and that glare could have scared the devil himself. “That’s what I know,” she bit out.

Of course, from her point of view and the shitty way I did it, yeah, I could see that.

Fuck.

“The girl you’re remembering—she’s dead. She doesn’t exist. I’m not her, she’s not me,” she snapped, her voice dripping with hostility. She grabbed her pack and slid out of the car. I followed, although slower, meeting her in front of it.

“I’m not that same boy! What I did, how I did it, is one of the biggest regrets of my life. When I realized what a shit move it was, I tried to reach out to apologize and explain. To have the conversation I didn’t have, but I couldn’t find you. I swear, I tried to find you to make it right.”

She shrugged on her pack. “Yeah, well, you’re not the only one with regrets, Jax.”

“I fucked up. I admit it, I’m so sorry.”

“Good for you. Let’s go.”

“Juliette...”

“You have very nice teeth,” she told me in an eerily calm voice, but the anger in her eyes told a different story.

I was confused by the drastic change of subject. “Thanks?”

“Do you like them?”

I frowned at her, not understanding why she was asking. “I rarely give deep thought to my teeth. Does this bizarre conversation have a point?”

“Do you want to keep them? I only ask because if you call me Juliette again, I’m going to knock some of them out of your head.”

“When did you get so violent, Juliette?”

She moved like lightning, pulling one of her handguns and pointing it at my head. “Call me that *fucking* name one more time, and I swear I’ll shoot you.”

I was stunned, and more than surprised, but at least her finger wasn't on the trigger.

“Can I at least ask why I can't call you by your name?” I asked hesitantly, hoping the question wouldn't make her drop her finger to the trigger.

She made a scoffing sound that seemed like she was telling me I was either out of my mind or not very bright. “I told you, Juliette is dead. *No one* calls me that. If you're going to use my name, call me Jett.” She shoved her gun back into her holster. “Now let's go.”

Fuck.

We disappeared into the darkness, our senses on high alert. Adrenaline was the only thing keeping me upright and moving. I was unsteady and listing slightly to the left, every step slow and painful.

We traveled for hours, taking several short breaks until the sun was about to come up. During our trek we saw no vehicles or people on the road. The entire time it was silent, only the sounds of our footsteps and the nocturnal creatures that ventured out in the darkness.

And Juliette...Jett never said a single damn word to me.

Chapter 8

Patrick

Not all of Afghanistan was barren desert and honestly... unattractive. Parts of it were quite beautiful.

When Juliette and I stopped shortly before sunrise, we were near the base of a craggy hill that was peppered with trees at its summit. “I’ll bet if we head up this hill, we’ll find a cave we can hide in to rest until it gets dark again,” I suggested, eyeballing the hillside. “If not, it still gives us an elevated position.”

Juliette nodded, “Yeah, okay.”

“Is that, yeah, okay, that’s an *awesome* idea or...?” I asked, smirking at her, hoping levity might break the silence and tension between us.

She pinned me with an icy glare I was afraid might freeze me solid, then spun around and started the slow trek up. Slow, because I couldn’t move fast.

The incline was moderate, and fortunately, didn’t require any actual climbing, but with my injuries, it still wasn’t easy. The

closer we got to the top, the more trees there were and, as we weaved through them, we heard rushing water getting louder and louder. The air became damp, and cooler, and was filled with the pleasant smell of water combined with the fragrant scent of earth and trees.

When we reached the summit and stepped out from the tree line, a small, picturesque waterfall appeared in front of us. Water cascaded in a sheet over the rocky ledge above it, pouring into a small, blue-green pool. The breeze in the air caused the foggy mist to refract the light, creating rainbows. The waterfall hid a cave behind it, which would make the perfect place for us to make camp and sleep for the day.

Standing side-by-side staring at the sight in front of us, for the first time, Juliette smiled a true, genuine smile, and the sight of it almost knocked me on my ass.

We carefully made our way along the ridge of the hillside to the cave. It wasn't huge, but it was deep enough we could set up camp and not be seen, even if we built a fire.

As we got closer, I could see a substantial, flat rock directly under the waterfall, almost completely smooth from centuries of water rushing over it. It jutted out over the edge of the cave, creating nature's perfect shower.

Once we were in the cave, Juliette helped me take off my pack and set it aside, shrugging off her own. "Sit and rest, you need it."

"I can't sit here and watch you set up camp," I argued.

“I’m in a lot better shape than you are. I can get it done faster, and you can’t risk hurting yourself worse. I need you to be able to walk.” She shrugged, “I’m used to it, it’s not a big deal.”

I didn’t like it. It went against everything in me to stand by and do nothing. But I couldn’t deny she was right, I was not in good shape and, if I was being honest, everything hurt. She got to work and like everything else I’d seen her do, she set up camp like a pro. She collected rocks from the cave, making a fire pit, and gathered firewood she found on the ground nearby. When she was done, she unrolled the bedrolls and set them up near the firepit, one on each side—as far apart as she could put us and still keep us near the heat.

When she’d finished setting up camp, she dug in her pack, pulling out a plastic bag with toiletries in it. She removed a bar of soap and a large chamois.

“I’m going to patch you up, but you need to clean up first. You don’t smell that great and you’re filthy.”

Her comment made me laugh, the pain causing a groan. “I could point out you don’t smell that good either.”

It surprised me when she actually chuckled.

Was I making progress thawing her out?

Handing me the soap and chamois, she told me, “You can go first. I’ll keep watch.” Unfortunately, she was back to her no-nonsense tone.

After I took everything from her, she moved to sit on a big rock right outside of the cave with her rifle resting across her lap, watching over the terrain, and I moved toward the waterfall.

Damn, it hurt to move. Getting out of my clothes nearly killed me, but somehow, I managed to get stripped down without her help. The water was cold when I stepped into the spray, and it pounded my battered body. It felt like a million razors slicing me open, but I refused to step out from under the water. I needed my wounds cleaned to avoid an infection, and had to admit, it felt good to wash the dried sweat, blood, and grime off me.

While I soaped up, my gaze slid to where Juliette was sitting. She was scrutinizing me, but wasn't focused on my face. Instead, she appeared to be admiring the rest of me. Her gaze meandered over my bare skin like I was a tasty treat. I watched her turn away, but she quickly looked back.

Her blatant, intimate perusal felt like a physical touch. I turned my back to her. The last thing I wanted was for her to see me grinning, or, despite the chilly water, the reaction of my body. After I scrubbed myself clean and rinsed off, I dried myself with the chamois. I pulled on my pants, foregoing my shirt, at least for now, because I knew it would be painful to put it back on. When we traded places, Juliette avoided my eyes, but I couldn't help noticing she had a pleasing, rosy flush to her face.

I was a little surprised she didn't ask for privacy or seem overly concerned about stripping down in front of me. I managed to respect her privacy while she took off her clothes, but, turnabout's fair play, so I peeked too. Well, more than peeked, I gawked.

I'd noticed some of her scars in the supply room but hadn't gotten a decent look at them. I'd been distracted by her bullet wound. That injury was still oozing blood. I could see several scars I knew were knife wounds, the two largest on her lower back and right thigh. Her others included a burn scar on her leg about the size of a fist, what appeared to be shrapnel scars on her shoulder, and what were very likely two of the gunshot wounds she told me about. But it wasn't her scars that held my interest.

Seeing her in all her naked glory was a shock—an extremely pleasant shock. She wasn't that cute, skinny, little girl anymore. She'd grown into a sexy woman, filled out, with curves in all the right places. She was stunning. With her back to me, I took my time admiring the curve of her waist, the flair of her hips, her perfect ass, and her long, shapely legs.

When she turned her back to the water, arching to rinse the soap out of her hair, she gave me a side view of her perfect breasts. I couldn't help my groan or thoughts about how they'd fit in my hands...and mouth.

All the blood in my body instantaneously headed south. If my dick got any harder, I could snap it off. I couldn't remember ever having this strong a reaction to any woman.

Which was astonishing considering the current condition of my body.

Not the time, Morgan.

Tell that to your dick.

I reminded myself I shouldn't stare—that I should respect her privacy—and I tried to avert my eyes, but I simply couldn't keep my gaze from wandering back to her. The woman was fucking perfection.

After she finished bathing, she dried off and pulled on clean underwear, pants, a bra, and a tank top before putting her boots back on. Now that she was dressed, I moved from my perch back inside the cave.

“Are you okay?” She asked, finger combing her wet hair, not angry like she had been.

It was the first time I'd seen her with her hair down, and it was so much longer than it had been the last time I saw her. It was distracting. “Yeah, why?”

“You're staring.”

“Sorry. You're beautiful,” I blurted like an idiot.

She didn't seem affected or impressed by my compliment. “Yeah, well, your eyes are nearly swollen shut, so you're not seeing too well.”

I held her gaze. “I'm seeing just fine, Juliette. Uh, Jett,” I quickly corrected. Tearing my eyes from hers, I cleared my throat, “Let's take care of that bullet wound,” I told her,

wondering how I was going to concentrate. I was also hoping she didn't notice I was sporting the world's most persistent hard on.

She lifted her shirt, twisting, trying to examine the wound. When I reached my hand out for her, she slapped it away.

“Stop being so fucking stubborn and let me help you, woman.”

She let out a heavy sigh but retrieved her medical pack, shoving it into my hands. As soon as I started cleaning the wound, she sucked in a hissing breath through her teeth, letting out a slight moan.

“Sorry, I know it hurts.”

Although I could tell it was taking considerable effort on her part—breathing deep, going stiff, then slowly, quietly, letting her breath out in a ragged rush—she showed less outward reaction after I mentioned it must be painful. As if she thought it was a sign of weakness.

“I'm worried about this gash. It's really deep. We're going to need to keep a close eye on it.”

“Says the man who can hardly walk,” she said, wryly. “It's a scratch, Jax.”

I shook my head at her. This brave, stubborn, beautiful woman. “How did you fight those two men with this wound?”

She furrowed her brow and waved one of her hands. “Pfft, I'd hardly consider that a fight, Jax.”

It hadn't escaped my notice that she was calling me Jax and refusing to say my name. I thought about asking her why, but considering everything, I rejected the idea. In all likelihood, I'd probably hate her answer anyway.

What the hell was going on with me? What she called me shouldn't bother me. Normally, I didn't care what a woman called me. But, for some reason, I wanted to hear my name—my *real* name—coming from her lips.

“Did this happen while you were helping my team?”

She nodded, her voice tight, “Ricochet off a rock I think.”

Rationally, I knew it was part of her job, even though I wasn't sure exactly what her job was. But I didn't like hearing it. I didn't like knowing she put herself in danger where people shot at her.

I could tell from her breathing, pressing the bandage so it would stick hurt her. But, other than changes in her breathing, she stayed still and never made a sound.

Juliette Donovan was as tough as they come.

Chapter 9

Jett

By the time we'd made our way up the hill, Patrick seemed worse. Let's be honest, he looked like twice baked poo. He was pale and sweating. Every step he took had him grunting and groaning in pain.

While he showered in the waterfall, I let my eyes wander over him. I couldn't help myself. After all, I'm only human... sue me. With the beating he'd taken, it was impossible to tell what he really looked like, but, even with his beat-up face and bruised body, he was beautiful.

The bastard.

I'd always loved his eyes; they were unique, hazel with those little flecks of gold. Although they didn't look so good right now. I used to think when he looked at me with those eyes, he was the one person who could see *me*. Boy, was I wrong about *that*.

Even with his swollen mouth and split lip, he had the same kissable lips I remembered so well. Every so often, he used to

smile a lopsided smile that always made him appear so boyish. When he hit me with that smile, I was putty in his hands. But with his battered and swollen face, he wasn't really able to smile. And I wasn't putty anymore.

Last time I saw him, he was barely shaving, his facial hair patchy at best. But he didn't have that problem any longer. Seeing him now, it was obvious he hadn't shaved for several days. And, of course, I had to be a sucker for a man with scruff on his face. There was something so sexy about it.

I'd let my eyes drift over every inch of him. Watching the water glide over his wide chest and tapered waist, his strong arms, long legs, and those muscular thighs. His body was bruised, but his sculpted, six-pack abs were still on display. Or was that a twelve pack? As if that wasn't enough, he was sporting those panty melting, lady magnet, sexy as hell V muscles. He had a perfect, tight ass and the sweetest little treasure trail leading straight to nirvana.

Unless my eyes were deceiving me—and I didn't think they were—all of him was...bigger.

While I studied him, I could see little glimpses of the boy I once knew in the man in front of me. Patrick Morgan, the man I couldn't forget...no matter how much I wanted to.

I was flooded with thoughts and feelings I'd kept buried in the dark under lock and key for years. There were also a whole shit-ton of new feelings I wasn't expecting and didn't want. Being here with him, my past and present were twisting together in my head.

Even after all these years, I could still remember what his hands felt like on me. What his kisses tasted like. Oh lord, his sweet kisses.

My physical reaction to him was even stronger now that he was a grown man. I could only imagine what he was capable of. Back then, I didn't know *anything* about sex and the only way to describe me would be vanilla.

In all honesty, neither one of us knew what we were doing. Oh, we thought we did. We thought we knew it all. But we were nothing but a couple of fumbling kids. We just didn't know it or care.

We'd spent every minute we could together, which wasn't easy being enlisted and trapped on a ship, but we managed it. We'd found moments only for us. Stolen glances. Stolen smiles. Stolen kisses.

My stolen heart.

He was sweet and made me laugh. It didn't take long to fall for him. To give my heart to him completely, without any reservation. That was a mistake that could only be blamed on the naïve positivity of a barely twenty-year-old.

Unfortunately, that girl was an idiot.

Back then, when I looked at him, I saw my future, bright and happy, stretched out in front of me. Then, without warning, I got his text message, and my world came crashing in on me.

My nerves were fried being near him again and I was *not* happy about my body's traitorous reaction.

No, Jett. Stop thinking about it. It's the shock it's him and it's been a while since you've had sex. That's all.

You sure about that? Because...do you see him?

Shut. Up.

After we'd both showered, he insisted on cleaning and tending my wound. Even though I'd told him it was only a scratch, the truth was it was much worse, and it hurt like a mofo. Luckily, or unluckily, I was currently distracted from the pain by his nearness. He was so close I could smell him. He smelled like a combination of the soap he'd used and the scent that was uniquely Patrick, but—different. Stronger. Manlier.

Smells, like music, had the ability to transport you through time and my head was going places it should not be going. Then he touched me, and my brain started playing a loop of memories.

Memories I didn't want.

Memories of him. Of us.

We'd been so young. Those tender feelings so new and fragile. I'd loved him with every atom of my being. First love. Innocent love. Shattered love.

Stop it. Stop it. Stop it. You hate him. He's the bastard who ripped your heart right out of you and walked away without a care in the world, remember? You should be thinking about stabbing him in the face.

My inner voice was right, so I slammed the door on those memories. Remembering was dangerous and nothing good could come from thinking about *him*.

Jeez, how long does it take to clean and dress a wound? His fingers on me were wreaking havoc on my senses. He wasn't doing anything he shouldn't. He wasn't being inappropriate. And yet...it still felt like something intimate.

“Jett, you okay?”

“What?” I asked, distractedly.

“Are you okay?” he repeated, concern etched across his face. “Looks like you’ve seen a ghost.”

I have seen a ghost. A fricken ghost that's right next to me. Haunting me. I need to get the hell away from him.

“Are you almost done?” I snapped.

He nodded his head, his eyes filled with confusion and was that...sadness? Regret? Pain?

Who cares?

Not me.

I wanted to run, but I couldn't. I couldn't because he had wounds of his own, and now I had to be the one to tend to them.

I wanted to scream.

When he'd finally finished bandaging me, I stared at the large bruise on his left side. Dark, deep purple, blue, and maroon. It looked horrible and extremely painful. I took the

four Ace bandages I snagged from the supply room and tightly wrapped his ribs. The process causing me to be too close to him, having to wrap my arm around him over and over again. I was so close his breath ghosted over my hair with every exhale, and I could feel the rumble of his groans. The whole thing felt like it took an eternity.

When it was finally done, I helped him put on a shirt, then started a fire and had him lay on the bedroll I'd spread out for him. I pulled out supplies and started on the wounds on his face. "This is probably going to hurt," I told him as I cleaned the cut over his eye.

Not that I care if he's in pain.

"You said you don't date. Why is that?"

I felt him staring at me, waiting for an answer. But I didn't respond. The last thing I wanted was to give him the satisfaction of knowing he'd wrecked me, and I'd never trust anyone that way again. Instead, I stayed focused on what I was doing, telling him, "This cut needs a butterfly bandage." I reached back into my medical pack to retrieve it.

"I get it. I'm not into the whole dating thing either. It's just hard to believe you're still single."

"I couldn't care less what you do...or who you do for that matter," I told him, trying to concentrate on his wounds. I did not want to get dragged into this particular conversation or any conversation with him for that matter.

“What can I do to make you forgive me?” he asked, carefully.

“Build a time machine and don’t meet me.”

He released a heavy sigh, thankfully changing the subject, “We have a catch-22. It’s probably safer for us to travel at night, but it’s more dangerous because of the terrain.”

“Well, we’re moving pretty slow anyway, so if you’re asking my opinion, I vote we travel at night.”

Now that I’d calmed down a little, I felt bad about telling him I should have left him to rot. It wasn’t his fault he’d been captured and, based on his current condition I’d say he’d prefer if he hadn’t been. It was impossible to miss how bad he looked. The man was in rough shape.

Unfortunately, we were going to have to spend some time together until he was reunited with his team, so I needed to get control of my emotions. Particularly since I shouldn’t even be having emotions.

My eyes finally met his. “I don’t hate you any less, but I didn’t mean what I said about leaving you to rot.”

“I know,” he said softly.

“You don’t know anything!” I took a deep breath and let it out slowly, shaking my head. “Sorry. It’s just...seeing you after all this time is freaking me out a little.”

Or a whole lot.

Jesus, take the wheel I’m losing my mind here.

I finished cleaning and bandaging the cuts on his face and put everything away. “How’s your head?”

Stop being concerned about him.

I’m only concerned because we still have to get out of here. I don’t care if his freaking head hurts as long as he can keep moving.

Yes, you do.

If you weren’t an inner voice, I’d shoot you.

“Pounding. I took a blow to the back of my head that knocked me out. I’ve got a decent goose egg, but at least it isn’t bleeding.”

I gave him some pain meds and, after he swallowed them, told him, “Close your eyes.” His eyes landed on mine and I nodded, “Close your eyes, take a nap.”

His eyes drifted closed and he whispered, “Bossy.”

It didn’t take long for him to fall asleep. I had a feeling him sleeping was an indication of exactly how bad he felt. That he’d normally be on alert, watching for danger, and not sleeping at all.

I sat there, staring down at him. My hand involuntarily reached out, my thumb gently rubbing his forehead, my fingers resting against the side of his head. He exhaled a small sigh and a hum of pleasure.

What in the actual fuck are you doing?

I have no idea. I'm having a mental breakdown. I've gone insane.

I blame him.

How was I going to survive this without going out of my mind or killing him? Although killing him *would* solve a lot of my problems.

No, Jett. You're not allowed to kill him.

How the hell did this happen? I'm not a bad person. Why would the universe throw Patrick Morgan back in my life?

Flopping onto my back, I stared up at the rocky ceiling of the cave, my hands crossed over my chest. I was so tired, both mentally and physically. I'd just rest for a couple of minutes and get my stupid emotions under control before I took Roxy and went on watch.

Chapter 10

Patrick

I woke up as the sun was sinking toward the horizon. I blinked the sleep away, trying to remember where I was. It took a few seconds for the previous day's events to come back to me. But it was Juliette curled against my side that confused me. She had one arm tucked between us, the other on my chest. Her head was pillowed on my shoulder, my arm resting on her back.

I could tell from her slow, even breathing she was asleep. I had no idea how we ended up this way, but I was damn glad we did. I wasn't a cuddler, but had to admit I liked the way she felt against me. I had the strongest urge to pull her closer to me. I was too comfortable and wasn't overly enthusiastic about making my battered body move any time soon, so I decided to enjoy the feeling of Juliette against me and lay here a little longer.

Despite the venom she threw at me when she was awake, she trusted me enough to sleep next to me like this. I just couldn't figure out how the hell it had happened.

I still couldn't get over the fact that she was here.

Juliette Donovan in a cave in nowhere Afghanistan...what were the odds?

I liked this woman. She was so different from how I remembered her. So confident and take charge. Her strength, her resilience, her personality, her fascinating eyes. Her smokin' hot body. The whole package was exceptionally attractive.

Even though I wasn't her favorite person—more like her least favorite person—she still showed me kindness and compassion. She tended my wounds and made sure I didn't fall over while we traveled. She was putting off her own mission to help me get back to my team.

I wanted to get to know this new Juliette...Jett. As confusing as it was, I wanted to know everything about her.

I'd hurt her. I had no idea how much until she'd realized who I was. Past Patrick was a fucking dick. I don't think I'd ever felt worse about anything in my life. I was consumed with guilt, regret, shame, and remorse. I couldn't figure out how to make it right. I wished I did have that time machine so I could go back and fix this.

The attraction I felt wasn't only her appearance or what she'd done for me and my team, it was more than that. I could feel it, and it came with a primitive instinct to protect her. Which was comical since I was in no shape to protect much of anything, and it was clear she could take care of herself. I just

didn't want her to have to. I'd never felt this protective about anyone. No. Not protective—possessive.

Considering I'd never felt this way about a woman, it was confusing as hell. I hadn't slept next to a woman in at least a decade. I was Mr. One and Done. I never stayed the whole night with *any* woman. Ever. But here I was with Jett snuggled up next to me, feeling like she was exactly where she belonged.

I didn't know anything about Jett. I didn't even know where she lived. She most likely lived in a different state than me, or possibly a different country. I didn't care where she lived, I wanted to see her after we got out of here. But distance wasn't the problem, it was the uphill battle of getting her to agree to see me again.

Understatement of the year.

I needed her to talk to me. When it came to me, she'd built massive walls around herself, and now there was a cavernous distance between us I didn't know how to traverse. She was angry, bitter, and full of resentment and that was my fault. But, if she wouldn't talk to me, there was no chance she'd ever forgive me.

I knew I needed to wake her up, but I didn't want to. It was irrational given our situation, but I wanted to keep lying here in our cozy, little cave. With the sound of the waterfall in the background and Juliette nestled against me, I soaked up the feeling that, in her sleep, she didn't hate me.

I lazily rubbed her back. She sighed and burrowed into me, grumbling something in Pashtu—at least I thought it was Pashtu—her voice soft and sleepy. I had no idea what she'd said but couldn't help my amusement.

After a few moments stroking her back, she jerked and rolled away before she suddenly sat up. Blinking down at me, a dazed look on her face, she cleared her throat, “How did you sleep? Do you feel better?”

Evidently, she was surprised she'd been sleeping in my arms and was trying to pretend it hadn't happened. But I didn't think she realized her hand was still resting on my chest. When she finally did, she snatched it away so fast it was like she'd been scalded.

I grinned up at her. “I slept pretty well, all things considered.”

She stared down at me, studying me intently, a little furrow between her brows. I had an overwhelming desire to pull her back into my arms and kiss that furrow away. As if she could hear my thoughts, her face flushed, and she scrambled away, refusing to look at me.

“We're not leaving this cave until you eat something.” Even though her voice was stern, it trembled when she spoke, and that tremble turned me way the hell on.

Seemed I wasn't the only one feeling the chemistry between us, even if her feelings came with a side order of rage. “Yes ma'am,” I answered with a grin.

It took some effort, and was painful as hell, but I managed to get myself into a sitting position.

“I’m thinking MRE. You need the fuel.”

“Sounds good,” I agreed with a smile wide enough to feel it tug the split on my lip.

“Should we share one to ration our food? We have no idea how long this journey is going to take.”

She sounded nervous and that both surprised and pleased me. My instinct told me she was trying to distract herself from the fact that she woke up in my arms and might be having feelings about that.

“I don’t have much of an appetite, so sharing sounds perfect.”

She took a bottle of water, antibiotics, and some ibuprofen out of her pack. After giving me the pills, she waited until I swallowed them then handed me an MRE. “You make this, and I’ll pack up camp.”

After we shared an MRE of pasta, I pointed to her arm and asked, “Can we check out your map and try to figure out where we are?”

She removed the electronic device from her wrist, but in order for both of us to see the small screen, we had to sit close together. So close, our shoulders and thighs were brushing together. So close, I could smell her, heard her breathing increase, and saw her pulse beating wildly in her throat. I couldn’t help my smirk of satisfaction at that turn of events.

According to her map, we were smack dab in the middle of nowhere and more than sixty miles from where I'd last seen my team. I knew as long as we kept moving east, we'd eventually hit civilization, and her map confirmed that. But the nearest town was still way too many miles away.

When we were ready to head out, Juliette helped me to my feet and assisted me with my pack but didn't put on her own. "I need a minute."

I nodded my understanding. "I'll wait outside. If you let me borrow your GPS thing, I'll try the SAT phone again."

After she handed it to me, I left her alone in the cave. I took the opportunity to relieve myself, crossed my fingers, and made the call.

"Montgomery."

"Reaper, thank fuck," I quickly read off our longitude and latitude in case the phone cut out again.

"Repeat...coordi...Jax! Say...last...Jax?"

I listened to the static for several seconds then disconnected. Piece of crap phone. But, even with the short contact, at least my team knew we were still alive and trying to reach them.

When Jett came out ready to go, I returned the GPS device.

She strapped it back on her wrist. "How'd it go?"

"Don't ask."

As we started down the hill, with Juliette in the lead, I placed my hands on her shoulders. She jerked away and whirled

around to glare at me.

“I might need you for balance,” I told her in response to her scowl.

I didn't *really* think I'd need her for balance, and, even if I did, I could have braced myself against her pack. I wanted to touch her. I craved the connection to her. Besides, the only chance I had with her was to break down her walls by gradually chipping away at them.

Juliette narrowed her eyes, shooting daggers at me as if she were trying to determine if I was telling the truth or not. She finally let out a heavy sigh. “Fine. But don't think this means I give a shit about you.”

“I wouldn't dream of it,” I responded, making sure to keep my grin hidden until her back was to me again.

The sun was low in the sky now, the two of us racing nightfall. We carefully made our way down the hill, managing to make it just as the last of the light lit the sky. We stayed quiet as we continued on our way, watching and listening as we walked. After about two hours, we stumbled onto a road and took a break.

In the silence of the night, we heard the truck before we saw it. I snagged Juliette's hand and quickly moved us off the road and into the brush. “Get down,” I ordered.

“Well, gee whiz, I never would have thought of that,” she grumbled sarcastically as she laid on the ground on her belly, watching the road.

Not giving her a chance to prepare herself, I rolled her to her back, positioning myself over her. Balancing on my forearms, covering her with my body to protect her—or so I told myself. It hurt like hell, but I didn't care.

“What do you think you're doing?” she whisper-hissed.

“Don't move or make a sound,” I whispered back.

“This is not my first rodeo, you know. Even if it was, I'm pretty sure I could figure out we need to hide from a vehicle. Get off me.” She pushed against my chest, trying to dislodge me.

“Shh. Hush and stay still.”

She stilled and squeezed her eyes shut. Her breathing was shaky. She started to tremble, but I didn't think it was from fear.

I didn't speak again until long after the truck went by. “Jett,” I whispered.

Her eyes popped open, and she stared up at me.

“Are you okay?”

She nodded. “Yep.”

“I didn't hurt you, did I?”

She shook her head. “Nope.”

“Ready to go?”

She nodded again. “Yes. Absolutely.”

I almost laughed. It would seem I'd found something that brought her hostility to a screeching halt. I rolled off her onto my back. She popped to her feet, and I held my hand out to her. She glared down at me while I grinned up at her.

"I'm gonna need some help getting up."

She screwed up her face and rolled her eyes but took my hand and helped ease me off the ground to my feet.

"Ready?" I got another nod in response. I reached out to clasp her hand, but she jerked out of my grasp. Seemed she'd recovered and the moment was over.

Even being on the flat surface of the road, we were still moving slowly—because of me—but we covered more ground than we had the previous night. By the time the sun was about to come up, I felt like we'd traveled a decent distance and we started searching for a place to rest for the day.

The landscape was different now. Unfortunately, there were no rocky hills where we might find another cave to sleep in, or waterfalls I could watch Juliette bathe in. Here, it was rocks, dirt, and scrub brush. Heading off the road, we made our way to a thick clump of shrubs.

"Stay here while I break some of these branches and make a space for us," she told me, taking off her pack and dropping it at my feet.

"Do you need help?"

"No, I've got this."

She snapped and hacked off branches with her big knife—creating a hollow space—until she could crawl into the center of the clump of shrubs. Once she was in, she kept hacking off branches to widen the area.

While she worked, I could hear her mumbling to herself. I didn't catch much of it, but she was muttering something about hot, sexist men and the universe hating her. I tried not to let her hear the smile in my voice, "Did you say something?"

"No."

Once she'd carved out enough space in the center, she spread out the bedrolls and poked her head out, "Okay, crawl on in."

Once we were inside, she piled some of the branches she'd cut off in front of the opening. The space was small, intimate. We'd be well-hidden, but we'd also be forced to stay close together, which was more than fine by me.

Juliette set her rifle on the ground next to her and took my pack off me. She gave me painkillers, another dose of antibiotics, and we shared another MRE.

I'd remembered she had a sweet tooth when we were kids. I didn't know if she still had it, but I'd snagged the bag of M&Ms from the MRE we had this morning while her back was turned. After we ate, I handed them to her.

She smiled for the briefest moment before glaring at me. "What's this for?"

"I thought you might like them."

"Why?"

“Do I need a reason?”

She frowned at me.

“They’re just M&Ms, Jett. I remembered you liked them. No ulterior motive. If you don’t want them, give them back,” I told her, holding out my hand.

“No. No, I want them.” Even though it was small, I got a rare smile out of her. “Thank you.”

That fucking smile.

I’d take it. Once she realized I didn’t want anything in return, she opened the bag and offered to share. I declined. But I wasn’t sure I’d ever seen anyone as pleased as Jett having that little bag of M&Ms.

It made me wish I had some other sweet treats to give her, if only to see her happy. I watched her contentedly savor them as if they were the last thing she’d ever eat.

Chapter 11

Jett

I was not going to wonder why Patrick had gifted me M&Ms. Instead, I was going to enjoy them and not analyze what he hoped to gain by giving them to me. Whatever hidden agenda he had, I wasn't going to fall for it. If he wanted to bribe me to get on my good side—which he could not—it would take a hell of a lot more than M&Ms. That would take a full-on candy buffet. A total Willy Wonka situation...at the *very* least.

Several times during the night, Patrick had tried the satellite phone. It worked only once, and the connection didn't last long. He kept insisting it would work eventually and he'd be able to get his location to his team. I wasn't as sure as he was and wondered if he was just as worried as me but was keeping that to himself.

That storeroom contained everything else, but there had been no other phones or electronics. I had to wonder if that satellite phone was left there because it was broken or defective.

It was easy to ignore how bad Patrick's condition was while we were in the dark, but, as soon as the sun came up, it was

more than obvious he wasn't doing well.

Besides the kaleidoscope of bruises on his face and torso, his breathing was labored, and he was perspiring heavily. When he walked, he was bent to his left and it got worse the longer we traveled. I was convinced, at the very least, he had broken ribs.

I wanted to be happy about it. I should be happy about it. He deserved the pain. But, for some reason, I wasn't. I was concerned. I wasn't sure how much longer he'd be able to keep going. Every time he was on his feet, he seemed like he was seconds away from falling over. I couldn't imagine how he'd made it this far, but through it all, he didn't whine or complain. I had to admit, the man's dogged determination was commendable.

I didn't want to, but after we'd eaten, I asked him how he was feeling.

"I'm alright," he told me automatically, but I knew it wasn't true.

"No, you're not. You look like death warmed over. Like you belong in a zombie movie...as the zombie."

I opened my pack, removed my Ghillie suit to let him use as a pillow, and told him to lay down.

I was even more concerned at the effort it took for him to move and the sounds of pain coming out of him as he struggled to do it. But it was the long pain-filled moan he released once he finally got on his back that really worried me.

Do not feel sorry for him.

I wanted to tell him I didn't think he'd be able to keep going until we made it back to some sort of civilization but kept those thoughts to myself knowing there wasn't anything either one of us could do about it.

The only option I could think of was for me to continue on alone and bring back help. But that idea seemed problematic. What if he was found and taken again while I was gone? What if I got captured and he was left out here alone? What if he got worse?

“What are you over there thinking so hard about?” he asked, his question pulling me out of my thoughts.

My eyes slid to his and I shook my head, “I'm thinking about options, but there don't seem to be any.”

“It's going to be okay. I promise.”

“You can't know that, and you definitely can't promise it.”

“Jett, I'm going to do everything in my power to make sure you get out of here.”

“I don't need your help. You're the one who can barely move without groaning in pain. You need help, not me.”

“If push comes to shove, you'll leave me behind. No matter what, you're getting out of here. We're well hidden, you don't need to go on watch. Lay down and sleep, you need it.”

Not a good idea.

Mayday, mayday. Abort. Abort.

Ignoring my inner voice, I laid on my back next to him. I tried to avoid any part of my body touching any part of his, but that was impossible. The space was too tiny, and he was so big. Maybe I should go sleep outside.

“We didn’t get this far to fail. We only have to hang on a little longer. The only easy day was yesterday.”

Although I had no idea why, he was quoting the SEAL motto, the only easy day was yesterday. “I never understood that. The whole idea that if you think yesterday was crap, wait until you see what’s in store for you today. It’s not a very good motto. It’s a wonder anyone signs up to be a SEAL with that hanging over them.”

He chuckled and groaned. “Don’t make me laugh, Jett.”

“Sorry.”

No, you’re not.

“How’s your head?”

“Pounding.”

I turned on my side and propped my head on my hand, peering down at him. “Do you think you have a concussion?”

“I think it’s a good possibility. I just need some rest.”

“No, you need a hospital.”

I started rubbing his head with my free hand. His eyes closed, and I watched as the tension in his face melted away. It didn’t take long for him to fall asleep, and I hoped he would

feel better when he woke up, but only because we still had more ground to cover and not because I cared.

It didn't seem like a good idea to continue to touch and stare at him, so I rolled onto my back, my arms folded over my chest. We were side-by-side, so close we were touching shoulders to ankles. I could feel his body heat radiating off him. It was like I could *feel* his masculinity seeping out of him. This was not fucking good.

I was never going to be able to sleep with all the thoughts in my head and my growing apprehension that he was too close to me. But the next thing I knew, I was waking up to Patrick gently rubbing my back again.

I have sex with men, but I don't 'sleep' with them. So, I wasn't used to waking up next to a man and especially not this particular man. I found it extremely disconcerting.

Everything in me screamed 'run away.' But I was *not* going to let him know that waking up like this was affecting me. That *he* was affecting me. So, instead of bolting, I stretched a little, turning on my side to face him. "Morning," I said casually, even managing a small smile.

I should be an actress.

He smiled back at me. "Good morning."

In the waning light I could see that his face was still mangled, but the swelling around his eyes was better. His left eye was more than halfway open, and the rest of his face didn't seem as swollen. Surprising me, he reached up,

brushing a stray strand of hair off my face and gazed at me with such tenderness and longing, it was electrifying. My breath hitched. My body suddenly too potently aware of him.

Jett! What. The hell. Are you doing?

I shook my head, quickly sitting up and taking a deep breath. I'd frozen my heart a long time ago. I was an ice queen and proud of it, and that was the way it was going to stay. I couldn't allow him the opportunity to defrost me, and, in all honesty, he was probably the only man on the planet who could do it.

I snatched up my rifle and pack and, without a word or glance backward, crawled out of our shrub fort.

Time to fucking go.

Chapter 12

Patrick

Jett and I were on a graveyard schedule—sleeping during the day and traveling at night. Our food was limited to whatever Jett had packed, so we'd been rationing, preparing an MRE for our breakfast, another for dinner, and eating the other foods she'd brought for lunch.

According to Jett's fancy little wrist device, it was midnight, what had become the time we took a longer break and ate 'lunch.'

Jett opened her pack, removing a bottle of water and handing it to me. "Drink this. Let's see what we have today." She started digging around in her pack. "We've got some fruit. Some jerky—that's probably still too chewy for you. Oh, I have salty nuts," she said innocently, looking up at me.

I met her gaze and grinned, one eyebrow cocked.

She rolled her eyes at me. "What are you, twelve?"

"Actually, I'm nine."

Her lips twitched with the barest hint of a smile, and I felt victorious.

She shook her head at me. “Do you want some nuts or not?”

My grin deepened and, although I didn’t say anything, I could see she was struggling not to smile back. “I give up. You can just starve, Morgan.”

“The water is fine. I’m not really hungry.”

“You have to eat, Jax. You can’t stroll through the desert without food. Do you want some painkillers?”

Normally, I’d refuse, wanting to keep a clear head, but the way my body felt, I’d take whatever help I could get. “Yes. Please.”

She nodded and opened her medical pack, taking out a couple of pills and handing them to me.

“Thank you. Are you alright? How’s your gunshot wound? I want to check that and change your bandage later.”

“I’m fine, but you don’t look so good.”

“Don’t feel that great either.” I tossed the pills in my mouth and took a swig of water, swallowing them with a grimace.

Juliette dug around in her backpack and took out a couple of apples. Using the small knife she had tucked in her flak jacket, she cut a small slice of one and held it out to me, “Eat this.”

I took it from her. “Are you always this bossy?” I tried smiling at her, letting her know I was teasing her.

She sliced another piece and popped it in her mouth, “I can be a lot bossier when it comes to making sure you don’t fall over and force me to carry your sorry ass.”

“Jett, I have to tell you something.”

She froze mid-chew. Her eyes narrowed slightly, as if she expected me to tell her something bad or something she didn’t want to hear.

“You saw me and my team, and you know I’m Navy. What you might not have guessed is we’re SEALs. I know my team is searching for me. They’ll come for us if we can get our location to them.”

She stared at me, and I could almost see the thoughts spinning through her head. I saw anger flash through her eyes, but she quickly shut it down and shook it off.

“That makes sense. I had a feeling you guys were special ops when I first saw you.” She handed me another slice of apple. “Do you think they knew that? Do you think that’s why they captured you and tried to take your friend?”

“I don’t know how they could have known.”

“You guys could have a traitor. A spy or a mole,” she said, thoughtfully.

She was right. That was a possibility. Something about this op had seemed off from the get-go, although I hadn’t been able to put my finger on what it was.

“I saw the whole thing unfold. No two ways about it, your team was ambushed. They were waiting for you.”

That information stunned me. “What?”

She handed me another piece of apple, popping another slice in her mouth, and nodded. “They knew you were coming and stayed well-hidden until it was too late for me to warn you guys. They came out of nowhere as soon as your team hit that vacant lot, although I’m still not sure how they knew you were there. If I’d seen them, I could have tried to warn you.

“I didn’t have comms and I couldn’t yell, but I could have fired a warning shot to get your attention before you were in that kill zone, and it *was* set up as a kill zone.”

I ran my hand roughly through my hair. “Fuck.”

Jett nodded, handing me another piece of apple. “Curious thing is, they *didn’t* kill you guys. No offense, but all of you should be dead.”

I didn’t know what to do with that information. If someone intended to kill or capture us, I wanted to know who the hell it was so we could return the favor.

In addition to that, my curiosity about how she went from happy-go-lucky Juliette to badass warrior Jett was getting worse. I was worried asking would piss her off, but she was talking to me, so I took a chance.

“Jett, how did you end up doing what you do?” I asked, cautiously.

She shrugged one shoulder. “Shadowhawk made me an offer and I accepted.”

I couldn't hide my surprise, "Shadowhawk? You work for Shadowhawk?" Fuck. It was well-known Shadowhawk operatives were elite.

We continued chatting until it was time to get going again. This had been the first conversation we'd had where she didn't seem pissed off at me, and somehow while we talked, she'd managed to get me to eat one of the apples.

Having a normal conversation with Juliette made me feel like I was making progress with her. I desperately wanted to breach the barriers between us and get her to forgive me. So, I rolled the dice and brought up our past again. "Jett, I'm sorry for what I did. Truly sorry."

The immediate change in her clearly indicated I should have kept my big mouth shut.

"Oh, *now* you're sorry?" she snapped. "Is that what you're saying to me? Because I don't remember the word 'sorry' in your *text* message. You had twelve years to say you're sorry. If circumstances hadn't forced us to cross paths again, you'd still be holding in your sorry."

"You did it well, Jax. I didn't see it coming. But it wasn't enough you sent that text, you left every memory of us in a box on my bunk, like you were erasing me from your life. Then you disappeared. I'm guessing to go to BUD/s. You left me behind, and your life went on as if nothing happened. You broke my heart." She gave her head a little shake. "No. That's wrong. You vaporized it."

“I’m so sorry, Jett. I know it doesn’t help, but it’s the only thing I can say. I don’t know what to do to make it better... because I feel like there isn’t anything I *can* do to make it better.”

It was apparent I’d unleashed something in her because she continued as if she hadn’t heard me, “As if that wasn’t enough, I became a laughingstock. Do you have any idea how many jokes I heard about the poor Romeo whose Juliette was so defective he had to break up with her by text message and disappear to get away from her?”

I reached out for her, but, thinking better of it, pulled back at the last second, dropping my hand in my lap. “No. No, Jett, there was nothing wrong with you. Not then, not now.” I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I had no idea she’d been ridiculed because of what *I’d* done.

She sat forward, staring into the distance while the silence between us stretched. I kept quiet, knowing there was more, but not sure I wanted to hear it. I was hoping if she got it out, we could move past it. When she finally spoke again, her voice had lost its anger. “It’s ironic really. As luck would have it, I had something to tell you that day. Turns out, while you were off becoming a SEAL, I was being dishonorably discharged for being pregnant and refusing to tell them your name.”

All the oxygen was suddenly sucked out of the air. I couldn’t have heard her correctly. Shocked and stunned, I stared at her

profile for several long seconds, struggling to find my voice. “We have a kid?” I whispered.

Her hands were fidgeting in her lap, and she was still staring out at the horizon, her voice soft and sad, “No, Jax, we don’t have a kid. I lost her.”

“Her?” I breathed, blinking up at her.

“Because we’d been on the ship for months, command knew it had to be another sailor, and they were pretty intent on finding you. They wanted to make examples of us. Since I wouldn’t tell them who you were, they made a bigger example of me instead, and they were vicious about it. But, at that point, I really didn’t give a shit about being thrown out of the Navy.”

That wasn’t right. She should have been transferred to a land-based assignment, not less than honorably discharged. “Jesus, Jett. I didn’t know. I swear, I didn’t know.” What else could I say? I was stunned by what she was telling me.

“I loved you so much,” she whispered, so quietly I wasn’t sure I’d heard her right. She finally faced me, giving me a scathing look. “I’d lost you and my Navy career, but I had my baby. It was the last thing I expected, but I’m not sure I ever wanted *anything* more than I wanted that baby. Feeling her grow and move inside me, I’d never felt anything close to that. I didn’t know love like that existed. Nothing else mattered to me.”

Her voice was barely a whisper, so filled with heartache and sorrow it was painful to hear, “Then it all went horribly wrong.

She came too early. She was so tiny.”

For a moment, she seemed to disappear into the past. “I named her Emily.”

Her voice cracked.

My heart seized.

She shook her head and cleared her throat, as if physically shaking off her memories. When she spoke again, her voice was stronger, angrier, “I moped. I mourned. I cried a river of tears.” She squeezed her eyes closed. “God, I was *pathetic*.”

“Six months later, I was approached by Shadowhawk, and I accepted their offer. That was also when I decided to stop being pathetic, and I embraced the anger and rage living inside me. I wanted to shed the old Juliette. I didn’t want anything to do with her and her stupid, stupid heart. She was dead...and I buried her. Less than a handful of people even know my real name is Juliette. Because of you, and all those stupid jokes, I couldn’t stand to hear my own name.”

“Jett, *please*,” I begged. “Stop, *please*.” I wasn’t sure I could take much more.

But she didn’t stop.

Her voice was a knife. “I removed love from my emotions and my vocabulary. Love is for saps and suckers. Love will chew you up, spit you out, break your heart, and leave you lying face down on a rainy Tuesday after it rips everything away from you. I wasn’t ever going to allow myself to be that vulnerable again. No one will *ever* hurt me like that again.

“I channeled my anger and rage, learning everything I could, and gained a confidence I’d never had and didn’t know existed. I worked hard, trained harder, and, at twenty-six, I became the youngest team leader in Shadowhawk history.

“Scuttlebutt said I moved up so fast because I had a death wish, and maybe that’s true. I do my job, but don’t really care if I live or die doing it as long as I get it done.”

“Please, Jett,” I pleaded, shaking my head. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing and all I wanted was for her to stop talking. I knew what she was saying was true, but I didn’t want it to be. Hearing the abhorrent things she went through, the way she’d annihilated her emotions, and knowing I had been the catalyst that caused it made me sick.

But she ignored me and kept talking.

“I was so naïve back then. I got a tough lesson from you on the way things work, though. And that lesson stuck with me. So, the innocent, carefree Juliette you once knew is gone, and she’s never coming back.”

She turned her full attention to me, pinning me with those unique eyes. “I’ve done a lot of horrifying things, and I’ve seen the most atrocious things one human can do to another, but it’s still *you* that haunts me in the dark.

“I’ve spent all these years trying to get away from you, to forget you. Forget your lies and bullshit words of love. Forget the child we created together. And look at me now—here I am stuck with you.”

I never could have imagined that one stupid, childish decision on my part would affect someone so deeply. Realizing how much Juliette suffered from my decision broke my heart.

My emotions were out of control. I felt a deep shame for what I'd done. I was embarrassed, mortified, and the guilt I felt was oppressive. On top of everything else, I felt an unexpected, overwhelming sadness about the baby.

A daughter. Emily.

Jett stood up and frowned down at me. I knew she was waiting for me to speak. I wanted to explain. I wanted to say something—anything—to make it right, to take away the pain I'd caused her. But a torrent of emotions was rushing through me. My head was reeling from what she'd told me, and I wanted to find the right words. Problem was, the right words didn't exist. What could I possibly say to make her feel better?

"I...I..." I licked my lips, which felt like they'd dried to dust. "I..."

She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at me, "You, you, what? Huh? What, Jax?"

But nothing came out of my mouth, and I just stared up at her like an asshole.

She shook her head and strode away. All I could do was sit there flabbergasted and watch her go. Thankfully, she didn't go far, sitting on a large rock a couple hundred feet away,

scanning the horizon and surrounding area with her rifle in her lap.

I scrubbed my hands roughly over my face. I knew the way I'd broken up with her was wrong as soon as I'd done it. But we were only kids, and I was a stupid, selfish boy. I'd only been thinking about myself, about what I wanted, what I needed. I *had* cared about her. I left her because I couldn't be the man she wanted me to be.

If I could go back, I still would have broken up with her, but I would have done it in a much better way—a more mature way—with kindness, the way she deserved.

I could never forgive myself for what I'd done to her, for what she'd been through. And if I couldn't forgive myself, what chance was there that Jett could ever forgive me?

When she finally came back and asked if I was ready to go, she acted like our conversation hadn't happened.

“Jett...”

“You know what, Jax? There's nothing you can say, and I don't want to hear it anyway. It was a long time ago, just drop it. Get up and let's get moving.”

Chapter 13

Patrick

Both of us were quiet while we packed up and started walking again. It was impossible to get Juliette's words out of my head. She'd been pregnant. I didn't know how to feel about that. I'd only rarely thought about having kids and, when I did, my answer was always the same...I didn't want them.

Everything about a baby with Juliette would have been wrong—our ages, our Navy careers, our relationship. But, for reasons I didn't understand and couldn't explain, I felt sad and disappointed. I couldn't stop thinking about it.

If she'd told me she was pregnant, I wouldn't have left her high and dry. I would have supported her in whatever way she needed. I would have been a father to my child.

We made a baby together, a daughter...Emily...and lost her.

We might not have belonged together back then, but it made me feel worse about how I ended things with her. Not only had I hurt her, she'd been pregnant, lost the baby, and had to deal with that loss. Alone. And, apparently, she also had to face the

Navy making an example out of her. She'd been dishonorably discharged. She didn't deserve that.

She could have given the Navy my name, making things easier for herself, but she hadn't. She could have fought the discharge, but didn't. By withholding my name, she'd destroyed her Navy career but had saved mine. I didn't understand why she'd do that. Especially not now that I was completely aware of how deeply I'd hurt her.

As a result, she wore her anger and heartbreak like armor. What I'd done wasn't just a stupid mistake on my part. It was a betrayal. No wonder she hated me.

I didn't know what to say to her, how to talk to her. Because of my ribs, for the last two nights she'd stayed on my left side, supporting me, letting me put my arm around her so I could lean on her. Her support helped—a lot, but after what she'd told me, I couldn't imagine how hard it must be for her to have to help me in *any* way.

I instinctively knew she wouldn't want to talk about it. I couldn't blame her and, honestly, I didn't know if I could take it again. But I didn't want deafening silence to hang between us. So, I decided on small talk. I couldn't go wrong with small talk.

Juliette's parents had died when she was young and she'd been raised by her grandmother, who she adored. That seemed like a safe topic of conversation. "How's your grandma?"

"She died—six years ago," she responded, flatly.

“I’m so sorry, Jett.”

Shit. I cannot catch a break with her. Maybe I should try something less personal. Or maybe I should just keep my mouth shut.

“Why don’t you have a team or back-up?”

“I don’t normally work with a team anymore. Except for one person, I work better alone. Mainly, I do hostile elimination. It suits my antisocial personality.”

“You, antisocial?” That statement shocked me, that didn’t sound right. She’d been shy, but social.

“Yeah, well, shit happened and changed me. I told you, that naïve, carefree girl doesn’t exist anymore. I’ve got a few trust issues.”

Fuck. Keep digging the hole deeper and deeper, Morgan. Talking to her is like trying to walk in a field full of landmines. Blindfolded. On one foot.

I was pleasantly surprised when she didn’t shut down. “I work for Shadowhawk, but I get loaned out quite a bit.”

“What do you mean loaned out?”

“Sometimes the alphabets can’t send you guys when their hands are tied. Or when they need something...*questionable* done and don’t want to get their hands dirty. And, of course, if we get caught or killed, they can blame us and walk away without having caused an international incident. Plausible deniability and all that, which happens more than you’d think.”

“That’s kind of fucked up.”

She chuckled and nodded her head. “Yeah. But I’m retiring, so I won’t have to put up with it much longer. This is my last mission. Well, as soon as I get back on track and finish it. I bought my first house, but got this op before I could move in.”

“That’s awesome, Jett. Where’s your house?” I asked without thinking.

“In Virginia Beach. It’s right on the water.”

From the way she sounded, she was happy and excited about it. It was probably her excitement that had her telling me where she lived, and it was undoubtedly better not to mention I also lived in Virginia Beach, which was one hell of a lucky coincidence. But it did mean seeing her again was a possibility...if she didn’t kill me first.

“Sweet. Not to be out of line, but how can you afford to retire?”

“I inherited my parent’s estate when I turned thirty, and my grandma’s house when she died. Shadowhawk also pays me a lot of money but I’m never home to spend it. So, I’m fortunate to retire and live comfortably the rest of my life doing whatever I want.”

“But you’re only thirty-two. That’s pretty young to retire, isn’t it?”

“It is. But I’ve been working almost nonstop for a decade. My body’s been broken and battered. I’ve been shot, stabbed,

burned, locked up, blown up, and beaten up. Been in firefights, helo crashes, and more car accidents than I can count.

“I’ve stormed into hell more times than I care to remember. I’ve been in enough dangerous situations, seen enough death, blah, blah, blah, you know how it is. I want to get out while I can still enjoy my life.”

Yeah, I knew how it was and, even though I understood it was her job, I didn’t like hearing the danger she’d been in or that she’d been hurt doing it. At least I had a team and back-up before, during, and after a mission. I couldn’t imagine what it was like to do the kind of work we did on your own.

“What are you going to do in your retirement?”

“I just want to have a normal life. So regular stuff. Maybe travel to some *nice* places. Be a tourist. Nothing but beaches, waves to surf, bikinis, and cocktails.” She smiled a small smile thinking about it. “All I have to do is finish this mission and get home in one piece.”

“Guess me and my team really messed that up for you.”

She shrugged. “Shit happens. It’s only a delay. My target won’t be getting away from me.”

I grinned and changed the subject. “Bikini, huh?”

“Shut up,” she said, but there was no heat in her words.

I chuckled. “When did you start surfing?”

“My best friend, Augie, taught me maybe five or six years ago? As it happens, he’s a retired SEAL.”

I shook my head. “Don’t know an Augie.”

“He can give off a scary vibe and a lot of people tend to steer clear of him because of that. Although I never really got that because he’s such a great guy.

“I mean, sure, he knows fifteen different ways to break your neck, but he’s sweet and kind, loyal and funny. He’s the best man I’ve ever known.”

Ouch. I wanted to find this faceless Augie and kick the crap out of him.

“Well, you’re one of us now so you have a team at your back. Anything you ever need, you only have to ask. SEALs don’t leave SEALs behind.”

“I’m not a SEAL and I’m not one of you, not one of your team.”

“Maybe not technically, but you’re responsible for me getting out of that hellhole and making sure I don’t fall over on this road. If it weren’t for you, your bravery, I’d be dead or wishing I was dead. My team would most likely be dead. *No one*—not the team, not their women, and especially not me—are *ever* going to forget that. *Whatever* you need, we’ll make sure you have it.”

“That’s not necessary. I can take care of myself. Been doing it for a long time now.”

It made my chest tight wondering if I’d done this to her. If I was the one who’d made her isolate herself and think she had to do everything on her own.

“I’m sorry, Jett...for what I did. I fucked up. I don’t know how to make it right. Tell me how to make it right.”

“You can’t. It’s over and done, let’s not talk about it.” Her voice wasn’t angry, but it was tight and strained...and held a warning.

One I didn’t pay attention to.

“But, even after all this time, you’re still angry.”

She huffed out a laugh, but she wasn’t amused. “Anger protects me. Anger keeps people away from me.

“Actually, I should thank you. Because of you, I don’t have to worry about getting close to people or caring about them. You want to keep from being hurt? Be the first one out the door. Don’t form any sort of attachments. You can’t lose someone if you never care about anyone. My heart will never be broken again because I don’t have one to give away anymore.

“If you hadn’t been such a jerk, people would still be able to walk all over me. I wouldn’t be as good at this job as I am. Hell, I wouldn’t even have this job.

“I’d be wasting my time like so many other women searching for love and wanting a family. So, thank you for that. Can you walk on your own for a bit? I’m going to do some recon.”

She didn’t wait for an answer, just briskly strutted away, her ponytail swishing back and forth with every step.

Fuck. I damaged her profoundly. How the hell could I *ever* make this right?

She was right about one thing though, the old Juliette and the new Jett were two completely different women. I could hardly believe they were the same person.

There were glimpses...moments when Jett didn't seem like she hated my guts. And I liked her, a hell of a lot.

How could I find moments when she didn't hate me at all? *Could* I find moments when she didn't hate me at all? Because I was going to make this right, no matter what it took. I had to. The only problem was, I didn't know how yet.



When Jett came back about ten minutes later, she took up her place on my left side, letting me lean against her again with my arm around her, but she kept hers free so she could use her rifle if she needed to.

I might be a glutton for punishment, but I wasn't going to stop trying to talk to her. "What's the first thing you want to eat when you get back?"

She smiled at me. Smiled. That was a pleasant surprise. "A good, old-fashioned American burger."

"Oh yeah, a big, sloppy burger and fries," I agreed.

"*And* onion rings. Ooh, and a chocolate milkshake."

“You know what else I really like?” I asked, hoping to keep her talking.

She didn't skip a beat. “Men in high heels?”

I stopped in my tracks, staring at her, blinking. Shocked, she'd made a joke. She smirked at me, then her face broke into a huge smile, and we both started laughing.

I realized it was the first time she'd genuinely laughed, and the sound went straight to my balls. Laughing hurt like hell, but I'd take any amount of pain to freeze the moment, to see and hear that happiness coming from her every minute of the day.

Chapter 14

Patrick

It was nearing dawn. That time of the morning where it was still dark, the sky scarcely showing the first violet-blue tinge of a new day. Jett and I had been walking the entire night without incident when I got that feeling something wasn't right. The kind of feeling that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. That feeling that's kept me alive.

“Hang on a second, Jett.”

She must have heard the apprehension in my voice because she froze and both of us snapped our rifles up. I was looking through my scope down the road in front of us. Jett swung around, scanning the area behind us.

“We've got a parked pickup truck. Men in the back of it.”

Jett spun around, the two of us shoulder to shoulder, our rifles pointed down the road, watching through our scopes. “We need to go,” she urged after taking in the scene in front of us.

We quickly hurried off the road, heading for the brush. But, before we could make it to cover, we were hit with the vehicle's lights.

I couldn't help but wonder if they were from the compound and searching for us. Although I had no idea how they could have known which way we'd gone or where we were.

Even if they weren't from the compound, I'd been a SEAL too long to think they were upstanding motorists out for a ride, sitting parked on the side of the road. Not in this part of the world.

The lights were blinding. As soon as we were exposed, the engine revved, and the truck barreled toward us.

"Run, Jett!" I barked at her. "Head for that outcropping of rocks."

"You go," she countered, hitting the dirt and peering through the scope of her rifle. "You're slower than me. I'll cover you."

"Would it kill you to do what I ask just once?" I complained as I dropped down next to her as fast as my body would let me. "Do you not understand I'm trying to keep you safe? I swear, you're the most stubborn woman I've ever met."

Ignoring me, her concentration stayed focused on the view through her scope. She made some adjustments on the gun as her breathing and body language changed. Everything about her seemed calm and relaxed, then her finger dropped to the trigger and she squeezed.

I heard the tire blow out. The truck jerked and swerved, veering off the road and into the brush. The men started bailing, jumping out of the bed of the truck as it hit a ditch and tipped over onto its side, sliding to a stop a couple of hundred feet on the other side of the road.

We started shooting, killing several of them, but when they returned fire, I knew we were seriously outgunned and without much cover.

“Jett, go without me. Head for the outcropping of rocks behind us. I’ve got your six. If anything happens to me, you get the hell out of here.”

Jett got to her feet. I was relieved she was finally going to listen to me. That she was going to go and get herself to safety. “I’m not leaving you behind,” she grunted as she grabbed me under the arm and hauled me to my feet.

Exposed and with no time to argue with her, I had no choice but to take off for the rocks with her. “Stay low, Jett. We’re totally out in the open until we reach those rocks.”

“Thanks for telling me. I’m not sure I would have thought of that,” she flung back, sarcastically.

We needed to run, but my injuries and the pain made that impossible. The best I could do was a bent over, limping, zigzagging jog. The two of us returned fire over our shoulders while bullets peppered the ground, kicking up dirt near our feet, coming too close for comfort.

“Leave me,” I snapped, roughly. “Go on without me, Jett. I’m only slowing you down.”

Jett slid her left arm around me in a tight hold. “No. Now shut up and *move*, frogman!” she shouted.

“So fucking bossy,” I mumbled as we picked up the pace.

We kept moving. Half jogging, half Jett dragging me along beside her. I had no idea how, but, miraculously, we made it to the outcropping of rocks without either of us being shot.

“Stay down,” I implored once we’d reached the rocks and ducked behind them, taking cover.

“Really, Einstein?” she quipped. “And here I was thinking about getting up, doing a dance for them, and yelling here we are, come and kill us.”

Even with the life-or-death situation in front of us, I found myself smiling. I couldn’t get enough of this spunky, badass, firecracker of a woman.

Dawn had painted the sky pink and orange, allowing all of us to see the terrain better. The men knew where we were and had crossed the road, fanning out, and were shooting at us while heading in our direction.

Jett dropped her pack and belly crawled a short distance from me, resting the barrel of her rifle on a large rock.

I took up a position near her. “Light ’em up,” I told her and the two of us started shooting.

Jett took our right flank, I took our left, and, one by one, we took out the tangos until only one was left standing. Once he realized he was alone he whirled around and started running away.

“Running won’t help you,” Jett muttered to herself.

A moment later, she squeezed her trigger, shooting the man in the back of the head. His body violently jerked and he face-planted in the dirt.

Everything went quiet.

After scanning the area, Jett stood up, letting her rifle hang at her side, reaching down to help me stand. Once I was on my feet, I couldn’t stop myself, I pulled her into me, hugging her. It hurt like hell and wasn’t comfortable, or even very sexy, but it was worth the pain and awkwardness to feel her in my arms against me.

“Fuck, Jett. Great job. Great fucking job. You’d make a hell of a SEAL.”

I was genuinely shocked when her arms briefly wrapped around me and held me tight as she studied me, desire dancing in her eyes. Her gaze dropped from mine, lowering to my mouth, her tongue running over her lips, drawing my eyes to them.

The air between us vibrated.

My hands palmed her face, my thumbs absently stroking her jaw—waiting.

Waiting for her to pull away.

Waiting for her to tell me to take my hands off her.

But she didn't say a word. Instead, she wound her arms around my neck. Seizing the opportunity, I dropped my head, capturing her mouth with mine and she sighed against my lips.

Her arms tightened around me, one of mine palming the back of her head, tangled in her hair, the other on her back holding her irresistible body to mine.

The kiss started slow and languid. Gentle. Soft lips and tentative tongues touching each other—to devouring, greedy, and all-consuming in seconds.

Kissing her felt like being struck by lightning, a blaze of desire and heat burning through my veins. A feeling I'd never felt.

I tightened my grip on her, pulling her into me, our bodies as close as they could be with our vests on. She made desperate sounds into my mouth, clutching my head, fisting and tugging my hair. I responded with my own moans of pleasure, our tongues stroking and gliding over each other in an erotic rhythm.

She twined one leg around my thigh, trying to get even closer. I hitched her leg higher, holding her thigh to my hip. I rolled my hips, grinding my cock against her where we both wanted it most. We moaned in unison at the friction, my cock swelling and throbbing. Pure, carnal need shooting through me.

Then, surprising me, she suddenly jerked her mouth away from mine. I groaned at the abrupt loss. Her eyes held mine, our breathing harsh, coming in quick pants, knowing that had been the best kiss of my life. No way she would kiss me like that if she really hated me and, with that thought, I grinned at her.

“What the hell are you doing?” she snapped at me.

I brushed a stray tendril of hair off her face. “What?”

“Don’t do that.”

I smirked at her. “Do what?”

“Kiss me.”

I leaned closer to her, our noses almost touching, “You kissed me back.”

“You’re dangerously close to me beating the shit out of you.” I knew she didn’t mean it, her voice held no anger. Instead, it was soft and breathy...sexy as hell.

I was grinning and still had a hold of her, her leg still hooked around my thigh. Either she didn’t want to pull away or didn’t notice I still held her in my arms.

“Too late. I’ve already had the shit beat out of me.” I kissed her cheek and brushed my face against hers tenderly. “But I’d risk it to feel your hot mouth on mine again.” I nuzzled my nose against her ear. She shivered, and I leaned back to see her expression.

She let out a sigh and stared at me with half-lidded eyes. Her pupils were blown, her eyes hazy, shimmering with desire. Her brown eye was the color of rich chocolate, her blue eye shimmering like a sapphire. For a second, I thought she was going to give in and kiss me again. I held my breath hoping she would.

“This didn’t happen,” she said, softly.

“Okay,” I agreed, rubbing my thumb over her kiss-swollen bottom lip. “Except it did.”

“I hate you,” she breathed out in what sounded like an affectionate sigh.

“You didn’t kiss me like you hated me. I’m prepared to kiss you again if you want to make sure.”

“Shut up. That didn’t happen.”

She must have finally realized she was still in my arms, her leg slowly sliding out of my grasp and down my thigh as if she still wanted the connection until she took a shaky step back and seemed to regain some of her composure.

“Except it did.”

“I should leave you here.”

I smiled at her. “But you won’t.”

“You’re so freaking annoying.”

The words she was using were angry, but her tone was affectionate, and I was ecstatic about that.

She slipped her pack on and we started walking again, my arm around her because I still needed her for support, and I struggled to keep from laughing at that turn of events.

It was completely unexpected, but I believed I'd found a way through her mile-high steel barriers, and I couldn't say the way in was disappointing.

I wanted this woman. As shocked as I was by the thought—because I'd never felt this way—I wanted to claim her as mine. Even knowing how much she'd hate the idea, how hard she'd fight against it. The thought of that fight had me smiling because it was a fight I was not only anticipating...it was one I intended on winning.

Chapter 15

Patrick

Once again, we slept through the day and walked for another long night, and somehow, we'd finally made it back to civilization. Based on how I was feeling, none too soon. I wasn't sure I had another night traipsing through the desert left in me.

We were standing well away from the small village, concealing ourselves in the brush. After watching for a while, we'd decided the best way to get in unseen was to circle around and enter from another direction, but we needed to hurry if we were going to make it before the streets came alive with people.

We'd just started to move when I heard the distinctive sound, and we both reacted at the same time.

“RPG!”

“Incoming!”

Without thought, I was hitting Jett like a linebacker, slamming us both to the ground. I landed on top of her and

heard the air leave her lungs with a grunt when she hit the dirt.

Resting on my forearms to keep from putting all my weight on her, I covered as much of her as possible with my body. I gasped as white hot pain like I'd never felt shot through me from my impulsive action.

The RPG whistled over our heads. Thankfully, the explosion and concussive force missed us, but it was close enough the ground shook. Close enough, debris and dust rained down on and around us.

I could feel how stiff Jett was. Her breath coming in short pants and, once again, I didn't think it was completely from fear.

She was clearly irritated when she asked, "Have you ever heard of personal space?"

I knew it was inappropriate timing, with people trying to kill us again, but who knew if I'd have another chance. My eyes caught and held hers. "You were right, I was an asshole. A fucking bastard. I'm so sorry, Jett."

She pushed at my chest. "Whatever. Get the fuck off me."

I rolled off her onto my back, it was the best I could do with the excruciating pain in my chest and left side. I couldn't take a full breath and I knew something was seriously wrong.

I rolled my head to face her. "You, okay?"

"I think so," she said, casually. "Just got the wind knocked out of me." She rolled and crawled a short distance away,

laying on her belly, surveying the scene through her rifle scope as if nothing had happened.

“Another group,” she whispered. “I can see five, clustered together. They’re getting ready to fire another RPG at us. Cover your ears, this is gonna get loud.”

Seconds after she squeezed the trigger, there was an explosion.

“Jesus, what the fuck was that!?”

She didn’t turn away from her scope. “RPG. I told you it was gonna get loud,” she calmly explained.

“RPG? You shot the rocket?”

“Yeah.”

She fired off two more shots, stood up, and stared down at me lying there like a turtle on its back.

“What the hell?” I asked, looking up at her.

She shrugged one shoulder. “Got rid of the threat.”

Everything I’d seen from her, especially her casual reactions, told me this was a woman used to being in dangerous situations. I didn’t like knowing that. I was aware the feeling was unreasonable, but I still didn’t like it. Even with those feelings, it was impossible not to be seriously impressed with her skills.

The explosions from the RPGs were loud and would have woken everyone nearby. Luckily, the streets were still deserted, but likely wouldn’t stay that way long. Despite the

new danger, we decided to proceed with our plan to move into the town and hide out there. It wasn't as if we had a variety of other options.

After Jett helped me up, we moved carefully and, staying hidden, made our way into the little town just as the sun made its way over the horizon.

I could barely walk. Every step felt like a red hot poker was stabbing me in the side. If the bad guys didn't get me the agonizing pain might. I still couldn't take a deep breath and was gasping and wheezing my way into town. The only thing keeping me going was knowing Jett would be safer with the change in location.

We found an abandoned building on the outskirts that was littered with junk and trash. After ordering me to rest, Jett used the junk, randomly piling it to make us a hidey hole. She did a great job. When it was done, if anyone came into this building searching for us, they wouldn't see anything other than a building with crap piled everywhere.

I was in bad shape, and we both knew it, so I didn't fight her about not helping. While Jett constructed our hiding spot, I tried the SAT phone again, but it still wasn't working. At this point, I couldn't say I was surprised by that. I just needed to rest for a few minutes and catch my breath, then I'd figure out what our next move should be.

After Jett finished our hiding spot and we crawled inside, I saw the cuts and scrapes on her arms and the left side of her face. Injuries from me slamming her to the ground. I hadn't

meant to go at her that hard, but everything in me needed to protect her from that RPG.

She was also dirty, with twigs, and leaves, and dirt in her hair. She was physically hurt because of me, and I felt guilty as hell about that. Seemed like the only emotions I felt around her were guilt, regret...and desire.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

I gently touched the scrapes on her face. “I’m so sorry I hurt you, Jett.”

She jerked her head away from me. “Seriously, stop talking about that and don’t touch me.”

I picked up her arm, showing it to her, and she noticed the scratches. “Oh.” She yanked her arm away from me. “It’s nothing. I didn’t even notice it.”

“Give me something to clean these with.”

“I’m fine.”

“Jett...give me something to clean these with,” I told her in a don’t-argue-with-me voice.

She sighed and retrieved some antiseptic wipes. I used them to clean her arms and face, taking the opportunity to make sure she wasn’t hurt anywhere else.

“I’m fine, stop it.”

“Sit still, Jett.”

She heaved out a frustrated sigh but did what she was told. I had the distinct impression she was rattled because I was so

close to her and touching her and it was affecting her. Was I upset about that? Not in the least.

When I'd finished, concern clouded her features. "You don't look so good, and your breathing sounds labored. That caveman tackle broke a rib, I'd bet on it. How's your head? Is it hurting again?"

I couldn't hide the fact I was having difficulty breathing. Every breath was an effort, coming in short gasps, and it felt like I was breathing liquid fire into my lungs. But I had a feeling whatever was wrong with me was worse than a few broken ribs.

"I thought you didn't care," I reminded her.

"I don't. But if I'm going to get you out of here, I need to know your medical issues. Unless you want me to leave you here, which is fine by me."

I knew she wouldn't leave me. She'd had plenty of opportunities to leave me behind. I'd even told her to leave me, and she'd refused. If she was going to abandon me, she already would have. She was warring with herself. She was still saying the angry words, but her voice had lost its hard edge. Her eyes were filled with concern, not anger.

She was right about one thing though, I was getting worse. There wasn't anything to gain by lying to her, so I told her the truth. "Yeah, my head hurts. And my left side. It hurts to breathe."

"Lay down. You can use my leg as a pillow. I'll keep watch."

Even though I was struggling to stay upright, was exhausted and wanted nothing more than to sleep for a week, I still told her, “I think I should stay awake just in case anyone comes searching for us.”

“Okay. Then lay down for a little bit. You can stay awake but still rest.”

If she was going to allow me to intentionally touch her, I wasn't going to pass up the opportunity. Once I managed to get prone, I laid my head on her thigh and hooked my arm around her leg.

“Don't read anything into this. I'm only doing it because I have enough problems without having to explain your death to your team and commanding officer. Besides, the Navy would have me up to my ass in paperwork if you died on my watch, and I hate paperwork.”

I grinned. “Whatever you say. Don't worry, I'm alright.”

“I think you have a fever, Jax,” she said.

She started gently rubbing my head, her fingers running through my hair, massaging my scalp. It felt good. Really good. And like the other times she'd done it, it eased the pounding in my head.

Despite everything she felt about me, she'd taken care of me, made sure I ate, and took meds. She'd put her own life in danger to save mine. Had killed men to get me out of that hellhole and stayed by my side, helping me every step of the way.

Outside of my team, no one had ever done anything like that for me. And the way she was rubbing my head, her body under my hands felt really fucking good. And kissing her—the way her soft lips felt against mine, the little sounds of need she'd made—I wanted more of her. So much more.

“You're an amazing woman, Jett Donovan,” I whispered right before I lost the battle to stay awake and surrendered to sleep.

Chapter 16

Jett

You're an amazing woman, Jett Donovan.

No. Nope. Nuh-uh. No way. No.

Do not fall for his bullshit.

Why couldn't I stop thinking about that kiss? Kissing him slammed me with memories and emotions I'd spent years keeping buried. But *that* kiss was different than any other kiss I'd ever had, different than the kisses I remembered. His lips against mine, the rasp of his beard against my face, the resplendent feel of his talented tongue.

Patrick Morgan had always been a good kisser, but he'd definitely picked up new skills somewhere along the way. I didn't kiss the men I had sex with on the mouth. Kissing was intimate—I didn't do intimate.

It had been so long since I'd kissed anyone, I couldn't even remember when it was. No. That wasn't true, the last real kiss I had was twelve years ago, the night before I got Patrick's text.

I don't know why I kissed him. It was reckless and stupid. But when he wrapped me in his arms, something inside me snapped, and I just couldn't help myself. Once my lips were against his—the intimacy, the closeness, the intensity was so powerful I was overwhelmed by it. Possessed by it. I touched my fingertips to my mouth as if I could still feel him there.

The physical exertion of the past couple of days had taken a toll on him. But tackling me had made something worse. It sounded like he was struggling to breathe, his wheezing breath coming in short puffs, and I could tell *any* movement was causing him excruciating pain.

On top of that, he felt hot. He was running a fever, which wasn't a good sign. He needed a doctor—now—but that piece of crap satellite phone still wasn't working. What we needed was a new plan, and I needed distance from him. The only way I was going to get away from him and get him out of my life forever was to get him back to his team.

I dug in my pack for my ghillie suit and the Burqa, and carefully eased out from under him. I gently placed the ghillie suit under Patrick's head, crawled out of our hiding place, and slipped on the Burqa. The only part of me now visible was part of my forehead and my eyes. Patrick didn't even stir, which had me convinced the crazy idea I had was the right thing to do.

I'd been trained to be a decent thief. That probably wasn't something most people would brag about, but it *was* part of my skill set, and it came in handy more often than you'd think.

There was only one issue with my plan—I was a woman alone, a huge red flag in this part of the world. So, when I snuck out, I stayed hidden and waited until several other women passed by and kept close enough to them, I appeared to be part of their group.

I needed to be quick and as inconspicuous as possible. Luckily, the women were headed in the direction of some sort of café that had tables set up outside. That was about as lucky as I could get and should work for what I had in mind.

In the end, it was almost too easy. I stole a man's phone from his table when he wasn't watching. He set it down and turned his head—I passed by, picked it up, and kept pace with the other women.

Once I had the stolen phone, I carefully made my way back to our hiding spot, weaving through the alleyways, backtracking several times to make sure I wasn't being watched or followed.

Piece of cake.

When I got back, Patrick was out of the hidey hole calling for me in a weak voice and it sounded like he was freaking out. Relief washed over him when he saw me. When I reached him, he hugged me, but there wasn't any strength in it, and I could tell it hurt him.

“Where were you?” he wheezed.

“I went out for a few minutes,” I told him, stripping off the Burqa.

“What the hell do you mean you went out? What were you thinking, Jett? Do you know how dangerous that was? What the hell could possibly be so important that you exposed yourself like that?”

By the time he was done with his tirade, he was gasping for air. He was obviously angry. I couldn't blame him. I'd be angry if the situation was reversed, and I'd woken up and he was gone. But I knew I'd done the right thing.

“You were, jackass. *You* were what was so important. You're in trouble.” I held up the phone. “I went to get this. That SAT phone isn't working and you're in bad shape. You need to get the hell out of here and straight to a hospital. I'm sorry if I scared you, but we needed a new plan, and we needed it fast.”

He hugged me again, but it was even weaker. It was more him pressing his body against mine than a hug. Or maybe he was using me to stay on his feet.

“Fuck, baby, you're killing me...I do not condone you taking that risk...going out on your own because of me, and...I'm still mad at you, but good job, Jett.” He spoke haltingly as he gasped and wheezed and fought for air.

The last thing I wanted was for him to know how concerned I was for him. “What are you, a girl? I'm a trained operative, stealing a phone is child's play.” I pointed my finger at him. “And don't call me baby.”

He rested his forehead against mine. “You scared the crap out of me, *woman*.”

I told myself the reason I wasn't pushing him away was because he was hurt, freaking out, and I didn't want to shove him and hurt him more. I refused to entertain any other reason for it.

Chapter 17

Jett

Patrick took the phone from me, punched in a number, and put the call on speaker.

“Montgomery,” a deep voice answered.

“Reaper?”

“Jax? Everyone stand fast! Hang on, I’m putting you on speaker.”

“Jax, are you okay, brother?” the deep voice asked.

“Been better.”

“We’ve been going crazy searching for you,” that was a different voice.

“Where the hell are you?” Yet another voice inquired.

“I’m going to give you the coordinates for our location.”

“Our? How did you get away?” Another voice piped in.

His eyes locked with mine as he answered, “I had help.”

“Give me the details,” one of the voices demanded.

But Patrick didn't get the chance to give them the information. Instead, he started to sway, and his face had a distinctive blue tinge to it. As if that wasn't bad enough, it suddenly sounded like he was breathing water.

I quickly reached out to try to steady him. "Jax, are you okay?"

"Who the hell is that?" one of the voices barked.

"Jax? Jax!" A chorus of male voices called through the phone.

He shoved the phone at me, his eyes wide, his expression a mask of panic. "Can't..." he mouthed.

I caught him around the waist the moment his knees buckled. "Patrick!"

I wasn't able to hold his weight, and the two of us crumpled to the floor in a heap, but at least him landing on top of me kept him from hitting the floor at full force.

"Shit."

I wiggled out from under him and rolled him onto his back.

"Jax!" Concerned male voices continued yelling through the phone.

"Guys, give me a minute. We have a situation," I snapped, sucking in a deep breath, trying to remain calm.

"What's happening?"

"What situation?"

"Who the hell are *you*?"

“Just hang on one minute,” I told them.

While I was telling them to hold on, I quickly ripped open Patrick’s flak jacket and pulled the scissors from my vest, cutting his shirt open. Then I set the phone on his chest.

Fast crawling into the hidey hole, I grabbed my pack and hurried back to Patrick. I was pretty sure his lung had collapsed, but I didn’t know that for sure. I was scared I could be making a huge mistake, but I didn’t see another choice. Something had to be done or he could die.

I tried to keep my fear at bay, knowing the greatest adversary in an emergency situation was panic. The adrenaline spike and increased blood pressure could make it impossible to think clearly at the exact moment I needed a clear head.

Turning my attention to Patrick, my eyes locked on his, I kept my voice as calm as possible, “Patrick, relax and stay with me. You’re going to be fine.”

I yanked gloves, antiseptic wipes, and aerosol numbing spray out of my med pack. Then a scalpel and a chest tube that were both in sterile packaging.

I opened one end of the chest tube packaging so I could get it out when I needed it. I laid everything on his chest as fast as I could. Time was of the essence, and I was being as quick and efficient as I could.

Relying on him to tell me what I needed to know, I asked, “Which side hurts?”

He raised his left hand. His eyes were filled with fear while he gasped for breath.

“Left side?”

He gave a slight nod of his head. Yeah, that made sense.

“Keep hanging on, guys, do not hang up,” I ordered his team while I put on nitrile gloves.

“What the fuck is happening?” One of them asked.

I ignored him.

“This might be cold,” I warned Patrick just before I swabbed the left half of his torso with antiseptic wipes.

“Whoever the hell you are, tell us what’s happening,” a concerned and angry male voice called through the phone.

“We’ve got a little medical issue.”

“What fucking medical issue?” A different voice asked.

Patrick’s eyes drifted closed. “Patrick! Eyes on me.”

His eyes popped open, and he stared up at me.

I kept my voice calm, “Nothing to worry about. Stay with me. I got you.”

I picked up and showed him a small aerosol can, “Numbing spray. It’s not much, but it’s better than nothing.”

I sprayed the numbing agent and grabbed a roll of gauze, holding it in front of his face. “Bite down on this.”

He nodded and opened his mouth, and I placed the gauze in his mouth. Then I straddled him, setting all my weight on his

thighs. I picked up the scalpel, opened and tossed aside the sterile packaging, and, using my gloved fingers, counted his ribs to find the right space. Or what I hoped was the right space.

All Shadowhawk operatives had combat and basic emergency medical training, but I'd only performed this particular procedure in the field twice and it had been a while since the last time.

“Okay, let’s see what you’re made of, frogman. This is going to hurt like a bitch. You ready?”

“What the fuck,” came over the phone.

I ignored it and Patrick gave me a curt nod.

“Try to stay still, it’s almost over.”

Using the scalpel, I made a cut about an inch and a half long through the muscles of his chest wall, blood immediately trickling out of the cut. He clenched his jaw, biting hard on the gauze. He hissed and groaned. His hips bucked, instinctually trying to escape the pain, almost knocking me off balance. His right leg bent and kicked back out several times, but all things considered, he stayed pretty still.

I placed the scalpel on his chest. “Sorry about this,” I apologized as I stuck my gloved index finger into the incision to spread it apart and feel for his ribs.

He let out a wail that sounded like a wounded animal and bucked his hips again.

“What the fuck are you doing to him?” came through the phone.

“Jax!”

“Tell us what the fuck is going on!”

His friends were starting to annoy me. “Boys, I am seriously out of my comfort zone here and I’m trying to concentrate, so could you *please* shut up for one damn minute.”

Their silence confirmed they’d actually listened to me this time.

“You’re doing great. Almost there. Hard part’s over.”

I removed my finger and replaced it with the chest tube, pushing it into the opening and between his ribs. I breathed a huge sigh of relief when I heard the hiss of air from his chest cavity escaping through the tube.

He closed his eyes and took his first decent breath in days. His color came flooding back and relief washed over his face. I had the distinct feeling I was wearing a similar expression.

I removed the gauze from his mouth. “You with me, Patrick?”

His eyes opened, and he gave me a slight nod.

“Good. Is it better now?”

He nodded again and gave me a thumbs up.

“Excellent. It pains me to admit, but you handled that like a real badass,” I told him as I climbed off him.

He grinned up at me.

“Keep still. I need to put a couple of stitches in.” I turned my attention to the men on the phone, “You guys still there?”

Whoever answered me sounded seriously pissed off, “Yes, we’re still fucking here. What the fuck is going on?”

“Hey, I get you’re concerned, but don’t get bitchy with me because I’m not in the mood for it.”

Patrick grinned again.

“I’m going to give you our location coordinates. You need to get here ASAP.”

I looked down at my wrist device. “Ready?”

“Yes,” one of the voices responded curtly.

I read off our longitude and latitude, describing the building while I drew lidocaine into a syringe and collected the supplies to stitch the chest tube in place.

“Read those coordinates back to me.”

One of them did.

“Who are you?” one of them asked.

“You can call me Shooter.”

“Is Jax alright?” There was definite concern in the question.

“He’s okay, but he needs medical attention—*now*. I have to go. Get your asses here as soon as you can.”

“Wai—”

Not giving them a chance to say anything else, I disconnected the call. “Your friends are super bossy. You’re

doing really good, Patrick. I'm going to numb you up. It's only going to hurt for a few more minutes. Sorry I didn't have time for that before."

Using the syringe with lidocaine, I numbed him and started stitching up either side of the chest tube to close the incision I'd made and hold the tube firmly in place. Then I bandaged him to keep it clean.

"No moving, okay?"

I put everything away, then rolled up the Burqa and my ghillie suit, carefully placing them under his head and shoulders to elevate him the best I could. Once that was done, I crawled in the hidey hole and retrieved Roxy.

Holding my rifle across my lap, I sat crossed legged on the floor next to his right hip. He reached for my hand, and I threaded our fingers together, resting them on my thigh.

"Thank you," he whispered, squeezing my hand.

"Your team is coming for you. Think you can refrain from getting into any more trouble until they get here?"

He grinned and nodded.

I grinned back at him. "I guess we'll see."

He closed his eyes, gently squeezed my hand, and passed out.

Chapter 18

Jett

I did not like or understand the fear I'd felt when Patrick collapsed. It felt like much more than normal concern.

For days, I'd been trying to separate Jax from the Patrick I once knew. If we had to spend this time together, I needed them to be different people—or at least pretend they were different people—for my own sanity and self-preservation. Which is why I'd only let myself call him Jax...until he'd collapsed. Watching him struggle to breathe, seeing the terror in his eyes, I'd let his name slip from my lips. I'd been trying to shove away the knowledge that, in that moment, as much as I hated to admit it, he was *my* Patrick again.

I told myself it didn't mean anything. That it was the unusual situation. The shock and surprise of seeing him again after all these years, the fact that he'd collapsed from his injuries. The realization he could die.

Traveling with Patrick, being forced to help him, the close proximity, the way he'd called me *baby*...it was making me dizzy. Had me twisted up inside. Over the last several days,

every brush of his body against mine, the feel of him near me, kissing him, waking up in his arms...it was too much.

Too intense.

Too...emotional.

I had no idea why the hell I was feeling the way I was, but the fact that I was feeling anything for him scared me to death.

The conflict raging inside me was like a living nightmare. Wanting to lean in closer to him, but also wanting to turn away and run. Every minute, every second of the last few days with him had been torture, and I needed it to end.

I deserve hazard pay for having to spend time with him. I should send the Navy a bill when I get home.

It had been a while since I'd talked to Patrick's team. Or maybe it hadn't, and it only felt like time was dragging.

Patrick was still unconscious, and I continued to hold his hand while I sat listening to him breathe and watching the steady rise and fall of his chest. I was actually glad he was out. At least this way he wasn't in pain or panicking.

All I could think about was Patrick's team showing up to save him so I could get the hell out of here. Get back to my mission and away from Patrick *freaking* Morgan forever...so I didn't make any more stupid mistakes like kissing him again—or something so much worse.

Sometime later, I thought I heard a noise, but it was so slight I couldn't be sure. I carefully set Patrick's hand on his chest,

stood up, and stepped around him to put myself between him and whatever might be coming into the room.

“Where the fuck are they?”

I definitely heard that. It was deep and male, and it was in English, but still, I didn't move or say anything to call attention to myself.

Letting Roxy hang at my side, I pulled both handguns from my hips. My guns were up, ready for whatever came through the door. Eight soldiers fully kitted out flooded into the room. One of them was a freaking giant. When they saw me, every gun snapped in my direction and pointed at me.

A big man with black hair, a short beard, and piercing, ocean blue eyes was the one that demanded my attention. Something about his *presence* said he was the man in charge. I kept one of my guns trained squarely on him, the other one pointed in the direction of the men standing next to him.

“Who are you?” I asked, staying focused on the blue-eyed man, but watching the rest of them in my peripheral vision.

“We're Jax's team. You must be Shooter?”

“Yes.”

I holstered my guns and, thankfully, they lowered theirs. I really would have hated having to shoot some of them. Especially knowing the second I did, they'd shoot back and, being outnumbered, they might kill me. Scratch that, they'd probably kill me.

Blue eyes made eye contact with the giant and gave a slight jerk of his head in my direction. “Boomer.”

The giant nodded, and I took that to mean he was in charge of watching me.

“I don’t need a babysitter,” I informed blue eyes.

“I’ll keep an eye on her,” one of the others unexpectedly said.

When I faced him, he gave me a knowing smile.

Why does he seem familiar? I’ve met him before. Wait, I remember him...Augie’s friend, Midas.

It must have been three years ago. Augie asked me for a favor, and we helped Midas and his girlfriend out of a nasty situation with a serial killer.

That meant Midas was on Patrick’s team, and they knew Augie. What were the odds of that?

“Green team, perimeter,” blue eyes barked, snapping me back to what was happening in the room.

“Roger that,” four of them said in unison.

I’d been right, blue eyes was the man in charge. He was handsome, but more than a little intimidating, giving off a fuck-with-me-and-see-what-happens vibe.

I stepped aside, and blue eyes and a second man rushed to Patrick lying on the floor. Even though I was holding my rifle in a non-threatening manner, the giant was eyeballing Roxy.

“Don’t worry, if I was going to shoot you, you’d never see me coming.” I couldn’t resist telling him.

Midas barked out a laugh, causing the giant’s face to scrunch up in confusion. Then the giant surprised me by grinning at me. I didn’t know if that was because Midas had laughed, or if he was amused by a woman who thought she knew how to use a big gun.

I got that response from men way too often, but I didn’t mind—not really—it worked in my favor when people underestimated me.

Except for Midas, whose interest shifted between Patrick and me, the rest of them kept their attention on Patrick and ignored me.

Midas moved closer, until we were shoulder to shoulder and spoke in a low voice only I could hear while keeping his eye on his team and Patrick. “Fancy meeting you here.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, what are the odds? How’s Vivian?”

He smiled wide, his eyes shifting to mine, pure happiness taking over his features. “She’s really good. We’re married now and recently found out she’s pregnant.”

I couldn’t help but smile back at him. “That’s great, I’m glad to hear it. Congratulations.”

“Thanks. We’re pretty excited about it. I didn’t tell the team much about you, but with you being here and whatever happened with Jax, they might pick up that we’ve met.”

“You can tell them what you want, but I’d appreciate it if you wait until I’m gone. I don’t have time to deal with your team’s inquisition right now.”

Midas didn’t have the chance to say anything else because the activity around Patrick captured our attention.

“Fuck, look at his face,” the giant growled.

“What the fuck happened to his side?” came from blue eyes.

The other one, who was kneeling next to Patrick, focused on me. “You put this chest tube in? That’s what you were doing when you were on the phone?”

I gave him a curt nod.

“Whoever did this to him is dead,” the one kneeling next to Patrick swore.

“Let’s get him loaded up and get the fuck out of here,” blue eyes ordered. Their concern was evident, handling Patrick with care, gently placing him on a field stretcher.

Blue eyes looked from Patrick to me, studying me, taking me in from head to toe. “Who are you?” he asked in his non-sense tone.

“I’m no one. Listen, I don’t mean to be rude, but Jax can answer any questions you have. I have my own mission to complete, and I’d really like to get going.”

He narrowed his eyes at me, and I could see he had questions. I really couldn’t blame him. “You should be checked out by a doctor,” blue eyes told me. “And even

though I don't know what the hell is going on here, when Jax wakes up, he'll want to know you're alright."

A very unladylike snort came out of me. "Doubtful."

Based on their expressions, I knew they didn't understand. But honestly, I didn't care what they thought.

"Where are you headed?" blue eyes asked.

I flipped the cover on my wrist device and checked the information on the screen. "I need to head east."

"We're heading east," Midas told me with a smile.

"If I could hitch a ride for a while, that'd be great."

"Yes. Absolutely. It's the least we can do," Midas replied, cheerfully.

Blue eyes eyeballed him, one eyebrow raised in question. There wasn't a doubt in my mind he was silently asking Midas '*what the fuck?*'

I nodded at Midas. "Thanks. Appreciate it."

I collected both mine and Patrick's packs. The giant one blue eyes called Boomer took Patrick's ruck from me. I picked up my ghillie suit and the burqa, shoved them in my pack, and shrugged it on.

Blue eyes focused on me again. "I'm Reaper. This is Smoke, Midas, and Boomer."

I gave them all a chin lift. "Hey."

Picking up Patrick's stretcher, they carried him out, and I followed them. All of us kept our weapons up and moving,

scanning for danger as we headed outside. The locals who had gathered watched us in fear and confusion. Reaper tapped me on the shoulder, pointing to a deuce and a half, and I climbed in. They eased Patrick into the covered Army truck and, as soon as we were all loaded up, Boomer banged on the bulkhead with his giant fist, and we started moving.

Smoke knelt on the floor of the truck next to Patrick. Reaper and Midas sat on the bench on one side, me and Boomer on the bench on the other. All of us keeping an eye on Patrick. Even though the truck was big, it still felt confining with how much space they took up.

Smoke skillfully started an IV in Patrick's arm. I wasn't sure how he did it, since we were flying down a bumpy road so fast it felt like we were going a thousand miles an hour. But the bouncing of the truck didn't seem to hinder him.

I assumed Smoke was their medic, so I relayed everything I knew about Patrick's condition. "I cleaned out his cuts and he's been taking antibiotics. He took a hit to the head and has been having bad headaches, and you can see his left side is a mess.

"I'm pretty sure he's got broken ribs, most likely a concussion, and I assume a collapsed lung, which is why he needed the chest tube. He started running a fever last night. He's been out since shortly after the tube went in, but his breathing is better now, so I think I guessed right."

Smoke listened intently, his eyes cutting back to Patrick. "Jesus. What the fuck happened to him?"

The way they all turned and stared at me, the question wasn't rhetorical. I shrugged. "Terrorists don't play nice."

Smoke frowned at me, "We want to know what the fuck is going on."

I checked my wrist device again. "You can talk to your boy Jax about it. This is my stop."

Boomer's eyes darted to Reaper who continued to stare at me for several long moments. He finally frowned and gave a slight nod. Boomer reached his giant arm past me to bang on the bulkhead and the truck came to a stop. Reaper, Boomer, and Midas hopped out to give me room to get out before climbing back in the truck.

Reaper was the first to speak, "Thank you for everything you did to get him back to us. We owe you."

I nodded. "You're welcome. Thanks for the ride, guys."

"How can we contact you if we need to debrief you or if Jax wants to talk to you?" Smoke asked.

"Jax said everything there was to say more than a decade ago." I allowed myself one last, lingering look at Patrick then spun on my heel, leaving them staring after me. A moment later, I heard the truck drive away.

I let out a long, heavy sigh. *Finally*, my nightmare was over. Patrick was going to be just fine, and I could get back to business and get the hell out of here.

I am not going to miss that asshole.

Keep telling yourself that and maybe eventually you'll believe it.

Chapter 19

Patrick

When I woke up, I blinked at the stark white ceiling in confusion, trying to sort out my jumbled memories. It took a few seconds to understand I wasn't in the abandoned building with Jett any longer, instead I was in a hospital. I also noticed I could breathe better, and my head didn't feel like it was going to explode.

Reaper, Smoke, Midas, and Boomer were surrounding my bed, grinning down at me. Damn, they were a sight for sore eyes. I was beyond relieved to see they'd made it out, that they were alive and well.

Boomer was the first to speak, "Hey there, sunshine."

"Fucking hell, brother, you scared the shit out of us." Reaper added with a grin.

"Damn good to see you, Jax," came from Midas.

I couldn't help smiling up at them. "Pretty fucking good to see you guys too," I croaked. My throat felt like I'd swallowed

sandpaper. “I was worried I might never see you asshats again.”

“You are so not pretty right now,” Smoke informed me, handing me a glass of water.

The team gave me the rundown on my injuries while I sipped the water, telling me it would take time, but I’d recover. In addition to the variety of cuts and bruises, I had a concussion, four broken ribs, and a collapsed lung.

“Bruiser?” I asked.

“Alive. Sent home and recovering. Through and through in the arm. He’ll be fine,” Reaper advised me.

Relief washed over me. Even after Jett told me she’d seen Bruiser moving, I’d been afraid his injuries were life threatening.

“How are you feeling?” Smoke asked.

“Wrung out. Sore. But much better. Where’s Jett?”

“She’s gone,” Midas told me, sympathetically.

“Gone?” I was disappointed. I shouldn’t be surprised she’d left, but I was. I guess I hadn’t made progress with her after all. She didn’t even say goodbye. I didn’t have a chance to thank her for everything she did for me. Worse, I had no idea how to contact her. “Gone where?” I asked, coming out of my thoughts.

“We don’t know,” Reaper answered. “She said she had a mission to complete.”

“We dropped her off in the middle of nowhere squared.”
Boomer added.

“Fuck.”

“Who the hell is she, Jax?” Smoke wanted to know. “She wouldn’t answer any of our questions...kept saying we needed to ask you.”

“Jett Donovan. She’s one of the strongest, bravest people I’ve ever met.”

“How did you meet her?” Midas asked.

“Remember I told you guys I once dated a girl with two different colored eyes?”

They all nodded.

“That was Jett. She was Navy and her name was Juliette back then.” A smile crept across my lips remembering her pulling her gun on me. “But don’t call her that, she *really* doesn’t like it.”

Midas shook head. “What are the odds of that?” he asked quietly, almost to himself.

“She’s not Navy anymore. Not all alone and dressed the way she was,” Smoke pointed out.

“No, she works for Shadowhawk.”

Boomer whistled. “No fucking shit?”

“She’s out there on her own. I’m worried about her.”

“What was her mission? Why is she here?” Smoke wondered.

“Not sure. From the little she said, she’s here to take someone out. Hostile elimination is her specialty.”

Reaper, Smoke, and Boomer seemed surprised by that information, but Midas only nodded as if I’d confirmed something he already knew. I was starting to wonder about his odd reactions.

“Fuck. Really?” Smoke asked.

Reaper seemed amused. “So, your new girlfriend is an elite, badass Shadowhawk operative?”

Oddly, I didn’t even have a twinge of unease over Reaper calling Jett my girlfriend, even if he *was* taunting me. “Except she hates me,” I responded absently. “I’m really glad to see you guys are all okay.”

Reaper frowned, shaking his head. “We almost weren’t. We were sitting ducks until some fucking ghost sniper showed up out of nowhere and started picking off the tangos trying to kill us.”

“Thought at first he was there to take us out but realized pretty quickly he was on our side,” Smoke added.

“We were well and truly FUBAR,” Boomer admitted. “We’d be dead if that guy hadn’t come along.”

“He saved our asses,” Midas stated. “I’d like to know who it was so we could buy him a drink and say thanks.”

I smiled, my eyes drifting over each of them. “That was Jett.”

“What was Jett?” Smoke asked.

“The sniper who saved our asses, it was Jett.”

“Explain,” Reaper demanded, tersely.

“She was already there when we showed up. She saw the whole thing go down. She said we were ambushed, like they knew we were coming. Jett brought up a good point, that there might be a traitor or a mole and we’d been compromised before we ever got there.”

“She might be right,” Reaper said, thoughtfully.

“Something felt off about the whole op. Guess that bad feeling I had was on the money,” I told them.

Reaper frowned down at me. “What the hell happened to you out there, Jax?”

“When the gunfire started, I dove for cover behind that building. Next thing I know, I’m being knocked out from behind. I woke up tied to a chair and two assholes beat the ever-loving shit out of me. When they were done, they tossed me in a cell. That’s where Jett caught up with me.”

“What did they want?” Smoke wanted to know.

“No idea. They never said anything or demanded any intel. I figured they beat me so badly, I’d clearly understand the gravity of my situation. So when they came back for me, I’d tell them anything they wanted to know to avoid another beating. That’s only conjecture. Luckily I didn’t have to stick around long enough to find out what the fuck they wanted from me.”

“And what about Jett?” Midas asked. “How did she get involved?”

“She wouldn’t tell me much, but what I pieced together was she saw us get ambushed and me get tossed into an SUV. She tracked her target, which I’m pretty sure was *our* target, and that led her to me.” I shook my head. “The crazy woman got captured on purpose to find me. They threw her in the cell next to mine, and she got us out.

“You should see her in action, she’s amazing. The woman kicks ass. She set aside her mission to help us...me. She kept me alive out there. She refused to leave me behind even after I told her to. When my lung collapsed, she didn’t panic, she just did what needed to be done like she did it every day.

“She kept me calm when I couldn’t draw a decent breath, when I felt like I was suffocating. You guys heard it. I can’t ever repay her for what she did for me. She saved my fucking life. She saved all our lives.”

Boomer stared down at me. “That doesn’t sound like someone who hates you.”

“We owe her, and we’re going to find her and thank her,” Smoke stated, adamantly.

“I’d like to hear her side of it. Let’s talk to the commander and set something up with Jett so we can debrief her,” Reaper announced, decisively.

As our computer expert, Midas was in the best position to gather information about her. “Midas, you have to find out

everything you can about her. First priority, find out where she lives. She said she recently bought a house somewhere in Virginia Beach right on the water.”

Midas was fidgeting and I could tell something was on his mind. “Um...I need to tell you guys something and, with everything else, it’s going to be hard to believe.” He didn’t wait for a response, “Do you guys remember Gonzo’s friend, the one we called Sugar Darlin’ because he wouldn’t tell us her name? The woman who helped us with Alfred Bentley, the serial killer who tried to kill Vivi?”

“Yeah, of course.” Reaper confirmed. “What about her?”

I remembered that night. It was hard to forget. But, thinking about it, I suddenly remembered Vivian telling us the woman—the *sniper*—had two different colored eyes. “No,” I shook my head. “No way.”

Midas nodded at me. “Yep. Jett is Sugar Darlin’. I recognized her as soon as I saw her.”

“What?!” Smoke exclaimed loudly.

“What are the fucking odds of that?” Boomer asked, just as surprised as the rest of us.

“My Jett is Sugar Darlin’? She knows Gonzo?”

Boomer grinned at me. “You said she hated you, can you really call her *your* Jett?”

“Shut up, Boomer,” I said without heat, turning my attention back to Midas, “If she knows Gonzo, then he’ll know how to find her.”

Midas ran a hand through his hair. “Gonzo wouldn’t even tell us her name back then, what makes you think he’ll tell you anything about her now?”

“How do you think they met?” Boomer wondered.

“That whole mess was a few years ago,” Smoke said thoughtfully. “But, if I remember correctly, Gonzo and Jett sounded pretty friendly on the phone.”

“Didn’t he make a date with her that day?” Boomer asked Smoke.

Smoke nodded. “He did. Maybe they’re dating.”

Boomer laughed. “Oh man, maybe she’s Gonzo’s girlfriend.”

“It’s possible,” Reaper told Boomer before he addressed me again. “She might already be spoken for, brother.”

“Yeah, by *Gonzo*,” Boomer said, seriously.

Reaper was smiling down at me.

“Why are you smiling like that? What could you possibly find amusing about this?”

“You finally found a woman you want for more than a night, but she hates you and she might be dating Gonzo. I’m thinking this could get *really* interesting.”

It’s very possible that was the understatement of the century.

Chapter 20

Patrick

A few days later, we were back in the States. I was still sore and felt like shit, but I was alive and on the mend. The team and the commander were on base doing our AAR of the Messenger op. I was ecstatic when Bruiser came through the door, his arm in a sling, looking no worse for wear.

“You look like shit, but, fucking hell, it’s good to see you, brother,” Bruiser told me as we hugged the best we could with our injuries. “Seems like I got the better end of things.”

“Good to see you too,” I responded, taking a seat at the big table in the middle of the room. “I was thinking the worst when I saw you get shot and go down.”

“Would have been dead or taken with you if someone hadn’t shot that bastard who was about to get the jump on me,” Bruiser said, taking a seat. “Whoever took that shot has serious skills or was really lucky. It was so close I heard the fucker’s skull shatter.”

I grinned, knowing it was Jett who had killed the man. Jett, who I couldn't seem to stop thinking about. Even though we'd been in a volatile situation and the time I spent with her wasn't a vacation by any stretch of the imagination, I couldn't stop replaying it and remembering it fondly.

The president would be sitting in on this meeting and Midas connected him after we had all taken our seats. Calling from the iconic Oval Office, John Thompson's image popped up on the big screen on the wall.

We had an unusual relationship with the president. He'd been a SEAL before he went into politics. One of his SEAL teammates was Alex's father. Because of that friendship, he was a surrogate father to Reaper's wife. We knew him not only as the president, but also as Alex's 'Uncle John.'

Even with our unique relationship with him, he didn't normally sit in on our AARs. Admittedly, I was more than curious why he was sitting in on this one.

Wasting no time, we got the meeting started. First, we ran down the op and everything that happened. Then I explained the details from the time the team entered the vacant lot until I got on the phone and passed out. Excluding the personal particulars between me and Jett, of course.

"What I'm about to tell you doesn't leave this room," the president told us somberly when we'd finished. "Intel indicates we have a traitor, and your last op was intentionally compromised."

The room exploded in reaction to that news. Bursts of angry ‘what’ and ‘fuck’ and ‘son of a bitch’ coming out of all of us.

Reaper was on his feet, visibly pissed off. “One of my guys gets shot, one gets captured, and the rest of us almost get killed. Now you’re telling us there’s a traitor who jeopardized our op? That my team walked into a trap? What the fuck are we doing about that, John?”

“What’s being done to find this asshole?” Smoke chimed in.

“Unfortunately, I can’t share much, because right now there isn’t much to tell,” POTUS admitted.

“What about the woman?” Bruiser asked me.

I wasn’t sure where he was going with this, but still responded, “She’s strong and brave, fearless, compassionate. Fucking gorgeous.”

“I wasn’t asking about your love life, jackass,” Bruiser retorted, rolling his eyes and shaking his head. “I was asking if she can be trusted, if she’s with the enemy and helped you—us—so she could gather intel. Her saving you was pretty convenient. Is it possible *she’s* the traitor?”

Bruiser didn’t have the best childhood, although we didn’t know the details because he never talked about it. But whatever had happened to him left him with a serious distrust of women.

“Fuck off, Bruiser,” I shot back, my voice full of the anger I suddenly felt. “Hell, yes, we can trust her. Don’t think we can’t just because she’s a woman. She’s not a fucking traitor.”

Bruiser put his hands up in surrender. “Got it. You don’t think she’s a fucking terrorist mole. I hope you’re right about that. Jesus, every time one of you finds a woman it’s like you turn into teenage girls.”

“Would you still think she was a traitor if you knew she saved *you*?” I asked him smugly.

“What the hell does that mean?”

“She’s the sniper who saved your ass. The one who saved *all* our asses.” It was worth telling him to see the expression on his face.

“What?”

“Jett Donovan is not a mole or a traitor, Bruiser,” the president told him with conviction.

My eyes darted to the president’s screen. “You know her?”

“Never heard of her. But, like Bruiser, I had some questions and made some inquiries. As you know, she works for Shadowhawk Security. I talked to her boss and read some of her file. She’s pulled off some serious shit in some serious places. The woman is a pipe hitter.”

“Her security clearance is stratospheric,” the president continued. “It’s on par with mine, maybe even higher. From Langley to JSOC, my predecessor, I don’t think there’s an agency that hasn’t requested her. She’s one of the most effective black op agents Shadowhawk has ever had. If she gets put on a job, that job gets done, no matter what it takes.”

I ignored the rumblings and shocked responses from the team, asking the president, “Do you know if she completed her mission? If she got out and got home?”

He shook his head. “She wasn’t back when I talked to the head of Shadowhawk yesterday.”

“I need to know she’s alright, John.”

“If we do have a mole or a traitor, I want her on the job to help ferret the bastard out. I need people I can trust on this, and Jett Donovan has never once let her country down. Not only would I trust her with my life, but I trust her with *yours*.”

“She said this was her last mission,” I told him. “When it’s complete, she’s retired.”

POTUS smiled in response to that declaration. “I want to talk to her, debrief her. Enlist her help. Buy the woman a drink for saving your sorry asses. Let’s set something up, I’ll make sure she’s there,” he said with confidence. “But, until we know what’s going on, we keep this information between us.”

It seemed reasonable. No one could or would refuse a direct request from the president of the United States.

I was pissed our mission had been undermined by a traitor, but I couldn’t deny the excitement coursing through me at the prospect of seeing Jett again.

Chapter 21

Jett

Three days after Patrick's team rescued him, I was finally able to complete my mission. It took the better part of a week to get myself back home and then I had to do my after-action report. This AAR had been more detailed than any other I'd ever done because there had been additional questions to answer from somewhere higher up the food chain. I guessed that was because of what happened with Patrick and his team.

I'd been told the Navy would probably want to talk to me at some point, but no one had contacted me, so I assumed they were satisfied with whatever Patrick told them.

What was driving me crazy was, I hadn't been able to stop thinking about *him*. Was he alright? Not because I cared—I didn't—I was concerned about his team. Plus, I *had* spent a lot of time and effort to save him—I'd hate to see that effort wasted.

I'd been home five weeks and was now officially retired. I'd spent my first few weeks as a retiree moving into my new house and adjusting to civilian life. Although I did sleep for

the first two days straight. I'd moved everything I was keeping from my shoebox apartment and shut off all the utilities. Then I'd restarted everything at the new house. Who knew it was so time consuming to have utilities turned on?

I didn't have my own car because I'd been driving a Shadowhawk vehicle for years, which meant I needed to buy something of my own. That sucked away an entire day. I had every intention of buying a car but ended up with a small truck. Because, well, once I saw it, I couldn't resist it. Something about it appealed to me.

I'd been taking my time choosing furniture. This was the first real place of my own, and I didn't want it to end up looking like a Pottery Barn exploded. I wanted it to be my calm in the storm, my sanctuary. My home.

First on my list was a couch. That sounded like such a simple thing but ended up being the furniture version of Goldilocks. Too hard, too soft, too big, too small...too ugly. It took a week of searching, but I finally found the greatest couch ever made. It was a big, comfortable, 'L' shaped sectional with wide cushions in a smoky gray.

As luck would have it, when I found the couch, I also found an amazing chair. It was big enough it could easily fit two people, and was the most comfortable chair I think I'd ever sat in. I dubbed it my reading chair and set it up near my fireplace.

After buying the couch and chair, I'd left the furniture store and was headed back to my truck when a bicycle in the window of the shop next door caught my eye. It was the cutest

retro cruiser. Turquoise blue, with whitewall tires, a cup holder, and a little basket on the handlebars. I couldn't resist it and ended up buying it.

It was astounding how many things you needed to live in a house, and I didn't understand a lot of it. Like, why were there so many small kitchen appliances? After staring at coffee makers for half an hour I finally asked one of the salespeople which one just made coffee and she stared at me like an alien who'd recently landed on earth.

I was taking my time because I wanted everything to be warm, welcoming, and comfortable. But who knew there were so many kinds of sheets, towels, and bedding? So many kinds of plates, bowls, glasses, and silverware? I sure as hell didn't.

It was shocking how much of that you needed when you were actually going to be around to use it. Most of what I previously owned could fit in a couple of duffels.

Don't even get me started on the groceries. I'd lived in my apartment for eight years and never had anything in my fridge other than drinks and leftover containers of takeout.

I couldn't understand how people did this every day. All of it was exhausting. It didn't take long to conclude I wasn't made for this shopping thing.

Once I finally had the shopping under control, I spent days doing nothing but lying around relaxing, reading, surfing, and sleeping. The last five weeks had been totally outside my normal, but I liked it. Not the shopping. I'd done more shopping than I had in my entire life and needed days in

between to recover. But, knowing I wasn't about to be sent somewhere I didn't want to go, being able to do whatever I wanted, hitting the waves—yeah, I liked that. A lot. I was even considering getting a dog.

Yesterday, I rode my bike to the boardwalk near my house. The same boardwalk where Augie lived in the apartment above the art gallery. I stopped by to surprise him, but he wasn't home, so I strolled around instead.

I found a furniture store that sold handmade, solid wood furniture. After I went inside, I fell in love with most of the inventory and bought quite a few things. They didn't deliver, so my next obstacle was figuring out how I was going to get all that furniture home.

Afterward, I ate some pizza at the pizza place, bought some pastries at Lulabelle's bakery, and sat and people watched *without* a target, which was strange and different. I was still getting used to that. By the time I rode home, it was getting dark.

I'd started to develop a routine. Almost every morning I'd surf, then ride my bike to Lulabelle's for coffee and treats. I'd spend some time reading or relaxing on my deck and, most days, I'd go for a run or to the gym to keep my body honed.

At least once a week, Roxy and I went to the gun range to stay sharp. We often drew a crowd of spectators and we'd even made some money on the side. Other shooters would gather around betting on whether I could make a particular long-

range shot. Collecting their money was like taking candy from a baby.

After too many years of being sent back and forth through multiple time zones, my internal clock was broken. So, when I couldn't sleep or woke up in the middle of the night, I'd take a book and go to the 24-hour diner on the boardwalk to read or pass the time with the other sleepless nightwalkers.

I was still alert and hypervigilant about my surroundings. I was too well trained and had seen too much and wondered if I'd ever completely let down my guard. It was strange not to have to hide in the shadows any longer. To know my day wouldn't be filled with bad guys and violence. I didn't know what my future would bring, but overall, I'd have to say, retired life was pretty awesome.

Chapter 22

Patrick

For the first time since our op in Afghanistan, we were running as a team on the beach. Since the doctor had only recently released me to full duty, the team was taking it easy on me. Although I felt pretty good, I still wasn't a hundred percent.

It was early Friday morning, the sun was shining, and the spectacular cerulean sky was clear and bright as far as the eye could see. And I, for one, was happy to be alive and getting back to normal.

It had been two months since I last saw Jett, and I still couldn't stop thinking about her, wondering if she completed her mission and made it back home. Wondering if she was okay. Wondering where the hell she was.

I missed her unique-eyed glares and sassy retorts. Her rare smiles. The feeling of her against me while she slept. The taste of her lips. I missed everything about her. I'd felt strangely empty in the months she'd been out of my life, and I wanted her back. Which was insane.

Midas hadn't been able to find *anything* about her, Gonzo had been unreachable, and there'd been no updates from the president. All of it worried me...what if she hadn't made it out? What if she'd been captured and was being tortured somewhere?

Boomer let out a low wolf-whistle, and my attention snapped back to the beach and my teammates. "Holy hell, I've just seen a vision. I think I'm in love."

We stopped running and followed Boomer's line of sight to a woman coming out of the water wearing a short sleeved, legless wetsuit and carrying a surfboard under her arm. When she reached the shore, she dropped her board onto the sand, and splayed her hands over her wet hair to slick it away from her face, wringing the excess water out of it. A group of sailors running on the beach hooted, whistled, and waved enthusiastically as they jogged by, making her laugh as she waved back at them.

My smile was huge, my stomach flipping over at the sight. I'd recognize her anywhere. "Fuck me—it's her."

"Her who?" Bruiser asked without taking his eyes off her.

"Jett. She said she bought a place on the beach. What are the fucking odds it was *this* beach?"

"She looks different in civies. Jesus, check her out," Boomer proclaimed cheerfully.

Yeah, I was checking her out, how could I not? But I didn't want anyone else lusting after her.

A wave of unexpected possessiveness rushed over me.

I thumped Boomer on the arm. “Stop ogling her.”

Boomer’s eyes stayed glued to her. “Dude, do you see her? She’s made to be ogled.”

“I don’t care, get your eyes off her,” I growled.

Boomer cocked an eyebrow and grinned at me, “Caveman much?”

“She sure doesn’t look like a sniper,” Bruiser said, absently.

I huffed out a laugh. “You might not see it, but, trust me, the woman is deadly with a rifle. And a knife.”

“We have to go talk to her,” Reaper announced.

I wasn’t prepared for this and was suddenly nervous as hell. Would she even talk to me? “I don’t know,” I said, skeptically.

“Why not?” Midas asked.

“Yeah, you’ve been moping about not being able to find her, here she is. What’s the problem?” Reaper piped in.

“The problem is...she hates me.”

“The woman saved our asses, we’re not ignoring her.” I was shocked as hell it was Bruiser insisting we go talk to her.

“What’d you do to her anyway?” Smoke asked as they all started moving toward her, and I nervously followed.

We were all smiling when we approached, coming to a stop in front of her. Her eyes widened in surprise when she realized who we were. I was so happy to see her again, I had to

physically restrain myself from pulling her into my arms and telling my teammates to get lost.

“Hi Jett, I’m Bruiser,” he greeted her, holding out his hand before the rest of us could say anything. “Thank you for saving Jax’s sorry ass and ours.”

“Hi, Bruiser,” she responded with a smile, shaking his offered hand. “Nice to meet you. I’m really glad you’re going to be okay. How’s the gunshot?”

“It’s fine. All healed,” Bruiser told her.

“I’m glad it wasn’t worse and you’re going to be alright.”

“From what I understand, that’s because of you. That was a hell of a fucking shot. Thank you for shooting that asshole and not letting him kill me.”

She shrugged. “Right place, right time.”

Her eyes shifted from Bruiser to me, her gaze slowly wandering the length of me. She gave me a thorough and appreciative once over as if she’d never seen me. I realized it was the first time she was seeing the older, more mature me when I wasn’t swollen and beat to shit. When our eyes met, I couldn’t miss the lust flickering through hers or how rattled she seemed when she discovered I’d been watching her and the way she’d perused me.

I, on the other hand, wanted to wrap her in my arms, kiss her breathless, and tell her how happy I was to see her. But I was pretty sure that wouldn’t go over well, so I reluctantly kept my mouth shut.

With the spell broken, she glared at me. “You’re like a bad penny.”

“What does that mean?” I asked her with a grin.

“You just keep showing up.”

“Sugar Darlin’,” Smoke blurted with a smile, taking her attention from me.

“I’m sorry?”

“You’re Sugar Darlin’,” Smoke repeated.

Jett tilted her head and frowned. “I don’t know what that means.”

“Don’t listen to him,” I told her, unable to stop smiling at her. I was beyond thrilled she was here, standing right in front of me.

She pinned me with a death glare. “How’d you find me?”

Thankfully, Reaper saved me from having to explain. “My wife and I have a house on this beach, it’s only three houses down from this one on the end,” he told her, pointing down the sand. “Although we don’t spend as much time there as we used to.”

“We run on this beach several times a week,” Boomer added, with a huge smile. He really needed to get his interest off her or I might have to punch him in the face.

“Which house is yours?” Bruiser asked her.

She pointed. “I’m the one on the end.”

I couldn't express how happy I was to know where she lived. Even though her house was infamous on this beach for a double homicide that occurred about two years ago and had sat empty since then. Or at least until now.

"Homicide House!?" Boomer exclaimed. "You bought Homicide House? On purpose?" Boomer was somewhat superstitious, so his shock and apprehension wasn't surprising.

"The bodies aren't still in there," she told him with a smile. "People die in houses all the time and it doesn't stop them from being sold, but a double homicide sure does lower the asking price."

"But there was a *double homicide*," Boomer explained as if she didn't understand.

She shook her head at him. "Then the odds are with me it won't happen again."

Thankfully, Reaper changed the subject, preventing Boomer from going on a tangent about ghosts and spirits or some other supernatural bullshit. "We owe you for what you did for both Jax and the team in Afghanistan and for what you did for Midas and Vivian," Reaper told her.

"You don't owe me anything, I'm glad I could help."

"Anything you ever need, say the word and we'll have your six," Midas told her seriously.

"Do you really mean that?"

"Yes," I answered immediately, smiling wide.

She glared at me before shifting her attention to the others. “Actually, I *could* use some help. I bought some furniture from the store on the boardwalk. They don’t deliver and my friend who could help me is out of town.”

Did she mean Gonzo? Or that Augie guy? At least she didn’t say *boyfriend*.

“We’re in,” Smoke told her without hesitation.

“Really? It’s a lot of stuff.”

“Doesn’t matter. Just say when,” Bruiser told her.

“I can pick it up anytime, so whenever it’s good for you guys.”

“How’s tomorrow morning? Say ten?” Reaper asked, turning to the rest of us for confirmation. We all nodded our agreement.

She smiled a huge smile. “That would be great, thank you.”

That fucking smile.

“Anything, anytime, we mean that,” Reaper informed her. “We need to get going. It’s good to officially meet you, Jett. Welcome to the neighborhood.” The rest of the guys waved and turned to finish our run.

“I’ll catch up,” I called after them as they jogged away. “I’m glad to see you made it out okay,” I said once we were alone.

“Yeah. No other problems. You seem better. You look different without the bruises. You grew up.” Her cheeks

flushed and she seemed flustered like she hadn't meant to admit that out loud.

"I'm good now...thanks to you. Maybe I could take you out for that burger to thank you."

"I'm glad you're okay, but you don't need to thank me."

That's not a no.

"I really feel like I do. Think about it. I have to go, but I'm glad you got home safe." I smiled at her, "You look good as a civilian, Donovan. Really fucking good."

I turned, jogging down the beach to catch up with the team before she could give me one of her sassy comebacks and tell me she'd never go out with me in a million years.

Chapter 23

Patrick

I never understood how Reaper, Smoke, and Midas had fallen so hard and fast for their women. But after spending a few days with Jett in Afghanistan and seeing her on the beach this morning, I could appreciate the instant connection they'd felt. A connection stronger than anything they'd ever experienced. Because, for the first time in my life, I felt that consuming, overpowering attachment toward Jett.

I couldn't remember the last time I had to chase a woman I was attracted to. Ordinarily, I didn't have to. As conceited as it sounded, all I had to do was show a woman I was interested and they usually came to me.

But Jett? I couldn't get *her* out of my damn head, and now that I knew where she lived, I couldn't stay away from her. Which was how I found myself staring up at her house, excitement coursing through my veins.

What the hell am I doing?

Even knowing this probably wasn't going to end well, I couldn't force myself to leave.

Jett's house had been completely remodeled after the murders, and, out of curiosity, we'd toured it when it went up for sale. It was a great house with steps from the beach leading up to a large two-level deck with railings, gates, and an arbor—the perfect place for a party. There was even a simple, outdoor shower next to the steps on the beach.

It had two bedrooms and two baths. Although it wasn't huge, the galley style kitchen was a chef's dream with a granite top counter island and top of the line appliances. The large living room had a stone fireplace and a huge picture window with an unobstructed view of the ocean. The master bedroom was complete with an ensuite, fully decked out bathroom, and there was even a small laundry room.

I climbed the steps, went through the gate, and crossed her deck. After taking a deep breath to steady my nerves, I knocked on the French doors and waited.

Jett opened the door, a vision in cut off jean shorts, a loose sweater hanging off one shoulder, her sun kissed hair flowing over her shoulders and down her back. Based on her expression, I was the last person she expected to see standing on her doorstep.

“Fucktastic, *you're* here,” she greeted me, dryly. “What do you want?” she asked, one hand holding the door, the other moving to rest on her hip.

I held up a bottle of Roca Patrón silver.

“You think an expensive bottle of tequila makes everything okay?”

“No.” I grinned at her, “But it doesn’t hurt.”

She narrowed her eyes at me, turning abruptly and disappearing into the house, leaving the door open. I took that as an invitation, following her in and closing the door behind me. Her living room was nearly empty, the only furniture a fantastic sectional, a big chair, and the TV hanging on the wall.

Jett strolled into the kitchen, reaching to take two shot glasses out of the cupboard, setting them on the counter in front of me. Pulling a lime from a basket of fruit, she quickly cut it into wedges on a small plate. I opened the tequila, filled both glasses, and carefully slid one back to her.

She picked it up, draining it in one go, taking a piece of lime and sucking on it while I stared at the way her lips wrapped around that little wedge of fruit. I was slightly stunned when she slid her glass back across the counter. I refilled it, and without hesitation, she drank it down.

Once again, she sucked on a wedge of lime and slid her glass back toward me. Juliette had never been much of a drinker, but here was Jett, knocking back tequila shots like a seventies rock star. When I only gaped at her, she tilted her head and cocked a perfectly plucked eyebrow at me, the one over her brown eye. Grinning, I filled her glass a third time, and she knocked that shot back too.

I waited a moment. When it didn't appear she'd ask for another, I finally picked up my own glass. I swallowed the shot with a wince and a whoosh of breath from the fiery liquid sliding down my throat. A reaction I belatedly realized Jett hadn't had.

I sucked on my own wedge of lime, squinting against the tartness. I cleared my throat, raising my eyes to meet hers. "Jett, I just want to say again how sorry I am, and I hope someday you might find a way to forgive me."

She marched around the kitchen island to stand a few feet in front of me, her hands balled into fists at her side. "Jeez, would you stop with that? There's nothing you can say that changes anything. Let it go already."

"I know I can't say anything to take back what I did, or change what you went through, but I feel like shit knowing I hurt you like that."

She closed the distance between us in two long strides. "You. Can't. Fix. It," she barked, poking her finger in my chest with every word. "Why can't you get that through your fat head?"

"I know I can't fix it, but I want to make it better. I'm so ashamed of what I did, and I *hate* that you were hurt because of it."

Surprising me, she fisted my shirt with both hands, jerking me forward until our faces were only inches apart. "All I hear when you talk is blah, blah, blah, blah, blah."

I could smell the tequila and a hint of lime on her breath, and the underlying subtle scent that was uniquely, wonderfully Jett. She was staring at me with a combination of heat, and hatred, and an unconcealed challenge, my shirt still twisted in her hands. A fact my dick had taken definite notice of.

I couldn't deny it. I didn't want to deny it...I wanted her. I wanted her with a force I'd never experienced. No other woman had ever affected me as much as Jett. The desire I felt for her was almost more than my body could stand.

Without another thought, I hauled her into me by the nape of her neck, crashing our mouths together, kissing her...hard. Deep, plunging strokes of my tongue against hers. It wasn't gentle. It wasn't teasing or seduction. It was carnal. Angry, greedy, and urgent.

I finally had Jett in my arms again, and it was amazing. She felt like she was made to fit against me and tasted like tequila and lime. Indulgence and possibilities.

She kissed me back just as enthusiastically until she suddenly realized she was a willing participant. Taking my bottom lip between her teeth, she bit down, not hard enough to draw blood, but hard enough to sting before she jerked her mouth from mine.

I growled, pulling her into me tighter, giving her a sharp slap on the ass, "Behave."

She let out a surprised squeak in reaction. Staring back at me for several long seconds, she moved to kiss me, but, instead,

bit my lip again. It seemed my little minx wanted to play, and I was more than happy to indulge her.

I gave her another firm slap to the ass. “I said behave,” I told her, sternly.

Her eyes drifted closed and the sexist moan I’d ever heard slipped out of her. Twisting a handful of her hair in my fist, I tugged, giving her no choice but to tilt her head back and make eye contact with me. I grinned down at her, “You like that, don’t you, baby?”

It wasn’t a question, and I was kissing her again before she could respond or argue. She fought me briefly until she surrendered, melting into me with a sensual groan.

This kiss was savage, almost vicious. Rough, demanding, dominant, and all-consuming. She was making small, desperate sounds into my mouth, and I greedily swallowed them. Her hands fisted and tugged my hair, her nails scraping my scalp. She was claws and teeth...and need.

We were going at each other like two wild animals, and I loved every second of it. Loved the battle for dominance there was no doubt she was going to lose.

Still holding her tightly against me, I responded with my own carnal moans of pleasure. Nudging her legs apart with my knee, I gave a flex and roll of my hips against her. My rock-hard cock grinding against her core, making both of us gasp at the friction.

She yanked at the hem of my shirt, her blunt nails scraping the sensitive skin on the small of my back. I pulled away from her only long enough to tear it over my head and reclaimed her mouth.

And then everything shifted, and the kiss turned hot and hungry. Passionate. Our tongues stroking and sliding over each other, devouring each other. As far as I was concerned, it was a kiss of absolute possession.

When we broke apart, both of us were gasping and panting for air. I yanked her sweater over her head and popped the button on her shorts, sliding them down her long legs. Now that she wasn't fighting me, my hands were eager to touch her everywhere at once. Gliding over the silky skin of her back, squeezing her plump breasts, coasting over the curve of her ass, giving it a firm squeeze.

“Jesus, look at you. You're perfect.”

Spinning her around, her back to my front, I wrapped my arms around her, holding her firmly against my chest while she struggled against me. The woman had hand-to-hand skills, she could get free if she really wanted to, and, if she told me to let her go, I would, even if it might kill me.

I knew she wanted me as much as I wanted her, but after spending years telling herself she hated me, she couldn't give herself permission. She wanted more from me, even if she insisted on pretending she didn't. I understood she needed to *feel* like she didn't have a choice, even though she knew she did.

One arm tightened around her, pinning her arms against her sides, my free hand sliding up her body and wrapping firmly around her throat. She resisted again, but I knew it was only for show. I could feel the wild pulse of her heartbeat beneath my fingers. My thumb lightly grazed her jaw, my fingers tightening almost imperceptibly around her throat. She whimpered and stilled, her breath quick and erratic.

Keeping my hand on her throat, I whispered fiercely in her ear, "Do not move." When I released her arms, except for the heaving of her chest from her ragged breathing, she stood perfectly still.

I took a half a step away from her to unhook her bra and toss it to the floor before pulling her back against my chest again. The feel of her naked skin against mine was intoxicating and electrifying. With both hands I squeezed and plumped her breasts, pinching and rolling her rose-colored nipples between my fingers, earning me an arch of her back and a passionate moan. I splayed my hand on her stomach, slowly sliding across the soft skin of her belly, my fingers teasing under the waistband of her panties. Her stomach muscles trembling and quivering under my touch. Her reactions causing my dick to throb, spurring me on.

"I love how responsive you are, how much you like my hands on you."

Dipping my fingers lower under the waistband of her panties, I slid them through her. She was drenched.

“I hate you,” she groaned in a sexy snarl, as she leaned her weight back into me, resting her head against my chest.

“No, you don’t,” I told her, my fingers slipping inside her. “If you did, you wouldn’t be this wet for me.”

She let out a broken moan, as if she were trying to hold it back, her voice sensual and breathy, “Yeah, well, that thing has a mind of its own, so don’t think it means anything.”

I chuckled, nuzzling her neck, causing a whole-body shiver, her head tilting to the side for me. I kissed the shell of her ear and nipped her lobe, triggering another sinful moan to float out of her.

Hot as fuck.

My fingers dipped in and out of her, her hips flexing every time my fingers rhythmically circled over her clit.

My cock was weeping. “You want me, love?” I asked, my voice deep and gravelly in her ear. “You want me to spread you out and make you scream my name when you come?”

A whine—a seductive, throaty sound—came out of her and she leaned into me, widening her stance in response.

I worked my fingers in and out of her while she writhed against my hand. “Say it, baby,” I rasped, my mouth against her ear.

“I want you, you *bastard*.” Her needy voice sounded as if the words were being forced out of her through clenched teeth.

That was all I needed to hear. I spun her so she was facing me again, pulling a condom out of the front pocket of my jeans and holding it out to her. "Put this on me," I demanded.

She narrowed her eyes, snatching the condom out of my hand with a glare. Then her lips unexpectedly curved into a small, wicked smile, giving me pause.

Suddenly, I wasn't a hundred percent sure she wouldn't cause my cock painful, irreversible damage, and I was hoping I wasn't making a huge mistake. But, before I could take the condom back from her and tell her I'd changed my mind, she dropped to her knees.

All thoughts of the damage she could inflict left my head and my cock jerked at the sight of her on her knees in front of me.

She nimbly unbuttoned and unzipped my pants while she looked up at me, fire burning in her eyes. Slowly, torturously, she slid my pants and boxer briefs down my hips and thighs and my steel-hard cock bounced free.

She licked the underside of my cock, sucking me into her mouth and humming, releasing me with a pop and placing a gentle, lingering kiss to the head. My dick twitched, my eyes rolled back in my head, and I moaned.

She tore open the packet and put the condom in her mouth. She stared up at me, put her hands behind her back, and swallowed me. On her way up, she sucked hard, her cheeks hollowing, and, when she pulled off me, my dick was completely sheathed. Grinning up at me, she used her hand to

smooth out the condom, and I almost came from the sight and exquisite feel of it.

I did not want to know where or how she learned *that* trick. But I did know I wanted to watch her do it again and was seconds away from tearing off the condom and giving her another one so she could.

“Jesus fuck, Jett.”

I grabbed her by her biceps, hauling her to her feet, kissing her again, plunging my tongue into her mouth.

Surprising me, she broke the kiss and spun around, bending over the arm of the couch. Her perfect backside in the air. The little minx widened her stance, smiled coyly over her shoulder, and wiggled her ass. The sight went straight to my balls. As if I'd be able to resist her beautiful ass in the air. Stroking her back, my fingers traced over her dragon tattoo. I curled over her, biting her shoulder, kissing my way down her back, savoring every sinful sound coming out of her. I tugged her panties down and she stepped out of them, kicking them aside.

Not wasting another second, I pushed into her with a long, hard, deep slide and a lusty grunt of pure pleasure. Being inside of her was unlike anything I'd ever felt. Gripping her hip with one hand, I wrapped her long hair around my other wrist forcing her head to tilt back. A delectable, needy whimper flowed out of her, and it was hot as fuck.

“Damn, you feel so good. You were made for me, Jett.”

“Fuck off,” she half moaned, half growled.

I chuffed out a laugh. “You can count on it, baby,” I told her, pulling out and sliding back into her.

I was glad she couldn't see my grin. She must not have found my comment humorous because she held onto the arm of the couch with both hands and pushed back against me hard. Rocking forward, she did it again.

“Is that all you've got, Morgan?” she taunted, her voice hypnotic and trembling.

If my sexy vixen wanted it hard and fast, I was more than happy to indulge her. I slapped her ass, the crack of my hand against her skin loud in the room. “Jett, behave.” That only seemed to spur her on. I slapped her ass again, her raunchy moan triggering my own.

With every powerful thrust forward, she slammed back into me with unrelenting force, trying to buck me off. I had to let go of her hair to get a firm grip on her hips to keep from losing our connection.

I'd never been this hard, this turned on. It was raw and carnal. Pleasure I'd never felt. Need I'd never experienced. I unleashed. It was frenzied. Intense, and brutal. My hips snapping at a frantic, relentless pace, giving her everything I had. Faster. Harder. Lust and need turning into desperation. She didn't crumble, pushing back into me as if she was as gone as I was. I felt the lightning at the base of my spine, my balls ached and throbbed, starting to draw up, consumed by the need for release.

“Fuck. Need you to get yourself there, little bronco. You feel too good, I’m close,” my raspy voice tight and strained.

Her hand immediately moved between her legs, “Ohmygod. Yes Patrick. Don’t stop!”

“Fuck, baby. Fuck yeah, that’s it. Come for me, love. Right now.”

That was all it took. As soon as I felt her pussy pulsing and spasming around my cock, hearing her lose control and calling out my name, my thrusts faltered. Holding her tightly against me, I buried myself in her as deeply as I could, my hips flush against her gorgeous ass. I threw my head back, my whole body in freefall, my hips jerking helplessly. Shuddering as I filled the condom with a roar and an orgasm that felt never ending.

Jett sprawled over the arm of the couch, I collapsed over her back, the two of us gulping in air while I trailed kisses along her neck. Gently stroking my hand up her back and down over her ass, kissing and caressing her bright pink butt cheek with a small smile.

I wasn’t nearly done with her, but knew if I left her to deal with the condom there was a good chance she’d bolt. So, I slid out of her, swung her up into my arms, carrying her to the bedroom. I kissed her the whole way, pinballing us off the walls as I went while my greedy mouth claimed hers.

The only furniture in her bedroom was a mattress and box springs. A basket and clock sitting on the floor next to her bed.

I carefully placed her on the mattress and went into the bathroom to get rid of the condom.

Now that I had her in bed, I was going to explore her, taste her, and make her come undone until she screamed my name again. I took my time, kissing her, marking her, sucking on her collarbone and the fleshy part of her fabulous tits. Gently tracing her scars. Sucking and nipping her earlobe, her shoulder, her nipples, making her writhe and gasp under me. It didn't take long for me to start getting hard again.

I sucked a mark on her inner thigh while slipping two fingers inside her. "This belongs to me now," I informed her, forcefully.

That declaration earned me a whimper, but she didn't protest or argue. Instead, she dropped her legs open in invitation, causing my own guttural groan to escape.

I couldn't get enough of the feel of her skin against mine. Bare chest against bare chest. Soft against hard. She hooked her legs over my thighs, trying to bring me even closer to her. I responded with a slight thrust and roll of my hips, pushing my rapidly hardening dick against her wet heat. She moaned, pushing her head into the pillow, exposing her long, delicate neck. Unable to resist, I teased a path of open-mouthed kisses along her throat. Her head tilted, allowing me more access, the sound of her whispering my name in my ears.

"You like that, baby? You want more of me?"

"Yes," she sighed.

I pulled away and gazed down at her, staring into those unique eyes. “Do what I tell you or I’ll stop. Do you understand?”

Her eyes widened slightly, her pupils dilated, and she pulled her bottom lip into her mouth. It was almost my undoing. I knelt between her legs peering down at her. “Put your hands over your head and don’t move them.”

She stretched her arms over her head, glaring at me before suddenly giving me a small, lopsided grin. She stretched seductively, arching her back off the bed, lifting and rolling her hips back and forth. Resting one foot against my chest, digging her toes into my pec, smiling while her unique eyes drifted over me. That fucking smile. My tantalizing tease.

I might be telling her what to do, but she was the one in control. I moved her leg over my shoulder, gripped her hips, and tugged her toward me. Her eyes flared and she gasped, but she kept her arms over her head.

“You’re so fucking sexy.”

That earned me a long, low moan.

I knew she wanted to touch me. Knew she was struggling to keep her arms above her head. Her hands were full of sheet, twisted in her fists. “Patrick,” she whined, her soft voice full of hunger and need.

When I ran my tongue through her pussy with one long lick, she almost came off the bed. “You taste fucking delicious.” Another long lick. “Is this what you want?”

“Yes,” she cried, desperate and breathless, her hips lifting off the bed chasing my mouth when I moved away from her. As much as I wanted her to come on my tongue, I needed to be inside her again.

“Condom?”

“Basket on the floor,” she said with a slight jerk of her head, trying to catch her breath.

I quickly snatched a condom out of the basket and rolled it on. “Spread your legs.”

She let out a sexy whimper, dropping her legs open.

I slid into her, watching as her eyes drifted closed. “Open your eyes. I want you to know it’s me making you feel this good.”

Her eyes opened and met mine while I moved in and out of her with deep, languid strokes. The intensity of her lust-filled gaze was a physical force that captured and held me prisoner.

I laced our fingers together, keeping them pinned over her head, pressing them into the mattress, and kissed her.

“You were made to take my cock, baby.”

She was making sounds of ecstasy and chanting a jumble of words, *yes* and *god* and *please*, but what affected me most was the breathy way she called my name. My *real* name. It felt like she was reaching inside me and squeezing my heart.

After another mind-blowing release, we fell into an orgasmic coma, and I may have dozed off. Or passed out. When I came

to, I was on my back with Jett propped on her elbow staring at me, her hand wrapped around my half hard cock, slowly stroking me. I grasped her by the nape of the neck, hauling her into me for a drugging kiss.

She produced a condom out of nowhere like the sorceress she was.

“I love a woman who’s prepared,” I told her with a grin. “Climb on and ride me, baby.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“You’re not in charge here, love. We’re going to do this my way or not at all. Now, climb on.”

Without further protest she rolled on the condom and straddled me, guiding me into her hot, wet heat. My hands roamed over her silky skin, palming her breasts, rolling her nipples between my fingers. She leaned back, gripping my thighs tight.

“You don’t hate my cock, baby.”

Letting go of my thighs, she placed her palms flat on my chest, digging her fingers into my skin, using it for leverage, and rode me harder. Her nails scraping against my chest, her hair curtained around me. The sting intensifying the feeling. Her nails weren’t long, but she was still going to leave marks.

She teased my nipples before twisting them, making me hiss and buck up into her. “Don’t call me that.”

I pulled her down and kissed her.

When she came, she moaned loudly, calling out my name, and I followed shortly after her. After we'd caught our breath, I went into the bathroom and disposed of the condom. When I came back out, I took in the scene in front of me for a moment. Her bed was a mess. Three of the four corners of the fitted sheet had given up their hold, and most of the comforter was piled on the floor, but she didn't seem to care. I crawled into her bed, curling myself around her, my front to her back, flipping the comforter over us.

She wiggled into me and sighed happily. I marveled at how well she fit against me. Like two puzzle pieces clicking into place, as if we were two halves finally coming together to make us whole. I held her tighter. I'd never been more content or wrung out in my entire life.

When she was younger, she'd been so mild-mannered. The Juliette I knew was shy and reserved. I never would have considered saying or doing these things to or with her back then.

But Jett was an entirely sexy woman. Uninhibited. Sexually confident. Not afraid to take what she needed, or to let me take what I wanted. There was nothing shy or reserved about her. I didn't want to think about where she'd learned these new skills and lost those inhibitions, but the way I felt right now, at this moment, I was damn glad she had.

Several blissful minutes went by when I suddenly felt her stiffen and she squirmed away from me, climbing out of bed, and striding out of the room.

It surprised me. Wondering what had happened, I followed her into the living room. Fuck she was gorgeous. She didn't seem to care that she was naked, her wildly sex-tousled hair only adding to her appeal. I wanted to take her back to her rumpled bed and see how much more we could mess it up.

I watched her, frowning. "Jett?"

She was picking my clothes up off the living room floor. Seeing me standing there watching her, she pushed them into my chest, opened the door, and shoved me out onto the deck naked, slamming the door behind me.

It opened again a few seconds later, and she threw my balled-up underwear at me, which hit me in the face, then she tossed my shoes out and slammed the door again. This time, I heard the lock engage and, seconds later, the lights went off.

I was smiling what I was sure was a huge, dopey smile as I got dressed on her deck.

What the hell just happened? And when could it happen again?

I wasn't sure I'd ever get enough of her. After tonight, I wasn't letting her go again. Ever. She didn't know it and I wasn't about to tell her—at least not yet—but Jett Donovan was all mine.

Chapter 24

Jett

I woke up smiling and stretched like a happy cat in a patch of spring sunshine. Then I smelled him...us. Patrick and sex, and my brain kicked in. Angry, hate sex with Patrick was a huge mistake. A multiple orgasm, rocking good time, best sex of my *life* mistake. I should have resisted. Should have said no. Should have never let him in the damn door.

I blamed the tequila for forcing me into that stupid decision. I shouldn't have had any of his fancy, tasty tequila, or, at the very least, stopped at one shot as a show of good manners. I definitely should not have pounded down three shots in a row on an empty stomach.

For weeks I couldn't stop thinking about him. Then, he showed up on the beach like an irresistible, shirtless, hunky Adonis. When he appeared on my doorstep, all those feelings I'd been working so hard to shove away exploded in a mushroom cloud and I knew I was in serious trouble. So I'd opted for the alcohol, thinking that would give me the strength to throw him out. Clearly, that backfired spectacularly.

Instead, my rational, sensible brain deserted me and sat watching from somewhere on the sidelines, munching popcorn and laughing at my very bad choices.

It was madness.

Lunacy.

Tequila.

Patrick Morgan was nothing but a dangerous temptation. He was no longer the lanky, fumbling boy I remembered. He was a hard-bodied man—no fumbling in sight. Now, he was hard everywhere, sculpted. Shredded. Powerful thighs, gazillion pack abs, those sexy V muscles, a lickable little happy trail, and that rock-hard ass.

He had a beautiful face I wanted to slap. A wickedly talented mouth—the man's tongue should be insured—and now he came with serious skills and a big, gorgeous cock. He made all my other partners pale in comparison. Like they were all blundering virgins who couldn't find what they were searching for with a flashlight and a map. He screwed me like it was his fucking job and he was gunning for a promotion, and it made my brain go stupid.

He was bossy.

Demanding.

Caring.

Dominant.

Tender.

And I loved it. Every filthy, dirty, sweaty second of it.

Idiot. You don't have the brains god gave a hammer.

In my work, I called the shots...literally. I made decisions and, sometimes, those decisions meant people died. Right or wrong, when I was on a job, every decision was mine.

In bed with Patrick, I didn't have to make any decisions. He made the choices, and all I had to do was go with the flow, instinctively knowing he'd take care of me and we'd both get what we needed. And boy oh boy, did he give me what I needed until I was thoroughly debauched and completely wrecked.

Our sexual chemistry was off the hook. How could he make my dead heart ache and my lady parts pulse with one look? He'd woken up chunks of me that were long dead and made me feel things I'd never felt.

Last night was *the* best sex of my life. There, I said it, and now I could move on from it.

Sex with Patrick Morgan was a big mistake alright. Problem was, I still wanted the gorgeous, rock-hard bastard. I was lusting over someone I didn't even like. How was that possible? How could I want someone I hated so much? Yeah, okay, he is a sexy motherfucker, but that's no excuse.

Jeez, you could've shown some restraint, maybe a little dignity. Like, what the hell, Jett?

I threw my arm over my eyes and groaned.

Apparently, all the lectures I'd given myself over the years about the vicious ways I'd hurt him if I ever saw him again were nothing more than lies. Because the very first opportunity I got, I spent the night having incredible sex with him instead of slitting his throat the way I promised myself I would. The man made me brainless.

Why did it have to be *him*?

After we were both too exhausted to go another round, I laid there, cocooned in his arms, his warm body curled around mine, and it felt so good. Too good. All I could think was he was the one man who had the power to break me—again—and I needed to run. Lucky for me, I remembered it was my house. I didn't have to run, I only needed to throw him out.

Laying here thinking about what a gargantuan mistake I'd made last night wasn't helping me, and I needed his scent off me as soon as possible. I forced myself up and out of bed. As soon as I stood up, I realized how sore I was. Deliciously, delightfully sore. Grumbling, I angrily stripped the bed and threw everything in the washer before heading for the bathroom to take a shower.

You know what, it's fine. It happened and that's the end of it. He was out of my system and now I could forget about Patrick Morgan and move on. Except, I couldn't forget. As if the loop of porn memories bouncing in my head wasn't enough, I was wearing his marks. Lingering evidence I couldn't ignore.

At least he didn't mark me where anyone could see it in regular clothes, but, if I wore a bathing suit, short shorts, or a

tank top, his marks would be visible.

Arrogant sex god caveman.

Twisting this way and that, I examined myself in the mirror. My lips were still swollen from Patrick's greedy kisses. I had a stinging beard burn on the inside of my thighs that practically looked like road rash. A good size hickey stood out on the flesh of my left breast, another on my right collarbone, two were high on the inside of my left thigh, and I had finger marks on both hips. There was also what seemed suspiciously like the remnants of a bite mark on the back of my right shoulder because, apparently, Patrick was channeling Damon flippin' Salvatore last night.

My eyes drifted shut remembering how all those marks got there. Even though he'd marked me, he hadn't done it painfully. It just sort of...happened in the scorching heat of the moment.

Holy hell.

Catching my reflection, I had a ridiculous grin on my face. I instantly replaced it with a scowl, shaking my head in disgust at the fool staring back at me.

I might as well have a flashing neon sign over my head saying, 'look at me, I slept with Patrick Morgan.'

At least I could take comfort in knowing I'd left as many marks on him. I'd bet serious money his back and chest still bore *my* scratch marks this morning. And I'd sucked more than

one hickey onto his skin too. That thought made me feel better, and I grinned as I turned on the shower.

Good luck explaining that to your friends, jackass.

Although...he was a guy, he'd probably announce how he got them and wear them proudly. Damn it, I should have killed him when I had the chance.

New rule...no more seeing him and definitely no more life-changing, best sex *ever* with Patrick Morgan. Never ever again. *Never.*

Problem solved.

At least neither of us was interested in dating or, perish the thought, a relationship. I didn't have to worry about him getting attached or clingy thinking last night was the beginning of something or that it meant anything. Because it wasn't and it didn't.

Last night was nothing more than me closing out the Patrick Morgan chapter of my life.

Except I was about to meet up with his team and he was going to be there. What had I been thinking when I asked them to help me move furniture? I could have hired people. I let out a loud groan. Ugh, hello mouth, here's the big foot you ordered. This will teach me to keep my big trap shut next time.

Maybe Patrick would chicken out and stay away.

A girl could hope...right?

Chapter 25

Patrick

For the millionth time since she threw me out of her house, I was thinking about Jett. Jett Donovan, my gorgeous, luscious, sexy minx. And the sex. Jesus, the sex. When we were kids, sex with Juliette was good. Satisfying. But sex with Jett was in a completely different stratosphere. It was incredible. Mind blowing...athletic.

The irony and disappointment over Jett throwing me out of her bed wasn't lost on me. I'm not a sleepover kind of man. I was the king of casual sex. Sir One and Done. Mr. No Strings, No Emotion, No Attachments. But last night felt different. It didn't feel like a hookup. The emotional intensity and wild abandon were like nothing I'd ever felt or experienced. I'd never opened myself up to anyone that way, never completely let go like that.

I loved the way it felt when she held me close and wrapped her legs around me, holding me to her, keeping me close. The way she took whatever I gave her. The way she looked at me—into me—with her unique, lust filled eyes. The breathy way

she sighed my name when I touched her, shouting it when she came. There weren't adequate words to describe what it had felt like. I was one hundred percent, absolutely, entirely in lust with her. Everything about her was addicting.

Of course, once her orgasmic high wore off, she'd shot daggers out of her eyes at me, which turned me on almost as much. The only thing that could have made the night better would have been falling asleep and waking up with her in my arms and starting all over again this morning.

And therein lies the irony. I actually *wanted* to wake up in her bed with her in my arms and *she* didn't want that. The situation should be downright comical, but there was nothing funny about it.

Baby steps, Morgan.

Jett had told us there was a lot of furniture to move, so this morning we'd all met at Alex and Reaper's ranch to borrow trucks. Reaper and I were in one, Bruiser and Midas in another, and Boomer and Smoke in the third. With Jett's truck, maybe we'd only have to make one trip.

When the team's convoy of trucks arrived, Jett was already in the alley behind the furniture store. She was sitting on the tailgate of her truck, her long legs scissor swinging while she waited. She was downright delectable with her hair in a sleek ponytail, wearing well-worn jeans, sneakers, and a tight fitted t-shirt that showed off all her curves. As soon as I caught sight of her, my heart beat double time and my face split into a wide smile.

While she was friendly greeting the rest of the team and thanked them for coming, her eyes flitted anywhere and everywhere except directly at *me*. When she finally did make eye contact, she tried to glare at me, but couldn't quite pull it off, and I had to force myself to keep from laughing.

But I couldn't help smirking at her, and crowded into her space once the rest of the team moved away. "You seem different this morning, Donovan. You have such a lovely glow about you."

That got her attention. She scowled back at me, but her slight blush gave her away. I'd never seen anyone more beautiful and had a difficult time keeping myself from pulling her into me and kissing her the way I wanted. I didn't, because I was pretty sure she wouldn't appreciate it and might do something painful in retaliation.

Jett pretended to scratch an itch on the side of her nose with her middle finger while she pinned me with a laser death ray and shot venom out her narrowed eyes.

This time, I did laugh.

I leaned in, speaking softly in her ear, "Have you been thinking about me? About how much you enjoyed yourself last night?"

"I was faking it," she hissed back.

I nuzzled her neck, nipping her earlobe. She shivered and her head tilted slightly, making me smile at the reflexive reaction. "Ah, love, we both know that's the biggest lie you've ever

told.” Without another word, I walked away from her, laughing as I went.

We got to work loading the trucks with her furniture. She'd bought quite a few things, but considering how empty her house was, it wasn't unreasonable. Even with Boomer's constant complaining about the ghosts of Homicide House, the seven of us made quick work loading the four trucks with two double loungers, four chairs, several small tables, and a large table with ten chairs for her deck. There was also a dining table and six chairs, two end tables, a coffee table, a small round table, two complete bedroom sets, and a couple of large bookcases for the house.

While she wanted to help, we wouldn't let Jett move any of the big pieces, so once the bed frames and mattresses were in place, Jett went to work making the beds and telling us where she wanted everything to go.

The entire time we loaded and unloaded the trucks, Jett did her best to ignore me. She kept her distance, wouldn't talk to me, and refused to even glance in my direction.

In response, every time I passed her, I made a point of touching her somehow. A graze of my shoulder against hers, a brush of my hand along her side, resting my hand on the small of her back, sliding my chest across her back. Riling her up until she was tracking my every movement whenever I was near her.

“Stop touching me,” she grumbled after I slid my palm against her ass and gave it a squeeze.

I maneuvered her against the wall, a small gasp escaping her when I caged her in, and kissed her lush lips, my tongue ravaging her mouth. Her arms winding around my neck as she kissed me back, pressing herself against me.

When I pulled away, her face was flushed. Her breathing irregular. Her lips damp. “What were you saying?” I asked, trailing a path of kisses along her neck.

Her head tilted on a soft moan, and she whispered my name. Then I forced myself to walk away from her, leaving her standing there tousled and needy. The woman might pretend she didn’t want anything to do with me, but her reactions whenever I touched her said otherwise. Knowing I was affecting her as much as she affected me was a huge turn on.

Once the trucks were empty and the furniture set up, Jett fed us. She filled the big patio table with a variety of cold cuts, cheeses, breads, chips, drinks, and a big bowl of fruit.

“This is a great house, Jett,” Bruiser commented as we sat down to eat.

“You should have a housewarming party,” Smoke chimed in.

“Even the ghosts can come, right Boomer?” I teased.

“Don’t make jokes about that, you could piss them off,” Boomer cautioned seriously.

We all laughed.

“So, what’s going on with the two of you?” Midas asked, waving his hand between me and Jett.

“Nothing.”

“Everything.”

We said at the same time. Jett hit me with a fierce, threatening glare. I smiled back at her innocently.

“Sounds about right,” Boomer chuckled as he reached for more food.

Bruiser rolled his eyes. “Great, here we go again.”

Once we’d finished stuffing our faces with food, we hung around chatting and relaxing on the deck drinking beers. Eventually, Jett offered to pay us for our help. Of course, we were insulted by her offer. It wouldn’t be right to take her money under any circumstance, but we owed her a debt we could never repay. Taking her money would have been exceptionally bad manners.

“Then at least let me take you out for a drink,” Jett countered after we rejected her offer of payment.

Reaper shook his head at her. “We’re the ones who owe you.”

“We’re taking *you* out for a drink and we won’t take no for an answer,” Bruiser announced in a no-nonsense tone.

“What about Alex, Hali, and Vivian?” Smoke wondered.

“Bring them. The more the merrier,” Jett said, leveling me with a glare. “Except you, Jax. You’re not invited.”

The guys chuckled.

Ignoring them, I grinned back at her. “Oh, I’ll be there. You can count on it.”

Her eyes flared slightly, a flash of lust whizzing through them, and she went back to pretending I didn’t exist.

Before everyone left, we made plans for the team and the women to go out for drinks at our favorite bar, Harry B’s, the following Saturday.

Jett thanked the guys for their help, and they said their goodbyes. Despite the fact I was stranded without a vehicle, I stayed behind. I could always stay at Reaper’s beach house. Worst case scenario, I could catch an Uber back to the ranch and my motorcycle. Even if I had to walk home, there wasn’t a chance in hell I was going to pass up the opportunity to spend more time with Jett.

In fact, I’d been planning on it.

Chapter 26

Jett

I wasn't really surprised Patrick stayed behind after the others left. I should have been, but I wasn't. In fact, the way he'd been touching me all day had my traitorous body humming with anticipation. Almost the second the door was closed behind him, he picked me up and carried me down the hall into my bedroom and we tumbled onto my new bed.

I didn't fight him because I'm weak. And pitiful. And apparently a bit of a masochist. So much for this morning's pep talk. As luck would have it, I was a woman whose body craved the one man I hated more than anyone else. It was disgraceful.

He stripped off my shirt and bra. With a roguish grin he made a show of slowly pulling two long, silky, black scarves out of his pocket, like a magician's trick.

"What are you doing?" I asked him softly, my heart racing at the expectation of what he had in store for me today.

He smiled at me. “Breaking in this new headboard. Are you okay with being tied up?”

“Depends on who’s doing the tying.”

“Jett, I’m going to tie you up. Are you good with that?”

I didn’t answer, only nodded. Oh yeah, I was good with that.

Because I’m pathetic.

He tied one of the long scarves around my wrists, securing my arms to the headboard. He held up the other scarf showing it to me. “Blindfold.”

I nodded and he tied it over my eyes. “Am I going to need a safe word?” I asked, suggestively.

“Do you *have* a safe word?” He whispered close to my ear once the blindfold was securely in place.

His deep, gravelly voice caused a shudder to roll through me.

I grinned. “As a matter of fact, I do. It’s *aardvark*.”

He ran his fingers between my breasts, down to my belly button, and back up again. My stomach muscles dancing, goosebumps erupting over my skin in the wake of his featherlight touch. His fingers continued casually floating over my skin in random patterns.

“Now, why would you need a safe word?” He asked in a lazy tone.

“Reasons,” I answered, in a breathy voice.

He unfastened my jeans and slowly tugged them off but left my panties on.

“You have no idea how erotic it is that you’re wearing my marks on your beautiful body. It’s such a fucking turn on.” He kissed me deeply, leaving me breathless and wanting.

I felt him get off the bed and heard his soft footsteps as he walked out of the room. I wondered if this was some sort of cruel trick. Tie me up, blindfold me, and leave. If he was *that* man, I literally would kill him.

Listening intently, I could hear him opening and closing the fridge door in the kitchen. When he came back, I heard the telltale sound of ice clinking in a glass as he set it on my new nightstand.

He went to get a drink? What the hell?

Without preamble, he thrust his tongue into my mouth. His kiss raw and passionate. When he pulled his mouth away, my head lifted off the bed chasing him, wanting his lips on mine again.

But he didn’t kiss me again, instead he began plumping and kneading my breasts. Sucking and nipping my nipples, almost to the point of pain, then kissing the sting away.

“Be a good girl and say my name,” his voice so husky and sensual against my ear it caused a shiver to run through me.

I pressed my lips together, slowly shaking my head.

He responded by dropping a hot path of kisses along my neck, to the shell of my ear, nuzzling it before whispering, “If

you won't say my name when I ask, I'll have to make you beg until you're screaming it." He nipped my earlobe, "Say my name, love."

My response was no more than an exhale, "No."

He disappeared and suddenly tugged me by my ankles, causing a surprised gasp to escape me. I felt him move, felt the bed near my head dip under his weight as he straddled my face.

"Open your mouth."

I knew what he was asking. I made a show of slowly licking my lips, heard his husky groan, and opened my mouth. I felt the heavy head of his cock rub against my damp lips.

Lifting my head off the bed, I sucked on his cockhead, the heady musk of his precum exploding on my tongue, and I hummed. Running my tongue along the underside of the tip, I lifted my head higher, taking him farther into my mouth, sucking a long, strong pull on my way back up. I felt him shift position as he gently thrust deeper. I sucked hard as he slid out of my mouth, tugging against the ties that bound my hands, letting out a loud whine when he pulled away from me.

"God damn, you're annoyingly sexy, Ms. Donovan." He nuzzled my neck, "Are you imagining me between your legs knowing the pleasure I can give you?"

My breath hitched. A whimper escaped. He kissed his way down my body, my hips rocking toward him.

He nuzzled me through my panties and inhaled deeply. “I can smell how much you want me,” he said in a filthy, seductive tone.

The only response I could give him was a broken moan.

“Do you want my mouth on you?”

“Mmmm...”

He teased my underwear off excruciatingly slow before sliding two fingers in and out of me, circling my clit. “So wet just for me.” And then he stopped, leaving me desperate for more.

He alternated kissing me, nipping and sucking my earlobe, and teasing my nipples. He nuzzled and kissed my neck while his fingers slid over my clit. Exploring, touching...kissing me as if it were the only thing he wanted to do.

I lifted my head off the bed, “Please,” I whined.

“Such a needy girl. Lie there and be patient,” he ordered in a smoky, sexy voice.

I dropped back on the pillow with a groan of frustration.

I heard him pick up the glass, and cocked my head, listening. I sucked in my breath, my back bowing off the mattress, goosebumps shooting across my skin when I felt the cold ice cube he ran over my nipple. Then he replaced the ice with his scorching mouth. Over and over, he ran the ice over my nipples then sucked and nipped with his hot mouth until I was writhing under him.

He trailed a sizzling path of open mouth kisses down my belly, and when he finally put his mouth on my clit, my breath punched out of me, and I bucked against his face. He'd been sucking on the ice and still had it in his mouth. The sensation of the freezing cold in combination with the fiery heat of my body was overwhelming.

My hands were clinging to the headboard for leverage since I couldn't get them on him. If I didn't hold on to something, I might slide right off the planet. My trembling thighs were involuntarily gripping his head, forcing him to brace his big hands on them, holding my legs open or risk suffocation. The sound that came out of me was loud enough anyone on the beach could have heard it.

I had no idea when, or where, or how he'd touch me next. The anticipation was excruciating. I'd feel movement, the dip of the mattress, a rush of his breath against my skin and then he'd disappear again. His touch was featherlight one minute, firm and greedy the next. His mouth, hot and demanding, trailing fire over my skin, kissing me, nipping me... everywhere. My hips undulating by their own volition.

He'd bring me to the edge, hold me on the brink, and back off, not touching me at all, as if he were sitting still and watching me squirm. The only sound was my labored breath as I tried to drag enough oxygen into my lungs to survive.

He'd built the anticipation so high every time he touched me, it felt like a lightning charge. My skin was prickly, every nerve thrumming, nothing but a chorus of moans and gasps, and

pleas coming out of me. I'd never been this turned on in my whole life.

"Tell me you want me," he whispered in a sexy, breathless voice.

I knew he wanted me to beg. He wanted me to surrender control to him. But I was refusing to give in to him this time, although, at the moment, I couldn't remember why. He was torturing me with his touch, his mouth, his tongue. Every movement disciplined and deliberate.

But I also knew if I held out, he suffered too. That was evident by his own groans, the tightness of his voice, and his own harsh, panting breath.

We were currently in the midst of an erotic game of chicken, and I couldn't begin to guess which one of us was going to give in first.

"I won't beg," I whined, but my denial sounded exactly like begging, even to my own ears.

He ran his tongue through my pussy in one long lick, circling my clit and placing a gentle kiss there, making me twitch. "You will, baby, and you know it," he said confidently with a smile in his voice.

His mouth disappeared and suddenly his voice was in my ear, low and throaty, "Tell me you want me."

"No," I whispered.

"You know you do," he said, sliding his fingers inside me again. My hips moved in time with his fingers. "Look how wet

you are for me. Tell me and I'll give you what you need. What we both know you want.”

I responded with a single word. A whimper. A plea. “*Patrick.*”

“I love the way my name sounds coming out of you. So wanton and sensual. Let's see if we can get you to scream it.”

I twitched and thrashed under his touch while he dragged moan after tortured moan out of me. He kissed my stomach, making my muscles flutter, then the inside of my thighs, one after the other. Each press of his lips moving closer to where I wanted him. I felt like I was connected to a high-tension wire. “Patrick!”

I was losing my ever-loving shit. I was writhing. My body trembling uncontrollably. I was nothing but frayed nerve endings. Pulsing with sexual tension, my body aching for release. It was frustrating, infuriating, and a whole bunch of other words I didn't have the brain power to think of.

“You are far too appealing, love. Say it. Tell me you want me.”

He hovered over me. He was so close, I could feel his warm, quivering puffs of breath on my face and knew I wasn't the only one struggling. “Say it,” he growled, his voice tight and strained, but commanding.

I could feel his erection—hot, hard, and heavy—dripping precum and sliding along my belly. I lifted my hips to bump

his cock, and he groaned out a sound of both pleasure and pain from deep in his chest.

I whimpered in response.

I was on the verge of tears. He'd pushed me past reason and my brain went offline, my body demanding the release I knew he could give me. This wasn't edging, it was erotically excruciating, and I couldn't take it anymore.

He lovingly cradled my face, nuzzling my ear before biting my earlobe. "Say the words, and I'll let you come, love," his melodious voice soft and tender.

And with that promise, I couldn't hold back any longer. "I want you. I want you. Please, Patrick. Please."

I heard the telltale sound of foil crinkling and knew he'd opened a condom. Relief flooded through me. My anticipation jacking up even higher. He rubbed the head of his cock against me.

"Is this what you want, love?"

"Yes. God yes, Patrick," I cried loudly.

"Tell me how bad you want my cock inside you."

"So fucking bad, *please* Patrick."

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, he shoved the blindfold off my head and lifted my hips. My legs immediately wrapped around his waist as he pushed deep inside me, bottoming out in one swift, grunting thrust. I almost came unglued yelling gibberish, "OhgodohmyfuckingshitPatrick."

The room was filled with the slippery sound of our bodies coming together and my moans of relief and pleasure. He slid in and out of me with deep, powerful thrusts. Kissing me, swallowing every desperate sound coming out of me.

Suddenly every muscle and tendon tightened and squeezed. My pulse thundered. I screamed his name. My back bowed, my head pressed into the pillow as wave after wave of my orgasm surged through me, my internal muscles seizing and shuddering around him. It was the strongest, most intense orgasm I'd ever had, and I wasn't sure it would ever stop. He pounded into me for several more grunting thrusts, his rhythm faltered and he threw back his head, shouting my name and collapsing against me. Both of us covered with sweat, panting and gasping for air.

Shifting his position so he wasn't crushing me, I felt him continue to throb deep inside me, while my body twitched and pulsed around him. I felt sex drunk. My legs felt like they were made of Jell-O and were still draped over him, because I didn't have the strength to move them.

Once he'd regained some semblance of normal breathing, he rubbed his scruffy cheek against mine. "That was amazing. *You're* amazing. I've never come that hard in my entire life." He ravaged my mouth with a searing kiss. "I can't get enough of you, Jett."

He pulled out of me, my body spasming around him as if trying to keep him inside me and went into the bathroom to take care of the condom. When he came back, he straddled and

untied me, caressing and kissing my wrists. He wrapped me up in his arms and we laid in a mess of sated bodies and tangled limbs for quite some time while we recovered and basked in the afterglow of pure pleasure.

Patrick finally broke the silence, softly trailing his fingers across my shoulder and down my arm. "Go to dinner with me."

"No." I squeezed my eyes shut. "Patrick?"

He kissed my cheek and along my neck, nuzzling my ear, my head spontaneously tilting for him. "Jett, don't say it. Not yet, love," he murmured against my ear, making my heart ache.

I didn't like it. It wasn't as if I had feelings for him... obviously. I hated him. At least my rational brain hated him. Unfortunately, my body was on a completely different wavelength.

He hauled me toward him, kissing me deeply, gently sweeping his thumb over my lips, when he pulled away.

"Get out of my house," I said quietly...reluctantly.

He kissed me again and, just as reluctantly, climbed out of bed. I watched him watch me while he dressed before coming to sit on the edge of the bed, brushing the hair off my face and kissing me sweetly. "Sleep well, love."

I felt like crying but didn't know why. Watching him walk away, I had to slap my hands over my mouth to keep from calling him back and begging him to stay. I needed to send

him away for good because that terrified me more than anything had in a long, long time.

Chapter 27

Jett

Over the last six days, Patrick showed up unannounced and uninvited four times. I kept telling myself it would be the last time—that I wouldn't let him in again—and every time I failed. I had the strength to fight off a man bigger than I was. I could carry a forty-pound pack and run five miles uphill no problem. I could climb up a rope and kick in a door, but I didn't have the strength to force myself to turn Patrick away when he showed up on my doorstep.

Luckily, Augie had returned from his latest disappearance—most likely due to a covert op—and the day after the amazing scarf sex, I told him in no uncertain terms he was going with me to Harry B's for moral support.

Although I liked them, I didn't really know Patrick's team that well, and I didn't know Alex, Hali, or Vivian at all. Okay, I did know a little about Vivian, but not enough to say I *knew* her.

I was more concerned about being near Patrick again because I had no self-control when he was in my general

vicinity. The man was like a drug and I was an addict. If Augie was there, I was fairly confident he'd act as the safeguard I needed to keep me from doing anything stupid with Patrick again. At least that was my hope.

Unfortunately, I also had to come clean to Augie about how I ran into Patrick on my mission in Afghanistan and that he was the one Augie knew only as the 'man whose name we do not speak.' I kept the fact that I'd repeatedly had sex with him since I returned from that mission—and it was the best thing ever—to myself. I wasn't ready for that particular disgrace to become public knowledge.

Not surprisingly, Augie was shocked, but as usual, he took it in stride. Mostly, because he was amused by the whole turn of events. Then he confirmed what I'd already surmised, he knew Patrick, his team, *and* their women.

What kind of freaky coincidence was that?

On Saturday, Augie and I arrived at Harry B's early and had some drinks, which helped to calm my nerves about what the hell I was doing here. Wondering why I'd agreed to this and opened myself up to meeting a bunch of new people when I was a loner who didn't like people all that much. I refused to admit the problem was the nervousness I felt because Patrick would be here tonight.

But I really needed to sit down and have a very serious conversation with myself about the benefits of thinking before speaking to avoid this kind of fiasco in the future.

Chapter 28

Patrick

For the last week, I'd gone to Jett's house almost every day. She'd let me in, we'd have the most unbelievable sex, and share the most incredible intimacy. In bed with me, her walls were non-existent. She was brutally honest in her reactions. She laid herself bare, giving up her vulnerabilities. Giving in to her desires and pleasure. She was completely herself, open and present. Warm and soft. Pliant and willing. And in those moments, she was entirely mine.

Afterward, despite the closeness and connection we shared, she'd throw her sky-high walls back in place and toss me out again. It was exceedingly frustrating.

I wanted more. Dinner, a movie, a damn stroll on the beach. A simple conversation to get to know each other better. A whole night in her bed. Was that really too much to ask?

As if that wasn't enough, she'd only call me Patrick when her walls were down. Once they were firmly back in place, and she was fighting her feelings for me, I was Jax again. It

was a silly thing. An inconsequential thing, but I wanted her to call me by my name.

Tonight was the first time we'd be out in public together on an 'almost' date, and I'd been looking forward to it all week. Tonight, I was going to do my best to punch a permanent crack in her mile high walls. To show her she had nothing to fear from me.

Even though we came separately, the team and their women somehow all arrived at the bar about the same time. *Angel's Working Overtime* by Luke Combs was playing through the jukebox, and a line dance was starting as we all walked through the door.

Jett caught my eye immediately. As if I were tuned to her, like she was a beacon that called out to me, pulling me into her gravity. A force I had no chance of resisting.

She was on the dance floor, dressed in jeans, turquoise blue cowboy boots, and a skintight, plain white, V-neck t-shirt that highlighted her perfect, round, full breasts. Her caramel hair was loose and free, cascading over her shoulders and down her back.

My dick swelled painfully against my fly at the sight of her.

Gonzo was on one side of her, some random pervert—who was eye fucking her and dancing too close for my liking—was on the other.

Gonzo and Jett were smiling at each other and moving in tandem like they'd danced together a million times. I didn't

know much about Gonzo because he didn't share his life with me or the team. But what I did know—because I'd seen it with my own eyes a zillion times—was he was adept at seducing women. A woman whisperer if you will. I knew they had a history but didn't know what it was. What I did know was he was eyeballing Jett like she was his next meal. *My Jett*. I didn't like it. At all. What was Gonzo doing here anyway? And why were they smiling at each other like that?

Weaving my way through the crowd of dancers, I gave Mr. Random Pervert a glare that said, 'scram or I'll hurt you' and slid in beside Jett when he wisely scurried away.

Bruiser, who had refused to learn to line dance, headed for the back of the bar to snag a couple of large tables, while the rest of the group slipped in somewhere behind us.

When Jett noticed me beside her, she unleashed her breathtaking smile on me. It was genuine, open, and lit up her entire face. It slammed me square in the chest and headed south to my dick, hitting me so hard, I missed the next two steps.

After the line dance ended, a slower song started playing and most of the crowd dispersed. I hooked Jett around the waist, keeping her on the dance floor with me.

It didn't escape my notice that I was holding her close and she was letting me. She wasn't trying to escape or telling me, 'I told you not to do that.' I also hadn't missed the way we danced together seamlessly, completely in tune, moving in perfect sync.

“You’re in an awfully good mood tonight,” I mentioned, casually.

“Had some drinks,” she easily responded.

“How many drinks?”

She shrugged one shoulder. “Wasn’t counting. A few.”

“Are you drunk?”

She smiled up at me. “No. Are you?”

Her fucking smile was hypnotizing and as usual it was wreaking havoc on my senses. “I haven’t had any drinks,” I answered, as I spun her away from me.

“You should remedy that,” she replied cheerfully, as she spun back into my arms, her palm landing on my chest, a smile still on her face.

I wrapped my arms around her waist and interlocked my fingers, tugging her closer. “I’d rather drag you out of here and do filthy things to you.”

She stared up at me with half-lidded eyes, and, for a moment, I wondered if she was going to agree. But then something changed, and she seemed to shake it off.

When the song ended, I tried to keep my arm around her as we crossed the dance floor to where the rest of our group was sitting, but she skirted away, out of arm’s reach. Evidently, she hadn’t had so many drinks that she forgot how much she disliked me...at least in public.

When we reached the table, I introduced Jett to the women. “This is Alex, she’s married to Reaper. Hali is married to Smoke, and you already know Vivian is with Midas. Ladies, this is Jett.”

“Oh my god, it’s really you!” Vivian exclaimed, popping out of her chair to throw her arms around Jett. “Grant told me he saw you, but it was so unbelievable. I’m so happy to see you again. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve thought about you and hoped you were okay.”

Hali seemed confused. “You two have met before?”

“Jett is Sugar Darlin’,” Vivian announced with a bright smile.

“That was you?” Alex asked, surprise in her voice.

Jett didn’t get the chance to respond because Alex hugged her and, as soon as she released her, Hali stepped up to take a turn asking, “*You’re Sugar Darlin’?*”

Jett seemed genuinely baffled. “Why do all of you call me that?”

It was Alex who explained, “When the team was at Gonzo’s about Vivian’s ordeal, Gonzo talked to you on the phone and kept calling you sugar and darlin’. The guys asked who you were but Gonzo wouldn’t tell them, so they started calling you Sugar Darlin’ because they didn’t know your name.”

Jett chuckled and shook her head.

“We can’t thank you enough for what you did for our men, for Vivian and Midas, and for Jax.” Alex told her seriously.

“We owe you, big time,” Vivian added.

“Thank you,” Alex told her. “Sincerely, Jett, thank you.”

“Anything you need, you only have to ask,” Hali added.

“Well, for starters, you could tell me what a girl has to do to get a drink around here.”

The other women laughed.

“That’s easy enough,” Alex said, hooking her arm in Jett’s, her emerald-eyed stare turning on me, “Go on, Jax. Your woman will be fine.”

My woman. I like the sound of that.

Unfortunately, Jett had a different opinion, “Um...no. I’m *not* his woman. I’m not *his* anything.”

Alex looked between the two of us with a smirk but kept whatever she was thinking to herself, turning and leading Jett to the bar. Hali and Vivian moved to sit at another table, also shooing me away. So, I headed for the tables Bruiser had snagged and joined the rest of my teammates.

I couldn’t help watching her with the other women. This thing with Jett was out of control, and yet, I couldn’t seem to stop it. With each night I spent with her I fell farther down the rabbit hole. Inching closer and closer to real feelings. Falling harder and faster than I thought possible.

It was shocking. Surprising. Mind boggling. Regardless of how astonishing it was, I wanted us to be a real couple. Wanted us to be *together*. No one was more amazed than I was

that I *liked* the way it felt when I was with her. I wanted to fall asleep with her in my arms and wake up in the morning with her. I wanted to do *everything* with her.

Problem was, Jett was making me work for it, which had never happened. Or maybe I'd never been interested in anyone enough to *want* to work for it. Not until Jett. Whatever it took. Whatever I had to do would be absolutely worth it because I couldn't imagine letting her go and walking away ever again.

Chapter 29

Jett

After getting drinks—beers for Alex and me, sparkling water for Vivian and Hali—Alex and I headed back to our table. I noticed both Hali and Vivian were starting to show a little baby bump.

“I heard both of you are pregnant. Congratulations,” I told them as Alex and I sat down.

They both got sappy smiles on their faces and, almost in exact synchronization, touched their bellies. “Thank you,” they said in unison.

They both seemed so happy, which I suppose was normal if you were into things like marriage and babies, which I certainly was not. At least not anymore. The mere thought of it sent a bone-chilling shiver down my spine.

“So, what’s going on with you and Jax? The guys said you two have a history, but they wouldn’t tell us anything. Bro code and all that.” Alex took a drink of her beer, watching me expectantly.

“Did you two do the nasty yet?” Hali blurted.

“Hali!” Alex warned.

Hali shrugged. “What? We all want to know.”

“But you don’t have to ask her like that,” Vivian admonished, shaking her head.

Ignoring them, Hali grinned at me like the Cheshire Cat, “You should jump him. The sex with them is so freaking hot. It’ll be the best you ever had.”

She isn’t wrong about that—much as I hate to admit it, Patrick could be crowned the king of the porn stars.

I took a pull off my beer to avoid saying anything.

“What is *wrong* with you?” Vivian asked Hali.

“It’s the pregnancy hormones,” Hali responded with a shrug.

“What was your excuse before?” Alex asked with a grin.

I found myself smiling at them. The banter and closeness between them was refreshing and heartwarming. It had been a really long time since I’d hung out with a group of women. Surprisingly, I liked it and felt comfortable around them.

Hali rolled her eyes at Alex, turning back to me. “Reaper jumped Alex three days after he met her, but it was only a one-night stand.”

“That was a great night,” Alex countered with a sigh and a dreamy smile. “The man showed incredible stamina.” She smiled wider and held up her hand with her fingers spread and mouthed, “Five times.”

Vivian and Hali whooped, while I tipped my beer toward Alex, and she clinked her bottle against mine.

She grinned, telling me, “I was only supposed to get one night, I wasn’t going to squander a second of it.”

I was confused. “But somehow you ended up getting married.”

“He tried to stay away, but he couldn’t resist her. He kept coming back for more,” Hali said with a grin.

“He was convinced he wasn’t a ‘relationship’ guy,” Vivian added, using air quotes. “Pretty comical since they got married a few months later and have five kids.”

“*Five?*” I croaked, almost choking on my beer.

Alex chuckled at my noticeable shock.

“Yeah, yeah, old news. We’d rather hear what’s going on with you and Jax,” Hali pressed.

Obviously, she wasn’t going to let it go, and I needed to make sure they didn’t get the wrong idea. “There’s nothing going on between us. We dated a long time ago. We broke up. End of story.”

Liar.

“Okay, rewind,” Vivian said. “There’s *so* much more to that story.”

“Let’s just say we saw the future of our relationship differently. I thought it was Whitney and he didn’t. He broke

up with me in a text message, and I didn't see or hear from him again until all this recent shit went down.”

Hali's brow pinched together in confusion. “What's... Whitney?”

I waved my hand. “You know, Whitney Houston, *The Greatest Love of All*.”

For a beat, they all gaped at me wide eyed then broke into boisterous laughter.

“Wait. He broke up with you in a text?” Alex asked when their laughter died down, a frown marring her pretty face.

“That he did,” I nodded, taking a swig of my beer.

In unison, the three of them turned to stare across the room at Patrick and all hell broke loose.

Chapter 30

Patrick

While the women were sitting at their own table chatting and laughing, I was sitting with Reaper, Smoke and Midas. Boomer and Bruiser were nearby, engaged in a game of pool. The women were close enough we could clearly see them, but far enough away we couldn't hear what they were talking about.

Hearing a loud whooping from where they were sitting, we all jerked our heads toward our women. Reaper, Smoke, and Midas shared a knowing look, their faces splitting into wide smiles.

“What do you think is going on over there?” I wondered out loud.

“Sex talk,” Reaper stated without elaborating.

“Yep,” Midas agreed, chuckling and taking a drink of his beer.

“No doubt about it, they're talking about your skills,” Smoke said, clapping me on the back.

“My skills?”

Smoke smirked at me, “Yeah, your sex skills.”

I’d seen this phenomenon. Alex, Hali, and Vivian didn’t seem to have a filter when it came to talking about sex. But, for some reason, it didn’t occur to me I’d ever be on the receiving end of one of those conversations. I had to admit though, I was curious what Jett might tell them.

“You’re not nervous, are you?” Smoke asked.

“Nervous? Nervous about what?”

“That you don’t...*measure* up,” Midas taunted, his eyes flashing with humor.

The three of them laughed.

All of a sudden, Alex, Hali, and Vivian turned and glared at me, clearly pissed off. “You broke up with her in a *text* message?!” Alex yelled across the bar.

Vivian was next to voice an opinion, “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Yeah, what the hell, Jax?” Hali added.

I noticed more than a few people were watching this exchange. Considering the women were hollering across the bar, that wasn’t a huge surprise.

Fuck.

Boomer turned from his pool game and leveled me with a glare. “Even I know you don’t break up with a girl in a text message. What the fuck, Jax.”

My gaze shifted to Jett. She grinned and shrugged, tipping her bottle at me, taking a long pull off her beer.

“No wonder she hates you,” Bruiser scoffed without looking away from the shot he was lining up on the pool table.

Double fuck.

I didn't have a defense. I *had* broken up with her in a text message. But the last thing I wanted was to try and explain myself to my teammates and their women. The four women got up to join us, and luckily, before they could interrogate me about Jett and our history, Gonzo strolled up to the table. He set down a tray of shots, settling his big frame in the empty chair next to Jett.

“Hey, Augie, where have you been?” Jett greeted him cheerfully.

Gonzo handed one of the shots to Jett, they clinked their glasses together, and downed them.

The rest of us were gaping at each other in varying degrees of confusion.

Smoke looked at me, mouthing, “Augie?”

Wait. Augie? Jett's *perfect* man? The Augie I wanted to beat the crap out of was Gonzo? “Gonzo is *your* Augie?” I asked Jett.

Gonzo smiled from ear to ear. “Damn right I'm her Augie.”

Hali wagged her finger between Gonzo and Jett. “Okay, what's going on *here*?”

Good question, Hali. What the hell is going on here?

Gonzo shifted to face Hali. “We’ve been friends a while. We’ve worked maybe twenty jobs together over the last decade.”

“Mostly undercover,” Jett added.

Not only did they look at each other like they were sharing *another* secret between them, but that was interesting information since what we knew was when Gonzo worked a job, he *always* worked alone. Of course, all we had were rumors of what he did and who he did it for. This was more information than he’d ever given us. Although now that I was thinking about it, we’d never asked him about that.

“You read any of those books I recommended?” Gonzo asked Jett.

“A couple. Now that I have time, I’ll be reading more. I used your list and ordered a bunch of them online.”

“What kind of books?” Alex asked, curiously.

“He loves romance novels,” Jett told Alex with a grin.

That was the biggest shock of the century besides her calling him Augie and telling us they’ve worked a bunch of jobs together. Apparently, this was ‘learn about Gonzo day.’

“No fucking way,” Reaper commented.

Jett smiled wide and nodded her head. “Oh yeah.”

Gonzo didn’t seem the least bit embarrassed. “Don’t knock it till you’ve tried it.”

Gonzo snagged Jett's hand and stood up. "C'mon, sugar, let's sing," he said, towing her toward the stage.

What the hell?

Jett stayed on the dance floor while Gonzo set up the music and jumped off the stage, standing next to her. The two of them appeared downright amused.

Love Train by the O'Jays came over the speakers. It seemed an unlikely choice, and I couldn't help wondering what they were doing in the middle of the dance floor. Why weren't they on the stage?

Both had good voices, Gonzo's southern accent coming through and adding something to their singing. But it was their dance moves that commanded attention. They were like something straight out of *Magic Mike*. Hip slaps and pelvic thrusts. Hands splayed wide, running down their bodies seductively. Side slides, head tossing, and hip rolls. Moving in perfect sync while never missing a lyric.

And then Jett planted her foot high on Gonzo's thigh. He grabbed her wrist, stood upright, and using his leg for height and leverage, she did a perfect backflip. Both of them smiling wide when she landed on her feet and went straight into a spin move that had her landing in his arms, as he dipped her, practically bending her in half.

It was like a professional, choreographed routine. Obviously, something they'd practiced and performed. And, for the life of me, I could not visualize how that happened.

They weren't good, they were freaking fantastic.

The crowd was going out of its mind, and we were all stunned, alternating between watching with our mouths gaping open and cheering wildly. Vivian had her phone out recording them, which was a good thing since I was convinced I might be hallucinating the whole thing.

None of us could believe we were watching Gonzo. Stoic, scary, angry, antisocial, rarely cracked a smile Gonzo was singing and dancing with a huge smile on his face.

With *my* woman.

Speaking of my woman, Juliette would never have considered getting up in front of a crowd and singing, let alone dancing like *that*. But Jett had no fear and it seemed like she was having the time of her life. I really needed to stop comparing Jett to Juliette because she was right, they *weren't* the same person.

What was going on with the two of them? Clearly, there was something significant between them. Were they sleeping together? And, if they were, why was she having sex with me?

Nope, not going there.

When the song ended, panting and out of breath, Gonzo hugged her and spun her around. She was laughing as he kissed her on the cheek. She seemed so carefree. Smiling and happy. I didn't like the easy camaraderie between them, and I hated that he could wrap her in his arms, and she didn't fight him. I'd never seen Gonzo like this, not even with Alex who'd

known Gonzo for a long time. I wanted to kick Gonzo's ass for kissing and hugging her. For making her laugh and smile.

Of course, getting into a fight with Gonzo would be a mistake if I wanted to live. Especially since I had no right to feel possessive about Jett, which rubbed me entirely the wrong way. I didn't have any claim on her—even though I wanted one. But I couldn't deny, *I* wanted to be the one who made her happy.

The bar erupted with applause, and smiling, they held hands and took a bow. Our table was on their feet making an extreme amount of noise, while the crowd began screaming for an encore.

Seriously, what the fuck is going on here?

Before I gave it any thought—which I really should have—I was on my feet moving toward them.

Gonzo was already headed for the bar. Jett was still sporting a smile when I stalked up next to her. I grasped her upper arm, leading her away from the stage. “Are you sleeping with Gonzo?” I demanded.

She jerked out of my grasp and, based on the change in her, I could tell she was pissed. “Whether I am or I'm not, it's none of your business,” she hissed. “In fact, just leave me the fuck alone, Jax.”

“You know what? If that's the way you want it, fine by me.”

“Good,” Jett said peevishly, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Good.” I parroted. “I’m going, Jett.”

“So go,” she snapped back.

“I will.”

“Bye.”

“Here I go.”

“So you keep saying, but here you still are.”

Fuck. I’d backed myself into a corner. Instead of calming down and talking to her like an adult, I turned and stalked away. Like a child. Like the moron I was.

In hindsight, it was crystal clear I handled that exactly the wrong way.

Chapter 31

Jett

Who knew Patrick was going to go all green-eyed monster wanting to know if I was sleeping with Augie? Where did that even come from? And why did he care who I slept with?

Obviously, it didn't *really* bother him, since he stormed away and almost immediately started talking to some top-heavy chick in sky-high heels who forgot half her clothes at home.

Standing at the far end of the bar, my back resting against it, I watched Patrick and the woman across the room. Who the hell was this Bar Bunny Barbie who was so clearly hitting on him? And why wasn't he walking away from her?

I suppose she was pretty in an I-hate-her sort of way. She was smiling at him with her blinding white teeth, resting her hand with its cherry red claws on his arm, flipping her unnaturally blonde hair over her shoulder, and he wasn't doing anything to discourage her. The woman was unquestionably everything I wasn't. Of course, he'd want someone like her.

Taking a swallow of my drink, I narrowed my eyes over the rim of my glass. I didn't like how I was feeling. I didn't like it one bit. I wanted to kill her. Or him. Or both of them. I wondered if there was a knife behind the bar I could borrow for a couple of minutes.

Patrick glanced at me and smiled a gloating smile, and if I could have killed him with a look, I would have. Staring back, the sound that came out of me sounded ominously like a growl.

Patrick Morgan had set up residence in my head, like an unwanted squatter. A brain worm. And now he was living there rent free. His sole purpose in life seemed to be driving me out of my mind. I needed to exorcise him, find a way to get him out of my head—and my bed—for good.

Problem was, my body craved him like a drug. Every time I laid eyes on him my body reacted, knowing the pleasure he could give me. Like Pavlov's dog, when his eyes ran over me with that combination of lust, heat, and hunger, I couldn't force myself to resist him.

It was pitiful. He didn't even have to ask, he showed up and I opened the door...and my legs. He had me wrapped around his little finger. Okay, not only his finger. The worst part—*the very worst part*—I was pretty sure he knew it.

Every day it got harder to make it just about the sex. Sure, it was high-quality sex—phenomenally mind-blowing sex—but still, trying to stop it was like trying to plug a dam with my finger. If I wasn't careful, feelings were going to burst free.

And catching feelings was *never* a good thing. Catching feelings for Patrick Morgan—*again*—would be a massive disaster and a one-way ticket to disappointment.

No, not happening. No way, no how. Not going down that road. Learned. My. Lesson.

I took another sip of my drink. I hated how he showed up at my house all smug and cocky and banged my brains out. I hated how he made me laugh—his stupid, annoying habit of amusing me against my will. I hated how great he looked in his ass-molding jeans or even better out of them.

All of it was black magic designed to keep me under his spell.

I needed a knife. If I killed him, it would solve all my problems. It didn't even have to be a big knife.

Augie slid up next to me, close enough our shoulders were touching. I kept my focus on Patrick, who was now flirting back with the woman like a teenage girl with her first crush while staring at me over blonde Barbie's shoulder with a shit eating grin on his face.

“Look at her, now she's bending forward to give him a good view of her ginormous boobs,” I said to Augie, still watching Patrick and the woman.

“She's so top heavy, maybe she's just tippin' over.”

I barked out a laugh. Augie always knew exactly what to say to make me feel better. I smiled up at him, “You're probably right, those things are *definitely* not natural.”

“C’mon, sugar, we’re dancin’.”

“I’m not in the mood,” I grumbled, shifting my focus back to Patrick and his blonde ball of fluff.

“Don’t care. Dancin’ now, Jett.”

I barely had enough time to set my drink on the bar before Augie dragged me onto the dance floor. But I was keeping Patrick ‘The Big Fat Jerk’ Morgan in my sights. Once we’d reached the center of the room, Augie put his arms around me, and I automatically did the same.

“Jett, look at me.”

I didn’t.

“He’s not interested in her. You know that don’t you?”

I still didn’t respond.

“Jett!” Augie barked right next to my ear when I didn’t answer him.

I twitched and finally looked up at him, “What? Jeez, you don’t have to yell in my ear.”

“Apparently I do if I want your attention.”

I ignored the dig. “Do you think the bartender has a knife behind the bar?”

Augie chuckled. “You’re not killin’ anyone tonight.”

“But I want to,” I whined. “And I really think it would make me feel better.” I glanced back at Patrick. “I need to stop having sex with him,” I muttered, absently.

“You’re havin’ sex with Jax?” The surprise in his voice was obvious and not unexpected. “I thought it was the history between you two that was throwin’ you. How the hell did *that* happen?”

My eyes met his. “I didn’t mean to have sex with him.”

He raised an eyebrow and smirked down at me.

“I’m serious. It just sort of happened. He came to my house and pissed me off and, next thing I knew...we were having hate sex in the living room. After that things...you know...escalated. Every time he shows up, my brain shorts out. It’s like I can’t stop myself.”

“Then what do you do?”

“What do you mean?”

“After the sex, what do you do?”

“Duh, I throw him out. It’s like fricken *Groundhog Day* now. He shows up, we have sex, I throw him out, and it starts all over again.”

Augie started laughing.

“Why are you laughing? This isn’t funny.”

“Groundhog Day dick, it’s amusin’.”

“No. No, it’s not. It’s decidedly *unamusing*. It’s anti-amusing. It’s the least amusing thing on the entire planet. I don’t know what’s happening to me. I don’t even like him.”

“You sure about that? Sounds like maybe you do.”

“I hate him—you know that. I know that...*he* knows that. There’s just...there’s something wrong with me. I have a sickness or something.”

“You sayin’ he has a magic dick?” He asked, grinning.

I smacked him on the chest with the palm of my hand. “Yes! Yes, that’s exactly what it is. He cursed me with that thing. What should I do about that?”

“What do you wanna do?”

“Why are you being Dr. Phil tonight? Why can’t you tell me what to do? I’ve watched you. I’ve seen how easily you get someone to fall into bed with you, you must have a magic dick too. So, if I wanted to take the spell away, what would I do?”

“Darlin’, I will forever cherish you thinkin’ my dick is magic, but I can’t tell you what to do.”

I sighed loudly. “Hey, do you have a pen or pencil on you?”

Augie smiled down at me. “I told you, you’re not killin’ anyone tonight.”

“What makes you think I don’t want to write something down? Maybe I want to make a grocery list.”

“I know you, sugar. Although, I’m a little surprised you’re jealous, especially of someone like her. Never expected that from you.”

“Jealous? No,” I shook my head vigorously. “No-ho-ho-no. Ab-so-fucking-lutely not.”

“Then why do you care?”

“Pfft, I don’t.”

Augie laughed at me. “Sugar, you can’t stop starin’ at them and you’re threatenin’ to kill at least one of them. If that doesn’t say you care, I don’t know what does.”

As the song wound down, Patrick finally disengaged himself from the woman. I wasn’t about to stand here and watch him leave with her. “I’ve had enough of this place. I’m going home.”

I left the dance floor, going to say goodbye to everyone. Each of the women hugged me, and Alex said she was going to set up a lunch, just for the girls. Despite everything, I was looking forward to that. I actually wanted to get to know these women better.

By the time I’d said goodbye to everyone and turned around, Augie had a beautiful brunette on his arm who was smiling up at him like he was the second coming. I’d seen this little miracle happen way too many times to be surprised by it.

The three of us left together, and I said good night to Augie and his latest pickup as they strolled down the street toward Augie’s apartment. I headed for home in the opposite direction.

I had no claim on Patrick Morgan. I didn’t *want* a claim on Patrick Morgan. He could screw any blonde he wanted. I couldn’t care less.

Keep telling yourself that, Jett.

Chapter 32

Patrick

I was trying to figure out how I could backpedal my argument with Jett when a woman approached me. She started making small talk, and I politely answered, hoping to extricate myself as soon as I could. Over the blonde's shoulder, I happened to notice Jett at the bar watching me. She was frowning and glaring like she was about to go on a killing spree, and I realized she was jealous. I was sure she'd vigorously disagree, but I took it as a good sign and couldn't help but smile at that turn of events.

I'd only continued talking to the woman because I could see how jealous it was making Jett. I thought if Jett realized she was jealous, it might finally make her come to the conclusion she did, in fact, like me.

I was seriously regretting that decision now.

What the hell is wrong with me? The woman is making me batshit crazy.

I was beginning to think Jett had feelings for me, or, at the very least, she didn't hate me anymore. I *knew* she liked having sex with me. There was *no* doubt about that.

But then she started dancing with Gonzo. They moved and swayed to the music while talking and laughing with their heads together.

When I couldn't handle watching them anymore, I excused myself from the woman I had no interest in, heading for the bathroom to calm down so I didn't do something stupid...like confronting the two of them and having my ass handed to me by Gonzo.

When I came back out, I surveyed the entire bar, but couldn't find her. I didn't see Jett *or* Gonzo. She was gone.

I hurried back to our table. "Where's Jett?" I asked everyone.

"She left a few minutes ago," Alex informed me.

"She left?"

Did they leave together? Did she go home with Gonzo?

"What about Gonzo?" I held my breath, not sure I wanted to hear the answer.

"He left with a gorgeous brunette," Boomer answered with a smirk.

My relief was immediate and intense.

A brunette, not Jett. That's great. Awesome.

After a quick goodbye, I rushed out of the bar. When I got out front, I searched, but didn't see her.

Fuck.

Jumping on my bike, I rode the short distance to her house. When I arrived, I parked and headed around back to her deck. The porch light was on, but the house was dark, no sign of Jett anywhere. Where the hell was she?

I was still standing on her deck when I caught sight of a lone figure walking on the beach. I instantly recognized the silhouette as Jett and took off running down the sand toward her.

What the hell is she doing alone on the beach at night? The woman's risky behavior is going to give me a heart attack one of these days.

“Do you have any idea how dangerous it is to walk alone on the beach at night?” I barked at her once I'd reached her. She'd disappeared and put herself in danger and my fear made me lash out at her. But even knowing I was overreacting, I couldn't seem to stop myself.

And, of course, you royally fucked up...again. Let's not forget that.

She stopped, turning to face me, and placed her hand on my shoulder. The next thing I knew, my legs were being taken out from under me and I was on my ass, staring up at her from the sand.

“I can take care of myself, Jax,” she called drolly over her shoulder as she sauntered away.

I couldn't help my smile. At least she didn't hold a knife to my throat or point a gun at my head. I chose to see that as progress. I scrambled to my feet, dusted the sand off my pants, and jogged after her.

"What's wrong, Jax? Did your bar bunny turn you down?" She asked irritably when I caught up with her again.

"She wasn't *my* bar bunny, and I didn't have any interest in her," I countered.

"Ha! That's not what it looked like."

"What about you and Gonzo?" I snapped back.

"What about me and Augie?"

"He's always touching and hugging you, dancing with you, and kissing you," I growled. The fact that I sounded bitter and jealous wasn't lost on me.

Jett kept walking but shifted to face me. "Augie is my friend, Jax. My *best* friend. And we've been over this, what I do or don't do with Augie is none of your business."

I'd bring up what I did or didn't do with another woman was none of *her* business either, but I didn't think that would help my cause. Besides, I didn't *want* any other woman. I only wanted Jett.

"If I'm not mistaken, you said you didn't care who or what I did."

"I *don't* care," she shot back.

“Then why are you so concerned about the woman at the bar?”

She climbed the steps of her deck with me right on her heels. “I wasn’t *concerned*,” she snapped as she removed her keys from her pocket and unlocked her door, strolling inside.

I followed her in, shutting the door behind us. “No, you were jealous,” I pointed out.

She spun around, her hands fisted at her sides. “I was *not* jealous of that...that...*woman!*”

Her outrage said otherwise, and I had to bite the inside of my cheek to forcibly keep from smiling at her. I hauled her into me by the nape of her neck, crashing our mouths together, kissing her deeply. She didn’t fight, instead, she melted against me, and I sighed against her mouth in relief, taking the kiss deeper. I loved how responsive she was. The way she surrendered the instant I touched her or kissed her, becoming soft and pliable under my touch. Contradicting all her protests that she didn’t like me.

I leaned back to gaze down at her, sweeping a lock of hair off her face. “You’re the *only* one I want, Jett,” I promised her, my voice low and raspy.

She released a tiny whimper, and it was hot as fucking hell. Her molten eyes stared into mine as she shoved against my chest, pushing me backward until the backs of my knees bumped the big chair in her living room and buckled as I dropped into it. Her eyes locked on mine as she began

removing her boots, stepping between my thighs, and sinking to her knees with a sexy grin on her face.

My dick twitched and swelled, extremely happy at this turn of events. Jett turned me on like no other woman ever had, and I simply couldn't get enough of her.

Every move she made was methodical and unhurried. Assured and self-confident. From taking off my shoes and socks, stripping off my shirt, unbuckling my belt, and undoing the button on my pants...to lowering my zipper and spreading it apart. All of it designed to tantalize and tease. Her fingers danced over my exposed skin. I was on fire, feeling like I was burning from the inside out. My dick was leaking, my balls throbbing.

I lifted my ass as she tugged off my jeans. My aching cock strained against my boxer briefs, wanting out of its cotton prison. She ran the palm of her hand over the bulge, cupping my balls through the material, her eyes soft and hazy as she gazed up at me. Mine drifted closed, and I groaned. She nuzzled me through my boxer briefs, inhaling deeply, letting out a sensual moan. Every leisurely, sexy move making me harder.

She slid my briefs slowly down my thighs, my cock sprang free, and I was stripped bare while she was still fully dressed. If my steel-hard cock was any indication, that turned me on even more.

Splaying her hands on my thighs, she pushed them apart, wrapping her mouth around my cock, her fingers digging into

my skin. In one long lick, she ran her tongue from base to tip along the sensitive underside of my cock. Then made slow circles around the head with her tongue, lapping the precum off the slit. My eyes rolled back in my head, my hips canting as she took my entire length in her mouth while staring up at me.

“Fuck, so good, baby.”

Everything felt incredible: the long, strong, persistent pulls, the hot, wet suction of her mouth, and the feeling of my cock brushing against the back of her throat. But if she didn't stop, this would be over before we even got started. I tugged her off me with a pop and her grunt of protest.

I had a hold of her by her biceps, gazing into her eyes. Her pupils were blown, her blue eye shimmered a dark azure, her other eye a dark, rich brown.

“Take off your clothes,” I ordered, my voice deep and gravelly.

She didn't argue. She stood up, removing her clothes as slowly as she removed mine. She never broke eye contact, while I sat, legs spread, like a naked king. Taking a condom from the front pocket of her jeans, she rolled it on, without a word, and straddled me. Notching the head of my cock in place, she eased down and started riding me.

I palmed her perfect tits, squeezing and plumping, sucking one nipple, then the other into my mouth, nipping the hard buds with my teeth. She groaned, dropping her head back, her hands wandering over my heated skin while she rode me. My

cock pulsed inside her. I feasted on her breasts before returning to her lips. We picked up speed, sliding long and deep, pistoning up into her while she ground down on me. Both of us panting and moaning, racing closer and closer to release...until I grabbed her by the hips, holding her still. "Stop."

"Stop," she parroted absently, panting. Her brow furrowed. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Then why are we stopping? Move, Patrick," she protested, frustrated at being yanked from the edge of release. She tried to roll her hips, but I held firm, keeping her still.

"Just wait, love," I whispered in her ear without elaborating.

"Wait for what?" she asked, clinging to me, digging her fingers into my shoulders, her panting breath ghosting over my skin.

I threaded our fingers together, holding our clasped hands over my heart.

"What the hell, Patrick?" She hissed through clenched teeth. "You're killing me."

I kissed the shell of her ear, nuzzled her throat, placing a gentle kiss to the pulse throbbing there. She whined, trying to move, but I wouldn't allow it.

"Shhh. No moving," I whispered.

I could feel her trembling. “Is this some bullshit tantric thing? More edging?” She grumbled through gritted teeth, trying to flex her hips again. “Because if it is, I’m not having it tonight.”

I cradled her face between my hands. “Trust me, love,” I told her, kissing her softly.

She stilled and let out a frustrated groan, dropping her head on my shoulder. I wondered if she realized she’d done exactly what I’d asked and didn’t argue that she didn’t trust me.

I cupped her face, lifting her head and kissing her breathless. I could feel my cock twitching inside her, her pussy fluttering around me. I knew she felt it too by the way she whimpered, and squirmed, and shivered. After several minutes, I flexed my hips, gently thrusting up into her. When I did, her hips rocked, her eyes rolled back, and her indecent moan filled the room. Staring into each other’s eyes, we moved together as one. Slowly at first, then faster, until we were feverish, rocking and rhythmically gliding against each other. Both of us chasing the euphoric high of ecstasy.

Jett broke apart in my arms, trembling and bucking. Bowing backward, practically screaming my name. I splintered apart seconds after her. Shuddering and thrusting up into her, chanting her name. Losing myself in wave after wave of the most intense pleasure I’d ever felt.

She collapsed against me, a sheen of sweat covering both of us. I bundled her in my arms, and she burrowed into my chest.

I felt her quick breaths against the hollow of my throat, felt her pussy continue to pulse and quiver around my softening cock.

“Holy mother of...what the hell was that?” she purred, winded and panting.

A low, rich chuckle escaped me. I couldn't agree with her more.

I kissed her tenderly, achingly slow. Soft and sweet. Jett slowly lifted off me. Her pussy fluttered around me, and my dick tried to rally. She removed and disposed of the condom in some tissues, before repositioning, laying in my lap. Her legs hung over the arm of the chair, her head pillowed against my chest. My fingertips absently trailing over her arm and back, playing with the ends of her silky hair. A feeling of pure contentment settled over me.

We sat that way, in comfortable tranquility, for some time until I finally broke the silence, “Go to dinner with me.”

“No,” she quietly responded. I felt her warm breath against my chest as she placed a lingering kiss on my pec. “Patrick?” she asked, silkily.

I held her tighter, knowing what was coming and not wanting to hear the words. But there was nothing I could do to stop them. Once again, she'd allowed me to bask in the joy of being with her for a short, blissful time, then she threw me out.

I wasn't amused by it anymore. It was getting harder and harder to leave her. I wanted her to lower her walls, climb into bed with her, and hold her in my arms against me all night.

But unfortunately, tonight was not that night.

Chapter 33

Patrick

From the moment I'd learned where she lived, I'd been showing up at Jett's house almost every day. But the last two days I forced myself to stay away. And I did have to *force* myself, which wasn't like me. Ordinarily, I didn't care if a woman I slept with didn't want to see me again. The reality was, I preferred it if they didn't. And I certainly wasn't in the habit of regularly showing up on a woman's doorstep. But I'd recently come to the terrifying revelation that I'd developed real *feelings* and *emotions* for Jett. I wasn't equipped to deal with these powerful feelings about her but had no ability to control or stop them. I'd tried, but I just couldn't stay away from her.

Today, when I arrived at her house, Jett was out surfing.

She'd made some changes since I was here last. Globe lights had been strung on the arbor and she'd moved the BBQ near the big table and chairs. She'd created a couple of different seating areas with the loungers, chairs, and small tables and now there were a few, well-placed outdoor heaters.

There were thick, brightly colored cushions on the loungers and chairs. Along the inside of the deck rail, she'd installed brackets to hang surfboards of different sizes.

She'd also added several potted trees and colorful flowers to the deck. The resulting ambience was relaxed and welcoming. I made myself comfortable in one of her loungers while I waited and watched her surf.

Half an hour later, Jett came out of the ocean, jogging across the beach with her board under her arm. When she noticed me, I saw a slight smile tug the edges of her mouth. So brief, if I hadn't been watching her so closely, I would have missed it before she suppressed it and scowled at me.

After rinsing off in her outdoor shower, she came up the steps. Without a word, she hung her board, walking past me and inside, but she left the door standing open. I smiled, taking that as her unspoken invitation. Not wanting to seem too eager, I waited a couple of minutes and followed her, finding her in the shower.

I stripped off my clothes and stepped under the spray behind her. After reverently washing every inch of her gorgeous body, I made love to her up against the shower wall. When we got out, I dried her off with the same care and spent some time brushing her hair. I'd never brushed a woman's hair. It was more intimate than I expected, and I could have done it all day and been happy. When we were finally dressed again, I asked her to dinner. As usual, she said no and told me to leave.

She kept letting me in, and we'd have the most incredible sex. The best sex I'd ever had. I loved being able to let my dominant side out and Jett did exactly what I told her. She glared at me and shot hatred out of her eyes until her pussy clenched around my cock, and I came harder than I ever had with anyone else. It was explosive, addictive, and insanely hot. I thought as time went on my attraction to her would wane, but instead, I only grew more and more addicted.

When I was with her, I felt emotionally connected to her in a way I'd never felt with anyone else. Once we were both spent and exhausted, I'd ask her out to dinner and, every time, she'd say no and kick me out. But unless I was mistaken—and I didn't think I was—she seemed more and more reluctant to say the words. And her last refusal came with her eyes full of regret. I was choosing to see that as a step in the right direction.

I wasn't giving up on Jett Donovan. Not ever. Eventually, she was going to agree to go on a date with me. Whatever was happening between us, I wanted it to go to the next level. But attempting to dismantle her walls was taking too damn long. I'd been trying to go slow, trying to show her I wasn't going anywhere, that she could trust me, but it was becoming crystal clear that strategy wasn't working.

She would lower her walls, trusting me with her body, but continued to put them firmly back in place once we were both spent and satisfied. But she never, *ever*, lowered the walls she'd built around her heart. I'd come to realize I wanted all of her. I wanted her heart as much as I wanted her body.

I was the team's explosives expert. What I needed to do was set a charge and blast through her towering walls and expansive barriers. I just needed to figure out the right tactic to accomplish that—and I would.

No matter how long it took, I was going to annihilate her walls into pieces so small she'd never be able to reconstruct them again. Because Jett Donovan was mine, even if she hadn't accepted it yet.

Chapter 34

Jett

Several days after our trip to Harry B's, and the unforgettable, amazing chair sex with Patrick—which I was *not* thinking about—I received a call from someone claiming to be “The President.”

Of course, I did what any other rational person would do when someone claiming to be the President of the United States called—I laughed. Obviously, I was being punked. I told him it was a good joke, but I wasn't falling for it and hung up.

I suspected Augie had set it up. It sounded like something he'd do. But when the man called back and ordered me not to hang up, he managed to convince me he actually *was* the president. And then I wanted to crawl into a hole because I felt like a Grade A moron.

He explained what I already knew from the Pentagon, a suspected traitor was leaking classified information. “I'd like you to work with Commander Reynold's SEAL team to resolve this issue.”

Patrick's team.

“No offense, sir, but why me?”

“Your reputation precedes you. I need people I can trust implicitly. Whoever is doing this is a risk to national security. Someone has been aiding our enemies. They're terrorists, committing treason and passing classified intel. Compromising patrol routes and other mission information. Endangering American troops. It needs to stop.”

He was angry, and after listening to his little rant, it was clear the president was having some serious trust issues. Not that I could blame him.

“I'm not sure if you're aware, sir, but the Navy and I aren't on the best of terms.”

“I *am* aware of what happened, and I don't agree with what was done to you. But I need you on this, Ms. Donovan. Go to this meeting as a favor to me, and if you decide you don't want to help, I'll try to understand and that will be the end of it.”

How was I supposed to refuse that? I couldn't, that's how.

Not waiting for my response, he told me, “I'll have Morgan pick you up tomorrow at oh eight hundred.”

Of course, he decided to send Patrick instead of one of the other guys off his team and it wasn't as if I could argue with the man, he was the freaking president. Which is how I ended up waiting for Patrick to pick me up and drive us to the base to meet with his team.

I really didn't want to go. I still resented the Navy for hitting me with a less than honorable discharge. And I definitely didn't want to spend time with Patrick. I didn't trust that I wouldn't have sex with him again, because when he was near me my brain shut off, my body took over, and all it wanted was the pleasure he could give me. My need and desire overruled my brain. My lust for him was stronger than my reason.

It wasn't only that, I was also beginning to worry Patrick was relentlessly chipping his way through my carefully constructed walls. It reminded me why I had rules. It was sex. Nothing more. No emotional involvement. No attachments. We were simply supposed to be fuck buddies. No, that's not right, because he's *not* my buddy, and I usually didn't do repeats. My fuck enemy. That was more appropriate.

Is that even a thing?

Either way, the line between having emotionless sex with him and something more meaningful was starting to blur. Because as it turned out, Patrick Morgan was my fucking Kryptonite.

But it was too late to back out now because Patrick had just knocked on my door, and I opened it to find him standing there freshly showered in his work uniform.

Holy guacamole.

As if he wasn't hot enough normally, this man in a uniform was a sexy assault on my senses. I stood stock still taking him in, my eyes slowly roaming over him. I don't know what

happened. I was slammed with overwhelming desire. All I could do was react. I stepped into his arms and kissed him like I needed it to breathe. After several minutes making out in my doorway I tore my lips away from his.

What the hell is wrong with me?

His smile was huge as if he found me extremely entertaining. “Remind me to wear my cammies around you more often.”

“I told you not to do that.”

He gently brushed my hair away from my face, and he really needed to stop doing that because I was starting to like it a little too much.

“I’m a gentleman and won’t remind you, you initiated that kiss,” he pointed out way too smugly.

God, his arrogance annoyed me. And turned me on.

The bastard.

“Now, let’s go or we won’t be going,” he said in a tight voice.

All I could do was nod and grab my purse and phone while I tried to rein in my out-of-control libido. Once we got outside, I jolted to a stop when I saw his motorcycle, realizing he expected me to ride with him. With my arms around him. Plastered to his back.

“No,” I told him, shaking my head. “Let’s take my truck.”

He handed me a helmet and swung his leg over the bike. “Too nice a day. C’mon, hop on or we’re gonna be late,” he

said with a grin, putting on his own helmet.

Man, I cannot catch a break.

At least on the back of his bike I didn't have to talk to him. It wasn't much, but I had that going for me.

"I swear if I catch you smiling, I'll punch you," I threatened, as I yanked the helmet on my head and climbed on behind him. Once I was settled, I rested my hands on his hips, refusing to put my arms around him.

But Patrick wrapped his hands around my wrists, carefully tugging my arms snugly around him, forcing me tightly against him before starting the bike. And, god help me, I liked it.

Kill me now.



It had been a long time since I'd been on a Navy base, and when we arrived at the gate, I was suddenly assaulted with memories. Bad memories.

After getting through security, we parked and Patrick escorted me into an enormous building that was a series of wide hallways, doors, and staircases. I was convinced it was designed to confuse people and make sure you ended up lost. We might as well be in an M.C. Escher painting. Without a

map and a guide, you might never find your way out of this labyrinth.

We came to a large, open area where three hallways converged, one much shorter than the other two, with a single door at the end of it. The door had big red signs on it. Stop. No cell phones. Do not enter unless you have top secret clearance. Patrick led us into that hallway, and I followed him. After leaving our phones and my purse in cubbies under the big Restricted Area sign, Patrick entered a code on an electronic keypad, and we stepped inside.

There were several rectangular tables pushed together in the center of the room making one giant table that could easily seat fifteen people. Several laptops were open and ready to be used and there was a phone right in the middle.

At the front of the room, three big, flat screen TVs hung side-by-side on the wall. To the left of those, were two smaller TVs, one under the other. An American flag and Special Operations Command flag were at the front of the room on flag stands. A white board, a big map of Afghanistan, and a huge bulletin board had been placed front and center.

There was a Navy SEAL flag hanging on one wall under six evenly spaced clocks, each showing a different time zone. The room also had a small desk with a lamp, several bookcases with fat binders, and a small couch.

It was similar to Shadowhawk's war room, just not as fancy or high-tech.

Along one of the walls was a counter with a microwave, a big coffee urn, cups, sugar, and creamer. A small refrigerator was on one end of the counter and an oven at the other. Someone had brought in several dozen doughnuts and set them near the coffee. I wanted at least one of those and was really hoping the coffee was good.

The rest of Patrick's team and their commander were already in the room. All of them were in their work cammies, dressed exactly alike. It was testosterone overload. Someone really should put together a calendar with these guys. The team smiled and seemed happy to see me.

Smiling back, I said hello to the guys, and Patrick introduced me to the only man in the room I hadn't met, "Jett, this is Commander Reynolds."

"Hello, nice to officially meet you, commander," I told him, shaking his offered hand.

"It's Malcom or Mal. Nice to meet you too, Jett. From everything I've heard, we owe you a debt of gratitude for saving my team's lives."

"I only did what anyone else would have done in the same situation."

"I highly doubt that," the commander told me. Then he explained I wasn't to leave the room alone. If I had to go to the bathroom or decided to leave, I was to be escorted. These guys were not messing around.

Patrick pulled out a chair for me and I sat down. Midas was on my right working on a laptop, not paying attention to any of us, his fingers flying across the keyboard with the speed of a Category 5 hurricane. Reaper, Boomer, Bruiser, and Smoke sat on the other side, and Commander Reynolds sat at the head of the table. They each had a cup of coffee in front of them.

After I was seated, Patrick crossed the room to the table with the coffee. When he came back, he had two cups of coffee and two doughnuts. He set one of each in front of me, taking the empty chair on my left. The doughnut he brought was maple glazed—my favorite. Did he know that? Or was it a lucky guess?

I shook my head. Whatever. Doesn't matter.

It was a sweet gesture, I'd give him that, but I'd fallen for his sweet gestures in the past and look how that turned out. If he thought bringing me coffee and my favorite doughnut was going to score him points, he was sadly mistaken.

I'm still taking the coffee and doughnut though, I'm not an idiot.

Boomer looked across the table at Patrick, grinning, "Where's mine? You never bring *me* doughnuts."

"Fuck off, Boomer," Patrick replied without heat.

The rest of the guys chuckled in response.

I'd just taken a bite of my doughnut when the door opened, and a man entered the room. Unfortunately, I recognized him.

My body went stiff, and Patrick noticed my reaction because he leaned in close and whispered, “Everything alright?”

I swallowed and licked my lips. “Highly doubtful,” I whispered back, not taking my eyes off the newcomer.

He was wearing a black suit, black tie, shiny black shoes, and a white button-down shirt. He must have seen *Men in Black* one too many times. I half expected him to whip out a pair of sunglasses and slide them over his hook nose to complete the look.

He was medium height and rail thin, looking like he’d blow over in a decent breeze. His dark hair was slicked back with what had to be a gallon of hair gel, and he was wearing so much cologne, I could taste it. I was on the verge of gagging from the smell and he wasn’t even close to me. He was the kind of man you instantly disliked. The best word to describe him was smarmy.

“Jett, this is Frank Cicero. He works for the agency. Frank, this is Jett Donovan from Shadowhawk,” Commander Reynolds introduced us.

Cicero responded with a curt nod of his head, “Donovan.”

I couldn’t keep the animosity or hatred out of my voice, “*Cicero.*” From my peripheral vision, I noticed everyone had focused their attention on me.

“I take it you two know each other?” the commander asked.

“Unfortunately,” I replied, not taking my eyes off Cicero.

“I see you’re still holding a grudge.”

“Until the end of time,” I responded, irritably.

“It was a long time ago. The op was completed. It’s water under the bridge, let it go, Donovan.”

“Yeah, we completed your op, but no amount of water or time changes the fact that you almost got me *and* Augie killed. I do tend to hold a grudge when an incompetent idiot gets me shot twice.”

I couldn’t stop my voice from rising or keep the venom out of it, “I didn’t even mention the six days it took us to get across the border trying not to bleed out and starve to death.”

I felt Patrick stiffen beside me. Under the table he placed his hand on my thigh, right above my knee. It got my attention and, while I hated he could affect me, it did settle me a little. I inhaled a couple of deep breaths, trying to calm myself down.

Cicero casually waved a dismissive hand at me. “Accidents happen, sweetheart.”

“Accidents happen? You’re going with accidents *fucking* happen?”

That figures.

“Donovan,” he changed topics, ignoring my irritation. “We need you to give us whatever intel you have about these men.” He placed a stack of photos with names printed on them in front of me.

“Am I cleared to provide details here?”

“Yes.”

I stared at him...well, glared at him. Frank Cicero was a power-hungry liar and an idiot. And, personally, I wasn't ever going to trust the CIA again. Not today, not tomorrow, not ever. I *especially* wasn't going to trust Frank Cicero.

I narrowed my eyes at him, sliding my chair back from the table and stood up. "I need to make a call."

I left the room and grabbed my phone, staying in sight of the sailor who'd been standing guard near the door while I made my call. When I came back a few minutes later everyone was watching me expectantly, but I sat back down as if nothing had happened.

I finally picked up the picture on top of the stack of photos. I glanced at it briefly and flicked it across the table in Cicero's direction with a frown. "What the hell is this?" I asked him.

"What do you mean?"

"Why are you showing me a picture of Fazal Habibullah?"

"The Messenger?" Reaper asked.

I ignored Reaper's surprise, looking at the next photo. "And Fazal's second-in-command, Khalil Dajani? What the hell are you up to, Cicero?" I tossed Khalil's photo across the table with the other one.

The team started passing around the photo of Fazal. I'd seen the picture, but based on their reactions, apparently they hadn't.

"You're sure those are the right names?" Commander Reynolds asked me.

“I’m 100% positive.”

“He looks less like a terrorist and more like a banker,” Bruiser muttered.

“He’s younger than I expected him to be,” came from Midas.

“Fazal Habibullah, who calls himself the Messenger, is one of the most wanted terrorists in the world,” Boomer told me.

I didn’t tell him I was aware of that fact. I’d been well-briefed prior to my mission. I knew all about Fazal and his horrific crimes.

I assumed because I hadn’t said anything, Smoke felt the need to explain further, “A lot of teams, including us, have been on missions looking for him. He’s been on our radar for a while.”

“Our intel about him always seemed to be flawed,” Midas added.

That statement put me on high alert.

“He’s smart and continually reinvents himself. This is the first current photo we’ve ever seen of him,” Commander Reynolds commented, reviewing the picture.

“Well, he’s off the radar now,” I told them, taking a bite of my doughnut.

Patrick shifted to face me. “What do you mean?”

I chewed and swallowed before answering. “He’s been neutralized,” I stated, simply.

Cicero's head snapped up, and there was more than a little surprise in his slimy eyes. I wondered about that odd reaction.

Patrick stared at me, his brow furrowed. "Are you sure?"

I nodded. "Pretty sure."

"What makes you think so?" Bruiser wanted to know.

I met his eyes and shrugged one shoulder. "I put a bullet in his head."

"You shot Habibullah?" Cicero asked, a little too anxiously, in my opinion.

Why wasn't he aware of that fact?

I nodded at Cicero, taking a drink of my coffee, "I did. I shot Fazal, Khalil, and three of his entourage."

"Who authorized that?" Cicero barked at me.

I ignored him, taking another bite of my doughnut, but couldn't help wondering why he sounded troubled and disturbed about a known terrorist, an enemy of the state—a war criminal—being dead? His reaction had my Spidey sense going off full blast.

Patrick leaned in close to me. "He was your target?"

I gave him a slight smile and a quick nod.

Patrick put his hand on my thigh again, keeping his head close to mine. "We were on the same mission at the same time. We were supposed to capture him. You were sent to kill him. Now the CIA is here asking about him," Patrick said quietly so

I was the only one who could hear him. “Does that seem strange to you?”

I met his eyes and slowly nodded. It *was* strange. Something about all this was off. Why would a team of Navy SEALs be sent to capture Fazal at the same time I was sent to eliminate him? Even if the Pentagon was using Shadowhawk to keep it on the down low, why wouldn't they cancel the team's mission? Why did the CIA want information about a dead man? None of it made sense. My gut said there was more going on here and whatever it was...it wasn't good.

Cicero had time to collect himself while I was lost in thought and got my attention, wanting me to continue with information about his photos. Which was another weird thing. Why would the CIA need *me* to tell them *anything* about the men in the photos? I suddenly felt like I was standing in a field of red flags.

“Kamaal Mohammad.” I said with a sigh, tapping the picture in front of me. “This is a scary dude. Really likes torture.”

“A scary *dude*?” Cicero echoed, as if he'd tasted something bad.

“Yes. A man, fella, guy, chap, a scary psycho dude.”

You condescending dick.

I heard Patrick chuckle, and when I looked at him, he was smiling and squeezed my thigh. Realizing his hand was still on my leg, I lifted it by his wrist and tossed it back into his lap.

Cicero had been pacing in an arc from one side of the table to the other since I dropped the information about Fazal. He seemed nervous and agitated. Entirely too distracted. I couldn't help wondering about his odd behavior.

I studied the next photo. "Scott Abernathy."

I didn't have the opportunity to provide any other information because Cicero leaned over my shoulder to check the name printed on the photo. "No. Our intel says that's Abdul Jaleel Kamali."

I snorted. "Yeah, we all know how accurate *your* intel is."

"Honey, I'm about done with your attitude and lack of respect and professionalism," Cicero barked at me.

"Good, then go back to the hole you crawled out of," I snapped back, just as angry.

Ignoring him, I moved on to the next photo. "This is Khaled Sayed. He's been moving up the terrorist ranks pretty steadily over the last couple of years."

Cicero was still standing behind me and spoke up again, "No, that's Ahmad ali Muhammad."

"He's younger in this picture, but that's Khaled Sayed. He's a disgusting, sadistic pig."

Cicero moved to the other side of the table and crossed his arms over his skinny chest. "Why would you say that?"

"That's need-to-know, and you don't."

"I told you, you're cleared to give details."

“Can’t do it.”

The team and Commander Reynolds sat watching, their eyes ping ponging back and forth between us.

“Donovan, I have top secret clearance.”

No matter how high his clearance was, I couldn’t talk about things that ‘officially’ didn’t happen.

“I guarantee that information goes well beyond your clearance and pay grade. I can call your director and you can ask him if you’d like. I have his private number.”

The guys chuckled and Cicero blanched. “That won’t be necessary.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.” I moved on to the next photo. “Anatoli Vassiliev. He’s a Soviet arms trafficker.”

Cicero repeatedly snapped his fingers to get my attention. I frowned at him. It pissed me off, and I could tell by the way Patrick stiffened and the expressions on the rest of the guy’s faces, they didn’t like it either.

“Don’t snap your fingers at me. I’m not your dog.”

He ignored my complaint. “You’re confused, sweetheart. Our intel says that’s Rafeeq Sayyid.”

I really hated the condescending way Cicero called me ‘sweetheart’ and was about to tell him exactly what I thought about it. But, before I could say anything, Patrick beat me to it. “Don’t talk to her like that,” he barked at Cicero, everything about his body language rigid and filled with tension.

Cicero shifted his devious eyes to Patrick, waving a dismissive hand at him, “You need to mind your own business.”

“Jett is my business,” Patrick growled in a deep, deadly voice. “Disrespect her again and see what happens.”

I should not be turned on by that.

I noticed the rest of the team was stiff, a couple of them nodding at Patrick’s remark, all of them glaring at Cicero as if daring him to insult me again. I turned, looking at Patrick’s profile. He gave me a quick glance before staring Cicero down again.

Not only could I take care of myself, I was used to it. Besides that, I worked in a predominantly male field where you didn’t cry for help when someone insulted you, at least not if you wanted any kind of respect. But I was too shocked to tell Patrick I could take care of myself and didn’t need him to fight my battles.

Why do I like him sticking up for me? Whatever this is, I need to end it. I need to stay away from him because I’m starting to like things like this a little too much. That can only lead to trouble...and another broken heart.

I cleared my throat. “Think, man, why would a Soviet be named Rafeeq? Where did you get your intel?” I asked Cicero, getting my thoughts back on track and defusing the situation between him and Patrick.

“*You* are not cleared to know *that*,” he said with a smug, shit-eating grin.

“You know, I’m just wondering if it ever concerns you how bad you are at your job?”

He’s not the only one who can be condescending.

“Donovan, can you set aside your hostility so we can get through this?”

“I’m perfectly capable of getting through this with my hostility fully intact.”

Chuckles and bursts of laughter from the team floated through the room while Cicero glared at me.

I ignored him, going back to the stack of photos. “Shehzad Kahn.” It was another one with the wrong name printed on the picture. “They call him Kahn, like in Star Trek.”

Cicero walked back behind me. “No, honey, that’s Jalaal Mirza.”

Call me honey one more time and see what happens.

He reached over me and tapped his finger on the photo. He was too close. The stench coming off him was oppressive. “See here, the name is on the photo,” he said like he was talking to a toddler.

If he didn’t move away from me, I was going to rip his arm off and beat him with it. He must have felt the anger coming off me because he wisely jerked his arm away and went back

to the other side of the table. I couldn't help noticing Patrick was tracking his every move with a death glare.

“Well, I hate to be the one to tell you, but your intel is wrong again. But then again, that seems to be today's theme.”

“Listen, sweetheart, we've checked and rechecked our intel. It's solid.”

Okay, now it's on, pal.

Patrick and I reacted at the same time. Patrick tensed, growling at Cicero, his voice deadly, “What did I tell you about disrespecting her?”

Meanwhile, I stood up abruptly and braced my hands on the table, leaning forward. “You're a desk jockey, a pencil pusher. You pull strings while everyone else does your dirty work. Obviously, you think you know everything, but you don't know jack shit about being in the field—never have, never will.

“So, maybe you should sit your bony ass down, keep your mouth shut, and let the professionals work...*sweetheart*. And if you call me honey, sweetie, little lady, or any other condescending, sexist, bullshit name again, I'll beat the crap out of you right here in this room.”

The guys started laughing as I sat down again.

“Oh, snap,” Boomer said with a wide grin.

“Get the fire extinguisher. She burned you good!” Bruiser told Cicero.

“Boom! Drop the mic,” Smoke said with a chuckle.

Midas held up his hand for a high five.

“She’s scary when she’s angry,” Boomer commented, looking at Patrick who was grinning at me.

The phone on the table rang, after Commander Reynolds answered it, he handed the receiver to Cicero. He identified himself, listened for a moment and hung up. “Excuse me, I need to make a call.”

As soon as Cicero left, the room stirred. Midas and Boomer got up, heading for the coffee and doughnuts. Boomer was so big, I couldn’t help but wonder how much food he consumed in a day.

“You really don’t like him, do you?” the commander asked after the door closed behind Cicero.

“I can see why. The man is a dick,” Patrick muttered under his breath.

Controlling my grin and ignoring Patrick, I gave Commander Reynolds my full attention. “Don’t believe a word out of that man’s mouth. He’s a liar. You can’t trust him. Something is hinky with that guy, always has been. If you trust him and his intel, he’ll get you all killed.”

When Cicero came back into the room, I couldn’t help asking the question burning in my head since he’d first come through the door. “Why are you really here, Cicero?”

“We need you for a job, and since you’re retired, we’re willing to make it worth your while. We’ll triple what

Shadowhawk was paying you.”

He's offering me an exorbitant amount of money. Why?

“What’s the stick?”

“The stick?”

“Yeah. The money you’re offering is the carrot. What’s the stick?”

He stood blinking at me like I was speaking Dothraki.

I rolled my eyes. “What’s the job?” I only asked out of curiosity, I’d never work for or with this man again.

“Joint mission with the CIA and these SEALs. We believe there’s a mole selling classified military secrets and that information is compromising military missions. We believe each of these men,” he said, indicating the photos, “have received that classified information.”

Basically, the same information POTUS gave me and the same issue the Pentagon had when they came to Shadowhawk.

“Who’s running Langley’s side?”

“I am,” he said with a quick nod of his head.

Leaning back in my chair, I crossed my arms over my chest, my response firm and immediate, “I’m retired.”

“We’ll quadruple it,” he said, a little too eagerly.

Something was very wrong here. “Like I said, I’m retired.”

“Gonzo’s retired, but he still helps out when we need him.”

“True, but he doesn’t work any op *you’re* involved in anymore, does he?”

“Donovan, your country needs you,” Cicero said, switching tactics, but I was pretty sure he was handing me a line.

“There’s not a tiny chance in hell I’d work an op with you again.”

I had a choice, the team didn’t. If the team was going to be in on this mission with Cicero involved, they were in danger. Maybe whoever the mole was would try to capture them again or this time eliminate them. Maybe that was the point of all this, it was a set up. A trap being put in place.

If I was there, I might be able to help them. If they went in on Cicero’s bogus intel on top of a mole selling military information, my instincts screamed they’d be screwed.

I wasn’t sure how it happened, but I cared about this team and their women, and I wanted to help. I didn’t want to see any of them hurt or killed. But I trusted Frank Cicero about as much as I trusted a rattlesnake in my bed.

“If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to hit the head,” I said abruptly as I stood up.

When I left the room, I once again retrieved my phone and was escorted to the bathroom by the sailor who’d been standing guard near the door. When I came back a few minutes later, I headed straight for the coffee. It was less than half a minute before the phone on the desk was ringing again.

I lifted my coffee cup, hiding my small smile behind it. But Patrick was watching and raised an eyebrow at me. I felt my smile widen and quickly wiped it off my face. Patrick slid out of his chair and crossed the room, coming to stand next to me.

Once again, the commander gave Frank the receiver. As he listened, he turned, glaring at me, and I looked back innocently. He told the caller he understood and hung up.

“Trouble in paradise?” I asked with a tilt of my head.

“Seems my director is replacing me on this mission.”

The whole team and the commander stared at me, but I kept my focus on Cicero.

“Gosh, that’s too bad. Guess you’d better run along now.”

“Donovan...”

“Nope,” I interrupted. “Time for you to go, Frankie.”

He huffed and was clearly angry, but shaking his head, he left the room.

“Did you get him fired?” Patrick asked once Cicero was gone.

“I made a call and asked for a favor.”

“Who the hell are you?” Bruiser grumbled.

“I’m nobody. I just don’t want to see anything bad happen to you guys, and if Cicero is involved, trust me, you’d be in danger.

“Now that Cicero isn’t part of this, if you guys will have me, I’ll help however I can.”

Patrick inched closer and whispered, “You’ll never be nobody to me, and I’m happy to have you watch our backs, but I’ll be watching all of you.” He pulled his head away from mine and studied me with his lopsided grin.

He needed to stop saying things like that to me. If he didn’t, there was a chance I’d start to believe him and that would be a mistake. And if he didn’t back away from me right now, I was going to kiss that cocky grin right off his face.

Chapter 35

Patrick

Jett's memory was incredible. The details she was able to recall and shared with us were impressive. I had much more confidence in her information than what the CIA had come up with. It seemed more and more likely deficient intel was the reason we hadn't been able to capture the Messenger or anyone in his network. The possibility that some of our ops had been jeopardized due to faulty intel was disconcerting.

Jett was angry and feisty taking on Cicero. Watching her, I couldn't hide my smile. The angrier she got, the more her eye color changed. Her blue eye was brighter, like a shimmering sapphire. But her brown eye had turned a honeyed amber. The combination was striking. She was so fucking gorgeous she took my breath away.

She had every right to be angry. It was obvious she had a history with Frank Cicero, and it wasn't a pleasant one. From what she'd said, she blamed him for her and Gonzo getting shot. I didn't know if she would, or could, share information, but I wanted to talk to her about that mission.

Cicero had been nothing but condescending to her. I'd tried to keep my temper under control but couldn't continue to listen to him insult her. After I jumped to her defense, I expected Jett to be mad. To tell me to mind my own business, but, when I chanced a look at her, it was just the opposite. She liked me staking my claim. She was staring at me with a look of such pure desire, it made my knees weak. I had to turn away before I yanked her into me and put on a show for my team by tossing her over my shoulder and carrying her out of here.

After Jett got Cicero fired—which was an extreme turn on—we decided to leave the base for lunch. As we walked to our vehicles, Jett slowed her pace until we were lagging behind everyone else. She turned to me, speaking low, “Do you trust Commander Reynolds?”

“What? Yes, absolutely. With my life.” Concerned by the question, I frowned at her, “Why do you ask?”

“I'll tell you later. I really need to think right now,” she said, vaguely.

“Jett, what's going on?” I asked, concerned by her behavior.

“Not sure, but I've got a really bad feeling. My skin is itchy, and I feel like there's a swarm of wasps in my belly. Trusting that feeling has kept me alive.”

I took hold of her hand, lacing our fingers together. Whatever was going on in her head must be serious because she didn't even attempt to pull away from me.

Since we'd come on my bike, Jett and I carpooled with Reaper and Bruiser. After we got in the car, Jett took a piece of paper and a pen out of her purse and wrote something down.

We drove the short distance to one of our favorite places, a big lot with ten different food trucks. Jett handed me the note and put a finger over her mouth, the universal sign for quiet. Frowning, I read it, surprised it said we needed to leave all our electronics in our cars.

I passed the note from one member of the team to the next. No one questioned it, we all followed Jett's instructions, leaving our phones behind.

Once we'd ordered and were seated, we all dug into our food.

"What's going on, Jett?" Reaper asked, his eyes cutting back and forth between me and Jett.

She made eye contact with each of us, speaking low so no one had a chance of overhearing her. "Where did you guys get your intel on Fazal?"

"It came from Langley," the commander told her without hesitation.

"From Cicero?"

"Some of it, but not all," he clarified.

"Why?" Smoke asked.

I placed my hand on her thigh and gave it a gentle squeeze. "Jett, tell us what's on your mind."

She turned her attention to Midas. “You said you guys got flawed intel on Fazal and that’s why he kept slipping through your fingers.”

Midas nodded his agreement but didn’t say anything.

“You guys weren’t the only ones looking. The CIA was also searching for Fazal. A CIA asset managed to get a photo of him—the one Cicero brought today. The asset was murdered a short time later, but he managed to get the photo out first.

“After the CIA asset was killed, the Pentagon came to Shadowhawk with concerns Counterterrorist intel had been compromised. They believed it was being sold to enemy combatants. To terrorists like Fazal, and that’s how he kept evading American forces.

“But, unlike the Navy, Shadowhawk didn’t have any problem getting accurate intel on Fazal, including some of his known hideouts. He wasn’t parading around the streets announcing himself, but with the intel I got, he wasn’t all that hard to find. It only took me three days.”

“We were given dead leads and inaccurate intel,” Midas speculated, uneasily.

Jett nodded. “I believe so. There’s a traitor, and you kept getting bad intel out of Langley that allowed at least one terrorist organization to run rampant and put anyone who went after them at risk.”

“Our op in Afghanistan *was* a set up,” Reaper stated, coldly.

“Other teams were also involved in failed ops concerning Fazal,” the commander told Jett.

“You think Cicero is the traitor?” Bruiser asked.

“I don’t know. But did you notice that almost every photo Cicero brought had the wrong ID? And did you catch how shocked and upset he was when he found out Fazal was dead?”

There was collective nodding around the table.

“We’re totally fucked,” Boomer blurted, unmistakably agitated.

“Maybe not. This is the first real lead we’ve had,” Reaper pointed out.

Jett agreed with a nod of her head.

“So, it’s possible the traitor is either Cicero or someone else from Langley,” Smoke clarified.

“All we know for sure is something isn’t right. But, in case you didn’t know, the CIA is full of backstabbing, shady fuckers,” Jett told us.

We all agreed. That wasn’t new information.

“We’re assuming it’s only one person, it could be a network.” Midas said, thoughtfully.

Jett’s focus shifted to the commander. “*Anyone* who gave the Navy intel on any op pertaining to Fazal Habibullah needs to be investigated.”

“When we get back to the base, we can research them and start digging,” Midas suggested, enthusiastic to track down whoever was behind this.

Jett shook her head. “No. You can’t. Your system is compromised. You don’t know what’s accurate and what’s not. Who’s clean and who’s dirty. You don’t know what, if any, information has been altered.”

“Fuck. If they’re in our system, any search we do could alert the mole we’re on to them,” Midas said, grimly.

“Exactly.”

Smoke shook his head. “We have no idea who we can trust.”

“The only people we can trust are the president and everyone sitting at this table,” the commander said, adamantly.

“When was the last time you swept for bugs?” Jett asked, absently stealing a French fry off my plate, making me smile.

“This is fucked up,” Boomer muttered.

Jett wiped her mouth with her napkin. “You should also assume you’re all being watched. There’s a reason your team was ambushed by Fazal’s men. A reason why Patrick was taken and why that dirtbag was trying to sneak up on Bruiser instead of shooting him.”

She looked at each one of us, “I don’t think the plan was to kill any of you. They had plenty of opportunities to do that. You were in a kill zone with terrorists that had high ground on either side of you and a direct line of sight. Instead, they scattered you and pinned you down. I think the plan was to

capture *all* of you. At this point, it's probably better to be paranoid, overly cautious, and assume you're being watched."

Midas frowned. "How are we going to investigate this if we can't trust our own systems? If we can't do any digging."

Jett smiled wide at him. "At this point, the investigation is a cyber issue, and it just so happens, I know a secure location with people who can help."

Chapter 36

Patrick

With the Navy's computer system most likely hijacked, Jett contacted her old boss at Shadowhawk. She explained the problem, requesting help from their cyber ops division. He agreed and several days later, with Midas in tow, the two of them headed to Shadowhawk.

Now, the team and Jett were meeting to discuss what Midas had found. As he loaded the information on his computer, he was like a kid on Christmas morning. "Shadowhawk's cyber division is off the hook. They have access to global databases. Back doors into almost every system known to man, in every country," Midas said, excitedly. "I'd love to have access to that every day."

"We were able to find the original orders for our op on the Messenger. We also found the orders that canceled that op because Jett was sent in instead. Although, someone had deleted those."

"Are you fucking kidding me?!" Reaper thundered, justifiably pissed off.

Midas continued as if he hadn't just confirmed our mission and the team had been purposely put in danger. "We also found the altered orders that we *actually* received. All of that led us down a rabbit hole until we were able to identify two names, Kazimir Novikov and Aleksei Kuznetsov."

"Russians? The Russians are tied up in this?" Bruiser asked, his surprise unmistakable.

Midas nodded, producing pictures of the two men. "This is a lot bigger than we thought and we still haven't identified the head of the operation, but these two definitely purchased classified intel and there's evidence they've sold it to others. Shadowhawk is working on tracking down the buyers."

He smiled at all of us. "We found and decrypted an email. In four days, Kazimir and Aleksei are meeting in Azerbaijan."

With actionable intel, and the desire for some serious payback, we started to plan. We took precautions to minimize any potential for a leak by keeping the planning confidential and off the Navy's computer system. When it was said and done, only our team, Jett, and the president were aware of our plans. At least we hoped that was the case.

What we came up with was simple, really. The team, Jett, and two soldiers would head out for our target location. The two soldiers—who were randomly selected and would be told nothing about the op—would wait with the bus.

We'd be dropped off three clicks from the target house and go in on foot. Once the team breached the building, the

soldiers would drive in. We'd capture the two HVTs, load them up, and drive away.

Jett would have our overwatch. The difference this time was she'd have comms. We'd decided our comms would be live, meaning we didn't have to use the push to talk button to communicate. It also meant everything said would be transmitted to all of us. The team wasn't used to an open mic, but that way Jett didn't have to lose concentration or move off her rifle to communicate with us.

With our plan in place, we headed to Azerbaijan to execute it.



Boots on the ground and wearing our ghillie suits, the seven of us traveled through the darkness in silence heading for our target. Jett was the only one of us not wearing a helmet. She'd told us it interfered with her ability to shoot, and she'd have to ditch it anyway. But that didn't mean I had to like it. Once again, I had a bad feeling about this mission. But was it my honed SEAL intuition or knowing there was a traitor who was screwing with us?

I walked next to Jett, rethinking her involvement in this op. Like the rest of us, she was well-trained—a skilled operator—but I still didn't want her in danger. I knew I was being unreasonable and irrational but couldn't help it.

For more than a decade, she'd lived in harm's way, yet I wanted to tell her to go back and wait with the bus until this was over. Unfortunately, our entire plan hinged on her help as a sniper. The fact that she wouldn't be near any of the action was the only thing keeping me from losing my mind.

After we'd traveled more than a mile, Reaper notified Commander Reynolds, who was in operation command, we'd reached our next checkpoint. Then he addressed Jett. "Shooter."

She glanced up at him. Reaper jerked his head toward the hills, and she nodded back at him. "This is where I get off, boys."

As she turned to go, I reached out, grasping her arm to stop her, unable to keep the concern out of my voice, "Be careful."

"You too. See you guys on the other side."

She flipped her night vision goggles down and jogged away. I stood watching her until she disappeared into the night, heading for her first overwatch position. I struggled between wanting to stop her and wanting to follow her. In the end, I did neither, and the six of us continued on, heading for our next checkpoint.

Our targets had chosen their location well, with their compound sitting in a desolate location that seemed as empty as a ghost town. Although none of us believed it was *actually* empty.

This was where the op got tricky. The tree line ended with one small, isolated clump of trees. From here, there was nothing but wide-open space between us and our target building. That was where Jett came in. We needed her to clear the way for us.

While it was better than nothing, the little copse of trees wasn't enough cover to sufficiently hide all six of us. There was nothing we could do about it, so we simply crouched down behind them in case we needed to move quickly. Rifles ready, we waited.

Checkpoint call signs were used to keep operation command informed about each stage of the mission. In this case, it also notified the team where Jett was and vice versa. Call signs changed with every op, and today we were using classic rock bands. Once we'd reached the little stand of trees, Reaper notified command and Jett we'd reached Van Halen.

“Van Halen, confirmed,” the commander replied.

Jett hadn't said a word since she left us, although I'd been paying close attention to her breathing. It wasn't much, but it made me feel better than complete silence would have. Her voice finally came over comms about five minutes after Reaper called in our position, “I've reached Journey.”

“Good copy,” the commander replied.

Then it was Reaper's turn, “Copy Journey.”

“Okay boys, let's see what we've got.” Surprising all of us, Jett started speaking in an animated voice like a game show

host, “Hell-o contestants. I’ll be your host for tonight’s episode of tang-go trivia.”

We all chuckled and grinned. I loved her sense of humor, and her teasing helped ease the stress and tension hanging in the air.

Boomer shook his head and mouthed, “Tango trivia?”

“Who’s got eyes on five, oh...nope, make that six tangos waiting for me to smoke them?” Jett asked, rhetorically.

We were wearing night vision goggles and scanning the area, all of us shaking our heads at each other, not seeing anyone.

“You sure, Shooter? We’re not seeing anything,” I said, keeping my voice low.

“Yeah, I’m sure. Now shut your face. You know this is my jam.”

Smoke smiled.

Bruiser mouthed, “Jam?”

“Hey, Boomer, you’re exposed. Can you lower that giant body of yours for me and stay down for a minute?”

“Roger that,” he responded, lying on his belly.

It didn’t take long for her to say, “One tango down. Hey, blonde, you need to move to your left and get down as well.”

“Pretty sure she means you, Jax,” Midas pointed out.

“Put your claws away, pussycat,” I teased her, as I followed her instructions, laying on my belly next to Boomer.

“Never. Smoke and Reaper, shift to your right please.” A moment later she casually announced, “Two tangos down.”

We suddenly heard men in the distance yelling in Russian. Smoke listened and whispered, “They know Shooter’s here.”

Whoever was out in the darkness started firing in her general direction. “Shooter, you good?” I said through comms, my voice reflecting my apprehension.

“Stand fast. Smoke is right, they’ve figured out I’ve joined the party.” She sounded a lot calmer than I felt.

Her comms were silent, and I’d started to worry, wanting to ask if she was okay. I stared at Reaper, willing him to ask her to check in, but he shook his head in response to my wordless question.

Relief hit me hard when I finally heard her say, “Three tangos down.”

It wasn’t long before she calmly told us, “Four tangos down.” She was quiet for several long moments and when she spoke again, there was an edge of concern in her voice, “Shit. All of you get completely horizontal and do not move. We’ve got two new players and a vehicle-mounted heavy gun. Give me a second.”

No.

The rest of the team quickly hit the dirt with Boomer and me.

Even though her voice was steady, she sounded nervous, and I couldn’t blame her. They had heavy artillery. Knowing she

was about to be on the receiving end of that weapon...terrified me.

After a tense moment, the silence was shattered by six hundred rounds a minute blasting out of the big gun. The sound was earsplitting, reverberating all around us.

“Fuck!” I heard Jett yelling through her comms over the thunderous sound, “Shit! Stand fast! Do not move!”

The big gun’s four-inch bullets were tearing up the ground and causing the smaller plants and trees where Jett was located to shatter and splinter from the force of impact. Thousands of what sounded like mini bombs were exploding out of the gun headed in her general vicinity. If even one of those bullets hit her, it wouldn’t kill her, it would rip her apart.

“Shooter!” I shouted.

Panic, hot and fierce, clawed at me. My heart started pounding. I wanted to help her, but there was nothing I could do. From our position, we couldn’t even see where the truck with the gun was located.

“Motherfu...” Her voice cut out.

“Shooter, get the fuck out of there!” Reaper ordered.

No response.

Reaper waited several seconds to make contact again, “Shooter, sitrep! How copy?”

Still no response from her. With the noise coming out of the gun, I didn’t have to worry about being heard and giving away

our position. I couldn't help shouting, the fear in my voice obvious, "Shooter, goddamn it, sitrep...*now!*"

There was still no answer. She was up on that hillside by herself, everything was exploding around her, we were yelling in her ear, and she was in the direct line of fire of major artillery. She had to be scared, even if she'd never admit it.

I took a deep breath. Despite the turmoil raging inside me, I kept my voice calm and soothing, but loud enough she could hear me, "Shooter, I know it feels like you're all alone up there, but you're not. I'm right here with you, baby. Just listen to the sound of my voice. You've got this, I have no doubt about that. So relax and breathe, because everything is going to be okay. Then do what you do best and take that fucker out."

For at least another twenty seconds—the longest twenty seconds of my life—she stayed silent. Then the gunfire suddenly ceased, the silence deafening after the thousands of rounds blasting from the big, truck-mounted gun. With the sudden quiet, I could hear Jett's fast and ragged breathing.

"Shooter, check in," Reaper demanded, tensely.

We heard her take a deep breath, and the long, shaky exhale that followed. "Not dead yet. All eight tangos down." She took another unsteady breath, "Fuck."

"Good copy," Reaper said with a grin.

"Shooter?" I couldn't keep the concern out of my voice.

“Close call. I’m okay, can’t hear very well though. Jax... thank you,” Her voice was still unsteady.

“Any time, sweetheart.”

She let out another whoosh of breath, telling us, “Making a final sweep.” There was a long silence, until she finally said, “You’re clear to proceed. I’m on the move.”

“Roger that,” Reaper replied.

The six of us sprinted through the darkness across the open space. “We’ve reached Aerosmith,” Reaper announced once we made cover behind a small, dilapidated shed.

“Copy,” the commander said.

“Aerosmith, good copy, thirty seconds out,” a breathless Jett said, obviously running. From our new vantage point, we could see four men patrolling the front and west side of the building. We stripped off our ghillie suits and waited. True to her word, a half a minute later Jett announced, “I’ve reached Bon Jovi.”

“Copy Bon Jovi,” we heard from the commander.

“Roger that,” Reaper responded, keeping his voice quiet.

“Okay, let’s see what else we’ve got. Please stand by,” she commented. She still sounded shaken and out of breath, but her voice was strong, and she didn’t sound afraid.

“That woman has balls of steel,” Bruiser said in admiration.

I couldn’t disagree, she really was extraordinary in every way.

“It’s almost like she’s missing the fear gene,” Midas remarked, thoughtfully.

I’ve had that same thought and it worries me. Maybe she did have a death wish.

“I like this woman. Since she hates you, do you mind if I ask her out?” Boomer whispered while we kept watch and waited.

I kept my voice low as well, “No, you can’t ask her out,” I snapped. “And she doesn’t hate me. We’re working some things out. She still has some...aggression. I’m wearing her down.”

“How’s that working for you?” Smoke taunted.

“I’m growing on her.”

“Yeah, like a fungus I can’t get rid of,” Jett’s voice crackled in our ears. I’d forgotten we had a hot mic and she’d been able to hear our whole conversation.

There was quiet laughing from the rest of the team.

“I don’t care what happens between you two, we are so keeping her,” Midas told me, seriously.

“Listen up, chuckleheads, I have a PID on our two HVTs. I can confirm they’re currently on the second-floor west side, back corner room.” She suddenly gasped. “Holy shit. I *knew* it,” her voice was angry and surprised.

“What is it? Shooter, are you okay?” I whispered, anxiously.

“We are very likely compromised. That smarmy bastard. Son. Of. A. Bitch.”

The team exchanged knowing looks. The way she called him ‘smarmy,’ we all knew she meant Frank Cicero.

“TOC for Shooter,” Commander Reynolds came in over our headsets.

“Go for Shooter,” Jett responded.

“Are you saying you have a positive identification on Frank Cicero?”

“TOC, that’s affirmative,” Jett replied. “I’ve got eyes on, sitting with our two HVTs, how copy?”

“Good copy,” the commander answered.

“They had to have heard that gunfire, why are they just sitting there?” She asked absently, as if she were talking to herself.

“Probably waiting for confirmation we’re all dead,” Reaper replied.

“Or waiting to ambush us again,” Smoke suggested, stiffly.

“Switching to thermal imaging,” Jett reported. “I’m picking up seven heat signatures on the ground floor. Eight on the second floor, plus the three HVTs. Huh. There’s something hinky on the ground floor on the west side of the building.”

“Hinky, how?” Reaper asked her.

“I’m picking up a pretty big heat signature, but it’s weak. Like it’s being blocked by something. In addition, there are four men standing guard outside, two in front and two on the west side. The back and east sides are likely covered as well.

Total count that I can see, twenty-two heavily armed dirtbags. Be advised, there is a serious goatfuck in play.”

“Roger that,” we chorused in response.

“Proceed or abort?” Jett asked, calmly.

Reaper turned his attention to all of us. This wasn’t our first rodeo, so it was no surprise when he told us, “We’re here, our intel is good. We’ve got a sniper on the ridge. We might not get another chance. Let’s get it done.”

We all nodded our agreement.

“Shooter, Charlie Mike,” Reaper told Jett. Charlie Mike, meaning continue mission.

“Charlie Mike, good copy. Taking out the two west side guards now.”

“Roger that, ‘preciate it,” Reaper responded.

“Stand by.”

Our new location allowed us to see her muzzle flash, and we were close enough to hear the whistling of her high caliber bullets as they sliced through the still air on their way to their targets. The sound was followed by grunts and the thud of bodies impacting the ground.

“Two west side guards down. When you’re good to go, I’ll take out the two guards in front.”

Reaper acknowledged each of us and we all nodded our readiness. “Send it,” he told Jett as we started to move.

As we approached the building, we watched the two guards at the front drop one after the other.

“You’re clear,” Jett announced.

“Copy that,” Reaper answered.

“Keep your sexy ass covered and watch your six, Shooter.”

Not surprisingly, she ignored me. “Heads on a swivel, boys. Good luck.”

As we approached the house, we split up. Reaper, Smoke, and Bruiser would go in the front and Midas, Boomer, and I would enter through the rear.

Proceeding with the plan, we’d start by throwing smoke grenades and flashbangs through the doors to confuse and disorient them. Then we’d enter the house and clear it, capturing the two HVTs and Cicero.

We confirmed we’d taken out the guards at the back and the east side of the building and were in position and ready.

“Masks on,” Reaper ordered.

Chapter 37

Patrick

“Execute, execute, execute.” Reaper said firmly over comms. The door splintered off its hinges when Boomer kicked it in, and we started rapidly throwing the grenades inside. It didn’t take long for two men to come running out choking and coughing, but they didn’t get far because we dropped them as soon as they exited the building.

“Shooter, we’re going in,” Reaper updated Jett.

“Roger that. I’m set and have your six,” she immediately responded.

Skirting past the bodies we’d taken out, we entered the building, and all hell broke loose. As soon as we burst through the door, we were being shot at. Firing their weapons at anything that moved, Reaper, Smoke, and Bruiser rushed up the stairs, while Midas, Boomer, and I dispatched anyone we came across on the ground floor. The air was thick with acrid smoke and, between the smoke and the breathing mask, it was almost impossible to see.

“Jax!” I heard the panic in Jett’s voice milliseconds before glass shattered behind me. I spun around in time to see a man in a gas mask behind me dropping to the ground. Jett must have shot him through the window. If she hadn’t, I’d likely be dead. But I’d just cleared that part of the room and he hadn’t been there. Where the hell had he come from?

“Thanks for the assist, baby,” I told her gratefully, while I continued sweeping the room.

She’d regained her composure, and her voice was calm again, “Roger that. And don’t call me baby.”

“Be advised, the dirtbags have breathing masks,” I informed the team.

“Stay away from the windows!” Jett’s concerned voice called out. “Tangos flooding in from the west side!”

Within seconds, glass started shattering. Jett was out there somewhere hitting anyone she could through the windows, although with the smoke and chaos, how she could see them, or tell the bad guys from the team, I didn’t know. But I trusted her not to hit any of us. Meanwhile, we were shooting the onslaught of men streaming into the room who seemed to be materializing out of the smoke.

“Boomer, hit the dirt!” Jett called out.

“Shit. That was close. Thanks, Shooter,” Boomer said, standing up a few seconds later, eyeing the dead man Jett had dropped.

It took a while, but finally, the gunfire started to slow, the smoke beginning to clear from the open doors and broken windows. It struck me if Jett hadn't been here, this would have gone an entirely different way.

“Jackpot. We've reached Queen,” Reaper said in our ears. “Two HVTs secure.”

“Copy Queen,” the commander said with a smile in his voice.

“Anyone have eyes on the third HVT?” Smoke asked.

There was a chorus of ‘negative’ from the team.

At the same time, Bruiser and I saw two men sneaking out through a panel in the wall, but who knew how many others had escaped in the smoke and confusion without us noticing them. “We have squirts moving out a hidden exit on the east side!” Bruiser announced as the two of us headed through the panel and into a tunnel.

The sun was coming up as Bruiser and I emerged from the secret passageway. We stumbled on an SUV tearing away, kicking up dirt and fishtailing as they turned onto the road. Bruiser and I started shooting at the vehicle, but our bullets were pinging off it, not doing any damage.

“Fucking vehicle is armored,” Bruiser barked.

“Do you have him? Do you have Cicero?” Jett snapped through our headsets. It sounded like she was on the move again.

“Negative. Cicero is not on target,” Reaper responded.

“Bet the chickenshit escaped out that secret passageway before all hell broke loose,” I told them.

“Shooter, can you do something about those squirter?” Reaper requested.

“Already on it,” Jett responded.

The SUV had to be almost three quarters of a mile away, but, moments later, there was a loud bang, and the SUV flipped trunk over hood, sliding to a stop on its roof.

“Nice shooting, honey!”

“Copy that, and don’t call me honey,” she said predictably, making me smile.

“Hell of a shot, Shooter,” Bruiser complimented her as we moved to the front of the building where the two soldiers and our bus were waiting for us.

“Time to go, Shooter,” Reaper said over comms.

“Roger that. Headed for our limo.”

Ripping off their masks, Reaper, Smoke, and Boomer came out of the building with the two HVTs. Midas came out last, telling us he’d found a big, concrete bunker hidden on the west side of the building.

“That must be where the extra tangos came from, and why Shooter picked up a weak heat signature,” I surmised.

Reaper dispatched Bruiser and Midas to check the occupants of the SUV. “We’ll pick you up on our way out,” he told them.

Although none of us mentioned it, we were all hoping Cicero would be found in the wreckage.

Boomer and I got on the bus and secured the two HVTs. Smoke climbed in next, and Reaper stood outside the open door waiting for Jett.

It wasn't long until we saw her in the distance running toward us. In the flush of morning light, we could see she'd ditched her ghillie suit and her rifle was cradled in front of her. She was three hundred feet away when a man ran out from behind another building and broadsided her from the right. She hit the ground...hard, the man who slammed into her landing on top of her. I heard her grunt come through my comms when she hit the ground.

She shoved him off, rolling out from under him and popped to her feet, turning, and shooting him as she started running again.

I watched out the back window as men appeared like armed roaches from the nearby buildings. Jett was tackled from behind, hitting the ground face first. One of the men jerked her up, putting her in a bear hug. She curled forward and slammed her head back into his face. He let go with a howl, and she tried to make a break for it. But she barely managed a few steps before she was captured again, this time by two men who yanked her by the arms—none too gently—off her feet.

“No!” I shouted.

They quickly stripped her of her rifle, guns, and knives, secured her arms behind her back and bound her ankles

together. The man she headbutted strode up to her and slapped her across the face. Jett pulled her shoulders back, standing up straight, and stared defiantly at the man. Then they all moved away from her, leaving her standing alone and turned to focus on us.

One of the men started hollering across the distance. They wanted to make a trade. Jett for our two HVTs.

I was watching from the back of the bus, not able to tear my eyes away from the horror in front of me. “Tell them yes. Tell them we’ll do it,” I yelled, without turning away from her, the terror I felt obvious in my voice.

Jett dropped her chin to her chest, her voice soft in our ears, “Reaper.”

Either they hadn’t noticed or didn’t care she had comms when they’d stripped her gear from her.

Reaper’s attention snapped to her. “Get on the bus and get out of here,” she told him.

“Jett, no. Fuck no, baby,” I whispered.

She ignored me. “They have no intention of making that trade. If you agree, we all die. Take the HVTs and get out of here. Someone needs to find Cicero, that’s on you now. Your team.”

I slapped my palms against the window. “Baby, no. No!” I moaned, shaking my head. My voice fracturing.

She didn’t acknowledge me. “This was a trap. You know what I’m saying is true. Save your team, Master Chief. Go

home to your families and promise to take that smarmy bastard down.”

Reaper stood stock-still, his eyes focused on Jett, as if he was trying to think of *any* other option than the one Jett was giving him. It gave me hope we wouldn't be leaving her behind after all.

When she spoke again, her voice was firm and had a hard edge to it, “Go now, frogman, before it's too late. Get out of here so they can't use me as leverage and capture all of you too.”

“Goddamnit, Jett, no!”

“What the fuck is going on?” Midas asked from the wrecked SUV.

“You listen to me, Shooter,” Reaper ordered in his don't-even-think-about-arguing tone as he got on the bus. “You keep yourself alive. We're getting reinforcements and coming back for you, so you stay the fuck alive. That's a fucking order. How copy?”

“Good copy,” she said quietly, but she didn't sound convincing.

Reaper ordered the Army soldier to drive. The bus jerked and we started moving.

“No!”

“Patrick.” Hearing her say my name, I froze, staring back at her. “It's okay, Patrick,” Jett said, her voice catching, cracking my heart in half.

Her captors must have realized she was communicating with us. Two men grabbed her arms. Another jerked her head to the side. “I want you to know I...”

That was the last thing that came through as they stripped her of her comms and her voice was silenced. Then the man who took them from her punched her in the face.

Her head rocked back, and her knees gave way. If the two men hadn’t been holding her, she would have been knocked down. She was dazed, but recovered, spit blood out of her mouth, nodding across the distance at us.

Even more armed men were appearing from the nearby buildings. They started shooting at us, but we were too far away now for them to do any real damage. Where were they coming from? Why hadn’t any of us seen them? Jett was right, this was another trap. We’d walked right into it, and now Jett was paying the price for our mistake.

I took several steps down the aisle, my intention to get out and help her. But Boomer blocked my path. “What the fuck are you doing? Stop the fucking bus!”

“You know we can’t,” Reaper said, solemnly. “She was right, we were outnumbered and outgunned. They want all of us and the HVTs. She’s trained for this, Jax. We’ll get her back.”

“Fuck you, Reaper! Would you be driving away if it was Alex? Or Hali? Or Vivian? You fucking son of a bitch, stop this goddamn bus!”

I tried climbing over the seats so I could jump out, I'd go out one of the damn windows if I had to. But Smoke and Boomer held me back. I knew I wouldn't get free of them, but I still struggled, screaming, "Let me go, motherfuckers!"

I jerked away and spun, heading to the back of the bus again, so I could see Jett out the back window. She was being held by her upper arms between two men. There were at least thirty armed men in total now standing on either side and behind her. Jett watching as we sped away from her.

Her eyes met mine and she gave me a small smile, then the men moved in front of her and blocked my view. The last thing I saw was Jett being picked up and thrown into the back of a truck like a sack of garbage.

I pounded my fists on the window, my scream ripped from the deepest recess of my soul, my heart struggling to beat. Agony tearing through me. "JETT!"

We were leaving Jett behind. Leaving her alone to face whatever torture they were going to inflict on her.

We made a quick stop to pick up Bruiser and Midas at the wrecked SUV. "Two dead dirtbags, but no Cicero," Midas told Reaper as he climbed on the bus.

"What the fuck happened?" Bruiser asked, frowning.

Reaper told them something, but I didn't hear it. I didn't care what he was telling them. Nothing else mattered but Jett.

The air was thick with worry and tension, the bus filled with a heavy, unsettled stillness. Midas was the one who finally

broke the silence. “She’s wearing her tracker, we’ll get her back,” he said with confidence.

“She’s one of us. We’re going back for her,” Bruiser added, adamantly.

I turned on them, marching up the aisle toward Reaper. “Fuck you! Fuck all of you! After everything she’s done for us, we’re going to drive away and leave her behind!?”

“Jax...” Reaper started.

I interrupted him, “They’re going to kill her. You know that, don’t you?” I stared Reaper down. “They’re going to kill her and, when they do, it’ll be your fault!”

In my fear and fury, I lunged for him, but Boomer must have anticipated my intentions and grabbed me from behind, pinning my arms against my sides and effectively stopping any chance of moving. I threw my head back, another scream of anguish and frustration erupting out of me.

“Let me fucking go!” I struggled, fighting to break free, but it was no use.

“I’m sorry, Jax. So, so sorry, but I can’t let you go until you calm down,” Boomer said gently, sympathetically. “You gonna calm down?”

I nodded, letting some of the tension out of my body because I couldn’t breathe, and I needed him to let me go or the big bastard was going to crush me.

“You think I *wanted* to leave her there?!“ Reaper yelled. “Jett is family, Jax. You think we won’t go balls to the wall for

her? But we were outnumbered. Outgunned. She was right, they would have captured or killed us all. And then there'd be *no* chance of getting her back.”

I collapsed back into a seat and hung my head, rubbing my temples, my leg bouncing. There wasn't enough oxygen to breathe. The violent pounding of my heart had stolen my breath. The world had lost its gravity, and I felt like I was hurtling through space. My thoughts were spinning. My head felt like it was going to explode worrying about what was happening to her, what they were doing to her. What they were *going* to do to her.

It felt like time was moving in slow motion. The drive back seemed to take forever. Every mile felt like a hundred. Every second felt like an hour.

The commander was waiting for us when we arrived. Reaper and the commander walked away, their heads together. The rest of the team moving to transfer the HVTs for interrogation.

I was on edge, a bundle of nerves. Jittery. It felt like my skin was too small for my bones. Like there was a gaping wound in my chest. I paced, impatiently waiting to get back on the road to Jett. Every minute she was gone was a minute too long. Another minute they were hurting her.

I didn't know how much time had passed when the commander and a soldier fully kitted up with his team arrived. “This is Warlock and his SEAL team out of Coronado. We're lucky they were close enough to lend support,” Commander Reynolds informed us as Reaper approached.

“We appreciate the assist,” Reaper told him, shaking his hand.

Warlock nodded, “Happy to help.” He motioned to his team, and they climbed into one of the waiting trucks. A green team followed shortly after. At least this time we were going in force.

I continued my pacing. Reaper appeared in front of me, stopping me. He came to me alone, the rest of the team standing a distance away, watching warily. I assumed we were *finally* ready to hit the road. It was about fucking time.

Reaper placed his hand on my shoulder and squeezed. “Maybe you should sit this one out and let us bring her back,” he cautiously suggested.

I jerked away from him. “Fuck off, Reaper.”

“Your head’s not on straight,” Reaper said, carefully. “You can’t let emotion and vengeance cloud your judgment, Jax. It puts us all at risk.”

I unleashed on him, lightning-hot rage boiling through my veins. “What was clouding *your* judgment when you put Jett at risk and left her behind with terrorists? Don’t worry about me, I’m solid,” I snarled.

“I will burn this fucking country to the ground to find Jett and bring her back to me!” I bellowed. I pointed to each member of my team, driving my point home. “And all of you...you’re either with me, or you’re in my fucking way,” I added with a deadly growl, shoving past Reaper and climbing

in the back of the second truck. Thankfully, it wasn't long until the rest of the team joined me, and we started moving.

We'd spent an hour getting back to drop off the HVTs. According to Midas, who was monitoring Jett's tracker, we had a two-hour drive to get to the location where she was being held.

When we finally reached her, they would have had her for at least three hours. It was too long—*much* too long. My mind was running rampant with the horrifying things they could do to her in that amount of time. I couldn't stop the sickening loop of images my mind conjured up. Each thought in my head was worse than the one before it.

It felt like I was being ripped apart from the inside out. I was shaking. Anguish and fear pulsing and aching through my veins. I couldn't prevent it or control it. The one thought that wouldn't leave me—the one that terrified me most—by the time we reached her, she could already be dead.

If that happened, I wouldn't survive it. I couldn't imagine life without her. A world where Jett didn't exist wasn't a world worth living in. I kept trying to force myself not to think that way but couldn't make the thought leave my head.

The realization I was in love with her slammed into me.

I loved her deeply.

Completely.

Hopelessly.

I couldn't lose the love of my life now that I'd found her. I just *couldn't*. Especially since I hadn't had the opportunity to tell her how I felt about her.

Chapter 38

Patrick

As if the delay in getting to the location wasn't bad enough, the building Jett's signal was coming from was huge—nothing but a tangle of hallways and doors. We couldn't even begin to search for her until we'd cleared each and every room.

Single-minded and primed to kick ass, we breached the door and entered the building. As soon as we crossed the threshold, men began shooting at us and we returned fire. Fanning out, Warlock's team spread out on the ground floor, while we headed upstairs with green team at our backs. When we reached the second floor, green team broke off, and the six of us continued up the stairs to the third floor.

Since we'd entered the building, Reaper had been sticking close to me, watching me like a hawk to make sure I didn't lose my mind, go rogue, and compromise the mission. He didn't need to worry. I was focused and my aim was true. I was perfectly fine killing anyone who had anything to do with taking Jett and hurting her.

I wanted it.

Welcomed it.

Knowing as soon as they were all dead, I could find her, hold her in my arms, and get her the fuck out of this hellhole.

Midas' voice came through my headset, "Shit. Her signal's gone dead."

Fuck. What did that mean?

It took too long in my opinion, but finally the shooting died down. The building was littered with bodies, most of the tangos lying dead on the floor, a testament of our ferocity to get Jett back, but some of them had given up and been zip tied. They were lined up, sitting on the main floor, being guarded. The other SEAL team leader, Warlock, advised us he'd been aggressively questioning them, but none admitted knowing where the American woman was being held.

"We'll manage the detainees. My team and green team will make sure the building is clear of stragglers and watch your six," Warlock announced over our comms.

"Appreciate it," Reaper responded, solemnly.

When it had been working, her tracker signal indicated we were in the right place, so where the hell were they keeping her? It felt like we'd cleared a hundred rooms and there was still no sign of Jett. With no trace of her, cold and menacing desperation slithered down my spine.

"Where the fuck is she?"

The grief-stricken words were barely out of my mouth when we heard a muffled, bloodcurdling scream echoing from

behind one of the doors in the long hallway we were in. I flinched hearing it, my head swiveling, feeling like I'd been painfully punched in the chest. But it was impossible to tell exactly where the sound was coming from.

And then the terrible, heart-stopping sound repeated.

“Fuck, what are they doing to her?” I asked, my tormented voice anxious. “Where the hell is it coming from?”

“Keep it together, Jax,” Reaper cautioned.

“Fuck you, Reaper. We have to find her.”

Jett was behind one of these doors, and something so atrocious was happening to her, her screams were echoing throughout the building. We methodically cleared the rooms one by one until only one was left. This had to be it. And, by the time we found it, I was vibrating with fear.

Like some of the other rooms we'd encountered, this one had a heavy-duty door and an electronic keypad that required a code to get in. Like the others, Midas went to work bypassing the keypad, but it felt like this one was taking forever.

Once we knew which room she was in, two things happened at once—the team was standing outside the door waiting on Midas and trying to figure out how many men might be on the other side—while, at the same time, we heard a man behind the door shout in broken English.

While Midas worked, we were forced to listen to the shouting coming from the other side of the door. “Tell me! We

know you have it. The sooner you tell me, the sooner this ends. Tell me where it is.”

Jett yelled back, “Go screw yourself! I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

Hearing her voice, knowing she was still alive made me feel like I could finally breathe again. But I wasn’t going to be able to calm down until I could see her and knew she was safe.

I heard Jett say ‘fuck you’ again, but it was much weaker, barely audible through the door. The relief of hearing her voice was short-lived because of the horrifying, gut-wrenching scream that followed.

I felt like I’d been electrocuted. The only way to describe what I was feeling was sheer terror. It physically hurt to hear the sounds of suffering—Jett’s suffering—coming from the other side of that door and not being able to get to her.

“Get the fucking door open!” I hissed.

Midas finally disabled the lock and we breached, Reaper and Smoke entered first, easily killing the two men in the large room, the rest of us flooding in after them. One man had been standing over her, the other sitting a short distance away at a small table with a laptop. Jett’s pack and weapons were on another table across the room.

The sight in front of me seized all bodily function. I could only stand frozen and stare in horror, my feet rooted to the floor. I couldn’t draw a breath. My heart lurched at the sight of

her, slamming out a thundering, wild, painful beat in my chest, and I felt the hot sting of tears behind my eyes.

Jett was stripped naked, on her belly, tied down on a metal table. There were numerous cuts of varying sizes on her back. Her blood, deep and dark, steadily dripped from them. As if that weren't bad enough, there was a syringe sticking out of her arm. The bastard must have injected her with something right before we breached the room.

There was a large container of salt spilled across the floor next to the dead man, as if he'd knocked it off the table when he was shot. There was an empty bucket in a sink, a wet towel, and a table with a multitude of knives and other tools of torture.

Jett was visibly shaking, her body appeared to be pulsing, her breath harsh and ragged. Based on the bucket, the wet towel, her wet hair, and the water on the floor, I could only assume in addition to everything else, she'd been waterboarded.

"Motherfucker," Bruiser murmured.

"Son of a bitch," came from Midas.

"Oh, sweet Jesus," Boomer whispered.

The rest of the team was standing on the other side of the table. After slinging my rifle over my shoulder, I quickly made my way to Jett, carefully pulling the empty syringe out of her arm and squatting down in front of her. Her wet hair was plastered over her face, and I started gently moving it out of

the way so she could see it was me. As soon as I touched her, she jerked and started struggling against her restraints, fighting and screaming to get my fucking hands off her.

The eye I could see was unfocused, wild, and filled with terror. She wasn't seeing me, her eye darting around while she violently thrashed against her restraints and continued screeching.

I could see some bruising on her face and placed my hand on the side of her head to avoid it. Moving until my face was close to hers, keeping my voice calm and low. Soothing. "Jett, it's me. It's Patrick. You're okay. I've got you, love. You're safe. It's me, Patrick."

She kept screaming, jerking, and fighting against her restraints.

"Come on, sweetheart. Jett. Jett, look at me. Come back to me, baby. C'mon back, Jett. Come back to me. You're safe now, I got you. I'm here. I'm here, baby."

Her eye finally focused on me, and while she was tense, she stopped struggling. She was panting for breath, her voice a croaky whisper, "Patrick?"

I breathed a sigh of relief, "Yeah, baby, it's me."

She sagged against the table, all the fight going out of her. "Patrick," she breathed with a sob.

I brushed the rest of her wet, matted hair off her face as carefully as possible. "Hang on, baby, I'm going to get you out of here."

The ties holding her were so tight around her wrists and ankles that her hands and feet were starting to turn blue. The restraints would be hard to cut off without nicking her, and the way my hands were shaking, I knew I wouldn't be able to cut her free without hurting her more.

“Smoke, cut her loose,” I pleaded, without taking my eyes off of Jett.

I stayed next to the table so she could see me, keeping my voice calm and soothing, talking to her while Smoke carefully cut her free of the restraints. As soon as she was untied, she started moving to turn onto her side and sit up, howling in pain at the movement.

My breath punched out of me when I saw the extent of her injuries. The right side of her face was barely recognizable. There was deep, purple-black bruising and swelling running from her jaw, across her cheek, and up to her right eye, which was swollen shut. Not just swollen shut but bulging. Anger, deep and ugly like I'd never felt, swept through me seeing her that way.

She had blood on her face from several cuts. Blood had run out of her nose and mouth, down her chin, leaving a smeared trail on her chest between her breasts, and down her stomach.

Blood was still trickling out of her mouth and dripping off her chin like a faucet with a slow leak, leading me to believe she had an open wound in her mouth. Her teeth had most likely cut the inside of her lip when she was hit. If her badly

bruised wrists and ankles were any indication, it was clear she'd fought hard against her restraints.

A tornado of emotions twisted and coiled inside me—rage and grief, relief and anguish all battled for dominance.

She was sitting on the table, with her legs dangling off, shaking violently. I moved to stand between her legs, trying to conceal her nakedness and make sure she couldn't fall onto the floor.

As soon as I stepped between her legs, she threw her arms around me, her face in the crook of my neck, and started to cry. Whole body sobs that sounded as if they were being torn out of her. My heart felt like it was being crushed inside my chest. I was terrified to touch her. Afraid I'd hurt her more. But I couldn't have kept myself from putting my arms around her—holding and comforting her—if my life depended on it.

“That's right, let it go, baby, let it out. It's all over, you're safe now. I've got you. You're safe, I won't let anyone hurt you,” I whispered in her ear while she cried. I rested my head against hers. “I was so fucking scared I'd lost you, Jett.”

I let her cry, holding her carefully but firmly, the sounds coming out of her breaking my heart. At the moment, holding her and letting her cry was the best thing I could do for her. It was what she needed, but it didn't make it any easier to hear.

Boomer slipped off his rucksack, opened it, and handed me a clean, black t-shirt.

“Baby, I'm going to put this on you. It's only a t-shirt.”

“I don’t need it,” she said softly, still shaking and swaying slightly, blood and tears staining trails down her cheeks.

I leaned my face close to hers, so only she could hear me. My voice low but on the commanding side, “You’re naked. Your beautiful body is only for my eyes. I’m covering you up, do you understand me?”

She nodded.

She sucked in her breath, letting out a hiss and a groan as I put the t-shirt on her as gently and carefully as I could. “Almost done. Just breathe, love.”

Boomer’s huge shirt was effective in covering her. If she’d been standing, it would have easily fallen mid-thigh.

“Smoke, can you give me some gauze?” While I waited, I skimmed my hand lightly up and down her arm in a soothing motion.

Using the gauze Smoke handed me, I wiped the blood out of her mouth, then rolled a piece and put it between her bottom lip and her teeth, where I confirmed the inside of her lip had been split open.

“Let’s get her on a stretcher,” Smoke said, as he eased closer.

“No.” She gazed up at me with her swollen, battered face and whispered, “I want to stay with you.”

Her words exploded in my chest. I wanted to hold her tighter but wouldn’t risk hurting her any more than I already was.

“I’m not letting you go, love. Not now. Not ever.”

Because you're mine.

“I’m going to pick you up and carry you out of this fucking shithole. It’s going to hurt. I’m so sorry, baby.” Even though I knew it would hurt her, had explained it would be painful, the sound of agony she made when I bundled her in my arms almost gutted me.

“So sorry, sweetheart.”

Once she was in my arms, her body went limp and sagged against me. She pillowed her head against my chest, holding me as tightly as she could. She was trembling and still a little teary. “I didn’t tell them anything.”

“I know you didn’t, sweetheart. They couldn’t break you.” I glanced across the room at her ruck and weapons. “Boomer, grab Roxy for me.”

“Roxy?”

“Her rifle.”

She was attached to that gun, and I didn’t want her to lose it. “Actually, let’s take all her gear.”

“Patrick?” she fisted my vest but didn’t pick her head up off my chest. “Patrick,” she breathed, her voice cracking, “What did they want from me?”

“I don’t know, honey. We can figure that out later.”

After making my way out of the building, I got her into the truck and put a pair of sweatpants on her, rolling down the

waistband so it wasn't touching any of the cuts on her back. Then I sat down with Jett in my lap, her head against my chest.

"She's tougher than a lot of men," Bruiser commented after the rest of the team climbed in the truck.

"How is she?" Reaper asked.

I snarled internally. Rage rolled off me in waves, a feral, living thing. I wasn't sure I'd ever been this angry. "How the *fuck* do you think she is? Take a good long look at her. This is your fault," I growled at him between clenched teeth.

"Don't be mad at them, we completed the mission," Jett murmured, surprising me.

Fuck, this woman had a core of steel, but I wasn't any less pissed off. If possible, I was angrier after seeing the condition she was in, imagining what she'd been through.

"At your expense."

She lifted her head, her unswollen eye meeting mine. "Occupational hazard. That's the job," she responded, philosophically.

She struggled to move, moaning in pain as she gingerly shifted to straddle me, until we were face to face. Keeping a firm grip on my vest and gently swaying.

Smoke handed me some antiseptic wipes, and I used them to wipe the mixture of blood, tears, and snot off her face.

"I don't feel right."

I stroked her hair. “I know, baby. We’re getting you to a doctor. You’ll feel better soon. Just hang on a little longer.”

I hoped that was true, but we still had a two-hour drive ahead of us.

Chapter 39

Patrick

Jett watched while Smoke put an IV in her arm. Bruiser handed me a bottle of water, and I cracked the top, holding it out for her. “Drink some of this, love.”

She took it and gulped it hungrily until I took it away from her. “Not too fast, it’ll make you sick.”

“I need to check the wounds on her back,” Smoke said, calmly.

“Sweetheart, Smoke is going to look at your back, okay?”

“My back?”

“Your back was hurt. Smoke is going to fix it for you.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

Smoke tugged the hem of Boomer’s t-shirt and lifted it over her shoulders so her back was exposed, but the front of her was still covered, securing it with a couple of clips. He glanced over her shoulder at me, sorrow and compassion

etched on his face. “Some of these can’t wait, they need to be stitched up right now.”

I knew it was bad. I saw Boomer wince, Reaper and Bruiser scowled, and Midas frowned as Smoke got to work numbing her.

“They drugged me. I think I’m hallucinating.”

She began speaking in Russian. When Smoke heard it, he started translating for us, “Special formula of my own creation. You will tell me what I want to know about Germany. You will tell me *everything* I want to know about Germany. You cannot resist, you will tell me where it is.”

“They must have dosed her right before we breached,” Reaper mumbled.

Her eyes met mine. “I think they gave me acid.”

“Acid?”

“Acid. LSD. Or maybe magic mushrooms or peyote. Maybe all three.”

“Why do you say that?”

She eyed the empty space next to Reaper. “I’m really high,” she said, absently scanning the inside of the truck. “So many colors.” She leaned forward until our noses almost touched. “My grandma is sitting next to Reaper, which is ironic because she’s dead and his name is Reaper.”

She smiled. With her battered face and blood smeared over her teeth, her smile had a creepy quality, but she had no way of

knowing that.

She looked back toward the empty space next to Reaper obviously listening to something only she could hear. “Grandma, that’s gross and so inappropriate. You’re at least forty years too old for him and—well—you’re dead.”

She listened again. “Oh my god, stop. You’re making my ears bleed.” After another brief moment of silence, she responded, “No, I wasn’t raised in a barn.” She released a long breath, telling all of us, “Grandma says hi and it’s nice to meet all of you. Especially you, Boomer.”

“What?! Why especially me?” Boomer asked, eyes darting around, clearly freaked out.

Jett’s focus swung back to the empty corner. “Happy now? If you’re going to stay, you need to sit there quietly. No more talking.”

“Wow, she is seriously trippin’,” Bruiser said.

“That creeped me out, man,” Boomer complained.

I squinted at Smoke over Jett’s shoulder. “How can I help her?”

“She said she was given a cocktail of drugs. We have no way of knowing exactly what they gave her. If we give her anything, we could make it worse or cause an adverse reaction.

“The IV and water will help flush her system. Keep a hold of her and don’t let her hurt herself. It doesn’t seem like a bad

trip, so just let her ride it out. The one good thing about it is she doesn't seem to be in pain anymore."

Smoke moved into her line of sight. "Jett, you need some stitches. Can you sit still for me?"

She twisted her head in his direction, telling him, "Okay." When she faced me again, she told me, "You're all surrounded by color. Reaper's is so blue. You've got white light all around you. But not blinding. Glowing. Are you an angel, Patrick?"

Despite the circumstances, the guys chuckled, and I grinned at her. "No, love, I'm not an angel."

She grabbed fistfuls of my vest and tugged. "Patrick, I don't hate you."

I covered her hands with mine. "I know, baby."

"I mean, I do. I do hate you, but not all the way or maybe not at all. Maybe I want to, but I can't. I want to trust you, I do, but I'm afraid. I'm so afraid of you, Patrick.

"I couldn't believe it was you in that cell in Afghanistan, but there you were. I mean, what the hell? Do you know what a *shock* that was? Of all the people, it had to be *you*. And then I was forced to stay with you, and it felt like I was being flayed open every second. I wanted to run. But I wanted to stay because, for the first time in all these years, I felt my heart start beating again."

"Jett," I breathed.

Even though it was weak, her grip on me tightened. "You were right. It wouldn't have worked out, we were only kids.

We didn't know *anything*. You were only a boy, and I was a cupcake. A *cupcake*." She sounded disgusted, saying it like it was a dirty word.

She rolled her eye and dropped her forehead on my chest. "Grandma, I told you to stay quiet. You're awfully chatty for a corpse."

I heard my teammates chuckling again.

"Whatever they gave her is effective in making her talk," Midas stated.

Boomer was noticeably agitated. "She needs to stop talking about her dead grandma, it's creepy."

"But you're not a boy now, you're a man," Jett continued as if she hadn't heard the interruption. "You're all man. A big, wide shouldered, sexy man. And you're a *good* man. You are. You're sweet and thoughtful and kind. You taste good and god, you smell *so* good."

Her hands had started roving tenderly over my face as if she needed to touch me. "Jesus, the things you do to me. You mark me to claim me, so I'll remember. Is that why? So I'll see your fingerprints and love bites on me and remember how I got them? Patrick's possessive marks of pleasure?"

I smiled back at her. "I could point out I'm not the only one who leaves marks, but this really isn't the place for this conversation."

"I don't know, I think she deserves to know," Boomer said with a grin.

She pressed her lips against mine, barely a touch, her voice soft, “Bossy bastard, you made me crave you like a drug. You’re the only one. The only one who has the power to break me wide open and destroy me. You terrify me, Patrick.”

She abruptly started waving her arm, grabbing for the IV, and trying to pull it out, yelling, “Snake!”

Luckily, I caught her gently by the wrist to keep her from yanking it out completely. She held her arm out, staring at it. “Patrick, that snake bit me.”

“Not a snake.” She was still staring at her arm. “Baby.” Her eyes slid to mine. “Not a snake.”

“Not a snake?”

“No, it’s an IV. It’s helping you. You need to leave it in, yeah?”

While she hadn’t removed the IV completely, she had dislodged it. “Jett, I’m going to fix this for you, okay?” Smoke asked her.

She turned and studied him. “Purple. Nice.”

I gave her more water and she relaxed, letting Smoke readjust her IV and gripped my vest again when he’d finished. “Patrick? I don’t want to keep throwing you out of my house. Except that first time was worth it to see the look on your face when I shoved you out naked.”

My teammates’ laughter didn’t surprise me.

“I *want* you to show up. I wait for it, and that’s bad. It’s very, very bad. Don’t you see? I have to let you go. It’s the only way to protect myself. I can’t keep letting you in because it makes me want more. You dent my barriers, Patrick. Every moment with you cracks my walls a little more. Enough cracks and the walls will come down. If I don’t end this, you’ll break through. I promised myself I’d never do that again, that I’d never feel like this again.”

I was shaking my head before she’d finished talking. “No. Please, Jett. Please don’t do that. I fucked up when we were younger. I know it. I admit it, and I wish more than anything I could take it back. I didn’t mean to hurt you. If I could take it away, I would. But I’m not going anywhere this time, I swear.”

I placed my hands on either side of her neck because I didn’t want to risk hurting her face, and leaned in, whispering in her ear, “Every day. Every single day you allow me, I will spend it loving you. Adoring you. Worshiping you, proving how sorry I am. I’m so twisted up about you, Jett, I can barely think about anything else.”

Her eye drifted closed and she sighed.

“Please forgive me and give me another chance. Drop your walls and let me inside, love. I promise, I promise you won’t regret it. *Please* Jett.”

Her voice was barely audible when she responded, “I’m afraid of how you make me feel. I’m afraid because I’m a big baby.”

I leaned back so she could see me. “You’re not a baby.”

She nodded her head. “Yes, I am. What am I gonna do?”

I reverently palmed the left side of her face. “You’re going to give me a second chance and let me love you.”

She leaned her head into my hand. “I am?”

“Yes.”

“You came back for me.”

“Of course, I fucking came. You’re mine, Juliette, nothing would have kept me away.”

“Yours?”

I took her hand in mine, resting our clasped hands over my heart. “Yes, *mine*. I don’t care what I have to do or how long it takes until you forgive me and I earn your trust, but I’m never letting you go again.” I cradled her face between my hands, noticing the tears gathering in her unswollen eye. “You. Are. Mine. Do you understand me?”

She nodded.

“Say it.”

She smiled her sinister, bloody, creepy grin at me. “What if I don’t?”

I leaned forward and whispered in her ear, “I’ll make you beg all night before I give you what you want.”

She let out a sensual gasp and dropped her head against my chest. A moment later she jerked up, wild eyed and frantic, still clutching my vest like a lifeline.

“Are you really here?”

“Yes, love, I’m really here. We’re all here.”

“How do I know you’re really here? What if it’s the drugs making me see you and that’s how they get me to talk? How do I know my brain isn’t making you up, so I don’t have to be in that room?”

“Please really be here. Say something they couldn’t know. Something *only* you could know.”

I didn’t hesitate. “You don’t put milk on your cereal. You didn’t learn to swim until you were ten. Ice cold chocolate milk is one of your favorite things.” I placed my mouth near her ear whispering, “You can put a condom on without your hands, which is the hottest, sexiest fucking thing I’ve ever seen in my life.” I pulled back to look at her. “Your favorite movie is *John Wick*.”

“They killed his dog, Patrick,” she stated, simply, as if that explained her reasoning.

Our gazes locked for several long seconds. “Kiss me.”

“Not the time or place, sweetheart, and you’re in no shape for kissing.”

“But if you kiss me, then I’ll know it’s really you.”

I placed barely there kisses to her cheek, and the edge of her bruised mouth. Nuzzled behind her ear, whispering, “I know how to get you wet and make you scream my name when you come on my face and my cock.”

She moaned softly as a shiver ran through her body.

“No one gets you as wet as I do, because I always know exactly what you need, isn’t that right?”

She nodded slightly and whispered, “Yes.”

“You know it’s me, love, because I’m the only one who can make you feel this way.”

Her forehead dropped onto my shoulder. “Patrick,” she breathed.

“I feel like we shouldn’t be watching this,” Bruiser commented.

“What do you think he said to her?” I heard Boomer ask.

Jett leaned back and stared at me, her hands on my face, her chin wobbling.

“Hey, what’s this about?”

“It’s really you. You came back for me.”

“I *couldn’t* leave you behind. Don’t you understand, Jett,” I caressed her face, my thumbs stroking her jaw. “You own me. You have my heart. My soul. I would do *anything* for you. But leaving you is the *one* thing I cannot do.”

A tear slipped out of her eye and rolled down her cheek and she whispered my name, tucking her head in the crook of my neck. “You own me too, Patrick.”

Chapter 40

Patrick

We sat that way for several long moments, but eventually Jett broke the spell. “What did they want from me? I don’t have anything. We didn’t take anything. I don’t know what they’re talking about. We need to warn Augie,” she said in a panic. “What if they go after him next? We can’t let anything happen to Augie.”

That *was* a possibility.

“Don’t worry, Jett, we’ll make sure Gonzo knows,” Midas reassured her.

“We killed him. That was the mission. We didn’t take anything. We didn’t have orders to take anything.” Her brow furrowed and she fixed me with a pointed look. “Did we? Did we take it, and I can’t remember?” She slapped her hands over her eyes. “What’s happening? Why can’t I remember?”

I carefully removed her hands from her face, worried she might hurt herself without realizing it. “They gave you drugs,

it's messing with your head, but everything is going to be fine, I promise.”

“Augie was talking to VanHausen and he wanted to go upstairs to show Augie something.” She giggled, and I was distracted by the sound. I’d never heard her giggle. “And we all know what he wanted to show him, because VanHausen wanted to bang Augie like a drum. Not that I blame him, Augie was smokin’ hot in that tux. VanHausen was handsome, built, and super rich, but Augie still wouldn’t have done it.”

“Because he was a man,” Reaper stated.

She glanced at Reaper. “Pfft, no. Because he was a terrorist—duh.”

We all looked at each other in confusion.

Her eyes came back to mine. “If our intel had been solid and we knew VanHausen was gay, we could have used Augie as a honeytrap instead. Sexpionage would have been sooo much easier.”

“Sexpionage?” Midas asked with a smile.

“Yeah. Sex and espionage.” She waved her hand. “sexpionage.”

“No way Gonzo is gay. I’ve seen him with countless women. He wasn’t faking that,” Boomer said.

“He goes either way.” She shrugged one shoulder. “He likes what he likes.”

“How did we not know that?” Bruiser asked.

“You guys don’t know much about him. You know...” Jett wagged her finger at all of us. “You’re not very good friends.”

“Apparently not,” Reaper agreed.

“After everything he’s done for us, we should remedy that,” Midas suggested.

Jett stared at the space next to Boomer and sighed loudly, “Seriously Grandma? And leave Boomer alone.”

Boomer jumped to his feet, knocking his head on the roof of the truck. “Ow.” He was rubbing his head, glancing around. “What the fuck?”

Jett eyed Boomer. “Sorry about that. She really seems to like you.”

“I don’t want her to like me! Tell her to leave me alone and go away.”

“She’s not really here, Boomer. Jett’s hallucinating,” Smoke stated, keeping his concentration on Jett’s back.

“Ghosts aren’t real, Boomer,” Midas told him.

“You don’t know. She could be real. It’s fucking creepy.”

Her gaze drifted over my shoulder, staring at the side of the truck, with a faraway look on her face. “We went upstairs and VanHausen tried to get rid of me. But we injected him with the drugs, and he died. He wasn’t supposed to die right away. Cicero said we had half an hour to escape.”

Fucking Cicero.

“Then all hell broke loose. We didn’t have time to take anything after that because everyone was trying to kill us.”

“Baby, maybe you should rest now,” I suggested.

“Let her talk, maybe it’ll jar something loose. Someone obviously thinks she has what they want or knows where it is,” Reaper said.

Midas added to Reaper’s thought, “She’s all over the place, but when she’s not talking about the hallucinations, she’s making sense.”

Jett fixed me with a pointed look as if she hadn’t heard our conversation. “Ireland!”

“Ireland?”

She gripped my vest and tried to shake me, but she didn’t have the strength. “Not Germany. Ireland. Stupid Cicero. His intel is always bad,” she stated, nodding her head.

“What about Ireland?”

She sighed and sounded wistful, “Declan Kilpatrick.” She giggled again. “When I got that op, I laughed when I thought—I would kill Patrick. Get it? Kilpatrick.” A serious expression tightened her face. “But I wouldn’t have. Even when I held my gun to your head, I wouldn’t have *really* killed you, you know.”

“She held a gun to your head?” Midas asked.

“He called me *Juliette*. I told him not to, but he kept doing it,” she told Midas. “I wouldn’t have killed you though.” She

assured me.

“I know, sweetheart.” Trying to get her back on track, I asked, “What about Ireland?”

“It was before Germany.” She took hold of my shoulders. “Don’t you see? Cicero set me up in Germany, and he sent Augie because Augie hates him. He never trusted Cicero.

“If I ended up dead, Augie would have found out why. And if Augie started really looking, he would have figured it out. Augie can dig like a dog with a bone. Then he would have killed Cicero. So, Cicero sent both of us.

“Cicero told us we’d have half an hour, but we only had seconds. Don’t you get it? We were *supposed* to die in Germany. We’d be dead, no one would ever know the details, and Cicero gets away clean.”

“Who’s Kilpatrick,” I asked again.

“Germany was a setup.”

“Baby, who’s Kilpatrick?” This time asking a little more forcefully.

She sighed, her voice wistful again. “Declan.”

I really did *not* like the way she said the man’s name.

“He was a bad guy. But a nice bad guy. He had a change of heart, but it came too late. I spent a couple of weeks with him. I liked him.”

I hated him.

“I wanted him to run, and I would have helped him. I’d never done that. But he was dead either way, and we both knew it.”

A pained expression spread across her face. “It made me sad. Our last night together, Declan gave me a thingamabob. A ‘last act of revenge and redemption’ he said. He told me to keep it secret and made me promise to finish what he couldn’t.”

“What thingamabob?” Reaper asked.

She waved her hand. “A computer thingy.”

“A thumb drive?” Midas guessed, excitedly.

“Yes!” She pointed at Midas. “Thank you. A thumb drive.”

“What was on it?”

Her eyes shifted back to me. “I don’t know. I never checked it. Ireland was hard. I got sent to Germany five days later and you know how that went.”

We didn’t.

“Everyone and their brother were after us. We were shot, almost starved and bled to death, and after we got across the border my memories are fuzzy.

“We were in the hospital, and it took a hot minute to recover. Then I got sent out again, can’t remember where right now. It’ll come to me. I forgot all about it until now because I don’t like to think about Declan. Man, I really liked him.”

“Where’s the flash drive now?”

She smiled her creepy, bloody smile. “I hid it—in Pandora’s box.”

“Pandora’s box?” Reaper inquired.

Jett glanced at him and nodded.

“What the fuck does that mean?” Bruiser asked.

“How are we supposed to decipher that? Or find some mythical box?” Midas wanted to know.

“What’s Pandora’s box, sweetheart?”

“Did you know Pandora was the wrath of Zeus? She was an instrument of punishment.” She nodded. “Augie made me a fake ID in case I ever need to disappear. No one knows about it. Shit. Don’t tell anyone, it’s a secret.

“He made my name Pandora Kleinschmidt. I’m not kidding. He laughed and laughed. Augie thinks he’s so funny.

“I have a secure box with money, a few weapons, and all her papers in it, just in case I ever needed to vanish.” She smiled at me again. “Pandora’s box.”

I smiled and kissed her delicately. “You’re a fucking genius.”

Smoke finished stitching her, unclipped Boomer’s shirt, and lowered it, covering her back.

“Patrick.” She rested her cheek against mine, “Patrick, I don’t hate you. I think I might even love you a little or with every fiber of my being.”

My heart tripped over itself at that revelation. “You love me, Jett?”

She nodded. “Because I’m an idiot.”

I smiled wide and kissed her. “You’re not an idiot.”

“What a day. I’m so tired. Is it okay if I take a nap?”

I gently kissed her cheek. “Of course, sweetheart. You can rest now, you’re safe. I got you.”

She laid her head on my chest. “You’ve got me,” she repeated, softly. In moments she was sound asleep, burrowed into my chest.

I was absently rubbing her side and stroking her hair. I was reeling from her words, worried about how manic and chaotic her thoughts had been. They’d obviously given her some powerful hallucinogenic drugs, and I was concerned there’d be lasting effects.

I was ecstatic hearing her admit she loves me. But what if she didn’t remember any of this? What if instead of remembering she loves me, she only remembered wanting to cut me out of her life? I couldn’t let her go.

But it was *me* she was relying on. It was *me* she wanted to stay with. She was curled up in *my* lap. Even if she didn’t remember, I *knew* she loved me and trusted me and that was a start. I could work with that.

I might even love you a little or with every fiber of my being.

Those words made my heart soar with the most intense happiness I’d ever felt

Chapter 41

Patrick

Once we'd made it back to base camp, we caught a helo and were flown to a ship. When we arrived, they took Jett away to work on her and it was several hours later when they brought her back and got her settled into a bed in the infirmary.

I sat watching over her while she slept, glad she wasn't experiencing pain or hallucinating while she was out.

She'd been incredibly lucky nothing was broken. Her eye was their biggest concern. It was so swollen, they couldn't properly examine it and weren't sure if she'd have permanent damage that would affect her eyesight. For now, they were keeping it packed in ice on and off to try and bring down the swelling.

Her mouth was swollen, her bottom lip split, both inside and out. She had superficial cuts that didn't require stitches, but she'd needed four stitches to close the wound inside her mouth and several for the gash over her eye. As if that wasn't enough, it took eighty-seven stitches to sew up the knife wounds on her back.

Her face was swollen and covered in ugly bruises in shades of black, blue, maroon, and purple that looked worse under the bright, fluorescent lights.

The sight of her felt like a fist to the gut.

Every cut, bruise, and scratch made me feel guilty for not being able to protect her, for not being able to force Reaper to turn the bus around and save her before she'd been taken and tortured in that room.

Seeing the results of that torture made me livid. I wanted to take her pain away but knew it wasn't possible and that made me angrier. I wished I could go back and kill those men again—only much, much slower this time. I rubbed a hand over my chest as if that could ease the deep ache I felt in my heart from seeing her like this.

As she started to wake up, I stood over her bed. “How are you feeling?”

“What time is it?” She croaked out, still groggy and half asleep.

“About one in the morning,” I answered, helping her get a drink of water.

“Why aren't you in bed sleeping?”

“Couldn't sleep.”

“Why not?”

Was she out of her mind? “Why do you think?”

She slowly, gingerly, slid over as much she could. “Climb in, get some sleep.”

“There’s nowhere else I’d rather be right now, but there’s not enough room. I could hurt you.”

Her eye drifted closed. “We’ll figure it out, Patrick. Climb in,” she told me in a soft but no-nonsense voice.

There really wasn’t much room in the small bed, but I wasn’t about to give up the opportunity to hold her in my arms. “Now who’s being bossy?” I said after I removed my shoes and laid down, careful not to touch her. But Jett snuggled close, draping herself over me.

I held her, one hand on her ass and the other around her head, my hand resting on her shoulder, so I didn’t touch the wounds on her back. “This okay?”

She sighed, “Yeah, it’s really good.”

I stroked her hair. “You know, this is the first time you’ve let me sleep next to you. When we get home, you’re going to let me do it again.”

“I am?” she whispered.

“Yes. And teach me to surf.”

I wasn’t sure if she’d heard me because she was already asleep again.



At sunrise, I forced myself to leave Jett and the comfort of her hospital bed to take a shower. Afterward, we met with Commander Reynolds for a team debrief that lasted until noon. By the time I made it back to the infirmary to check on her, Jett was gone.

“Where’s Jett Donovan?” I asked the doctor.

“She left.”

“What do you mean she left? Where did she go?”

“I don’t know. She said she was fine and took off.”

“And you let her go?”

I didn’t wait for his answer, I left in a panic to search for her until I remembered we were on a ship and there were only so many places she could go. Remembering that kept my panic in check. I found her in the galley holding an ice pack to her face eating mashed potatoes. At least she was eating, that was something.

I stood over her, arms crossed over my chest. “What the hell are you doing? You’re supposed to be in the infirmary.” I didn’t care that every prying eye in the room was focused on us.

“I’m fine.”

“Have you seen yourself? You’re not fucking fine.”

“Please don’t yell at me, Jax, my head hurts.”

Fuck, she’s back to calling me Jax again.

I let out a heavy sigh and sat next to her. “Shit. I’m sorry, but when you weren’t where you were supposed to be, I panicked. I’m not kidding, Jett, you’re going to be the death of me.” I carefully moved the ice pack from her face to examine her eye. It seemed like the swelling had gone down but it was still ugly. “How are you really feeling?”

“I feel like crap. I swear this has been the longest day of my life and I’ve only been awake about half an hour. My face hurts, my mouth hurts, my back hurts, and my head is killing me. It feels like I’ve got the worst hangover in all of history.”

“No hallucinations?”

“Hallucinations? I was hallucinating?”

I grinned at her. “A little bit, yeah.”

“No hallucinations. I mean, I don’t think so.”

“What do you remember?”

“I remember being captured and everything in that room. I remember being injected with something and then it’s a black hole of nothingness. I don’t even know how I got out of there or how I ended up here.”

“We regrouped and went back for you.”

“You came back for me?”

Why did she keep sounding so surprised by that?

“Of course, I fucking came. Did you really think I wouldn’t?”

A young squid with a buzzcut of fiery red hair approached our table. Although he seemed nervous, he still approached us. “Get you more potatoes or another smoothie, Jett?”

Who was this kid and how the hell did he know her?

I glared at him. “Jett?”

“Ignore him, Bart, he’s cranky. Yes, to both please. Your smoothies are yummy, and this gravy should be a food group.”

The sailor smiled wide at her, and his face went so red it nearly matched his hair. “I can make you something more tropical. Something with banana and pineapple if you want. Pineapple is good for bruises.”

“I would love that.”

The way the young sailor was smiling and blushing at her was like she hung the moon.

“Thank you, Bart.”

I rolled my eyes and glared at him until he scurried off, then tried, again, to talk some sense into her. “Jett, please, you need to rest. Let me take you back to the infirmary.”

“I don’t want to go there. I’m going to eat my potatoes and drink my smoothie. Then I’m going to figure out where I can take a nap.”

I was still angry with my team, especially with Reaper. Yet despite the tension between us, they still joined us after hitting the chow line. “Why is she here and not in the infirmary?” Reaper asked me as he set his tray on the table and sat down.

“Because she’s stubborn as hell.”

Smoke gave her a smile as he sat down. “How are you feeling, Jett?”

“I’m okay.”

“Do you see her? She’s not okay. She can barely sit upright. She’s going to finish her potatoes and smoothie and then I’m taking her to rest.”

“You know, it’s just so cute you think you can tell me what to do. You’re not the boss of me, so why don’t you mind your own business?”

My teammates smiled wide at me. Not surprisingly, they seemed to enjoy watching Jett put me in my place.

“Oh man, seems like you’re back to square one, brother,” Midas taunted with a grin.

Bart returned with her potatoes, her smoothie, and a new ice pack.

“Thank you so much, Bart.”

His blush reappeared, and I rolled my eyes at him again.

“Guys, this is Bart,” Jett told the team. “Bart, this is Reaper, Smoke, Midas, Boomer, Bruiser, and you met grumpy Jax.”

“Hey,” blushing Bart greeted the team before focusing his puppy dog eyes on Jett again. “Let me know if you need anything else, Jett.”

“I will, Bart. Thanks.”

“You don’t remember what happened?” Bruiser asked after the lovesick Bart left.

“It’s not like I can forget some of it. But I can’t remember anything after they injected me. What did happen? Did I say or do anything embarrassing?”

The team smiled and Boomer laughed, trying to cover it with a cough.

Jett groaned. “Do I even want to know?”



After everyone finished eating, we left the galley. Jett was moving slowly, and I couldn’t help noticing how exhausted she seemed.

“You know you need to stop being mad at your team, especially Reaper. Everyone did their job.”

“We could have done it without sacrificing you,” I growled.

“No, you couldn’t, and deep down you know that. You would have lost the HVTs and *all* of us would have been captured or killed. You were seriously outgunned and outnumbered.

“Do you think it was easy for Reaper to leave me there? You think he doesn’t feel like shit when he sees me?” She pulled me to a stop, making sure I was listening. “I’m here. I’m alive.

Yeah, I feel like crap, but I'll heal up. All things considered, it's not that bad."

I snorted at the absurdity of that statement. "Not that bad? Have you seen your face? Do you have any idea what you look like?"

She glared at me. "I was there when it happened, so yeah, I have a pretty good idea." She released a heavy sigh. "We did our jobs, Jax, and we confirmed Cicero is involved. That's more important than any one of us. You know as well as I do that when you do this job long enough shit is going to happen. You can't avoid it. It wasn't that long ago *you* got captured and had the crap beat out of you. It's part of the job.

"It could have been worse. If Reaper hadn't left me there, it *would* have been worse. If anyone has the right to be mad, it's me...and I'm not. They're your *team*, your *family*. You need to find a way to get past this. If it was any one of you *men*, you wouldn't be acting like this."

"Jett, can I talk to you for a minute?" Reaper interrupted when the rest of the team caught up with us.

She gave him her full attention. "Sure."

The rest of the team gathered around, listening.

"Are you really alright?"

"I'm not gonna lie, I don't feel great, but I'll be okay."

"I'm so sorry, Jett."

She poked him in the chest. “Don’t. This isn’t your fault. You did the right thing. I’m not mad. You should be proud of yourself for leaving me.”

We all stared at her like she was out of her mind.

“You did it because the mission called for it. It took incredible strength to leave me there. You kept your team safe, and you got those asshats because of it. It was the right thing to do. And you came back for me. I’m grateful for that.”

Reaper drew her into his arms, carefully hugging her. “You’re a hell of an operative, Donovan. You can have our six any time.”

She grinned up at him. “Thanks, Reaper. That means a lot.”

After he released her, Reaper moved to stand in front of me. “We good?”

I glanced at Jett, and she nodded at me. I let out a heavy sigh. “Yeah, we’re good, brother.”

We weren’t only a team, we *were* brothers. We fought like brothers, and none of us liked it when we were at odds with each other. Being team leader wasn’t easy, I knew that. Reaper had to make tough decisions on a regular basis. My rational brain knew Reaper had done what he believed was right. What he *and* Jett thought was right. And what Jett told me was unquestionably accurate—it couldn’t have been an easy decision for him. Jett was here, she was safe. While I hated what happened, and as much as I might want to, I couldn’t hold a grudge because he’d done his job.

Jett grinned and teased, “Do you guys need a minute alone to hug it out?”

“Nah, we’re cool in public,” Reaper told her with a smirk as he yanked me into him, bear hugging me and slapping me on the back. “I love you, brother.”

“You guys are so bromantic. I’m getting a cavity watching you two.”

“Just don’t think about leaving my woman behind again,” I warned Reaper as we started moving again.

Jett froze and spun on me, her hands on her hips, the quick movement causing her to sway a little. “I’m not *your* woman, neanderthal.”

The whole team laughed. It would appear they were amused she didn’t remember confessing her feelings for me.

I gently placed my hands on her shoulders and kissed her forehead. “Yes. You are. The sooner you accept that, the better.” In one swift move, I carefully swung her up into my arms and headed for the team’s quarters.

“What do you think you’re doing?” She demanded, her voice angry but her arms wrapping around my neck.

“You can barely stand upright.”

“Screw it,” she said, giving in and relaxing against me. “I’m too tired to argue with you. You’re exhausting, you know that?”

I couldn’t help grinning. “Whatever you say, baby.”

Chapter 42

Patrick

Two weeks after Jett had been taken hostage, the team and Gonzo gathered at Jett's to come up with a plan for collecting the flash drive Declan Kilpatrick gave her.

Jett had healed well, and luckily, there didn't seem to be any permanent damage to her eye.

"I assume the flash drive is in a safety deposit box?" Midas asked.

Gonzo and Jett shared a look and smiled. "Uh, not exactly," she answered Midas.

"You and I should go," Gonzo suggested. "They won't be able to handle it."

"Where Jett goes, I go," I told him, firmly.

Jett rolled her eyes and Gonzo quirked an eyebrow at me, telling Jett, "If he freaks out, he'll call attention to you and compromise the retrieval."

“I’m a trained SEAL, I’m not compromising shit,” I responded, irritated he thought I’d fuck up something so simple. “It’s a secure box. Get in, get out...how hard can it be?”

Jett and Gonzo shared some kind of silent communication before Jett turned her gaze to me. “Maybe Augie’s right, maybe we should go get it.”

Clearly, the two of them were withholding something and I was getting impatient waiting for them to tell us what the hell it was. “Where’s the box, Jett?”

“More fun if it’s a surprise,” Gonzo quipped.

“Augie. We should tell them.” I had a feeling she knew I was becoming agitated and decided to put me out of my misery. “It’s at a private club.”

“So, what’s the big deal? That doesn’t sound like a problem.”

“What club?” Midas asked.

“Obsession,” Gonzo told him with a smirk.

Midas plugged the name into his computer, his eyes darting to all of us over his screen with wide eyes.

“Spill it, what’s going on?” Reaper demanded in his I’m-losing-my-patience tone of voice.

Midas was grinning. “Obsession is a *very exclusive* private sex club in Norfolk.”

I wasn't a prude, but that information shocked me. "You're a member of a private *sex club*?"

Jett sighed. "It's not a big deal, and it's not what you're thinking."

"What do you do at this sex club?" Boomer wondered, moving to stand behind Midas to read over his shoulder.

"If you have to ask, you probably can't handle the answer," Gonzo told him.

"Is that really how much it costs to join?" Midas croaked.

Gonzo rolled his eyes at Jett. "I told you they couldn't handle it." He pinned his steely gaze on me. "Jett and I will go retrieve the drive."

"No." I shook my head. "Nothing's changed. Jett and I are going."

"Why is it there and not at a bank?" Smoke wanted to know.

"The club *was* a bank," Jett explained. "It's been converted, but the vault is the same. Members have access to the safety deposit boxes. It has more security, more discretion, and the hours are better than a bank. Besides, the boxes are untraceable."



Saturday afternoon, we met at a hotel where we'd booked a two-room suite. We wanted to make sure we had privacy and security when we reviewed the contents of the flash drive and couldn't risk taking it to the base or any of our own homes. It seemed unlikely anyone would search for us at a fancy hotel.

It didn't take us long to hash out our plan. Reaper, Smoke, and Boomer would keep watch outside the club. Gonzo and Midas would manage our electronics from the high-tech surveillance van Jett borrowed from Shadowhawk, and Bruiser would be driving.

Jett and I would go inside the club and retrieve the flash drive. Once we had it, the two of us would get out, and we'd all meet back at the hotel.

I'd changed into jeans, a gray button down, and a suit jacket that hid the shoulder holster and gun I was wearing.

When Jett came out of the bedroom, we all stood gawking at her. She was wearing pink, skinny jeans, black Chucks and a sparkly, silver, spaghetti strap top. But it was the neon pink wig with bangs and hot pink lipstick that stole the show.

"You look great, Jett," Smoke told her with a smile.

Boomer wolf whistled. "Damn, woman."

"I *will* hit you," I barked at Boomer. I wasn't trying to sound like a possessive caveman, it just came out that way.

Midas gave us our earpieces and we did a comms check. Once again, we'd have an open mic. Jett slipped a crossbody

purse over her head as we left our suite, heading for the elevators.

I wasn't a stranger to partying at a club, but admittedly, I'd never been to a sex club. My mind was running rampant, curious what I'd see when we got inside.

When we arrived, there was a line, and I was surprised how busy it was. At the door, there were bouncers—or more accurately henchmen—the size of tanks on either side of the entrance. After Jett showed her membership ID, we entered the building and headed for the stairs.

The first floor had a dance floor, bar, and a VIP area. We descended the stairs to the next floor that had a series of hallways with closed doors and a small bar with a sitting area. We went down another level and saw a smaller dance floor, another bar, private booths, couches, and high-top tables. From what I'd seen so far, there wasn't anything happening that I hadn't seen in any other club.

“I don't know if I should be shocked or turned on, you know your way around this place so well. I want you to know, we're having a very long talk about this later.”

“Don't get your panties in a twist. Someone gave Augie two memberships as...a thank you. He gave one to me,” she explained. “It costs a lot of money to join so it's safer than most clubs. Everyone here cares about discretion. Which means no one is going to roffie you and throw you in their basement—unless, of course, that's what you're interested in,” she teased with a devilishly wicked sparkle in her eyes.

Surprising me, she wrapped her arm around my waist, mine instantly snaking around her. She smirked at me, clearly entertained. “What’s your kink, Morgan? Whatever it is, it’s here.”

I pulled her close, palming her head with my free hand, “You. You’re my kink.” I kissed her. “Have I told you how fucking hot you look tonight with your pink hair?”

A small smile lifted the corners of her lips as we continued making our way through the club.

“What’s behind the doors?”

She waggled her eyebrows at me. “Playrooms. Like I said, whatever your kink, it’s here.”

We worked our way to the entrance of the vault, where a man in an expensive, bespoke suit stood at a small podium at the top of a set of marble stairs. Another bigger, hulking man, also in a suit, was standing behind him, his back against the wall. He was unmistakably the muscle.

Jett stepped up to the podium. “I’d like access to the vault please.”

The gatekeeper verified her membership, including her thumb print, and another man in a suit appeared out of nowhere.

When he was done with Jett, the gatekeeper shifted his hawk-eyed gaze to me. “Your membership identification please, sir.”

“He’s a guest for the evening,” Jett answered him.

“I’m sorry, sir, you’ll have to wait here.” He told me. Training his focus on the new guy, he told him, “Please escort Ms. Kleinschmidt to the vault.”

“Of course. Right this way, Ms. Kleinschmidt.”

Jett kissed me and whispered in my ear, “I’ll be right back. Remember, my comms will be offline while I’m in the vault. Try not to get into any trouble while I’m gone.” She gave me a sexy smirk as she disappeared down the stairs following the man in the suit.

With a gameshow assistant wave, the gatekeeper swept his arm to my left. “May I suggest waiting at the bar, sir?”

While he’d said it politely, it didn’t sound like a suggestion. I nodded at him, strolling to the bar, and sliding onto a stool. I ordered a drink, so I didn’t seem out of place and watched what was going on around me.

This place wasn’t what I’d expected. I figured it would be more like an out-of-control orgy spectacle, everyone naked and screwing each other on every surface. But, from what I’d seen, it wasn’t much different than a normal club. Flashing lights, music thumping, a bar. Dancing. People dressed in everything from leather and lace, mesh and latex, with some business casual thrown in.

I assumed whatever hardcore stuff was going on was happening behind the closed doors on the floors above us.

On this level, the dance floor was surrounded by high back booths in red leather that had thick, black curtains that could

be drawn together to create total privacy. I briefly wondered if Jett and I had time to explore one of those booths.

“What’s it like in there?” Bruiser asked, curiously.

“Yeah, tell us what you see,” Smoke piped in.

“I should’ve put a bodycam on him,” Midas complained.

“Damn it, Midas, why didn’t you think of that earlier?” Boomer asked, sounding annoyed.

Holding my drink to my mouth so it didn’t appear I was talking to myself, I told them, “It’s not what I expected.”

Chapter 43

Patrick

When Jett came back from the vault about ten minutes later, there were two scantily clad women—one blonde, dressed in leather, the other, a brunette in the tiniest skirt I'd ever seen—standing at the bar with me. They'd approached me not long after I ordered the cocktail I wasn't drinking.

I'd been doing my best to respond appropriately to their small talk, while keeping my eye on the room and watching for Jett, but I really would have preferred it if they went away.

Jett slid up next to me and smiled. She looped her arm around me, mine slipped around her waist, my hand resting on her hip, tugging her into my side.

“I see you made new friends, honey.”

Even though I knew she was playing a role, I liked her calling me honey. I enjoyed the way she was touching me on purpose and the possessive way she was claiming me in front of these women.

“This is Whitney and Brittney,” I introduced her, with a cheeky grin.

She tilted her head, her wide eyes locked on mine. I had to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing at the expression on her face. She recovered quickly, leaning into me, facing the two women again. “I’m sorry ladies, but this big brute and I have plans in the voyeur room.” She told them with a straight face, patting me on the chest. “He’s more of a watcher than a doer if you know what I mean.”

There was laughing in my ear and Jett’s face split into a wide smile.

The brunette gave me a once over, undressing me with her eyes, as her gaze zeroed in on my crotch. The blonde looked disappointed, whining, “Well, that’s too bad.”

“Don’t I know it,” Jett mock complained. “C’mon, sweetie.”

We strolled away from the women, and I squeezed her hip. “I’m not a doer? You should know, there will be retaliation for that little stunt. I’m making a list in my head of the ways I’m going to prove I’m a doer.”

She smirked at me. “Remind me to hydrate.”

I laughed and pulled her into my arms, kissing her before letting her go and grinning at her. I liked this playful side of her. “So, where’s this voyeur room? That sounded interesting.”

She chuckled. “No time. But if you’re good, maybe I’ll bring you back.”

“Shit. We’ve got a convoy of SUVs surrounding the building,” Reaper barked in our ears, interrupting the moment. “Get the hell out of there. We’ll try to clear the way for you.”

“Copy that,” I responded.

We swiftly made our way back up to the top floor of the club, heading for the exit, when Jett’s hold on me tightened, “Patrick,” she cautioned, jerking her head to the left.

I followed her line of sight...Cicero and what had to be two of his goons had just entered the club. The three of them were dressed alike in black suits and ties, surveying the club, looking completely out of place.

Jett clutched my bicep with both hands and changed directions. “Be advised, we have eyes on Cicero,” she informed the team, leading us toward the dance floor.

“How did he know we were here?” I wondered out loud.

“Can you apprehend him?” Reaper asked.

“Negative. He’s not alone. Too much potential for collateral damage,” I responded.

The dance floor was dimly lit with muted red, orange, and russet spotlights mounted high up on the walls and in the vaulted ceiling, flashing in time with the music.

Be My Lover by La Bouche was playing as we weaved through the mob to the middle of the dance floor where we were swallowed up and safely hidden by the crowd that was dancing with carefree abandon.

Jett released my arm, moving to the beat of the music and, the next thing I knew, we were smiling at each other, dancing, and bouncing along with everyone else.

The song ended, and the erotic music and lyrics of *Closer* by Nine Inch Nails started flowing through the speakers. With Cicero and his two thugs still roaming the room searching for us, we stayed on the dance floor, where we were blending in with the crowd.

Jett shifted, her back resting against my chest. I wrapped my arms around her, engulfing her, our bodies pressed tightly together.

She leaned her weight against me, her arms lifting over her head, gracefully moving in time with the music. Her arm hooked around the back of my neck, her fingers threading through my hair, her other hand covering mine as it drifted over her body. I kissed and nibbled a trail along her neck. She dropped her head back on my shoulder.

Her ass was firmly planted against me, her body sliding against mine erotically. Her hips rolling rhythmically across my hard dick in time with the slow, sensual throbbing of the bass, our bodies swaying together as one.

“Jett,” I sighed against her head.

My hands were roaming over her more than they would if we were anywhere else in public. Despite the throng of bodies on the dance floor, I was completely caught up in the moment, feeling as if the world had narrowed to the two of us.

This wasn't a dance, it was tortured ecstasy.

Had I ever been this turned on?

She spun in my arms, pressed against me, chest to thighs, my hands palming her ass. She had one arm around my neck, the other sliding down my body until she was cupping my rock-hard dick, causing a chest deep moan to slip out of me.

“Is this a gun I feel?” She asked, soft and breathy.

I hissed and hauled her tighter against me, rolling my hips. “No. That's what you do to me, baby.”

I couldn't help myself, I covered her mouth with mine, kissing her deeply, my tongue ravaging her mouth, relishing the taste and feel of her.

The sound of someone loudly clearing their throat was suddenly in my ear. “Let's not get distracted. Stay on task kids,” Gonzo interrupted with an obvious smile in his voice.

Shit. I'd forgotten all about them. Hell, I'd forgotten what we were supposed to be doing here. Some special operator I was. I could only conclude my absentmindedness was due to the powerful, all-consuming effect Jett had on me.

I kissed her gently and rested my forehead against hers. “Fuck.”

“Yeah,” Jett responded, breathlessly.

After kissing her once more, we surveyed the room and located Cicero sticking out like a sore thumb near the far wall.

Using the crowd as cover, we headed off the dance floor in the opposite direction, moving quickly for the side exit.

Chapter 44

Jett

Patrick adjusted himself and wasn't subtle about it and I couldn't help grinning at him.

“When the shit stops hitting the fan, we're coming back here,” he told me, tagging my hand and threading our fingers together.

“TMI, dude,” Smoke said in our ears.

“I wasn't talking to you, asshole.”

“I'm in,” Bruiser unexpectedly said.

“Yeah, me too,” Boomer chimed in.

Augie chuckled. “Guess not all of you are boring after all.”

Patrick glanced at me. “I could use a minute and a fucking drink.”

I didn't get the chance to respond, because Reaper beat me to it, “No time, brother.”

“We're heading out the north exit into the alley,” I announced.

The team had parked the surveillance van on the street down the block from the entrance to the club, which was also where Patrick had parked his motorcycle. Unfortunately, our current circumstances put us on the opposite side of the large building with Cicero and his men between us, the exit, and our ride away from here.

“We’re coming around for you,” Midas told us.

A few moments later we heard Reaper in our ears again, “Shit. Negative on exfil, we’ve got company right on our ass. We’re going to have to lose them, then we can come pick you up.”

We exited the club into the alley but hadn’t gone far when we noticed we were also being followed by two of Cicero’s men. We started fast walking while I reached into my purse and withdrew one of the two guns I’d taken from Pandora’s box, glad I’d taken the time to screw on the suppressors while I was in the vault. At the same time, Patrick unholstered the gun he had under his jacket. The men following us picked up their pace and Patrick and I glanced at each other and took off running.

We got to the end of the alley in time to see the surveillance van with the team barrel through the intersection, two black SUVs chasing after them. We made a right going around the corner and raced down the street.

“We’ll meet you at the secondary exfil location,” Reaper told us.

“Negative. We’re being chased and headed the opposite direction,” Patrick responded.

We both zeroed in on the taxi parked on the street, the cabbie leaning against the driver’s side door smoking a cigarette. I went straight for the passenger side and scrambled in while Patrick showed the driver his gun. “We need to borrow your cab.”

Without hesitation, the guy backed away with his hands up, the cigarette dangling from his mouth. Patrick jumped in and we sped away from the curb.

It was at least ten minutes before we heard from the team again. Augie’s voice coming over our comms, “We’ve lost our tail. Tell us where you’re at, sugar, and we’ll come pick you up.”

Patrick had the taxi moving at a high rate of speed. He appeared calm, but his face was a mask of concentration, and he was white knuckling the steering wheel. He was weaving in and out of traffic, using the shoulder to keep us moving when there wasn’t an opening to pass other cars. I was hanging onto the ‘oh shit’ handle, rolling left and right with every swerve he made while I updated Augie on our current situation.

“Negative. We carjacked some poor cabbie and we’re on the Berkley bridge, but we’ve got at least three SUVs on our ass.”

“They’re shooting at us,” Patrick announced, as if I hadn’t noticed the bullets hitting the back end of the cab.

I dug in my purse, found the four extra magazines I'd taken out of Pandora's box and shoved them in my back pockets. Taking off my seatbelt, I climbed halfway out the window. Keeping one foot on the floor and one against the back of the passenger seat, I braced my back against the window frame and tried to steady myself on the roof of the taxi, shooting back at them while Patrick weaved in and out of traffic.

I was aiming for the headlights, knowing if I blew them out, the air bags would deploy. That would slow them down at worst and stop them altogether at best. With their headlights on, I had a good target. Except I was forced to hang on to keep from falling out the window with the way Patrick was weaving in and out of traffic. His evasive driving maneuvers were making it impossible to shoot straight.

"Try to hold it steady for a second!" I hollered through the window.

Patrick didn't slow down, but he did stop zigzagging back and forth through traffic. I fired five shots in rapid succession and one of the SUV's headlights blinked out. Seconds later it swerved and slammed into the barrier of the bridge.

One down.

"Hang on, Jett!" Patrick shouted.

I barely had enough time to brace myself before he jerked the taxi across three lanes of traffic.

A second SUV immediately slipped in behind us after the first one crashed. I shot at it until my clip was empty.

Releasing the clip, I yanked a new one out of my pocket, slamming it home, and fired again, hitting the engine block through the grill. The hood blew off, the SUV swerved sharply to the right then veered left. It flipped a couple of times, landing on its roof and skidding upside down in a shower of sparks, finally coming to a stop.

Two down.

Luckily, no one else was hit, but people were slamming on their brakes, side-sliding to a stop. Tires squealed, cars spun out, horns were blaring. Traffic was coming to a standstill behind us, the pungent smell of burnt rubber starting to permeate the air.

The third SUV wove around the gridlock and was fast approaching. The taxi unable to outrun the SUV's bigger, more powerful engine. When it got close enough, I could see Cicero in the passenger seat preparing to shoot at us.

“Jett, they’re coming up fast. Get back in the car and put your seatbelt on, they’re going to ram us,” Patrick yelled.

“Evade! Evade!” We heard in our ears.

“Thanks for the tip,” Patrick retorted, sarcastically.

I ducked back in the cab right as Patrick hit the accelerator hard. The engine whined and roared, the force knocking me back in my seat. “This fucker just won’t give up,” Patrick complained as he crossed two lanes of traffic, passing cars to get us in the fast lane, trying to shake off our tail.

With my seatbelt on, I twisted, hanging out the window, firing at the SUV that was right on our bumper, and managed to duck back inside the taxi as the SUV hit us from behind on the back, passenger side bumper. They'd executed what was commonly known as a precision immobilization technique, or PIT maneuver, which was designed to cause the hit vehicle—us—to lose traction and spin out.

Jax tried to hold on to it, but the taxi fishtailed wildly, spinning counterclockwise a couple of times. We hadn't even come to a full stop when the back quarter panel was broadsided by another car and we spun back the other way, until we ended up on the shoulder of the slow lane.

Cars were skidding to a stop, crashing into each other, while others managed to avoid what was starting to look like a demolition derby behind us. But all things considered, it wasn't as bad as it could have been.

We got lucky, Cicero and the three goons with him ended up on one side of the bridge, and we ended up on the other, with traffic stopped between us.

Patrick turned and gave me a once over as we unbuckled our seatbelts. "You okay?"

"Yeah. You?"

"I'm good. We need to get out of here."

As we jumped out of the stolen taxi, we heard Bruiser in our ears, "Everyone whole?"

"Roger that," Patrick responded.

“We’re on our way to provide back up!” Reaper barked in our ears.

“Negative. The bridge is fucked. Traffic is at a standstill behind us, you’d have to come in from the opposite direction, and we don’t plan on sticking around that long. So, unless you’re already on a helo headed this way, you’d never get here in time,” Patrick informed him bluntly.

“Remember Amsterdam, darlin’?” Augie asked.

“Fuck no.”

“It’s been rainin’, water’s high.”

“What does that mean?” Patrick asked me as we ducked behind the cab.

“He wants us to jump off the bridge.”

“You jumped off a bridge?” He stared at me, tilting his head in thought. “Would that work?”

“We’re not doing it. Trust me, you don’t want to.” I told him as I quickly reloaded my weapon and pulled the second gun from my purse.

We watched Cicero casually stroll to the back of the SUV and remove what appeared to be a MAC-10 machine gun.

“Oh, shit.” I jumped to my feet, waving my guns and shouting, “Everyone down!”

In response, people scrambled, some hit the asphalt or dove behind their cars, others started running for their lives. We were using the stolen taxi as cover when the distinctive sound

of automatic gunfire and people screaming began. Cicero and his brute squad were shooting across traffic, not caring about the innocent civilians in the way.

Patrick and I returned fire, and while we managed to hit one of Cicero's thugs, we were seriously, dangerously outgunned, and we knew it. As if we weren't in a big enough predicament, things were about to get worse with two more SUVs full of Cicero's goon platoon trying to work their way through the wreckage behind us.

It didn't take long for Patrick to yell, "I'm out!"

I didn't respond. Instead, I reloaded my guns with my last two magazines and fired back until I was also out of ammo. "I'm out too."

"We need to go, baby." Patrick gripped my hand, towing me behind him as we ran, hunched over, toward a vehicle near the front of the carnage of cars. The twisted, metal wreckage behind us looked like something out of an action movie. I pointed my empty gun at the woman who was crouching near the car, her hands covering her head.

"I'm sorry about this, but we really need this car," I told the woman.

She immediately put her hands up and scrambled across the asphalt away from us. "Go over there and stay down," I ordered, pointing to another car with my gun.

Patrick slid into the driver's seat, and I jumped in the passenger side. He floored it, getting off at the first exit. The

last thing I saw as Patrick got off the bridge was the three SUVs trying to force their way through the traffic jam. Tires squealing, Patrick sped down the offramp. He made several arbitrary turns doing his best to get us out of sight and far away from Cicero and his gang of goons.

“You two okay?” Reaper asked over our comms.

Patrick glanced at me before answering, “Well, we’re still alive. Working on making sure we stay that way.”

“We’re changing hotels in case the location was compromised. I’m sending the new location to your phones,” Midas told us.

It didn’t appear we were being followed, and after making another series of quick turns, Patrick slowed until we were going the speed limit. With a moment to finally catch our breath, I laid my head back on the headrest and closed my eyes, letting out a long exhale.

Patrick reached over, taking the gun I didn’t realize I was still holding out of my hand, lacing our fingers together and placing our clasped hands on his thigh. Rolling my head on the headrest, our eyes locked.

“So, how are you enjoying your retirement so far?” he deadpanned.

Not expecting the question, I laughed a hearty, genuine laugh. “Well, I have to say, it’s a little more stimulating than I thought it would be. What do you think of the private sector?”

He gave me a big smile. “It’s not what I expected.” He picked up our clasped hands, kissing my knuckles, telling me, “We need to dump this car.”

Patrick pulled over and parked on a random street. We abandoned the car and started moving, distancing ourselves from it, in case Cicero and the brute squad managed to catch up. I yanked off my pink wig and skullcap, tossing them in a trashcan. Neither of us spoke, Patrick keeping a firm hold of my hand as we hurried down the sidewalk at a brisk pace.

After we’d gone about a quarter of a mile, I took out my phone to call an Uber. Once our ride was ordered, Patrick informed the team we’d be on our way to meet up with them shortly.

After updating the team, he kept his intense gaze steady on me, pushing me until I was pinned against the side of a building, crushing his mouth against mine, kissing me deeply. The kiss was intense, raw, and insatiable. Our ride, honking and calling my name from the curb, forcing him to reluctantly release me.

Patrick dragged his mouth from mine, both of us panting and breathless. I stared into the depths of his hazel eyes, seeing the unmistakable lust and longing. He gently rubbed his thumb over my bottom lip before tagging my hand and heading for our ride.

Chapter 45

Jett

We were sore and a little banged up, but all things considered, we were lucky to be alive.

We were quiet on the ride to the hotel, but Patrick kept me close, holding my hand, keeping his arm wrapped around me. Nuzzling my neck. As if he needed physical contact with me. After walking through the hotel lobby hand-in-hand, Patrick punched the button to call the elevator. Once the doors slid closed behind us, he pushed me up against the back wall and was kissing me again, as if he couldn't help himself.

Once we reached the room, Patrick knocked and Midas opened the door to let us in. The rest of the team and Augie who were in the sitting room between the two bedrooms relaxing gave us a once over as we came through the door.

“You two whole?” Reaper asked.

Patrick brushed past Midas, pulling me behind him into one of the bedrooms. “We’re fine. Just need to clean up,” he said

briskly over his shoulder, kicking the bedroom door shut behind us.

There was nothing like a good tumble after a life-or-death situation when your body was pumped full of adrenaline. As far as I was concerned, it was the very best way to deal with the adrenaline dump. And, based on how he was acting, it seemed like Patrick had the same idea.

As soon as the door was closed, we wordlessly stripped off our clothes, not caring where they landed. Patrick kicked off his shoes, one of them flying across the room, hitting the nightstand with a thump, landing next to the bed.

Patrick stood near the door, shirt open, pants and boxer briefs pooled around his ankles, watching me strip off my pants. A condom already covering his rock-hard dick.

I stalked across the room to him, my palms roaming over the hard planes of his bare chest, pushing his shirt off and shoving him until his back collided against the door with a thud.

He yanked me into him, kissing me frantically, wet and ravenous. He grasped my ass, lifting me into his arms, my legs wrapping around him as he shuffled us toward the bed. But he tripped over his pants, which were still tangled around his ankles, and we didn't quite make it. Instead, he stumbled, tried and failed to regain his balance, and we sideswiped the edge of the bed on our way down.

The force of the two of us hitting the mattress shoved it off the frame, the lamp falling off the nightstand on the opposite side. We bounced off the edge and toppled to the floor in a

naked heap. Patrick managed to twist his body, and I landed on top of him with a grunt. “Smooth move, Mr. Romance. You are seriously suave,” I said, smiling down at him.

“What the hell are they doing in there?” Boomer asked, startling us.

“Sounds like they’re rearranging the furniture.” That came from Smoke.

They sounded far away, so they’d likely—hopefully—removed their comms. But hearing Patrick’s teammates in our ears made us realize we were still wearing ours. We stared at each other for a beat and started laughing, yanking them out and tossing them across the room. We were still laughing when Patrick rolled us over and pushed into me. Our humor evaporated, both of us moaning in ecstasy. My thoughts were vapor, everything other than the pleasure Patrick was giving me flew out of my head.



Once we’d caught our breath, Patrick stood, offering his hand, tugging me to my feet and leading me to the bathroom. He got rid of the condom and turned on the shower. In between kisses, he took his time washing me. Those big, callused hands tenderly slipping over every inch of my soapy skin. When he was finished, I mirrored his actions.

We got out, dried off, and got dressed. As we reached the door, he tugged me into him, kissing me soundly. “Jesus, Jett, what are you doing to me?” he breathed in a raspy whisper against my head.

Then he was kissing me in a way he’d never kissed me before. Soft and lovingly. Heartfelt. Full of emotion, heavy and thick. So much so, my heart ached, wishing it was real, wishing I could believe in the power of it. But history proved Patrick Morgan couldn’t be trusted with my heart, and now I realized I couldn’t be trusted with him.

I needed out of this room and away from him or I might convince myself this *was* real, that I could believe what he was pretending to offer and ended up plummeting into the abyss.

Chapter 46

Patrick

When we strolled out of the bedroom, everyone was staring at us and grinning.

“Is there anything to eat? I’m starving,” Jett wondered, as if she didn’t notice everyone’s attention on us because they knew what we’d been doing for the last forty minutes.

I was concerned. Something had happened right before we left the bedroom. She’d gotten the strangest look in her eyes, a cross between fear and extreme sadness. I kept wondering what it was going to take to get her to drop her walls and let me in. Every time I thought I’d broken through, she constructed another barrier between us. I was impatient, yet I knew I couldn’t rush her. But at this rate, would I ever have the right to claim her as mine?

“Bruiser and Smoke went to pick up some food,” Boomer answered her with a grin.

After Bruiser and Smoke returned with enough food to feed an army and we were midway through the meal, Midas asked

Jett about Declan. Who he was and what she thought might be on the flash drive.

Jett explained Declan was a hacker—probably the best on the planet—who made his living uncovering and collecting information people didn't want found. Their deepest, darkest secrets. Although she didn't give us any details of her mission, she did tell us he'd had a change of heart, turning the tables on his former clients.

Declan had been in the process of using the information to destroy the worst offenders. The hypocrites. People in power involved in gun running, sex trafficking, child porn, or prostitution. Politicians who voted against LGBTQ rights but had a wife and a same-sex lover on the side. What amounted to very bad men, and some women, doing unspeakable things.

After we'd finished eating, Midas moved to his computer, and we all crowded behind him, anxious to see what was on the thumb drive. He held it up, looking at each of us. "You realize that exactly like Pandora's box, once we open this, there's no putting the genie back in the bottle."

"Do it," Reaper said without hesitation.

Declan's flash drive contained files. Lots and lots of files. A wealth of incriminating evidence on ordinary people but also politicians, judges, military personnel, terrorists, spies, traitors, CEOs, arms dealers, and even the mafia and bratva.

The files were well-organized from the worst of the worst to those that were dependable and trustworthy. Midas backed up the files for safe keeping, then split them evenly between us.

Each of us took one of the seven other laptops Midas had set up, starting the painstaking process of going through them.

I wasn't sure if Midas had done it on purpose, but my set included Declan's files on Jett and I couldn't resist opening them. She'd been tagged as skilled, honest, and reliable. Although her file also contained information Declan shouldn't have access to including photos, both personal and while on jobs.

There was one photo of Jett and Gonzo running for a helo. Jett was barefoot in a low-cut, sparkly red dress, while Gonzo was decked out in a tux. Both had guns and were shooting behind them. It could have been an action movie poster or the cover of a book. Gonzo, who was sitting next to me, saw me staring at it and made a copy of the photo for both him and Jett. When he showed it to her, they looked at each other and smiled, obviously remembering when it was taken.

"Bingo, baby! I found Cicero's file," Midas called out after a while.

The file on Cicero was comprehensive and damning. It contained evidence that he'd been selling military secrets almost his entire CIA career and got rich doing it. The file contained names, dates, locations, operations, and hidden bank records. There were encrypted emails that had been decoded, surveillance photos, and videos of Cicero meeting with known terrorists, including Fazal Habibullah. We discovered he was the head of the snake of what could only be called a criminal

organization. All of it proved, without doubt, Cicero was a traitor to his country.

Declan's flash drive was an extremely dangerous little device. Whoever possessed it had an enormous amount of power. And based on its contents, it was no wonder Cicero was so desperate to get his grubby hands on it.



Several days later, Jett spoke to POTUS, asking his permission to allow her to expose anyone without a military connection. After getting the president's agreement, she anonymously contacted the FBI and several reputable media outlets.

Among others, she outed several senators and congressmen. Also, a governor, three mayors, judges, attorneys, six deputy sheriffs, federal agents, several doctors, clergy, three CEOs, and four well-known actors.

The evidence she included proved crimes against women and children. Proof of bribes and corruption. Fraud, prostitution, pornography, and human and arms trafficking. All of it depraved and repulsive.

All in all, a hundred and fifty-three names with the evidence of their crimes went to the media and FBI. Jett saw it as cleaning house and keeping the promise she'd made to Declan Kilpatrick.

The FBI was busy making arrests, and not surprisingly, the media was in a feeding frenzy.

Needless to say, the president was pissed off and on the warpath. Having trust issues of his own, he was working directly with Jett, Gonzo, and the team. He'd authorized top-secret, special missions and ensured arrests were made and no one was slipping through the fingers of justice.

We'd all been tasked with eradicating different pieces of Cicero's network. Our team had been busy rounding up terrorists, enemy combatants, spies, and breaking up sex trafficking rings.

Gonzo and Jett had been tasked with locating Cicero's highest-ranking or most dangerous accomplices. High-value targets who'd caught wind of what was happening and either fled to non-extradition countries or otherwise tried to disappear.

After being gone nearly a month chasing down and eliminating their list of targets, Gonzo and Jett were currently in The Maldives where they'd caught up with the last target on their list.

The Congressional hearings, court cases, court martials, and the fallout from Declan's flash drive would go on for years, but once Jett and Gonzo took out this last target, they'd be headed home and *our* roles in this whole mess would finally be over.

I was relieved it was almost finished. I missed Jett desperately. I hadn't been able to stop thinking about her,

worrying about her...wanting her home with me.

Today, the team and Commander Reynolds were on base, the President joining us on screen from the White House. We were all gathered, waiting anxiously to watch Jett and Gonzo deal with this last target.

They were both equipped with body cams streaming live audio and video to us on the big screen on the wall, but they didn't have comms, so we weren't able to communicate with them.

Half the big screen was coming from Jett's bodycam, the other half from Gonzo's. They were in a lavish, penthouse suite. Jett's camera angle showed her putting a laptop in a plastic bag. I hadn't seen her for weeks and was eager for more than the sight of her arms and latex gloved hands.

From Gonzo's view, we were seeing their target who was bound to a chair with Ace bandages, a black hood over his head. He was clearly unconscious. He hadn't moved and his head was drooping against his shoulder. While we watched, Gonzo started smacking the hooded head, waking him up.

"Jett! He's comin' to hurry up," Gonzo called out.

Gonzo tugged the hood off their prisoner's head, and his eyes blinked against the light in the room. He raised his eyes and looked up, sounding confused, "Gonzo?"

Gonzo's bodycam showed Jett walking toward him from across the room. It was my first view of her in a month. My heartrate spiked and my stomach clenched. She looked mouth-

wateringly good. I sat forward in my seat, my elbows on my knees, my clasped hands hanging between them, fighting the urge to get up and run my fingers over the screen. Seeing her after all this time caused my dick to swell uncomfortably, making my pants feel too tight.

Gonzo was wearing a navy-blue suit without a tie, the top two buttons of his white shirt unbuttoned. Jett was wearing white dress pants, a black shirt, and a long, cobalt blue jacket that fell to her knees. She was obviously wearing contacts, as both her eyes were unnaturally blue—almost the same color as her jacket—and she was wearing a long, blonde wig.

Jett ambled up behind their prisoner, placing her hands on his shoulders. “Hello, you smarmy bastard,” she chirped happily in his ear.

Wide awake now, Frank Cicero jerked, sitting up straight, his eyes wide and round. “Donovan?”

“That’s right.”

Cicero shook his head as understanding dawned and he started jerking and twisting against his ties. Jett moved to face him, standing next to Gonzo, the videos on our screen now matching almost exactly.

“Give it your best shot, Cicero, but Augie is very good at tying people up. I doubt you’ll get yourself free.”

I smiled at the screen. My magnificent, little warrior.

“It’s true, I am good at tyin’ people up,” Gonzo bragged to Cicero with pride. “But it’s a toss-up who’s better at enhanced

interrogation.”

Jett huffed out a laugh. “You wish. I’m so much better at enhanced interrogation than you.”

“Are not.”

“Am too.” She turned to face him. “Let’s make it interesting, shall we? We’ll take turns carving Frankie up and let him judge.”

I was pretty sure they were joking, but it was understandable Cicero thought they were serious. He was terrified. Tugging and thrashing against his restraints so hard, he was in danger of tipping over the heavy chair he was sitting in. “Donovan, Gonzo, don’t.”

“Don’t what, Frankie?” Jett asked, sweetly.

“Whatever you think I did, I didn’t do it. I swear. You *have* to believe me.”

“No, we don’t,” Gonzo and Jett answered in unison, then grinned at each other.

“We know you did it. Declan had the proof, remember?” Jett reminded him, sounding bored.

“Please,” Cicero begged, giving up his brief subterfuge of innocence. “You need me. I have information. I have *valuable* information to trade.”

“Tell you what,” Jett said. “Answer our questions and we’ll let you go. But if you lie, all bets are off.”

“Of course. Yes.” Cicero vigorously bobbed his head in agreement. “Anything you need. Just don’t kill me.”

“Did you set the SEALs up in Afghanistan?” Jett asked.

“Yes. They weren’t supposed to make it out of that firefight. Fazal’s plan was to capture all of them. The way I heard it, his men would have succeeded if you hadn’t been there. The SEALs wouldn’t have made it out without you, but I had no idea you were going to be there, so I couldn’t warn him.”

Gonzo scowled at him. “Why? Why did you set them up?”

Disbelief spread across Cicero’s face. “Do you have any idea how much a team of Navy SEALs is worth?”

Gonzo and Jett looked at each other with disgust, and I heard the rest of the team reacting angrily behind me, but I never took my eyes off the screen.

Gonzo took over the interrogation, “How did you find us at the club?”

“I had Donovan followed from the base. I knew Declan Kilpatrick had the evidence to bury me. Half the intelligence community is afraid of that information. The other half wants to get their hands on it. With what’s in those files, you could control countries, regimes, and governments. It’s worth *billions*.”

His eyes met Jett’s. “There were rumors going around that Kilpatrick gave you all that evidence. I’d been trying to get my hands on it for years. Everyone knew how smart and security conscious Kilpatrick was. Every raid, every attempted hack

failed...until you were sent in. After he died, I kept a close eye on you, Donovan, but you were working so much, I never had the opportunity to get my hands on you.

“I’m familiar with that club. I know they have secure boxes. When my men followed you there, I was hoping you’d gone to retrieve those files. So, while my men kept the SEAL team busy outside, I slipped in, hoping to nab you before any of you knew I was there.”

My pulse kicked up a notch, thundering in my ears. My heart raced and rage boiled through my veins hearing Cicero admit his intentions to kidnap Jett.

Jett had gone motionless and rigid, but other than that, she showed no outward reaction to Cicero’s statement. “All your bad intel at the meeting with Reaper’s SEAL team...you did that on purpose. It was misdirection, a setup, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.” He nodded. “That’s where I made a mistake. I knew you were on to me when you challenged the names. Then you got me thrown out and I lost control of the situation, so I had to come up with something else.

“You and that team of SEALs were getting too close. I knew you were putting things together, and it was only a matter of time. I was pretty sure you had Declan Kilpatrick’s evidence. I needed it. I had to do something, so I set you up in Azerbaijan.”

Cicero was lucky I wasn’t in that room with them. I’d rip the bastard apart with my bare hands for being the one responsible for hurting Jett.

“How did you know we’d located Novikov and Kuznetsov in Azerbaijan?” Jett asked.

“I have...let’s call them employees, that keep certain people under surveillance and inform me of anything useful. When I found out you were going with them, I knew you and the SEAL team had figured things out, so I set a new trap.”

“We’re gonna need that list of *employees*,” Gonzo told him.

Instead of using the list as leverage to save his own ass, Cicero immediately started giving them the names.

“Okay. I think that’s everything,” Jett said, glancing at Gonzo who nodded in agreement.

“So you’ll let me go?” Cicero asked, hopefully.

Gonzo and Jett chuckled but there was no humor in it.

Cicero was obviously panicked. “You said you’d release me if I answered your questions!”

“We lied,” Jett responded with a grin.

He was sweating and twitchy, his eyes as big as dinner plates, darting around the room. “I can make you rich. I can make you both *very* rich,” he said, desperately.

The bodycam views shifted to Jett and Gonzo facing each other. “Is he implying we’d take his money to let him go?” Jett asked Gonzo.

Gonzo nodded his head. “I believe he is, sugar.”

Both views panned back to face Cicero in his chair. “Do you really think we’d take your fuckin’ blood money?” Gonzo

snapped at him.

“How many people died so you could make all that money, Frankie? How many lives were destroyed so you could get rich?” Jett snarled at him.

“You won’t get away with this.”

“Yes, we will. By the time you’re found, we’ll be out of the country,” Jett told him, casually. “Besides, you’re simply going to be another middle-aged guy who died of a heart attack in his bed.”

“Donovan, Gonzo, please. *Please*, don’t do this.”

Jett’s body cam shifted back toward Gonzo. “Is he crying?”

“That he is, darlin’.”

“Jeez, he’s pathetic.”

Gonzo pursed his lips and nodded. “Total pussy.”

“Why is it whenever we’ve got a bad guy tied to a chair, all they ever do is beg and plead?” Jett imitated Cicero’s whiny voice, “No. Please. Stop. Don’t hurt me, don’t kill me.”

When she spoke again, her voice was back to normal, “Just once it would be nice if they could man up, take responsibility, and admit when their bad choices had caught up to them and understand it’s time to pay the piper.”

Gonzo nodded, and Jett’s camera swung back to Cicero.

“You know, in addition to everything else he’s done, I think he forgot the SEAL team he tried to kill are our friends...and your boyfriend,” Gonzo pointed out.

“It appears so.” Jett’s camera jerked and faced Gonzo. “Wait. What? He’s not my boyfriend.”

Everyone in the room and the President chuckled. Everyone except me. While I *knew* she cared about me, after all this time she still refused to admit her feelings, and her comments stung. No, they more than stung, they hurt.

“Then what do you call him?” Gonzo wondered.

“I don’t call him anything.”

Ouch.

“Jett, darlin’, you know I love you, but neither one of you are the same people you were when you were kids. He’s truly sorry for the dick move with that breakup text, and considerin’ how much time you spend with him, you’ve forgiven him.

“You know I’m the first person who would kill him for hurtin’ you, and I’d make him suffer first. But I see the way you two look at each other. Life is short, you gotta stop lyin’ to yourself about that man and admit you care about him too.”

I was torn. I wasn’t happy Gonzo threatened to torture and kill me—especially when I didn’t doubt he would—but I was also shocked it was Gonzo advocating for me, pushing Jett in my direction.

“So, you’re saying I should take relationship advice from the man who vows never to *have* a relationship?”

“Are you sayin’ what you got goin’ with Jax is a relationship?”

“What? No. Why are we even talking about this, Augie?” She asked, obviously flustered.

“Well...we were talkin’ about how Cicero here tried to kill our friends and that led to talkin’ about your boyfriend.”

“I’m armed, Augie.” She brushed her jacket out of the way and casually rested her hand on the butt of the gun holstered on her right hip to make her point.

Gonzo chuckled. “Well, before you put a hole in me, remember how Cicero tried to kill us too?”

Jett nodded. “Yes, I do. Did you know he told me to get over it. That it was water under the bridge? But I’m still holding a grudge about that mission.”

“I ain’t happy about it either. Shoulder still aches every time it’s gonna rain or if I sleep on it too long.”

Cicero squirmed and started begging again, “Please. Please, I can make it right. I can make all this right.”

We could hear the anger in Gonzo’s voice as his camera swung to face Cicero and moved closer to him, “How? You can’t bring back the dead. You can’t cure the injured. You can’t stop the sufferin’ you caused. How are you gonna make it right, Cicero?”

The camera angle shifted as Gonzo faced Jett again, “You ready, sugar?”

“More than ready. Where’s the vial?” She asked, holding out her hand. “Give it to me.”

“No. I get to kill him.”

“Augie, sweetness, we talked about this. I get to kill him,” she said in a pacifying tone, as if she were speaking to a child.

“No! Please, no. Donovan, *please*.”

They both ignored Cicero’s pleas.

“Jett, darlin’...”

“Fine, I’ll flip you for it,” she interrupted, digging in her pocket. She had a variety of coins in her hand and plucked a quarter out of her palm.

Gonzo held his hand out and wiggled his fingers in the gimme gesture. “Lemme see it.”

Jett gasped. “Are you insinuating I’d cheat? I’m truly shocked and appalled you think I’d do that. I’m...well, I’m insulted is what I am.”

Gonzo chuckled. “Are you really though, Jetty spaghetti?” He asked, smiling, and taking the coin from her.

All of us started chuckling.

“Jetty spaghetti?” Boomer repeated with a smile.

“They really are good together,” Smoke commented.

“No, Augie.” She pointed at him. “We agreed. No more Jetty spaghetti...*ever*.”

Gonzo ignored her, holding the coin up to her, turning it to show her both sides. “Well, lookie here, this seems to be a two headed coin.”

Jett snatched it back and removed the change from her pocket again. Dropping the two headed coin back in her palm, she offered her hand to him. “Fine. You choose.”

“Please. Please, don’t kill me,” Cicero begged through his sobs.

Jett addressed Cicero while Gonzo picked through the coins in her hand. “You had no mercy for the men and women you injured or killed. No mercy for their loved ones they left behind. You won’t get mercy from us.”

“You know me and Jett don’t do mercy, Cicero,” Gonzo agreed, finally deciding on a quarter in Jett’s hand.

“That used to be what you liked most about us, Frankie. Besides, our orders are to kill you...a lot.”

“Orders? Since when do the two of you follow orders?”

Jett and Gonzo looked at each other. “I think the jackass is insultin’ us again,” Gonzo said.

“When have we ever *not* followed orders?” Jett questioned and Gonzo shrugged his shoulders.

“Sorry. I’m sorry. Please. Please, please. I’ll do *anything*.”

“Quit begging, it’s pathetic. We’re sending you straight to the other side of the veil, Frankie. It’s all over, and there’s nothing you can do about it,” Jett told him.

Gonzo flipped the coin in the air and Jett called heads. After Gonzo caught it and slapped it on his wrist, he showed it to her with a big smile on his face. “Tails. That’s what happens when

you try to cheat.” He handed the coin back to her. “You’re not gonna pout are you, darlin’?”

“No. I can be a good sport,” she muttered.

Gonzo laughed at her.

“I can! Whatever, jackass.”

Jett moved to stand behind Cicero, tugging his head back by his hair. Gonzo poured the contents of a small vial in his mouth and held it shut with one of his big hands on the top of his head, the other under his chin so he couldn’t spit it out. Meanwhile, Jett kept a hold on his head and pinched his nose shut.

It only took a few seconds for Cicero’s eyes to go wide and both Gonzo and Jett let go of him. His face screwed up, his breathing changed, his body went stiff like he’d been tased. He grunted and groaned, whispering, “fuck you” as his breath came quicker. Then he let out one long exhale and went limp.

Gonzo and Jett stood passively side by side in front of him, watching.

“You know, I really think we should have made him suffer more,” Jett said, thoughtfully.

“You’ve got a wicked, bloodthirsty side. You’re like a cat that likes to play with the mouse before you kill it.”

Jett shifted to face him. “Um, hello, kettle? I was just wondering if you knew you were black?”

They removed Cicero's restraints, carrying him to the bed. They quickly stripped him to his underwear, laid him down and covered him up.

"Ugh, I can't believe we have to touch him," Jett complained. "He's all sweaty and gross. I'm wearing gloves and I still feel like I need a shower to wash off his cooties."

When they'd finished, Cicero looked like he was sleeping peacefully in his bed. They collected everything and left the penthouse, heading down the hallway to the elevator. Once they were in and the doors closed behind them, Jett faced Gonzo, "Hey, I'm hungry. Let's go for burgers and beer."

Gonzo chuckled. "It's comments like that that make me worry about us."

"Sorry, not sorry there's one less murdering sleazebag out there. Who knows how many lives we saved by killing him. We did the world a favor." She looked up at him. "We're still getting burgers though, right?"

Gonzo laughed heartily, "Yeah, sugar, we'll get burgers, and after we get a couple beers in you, we'll continue our discussion about your boyfriend."

"Seriously, Augie—gun, bullets, grievous bodily harm. You should think about that. The ironic thing is, I think you're really a romantic at heart. I think you *do* want to find someone to call your own."

Gonzo laughed. "You're way off base there, darlin'."

Jett shook her head. “I don’t think so. I think I’m right on base. You’re afraid, just like the rest of us.”

Is that Jett admitting she’s afraid of how she feels about me?

Gonzo ignored her, taking out his phone. We watched as the president’s phone rang and he answered it.

“It’s done,” Gonzo stated.

“Good work,” the president told him. “You two will have to postpone the burgers and beer though. Your plane is ready and waiting for you.”

“Roger that.”

POTUS disconnected the call while Gonzo and Jett stripped off their body cams and the screen went black.

Everyone got up and started milling around, the team making comments about how well Jett and Gonzo worked together. I headed straight for Reaper. “I owe you an apology for Azerbaijan. You and Jett were right, we would’ve been killed if we’d tried to engage or rescue her without backup. I can see that now.”

Reaper gave my shoulder a hard squeeze. “I appreciate that, but there’s no need to apologize, brother.”

“I dumped my anger on you. I was out of my mind with fear and panic. I wasn’t thinking straight and lashed out at you. You didn’t deserve that.”

“I know that, Jax. The woman you love was in harm’s way. Your reaction was understandable. If it had been Alex, I can’t

say I wouldn't have behaved the exact same way. No need to apologize for that." Reaper gave my shoulder another squeeze and strode away.

I stood, staring at the now black screen on the wall. I wasn't listening to any of the conversations going on around me. All I could think about was Jett finally coming home.

Chapter 47

Jett

I pulled into my driveway about two in the morning. I was *finally* home. After grabbing my go bag, I dragged my ass out of the truck. I was so exhausted. When I came around the corner, I noticed Patrick sleeping in one of the loungers on my deck. He was on his back, his head tilted slightly to the side, his lips parted. He was so beautiful and peaceful. God, he was a sight for sore eyes.

My heart leapt as I stood for a moment looking down at him, watching him sleep. How long had he been here waiting for me? I'd spent some time—okay, a lot of time—thinking about him while I'd been away. I tried to untangle the heaping mess of my emotions about Patrick. I spent even more time on the way home, thinking about what Augie had said and being brutally honest about how I really felt.

I couldn't keep falling into bed with him—opening myself up then rebuilding the walls around my heart so I could safely hide and pretend he didn't mean anything to me. It wasn't fair to Patrick to refuse to make a decision. I either needed to take

a chance and be with him wholly and completely, or I needed to construct a wall of willpower and send him away for good.

I'd thought about the million things that had to happen for either of us to be born. To grow up in different places and still meet each other on that ship. Get together, break up, and end up side-by-side in cells in Afghanistan twelve years later.

That was an awful lot of events working to put us together. If I sent him away, would something bring us back to each other again? Like an inescapable force. And if it did, would I regret the time we spent apart? I couldn't stop thinking about it, and the funny thing was, I didn't even believe in that woo-woo destiny stuff.

Was I keeping Patrick at arm's length because I wanted it that way, or simply because I was afraid? Afraid to trust him. Afraid to let him in again. Afraid to let myself be defenseless and vulnerable.

And okay, it was getting harder to pretend I didn't care about him. Harder to keep convincing myself I didn't have feelings for him. I'd thought about him every day I was gone. I had to force myself not to call or text him. The fact is, I do care about him. I more than care about him and that scared the ever-loving crap out of me because I couldn't help wondering what would happen if he disappeared again.

Although, I wasn't the same girl I'd once been—not even close. I was older, hopefully a little wiser, and so much stronger. If Patrick left, I knew I could handle it. But he was adamant it wouldn't happen, even if he couldn't predict

something like that. Bad things happened to everyone, that was a fact I knew all too well. But good things happened too.

I knew what I had to do.

I *couldn't* stay away from him because, slowly but surely, he'd fractured my armor and slipped through the cracks. He'd collected all the jagged, scattered pieces of my heart, and, with every moment we'd spent together, he'd somehow bound them back together.

I'd come to the realization that good or bad, whatever life had in store for me from here on out, I wanted Patrick by my side. As terrifying as it was, I *wanted* to surrender my heart to him.

I went inside, dropping my go bag next to the door and locking my weapons in my gun safe before making my way back out to wake him up. Squatting next to the lounge, I stroked my hand across his wide chest, my voice soft, "Patrick?"

He came awake slowly. "Jett?"

His bed head hair, his deep, sleepy voice, and scruffy face all had a physical effect on me. It was such a turn on, and if I wasn't so tired, I'd jump him right on this lounge. It wasn't until that moment, when he was looking up at me as if I was something rare and valuable, I realized I finally felt like I was whole again.

Chapter 48

Patrick

Now that it was over, POTUS had given us a week off for a job well done.

I didn't know exactly when, but Jett was due back any time. Not wanting to miss a minute with her, I'd gone to her house to wait for her. I hadn't meant to fall asleep, and for a moment, I thought I was dreaming when I heard Jett softly calling my name. When I realized she was really next to me, I shot up, dragging her into my lap, holding her close against me, soaking up the feel of her finally being back in my arms. I covered her mouth with mine, kissing her thoroughly, pouring my love for her into that kiss.

Leaning away, I palmed her face, staring into her unique eyes. "You have no idea how much I missed you," I confessed, capturing her mouth again, kissing her soundly. "You look tired. Are you alright?"

"I'm exhausted. I just want to sleep for a week."

Surprising me, she climbed out of my lap and reached for my hand. “C’mon.” She led me inside, straight to her bedroom and, without fanfare, stripped off her clothes and climbed into bed.

I followed suit, taking my clothes off and crawling in after her. Once I was lying down, she wrapped herself around me, her head on my chest, her hand over my heart, one long leg draped over mine. I held her against me, relishing the feel of her. My hands roaming over her silky skin.

A few minutes later, her breathing evened out and I realized she was asleep. I was genuinely baffled. She’d invited me in, stripped off her clothes, but only wanted to curl around me and sleep? She hadn’t voiced the words, but this was the first time she’d invited me to *sleep* in her bed, and I wanted to shout my happiness from the rooftop. I stayed awake a long time, holding her against me, loving the feel of her being back in my arms, draped over me while she slept soundly.



When I woke the next morning, Jett was still in my arms, soft and warm against me. The feeling was more incredible than I’d imagined. I kissed her awake, not wasting any time getting inside her. I set a slow but powerful rhythm. Pumping in and out of her with slow, deliberate strokes. Taking us to an emotional place we’d never gone. Jett kept her eyes averted, refusing to look at me.

I knew she was struggling with the way the powerful intimacy was making her feel. Whatever had happened while she was away, her walls were crumbling, and I knew she was afraid of giving up their protection. Afraid to open herself up and be emotionally vulnerable. Afraid of being hurt again.

I didn't break my rhythm as I placed my hands on either side of her head. "Look at me, love."

She was staring at my chin, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears. "I don't know if I can," she whispered. "It's...it's too much, Patrick."

"There's nothing to be afraid of. I've got you, baby. You're safe with me." I kissed her soft lips, her jaw, behind her ear. "I'll be right here to catch you. I won't let you go, Jett."

When her eyes finally met mine, I saw the raw emotion. Tears slipped from her eyes, trickling across her temples and rolling into her hair, but she didn't break eye contact again.

The moment was powerful. Intimate. Consuming. My name on her lips—a prayer. I kissed her long and deep. A kiss full of the longing, and desire, and love I felt for her. All of it was a powerful drug. One I couldn't get enough of.

When she came, it was crying my name and clutching me tightly as if she couldn't get me close enough. As if I might disappear. As soon as her orgasm hit and her body squeezed against me, I lost it and I swear it was an out-of-body experience.

Once we'd caught our breath, I took care of the condom. I knew I needed to tread carefully, not wanting to give her too much time to think or change her mind and put those steel walls back in place to shut me out. But I couldn't help hoping this was the start of something bigger between us. I wanted to crawl back into bed with her, but instead, I pulled on my boxer briefs, heading for the kitchen.

Jett strolled out of her bedroom shortly after me. The sight of her wearing nothing but my t-shirt made my heart constrict in my chest. She slid onto one of the stools, watching while I made us gooey, grilled cheese sandwiches and sliced some fruit. When I set a glass of chocolate milk in front of her, she smiled so wide, I felt like I'd been struck by lightning.

“Patrick?”

“Yes, love?” The fact that she'd been calling me by my name since she returned home wasn't lost on me. I was overjoyed by that turn of events and for the first time, I was hopeful the walls around her heart had finally been destroyed.

“I've been gone for a month. Why do I have bread, milk, and fruit in my house?”

I turned around and faced her. I knew it was a risk, but I told her the truth, “Maybe knowing you were coming home, someone went shopping and then picked your lock to put those groceries away. I'm not saying that's what happened, but it is a plausible explanation.”

Sliding off the stool, she came around the island and kissed me. “Thank you for doing that, Patrick,” she breathed across

my lips.

After we ate, we plugged in a movie. Her couch was wide enough for us to spoon comfortably, and it wasn't long before she was asleep again.

She still hadn't thrown me out. Was it because she was too tired? Or had she finally realized she had feelings for me? I didn't care. I was just happy she was in my arms, letting me stay, and wasn't ready to think about how I'd feel, how disappointed I'd be—how much it would hurt—if she threw me out...again.

Later, we were on her deck making dinner. She'd made a salad, and after I told her to relax, she sat in one of the loungers watching me while I was at the BBQ grilling chicken and veggies.

“Who knew you were this domestic. I could totally get used to this,” she teased with a smile that lit up her eyes.

I grinned, pointing the tongs I was holding at her. “Oh, I've got skills, baby.”

A bubbly laugh burst from her. “Yes, you do.”

She seemed so happy and carefree, and it struck me something was different about her. As if a massive weight had lifted off her. Suspicion and fear no longer filled her unique eyes. She wasn't wary and guarded. I'd never seen her so relaxed and open. And I couldn't help noticing she didn't tell me not to call her baby.

We ate, we danced on her deck, and we made love until we were both boneless and exhausted. As we fell asleep tangled together in her bed, a deep sense of contentment washed over me knowing I was exactly where I belonged.

The next morning when I woke up, I panicked when I saw she was gone. After a moment I realized she hadn't thrown me out, and wherever she'd gone, she'd be back. When I made my way into the kitchen, there was a note on the coffee maker saying it was ready to go. The sweet and thoughtful gesture made me smile. I waited for the coffee to brew, taking a cup out onto the deck and saw her out in the ocean surfing.

It was still early—quiet, and peaceful. As if we were the only two people on the planet. I sat drinking my coffee, listening to the waves rhythmically crash against the shore and watching her, amazed by how graceful she was. When I saw her coming out of the water, I stood at the railing waiting for her. Once she saw me, she smiled wide, and I couldn't have been more ecstatic at that reaction. My heart fluttered, my stomach flipped over on itself, and I wondered if I'd ever get used to the overwhelming emotions I felt for her.

“Hey, sleepyhead,” she called up from the sand.

I smiled back at her. “Morning, love. Coffee?”

“Please, that'd be great.”

Again, she didn't argue the use of the endearment. Self-preservation warned me to be careful, to hold back and protect my feelings. That her new behavior might be temporary. I just

couldn't do it. I was all in. Heart, soul, mind, and body—Jett Donovan owned all of me.

I went inside to get her coffee while she rinsed off in her outdoor shower and stripped off her wetsuit. I set her coffee on the table, wrapping her in a towel and drying her off. Then I kissed her and pulled her into one of the loungers in front of me between my legs.

“Now that you're all caught up on sleep, there's going to be a celebration at Harry B's on Saturday. I already called and invited Gonzo.”

She didn't fight or argue, she simply leaned back against my chest and nodded.

We spent another perfect, lazy day together. We ate, made love, took a nap, and ate again. We were currently spooning on her couch, watching a movie.

Jett kept wiggling her perfect ass into me, driving me crazy. Especially knowing neither of us were wearing anything under our sweats, the thin cotton the only thing separating us. Every time she wiggled against me, I rocked forward, pushing my hard cock between her ass cheeks. I was considering sliding our sweats down to get us off this way and that thought had me smiling.

“Patrick?”

My body stiffened and my heart seized. I recognized that tone. It was her get-out-of-my-house tone. She was going to throw me out. I held her tighter. These last few days, being

with her like this—her being completely mine—had been paradise. They'd been the happiest days of my life. I'd come to realize this, us together, was everything I wanted every day for the rest of my life. I wasn't sure I'd survive her asking me to leave. I swallowed hard, not wanting to respond, not wanting to hear the words, but knowing I had to. "Yeah, love?" my reluctance obvious in my voice.

Jett's voice was soft and uncertain, "I...I..." She took in and exhaled a deep breath. "I want you to take me out on a date," she said quietly.

I couldn't help my gasp. That was the last thing I'd expected her to say. A wave of relief and happiness washed over me. A huge smile spread across my face. I rolled her over, hovering over her, yanking her sweats off, slithering out of my own. "You do? You mean it, Jett?"

I snatched a condom off her coffee table, rolling it on as quickly as I could. She giggled, something she rarely did. So rarely, her giggle was like stumbling onto Santa riding a unicorn in a traffic jam, and I reveled in the sound.

"Yes," she responded, twining her arms and legs around me. I kissed her, and she grinned up at me. "It should include dinner."

"Absolutely," I agreed, sliding into her with a moan of pleasure and happiness. "Tonight, at six."

She responded with a moan of her own. "I didn't mean it had to be tonight," she told me, her voice sexy and breathless.

I was pumping in and out of her slowly. “After all this time, I’m not giving you the chance to change your mind.” I pulled out of her. “Tonight,” I repeated, sliding back into her until I bottomed out. “At six.”

“Whatever you say, Patrick,” she breathed, seductively.

Chapter 49

Jett

Patrick's team and I were at Harry B's celebrating the takedown of Cicero and his treasonous network. Even though Alex, Hali, and Vivian weren't aware of any details—other than what had been on the news—they'd also come along to take part in the celebration.

It was finally over, and we could all get back to our normal lives. As promised, I'd finished what Declan had started. It was bittersweet, but I felt really good about it. Once again—or for the first time—I was retired.

Tonight was Karaoke night, and, as usual, it was crowded and energetic. Patrick and I were near the bar. He was standing behind me, his arms banded around my waist. I was leaning into him, my head against his shoulder. I was relaxed and comfortable in his arms. I wasn't trying to escape or run from him anymore. As far as I was concerned, I was right where I was supposed to be. But more than that, I was where I *wanted* to be.

Since I'd returned from The Maldives, Patrick had been staying at my place. He'd been sneaking things into my house almost every day. His clothes, shoes, uniforms, and toiletries kept mysteriously showing up, and it was funny as hell he thought he was being stealthy about it. But, instead of getting angry, whenever I noticed something new, I smiled and pretended not to notice. The truth was, I liked seeing his things in my house.

I was a little surprised he hadn't asked why I hadn't thrown him out. But until I'd asked him to take me on a real date, he held me tightly against him every night, as if he was worried I would. I couldn't really blame him for that.

Since I'd come home, we were acting like a real couple. We'd been talking a lot, about anything and everything. Sharing stories about our lives—both good and bad—without any anger or hostility. At times it was emotional. Real and raw and, yet, somehow wonderful.

We did everything together—cooked, took walks on the beach, read, slept, watched movies, and went for rides on his bike. I was even trying to teach him to surf. He might be a badass Navy SEAL, but comically, he could not get the hang of surfing. His uncoordinated, awkward attempts had become a great source of entertainment for me, making me laugh until tears rolled down my face. Sometimes, we sat quietly in each other's arms on my deck, watching the rhythmic waves of the ocean advance and retreat. Even our silences were comfortable and welcome.

It was all new to me, and this relaxed domestic dance we'd fallen into should have been oppressive and terrifying, but it wasn't.

I was adept at taking care of myself. But damn if I didn't crave the way Patrick took care of me. The way he stood up for me. Protected me. Cared for me. Loved me.

It was unexpected, and no one was more surprised than me, but I liked having him around. I liked falling asleep and waking up in his arms. I liked doing everything and nothing with him. Even the sex had gotten better, which I didn't think was possible. Admittedly, we couldn't keep our hands off each other, and in no way was I unhappy about that.

Patrick's embrace tightened around me and his sultry voice next to my ear snapped me out of my thoughts and back to the bar. "I'm about to wager you're a romantic at heart."

I turned in his arms, not sure I'd ever been so insulted in my entire life. "I am not."

He smiled wide, tugging me into him. "Yes, you are. You're a gun toting, knife wielding, ass kicking romantic."

"No, I'm *not*. Shut up."

He had the audacity to laugh. He let me go long enough to knock back a shot, before pulling me back into him, kissing me quick and hard. He tasted of Patrick and whiskey. "Well, we're about to find out." He winked and kissed me once more, then, surprising me, he strode away across the bar toward the stage.

“What does that mean? Where are you going?” I called after him.

He glanced over his shoulder and grinned at me but kept moving, jogging up the stage steps. The crowd started cheering, whistling, and clapping once he picked up the microphone. He ignored all of it, gazing at me as if I were the only person in the room, “This one’s for you, love.”

I was in shock. Patrick was going to sing? When the music started, I recognized the song immediately, *Somebody Like You* by Keith Urban.

He stood on stage, his eyes locked on mine, and sang his heart out. He had a decent voice, and he wasn’t holding back, giving it his all, never taking his eyes off me. I briefly wondered if he’d practiced this, because he knew all the words without having to use the teleprompter.

My fingers steepled over my mouth, attempting to hide my huge smile. I was doing my best not to react, not to let my emotions get the better of me, but it was impossible not to. He could have been off key and caterwauling, and I still would have been emotional watching him standing on stage in front of a crowd of people singing his heart out to me.

When the song ended, Patrick didn’t move off the stage. Instead, he put the mic to his mouth, his voice strong and clear, “I choose you, baby. If I live a million lifetimes, I will *always* choose you. If I have to wait for you forever, I will. I love you, Jett, and I’m never letting you go.”

Thunderous applause rang out as Patrick finished his declaration of love. He hopped off stage, landing on both feet, and stalked across the dance floor, smiling wide. I was five feet from the bar when I realized I was moving toward him. I ran the rest of the way, throwing myself into his arms.

Picking me up off my feet, his mouth slanted over mine for a searing kiss. When we finally separated, I was breathless from his kiss and the rapid pounding of my heart. I felt like I'd tumbled over the highest precipice. I should have been terrified, but I wasn't. I knew without a doubt Patrick would be there to catch me. I smiled up at him. "I love you too, baby."

His eyes went wide, and he sucked in a breath of surprise. I watched as a range of emotions flashed through his eyes.

To his credit, he recovered quickly. "It's about damn time, woman," he grumbled against my lips before kissing me again. When he leaned back and looked at me, he was smirking. "I knew it. You're a card carrying romantic."

He set me on my feet, his arms around my waist, holding me close against him, his voice husky and full of emotion, "Say it again, Jett."

"I love you," I repeated, softly. "I love you so fucking much."

He spun me around, making me laugh, tipping his head back, yelling loud enough the whole bar could hear him, "She loves me!"

There was another round of cheers and applause in response to his impulsive announcement, and I knew the loudest of it was coming from our friends. I could only laugh and shake my head at him.

Then the crowd and applause, the cheers and whistles, faded away until it was only the two of us in each other's arms.

“Call me that again.”

I tilted my head. “Call you what?”

He grinned, holding me tighter. “You know what.”

“You liked me calling you baby?” I purred.

He kissed me. “I did. I do. I like it a lot.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck, my fingers gliding through his silky hair. “Move in with me?”

He stared at me momentarily in shock, a wide, beautiful smile creeping across his face, “Really?”

I smiled back and nodded. “Yes. If you want to.”

“Fuck yes I want to.”

“Guess that means you can stop sneaking your stuff into my house,” I told him with a grin.

A slow, boyish smile spread across his lips, “You knew about that?”

“Of course, I knew. What am I, blind?”

He kissed me gently, gazing at me as if I were the most priceless thing he'd ever seen. “You're my savior, Jett. Every

part of me loves every part of you. My heart is yours, *only* yours...to protect or to break.”

“Patrick,” I sighed in a breathy whisper. I cradled his face in the palm of my hands, staring into his beautiful, hazel eyes.

“I gave you my whole heart a long time ago and you’ve owned it ever since. I’m so wildly, hopelessly, stupidly in love with you, Patrick Morgan. It’s you, baby. It’s *always* been you.”

“Jett,” he whispered against my lips before covering my mouth with his. As for me...I stood in the middle of the bar’s dance floor passionately kissing the only man I’d ever loved as if no one were watching.

Chapter 50

Boomer

We were at Harry B's celebrating the take down of a traitorous CIA agent and his network of equally depraved accomplices. Reaper and Alex, Smoke and Hali, and Midas and Vivian had gone back to playing pool after watching Jax finally get Jett to admit she loved him.

Those two were currently on the dance floor celebrating. If the way they were kissing and making googly eyes at each other was any indication, I expected them to be leaving soon to continue their celebration in private. Meanwhile, Bruiser and I were sitting at our table, alone, nursing beers.

I was sitting here feeling sentimental. So much had changed in the last few years. Reaper and Alex, Smoke and Hali, Midas and Vivian. And now Jax and Jett. All my teammates had fallen hard and fast for their women. Although, it had taken Jett quite a while to admit how she felt about Jax.

I was remembering the fun times we'd had together when we'd all been single men out to have a good time. Back when we didn't have to chase women because they flocked to us.

Now that I was searching for something more meaningful than a brief relationship or a one-night stand, I couldn't find a woman I clicked with. One that triggered that special spark. How ironic.

With Jax and Jett officially together, it was down to me and Bruiser as the last two single men on the team trying to find a woman.

Actually, that wasn't true. It was only me, since Bruiser was *never* going to allow himself to get tied to a woman. He'd never trust a woman enough to have a serious relationship. I truly think he'd prefer to be tortured by terrorists rather than consider dating and falling in love.

Bruiser wasn't what you'd call a good wingman. In fact, I doubt he'd even consider *being* a wingman.

Maybe I should talk to Gonzo. Now that Jax and Jett were together, Gonzo would probably see Jett less. He might be open to a new friend, and Gonzo would be an awesome wingman.

I was tired of going home to an empty apartment, eating, sleeping, and doing everything alone. Being single was no fun. I wanted to share my life with a woman. The ups and downs, the good, and even the bad. Someone I loved completely who loved me back.

My folks had been married more than thirty years and still acted like newlyweds. I always expected I'd follow that same path. Meet and marry the woman of my dreams, have kids, and live out the rest of my days with her.

I wanted what my friends had. What my folks had. After seeing it firsthand, I didn't want to settle. I wanted that deep, intense, whole-heart-can't-live-without-you love.

But I was thirty-two and still hadn't found her yet. I was starting to lose hope I ever would.

I exhaled a heavy sigh and took a pull off my beer. Where was *my* woman? Now that I was ready, I couldn't find her.



Will Boomer find his happily ever after?

Find out in *The SEAL and the Author*, book 5 of the *No Easy Day* series.

Acknowledgements

Thank you for reading *The SEAL and the Savior*. I hope you loved reading about Jax and Jett as much as I loved writing them.

I have to admit, I adore Jett. She was so much fun to write, and I want to be her when I grow up! I had a blast flipping things around, so it was Jett rescuing Jax because I love books with strong female characters who are still human and feminine. Let's face it, women are badass and the world would fall apart without us. So, if you loved Jett too, that makes me a happy author!

Becky and Catherine, here we are...book four. Who would have thunk it? My life is better for knowing you.

To my editor, Stacy Doyle, you edit like a boss. You're awesome at talking me off the ledge, when all I want to do is salt and burn the words on the page. You make me laugh when I want to cry, providing unwavering encouragement. Plus, you get my *Supernatural*, *Friends*, and *SOA* references! You are

irreplaceable, woman and I'm happy and lucky—beyond grateful to call you my editor *and* my friend.

My internet posse, my tribe, you know who you are, I couldn't do this without your support.

Thank you to my ARC readers and street team. Some of you have been here from the beginning and that means the world to me. Some of you are new and I'm so thankful you took a chance on me. Indie authors, including me, couldn't do what we do without your support. I appreciate everything you do.

This is where I usually thank my fur babies, Kate and Ziva for being good listeners. For making me laugh and never judging me. I unexpectedly lost Ziva during the editing of this book. Not only did it throw me for a loop, it changed *everything*. Both Katie and I were set adrift by Ziva's sudden passing and I lost any ability to focus and concentrate. Suddenly, everything felt different because everything *was* different.

For eleven years, Ziva was my family. My friend and my protector. I miss her more than I can put into words. Katie and I are still struggling to find our new 'normal' without her. Anyone who's ever loved and lost a furry family member knows what I'm talking about. So, I want to say a special thank you to Ziva for being one of the best friends I ever had. I love you and I'll miss you always.

To my readers...it's still a little mind boggling I get to do this, but I wouldn't have the chance if it wasn't for you. I always wanted to write and here I am because of the readers

who took a chance on me. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. I love each and every one of you.

Reviews are *so* important to indie authors. So, if you enjoyed this book, please consider leaving a review or rating on Amazon, Goodreads and/or Book Bub.

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