

# WITHOUT LIMITS

**REESE KNIGHTLEY**

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*Without Limits* (Cobalt Security book three)

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# COBALT SECURITY BODYGUARDS

Logan Cobalt—Head of Cobalt Security

Macy Cobalt

Jaxon West

Felix Acosta

Hayden Thorne

Ryder Freeman

Tyler Brick

Gunner Morgan

# PROLOGUE



*Early April*

Wyatt's fingers shook as he dialed the phone number.

It was a number he hadn't called in years, as he tore shirts and pants from his dresser and closet while the phone on the other end rang.

No answer, but he wasn't surprised. Hayden was probably on a job at the moment. He'd made something of himself and Wyatt was so fucking proud of him for lifting himself up and out of the shithole they'd both been born into.

It went to voicemail.

Beep.

*Hello, this is Hayden. I would come to the phone right now if I could find my phone. Please say the secret code to leave a message.*

He wanted to laugh, but knew tears would come instead.

“Hayden, listen. I know you're going to freak when you hear this, but you gotta know I only did this because I was trying to keep the dirt from finding you. Anyway, shit's gone



south and I need to disappear like yesterday...for real this time. You remember the key Jaxon gave you? It's to a safety deposit box—

*Beep. You have reached the end of this message.*

“Shit.” With shaking fingers, he dialed again and started shoving clothes into his suitcase and a backpack.

The same verbiage and the machine picked up where he left off. “Jaxon has the location of the box. Get the contents and disappear. Stay with Jaxon, he can keep you safe like I never—

*Beep: You have reached the end of this message.*

He punched the number again and finished throwing things into his bag.

“Anyway, Jaxon will know what to do. He will explain it all to you. And listen, baby brother...I know you won't believe me, but I love you.”

He ended the call and tucked his phone away. Sliding on the backpack and rolling his suitcase, he stepped out into the hallway of his apartment building. He started toward the elevator when it pinged and he stopped.

It could just be a neighbor, but instinct had him stepping back. When the doors slid open, he would have seconds to see who it was.

A man stepped out followed by another. He knew from experience that they were heavily armed by the bulges in their jackets. Just then, his neighbor, Mr. Winston from down the hall, opened his door and entered the hallway with his dog—a German Shepard named Nix.

Winston and Nix stood between him and the two gunmen.

Wyatt dropped his suitcase and ran for the window at the far end and the fire escape.

“Move!” one man shouted at the neighbor with his dog just before a bullet pierced the wall near the fire escape window.

It missed by a hair, and Wyatt dove through as another bullet hit. He shifted his backpack, his one remaining piece of gear, and climbed up the ladder instead of down.

His goal was the roof. He'd practiced this route a hundred times and even with his pack, it didn't slow him down at all.

More bullets followed, splintering the glass of the window he'd seconds ago climbed through. He made it to the top of the fire escape and climbed over the edge just as the two men appeared below.

Lunging across the heated top of the building, he sprinted to the other side, leaped over, caught the ledge, and dropped the five feet down to land on the top of a narrow side building. Running across its metal shingles, he jumped the five-foot distance to the next building's fire escape.

Gunfire followed behind him, peppering the asphalt roof of the building.

He climbed again and pulled himself up and over onto the roof. He knew they were close, but he risked a glance behind him, catching the two dark figures running, jumping, and catching the fire escape below.

*Fuck...way too close.*

He raced to the other side of the roof to his final escape route before he lurched to a stop.

His trusted exit was blocked by a construction crane. The building on the other side of the jump had been partially demolished. Just last week, it had stood intact, steady, and strong.

He hadn't been as smart as he'd thought planning this route a few weeks ago and now the jump between the two buildings was twice as far as before.

Bullets kicked up the tar near his feet and Wyatt tossed his pack over the side.

Backing up several feet, he sprinted, running full out like a jackrabbit. When he hit the edge, he reached, hoping like hell he could make it.

But Wyatt knew from experience that sometimes...  
Hope wasn't enough.

# CHAPTER ONE



“What do you mean he fucking quit?”

Jaxon stared at his boss, Logan Cobalt, from across the man’s office.

“He gave his notice while you were helping out Pegasus in California.” The man tossed a pen down and leaned back in his chair with a frown on his face. Big, muscled, and very good-looking, his boss was one intimidating son of a bitch. The man was in his late forties, but other than a touch of gray in his hair, you really couldn’t tell.

Jaxon turned from Logan’s all-too-knowing gaze and faced the window. Did the man ever take a break? Logan was married and as far as Jaxon knew, his pint-sized, FBI agent husband was a catch.

In the darkness beyond the man’s office window lay the Colorado skyline, but only the office behind him reflected in the glass.

Even that disappeared to be replaced with Hayden’s beautiful face.

His best friend for almost the last decade and his roommate for the last five, Hayden Thorne, had always been

there for him, had his back when shit hit the fan, and had talked him away from the ledge too many times to count.

Which begged the question...what the hell would make Hayden quit Cobalt? Or better yet, who?

Jaxon had already taken care of the son of a bitch from Hayden's past, so it couldn't be that.

"He never said a word to me," he mumbled, raking his loose hair back over one shoulder. He kept it long, but lately, it was getting downright lengthy and he thought briefly about visiting Alfani's located on Colfax Avenue before he went home, but a quick glance at the clock showed him it was too late, and since the barber shop didn't open until nine tomorrow morning, he would have to make due.

"Have you called him?" Logan asked.

*No...fuck...* he hadn't called Hayden. He snapped around to face Logan, and the man's green eyes drilled into him, but this time there was a slight squint to them.

"Do you know where he went?"

"Yeah," Logan growled.

He didn't like the look on his boss' face.

"Where?"

After Logan explained that Hayden had made, in Jaxon's opinion, one of the stupidest decisions he'd ever heard, Jaxon stepped out of Logan's office and closed the door. He yanked out his cell phone, dialed a number, and then stood there in the hallway of Cobalt Security's high rise and clenched the phone in his fist.

"Jaxon?" Dave said.

"We need to fucking talk," he said, and the words came out from between his clenched teeth.



*Three weeks later...*

The place was dark and dingy, the building old and broken, casting shadows where pristine walls had once stood.

Having stalked his prey for fucking weeks after his conversation with Logan and shortly thereafter, Dave, he still couldn't get a bead on Hayden.

The guy was good, but he'd known that because they'd worked together for roughly eight years, but he hadn't known Hayden was this good and it was disconcerting. Plus, a little fucking scary if he was being honest.

He was still kicking his own ass that he'd missed just how good Hayden was. It wasn't that he thought Hayden was soft, because he wasn't. And while Hayden was excellent at combat and weaponry, the pretty man didn't seem the type to be able to elude him for this long. Hayden also didn't seem the type to go and work for Erebus.

Fucking Erebus.

It stuck in Jaxon's throat to think of Hayden mixed in with the former SecDef's group of assassins. Well, not mixed because frankly, they mostly worked solo and only once in a while they would call upon each other when needed—but those times were few and far between. Jaxon knew firsthand of the inner workings of Erebus because he used to be one of them. He used to skulk in the shadows and steal the lives of rapists, murderers, pedophiles, and whatever sick fucks roamed the earth and he'd lived in the bloodiness of death for years.

Until the day he'd gotten a call from Logan Cobalt about a bodyguard company he was starting up. It seemed the best way to get free of the darkness and a way to spend more time with his two best friends, Ryder and Hayden. Jaxon had introduced Hayden to Logan and the man had hired him when Hayden had graduated. Hayden made an excellent bodyguard, and while he didn't have a military background like Jaxon, the man was a former MMA champion and also a trained

marksman. So, okay, Hayden had the skills but was it wrong to think that the guy was also smoking hot? And what the hell did that have to do with Hayden's skills as a bodyguard?

Nothing!

Yet, it was ludicrous to actually think of Hayden as a trained assassin. The guy was exuberant, a flirt, and Jaxon wanted to kill anything that would remove those traits. He couldn't imagine what a life with Erebus would do to Hayden.

What the fuck had driven him there? Jaxon sank deeper into the darkness, his black clothing keeping him hidden from view. He had tied back his long hair in a thick knot at the back of his head, but the front strands had since fallen out.

He leaned against the cold siding of a vacant building that used to be an office of some sort, but a few years ago, people primarily started working from home, which opened up a lot of real estate.

He wondered where Hayden was at this very moment. Had he made his first kill? Dave wouldn't tell him the exact job, only the general vicinity. Jaxon squinted into the darkness.

Was Hayden even still here? What if—

“You have a fucking death wish.”

A chill went down his spine at the quiet, silky tone. The voice sounded familiar and he wracked his brain trying to place it without turning around. He prided himself on his memory and it came to him just as he slowly pulled his hands free of his leather jacket.

And because he was dealing with someone he'd met in the past, he kept his palms up and away from his body before turning slowly around.

# CHAPTER TWO



“Hello, Ice.”

“Jaxon,” Ice said softly. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

He sighed deeply and turned around. While he could only make out the blond hair surrounding the guy’s head, gorgeous didn’t begin to describe the man he knew only as Ice. They’d met during a disastrous dark op that involved both Erebus and Pegasus.

“Looking for Hayden,” Jaxon answered, catching the glint of the handgun in the guy’s hand.

“You shouldn’t be here.”

“Why?”

“You were fucking miles away in your head.”

He was right and Jaxon grimaced. He’d been so caught up with Hayden that he hadn’t been paying attention and that could mean the difference between life and death.

“Anyone could have ended you,” Ice rasped.

“What are *you* doing here?” he countered instead of commenting on the accuracy of Ice’s statement.



“I’m on a job.”

“With Hayden?”

“No.” Ice frowned and the blond hair, held back by a clip, came loose and fell over the man’s shoulders.

“Do you know where he is?”

“Yes.”

He thought maybe he’d crack a crown with how tight he clenched his teeth.

“Where?”

“I called him in to assist me,” the man said, irritating the fuck out of him at the vague answers.

A hot streak of something hit Jaxon’s gut and he reassessed the hot as fuck man in front of him.

*Wait a minute...assist Ice?*

“I didn’t know you worked for Erebus,” Jaxon said, and made sure he kept his voice low, the words almost inaudible to keep their location hidden.

“It’s a recent move,” the assassin said. “Now shut the fuck up so I can do my job.”

What job? And since when did the assassins work in pairs?

Jaxon squinted but kept his mouth shut, and without another moment to spare, he slipped into the shadows and left Ice, with his sexy eyes and blond good looks, and disappeared.

He may not be as young as Ice, but he had come from that world and knew it like nobody’s business. He didn’t need to stop and think as instinct kicked and before Ice was even aware of which way he’d gone, Jaxon was all the way across the complex on the other side of a few buildings and sliding inside another alley.

He’d fucked up by letting thoughts of Hayden distract him from his mission—finding Hayden, but it wouldn’t happen again. His distraction when thinking of or being around Hayden was what had sent him off to help one of Dave’s

covert units in the first place. It had all started when he had become aware he needed to reassess where their friendship was going.

Stay friends or become something more had been on his mind too much to stay still, and as was his way when he grew restless, he changed locations. It was during that time he'd come to a decision that was aided by the fact that the people he dated never seemed to hang around long. Did he really want that for him and Hayden?

And the answer was a plain and simple no.

He really was better off alone. Wasn't he? Or at the very least, casually dating and keeping Hayden as a friend.

Now, as he combed through the night, Jaxon heard the familiar snick, snick, of a silencer going off in the distance, but when he reached the location he thought the sound had come from, he found the area vacant. He waited, completely hidden for the next several hours, but there were no signs of Hayden.

He started to wonder if he'd gotten the wrong information. Perhaps this was someone else's job and the longer the night went on the more his irritation increased.

When he got his hands on Hayden, he was going to... Well, he wasn't exactly sure what he was going to do, but one thing was for certain, he needed the smart mouthed flirt safe and once that happened then maybe, just maybe, he could get rid of this permanent fucking heartburn.

An hour before sunrise, Jaxon left the area and returned to the room he'd rented in the run-down motel just north of the job Hayden was supposed to be working. Pulling his keycard, Jaxon was just about to open the door when a slight movement to his left had him ducking. He pulled his weapon and pointed it straight into the face of the man who thought to sneak up on him.

"What the fuck, Gunner?" Jaxon snarled, not happy to see the man at all.

"Jaxon," Gunner drawled.

“What are you doing here?”

“Tracking you.”

“Why the fuck would you do that?”

Gunner’s mouth drew tight. “Logan sent me. I thought we already buried the hatchet.”

Jaxon gnashed his teeth. Yeah, they had settled their disagreement, but he was still kind of irritated with Gunner—the man had made a pass, one of a few that he knew of, at Felix and then ghosted the guy. People didn’t do that shit to his friends. Felix had really liked Gunner and although Gunner was very good-looking in a big cowboy, shit kicking kind of way with snug-fitting, stone-washed blue jeans and black dusty boots along with a tight button down, the man had been a fucking dick to one of his friends.

“Okay, yeah, we’re good, but you’re still an asshole and Felix doesn’t deserve it.”

Gunner rubbed at the hairs growing on his face and nodded with a tired sigh. The bodyguard had been on the fence about joining their team for quite some time, but over the past year, he’d shown up more and more. Jaxon figured Logan was wearing Gunner down.

“You’re right, Felix doesn’t.”

“So, you need to make it right with him, not me.”

“I made it right.” Gunner grimaced and Jaxon snorted before flipping the card against the lock. It hadn’t been and still wasn’t his business, but he was glad it was settled.

He walked into the motel room with Gunner behind him and then froze and all the breath left his lungs when he spotted the figure of a man across the room.

Gunner snapped the door shut and almost plowed into him. Too late, Gunner hadn’t seen the dark form in the corner until the sound of a bullet being chambered filled the air.

“Hello, Jaxon,” the darkly dressed man said and the Glock in the guy’s hand gleamed.

“Hello, Wrath.”

Jaxon stayed real still and Gunner took his cues from him. The assassin in the corner near the bathroom wasn't one to ever fuck with.

“How's Justice?” Jaxon asked the only question he knew that could make Wrath become almost human.

“He's well,” the assassin said about his own brother. “Special Forces now. Dave created a Fury 2.0.”

Jaxon smirked. “So I heard. A new and improved version. Cool thing Rip went into the Army a few years after him. Aren't they the same unit?”

“I really don't know if that's possible.”

“Are they coming home yet?”

“Not Justice. Rip came out a few years ago.” Wrath gave a heavy sigh.

“What?”

“I haven't seen him.”

“Wait...you haven't seen your brother in two years?”

“Try thirteen in the Army and add two to that.”

Jaxon went quiet, there wasn't much he could say on the subject, but that kind of sucked.

“I've heard things,” Wrath said after a few moments.

“Like what?”

“You're looking for Hayden.”

“What if I am?”

“Good.”

“Why do you say that?”

“He's not cut out for this life,” Wrath rasped, keeping his face and eyes heavily shadowed. Jaxon couldn't remember if he'd ever seen the color of Wrath's eyes and figured he hadn't and he really didn't want to.

“Where is he?” he asked and when Wrath answered, he didn’t like the answer.

# CHAPTER THREE



“Ah, come on.”

Hayden gave the bartender a wide flirty smile at the end of the words before adding, “You had to have seen Bozz here sometime.”

The man’s bright gaze ran over his face and mouth before flipping up to hold his eyes. The guy was sort of cute if you liked the smooth-talking, hair slicked back, shirt wrinkled type. He was tall and slim with big brown eyes and a nicely trimmed beard. Not his type, but Hayden could certainly see the appeal.

The man ran his eyes all over him, taking in his loose blond hair, and he shook it back for effect, knowing it would catch the light and glimmer. The color was similar to one of those angels you’d find in one of those Christmas-time plays—at least that was what Jaxon had said in one breath while glowering and ordering him to tie it back with the next.

Tie his hair back? Hayden snorted, remembering the dark, thick command. Of course, the order got his hackles up and he vowed to never tie it back around Jaxon again...well, unless he was on a job. Which reminded him that it had come loose during this job. Maybe he’d invest in different clips or switch

to those hairbands Jaxon used. And thinking of Jaxon, Hayden knew he had had to make the move from the job he loved with a passion and the decision had been one of the hardest things he'd ever done, but he'd done it.

“While you're thinking of your answer, why don't you pour me a shot of whisky?” Hayden cajoled, and the bartender smiled wide and quickly poured his drink, then placed the small glass before him.

Hayden studied the way the light from the bar reflected on the amber glass. It reminded him of the last time he'd tied one on a few years back. At one of their favorite bars, The Hole, he'd taken a few shots and was feeling good. Jaxon was out on a date with Karina or maybe that had been Kathryn, he couldn't remember. And the fact that his best friend had been out with a woman was fine by him.

“Pour me another,” he had told his and Jaxon's favorite bartender. Carson had smiled and kept them coming.

He had been three sheets to the wind and having a blast dancing in the bar and grill that night. The owners, Braxton and Sam, were husbands so the clientele of the place was always rich with diversity. Hayden danced up to the bar, tossed back another shot, and when he whirled around, he found a tall, attractive man in his path. The guy steadied him by way of hands on his hips and Hayden smiled, seeing the desire in the man's eyes.

It had been nice that night to be wanted and he tugged the guy to the dance floor. They gyrated together for the fast and slow songs and he found out the man's name was Allen. More shots commenced and when Hayden had excused himself to use the bathroom, Allen had followed. When Allen had crowded him up against the wall, it hadn't been a bad thing, but when the guy tried unzipping his pants there in his friend's establishment, Hayden had put the brakes on. Allen had been way more persistent than Hayden had expected, plus he himself had been drunk or he would have been able to handle the situation. Hayden slurred out another order, but Allen reached out and ripped his shirt open, and with a pop, the buttons scattered on the hallway floor.

“Get off me,” he mumbled, but Allen edged closer.

“You’ve been a fucking tease all night. Time to pay for those drinks.”

Before Hayden could respond, Allen was torn away from him and Jaxon was there. Through the haze, Hayden had watched as Jaxon beat Allen and tossed him out the back door into the alley before slamming it shut.

He stayed where he was, leaning against the wall, his shirt hanging open. Jaxon stalked back toward him, and he noticed the way the man’s big body moved, kind of like a jungle cat. Or maybe more like a pissed off lion with all that loose-hanging hair. There had been times through the years when Jaxon had dyed his hair pitch black, making it darker for an assignment or job, but Hayden really liked the man’s natural color much better. A dark, rich blond that resembled spun gold.

A muscle was ticking in Jaxon’s jaw when he approached and towered over him. Hayden gazed up into Jaxon’s glare.

“Are you hurt?” Jaxon growled, his voice tight, angry, and filled with something else Hayden suspected was irritation at having to leave what’s her name.

“You’re supposed to be on a date,” he slurred and tried batting Jaxon’s hands away when the bigger man pulled his shirt together to cover his chest.

“Be still.” Jaxon pulled off his jacket and settled the heavy leather over his shoulders, enclosing him in its warmth. Nothing more had been said that night, but the next morning when he’d woke up in bed smelling of puke and feeling like shit, Jaxon had let him have it good.

“And you can’t handle your damn liquor,” the man had raged at the end.

“I know.” He bowed his head, clutching the glass of juice Jaxon had shoved into his hands along with the aspirin he’d already swallowed. Jaxon was absolutely correct.

“Don’t do it again.”



“Okay.” He gave a quick glance upward and smiled and that fast, Jaxon had lost his anger and ruffled his hair, much to his annoyance.

A glass clinking in the bar brought Hayden back to the present to see another person had come into the place. Hayden shook off thoughts of the past and tossed the shot back. He had learned his lesson about over-drinking, but he still allowed himself one every now and then. Plus, it helped to counter the effect of what he was about to do.

That was right, he reminded himself, he was there to do a job and he refused to feel guilty about it.

Switching jobs had been the right decision.

He needed to move on and get his life in order by creating his own way. Forging his own path. Maybe he'd make a bumper sticker out of that phrase for his new vehicle. *Create your own way, forge your own path.* He hadn't bought his SUV yet, but it was on his bucket list, right up there with the Ducati that exceeded at least two hundred horsepower. He'd had the pleasure of saddling one of the superbikes at the track a few months back and had become hooked. Until Jaxon had caught wind of his addiction to racing bikes and put a stop to it.

See? That was what happened when his personal life became all tangled up with Jaxon West. His best friend thought he had the right to make decisions for him. Take, for example, he didn't even own his own damn car! Granted, at first, it was cool because Jaxon drove them everywhere, but now when he needed to be mobile, it was a pain in the ass.

“He was here,” the bartender's words yanked him back to the present.

The shitty dive bar in a rough part of town was a far cry from Braxton and Sam's bar and grill, but it was the perfect spot for a drug lord to run his operation. This place was very popular with the local druggies. The bar sat on the outskirts of Denver. In relation to the Cobalt office, it was a twenty-minute drive, give or take, depending on traffic. So, it would only take a phone call to have backup there to help if he wanted, but

Hayden reminded himself that he no longer worked with Logan Cobalt and his bodyguards, and having backup wasn't something assassins did, did they?

"Did you hear me?" the bartender said and held the bottle poised over his empty shot glass.

"No thanks. So...is Bozz here?" Hayden blinked his eyelashes a bit and smiled beneath the bartender's appreciative gaze.

"Check the back office and stop back by here when you're done." The look in the guy's eyes and the drop of the deep, rich baritone tone promised a good time.

Hayden gave a moment of thought. Should he? It wasn't like he had anywhere to be after this nor was it like he'd ever see the guy again. He had no other jobs after this one and when he'd checked the encrypted site, all the jobs listed there had been filled.

So what if he took a few moments to get a piece of ass? He was only human and he'd been a fucking saint over the past several years. He used to fuck anything that gave him a sidelong glance, but he'd changed his wild ways after losing Wyatt and moving in with Jaxon.

*Whoa...don't go there. Jesus Christ, get a fucking grip.* Why the fuck would he think of Wyatt now of all times? He must have stared at the bartender too long because the guy frowned.

"You okay?"

"Yup." He smiled even though his teeth were clenched, which probably made his face look weird. Oh well...he had no time to waste! And now that he thought further about it, he'd take the guy up for a quickie, but first he had a scumbag to kill.

Hayden waggled his eyebrows and sashayed toward the back hallway, knowing the guy's eyes were glued to his ass. So what? He had a cute ass. Many men and women had told him that before. He wrinkled his brow trying to recall the last time, but came up blank. So, in reality, and minus his ex-

boyfriend, Hayden couldn't think of a time he'd been hit on since he'd moved in with Jaxon. Wouldn't you know it! Jaxon had been a buzzkill all around.

*Ugh.*

Reaching the narrow opening where the store room, bathrooms, and office were located, Hayden kept going all the way to the end and stood in front of the door that had the words "office" in gold letters on a black plaque.

He pulled his gun from the holster he'd tucked beneath his light windbreaker. The Central Banish 45 CZ 75 was complete with a silencer twisted on the end. He left the Sig Sauer P365 with the threaded barrel and comp tucked away in the holster he'd strapped to his back this morning.

It always helped to have two guns.

Most people thought a second gun was better and expected to be carried in an ankle holster, but Hayden was never one to do the expected. He remembered one time he and Jaxon had been guarding a high-powered congressman's wife and had run down her stalker—Hayden had had the opportunity to use his second gun. What his bodyguard team hadn't known when they'd careened around the corner was that the stalker had commandeered his own brother and fifteen of the man's friends to help him with the crazy scheme. That night had been a gunfight none of them had expected. They were lucky that none of them had been injured before SWAT showed up.

A glass breaking snapped him out of the past and into the present and he made a sound in the back of his throat before he opened the door to the back office and stepped inside.

*Here goes nothing.*

# CHAPTER FOUR



Hayden entered the room and found Bozz Stanley Wilcox, the head of the Wilcox crime family, sitting behind the desk.

The crime boss appeared older than his photo and Hayden was suddenly reminded of Christmas because Bozz could have doubled for Santa Claus during the holiday season.

With his bushy white beard and equally white mustache, the man's bright blue eyes and wrinkled face had Chris Kringle written all over him. He was portly too, with that round build, and the whole picture was finished off with a shiny brow, and bushy eyebrows.

Fuck, even his nose was cherry red. But what sat on the desk in front of Bozz was no present that any mother or father with half a brain would ever give to their kids.

Stacks of money from selling drugs were piled high and by the number of bundled Benjamins, Bozz's business had had a very lucrative night.

"What?" Bozz didn't sound too happy to see him and that was when Hayden noticed the packages of drugs sitting next to the money. Each small clear plastic bag held white powder that Hayden knew would soon end up on the streets and someone's child would be addicted or worse, dead.

Well, shit.

It was all true. Bozz was a monster of the worst kind.

Hayden lifted his gun and pointed the barrel at Bozz's heart, and he lifted his hands real slow up in the air and stayed like that.

They both stared at each other for almost a minute and it was fifty seconds too long and Hayden knew it. He needed to pull the trigger before someone came back there or Bozz got smart and reached for a weapon.

"You want the money? Drugs?" Bozz gestured to the stacks on his desk.

"No," Hayden said distastefully, gripping the gun tightly.

"Hello, Bozz."

Hayden gnashed his teeth when Ice spoke behind him. He hadn't even heard the door open, that was how quiet Ice was. The tall blond man stepped around him and stood at his side.

"Goodbye, Bozz," Ice stated, and put two, *snick, snick*, into the man—one in the chest and one in the head before turning toward him.

Before he could fully process that Ice had stolen his portion of the job, Ice grabbed him by the arm and pulled him out of the office before shutting the door quietly.

Hayden wanted to protest when Ice took the gun from his hand and tucked it back into his shoulder holster out of sight.

"Come on," Ice said softly and Hayden followed him out the back door.

It was an exit Hayden had been too nervous to see. Damn it. Ice shoved him into the dark alley and Hayden suddenly couldn't get warm in the cold Denver night. He shivered and rubbed at his own arms.

Boots crunching over the gravel of the vacant back parking lot had him spinning around to find two of Cobalt Security's bodyguards, Jaxon West and Gunner Morgan, walking toward him.

Jaxon wore his long hair in a half knot and strands were falling loose, a black leather jacket, dark jeans, and combat boots. The man had the poise of a rockstar god and when Jaxon yanked him into his arms, Hayden was too fucking surprised to do anything but hug him back.

“Call me when you’re on the road,” Gunner quietly said to Jaxon and then got into a black SUV and drove out of the parking lot.

Jaxon turned away without a word and Hayden found himself ushered into the man’s dark gray pickup. The heater blasted and after a few minutes, Hayden was able to stop shivering.

“Okay, you can say it,” he croaked.

“Say what?”

“I make a piss poor assassin.”

“You’re a bodyguard, Hayden. You only kill to protect.”

Jaxon sounded so sure. Perhaps he was right, but Hayden wasn’t going to say so. Truly though, he’d only ever shot someone when they’d come for someone he was trying to protect, so maybe there was some truth to the words.

“So why did you take this job?” Jaxon growled, put the truck in gear, and drove away from the bar.

Hayden shrugged.

What could he say... that just once he wanted to do something outside of being a Cobalt bodyguard? He wanted to do something Jaxon wasn’t a part of?

Which reminded him of Jaxon leaving him and going for weeks to California without asking him to go nor a thought of what that would do to them, but he had and he couldn’t get the thought nor the feelings out of his head.

They’d been best friends for years and even closer since Ryder had married and was no longer around much, at least that was what he’d thought. Perhaps that was his first mistake thinking Jaxon wanted him around and on jobs. Friends didn’t take off without a word.

Obviously, thinking about it now, he realized he'd been wrong. He didn't bother to answer Jaxon's question, because again, what could he say?

Instead, he pulled his Sig Sauer P365 from his back holster and opened the large, modified glove compartment. Inside lay Jaxon's FNX-45 tactical suppressor-ready handgun and he tucked the weapon inside and also his spare. Might as well be comfortable while traveling.

When Jaxon turned the truck south on the freeway on-ramp instead of in the direction of his motel, Hayden glanced around.

"Where are we going?" He frowned. He had his go bag and a burner phone in the motel room.

"To see a friend of mine. Logan may take a job from him. So, we may be gone a couple of days."

"And Gunner?"

"He'll meet us there."

Hayden squinted. He didn't work for Logan any longer, but Jaxon didn't seem to care.

"Solomon has my phone and ID," he said instead of reminding the guy they weren't co-workers. "You know that's protocol." The no cell phone policy was one of Erebus' assassin's rules. Never carry phones or ID on your person while doing a job—in case it could be used to trace back to their main contacts and information. Erebus rules—leave it all with the boss and pick everything back up along with pay when the job was complete. Since Ice had done the whole hit, did that mean he wasn't going to get paid? Damn Jaxon. He scowled.

"We'll get you a new one."

"But I like my Mickey Mouse phone case." Yep, he pursed his lower lip.

Jaxon shook his head and Hayden had to admire the man's restraint. Right about now, Jaxon should be sighing and

making grumbling noises about him being a smartass but then would flash him a smile.

But he got none of that tonight.

“And I don’t have anything packed,” Hayden finished with a huff, and even that didn’t make the man smile.

“I grabbed a bag for you when I was getting mine.”

“*Control much?*” he wanted to snap, but held it in. Jaxon was a controlling SOB, but in all honesty, it was one of the man’s endearing qualities because he did it out of love.

“What if you didn’t find me tonight? Who would have taken Logan’s job?” Hayden goaded.

*That ought to show him*, he thought. Oh yeah, that sounded really tough. He silently groaned and gazed out the passenger side window.

“Nobody,” Jaxon murmured. “Logan would have waited or let the job go.”

Guilt washed over Hayden. “Shit.” He scrubbed at his face and leaned back against the expensive gray leather seat that was several shades darker than the paint of the brand-new Ram 1500 TRX pickup.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, sounding anything but.

“Talk to me.” Jaxon threw him a worried look before returning his eyes to the road. “What’s going on?”

“Other than you need a haircut?” He smirked and then grinned when Jaxon tossed him a scowl.

“Quit stalling.”

“I’m supposed to be the one with long hair.” He flipped his blond hair over one shoulder and completely stalled, as Jaxon called it, before waving his hands in the air for emphasis.

A muscle ticked in Jaxon’s jaw. “You don’t have a patent on hair length. Besides, I thought you liked mine long.”

“Who told you that?” he deflected and reached into the backseat to pull out a backpack that he was sure was filled



with snacks. They never took a case or worked a job without bringing food along. Plus, he was not getting into a discussion about why Jaxon had grown his hair long. Hayden already knew the answer to that question because he'd once asked. He clearly remembered what Jaxon had said—he did it to attract more dates.

Dates! Like Jaxon West, sex god, badass in leather, needed more flipping dates. What a joke.

Anyhow, it became apparent that Jaxon didn't recall telling him that little bit of information and Hayden rolled his eyes before digging into the pack. He made a sound when he came up with string cheese wrapped in plastic.

"Give me one of those."

"Not happening, you only brought two." Hayden snatched both cheeses out and set the bag between them.

"Right, one for you and one for me."

"But I'm hungrier, so I get both."

"How do you know I'm not starving?" Jaxon squinted, but Hayden saw the smirk lifting the corner of the man's mouth. A dimple popped in Jaxon's unshaven cheek.

"No. Besides, you always find time to eat," Hayden reminded him. Of the two of them, he was the one to forget to eat and was constantly reminded by Jaxon—who always seemed to call him skinny.

"Okay, you can have it. You're too thin as it is."

And there it was. If Hayden had been a more sensitive guy, he would have taken offense, but he actually liked his trim form.

Hayden shook his head, peeled the string cheese, and leaned toward Jaxon. When the man opened his mouth to say something, Hayden poked the cheese between his lips, making Jaxon half gag.

"There. Happy?" he said, acting like he was the one put out.

Jaxon coughed and pulled the cheese out to take a bite and at the same time, threw him a dirty look.

Ahhhhh, it felt like old times.

“So, you wanted to work as an assassin?”

Hayden gazed out the window, taking a bite of the cheese. “Something like that.”

“So, how’d that work out for you?”

Hayden snapped around to glare at Jaxon. “Don’t be an ass.” He was suddenly pinned briefly beneath Jaxon’s stormy gaze, but didn’t give a shit if the guy was judging him. “Just because I couldn’t shoot Santa doesn’t mean I won’t shoot you,” he growled around a bite of cheese.

“Santa?” Jaxon’s eyes went wide and the sound of the man’s deep laughter did funny things to his stomach.

The laughter hurt.

Damn it.

He hated being laughed at when he wasn’t being funny. Perhaps Jaxon needed a reminder of the fact that Hayden had kicked his ass in the past and could do so again very easily. If Jaxon thought he was returning to Cobalt Security, the guy could think again.

“I’m not going back.”

Jaxon shot him a glare and then turned back to the road, his big, tattooed hands curled tightly around the steering wheel.

“We will see.”

“I’m serious.”

“Sure you are.” Jaxon’s skepticism was thick.

“You know what, Jaxon? People can act stupid on occasion, but you abuse the privilege!” he hissed.

Jaxon’s chuckle rang loudly in the cab of the truck.

*Damn the man.*

# CHAPTER FIVE



The motel was okay as motels went and Hayden dumped his bag on the bed.

“I don’t know why we had to stay here,” he grumbled, shutting the door.

“Just change and come eat,” Jaxon said from behind him, causing him to jump and whirl. He lost his balance and ended up crashing into Jaxon. The man’s hands caught his upper arms and Hayden ended up against Jaxon, chest to chest. He wobbled and fisted the front of Jaxon’s shirt. When Jaxon didn’t release him right away, Hayden tipped his head back and gazed up into a pair of unreadable gray eyes.

“What?” Hayden frowned and Jaxon’s hands squeezed his arms before falling away.

“Nothing,” Jaxon rasped and reached past him to open the door. Hayden coughed when something got stuck in his throat and in order to dodge around Jaxon, he had to brush his side against the man’s hip.

“Where’s Gunner?” Hayden croaked, stepping outside.

“I have no idea. I sent him a text, but he never responded,” Jaxon said and walked down the sidewalk. Hayden fell into

step.

They found a pizza joint not far from the motel and ordered a couple of larges. This place reminded Jaxon of the place where he first got to know Hayden. He'd met both Wyatt and Hayden at a flag football game. Shortly after leaving the Army, Ryder had invited him and since he hadn't had shit to do at that moment, he'd gone.

The four of them had gone out for pizza and beer and continued hanging out on occasion after that. It became a casual friendship with Wyatt, but with Hayden, Jaxon had instantly clicked. That day, Hayden, as slender as he was, had almost eaten an entire large pepperoni and sausage pizza by himself. Good thing Ryder had ordered several for the table that night. Jaxon had ended up with Hayden next to him and they'd shared a pitcher of beer. Before the night was over, he'd slung his arm around the bright blue-eyed blond and had sung at the top of his lungs, drunk, until his voice had gone hoarse. They had laughed like lunatics. When it came to Hayden, he'd always had a soft spot.

And it only made sense that when Wyatt was gone, it had been the most natural thing in the world to bring Hayden into his home to live.

"Whatcha thinking?" Hayden asked, jogging him from the past.

"Nothing."

Hayden snorted and took a large bite of pepperoni and sausage. "So, how come we couldn't get to your friend's place tonight?"

"Because it's his business and they don't open until the morning."

"Ah, ok," he said around a bite of food and found Jaxon staring at him oddly. "What? Do I have food on my face?"

Jaxon squinted and reached across the table and wiped his thumb against his bottom lip. Something the man had done countless times before. Only instead of wiping it off on his jeans or a napkin, Jaxon sucked the sauce from his finger.

“Did you just steal my red sauce?” He gulped, trying to laugh, but it wasn’t coming as fast as it usually did so he stuck to making a joke and kept his voice light.

“Yup,” Jaxon drawled with a smirk and took another bite of the salad before more pizza.

“I’m pressing charges next time.”

“What charge would that be?”

“Grand theft?”

Jaxon laughed, the sound echoing around the deserted place. They were the only ones other than the staff. After all, it was almost midnight. Hayden snickered and turned his attention to his food, but for some reason, his eyes kept flickering over the edge of the tattoo peeking from the collar of Jaxon’s t-shirt. Hayden knew it was the top of an intricate design of a dragon. It wasn’t the only ink on Jaxon, but it was the most impressive and memorable. It trailed across the bodyguard’s pectoral down the left side next to his six-pack abs, with the tail ending low on his left hip.

The bite of pizza Hayden had in his mouth suddenly needed a lot of water to wash it down.



Hayden had been silent as they walked the few short blocks back to the motel. When they got back to the room, Hayden had snagged a shower first. Returning to the room wearing a t-shirt and pajama pants, the slender blond had climbed into one of the queen beds and pulled the covers over his body and head. Jaxon showered, changed, and stretched out on the other bed.

He didn’t believe for one minute that Hayden meant what he had said earlier. The man wasn’t leaving Cobalt Security. He was positive Hayden had only said that to get under his skin. Just the thought of Hayden leaving was ludicrous. He had wanted to talk to Hayden about his poor choice of

employment, but that evening he'd been thwarted every time he tried to bring it up. He fell asleep gazing at the long, lean form of Hayden sleeping across the way.

In the morning, he'd been given the silent treatment even after he'd been good enough to give Hayden one of the burner phones he'd stashed in his bag.

Other than a muttered thank you, he got nothing as he took the onramp onto the highway.

He wasn't sure what the hell was wrong with Hayden, but by the end of this road trip, he was going to find the fuck out. If it was one of the last things he did, he was going to figure out how to fix whatever had happened between them. There was no way he was living without Hayden's friendship. The thought that they wouldn't ever hang out again sat like lead in Jaxon's throat.

Damn it, he wanted answers.

A call from his mom came through the dashboard and he grimaced. Of all the times she could call, now was not one of them. He threw a warning look at Hayden.

"Behave," he growled.

"I'm always good," Hayden snorted.

"Define good," he muttered and punched the answer call button. "Hi, Ma."

"Hi, Mrs. West," Hayden sing-songed.

"Hi, Jaxon. Hi, Hayden. What are you boys up to this weekend?"

"Nothing."

"On a job." Jaxon glared at Hayden's innocent expression. It was a look the man used when he wanted to manipulate him—making those blue eyes wide, parting his lips, and shaking his hair out. The part that was nuts was it worked every single time.

"Oh...well, I'm having your brothers and sister over to the house for Sunday dinner, Jaxon, but since you're busy..."

Hayden, can you make it?”

“Yes ma’am,” Hayden happily replied and gave him a slow wink.

*Fuck.*

“Ma? I can’t talk right now, but we will both be there.”

“Fantastic! Love you both. Bye!”

“Love you.” Jaxon smiled at her exuberance.

“Love you!” Hayden shouted and Jaxon ended the call.

“She’s my favorite.”

“Favorite what?”

“Mom of all time.”

“She’s the only mom in your life right now.”

“True, but she’s still my favorite.”

Jaxon smirked. His mom and Hayden had hit it off from the start. In fact, when Jaxon thought about his loud, boisterous family, there hadn’t been a single person who hadn’t taken to Hayden from the first moment. Hayden was the type of guy who drew people to him with his easy smile and wicked, if a little bit odd, sense of humor.

When he finally got around to taking Hayden to meet his family, his Mom had been so smitten that she’d scolded him for not bringing the younger man by to meet her sooner. Jaxon’s brothers both had families with one who had teenaged twin boys and his sister had recently married and was expecting. Of course, the kids had all taken to Hayden because of his easy smile and his bright eyes, and his skill for gaming won over the teenagers.

When Jaxon had moved Hayden in to live with him, his mom had scolded him for not telling her. She’d gone on about decorating his room.

“You’re living with him and you didn’t even tell me?”

“Ma, it’s not like that,” he had groaned at his tiny mother. He got his height from his dad, and sighed. “He only moved in

not too long ago.”

She had harrumphed with her hands on her hips.

“He has lost his mom and now his brother. You take care of him,” she sniffled.

“I will.” Jaxon had folded her into his arms.

“Whatcha thinking?” Hayden’s voice brought him back to the cab of the truck.

“Nothing.” He shook off his thoughts and took the exit that would take them to the deli.

A few moments later, he pulled up outside of the place where his high school friend worked, and parked his truck. When Jess had called Logan, he’d reported a suspicious-looking man hanging around his place of business for a week.

Before Jaxon could say a word, Hayden jumped out of the truck and shut the door.

“Shit,” he muttered and grabbed his weapon from the glove compartment and shoved it into his shoulder holster beneath his leather jacket. Coming around the truck, he found Hayden waiting for him.

“Who are we meeting?” Hayden was smiling and that was always a good sign.

Gunner pulled up in his black SUV, parked, and rolled down the window.

“Give me two minutes,” Jaxon told the bodyguard, who nodded and started scrolling through his phone.

Jaxon spun around just as the sun peeked out from behind a cloud that sent light shimmering in Hayden’s blond hair, giving the man an ethereal glow and he stood frozen, caught off guard for a moment studying the silky strands. He almost lifted his fingers to touch Hayden’s hair, but caught himself. He sensed Hayden was on the verge of punching him for some reason and didn’t want to give the guy any more ammunition.



They normally got along really well; it was strange to be so at odds with the usually bubbly younger man. He'd always thought their temperaments were perfectly matched and that was why they'd become fast friends. Now, it seemed as if he couldn't find any of the right words to say. While Hayden buried himself in joking around, Jaxon knew the man used it as a defense mechanism—but why would Hayden need to keep up his defenses around him?

“Jax?” Hayden said with an adorable furrow etching his brow.

Jaxon cleared his throat. “We're meeting Jesse Freeman. He's a buddy from high school.”

They'd both played basketball at Denver's East High and won plenty of state championships. After high school, Jesse had gone to college while he'd gone into the military and subsequently gotten his own degrees.

“An ex-boyfriend, buddy?” Hayden asked, and Jaxon realized the man's beautiful mouth was stretched wide.

Jaxon rolled his eyes to cover any signs that his own mouth had gone completely dry and reached for the door. People came in and out.

With a hand on Hayden's lower back, he ushered the man into the front room of Freeman's Deli and Coffee.

# CHAPTER SIX



The inside of the deli was cool and comforting, and he thought he and Hayden could stay for an early lunch.

Jesse stood behind the counter helping a customer and when he glanced up at the jingle of the small bell at the top of the door, his friend's eyes widened with surprise and then delight at recognizing him.

Actually, there was too much fucking surprise and confusion on Jesse's part and the hairs on the back of Jaxon's neck stood up, but before he could even process anything further, the room exploded.

A loud sound cracked the air and the front of the deli window blew out, sending a force punching Jaxon in the back. The pressure sent him flying and he lost sight of Hayden when his vision went black.

His back slammed on the ground, sending shooting pain through his spine and his body sent tables smashing out of his way. Glass shattered around him and smoke billowed thick gray and black. Screams pierced the air and were soon followed by sounds of crying and confusion.

He couldn't get his limbs to work, nor his lungs to draw in air.

Jaxon tried to speak, to call out to Hayden, but only managed a coughing gag along with several dry heaves before he sucked in a gulp of air, one after the other.

Lifting one arm that felt like lead, he kept reaching until he gripped the butt of his gun, but he didn't have the strength to pull it and that was concerning.

"Jax! Hayden!" Gunner hollered, barreling through the gutted-out front.

Blinking through the haze that filled his vision, he saw blue sky overhead and he rolled his head to the side. The spot where Hayden had stood was empty.

Where the fuck was Hayden?

A dull sense of panic bloomed in his chest and he made a sound as he gasped for air. The blast seemed to have come from behind him, so Hayden should have been protected by his body. But then Hayden was slimmer and way slighter, so maybe not.

The room lay in shambles. Devastation surrounded him with not only the room, but victims of the blast. The whole front of the deli and the glass cabinet that separated the front from the back had been blown all to hell, hitting several people in the process. He didn't see Jesse because the counter was gone and that worried him.

"Help me," a woman whimpered.

Gunner's big body came crunching over what remained of a section of the roof.

"Go see her," Jaxon yelled at Gunner, but it came out a raspy whisper so he waved a hand toward the woman and Gunner immediately turned that way.

Groaning, Jaxon forced every muscle in his body to move and rolled from his back and onto his stomach with monumental force before he managed to get to his hands and knees.

"Hayden," Jaxon groaned.

“You okay, buddy?” a male voice asked, glass crunching beneath his sneakers, and a stranger approached through the blown-out front of the building.

“Yeah,” he croaked. “Check the owner. Check the others.” He said the words to the floor and then lifted his head.

“Hayden?” he rasped again, coughed, and said louder, “Hayden!”

Nothing.

The lack of response to his frantic calls brought him up to his knees and scrambling. Panic lent him temporary strength and he lifted tables, chairs, and fallen ceiling tiles like a madman.

“Hayden, talk to me.” He yanked several heavy pieces of metal from a large section of tile and gave a sob of relief when he spotted the top of Hayden’s blond head buried beneath.

Shaking, Jaxon crawled the distance between them and pushed the rest of the debris from Hayden’s prone body.

Shaking fingers found a pulse in the man’s neck. It was weak...but Hayden’s heart was beating. Ignoring the way his eyes watered, Jaxon dropped to his ass on the floor and pulled Hayden up to rest across his thighs.

More people spilled in through the front of the destroyed building and started moving things to get people out.

Jaxon moved hair from Hayden’s face and then sat gazing blankly at his own hands. They were covered in gray dust, like a dead man’s hands. He took short, shallow breaths to stave off the piercing pain in the left side of his chest, and he combed his fingers through Hayden’s hair, slowly brushing it away from the man’s face.

“Hayden, can you hear me?” he whispered.

The man coughed and sputtered and Jaxon was so fucking thankful, he didn’t care that the tears leaked, putting tracks down his cheeks.

“Yeah,” Hayden coughed. “Yeah, yeah.”

Jaxon huffed and pulled Hayden tighter into his arms. The man's face was covered with gray dust, but those damned adorable blue eyes were gazing up at him and that was all that fucking mattered.

The ceiling above them cracked and shuddered with a loud groan.

"Fuck!" Jaxon growled and bent forward to protect Hayden's face and head with his own chest with seconds to spare as another large piece of tile fell and crashed down on them both.

People yelled and someone screamed, and in the distance, Jaxon heard the wailing of sirens growing closer.

Gritting his teeth through the pain, the world darkened out and then refocused.

He tucked his lips against Hayden's temple and prayed.

Somewhere in the distance, he heard Gunner cursing and shouting. He could only imagine the big man yanking debris off of them because he couldn't see anything at that point.

Within a minute, Gunner had yanked the tiles and chunks of the roof from on top of him and Hayden.

Jaxon looked up and it was on the tip of his tongue to thank Gunner, but the room went dim.

The last thing he remembered was snarling when someone tried to take Hayden from his arms.



Fog...

Yeah...his brain was all fogged up and so were the voices whispering in the room.

Did Jaxon and Logan think they could speak too softly for him to hear?

Hayden would have laughed if every bone in his body hadn't been hurting.

"The backpack was left beneath a table," Logan said.

"What are you saying?" Jaxon's voice sounded raw.

"It was intentional. It looks like we were set up," Logan growled. "I talked to your friend's manager and she said that whoever called Cobalt security for this job wasn't Jesse Freeman."

"So, all they had to do was wait until we walked in."

"Did you see anyone leaving?" Logan said.

"No, I didn't. It was crowded though." Jaxon's sigh sounded heavy.

A bomb. That was what they were discussing. It didn't take a rocket scientist to get the gist of it. Who had set them up? Was it someone from his or Jaxon's past? Or was this someone out to get Cobalt Security? Like, take them out one at a time?

The team did have a lot of bitter people according to the hate mail Logan regularly received at the office. After all, they had prevented criminals from killing people and some of those crooks ended up in jail, so it stood to reason they could have a psycho on their hands.

"Hayden?"

Jaxon's voice was much closer. Had he made a sound? Hayden cleared his throat and a straw was placed at his lips. He took a tiny swallow and then squinted, opening his eyes.

The room was shadowed with the overhead lights switched off. He lifted his lids higher and found his gaze caught by Jaxon's storm cloud gaze.

Whoa...he'd never seen that look in Jaxon's eyes before and he wasn't sure what it was.

Unsure of how long he'd been here, he glanced around and then down at the gown he was wearing before turning his attention to the hospital bed he was in.

“Hayden...” Jaxon said, but the breathy way his name came out with that long, soft sigh caused his stomach to jump.

“You look like shit,” he breathed through the pain, running his eyes over the cuts on Jaxon’s forehead and one cheek.

“It’s nothing.”

His eyes moved from Jaxon’s to the man hovering behind him and he met Logan Cobalt’s worried frown. From the look of both of them, he thought maybe he’d been hurt badly. Rather than ask, because he wasn’t sure he wanted to know right at that moment, he looked around the room and spotted his clothes sitting in a bag on the chair.

“That bastard ruined my best shirt,” he grumbled, gazing down at the hospital gown and his laugh came out jumpy.

Jaxon’s answering bark of laughter was thick and clogged, but then the man’s breath caught and etches of pain lanced across his face.

“Are you hurt?” Hayden asked, and he couldn’t help it that his voice sounded like a frantic frog.

“Just some bruised ribs.” Jaxon shook his head.

Not believing Jaxon’s glib and rather quick response, Hayden finally began testing his own limbs for any breaks, bruises, or worse, and after wiggling all of his fingers and toes, he found that the only pain remaining was the throb in his head.

“How long have we been here?” He slowly pulled himself up into a sitting position.

“You were brought in yesterday,” Jaxon said, hurrying to push the button to raise the head of the bed.

Had he been out the whole time? He eased back against the mattress and let Jaxon reposition the thin blanket and sheet around his waist.

“What’s the prognosis, Doc?” Hayden smirked, slanting a glance at Logan.

He'd been surprised to see Logan there, but he shouldn't have been. Logan Cobalt was one of the best bosses Hayden had ever worked for, and he felt a momentary twinge of guilt that he'd quit on the guy.

"You suffered a mild concussion that knocked you out for way too long."

"Mild, my ass. It's severe," Jaxon said, arguing with Logan—which was dangerous in Hayden's opinion. Logan wasn't one to be fucked with, but apparently, by the look on his face, Jaxon didn't care.

"The doctor said it's mild," Logan assured him and sent a dark look at Jaxon.

A slight knock had both men turning toward the door. Logan slipped a hand into his coat and Hayden knew his boss was ready to pull his weapon if whoever came through the door was a threat.

Jaxon, on the other hand, went full-on tactical bear and pulled his weapon before stalking over to yank open the door.

"What the fuck do you want? You can't see him," Jaxon said, sounding all growly and possessive, and Hayden's stomach clenched.

Ice pushed past Jaxon, which wasn't easy to do, and entered the room.

Jaxon stepped up and body-checked the guy. Oh, it wasn't hard, but it was a *don't fuck with me* move and Ice froze.

Hayden met Ice's frosty-colored eyes from across the room and made himself not read anything into Jaxon's Neanderthal bristling. That was Jaxon's way. It was actually the real reason why Jaxon had left Erebus years ago—the man was too damned caring. Hayden knew all about Jaxon's time with the assassins even though they'd never talked about it. He'd heard about it through the grapevine over the past several weeks.

Jaxon West had been one of their best assassins before he'd abruptly thrown in the towel and left it all behind. And Hayden had no idea of why exactly, because the others in Erebus didn't know either, so he figured it had to do with



Jaxon's protective nature. If Jaxon leaving Erebus was for any other reason, Hayden knew nothing about it.

He stared at Ice. Technically, he still worked for Erebus and Ice was his co-worker for want of a better label.

"Hey," Hayden said still in that froggy voice and Ice frowned at the bodyguard still trying to block his way from advancing.

"Jaxon, let him through," Hayden said, and the much bigger man moved his body so Ice could approach the bed.

Of course, Jaxon didn't give a shit about their privacy and came to the other side of his hospital bed and lifted his hand.

It was a dick move on Jaxon's part because the move sent the wrong message to Ice, who had narrowed his eyes and Hayden almost snickered. But right then, the spit dried into his mouth when Jaxon linked their fingers together and it was all he could do to concentrate on Ice's words and not the thumb that was running over the top of his fingers.

"Hey." Ice gave Logan an up nod.

Logan squinted at the assassin and returned Ice's nod.

"Solomon sent me to see if you're okay," Ice told Hayden. "He gave your phone and ID to Ryder."

"Fuck Solomon," Jaxon growled.

Solomon was the head of Erebus, who in the food chain was just beneath Dave, and Hayden wasn't sure Jaxon should be cursing the guy.

"So? Are you okay?" Ice ignored Jaxon's outburst.

"Well, they fucked up my best shirt, so no, I'm not okay."

"I'll buy you a new shirt," Ice said softly.

"The fuck you will," Jaxon snarled.

"Wait!" Hayden said, his eyes bright on Jaxon and he smiled. "What if I want him to buy me a new shirt?"

Jaxon looked like a thundercloud took up residence on his handsome face. "I'll buy you any fuckin' shirt you want."

“Even if it’s pomegranate?”

Jaxon looked confused. “Is that even a color?”

“It’s a fruit.” Hayden’s smile widened.

Logan groaned and shook his head. “I’m stepping out. I need to talk with you before you’re discharged, Hayden.”

“I’ll let my secretary know,” Hayden quipped.

Logan couldn’t hide his chuckle and left the room. The silence was sticky and Hayden was just about out of jokes to take his focus off his throbbing headache and the hand Jaxon refused to release even when he’d tugged at it.

“What do you want?” Jaxon stared at Ice with a flat, deadly expression.

“I’m just following orders, Jax. Solomon sent me to check in on him.”

“So you’ve checked.”

Hayden thought he should put Jaxon in check, but he kind of liked this badass protective side. He hadn’t seen it since Jaxon had a hand in removing his brother Wyatt from his life.

It was nice.

“Looks like you two need a babysitter,” Ice said, returning Jaxon’s alpha aggression head-on.

“Ohhhh.” Hayden laughed and then groaned from the slight pain lancing through his head. He shrugged off Jaxon’s concerned look.

“Isn’t that cool? The bodyguard needs a bodyguard.” Hayden waved a hand and Jaxon’s scowl deepened.

“Why in the world would you think this is about me?” Jaxon growled.

Hayden blinked. Yeah, okay, he probably looked like an owl, but this couldn’t be about him.

“It can’t be about me. You fixed that problem.”

Jaxon glanced away.

Was that guilt? Hayden slowly pulled himself up, sliding his fingers out of Jaxon's hold. Where before, Jaxon had gripped his fingers tightly, now they let him slip away.

"Jaxon...you did fix the problem, didn't you?" he said, gripping the sheet tightly.

"It's...complicated."

"Complicated like constipation? Or complicated like diarrhea? Because they are two very different levels of complicated. One has you sitting and the other has you running."

Jaxon looked at him like he was out of his mind. And maybe he was. His head throbbed.

Maybe that was it!

This was a dream and he was going to wake up any minute and Jaxon was going to tell him that his brother was still dead.

# CHAPTER SEVEN



*No, your brother is not dead, I put him in WITSEC because he turned state's evidence on Rafferty and I lied to you about it.*

Of course, Jaxon didn't say any of that out loud. He'd kept his mouth shut for five fucking years. Wyatt was hidden away by the Marshals and Hayden was free and clear from the shit Wyatt had been caught up in.

"Jaxon, what the fuck?"

"Give us a fucking minute," Jaxon growled at the smug-looking Ice. He didn't know what the guy was looking so smug about, it wasn't like Ice knew shit about Wyatt.

The only two people on earth who knew besides Dave were the US Marshals, specifically Whiplash Tauber and Axel Bains, and maybe a handful of others.

Ice walked out, closing the hospital room door, and Jaxon took a deep breath.

"Look, Wyatt is dead. We went over this five years ago. You need to stop thinking it's him every time something happens," Jaxon said the lie to his best friend with a bitter taste in his mouth.

"Then why did you look so fucking guilty?"

“Because you got hurt looking into a job from one of my friends.” That part wasn’t a lie and Jaxon hung onto it.

“Was it really your friend who got us hurt?”

“No, Jesse is in a coma and his place is destroyed.”

“I’m sorry...And you think someone set us up?”

“What else could it be?” Hayden said, biting his bottom lip, a look of sadness washing through his whole body.

He shook off his desire to take the man in his arms and scowled instead. “So, are you getting dressed or do you need a rest, Princess?”

“You know what? Have a nice day, dumbass! Preferably somewhere else,” Hayden snapped at him all grumpily, but that fire was back in his blue eyes.

Jaxon flattened his lips to keep them from curving upward, but Hayden noticed.

“You’re the reason I’m on medication!”

Okay, that got his lips smiling wide. “You don’t take any.”

Hayden gave a rueful smile in return and pursed his lips.

Oh fuck. Jaxon stared at Hayden’s puckered mouth until the man cleared his throat. Jerking his eyes away, he clenched his teeth. Damn it. What the fuck was wrong with him?

He wouldn’t jeopardize anything he had with Hayden, but ever since he’d covered Hayden in the blown-out deli, he couldn’t stop every protective urge inside from rearing up.

But he knew from experience that dating a friend didn’t work. He’d tried once a long time ago, getting involved with a really close buddy of his and it had ended badly.

“Jax?”

Hayden’s whispering voice jerked him from his chaotic thinking.

“Yeah?”

“How is Jesse, what do the doctors say?”

“Not too good. It’s a medically induced coma, just until they can assess everything.”

“I really am sorry.”

Jaxon nodded and then mentally shook himself. Stressing about Jesse wasn’t going to do his friend any good. They had a fucking bomber to catch.

“So...you ready to get out of this joint?” He kept his voice light.

“Hell yeah. Can I?”

“Yeah.” Jaxon lifted a set of papers on the hospital tray. “Logan signed these; the doctor signed off as long as you don’t over-exert yourself.”

Hayden nodded with a smile that sent Jaxon’s heart lurching and he couldn’t look away when the slender man slowly slid his long legs over the side of the bed.

Swallowing, Jaxon stepped forward to assist by pulling the clothes from the bag of stuff he’d brought. While the man finished getting dressed, Jaxon headed over to wait near the door, putting some distance between them.

“Ready!” Hayden said and approached.

He opened the door and poked his head out before letting Hayden walk through.

“Expecting trouble?”

“With you, always.”

Hayden rolled his eyes and smacked him on the arm. “I’m not the one with trouble as his middle name.”

“When have I ever been trouble?” Jaxon lifted both eyebrows.

“I see you two are in rare form,” Felix Acosta called out, interrupting them, and approached down the long hallway.

“Hey.” Hayden grinned and returned the gentle hug the fellow bodyguard gave him.

“How are you?” Felix placed him at arm’s length and looked him over.

“Aches and pains, nothing broken, slight concussion,” he answered, tossing a stern look at Jaxon, who looked ready to argue.

“And you?” Felix eyed Jaxon, who scowled.

“And him what?” Hayden smiled.

“Ooooooh, Hayden wasn’t supposed to know that you passed out?”

“You have a big mouth.” Jaxon glared at the bodyguard.

Felix laughed. “That I do, my friend, that I do.”

“What happened!” Hayden turned on him, but the move was too fast and the younger man gasped and went pale. Jaxon slipped a protective arm around Hayden’s waist, pulling him close to prevent him from falling.

“Damn it, Felix.” Jaxon guided Hayden gently down the hospital hallway.

“Oops.” Felix looked contrite and fell into step beside them.

Felix Acosta was one of the biggest flirts and had the looks to back it up. Not only good-looking, like Felix could have stepped right out of a movie set kind of way, Felix was the prettiest of them all in Hayden’s opinion, with his dark curly hair and bright blue eyes.

Both Tyler Brick and Gunner Morgan stood from chairs and came around the line of waiting people in the lobby.

Brick held out his cell phone to Jaxon.

“Who is it?” He eyed the phone.

“It’s Ryder. Talk to him before he flies down here and kicks my ass for not putting you on the phone,” Brick said.

Jaxon snorted. Tyler Brick was the biggest son of a bitch he’d ever come across, and he lived up to his last name—hence the reason he went by Brick instead of Tyler. The big

bodyguard had more tattoos than he'd seen in a long ass time. They covered Brick's arms, chest, and neck.

Gunner was big, but not as tall or thick as Brick, yet the cowboy sure had the bulk and could give both him and Brick a run for their money. Jaxon regularly sparred with both men and none of them ever knew ahead of time who would come out the winner.

"Ryder?" Jaxon said, taking the phone, and watched as Brick stepped up to Hayden and looked him over.

Where before, there had been tension between Hayden and Brick, Jaxon detected none. He never did find out what had happened between the two men, but it had nothing to do with sexual tension and he knew that because he'd flat out asked Hayden. And even though Hayden had told him they weren't hooking up or anything like that, Hayden never did tell him what their disagreement had been about.

"Thank fuck," his best friend snarled into the phone, but Jaxon heard the relief in his best friend's words. When Hayden tried to step away, Jaxon took hold of the man's arm and when Hayden tried to wiggle away, Jaxon tightened his grip, sliding his arm around Hayden's waist until the man settled against his side.

It wasn't normal for them, this closeness, but Jaxon wanted...no, he needed Hayden close right then and he wasn't going to question why that was at the moment.

"I'm okay," he answered Ryder. "Hayden was banged up a bit, but we are both still breathing."

"What the fuck happened?"

"I don't know yet, but when I find out, I'll let you know."

"You need me there, you say the word." Ryder lived close. The man was located in Colorado Springs half the time and the other half in Denver. Harrison, Ryder's husband, was content with the arrangement, so it currently worked for both men.

"I will. I need to go, I have to get Hayden settled in," he said.



“Give him our love,” Ryder said and ended the call.

“Ryder and Harrison send their love,” Jaxon murmured to Hayden and handed back the phone to Brick.

“Awww, I love them too,” Hayden said in a mushy voice, and he heard the fatigue.

“They didn’t get your phone yet.”

Hayden yawned and swayed. “I need my insurance card.”

Shaking his head, Jaxon gently sat Hayden in a nearby chair and went to the desk to check them out.

“I already took care of it,” Logan said, coming around from one of the other checkout stations.

“Thanks, boss,” Hayden said with a cheeky grin, causing Felix to snicker. “I knew your money would come in handy.”

Jaxon rolled his eyes, but he couldn’t argue. Logan Cobalt was one of the richest men in the world.

“We have insurance,” Felix piped up.

Jaxon noticed that Felix and Gunner were being cordial to each other. Not overly friendly, but Felix wasn’t glaring and Gunner wasn’t scowling.

There was hope.

Brick’s phone went off and the bodyguard frowned at the screen. “Damn nuisance,” the big man muttered and answered the call within earshot.

“What,” Brick growled into the phone and then glared at nothing. “That’s not a reason to call.” Without another word, the guy hung up his cell and tucked it away in his pocket before gazing at them. “What?”

“Nothing,” Jaxon murmured, helping Hayden up from the chair.

“Ooh la la,” Hayden laughingly told Brick, who flipped him off.

Logan broke the moment by stepping forward to cup Hayden’s face. All laughter faded from Hayden’s blue eyes at

that moment and Jaxon's mouth dried up.

"You sure you're okay?" Logan asked, looking Hayden over.

"Yeah." Hayden solemnly nodded.

"And you?" Logan released Hayden and turned to Jaxon.

"I'm fine, and if you cup my face like that, I'm going to punch you." He squinted at Logan.

"You fucking wish," Logan growled and Jaxon smirked.

He normally didn't joke around with Logan, first, because he was their boss and second, he was one tough son of a bitch, but having Hayden in the hospital had them all a bit shaken and him the most.

Hayden giggled and the sound had the group of men laughing. They made their way to the front door and stepped out into the sunshine.

*Tat, tat, tat!*

The familiar spatter of gunfire filled the air and bullets hit the front of the hospital, shattering one of the doors and sending stucco and debris flying into the air.

Jaxon dropped to the concrete and took Hayden to the ground, covering the man with his own body. Hayden stayed still, stretched on his stomach, and covered the back of his own head with his hands. It might not stop a bullet, but it could protect him from flying objects.

Gunner, Brick, and Felix returned fire while diving for cover, and Logan crouched next to him and Hayden, gun drawn. People screamed and ran and Jaxon had a moment of horrifying *deja vu*.

Other than protecting his head, Hayden hadn't moved a muscle beneath him.

"Cover me," Jaxon told Logan and when his boss opened fire, Jaxon eased up, curled his arms around Hayden, and jumped to his feet. He picked up Hayden and ran back the way they'd come.

He made it through the shattered door and around the corner from the gun battle raging outside. The people who got caught in the waiting room were crouched, hiding behind waiting room chairs.

“Hayden!” He placed Hayden in one of the chairs.

“I’m okay,” Hayden said, blinking up at him.

“You weren’t talking.”

“You shouldn’t be surprised, you flattened me.”

“You never stop talking,” he grumbled and hid the shaking of his hands by stroking them through the light blond hair that spilled over Hayden’s shoulders.

“Think of this as the one moment in time that will never happen again.”

Jaxon groaned with a half laugh. There was his smart aleck. He brushed the hair away from Hayden’s face.

“I thought I hurt you when I slammed you to the ground.”

“I’m tougher than I look. I can take a licking and keep on...”

The bruised and battered beauty tipped his chin up and Jaxon had the crazy urge to kiss Hayden on the mouth.

*Where the fuck had that come from?*

Clearing his throat, Jaxon said, “Stay here,” before he was up and running back to the door, gun drawn in a low crouch.

Other than the sound of people crying and sirens wailing, the gunfire had stopped. Gunner was helping Felix to his feet, brushing glass from the man’s hair, and for once, Felix didn’t tell Gunner to fuck off. Brick was assisting a nurse who’d been caught outside with them, but escaped harm.

Logan stalked up to Jaxon and slapped a set of keys in his hand.

“Get on the road,” Logan ordered. “I’ll send you the address of a safe house. Take my SUV.”

Jaxon nodded, took the keys Logan held out, and then stepped toward the waiting room before he suddenly turned back.

“What are you going to do?” He held the man’s gaze.

“Make a few calls,” Logan growled.

# CHAPTER EIGHT



“This really isn’t necessary.” Hayden stood in the middle of the safe house.

The townhouse was located not too far from Sloan Lake, and because the place was newly built, people wouldn’t think too much about new occupants moving in. All they could hope was that it was far enough away from prying eyes.

The place was a ten-minute drive from Denver and Cobalt Security headquarters.

“Trust me, this is necessary,” Jaxon said, putting down the two overnight bags.

It was the stuff Jaxon had packed before Hayden had tried to kill Bozz and prior to the deli being blowing up. That had been twenty-four hours earlier but to Hayden, it felt like days had gone by. Exhaustion did that to a guy, and a concussion.

Jaxon strode through the house checking everything.

“Did you know about this place?” he called out and rummaged in his pack. He couldn’t ever remember this particular condo being on their list of safe places to bring clients. Sometimes, they had to improvise and hide people

from potential suspects when the environment they were in proved to be unfit.

Pulling out his Sig Sauer from the duffle, he tucked it beneath his shirt. After everything that happened, he wasn't going to be without his weapon.

He began walking through the quaintly decorated townhouse-type condo with comfy leather couches, brown wood floors, and white shag rugs. A massive television hung on the wall with a custom hutch beneath. Splashes of red were thrown in to give the place color. Hayden stopped at the patio windows and opened the white vertical blinds to be faced with a smattering of trees. Over the tops of homes and the park, he could see the blue-colored lake in the distance. A boat floated across the surface with two men fishing and the city of Denver rising in the distance.

"No, Logan told me that it's a recent acquisition of Giovanni Rossi's," Jaxon finally answered him, his voice closer when the man reentered the living room.

Hayden smiled out the window, spotting a neighbor walking two dogs. Or rather, the large Greyhound dogs were walking the neighbor.

Giovanni Rossi was the head of two covert teams that worked mostly out of California with the occasional international jobs. Phoenix and Pegasus mainly assisted law enforcement. And while he would have loved nothing more than to cozy up here away from the world with Jaxon, he wasn't going to wait here while their team discovered what the hell was going on.

"We can't stay here long."

"Why not?" Jaxon grumbled, and Hayden turned to face the glowering man.

"I have a hair appointment."

"What the hell are you going to do to your hair?" Jaxon scowled at his head.

"Who knows, shave my head bald?" he smirked, and Jaxon squinted and then grinned.

“That will be the day.”

“I still can’t stay here long,” Hayden murmured.

“Again, why not?”

“I have to collect my clothes from the motel.” He crossed his arms. Hayden knew he was being combative, but he had a headache.

“Come on, lay out in the chair on the balcony and I’ll make you some hot cocoa,” Jaxon said in that gruff, sexy voice of his.

Hayden let himself be drawn out onto the rather nice-sized balcony. He sat in a recliner that was positioned in the sun. Because it was late April and chilly in Colorado, but the sun was still shining, Jaxon spread a blanket over his lap.

“Don’t get used to this.” He sent the man a narrowed look and Jaxon backed up with his hands up.

“I won’t, but you’ve been blown up and shot at in a matter of a few days. I think some relaxing is in order.”

“Are you telling me to chill out?” Hayden pursed his lips and then swallowed when Jaxon’s gaze dropped to his mouth.

“You’re at an eleven, I need you to bring it down to a six at the most.”

“I may give you an eight if you’re lucky.”

“I need at least a seven.”

“Grab a straw because you suck,” he quipped, holding back a laugh. He’d read that one somewhere and it was too good to pass up.

Jaxon huffed on an amused breath. “Okay, an eight. I’ll take what I can get.”

Another response sat on the tip of Hayden’s tongue, but Jaxon disappeared back into the house.

Hayden sighed, tucked his Glock beneath the pillow at his side, and gazed out at the tranquil scene. He wanted to walk to the lake, but figured it had to be a mile or more and he wasn’t

sure he had the energy. Jaxon thought he was an eleven now, but there'd been a time, when he was younger, where he'd been at least a twenty.

He'd always been up to trouble and had run wild most of his youth. His mother, rest her soul, had been a patient woman, at least with him. They'd grown up in a small homestead on the outskirts of Phoenix, Arizona, with enough of a yard to go full speed. The neighborhood had been filled with kids and fun. Then Byron had been killed by a drunk driver.

He shook off the thought of his youngest brother and of the last time he'd seen him happily waving his hand, eight years old—Byron had been gone in the next moment, leaving his mom, Hayden, and Wyatt behind.

It was ten years after Byron's death that their mom passed from breast cancer. At sixteen, Hayden had clung to Wyatt as it was just the two of them against the world. They hadn't known their dad because he'd died in the war, and his mom had kept them alive with the checks from the Army.

The military was something he never wanted to join. Instead, he'd gone to college and obtained his bachelor's degree in computer science and criminology and that was a happier time and several years prior to finding out his older brother had been a traitor and killed because of it.

Hayden was the only one left of his entire family.

The screen door creaked and Jaxon reappeared with two cups of cocoa and handed him one.

Hayden sipped at the sweet liquid, licked his lips, and kept his eyes glued to the trees.

“Why so sad?”

“Me?” He fought to give a slight smile. “I'm always happy.” When Jaxon didn't answer, Hayden slid his eyes upward and found those smoky gray orbs locked on him.

“I was just thinking...about when I was young and didn't have a care in the world. It was just me and my brothers and what trouble we could get into.” He knew his voice sounded



pensive, but damn it, sometimes he didn't want to be the life of the party.

Tears spurted, catching him by surprise, and he turned his head quickly to hide them. The cup in his hands wobbled.

“Hey.” Jaxon was there in a heartbeat, rescuing his mug before setting them both on a small nearby table. Jaxon plucked him up like he weighed nothing, took his flipping seat, and then sat him on his lap as if he were a child. Stunned, he froze for a moment. He wiggled when strong arms crushed him close and after a few more struggles, Hayden stopped fighting.

“It's going to be okay,” Jaxon's deep voice murmured and his big hand smoothed slowly up and down his back.

“Jaxon...I...” Hayden drew back, stumbling over his words.

But they wouldn't come.

Because he wasn't sure what he wanted to say.

# CHAPTER NINE



“Hey,” Jaxon drew back, balancing one ass cheek on the edge of the chair in order to place Hayden on the biggest part of the seat.

It gave him a better view of Hayden’s eyes, and he ran a concerned glance over the man’s face.

“How are you feeling?” Jaxon brushed the hair from Hayden’s forehead.

“It’s going to be okay. Whatever this is, we’re going to get through it together.”

“Thick and thin?” One of Hayden’s blond brows quirked.

“Yes.”

“Come rain or shine?”

“Mhmm,” Jaxon vowed, trying not to smile.

“For better or worse?”

Was that a trick question? Jaxon gulped. Hayden was giving him that damned grin that made him want to kiss those pursed lips. His mouth grew dry and he gave a hard swallow, only able to nod.

“Come hell or high water?” Hayden tapped his fingers on the arm of the chair and then finished with, “Or against all odds?”

“Yes,” he croaked.

“Like two peas in—”

Jaxon placed two fingers on Hayden’s lips to stop the flow of words. The man’s blue eyes swam with laughter over the tops, and his lips pursed with a loud smacking kiss against his fingertips. Jaxon felt the zing all the way up his arm as if Hayden’s lips held an unseen power, and Jaxon had the insane urge to kiss him.

He slowly dropped his hand with the sound of his heart thundering in his ears. Hayden’s eyes grew soft and fuck... Jaxon didn’t know what the look was in those beautiful blue depths, but they’d changed somehow, making his mouth go dry like the desert.

Then Hayden’s lips parted and Jaxon leaned in oh so fucking slowly...closing the distance between their lips.

*Slam!*

“Shit!” Hayden jumped from the sound of a car door slamming and Jaxon jerked away, falling backward off the fucking seat. His ass smacked the patio floor hard, jarring his tailbone and leaving a throbbing pain in its wake.

Hayden laughed. Oh my god, the man laughed and laughed.

“Shut up.” Jaxon rolled, lurching to his feet and stalking to the edge of the patio to look over the railing at the tranquil little cul-de-sac below. The door slam had been the neighbor, a woman coming home with arms full of groceries. He spun on Hayden, who was still giggling and squinted.

“Oh, come on, that was funny.”

“My ass doesn’t think so.” He frowned, rubbing at the ache in the back of his jeans.

“Want me to rub it?” Hayden blinked his eyelashes and smirked.

Okay, now that struck his funny bone and his desire at the same time, and to cover the sudden state of his cock when he thought about Hayden touching his ass, Jaxon grinned and then chuckled.

“I guess that was funny.” He rubbed a hand at the back of his neck, turning slightly away.

They’d almost kissed.

And what the fuck had he been thinking anyway? A kiss between them would have been disastrous! Wouldn’t it have? Yes, it damned well would have.

That wasn’t who they were. They were best friends. They’d been to hell and back on numerous occasions and not once had they ever crossed that line.

Did he want to potentially ruin a friendship to get a piece of ass?

Wait...Hayden wasn’t just some piece of ass, and Jaxon was positive it wouldn’t be a quickie with Hayden. And that very thought left him wondering.

Yeah, wondering...and a whole hell of a lot of other things.

Shit, he needed to get laid, that must be the problem. He thought about the list of numbers in his phone. He’d dated several men and women in his lifetime, and a couple of Exes—he had a whole list of hookups on his phone if he wanted. That was what this had to be. He hadn’t gotten laid since months before he’d left for California to help Dave with his assassin problem.

“Earth to Jax.”

He pressed his lips, shook his head, and said gruffly, “Come on, let’s see if there’s anything to eat in this joint.”

They ended up ordering pizza because the cupboards were bare and Jaxon tried like hell to keep his mind off of the way the light from the television sent a glow through Hayden’s light hair. He needed to focus more on eating the food and trying to figure out who the fuck would want them dead.

Hayden pulled a large piece of the pizza from the pie and placed it on his plate before serving himself. It was a habit, just like Hayden pulling off the onions to pile on his. He waited patiently for the man to finish before he lifted the piece and took a large bite. They both dug into the mouthwatering goodness.

Half an hour went by, and Jaxon kept his eyes on the television even though he was done eating. The silence from Hayden had him frowning and when he glanced over, he found Hayden dozing off. Jaxon turned off the television and stood before he leaned over and cupped Hayden's cheek.

"What?" The man instantly blinked his eyes wide and startled.

"It's time for bed."

Hayden rubbed his face and nodded before lifting to his feet. Jaxon shut off the lights as the younger man walked down the hallway letting out a huge yawn.

He followed shortly after and found Hayden sitting on the edge of the bed in one of the spare rooms. "Get some sleep."

Hayden gazed at him. "Leave the door open."

Jaxon smiled. It was a habit of Hayden's, even back at home the guy didn't close his door. Jaxon pushed the wood wider and continued down the hall to the other spare room. He changed his shirt and grabbed an extra clip before heading back down the hall. Stopping in Hayden's doorway, he saw the top of the man's head poking out from beneath the blankets.

*It was going to be a long night*, he thought, and continued back into the living room.



Jaxon flipped through the television channels the next morning so Hayden didn't have a chance to brainstorm ideas he'd been mulling over that morning during breakfast.

It was like that between them. Jaxon usually picked the program on TV to watch and Hayden would go along because they had the same tastes in movies...oh, and music.

Shortly after moving into Jaxon's spare room, Hayden had discovered they enjoyed the same music. Their mutual love of classic rock hadn't been discovered by being in the same household, but rather from a hole-in-the-wall bar they'd found several years ago.

The place had been packed, and the music hadn't been all that great until Jaxon had bribed the DJ to play some classic rock. When Jaxon started pumping his arms and cocking his legs out like a broken chicken dancing, Hayden had bent over, hands on his thighs, laughing hysterically. Jaxon had pounced on him and pulled him into his arms. They'd danced that night to every rock song the DJ could find.

"You're not too bad when you slow down," he had teased, dodging Jaxon's big feet. "Less like a broken chicken."

"I'll have you know that all the girls in high school wanted to dance with me."

"When was that, 1960?" He grinned and Jaxon scowled.

Hayden had wiggled away and Jaxon had chased him around the dance floor much to the amusement of the other dancers.

They had the best time when it was just the two of them.

Smiling at the memories, he scrolled through the email on the open laptop on the coffee table and spotted a recent one from Logan. Snatching up the remote, he flipped off the TV.

"I was watching that," Jaxon grumbled, shooting him a quick look.

"Watching what?" he countered.

"Um..." Busted. Jaxon looked away. "Nothing."

Hayden snicker snorted and then pointed to the email. "Logan sent over some of the case files we've recently worked. Maybe something will be in there and we can find out

who the hell wants us dead,” he said, going through the list of potential suspects.

“Good idea.”

“Mhmm.” Hayden’s fingers paused and then he gave a heavy sigh.

“What’s wrong?”

“I want my cell phone.” Hayden pursed his lips and then tossed him a sad pout. “I feel odd without it and we forgot to get me a new one.”

“I’ll send for your things.”

“Yeah, how?” Hayden’s face filled with hope.

“I’ll have Solomon meet Ryder with your stuff. He’ll check your phone to make sure that nobody put a tracker on it.”

Hayden rolled his eyes at that, but tapped his fingers on the keys.

“Yeah, like I’d let someone put a tracker on my phone. And who’s to say Solomon would even meet Ryder.”

“He will. Solomon knows Ryder.”

Hayden squinted at him for a few moments.

“What?” Jaxon lifted both eyebrows.

“I still think it’s someone after you and I just happened to be collateral damage.”

He was confused for a second when Hayden switched the subject on him, but came back with his own logic.

“Maybe. I’m not taking any chances though,” he said, and stared when Hayden slid a wary blue gaze his way.

A puzzled look crept into Hayden’s eyes as if he were silently trying to figure out something, and Jaxon cleared his throat—nodding toward the computer screen.

“Anything?”

“Well, yeah,” Hayden smirked, turned to the computer, and began reading the list of names.

Jaxon sent a quick text on his phone and then held it up. “Ryder will get your stuff and meet with Solomon.”

He harrumphed, but was secretly pleased. Scrolling through the list of case files, he realized that most of the cases were ones where the perp was either dead or in jail. There were a few older ones where stalkers had been released on good behavior. One case stuck out. Cobalt Security had been called in to protect a woman from a stalker. The man had been caught a month later and sent to prison.

“Says here that the guy is now out on good behavior.”

“Where’s the woman?”

“She died from cancer a year ago.” Hayden grimaced. “He may be pissed at that or pissed at us for keeping him from her while she was still alive,” Hayden finished after reading the short info on Ruby Kirkland.

“Who was the perp again?”

“Richard Lundry.”

“Yeah. I remember him, total dick,” he said. The fucker had held a knife to Ruby’s throat while attempting to kidnap her.

“Why the hell would they let him out?”

“Maybe because Ruby is dead? He can’t stalk her anymore?”

“Yeah, he’ll just become someone else’s fucking nightmare.”

“Hey, Dick is only a few hours from here...let’s pay him a visit,” Hayden said.

“No.”

“Pullllleeease?” Hayden’s eyes gleamed with excitement and his lips parted.



“No.” Jaxon squinted and steeled himself against Hayden’s trickery.

*Sexy, sexy trickster.*

“You know you want to.”

“No, I don’t.”

“If we don’t go now, I’ll just sneak away when you’re not looking.”

“You can’t do that. I’m always looking.” Jaxon ran his eyes over Hayden’s smiling face.

“Remember Cinco de Mayo last year?”

Jaxon scowled.

“Or New Years 2018? Or what about when we went to the rodeo the same year?”

Jaxon groaned and rubbed at the back of his neck remembering the bets Hayden had waged that he could ditch him. But mostly, Jaxon remembered how he’d lost the bet every single damned time. Yeah, Hayden could give him the slip in a heartbeat—the guy was talented.

“Remembering the past three weeks?” Hayden cackled.

Jaxon glared. He should have known Hayden would rub that one in. He let out a heavy sigh. “You always did like the chase.”

“Nah, it’s more about catching them.” Hayden waggled his brows.

Jaxon snorted, studied the grinning man, and then thought...why the hell not? It would give them something to do and take his mind off of things that he shouldn’t be thinking about. It might give them a break in the case and root out their attacker.

Maybe this way, they could get a jump on the perp without waiting around for Logan to call whomever. Still, though, Jaxon sent Logan a text of their plan and he wasn’t surprised when his phone rang a moment later.

“What now?” Logan’s growled words were heavy with disbelief.

Jaxon explained about their suspect. “We could get the guy when he’s not expecting it.”

Logan sighed. “True. And when you do go after this joker, be fucking careful. I can pull Brick and Felix off another suspect and send them your way.”

“What suspect?”

“The team has received a few death threats they’re checking into.”

“Nah, don’t pull them. Keep them on that while we check this guy out. It could be nothing.”

“Just do recon, don’t engage. Hayden doesn’t work for me,” Logan ordered after a moment. “Plus, he’s got to be sore as hell.”

“Copy,” Jaxon said and ended the call. He gripped the phone and turned to find Hayden watching him. The bruise on the younger man’s jaw had him squinting.

“What?” Hayden’s pretty lips pursed.

“Stay close to me and there will be no ditching,” Jaxon croaked.

“Did you bring my running shoes?”

“I did,” Jaxon said, slowly nodding.

“Try to keep up.”

There was no way in hell he could keep up running with Hayden, the man was hella fast, not to mention wily. Jaxon eyed the sexy smirk Hayden wore and it once again gave him ideas that he shouldn’t have.

Jaxon cleared his throat and murmured, “Don’t lose me.”

“Never.”

And damned if that one word didn’t send his heart pounding.

# CHAPTER TEN



Jaxon had been looking at him off and on ever since the man had fallen on his ass on the patio.

For a minute there, Hayden had the insane idea that Jaxon had been close to kissing him.

Maybe he'd been hallucinating.

And if not, he wasn't sure how he felt about it, and he wasn't sure if he was glad the neighbor had interrupted them or not.

Didn't Jaxon have enough names on his dating list? Yes, he did. Thinking of the list of Jaxon's dating numbers suddenly turned Hayden's stomach sour, but it was only because nobody should have that many people in a little black book!

The idea of burning that book of names took root, but he couldn't do that because the list was actually on Jaxon's phone and not paper. But he could smash the cell to pieces or delete the list completely from the cloud—he knew people with the skills to do it.

Why the hell was he getting all up in Jaxon's business all of a sudden?

*It's just my crazy thinking,* that annoying voice of reason said.

Jaxon was his best friend and he had no right to be possessive about who the guy dated. He recalled the strange look on Jaxon's face when he'd announced he was dating Thomas, but then Jaxon had smiled, patted his shoulder, and retreated to the kitchen to cook dinner.

Right now, though, they both weren't dating anyone.

In fact, his own lover had left rather abruptly and Hayden was fine with that. Their relationship had been a bit volatile anyway, because... well...he was a lot to handle and Thomas hadn't liked it when he joked around or acted like his flirty, sassy self. Thomas also never liked his and Jaxon's closeness and constantly complained about how they acted more like a married couple than best friends.

"We are not," Hayden had scowled at Thomas.

"You fucking give him food off your plate."

Hayden shrugged. "So? Who cares?"

"You banter constantly with stupid jokes, teasing each other."

"Yeah? Well, we're best friends."

"You're constantly pushing his hair back."

"Well, he does tend to get it stuck in his beard," Hayden had reasoned.

"He helps you put on your coat when you're going on a date with me," Thomas had snapped.

"Does he?" Hayden smiled and then sighed and changed the subject.

It hadn't been long after that day when he and Thomas started arguing constantly. Once they'd gotten into it in front of Jaxon. When Thomas had stepped closer to growl into his face one night on the front porch, Jaxon had jerked open the door and threatened to shoot the guy. Jaxon's words had warmed Hayden's heart, although he did wonder why Jaxon

was standing so close to the front door. Thomas had ended their relationship a few days later over a text message of all things.

A few weeks after that, Jaxon had taken that damned job in California, and Hayden had been left bewildered when the man had left without saying a word. It was several days after Jaxon left that he'd become pissed and another few days after that he'd decided to get the hell out of Cobalt Security and forge his own path.

Drastic, yes, but he felt confused at his level of hurt and anger at Jaxon's desertion.

Now though, Jaxon had nixed up his plans by coming after him. It was as if Jaxon was making a point by letting him know that he could run but he couldn't hide, and Hayden couldn't deny the fact that it thrilled him that Jaxon had come for him.

They were best friends after all.

Hayden smirked and pulled on the dark tactical gear Jaxon had thoughtfully put into his bag.

Jaxon gave him a strange look, but Hayden ignored it. He tugged on his socks and dark running shoes before he stood and tucked his Sig into a holster he'd strapped on. Lifting his long hair, he pulled it tightly back and quickly put it into a bun.

Similarly, Jaxon lifted his own heavy, dark blond hair and tied it at his nape. Most of the front strands fell forward, catching in his beard when Jaxon pulled on a leather jacket over his black attire.

Damn, the man looked badass.

"What?"

"Hmm?" Hayden said with a smile and stepped forward to brush each piece of hair from Jaxon's beard before flipping them over the man's shoulder.

Jaxon stood still and Hayden swore the heat was rising off the guy in waves.

How odd.

Flipping his eyes up, their gazes locked and held and Hayden suddenly felt lightheaded.

“Ready?” he croaked.

Jaxon didn’t answer and took several jerking steps away, moving toward the bedroom door and Hayden stifled a grumbling sound and followed.

They had changed many times in the same room before, but now it felt different.

As if something had shifted between them.



They arrived at the halfway house a little after noon and Hayden parked Jaxon’s SUV against the curb of the street in a nicer part of town.

Jaxon frequently made him drive because the man would rather use his time buried in his phone and working than behind the wheel. However, this time, Jaxon hadn’t even pulled his phone out.

After he parked, Hayden tossed the keys to Jaxon and hopped out of the truck to close the door.

“Follow my lead,” he said, coming around the truck.

“Why?” Jaxon frowned.

“I have a plan.” Hayden pulled on his zip-up-the-front black sweatshirt and started up the walkway.

“Why do you get to have the plan?” Jaxon complained.

Hayden tossed a glance over his shoulder and caught Jaxon’s eyes on his ass. Before the man could look up, Hayden spun around and smothered a smile.

Of course, brat that he was, he put an exaggerated sway to his hips as he sauntered up the steps.

“Because I’m the brains of this operation.”

Jaxon stepped up beside him and gazed down into his face. “I thought you were the beauty?”

Why did those words send a shiver up his spine? Shaking himself, Hayden popped out a response.

“I can be both,” he promised, returning Jaxon’s smirking smile.

“That’s not the way it works.”

“Today it does.”

Jaxon’s smirk turned into a genuine smile that appeared a bit like a challenge.

What did that mean?

Hayden pursed his lips for a moment, then knocked on the door while a hundred comebacks sat on the tip of his tongue.

Right in the middle of searching for a bad guy was probably not the best time to start this strange flirting thing they had going on. It was flirting, right?

*Knock it off!* he silently berated himself. He did have some self-discipline after all. It might be a small amount, but it was there nonetheless.

“So, what’s the plan?” Jaxon’s whisper came hot near his ear and sent a shiver up his back just as the door opened.

“Hello.” Hayden smiled, trying to focus, when a tall, thin man with a bald head, long graying mustache, and beard answered the door.

“Mr. Dawson?”

“Yes,” the guy slowly answered.

“I’m Hayden Thorne and this is Jaxon West. We are investigating the bombing that happened at Freeman’s Deli and Coffee House. You might have seen it on the news?”

Dawson studied them both and then slowly nodded. “I saw it.”

“Mr. West and I may have been targeted by one of the people in your halfway house. And we just need you to verify if they were here.”

“Who do you suspect?”

“Richard Lundry.”

Dawson’s head tipped and he shoved the screen door open and jerked his head toward the stairs right inside near the entrance.

“He’s upstairs, first door on the left,” Dawson said, but then turned and led the way upstairs. The man pounded a fist on the closed door and then snapped it open.

Lundry sat up on the ruffled bed, hair askew, clearly having been sleeping in his clothes.

“You been off site, Lundry?”

“No.” Lundry look suspiciously at the three of them.

“Lift your pant leg,” Dawson ordered.

Lundry reached down and pulled up his jeans pant leg, displaying an ankle monitor.

“He can’t go more than a hundred yards away from this place.”

“Thanks.” Jaxon nodded to Dawson and pulled Hayden from the room.

“Now what?” Hayden said as soon as they were back outside and walking away from the house.

“We go back to the files,” Jaxon answered, sliding behind the wheel.

“It sounds boring...and safe.”

“I saw a Nintendo Switch in the back bedroom. I may let you win at Mario Kart.”

“Oh please...you mean I’ll let you win.”

“Lies.”



Hayden loved the sound of Jaxon's deep teasing voice and he was loath to kill the mood so he stayed silent, but he knew what Jaxon was trying to do and it wasn't going to work.

He wasn't quitting Erebus nor returning to Cobalt Security.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN



Hayden pulled away when they reached the condo.

That was the only thing Jaxon could think of when Hayden disappeared into one of the back bedrooms and he was left cooling his heels.

For about fifteen minutes.

Tired of waiting, he stalked down the hallway and stopped outside Hayden's bedroom door. He sighed. He didn't want to encroach on the man's privacy.

Who was he kidding? That was a lie. He wanted to encroach all the hell up in Hayden's business.

"Hayden, I got the Nintendo working."

He rapped when there was no response from within. Maybe he was taking a shower? He turned the knob and pushed open the bedroom door. The room stood empty and he walked to the partially closed bathroom door.

"You decent?" he called out, knocking on the door, and pushed it open to find it empty. "Fuck!"

Striding quickly through the condo, he checked the rest of the place, but there was no sign of Hayden. Yanking out his

cell phone, he went to call Hayden's number when he realized the man didn't have a cell phone. He walked back into the bedroom and stood in the doorway. It took him a moment to figure out what he was seeing on the nightstand. The closed laptop and a pen lay on top of a piece of paper and he hurried to pick it up.

*Jax, I can't take my cell on Erebus jobs, so when Ryder brings it over, please keep it for me. I didn't tell you I was leaving because you think you have a say in where I go. That's something we will talk about when I get back. Do you want a say in what I do? Think about that question. I will be back soon.*

*Trust me,*

*Hayden*

Jaxon crushed the note in his hand and then smoothed it out against his chest before he sank to the bed. Erebus job? The hell?

The room smelled like Hayden's light cologne and Jaxon gripped the pillow and brought it to his face.

*Shit!* He released his grip and bounced up and away from the bed.

Hayden pissed him off! Did the man really think he was going to sit and wait for him to come back? Didn't Hayden realize who he was? Who he used to be? He used to fucking run Erebus for Dave. There was no place in that organization he couldn't infiltrate and if Hayden thought he could stay hidden, he was sorely mistaken.

His phone rang on the heels of that thought and he answered it seeing Logan's name flash.

"Hayden took off," he said through his teeth, not giving his boss a chance to speak.

"I know. Dave called me. He sent Hayden an email."

Jaxon released a ragged breath. Fucking Dave! "I'm going to beat that son of a bitch to a pulp!"

“Calm down. It’s an easy job for Hayden and I have a job for you.”

“What job did Dave give him?” He scowled as he walked back to the front room of the condo.

“Instead of a hit job, Dave gave him a protection job.”

“Erebus doesn’t do protection jobs,” Jaxon said flatly.

“They do today.”

He swallowed around the lump that felt like a fucking rock in his throat.

“I have a job for you,” Logan said again.

“What.” Yeah, the word was clipped out and rude sounding, but he didn’t give a shit, he didn’t want a job right now, he needed to find Hayden.

“I need you to be Hayden’s bodyguard.”

That caught him so off guard, he couldn’t formulate a word. Why the hell would Logan put him on guarding Hayden?

“What are you not telling me?”

“Nothing. I just feel that keeping you two together while we figure out this bullshit is the best thing for everyone.”

On that, they could both agree.

Jaxon stalked to the counter near the kitchen and slipped on his shoulder holster while he cupped the phone between his jaw and shoulder.

“Where is he?” he asked, slipping in his weapon and lifting his leather jacket.

“I’ll send the details to your phone, and Jaxon?”

He waited but didn’t speak.

“Be careful,” Logan ordered and ended the call.

He was always careful, damnit. It was Hayden who was the reckless one. That mouth of his got him into more trouble than Jaxon could remember.

Now, he just had to find him.

But by the time Jaxon caught up with Hayden, it was three days later.

Beyond pissed would not even do justice to his state of mind right now, and he had to admit that Hayden had outfoxed him at every turn.

Hayden wasn't at the address Logan had given him, but the man had left enough vague clues to his whereabouts to make Jaxon's blood boil.

At one point over the past few days, he would have sworn he'd heard Hayden's laughter.

*The little shit.*

When he got his hands on him, he was going to wring his neck, after he fucking got his kiss.

Yep, he'd decided after the first and very long twenty-four hours, that this shit was over. He wanted...no he fucking needed Hayden and nothing or no one was going to get in his way.

Not even Hayden.

*Do you want a say in what I do?* The words Hayden had written came up. Fuck yes, he wanted that. He wanted a say in every damned thing Hayden did from this day forward. That thought was now burned into his very being.

*It's only been three days.*

So the fuck what?

Just a few days of being denied Hayden was driving him fucking nuts. It was one thing when Hayden was within his reach and another when he wasn't.

Honestly, it had been fucking hell while he'd been in California.

With Hayden close, Jaxon could reason himself out of starting a relationship that could potentially ruin their

friendship. However, when he was without Hayden, all he could fucking think about...no, obsess over, was being close to him and holding him and kissing him.

Besides, if he were being honest here, he'd been heading down this path with Hayden for years. He'd gotten rid of that fucking prick Thomas fast enough, hadn't he? And it had been easy to do after beating the shit out of the guy and threatening to make him disappear if he ever approached Hayden again.

At 4 AM in the morning, he parked his truck in the hospital parking lot and locked it before striding through the parked cars until he reached the building.

*“Jaxon.”*

The whisper came from somewhere behind to his left and he spun, weapon out, and slipped against the wall of the hospital. Still feeling exposed, he eased into a crouch and then ran to the end of the building and across another short parking lot, keeping out of the light, until he could slip into a narrow walkway.

From here, he could watch and wait.

Maybe the whisper had been from Hayden, but on the heels of that thought, he knew the answer. That voice was not Hayden's. He knew the man's lilting tone like he knew his own. He couldn't recall how many times he'd wished over the past few weeks to have Hayden whispering to him and preferably against his skin.

Which brought up the question...did Hayden want that? Jaxon couldn't be sure, Hayden was a flirt, but played his emotions close to his chest and it always left Jaxon floundering.

*God damn it!*

Clenching his teeth, he pressed a hand to his dick and got his brain back in the game. He still had to find Hayden and they still had to find out who the fuck bombed his friend's deli.

But right now, he needed to know who the hell had whispered his name.

“Stand down, Jax, it’s only me.”

“Fucking hell, Wrath. What the fuck are you doing out here whispering my fucking name?” he growled, clenching his hand around his weapon, tempted to shoot the darkly dressed figure who had melted out of the shadows just for spite.

“Keeping you on your toes.” Wrath’s mouth tipped at the corner. “Someone needs to.” The damned smirk was the only part of the man Jaxon could see with the assassin’s hood pulled low. The edge of glow from a distant light pole gave a slight wash of illumination.

“I’m on my fucking toes, you ass.”

“Right.”

Was that a snort from Wrath? Jaxon narrowed his eyes and finally slipped his weapon back inside his shoulder holster beneath his leather jacket.

“You’ve been hunting Hayden for days,” Wrath rasped. “What’s the problem?”

“He’s...crafty,” he admitted, rubbing a hand against his mouth, feeling the growth of his beard.

“He’s good.” Wrath had yet to move from where he stood in the darkest black shadows.

“Wait...” Jaxon scowled. “The last time we talked, you said that Hayden didn’t belong with Erebus.”

“Watching him evade you and take care of business at the same time has changed my opinion.” Wrath slightly shifted his stance. “He’s one of the best I’ve ever seen. Except for the new guy.”

“New guy?”

“Mhmm. He stays well hidden, and I can’t get close enough to get a look.”

Wait...Wrath couldn’t get close enough? Jaxon didn’t know a man on earth who could elude Wrath.

“Did you ask Solomon?”

“I did.”

Jaxon clenched his teeth when Wrath didn't continue.  
“And?”

“He declined to answer.”

“That's odd.”

“Mhmm.”

“Do you know where Hayden is?”

“He's finished the job since you started hunting him.”

“Yeah, I know that,” Jaxon said through his teeth. “I'm supposed to be his bodyguard.”

Wrath made a noise that sounded suspiciously like amusement.

“Fuck off, Wrath.”

“Look to the bomb site, he was searching there yesterday.”

Jaxon frowned, he'd been over that site the past few days. The whole team of Cobalt bodyguards were scrambling to find shit out and Jaxon didn't like it. Felix and Brick had hit a dead end with their suspect and had moved on to other possible perps.

Gunner was onto something, but hadn't checked in with them in a few days. Logan had advised they keep searching and that Jaxon find Hayden.

His ass still felt the chewing from Logan.

“Where's Hayden?” Logan had said in a deep, commanding voice.

“I haven't found him yet.”

“What do you mean?” Logan had growled and Jaxon straightened his spine even though the man wasn't in the room with him. Logan had that way about him. The man commanded respect and fear at the same time. And while his boss could be easygoing at times, Jaxon never wanted to test the limits of Logan's patience.

“He's giving me the slip.”



“You had one fucking job, Jaxon.” The snarl tightened his gut.

“I’ll find him.”

“See that you do,” Logan ordered before hanging up the phone.

“Keep your head in the game,” Wrath snapped, bringing him back to the dark alley.

“Yeah, yeah,” he grimaced because Wrath was right. “What the hell is Hayden searching for at the bomb site...” he murmured more to himself. They’d combed through everything.

“Evidence?”

And just like that, Wrath was gone.

Excitement smacked hard in Jaxon’s stomach.

Finally! Fucking finally, he was going to get his hands on Hayden. But first, he turned toward the hospital entrance.

Jesse had had the tube removed from his throat and regained consciousness that morning. His friend was now taking visitors and while there were several more hours until visiting hours, Jaxon needed some possible answers.

Maybe the bomb had been about Jesse and not him or Hayden.

# CHAPTER TWELVE



It had been fun ditching Jaxon.

It had also been lonely as hell and now he was sick of waiting.

It had been easy enough for him to give Wrath a message to pass onto Jaxon.

Now all he had to do was wait near the bomb site for Jaxon to show up and he'd let the man catch him. Waiting there at least gave him something to do. He'd found where someone had placed the backpack bomb beneath a table. Of course, CSI had collected all the evidence, but Hayden knew by the charred patterns the exact center of the blast radius.

Which raised the question of how did the bomber know when to detonate the device? Were they close by waiting for them to arrive? Or, was it just bad timing on their part and the perp had been after Jesse all along?

Jesse's store was demolished and even if the man could rebuild, he'd still need to knock down the rest of the structure and build anew. That was if Jesse pulled through. He'd gotten into the hospital a couple of days ago and found out that Jesse was still on the ventilator.

He really should call Jaxon and put him out of his misery, but that would mean getting a burner phone. Besides, calling would have ended his game of cat and mouse, and this was too much damned fun.

Of course, this time around, there was no bet going on. This time, he was doing it to show Jaxon that he could handle himself.

A slight sound reached him and he moved to the wall and stepped over the blown-out section and settled his back against the portion that still remained.

He pulled his weapon and turned it toward the stranger who had stepped out from the end of the broken structure. This wasn't the first time Hayden had caught brief glimpses of the stranger. The guy had been following him for a few days, but this was the first time the man had approached him. Hayden had no idea who he was.

Neither did Wrath. Which was odd because when Hayden had spoken to Wrath a few days ago, the assassin admitted he'd noticed the stranger following him. Yet, as much as they both had tried, neither Hayden nor Wrath had been able to get close to the man now standing in front of him. They only knew this guy was there, and had been, lingering in the shadows.

"You're good," the man said.

"So are you." Hayden tightened his grip around his Sig and pointed the barrel at the guy's heart.

The man slowly lifted his hands with a cocky smile that Hayden instantly liked.

"I'm one of you."

"Oh?" Hayden wracked his brain, but for the life of him, he couldn't remember ever seeing this guy nor had Solomon said a word.

"The personification of darkness and shadow," the man softly quoted the meaning of Erebus.

The sense of relief was instant, at least Hayden wouldn't need to kill this guy.

Call him skeptical, but he still wasn't sure. "Who's our leader?"

"You talking about Solomon...or Dave?" the man smirked.

Hayden huffed and the man held out a cell phone.

"You're not supposed to carry that."

"I'm not." Humor filtered through the man's gaze.

"You call," Hayden said as he shook his head. The guy could be trying to get him to call their boss.

The man nodded and dialed a number Hayden couldn't see.

"Sir," the guy said and quickly gave an access code and explained the situation between them before holding out the phone. "He wants to talk with you."

"Hello?"

"Hayden?"

"Yes, sir." His spine snapped straight at the sound of the former SecDef's voice.

"The man in front of you is legit. I'll talk to Solomon about communicating information better."

"What's his na—"

Dave ended the call before he could get the question out and Hayden sighed.

"I'm Hayden."

"Justice." The man tipped his head and something familiar about it struck Hayden as he handed back the phone.

"Have we met?"

"No."

"You seem familiar."

"I guess I have one of those faces."

Hayden snorted because the guy wasn't showing his face. Justice wore the typical Erebus black clothing but instead of a

dark hood covering the top half of his face, Justice wore a black beanie pulled down over his face with only the eyes and mouth cut out—even though it was early morning, broad daylight.

“Why have you been following me?”

“Who says I have?”

“So, you’ve been following Wrath?”

“Maybe.”

“What are you looking for?”

“A man called Rip.”

“I’ve never heard of him.”

“He’s one of you.”

“I’ve only been with them just shy of a few months. If he is one of us, you might want to ask Wrath or Solomon.”

Tires squealed into the parking lot of the blown-out deli and Hayden glanced in that direction as Jaxon’s truck came barreling into a space.

When Hayden turned back, Justice was gone. It had been an odd conversation and Hayden wondered who this Rip guy was, but shoved it aside.

His palms went damp when he turned back to Jaxon’s truck and he walked toward the big man getting out of the vehicle.

Was it weird that he wanted to run to him?

He’d finally figured out that the shit going on with him was because he was attracted to Jaxon. He couldn’t say exactly when his attraction began, but it was there.

And he was fucking scared.

He didn’t want to lose their friendship, and the only answer he could come up with was to get some distance between them for the past several days. He had dodged Jaxon at every turn even though the man had once been so close that

he'd almost stepped out of the shadows, but fear had held him back.

Why now of all times? Why now did he keep thinking about being in Jaxon's arms and having the man hold him close like he'd done on the condo's balcony?

Was that the reason he'd asked the question in the note?  
*Do you want a say in what I do?*

*Oh, my freaking god, just shoot me now.*

What had he been thinking by asking that question? All he could do now was chalk it up as the stupidest thing he'd ever done. Hopefully, Jaxon would just laugh it off because there was no way they'd work beyond friends.

Jaxon *would* laugh it off, right?

Across the distance he stared, unable to pull his eyes away. Jaxon was not laughing. Their gazes collided and held across the distance.

The man's eyes were almost a pewter color, darker now than the normal light smoke. Why did they suddenly seem so beautiful?

Well, he might as well face the music. Hayden walked until he was a few feet from Jaxon and then he stopped, unsure. Jaxon didn't stop and closed the distance with a hand fisted to his shirt.

"You're driving me nuts."

Wait...what?

He what?

With a pounding heart, Hayden searched Jaxon's eyes at the harshly muttered words.

"It's my mission," he teased, but the words came out shaky because well, his heart was pounding.

Jaxon's grip tightened and Hayden found himself drawn closer. His feet shuffled on the pavement and his mouth dried up, he licked his lips and Jaxon's eyes zeroed in on that.

He was tugged closer until only a foot stood between his chest and Jaxon's heaving one.

Tipping his head back, Hayden gazed into Jaxon's eyes, then at his firm mouth that was coming closer.

Oh shit. Was Jaxon going to kiss him?

Jaxon eased the distance between their mouths and just as the kiss was about to land... Hayden turned his head.

The kiss landed on his cheek.

"What are you doing?" Hayden squeaked.

Talk about a no-brainer question, but Hayden thought Jaxon might have lost his brain cells somewhere.

Was this all because of his question? The scene from the balcony a few days ago flared up and of how close Jaxon had come to kissing him there too. It hadn't all been in his mind.

They couldn't do this, could they? Or the better question was *should* they after all these years?

Shit.

Jaxon lightly clamped his teeth along his jaw and Hayden's breath came out with a strangled gasp at the touch of Jaxon's mouth on him. Desire shot straight down his abs and into his groin.

Oh fuck, maybe they could?

No, they couldn't.

*Shit.* Talk about indecisiveness.

The hand on his shirt held him in that tight grip and Jaxon's big body almost swallowed him up.

"Jaxon," he groaned this time. "What are you doing?"

"Isn't it obvious?" The man softly chuckled against his skin, trailing his mouth from his jaw to his neck and Hayden thought his dick would explode.

Yeah, no, this wasn't such a good idea now that he thought about it. He wedged his arms up between them and shoved Jaxon away.

Not that the big guy moved that far, but he moved some. Gasping for breath, Hayden yanked and Jaxon finally released his hold.

Stumbling a few feet from the man, they stood there watching each other...well, Jaxon was watching his mouth with eyes filled with so much heat it sent Hayden's stomach jumping.

"Stop it," he hissed.

Jaxon's amused gaze flipped up to hold his. "You asked me if I wanted a say in what you do."

Hayden crossed his arms over his chest and huffed. "I...I don't want an answer." He licked his lips.

"Why not?"

"I...let me think about it."

The corner of Jaxon's lip curved. "It does take some time to wrap your head around it, doesn't it?"

"Wrap my head around what?" he croaked.

"Us."



# CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Jaxon's cell phone buzzed, preventing him from getting an answer from Hayden.

It might have been a good thing because he couldn't be sure that Hayden would have commented about what he'd said, and it took everything inside of Jaxon not to haul the man closer and take what he wanted. The rise of desire combined with a possessiveness he only felt with Hayden had his cock, not to mention his whole fucking body, hard and on edge.

Answering the phone, he kept his eyes on the man's face.

"Yes sir."

"Have you found Hayden?" Logan growled.

"Yes," he said, tracking Hayden's pacing back and forth. The slender man did that when he was nervous.

Hayden could be nervous all he wanted and that was fine with Jaxon, as long as he didn't run.

"I need you to meet the rest of the team. Gunner found something. I'll text you the address."

"Got it."

Logan ended the call and Jaxon lowered the phone.

Hayden stopped pacing.

“What is it?”

“The team has a lead.”



“What do we have?” Jaxon asked.

“We have two suspects and a shit ton of explosives,” Gunner responded.

They had gathered in another safe house except instead of a nice comfortable condo or house, this one was better and bigger. Housed inside of a warehouse-type building that Gunner said belonged to Phoenix. Giovanni Rossi had more safe houses than one man should have, but Jaxon was glad it kept their own team safe at the moment. He hated having Hayden out in the open for long.

Inside were several nice-sized private bedrooms that sat behind thick wooden doors. Off to one side, he could see a full-sized kitchen. Everything looked newly built and from what Jaxon could tell, it included a high-tech system. In the center of the building sat a common room with an area rug, several couches, a large conference table that could double for eating, and a large television set against one wall.

Just the alarm system alone made Jaxon feel a bit better. He shifted on the couch and kept his eyes trained on Hayden, who had yet to sit since they’d arrived twenty minutes earlier. The guy hadn’t said one word to him on the drive to this place.

Hayden was antsy and so the fuck was he. Jaxon thought for sure by now, they’d be lying in a king-sized bed in the room he’d rented at a nice hotel, but no, Hayden now seemed to be ignoring what had happened.

A few minutes ago, Jaxon thought he saw something flash in Hayden’s eyes, but now he wasn’t so sure.

The near kiss burned in his brain and for something to do, he pulled out his cell and discreetly checked out the room via the hotel's website. Realizing that Hayden was staring at him, Jaxon avoided the man's squinty-eyed gaze and tucked his phone away. What would Hayden think if he knew about the room?

So what? Damn it, was it a crime to think he had thought he'd get lucky with Hayden?

"Did your friend ever wake up?" Gunner asked, jerking Jaxon out of his thoughts and his eyes from Hayden's.

"Yeah," he nodded.

"Really? When?" Hayden asked, placing his hands on his trim hips.

"This morning," Jaxon said with a relieved smile that Hayden was at least talking to him again, and he tried not to let his mind wander to the feel of the man's hips beneath his hands when he'd gripped them in the parking lot of Jesse's deli.

They had fit together so perfectly.

"I'm so glad." Hayden's words sounded so heartfelt, Jaxon's chest tightened.

"Thank you," Jaxon said. "Jesse has no idea of who set the bomb, plus he did not call Logan to hire us."

"I have an idea of who it might be," Felix interrupted and flipped on the television. The man's fingers flew over the keys of the laptop and in a few moments, the TV screen lit up as a monitor, and in another moment, a photo filled the screen.

"This is Winston Gains," Felix said with a chin nod at the picture. "He's wanted for placing pipe bombs at a soccer field and detonating three bombs at a mall."

Felix tapped a key and Gains's face was replaced by another man.

"Here's one we all know and hate." Gunner gestured at the screen.

“Charles Foley,” Felix agreed.

“Fuck.” Hayden spat, staring at the TV screen.

*Fuck was an understatement*, Jaxon thought.

Gunner didn’t give any additional information on Foley because it wasn’t necessary. They’d put Charles Foley III away after he’d kidnapped two young twin girls.

The father of the twins was a close personal friend of Dave’s and it was only after the girls had been kidnapped that the father made a frantic phone call to the former SecDef, who contacted Logan, who in turn called on the whole of Cobalt Security to protect the family until the twins had been found.

“Why the fuck is he out of prison?” Hayden hissed, jogging him back to the present.

“I don’t know. Logan has a call into the prison, but it may be a technical glitch.”

“A fucking glitch? Like something wrong with the prison? Or a glitch in the fucking legal system?” Hayden raged, and Jaxon stood and headed to the man.

“Hey, we got Foley once, we’ll get him again,” Jaxon murmured when he stepped closer.

“He killed those two girls,” Hayden hissed at him. “How the fuck is he out with two murder charges?”

And that was the crux of the matter. No matter how much they’d searched, went without sleep, and fought to find them, Foley had killed the twins within the first twenty-four hours. It didn’t help that Cobalt Security had located the twins’ bodies within twelve hours after taking the case.

Logan had become a practicing private investigator and he used his team in all the ways a PI would. So, not only did they guard potential victims, but they investigated and apprehended as well. It helped that Logan’s husband was a former FBI agent with all the connections possible in the Federal realm and that Logan was best friends with the former SecDef.

“Logan is checking Foley’s escape and we’re to stay put until he gets that info,” Gunner said in that no-nonsense voice

of his.

“So, how do you think he got out?” Hayden asked Gunner.

“I think he escaped somehow and nobody is saying shit.”

“Inside job?” Hayden frowned.

“Maybe?” Gunner sighed and shook his head. “Dunno.”

“What I’d like to know is why Foley’s running with this Gains guy,” Felix interjected.

Silence swept over the room.

“He needed someone to create that bomb,” Gunner said.

“So, now we know the hit was for you,” Jaxon murmured.

“Me?” Hayden shook his head.

“Yes, you. You were the one who apprehended him.”

“It was a team effort,” Hayden argued, still shaking his head.

“Think about it,” Jaxon said. He remembered that day clearly. They’d cornered Foley in a high-rise in the middle of the city. From there, they’d split up and taken the building along with the local PD and SWAT.

It had been Hayden who’d found Foley with the dead twins. It had been Hayden who’d beat the guy senseless, and it had been Hayden who Jaxon had to talk down from putting a bullet in the fucker’s head.

“Shit.” Hayden ran a hand down his face.

“Yeah. It’s you all right,” Jaxon growled. “Fuck.”

Felix’s phone rang and the man punched at the screen.

“You’re on speaker phone, Logan. The team is here.”

“Just over three weeks ago, Charles Foley had a medical emergency in prison. They took him to the infirmary and he escaped with the help of a guard he paid off. We weren’t notified because they’re incompetent assholes.”

“Did he have an emergency?”

“Yeah, he had an appendix attack that he took advantage of.”

Jaxon stared at Hayden while they waited for Logan to continue. Other than going a bit pale, Hayden seemed to be holding up well. And why wouldn't he? The guy was a trained professional, an operative turned assassin, and if Jaxon were being honest, he was proud of Hayden.

“There's something else.”

“What?”

“Ryder and Harrison were shot at this morning.”

“What?” Jaxon growled.

“Their SUV was shot to hell, but they're both okay. I wanted to send them both to Texas to stay with Maddox and River until this shit can be handled, but Ryder had some choice words to say about that,” Logan finished in a voice that wasn't happy.

Jaxon knew running and hiding would stick in Ryder's throat. But he also knew Ryder would do anything to keep his husband safe. Maddox and River were ex-Special Forces and the Triple R ranch in Texas was built like a fucking fortress.

“Where are they?”

“Ryder and Harrison are on their way to you.”

“What do you want us to do in the meantime?” Jaxon inquired.

“Well, that depends. I can't ask Hayden to do anything because he no longer works for me.”

Jaxon's eyes swept to Hayden and he saw the confusion, then a frown, and then the man glared at the phone—hands clenched at his sides.

“I can help,” Hayden snapped.

“Not if you don't work for me. You can take your ass to Texas and stay at the ranch or call Solomon and take another job, but you are not on the Foley case,” Logan snapped right back.

Jaxon wasn't going to ask how the fuck Logan knew about Solomon, but he figured that information probably came from Dave. It was all he could do not to snap his teeth when Logan suggested Hayden take another hit job.

"Wait!" Hayden frowned. "Give me a second to call Dave. I need a phone! I'm on this case, Logan. You hear me?"

Everyone kind of froze when Hayden shouted at their boss. Jaxon was sure Hayden hadn't even realized and after a moment, Logan responded.

"I hear you. Ryder and Harrison have your cell phone," Logan said, and everyone heard the slight satisfaction in their boss's short, curt voice before Logan ended the call.

Jaxon pulled out his own cell and held it out for Hayden to use, but at that very moment, another call came in.

"Hang on," Jaxon said and answered the call from Logan. That it was coming into his personal cell after having just talked to the man on Felix's phone was concerning.

"Hello?"

"Jaxon, step outside without saying a word."

Jaxon's eyes flew to Hayden and the man froze.

"What?" Hayden hissed.

Jaxon shook his head and walked out of the room, squeezing the phone.

Once he was outside with the door shut behind him, he spoke.

"What's going on?"

"That case you're working on has ties to the Moss crime family.

"Winston Gains has ties to the Moss crime family?" he parroted just to make sure he heard correctly.

"Yes, I can't say anything further right now until after I check out a lead, but keep this from Hayden and stay extra vigilant," Logan said and ended the call.

Stay vigilant? Keep this from Hayden? What the fuck? If Gains was working for the Moss crime boss, shit was going to get ugly really fast.

Hayden glared at the closed door.

What the hell had taken Jaxon out of the safe house with that look on his face?

“Here,” Felix said, holding out his cell phone. “Call the SecDef from mine.”

Making a face, Hayden made the call to Dave, who wasn't a bit surprised he wanted back with Cobalt Security and fired him on the spot.

Hayden had the sudden suspicion that he'd been duped and was equally sure Logan had called Dave beforehand. Hayden hung up and handed the phone back to Felix.

*Well played, Logan, damn it.*

Hayden resumed his stare at the closed exit door and came to the conclusion that Jaxon was shutting him out again. He raked his hands through his hair, dislodging the clip that held it back, but not giving a shit.

Suddenly tired of waiting, he stalked to the door and yanked it open.

The door behind Jaxon yanked open with considerable force and Hayden stood in the doorway, blond hair all askew as if he'd run fingers through it multiple times.

“Who was that?”

“Nobody,” Jaxon said and stalked slowly forward.

Hayden didn't back up though, he tipped his chin up and stared back defiantly.

Clearly, the man didn't believe him.

They really had to work on mutual trust.



# CHAPTER FOURTEEN



“Jaxon?” Hayden whispered because the look in the man’s eyes scared him and surprise popped his mouth open when Jaxon yanked him back inside before closing and locking the door.

After setting the alarm, Jaxon continued pulling him until they stood inside one of the suites . The inside was nice with a wide bed and wine-colored bedspread, off-white carpet, and light gray washed dresser.

Jaxon didn’t even shut the door all the way before the man stopped and his chest heaved.

“What’s wrong?”

Jaxon locked eyes with him and the expression in the man’s gaze was suddenly burning into his. But before he could say a word, Hayden was yanked close.

“What—”

Jaxon’s mouth crushed down on his, cutting off the words.

*Oh shit.*

*Oh shit!*

The touch of Jaxon's mouth was heaven and suddenly, Hayden felt like he'd been given everything he'd recently discovered he actually wanted.

He lost his breath.

He lost his mind.

And he suspected somewhere along the way, he had completely lost his heart.

Jaxon raised his head, then crushed his lips again, all power and possessiveness rolled into one hot as hell, leather clad, tough muscle of power.

The man's hands fisted in his hair, holding his head still... not that he could have moved to save his life. Jaxon's tongue swept in and stole his breath, took control, and Hayden clung to his wide shoulders.

He gasped and groaned, pressed his lips and sucked at Jaxon's mouth, teeth nipping because he couldn't stay still. His hands cupped Jaxon's jaw and he curled his fingers through the coarse length of his beard. Jaxon's long hair fell from its tie and spilled forward, shrouding them.

"Hayden," Jaxon mumbled against his mouth before pulling slightly away.

"Do you have an answer?" Hayden asked, breathless because he was suddenly dying to know.

"What?" Jaxon croaked thickly, roughly, and a bit growly.

"Do you want a say in what I do?"

Jaxon made a sound between his teeth and the hands on his hips clenched harder.

"Is that a yes?" Hayden tried for light and laughing, but the words came out shaky.

"That's a hell yes," Jaxon rasped, his voice so deep the man sounded like he was struggling to talk. Jaxon's fingers stayed in his hair, keeping him locked in place.

"Well, what took you so long?"

“You told me not to give you an answer!” A bark of laughter accompanied the growly words and Hayden grinned.

He so loved making this man laugh.

“Me? Ha! I did no such thing,” he snickered.

“You did...and...”

“And?” Hayden held his breath.

“You’ve eluded me for the last time,” Jaxon said with a huff and finally unclenched his hands, letting them slide through his long hair. Hayden welcomed the stroking tug.

They should probably slow down and talk about things, right?

Right!

Hayden kicked the room’s door closed and shoved Jaxon up against the wood.

All his focus was on Jaxon, standing in front of him, returning his hungry stare.

“Tell me what you want.” Hayden tipped his chin up, perched his hands on his hips, and drew his gaze down Jaxon’s body before flipping up to lock on his lips.

“Stating the obvious here,” Jaxon growled and stepped closer, one hand fisting the hair at the back of his head to pull him forward against his hard body.

Right where he wanted to be.

“Not to me,” he said mulishly when the phone call Jaxon had taken came to mind. Who had called? And more importantly, why had Jaxon shut him out again?

“Want cloud letters?” Jaxon muttered.

“Going to rent a plane?”

“Maybe.”

He pouted, his irritation rising at being left out.

“What was the phone call about?”

“Nothing important.”

“Who was on the phone?”

“Nobody.”

“You want to get lucky?” He glared because Jaxon’s hands had gone to his hips as if he couldn’t bear for them to be apart and his fingers were going to leave marks. Bruises were the least of his worries though, secrets were.

“Yes,” Jaxon said, leaning in to run his lips along his throat.

“Don’t try to distract me,” he growled but his ire was lessening.

“Is it working?”

Jaxon mouth fused to his before he could formulate a response and when the man’s mouth moved on to trail down his neck, Hayden tipped his head.

“We can take it slow.” The words were guttural.

Through the thick wood of the closed door, Hayden heard the team talking, although, not the words because the sound was muffled.

Slow? Fuck taking it slow. Hayden had a newly awakened hunger. And he didn’t give a rat’s ass what any of the men they’d left standing out in the common room thought.

He yanked at Jaxon’s shirt and lifted the hem, pulling it over the man’s head. Jaxon’s breath caught, but Hayden was busy at the zipper of the man’s jeans. He only stilled when Jaxon closed one firm hand over both of his. Flipping his gaze up, he found Jaxon smiling and then one of his hands was lifted and the palm pressed to Jaxon’s lips. From there, Jaxon pressed his hand on the bare skin over his beating heart and Hayden felt his throat tighten.

Jaxon brushed the hair from his shoulder and began unbuttoning the front of his black shirt. Hayden was glad he’d showered and changed into a new set of clothes he’d purchased from one of the boutiques near the bomb site.

One button at a time was released on the front of the dress shirt and the knuckles of Jaxon’s hand caressed his skin as he

went. Hayden wanted to tear the shirt from his body and press close. Damn, the man took his sweet ass time, so Hayden let his hands wander over Jaxon's chest, a smattering of chest hair caressed his palms before he smoothed down rock hard abs, stroking and memorizing each dip.

Jaxon grunted and then Hayden's shirt was brushed from his shoulders, falling down his arms, and catching slightly at his wrists before it fell away. Lips touched, pressed, and kissed over his shoulder, chest, and neck.

Hayden was sure he was going to lose his balance but he didn't. Jaxon wrapped him up in those big strong arms and cradled him close. He wanted to bask in the attention, but he also wanted something more. Roaming his hands downward, he shoved at Jaxon's jeans and briefs until they rode low on the man's hips.

Hayden pushed further and when Jaxon's cock sprang free, Hayden took the long, thick length into his hand and stroked him. Jaxon groaned and sent his dick thrusting through his hand.

They shuddered at the same time and that was all it took for Jaxon to lift him by the back of his thighs.

Hayden spread his legs and wrapped them around the man's thickly muscled waist as he was carried to the bed.

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN



One taste of Hayden would never be enough.

Jaxon had come to realize that and it had been the main reason he'd gone running to California to help out Erebus. His days as a free man were over and had been from the first day he'd gazed into those summer blue-colored eyes years ago. And he bemoaned the lost time because of his fear.

He crushed Hayden's lips and coaxed the man's tongue into a dance while he nipped at Hayden's swollen mouth until the man's slender frame sank against him—all resistance gone.

He lowered Hayden to the wide bed and followed him down. Jaxon caught his weight with his hands on either side of Hayden's head.

The man's hair spilled out, sending it into a cloud of blond over the dark wine color of the bedspread. With quick, frantic moves, Hayden reached up and cleaved his fingers through Jaxon's hair before fisting the strands as if afraid he was going somewhere.

He wasn't.

And he wouldn't.

Not for a long time.

Jaxon pressed a kiss to Hayden's swollen and parted lips, trying to convey that he was there for the duration of a lifetime.

"We're crossing a line," Hayden moaned against his mouth and Jaxon drew back to stare into his eyes.

"I don't care, do you?" he growled before lowering his head.

Hayden jolted and eluded him, and Jaxon feared he'd gone too far when his kiss landed at the corner of the man's mouth. When he went to draw back, Hayden clutched at him and held him tightly.

The man was nervous.

Jaxon could work with that. In fact, he would take anything Hayden gave him.

Roaming his lips beneath the man's jaw, he drew one of Hayden's arms above his head and pressed it into the mattress.

He saw the hunger and worry. Hell, Hayden had been the one to kick the door closed moments ago, so wanting this was a given, and there was something else in those beautiful eyes that stared into his soul. Something that made his heart pound.

Reaching down, he tugged at the button fly on Hayden's blue jeans and his mouth went dry when the man stayed still. Encouraged, Jaxon caught the waistband and pulled it down, revealing a pair of tight, dark blue briefs.

Hayden's breath hitched and Jaxon jerked his gaze up.

"Answer me," he murmured. He'd never force Hayden to do anything he wasn't comfortable with.

"What?" Hayden's brow wrinkled.

"Do you care that we're crossing a line?"

"Shut up, you talk too much," Hayden said, the words thick.

Jaxon chuckled because they both knew that was a lie.

Demanding firm hands suddenly pulled at him and Jaxon trailed his mouth down over Hayden's chest and laved at each nipple until he arched beneath his lips, and Jaxon took full advantage by sucking each one until he was satisfied.

He left a trail of scratched skin behind by running his cropped beard along Hayden's skin before he lifted up and shoved off his own jeans. He didn't kick out of his briefs yet because he didn't have supplies, but it was more than that, he wanted to take his time. Back above Hayden, Jaxon hovered over the top of his slender form and then lowered down until his body was stretched out—giving Hayden his weight. They were touching chest to chest, abs to groin with their legs tangled.

Hayden groaned and gyrated beneath him and Jaxon returned his own hip thrusting. Once again, he lifted one of Hayden's arms and then the other over the man's head before he eased up to reach between them. Hayden's gaze held his and Jaxon reached down and freed Hayden's cock.

Slipping the cotton material down, he let it catch beneath Hayden's balls, leaving him exposed. Jaxon focused his eyes down and drank in the man's long cock before pushing his own briefs out of the way.

Then he was back, lowering himself to press their dicks together. His was thicker than Hayden's own length, but they fit together perfectly between them.

"Oh, yes," Hayden breathed, grinding his cock against him, spreading his legs and hooking them over the back of his thighs. When the man's arms lifted to curl around his neck, Jaxon braced himself with one hand and pushed first one arm and then the other back above Hayden's head.

Hayden made a sound in the back of his throat, but he caught on and quickly fisted the bedspread to keep his arms up. Jaxon sent his cock thrusting against Hayden's, who began slow grinding humps upward, bowing his back, trying to increase the pressure.

Jaxon pushed one leg against Hayden's balls, caught his hips in both hands, and ground his thigh until Hayden's hips



were undulating and thrusting.

Returning to lean over Hayden, Jaxon braced hands near his head and lowered his mouth. He took the man's parted lips in a deep kiss, matching the thrusting of his cock to the thrusting of his tongue.

Hayden gave up fisting the bedspread and sent his fingers running through Jaxon's hair.

No lube and no condoms had him reaching between them to take them both in hand. He began a slow tug and pull until Hayden was panting, chest heaving. Leaning down, he took the man's lips, parted them with his tongue, and drank from him while he pulled at their dicks.

"Not enough," Hayden hissed, arching upward.

"What are you saying?" he asked slowly just to make sure.

"We test every six months."

It was true. While they weren't technically law enforcement, many of the protocols they followed were the same and that was because Logan had put those measures in place at the very beginning of the team's creation. Jaxon had tested right before leaving for California, so that meant Hayden had been as well.

"I haven't been with anyone since then."

"Me neither," he said hoarsely, his voice going out because the thought of being inside Hayden was making him light-headed.

Pushing up with his arms, he gazed down into Hayden's face, then locked one hand around both wrists and pulled Hayden up until he was sitting. Jaxon slid back and off and flipped them until Hayden was straddling his hips.

Hayden's breath hitched when his balls and ass settled down on top of him and the man bowed his back, arms raising to lift the fall of blond hair in a move that was so god damned sexy, Jaxon almost blew his load right then and fucking there.

Hayden's hands roamed over his own neck and down the front of his sleek chest and rippling abs before they moved

downward and one hand clasped around his throbbing dick.

“Fuuuuck,” Jaxon groaned low and long. He gripped the sides of Hayden’s trim hips and lifted him, but Hayden had other plans and scooted back out of his reach.

He glowered until a pink tongue came out from between Hayden’s lips and licked the tip of his cock. Wetting his lips, Hayden placed his mouth over his cock and took the large flared head inside. Jaxon thought his head would explode from the pleasure and when Hayden took him all the way down the back of his throat, he groaned—the sound echoing through the room.

Not wanting to come yet, he fisted a hand in Hayden’s hair and pulled, lifting the man’s talented mouth from his cock before bringing him forward to kiss his lips. Hayden moaned into his mouth and parted his lips for him and Jaxon delved inside, laving, sucking, and kissing until they were both breathless and Hayden was grinding down on him.

Tugging from his grasp, Hayden roamed his mouth down his neck and over his chest before he licked back along the side of his shoulder and closed his teeth over his jaw and then lips once again. Arching his back, Hayden reached between them and took hold of his cock, stroking him from balls to head before he brought his hand up. Spitting into the palm, Jaxon’s eyes widened when he realized what Hayden’s intentions were and for the life of him, he couldn’t voice a protest.

Straddling his hips, Hayden poised his sweet rounded ass over the head of his cock and when the man went to lower himself down, Jaxon grabbed his hips and guided the downward sinking move. He tried to slow Hayden’s descent, but it was futile, and the man took him inside his body with a wet, slick, and hot slide all the way to the root.

“Hayden,” he groaned, unable to keep from speaking, and he clenched his hands at the man’s hips, knowing he’d leave bruises and not caring one bit.

Hayden arched his back, pressed his hands to his chest, and lifted up, almost drawing out completely before sinking

down and taking him again. Every bit of the man's ass gripped him like a silky vice and Jaxon's breath grew ragged. Oxygen became a second life-giving thing to him at the moment because right then, all he needed to live and breathe was Hayden.

"Jax," Hayden moaned, echoing his own call as if they both were beside themselves and gripped in similar passion.

Sliding his fingers of one hand from where they gripped the man's waist, Jaxon cupped the back of Hayden's head and pulled him down, moaning, "Yes," against his lips.

Hayden lurched and undulated, rocking up and down on his cock, and Jaxon caught at the man's waist again and lifted him slightly so he could piston upward into his warmth. Hayden's tongue pressed between his lips and Jaxon gently bit it in time with the thrusts of his body. Precome oozed from Hayden's slit and his cock bounced between them.

Panting, Hayden jerked his mouth away, body going tight, and then he shouted when his orgasm crashed through him.

"Oh fuck!"

Jaxon shoved upward several more times before he too lost it and splintered apart. He had wanted to make it last, but couldn't. The pull of Hayden's release had yanked him up the side of the cliff and tossed him over and he groaned long, low, and deep.

Hayden collapsed against his chest and they lay there panting.

Everything was as it should be between them except he needed to tell Hayden that his brother wasn't really dead.

And that thought sent dread through his stomach.

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Everything was fine until Jaxon tried to keep him inside the suite.

They'd stayed locked together in bed for another half an hour, just enjoying each other's company and as if by mutual consent, they'd even showered together. But ever since they had gotten dressed, Jaxon wanted him to stay put.

"I'll bring you something to eat."

"I can get my own food."

"Just stay here."

"You're acting weird."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are." He squinted at Jaxon and yanked open the door before striding out into the common area.

Only Brick and Felix were there, sitting on the couch with plates of food piled high. Hayden could already smell the sausage and bacon and gave the plates a quick glance with their pancakes and hash browns.

"Who cooked?" he asked, advancing toward the kitchen.

“Gunner,” Felix said with a chin nod toward the kitchen.

Once he reached the island inside the efficient and brightly lit kitchen, Hayden found Gunner with an apron tied around his waist, wielding a spatula like it was an extension of his hand at the cast iron skillet.

“How many?” The man pointed to the pancakes cooking in the pan.

“Four,” he said, grabbing a plate from the table and piling it high with bacon, eggs, and sausage.

“Six,” Jaxon answered, reaching around him and taking a plate.

Brick’s phone went off and instead of answering it, the man scowled and turned it off. Nobody said a word, but Hayden was sure they were as curious as he was. The bodyguard had been getting calls from someone very insistent about seeing him. Hayden had to wonder who Brick was dodging.

Later, as they sat around the table in the common room, Hayden realized Jaxon had dodged his question about the previous night’s phone call. Why the hell everyone was being so secretive, he didn’t know, but it was starting to get on his nerves.

Perhaps Jaxon’s call had been personal and he frowned. “It’s not your mom, is it?”

“What?” Jaxon glanced up from his plate.

“The call.”

“No,” the man answered before going back to shoveling in food.

It was like pulling teeth. Had it been an ex-lover? If so, then why had Jaxon’s face been white as a sheet as he ended the call? And why had Jaxon hung up the cell the moment he’d stepped outside?

He hated that Jaxon didn’t trust him enough to share, but he didn’t get a chance to point out the lack of trust as the sound of an engine reached their ears when a car pulled up in

the parking lot. The cameras that Felix had up on the television monitor lit up, showing a silver Ford SUV parked close to the building next to the team's vehicles.

Jaxon tensed and was up out of his seat, shoving his plate away before pulling the weapon from the shoulder holster the man always wore.

"Go into the suite and stay there," the man ordered him gruffly and strode toward the door.

Was Jaxon fucking serious?

Did the man think to send him hiding like he was a child?

Well, fuck that all to hell!

He pulled his Sig Sauer from his own holster and followed Jaxon over to the door to the safe house.

"You stay inside," Hayden snapped when the man scowled at him ferociously.

Jaxon's eyes went wide as if it had just dawned on him that he was armed and dangerous, and Hayden snapped his teeth. Stalking past Jaxon, he found his arm caught and held in the man's big, tight grip and was pulled to a stop.

"Wait," Jaxon hissed, and Hayden shivered because the man's breath ghosted against his ear and his beard brushed the skin along his cheek, which was the only reason he paused.

The man was completely annoying but also annoyed, he could feel it in Jaxon's tense muscles.

"It's Ryder," Felix said, breaking the tension between them.

Hayden pulled open the door in time to see Ryder exit the silver SUV along with his beautiful, blond husband, and Hayden tucked his weapon away before he jogged down the short steps.

Harrison pulled him into a hug the moment he drew near, and Ryder held out his hand to Jaxon.

"Thank god you're here," Hayden hissed in Harrison's ear.

He really needed a friend right then.

Several minutes later, he and Harrison sat in the middle of the big, wide bed Hayden had shared with Jaxon. When the door closed behind them, Harrison situated himself on the comfy mattress and ate from the plate of food he'd grabbed from the kitchen on their way through the common area.

From the bedroom, he and Harrison could hear when Brick and Felix started arguing about something.

Hayden cocked his head to listen intently. Would Jaxon come in to see what he and Harrison were up to? He wanted it so bad on one hand but on the other, he thought it would be too telling and he wasn't ready to share. Not that they didn't know because he and Jaxon had spent the night together, but it was still so new that he wasn't sure what to actually call them.

Jaxon had called them an "us" and the man was right about one thing, it took some wrapping his head around. Plus, Jaxon had been so closed-mouthed that morning, Hayden wasn't sure about a damned thing at the moment.

A door shut in the distance and a car started, and after another minute, he couldn't bear it. Hayden jumped up off the bed, leaving a surprised Harrison behind, and tore out of the room and into the common area.

Both Jaxon and Ryder were missing. Hurrying to the monitor, he stared at the screen where he could see Ryder's silver SUV driving away with Jaxon.

He felt adrift for some reason and he didn't know why. It wasn't like they hadn't worked different jobs before. He just wondered why Jaxon would leave him now of all times. Had he gotten a lead?

"What were you two talking about?" He spun on Brick and Felix.

"Research," Brick said, careful to keep his phone face down with the team text from Logan about the Moss crime family and Hayden. "Well, Felix is doing the typing. I'm doing the brain work."

Felix snorted. “We’re just putting some dots together with Winston Gains and... a local crime family.”

Hayden frowned and then nodded. If Gains was involved with a crime family, then it could be that someone other than Foley had ordered the attack. That begged the question of, if Charles Foley didn’t order the attack on his life, then who could it be? Also, if Foley wasn’t behind the bombing, then it stood to reason that Jaxon’s life was in jeopardy. Hell, all of them could be in danger, which made sense because Ryder and Harrison had been shot at.

Maybe it was someone from his assassin job? Did Bozz have a relative bent on revenge? But the minute he thought that, it didn’t make sense. The timing was off. The bomb at Jaxon’s friend’s deli had to have been planted before they arrived straight from the Bozz job that very day.

“You okay?” Brick came around the kitchen center island and walked over to stand next to him.

“Yeah,” he sighed, studying the empty road on the television as if by some miracle Jaxon would come back for him.

“I’m making lasagna for dinner tonight,” Felix called out from where he sat on the couch. “We didn’t have time to stop for groceries on the way, so I grabbed from my kitchen what Gunner cooked for breakfast, plus what I am going to make later. And some wine or beer. Whichever you prefer.”

Hayden yanked his eyes from the road outside and smiled at Felix. The man was trying so hard to make everything appear normal. Which in a sense was nice, but nothing was normal at the moment. Someone was trying to kill him or Jaxon, or both, and he didn’t have a clue. He eyed the cups of coffee that Felix held out.

“Take these and visit with your friend,” Felix smiled, holding out the mugs of piping hot coffee.

Hayden took both cups and he didn’t feel a bit guilty about leaving the men in the living room and returning to Harrison in the bedroom.



“Sorry,” he said.

As he closed the door with his foot, Harrison glanced up from his phone and pointed to the bed.

“Sit and tell me everything.”

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Jaxon sighed when the SUV pulled out of the parking lot, but that was only because he wanted to be with Hayden. It wasn't that he and Ryder were actually going anywhere, and they could have used one of the bedrooms, but for some reason, Ryder thought the SUV would be better.

A few miles down the street, the man pulled into a drive-thru coffee house and ordered them both large cups before he parked in one of the vacant spots.

"You okay?" Ryder handed him the fresh cup of coffee and took a sip from his own before flipping off his seat belt. Jaxon did the same and reached for the lever beneath the seat to give himself more legroom.

"Yeah. No," he grumbled, but then followed it up with, "I don't know what's up with Hayden." Other than the fact that they'd slept together and he was keeping secrets.

"You mean other than getting blown up?" Ryder brought up the bombing.

Well yeah, that.

"And shot at," Jaxon said, and nodded before he took a swallow of coffee and gazed across at his best friend. They

sipped the hot brew in silence for several minutes.

“So, what are Gunner, Felix, and Brick looking for?”

“A connection between Winston Gains and the Moss crime family.”

Hayden had been removed from the group text when he'd left Cobalt Security and had yet to be added back in by Logan. With the Moss crime family's involvement, Jaxon could see why.

Ryder squinted at him. “Didn't that family have something to do with Hayden's brother being killed?”

“Yeah, you saw the text from Logan,” Jaxon said and glanced out the window. “He said why he's leaving Hayden out.”

“Yeah. I wanted to confirm it from you,” Ryder said, and Jaxon looked over. He could tell by the look in the man's eyes he was mulling over something and that was confirmed in the next breath. “So... what's going on?”

“What do you mean?” He avoided his best friend's all-knowing gaze.

“Have you told him?” Ryder asked after a moment.

“Told who what?” Jaxon frowned, clutching the coffee in his hand.

“Told Hayden that you like him.”

“Of course, I like him.” He rolled and cracked his neck.

“No, I mean you really like him. You want to be with him.”

“I don't.”

He wasn't sure why the lie came so easily out of his mouth, but the only reason he could think of was that what he had with Hayden was still so very new. Too new to share.

“Don't fucking lie to me. I could see it before and now I can see it even more.”

Jaxon glanced away and then down at his cup. “He’s one of my best friends. I’m not sure how I feel about him.”

“Bullshit.”

A quick glance upward told him Ryder was not believing a word he’d said.

“Okay,” he said blowing out a long breath. “We had sex last night.”

“So?” His big muscular friend smirked.

“You know, that smirk doesn’t suit you.”

“Screw you.” Ryder scowled at the inked man. “You suck.”

Jaxon laughed and shoved his best friend’s shoulder. Ryder was one big son of a bitch, just like him, and when they stood next to each other, it was hard to tell who had more body mass. Jaxon liked to think that he did, but Ryder was definitely a force to be reckoned with.

“Don’t deflect, have you talked since last night?”

Jaxon paused with the cup halfway to his lips and then took a hasty swallow when he thought about earlier. He’d wanted Hayden so badly, they’d made love again in the shower. Even now, the thought of taking the man again had his jeans getting uncomfortable and his cock like iron.

“Not yet.”

“Why?”

“No time.”

“Do you even know if he wants the same thing as you?”

Jaxon blinked. Did Hayden want the same as he did? Did the guy want to be with him as more than a friend?

*Of course, he does.*

*Doesn’t he?*

Maybe the growing desire between them was a residual effect of Hayden quitting Cobalt. Or perhaps it had been the

adrenaline rush from the danger, or maybe it was because they'd lived in the same house together for years.

He dismissed each reason as it came up.

No.

He didn't want Hayden because of any of those things and he knew it as sure as he knew he'd never let him go. He wanted Hayden in his bed, life, and anywhere else he could have him. Now he just needed Hayden to confirm the same with him.

"No. I don't know. Maybe? Shit." He grimaced and gulped down the rest of his coffee.

"You, my man, should find out," Ryder said with a huffing laugh and grabbed both of their empty cups before he got out of the SUV and tossed the paper into the trash.

Thank fuck Jaxon's cell phone went off and he grabbed it like a lifeline.

"It's Logan," he said as Ryder slid back behind the wheel.

"Yes, sir?" Jaxon answered before the fourth ring as was protocol.

"I've found further information I need you to look into," Logan said.

"Okay...Ryder's with me, we drove from the safe house to get coffee and talk."

Logan blew out a breath. "You two come meet me. I'll send you my location when you're in flight."

"In flight?"

"Yeah, the helicopter is waiting on the roof of the nearby building. It's across state lines, Oklahoma City. Should take about four hours to get here."

It didn't surprise him that Logan knew his location; every vehicle of their team was equipped with a GPS locator their mechanic had turned on after installation. The building Logan was talking about was a high-rise next to the coffee shop.

“All right,” Jaxon answered slowly.

“And Jax?”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t bring Hayden.” Logan ended the call.

Frowning, he slowly tucked his phone away. He wasn’t comfortable leaving Hayden for long even though the safe house was a fucking fortress and only Rossi’s teams and Cobalt Security knew of its existence.

He swallowed down the sudden heartburn.

“What’d he say?” Ryder sat frowning at him.

“For you and I to meet him in Oklahoma City. He’s got some information, but said not to bring Hayden.”

“Text Brick, Gunner, and Felix,” Ryder said, starting the SUV. “And let them know.”

Jaxon nodded and pulled out his cell phone. He was surprised when Ryder floored it and went back to the safe house instead of the building.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m saying goodbye to my husband,” Ryder answered, parked, and was through the safe house door. Jaxon hurried after Ryder and shut the door and set the alarm.

“We got your text,” Felix said quietly when Jaxon turned to the common room area. “Where you flying to?”

“I have no idea,” he clipped out and stalked across the room before he knocked on the closed suite door softly.

“Come in,” Hayden called out.

Opening the door, he spotted both Hayden and Harrison sitting cross-legged on the top of the bed. Hayden’s eyes were dark blue pools of something Jaxon couldn’t quite put his finger on. He wanted to stay and find out what that hot yet soft look was all about, but Logan’s tone had sounded urgent. And their boss wasn’t one to wait for anyone or anything.

“Logan called. He needs me and Ryder to meet him in Oklahoma. We’ll be gone overnight.”

“And me?”

“Logan said to stay put.” Jaxon clenched his jaw. “I don’t like it,” he growled through his teeth.

When Hayden launched off the bed and hurried to him, Jaxon automatically opened his arms and hugged the slender man close. Hayden fit perfectly in his arms as if he were made for him and he combed his fingers through his loose blond hair.

Fuck. He swallowed hard. There was something there between them that he...no, *they* needed to explore and when he got back, he was going to ask some questions.

Plus, he needed to give Hayden some answers and if he wanted no more secrets between them, then he needed to come clean about the man’s brother.

Ryder snaked past him and strode to the bed to pull Harrison up and into his arms.

“You weren’t in our room,” Ryder growled.

“I was keeping Hayden company.” Instead of standing, Harrison got to his knees on the bed and sank into his big, muscular husband’s arms.

Jaxon didn’t dare kiss Hayden right then and after another moment, Hayden sighed and reluctantly stepped back. He gazed down into blue worried eyes and carefully brushed the jostled strands of hair away from Hayden’s face and over his shoulder.

“I’m coming with you,” Hayden announced firmly.

“You can’t.”

Hayden’s eyes narrowed. “Why?”

“Logan said no. And Dave already has you back reporting to Logan, so...”

Hayden blew out an annoyed-sounding breath and then slowly and begrudgingly nodded.

“Ryder and I should be back by morning. Gunner, Felix, and Brick are here as backup for you.” He put those last few words in there in case Hayden didn’t think he was capable of handling himself. “It’s just for precaution.”

“Tell them I’m in charge, I don’t want to accidentally shoot them if they get in my way,” Hayden said cheekily, and made his way back to the top of the mattress next to Harrison. Jaxon could have stood and watched the sway of those delectable hips forever, but Ryder passed him going out the door and cleared his throat.

With a nod, Jaxon closed the door, but leaned his forehead against the wood for a few seconds with his palms flat against the door. It took another few moments to get his cock and his heartbeat under control. A noise brought his head up and he spotted Ryder at the end of the hall watching him with that penetrating stare of his.

Stalking down the hallway, he stepped around the bodyguard and headed toward the door.

The sooner they got this over with, the sooner he could get back to Hayden.

He should have told Hayden the truth a long time ago.

Jaxon would later come to regret his past choices, because secrets had a way of wrapping back around and biting those who kept them in the ass.



# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Hayden stared at his friend.

He'd felt comfortable with Harrison from the moment they'd met years ago.

When Ryder, Harrison's then bodyguard had been protecting Harrison, the two men had stopped by Jaxon's home. He'd been living in Jaxon's spare room and it was there that he and Harrison had bonded. It had been over video games, good food, lots of laughter, and wine. They'd only grown closer through the years.

Carrying two full cups of coffee, Hayden closed the door with his foot and Harrison glanced up from his phone. The man's blond hair gleamed beneath the overhead light.

"Playing?" Hayden joked, and his eyes sparkled as he looked at him. With his windblown, dirty-blond hair, cornflower blue eyes, slim swimmer's build, and the graceful way he moved, nobody wouldn't think by looking at the man that the tech mogul was one of the wealthiest men in the world.

Although, Harrison was more into video games and flying around the world sightseeing and taking his husband, Ryder, with him than he was about running the company his father

had left him. It made sense because the two men were married and Ryder had remained Harrison's bodyguard to this very day. At times, the duties of Cobalt Security conflicted with Harrison's schedule, and as a consequence, Ryder had reduced the number of hours he worked for Logan's company to part-time.

Harrison gave a quick laugh and nod as he reached for his full cup of coffee that was sitting on the nightstand table next to the bed and held it out to him.

"It's really good coffee," Harrison said, sipping at his own cup.

Hayden tasted a bit and nodded.

"So, where were we?" he said before easing down to the edge of the bed.

"We had been talking about Jaxon before he knocked on the door to tell you goodbye."

"We finished talking about Jaxon," he muttered.

"No, we didn't because you didn't tell me anything new." Harrison smirked before adding, "Oh, and by the way, nice hug between you two just now."

Hayden snorted and became busy studying the way the light reflected off the frosted window.

"Did you want to gaze after him as he drove away?" Harrison teased.

"Yes," he admitted sheepishly.

"Good. You two make a great couple."

"In who's fairytale?"

"It's a story you get to write."

"I don't think Jaxon wants any part of those chapters."

"Are you kidding me?" Harrison's pretty mouth dropped open and Hayden felt his own brow furrow.

"What am I missing?" he said.

"Didn't you sleep with him?" Harrison asked.

Hayden jolted, staring at his friend. Was he that transparent?

“Are you only friends with benefits then?”

He swallowed hard, not liking that idea, and took another hasty sip of coffee. “How...”

“Oh boy.” Harrison rolled his eyes. “Your face, the way he held you at the door as if he couldn’t bear to be parted.”

“What?” He blinked blankly.

“Oh, buddy. You’re missing the part where that big oaf is head over heels.”

“Um... I don’t think so. And if it’s so, Jaxon might not feel the same.” Hayden chewed at the tip of his fingernail and placed his coffee on the small table near the bed.

“That’s not what I saw. But if that’s the case, then you have got to make him fall for you. You’ve got to bat your eyes like dis, and pucker up your lips like dis.” Harrison mimicked the voice of Sebastian in *The Little Mermaid*. “And kiss de man.”

Hayden laughed and groaned before falling back on the bed. Harrison plopped down next to him and combed his fingers through his hair. The strands pulled until they smoothed out and the rhythmic stroke was nice.

“If you braid it again, I’m going to stab you,” he murmured, lulled for a moment.

Harrison laughed. “You won’t, but nice try.”

Smiling up at the ceiling, he thought about Jaxon and all the things he could do to and with that man...plus all the ways he could get Jaxon to notice him as more than a what? What were they? Did Jaxon want to write the book of love with him? Or had their lovemaking made them friends with benefits like Harrison had suggested?

With a heavy sigh, he rolled over onto his stomach, not liking the idea at all. He wanted something more from Jaxon and now he needed to figure out what that was and how to go about getting it.

They chatted the rest of the morning without thought and Hayden noticed it was after noon. He yawned and stretched.

His eyes flicked to Harrison, who'd had to respond to an email. After all, the guy was a wealthy business tycoon. "I keep wondering why Logan told Jaxon to not bring me."

"Maybe the threat is more toward you than Jaxon," Harrison offered, glancing up from his phone. He rolled easily with the subject change.

"Maybe." He placed his cheek on his arms. "But he got a phone call last night and he wouldn't tell me who it was from."

"Probably business?" Harrison guessed, but Hayden shook his head. "What, you're thinking it was personal?"

"Yeah, maybe." Hayden bit his bottom lip and sat back up to finish the rest of the coffee in one long swallow.

"Nah. That's just a guess."

Placing the cup aside again, Hayden sighed. "So, what should I do?"

And just like that, he'd turned their conversation back to the only person on earth he wanted to talk about. The only one he was really interested in.

"Just be patient." Harrison went back to pick up his phone where he'd laid it on the bedspread and then suddenly squeaked. "Oh! I forgot, I have your bags from the hotel and your stuff from some spooky guy Ryder met in an alley."

"Yes, my phone!" He grinned trying not to laugh when Harrison called Solomon spooky. It was true, though, when he thought of it. The boss of Erebus was Dave, but Solomon ran and organized them. He was a fucking force of violence and strength; it came off the man in waves. Hayden never wanted to get on Solomon's bad side, that was for sure.

"They're by the front door," Harrison beamed, dragging him out of his head, and jumped from the bed, but Hayden didn't follow. His mind flashed quickly back to Jaxon and the last hug from him and how good the man's arms had felt.

“Hey, guys,” Felix called from down the hall. I made a charcuterie board!”

“Perfect timing!” Hayden said. “Let’s eat and quit being so gloomy.”

He forced a smile, took the hand Harrison held out, and let himself be pulled from the bed. They both carried their empty coffee cups as they headed out of the room and down the hall.

The kitchen smelled fantastic, rich with spices and flavors from the grilled hors d’oeuvres. Hayden placed several pieces of sausage, peppers, and cheese onto a paper plate. Entering the living room, he set his plate on the coffee table in front of one of the couches.

Just about to sit, he spotted his bags near the door and retrieved his phone and charger. He tucked his ID away and plugged the dead cell into a nearby outlet and then dropped to the couch to wolf down the cheese, peppers, and sausage snacks.

Everyone was quiet as they ate with a regular television channel on at a low volume. The local news was playing at the moment, but during the break, the network promised the new FBI: Wanted TV series was coming up next.

It was in that moment, Hayden decided he’d be patient. There was no sense getting antsy or anxious about Jaxon. The man would be back by morning and maybe tomorrow he could coax him to take a walk and they could talk. The thought of doing something romantic with Jaxon had him smiling as he took a bite of food.

He caught Harrison batting his lashes at him and almost choked on a piece of sausage.

“I don’t know what’s going on with you two, but Ryder will kick your ass if you keep hitting on Hayden.” Felix eyed Harrison, who sputtered.

Hayden laughed his ass off.

“As if.” Harrison looked down his nose at Felix and it was a haughty nose indeed as Harrison could pull off a snobbish attitude like it was precious art.

Of course, the team was used to being around wealthy men because Logan Cobalt was also one of the richest men in the world. Although, Logan didn't have near the snobbery that Harrison had.

Hayden didn't mind at all working with uber-rich people, in fact, he was grateful. Their team had been created by Logan Cobalt because he had the money and also because it had been a dream of Logan's. As a result of Logan's wealth, the company wanted for nothing and had endless funds at their disposal, which provided them with practically everything. Hayden felt fortunate that he was once again one of them.

"He's just giving me shit," Hayden told Felix.

"About?" Felix frowned.

"I'm teaching him how to flirt," Harrison said, pointing a toothpick at Felix.

"Ooooooh. With Jaxon?" Felix suddenly looked very interested.

"Knock it off," Brick ordered gruffly. "Leave Jaxon alone."

"He needs somebody to love," Harrison told Brick and stabbed his toothpick into another sausage.

"How would you know that?" Brick scowled and shoved several pieces of cheese and meat into his mouth in one bite.

"We all need somebody to loooove," Hayden sang, and even though the words to that song were different, it kind of fit.

Felix snorted and turned on Brick.

"What about you, big guy? You need someone to loooove?"

Brick reached over and shoved Felix off the couch. The bodyguard landed on the carpet and lay on his back laughing. Brick snorted and Hayden could have sworn the normally quiet, stoic guy was trying very hard not to chuckle.

Hayden's cell phone beeped and he jumped, leaning over to pluck it up.

Now he could text Jaxon!

A giddy feeling swam through his stomach.

# CHAPTER NINETEEN



The place Logan sent to meet was on the outskirts of Oklahoma City and the chopper set them down in a field not far from the location.

They got into the waiting black SUV and the driver drove them to a rundown apartment building in a seedier part of town. It took a while because of the amount of construction going on. Finally parked, they got out and approached the front entrance.

Two US Marshals stood in front of the doorway and Jaxon pulled out his Cobalt Security badge. Logan had equipped each of his bodyguards with them and they helped in situations like this.

“Go on up, they’re expecting you. Fourth floor,” one of the marshals said and stepped aside.

Inside was a touch better than the rundown outside. The carpet looked like it had been a recent upgrade and the elevator appeared in working order.

He still felt uncomfortable leaving Hayden, even with both Brick and Felix there. It just didn’t sit right. Did Hayden have his phone yet? He checked his own for messages, but there was nothing. And before he could think twice, he sent Hayden



a funny meme. Of course, if he got too antsy, he would call Felix and talk to Hayden on the bodyguard's phone. Which, he would do if he needed really n—

“I wonder who *they* are,” Ryder murmured.

“What?” He blinked, gazing blankly at his friend.

“The marshal said *they* are expecting us.”

“Yeah, so?”

“Jaxon...I bet this is a fucking safe house,” Ryder said.

“Yeah.”

Jaxon's gut tightened.

“Who do you think's here? Someone connected to the Moss family?”

Fuck, his friend was quick. Of course, he was. Logan only hired the best.

“I don't know.” But he had his suspicions, so that answer felt like a lie.

“I know your tells, bro.” Ryder squinted at him.

Jaxon ignored the man and pulled out the tie holding his hair at the back of his head and caught all the strands up again before retying the mass. Of course, several pieces escaped in the front and fell out, but the band kept most of it out of his way.

“Wouldn't it be better to cut it off?” Ryder asked, changing the subject because he knew the look on his best friend's face. Jaxon couldn't be forced. “Or find a clip somewhere?”

Jaxon smirked and pulled his Glock from his shoulder holster beneath his black leather jacket. “Yeah, but then I wouldn't have this sexy biker look.”

Ryder cackled. “You're full of shit.”

Jaxon smirked. Hayden loved that his hair was long so he planned on keeping it that way.

Ryder snorted and rolled his eyes. “Why'd you pull your weapon?”

“Because I don’t trust anything right now,” he said and aimed the gun at the elevator doors when it pinged. Ryder slipped out his piece and did the same. When the elevator doors opened on the fourth floor, the hallway beyond was empty. Jaxon placed the toe of his boot to keep the doors open and then took a look out one way and then the other.

“Clear,” he said softly, but kept his gun up and ready.

Easing out into the hallway, he spotted another marshal standing in front of an open door. The guy pulled his piece and pointed it at them.

“Stand down.” Logan appeared behind the marshal and moved the man out of the way. Everyone put their weapons away.

Logan jerked his head to the apartment and they both followed their boss inside.

“Whose place is this?” Ryder asked.

“Well, that’s classified.” The reply came cockily from US Marshal Whiplash Tauber.

“Yeah, we could tell you, but then we’d have to, you know... kill you,” US Marshal Axel Bains added and the big man’s voice was teasing.

“Asshats,” Jaxon said with a grin and Whip stepped forward. Instead of the traditional handshake, Whip tugged Jaxon into a hug which he returned tightly, and then the same with Axel.

“What the hell are you two doing here?” Ryder chuckled, returning the same tight hugs with both men.

Whip and Axel exchanged a look between them before ushering both Ryder and Jaxon into the apartment’s small living room.

“Spill.” Jaxon gave a scowl and then jerked his eyes to Logan, who quietly shut the apartment door, leaving the five of them sequestered inside.

“This was the safe house for Wyatt Thorne,” Logan said, watching him closely.

Jaxon felt the blood leave his face and he planted his feet apart to keep from jerking from the blow. He glanced around, but Wyatt was nowhere in sight. What was clear was that Hayden's brother wasn't in this house safe and sound waiting to testify.

The Moss Crime family was ruthless, and they'd found Wyatt alive. The attempted murder of Hayden was connected. If they got Hayden, Wyatt would turn himself over. He knew that much having known the brothers for years. This was fucked up beyond all recognition.

"Where is Wyatt?" Jaxon croaked.

"We don't know. We suspect that Andrew Moss hit this house, and we suspect he's the one who tried to kill Hayden," Axel interjected.

"Why's that? Wouldn't it be better served to have Hayden alive?" Ryder asked, almost reading his mind. Jaxon couldn't speak, though, and he stood trying to swallow past the dryness in his throat.

"If they killed Hayden, Wyatt would be forced out of hiding to attend the funeral," Whip murmured when Axel seemed reluctant to continue.

"It had to be Baron Turner," Jaxon said flatly, he didn't need to guess who wanted Wyatt dead.

Wyatt had worked for Baron Turner who was, and had in fact been, Andrew Moss' second-in-command for years. In order to stay out of prison on racketeering charges, Wyatt had turned state's evidence.

"That son of a bitch," Jaxon snapped. He wasn't talking about Turner, he was talking about Wyatt. "I knew one way or another, Wyatt was going to get Hayden killed."

"Jaxon..." Whip murmured.

"No. Someone needs to put that motherfucker down," Jaxon said. "Fuck turning state's evidence. I say we call in Pegasus or Phoenix or fuck, even Erebus, and kill Turner and put a fucking bullet in Wyatt's head."

“Jaxon,” Whip said sharply.

Axel threw Whip a dark look.

“What?” Jaxon snarled.

Whip looked away from Axel and sent a hand thrusting through his long hair.

“What are you not telling me?” he asked through clenched teeth, sending a rage-filled look at Whip and Axel before turning on Logan, who stood gazing calmly back.

“Wyatt is not a criminal. He was placed in Andrew Moss’ organization,” Whip said.

“Placed? Like an undercover cop?” The words sounded thick on his tongue, it had to be shock. It was the last fucking thing in the world he expected, and the lies he’d been told all this time pissed him off even further. He’d known all along that Wyatt was in WITSEC, but what he hadn’t known was that Wyatt was undercover. Which meant Wyatt was innocent.

Thinking that Hayden’s brother was a criminal was the main reason Jaxon never felt much guilt about lying to Hayden.

“Yeah, Wyatt is a Federal agent,” Whip murmured.

The room closed in and then zoomed out. Every dirty thought he’d had about Wyatt came back. All the lies through the years to Hayden fluttered through his head. All the fucking untruths time after time came slamming back into him, crushing his chest.

“Why the fuck didn’t you tell me?”

“Because we needed Andrew Moss to think that Wyatt was dead. Only until the trial, then we were going to bring Wyatt in and he wanted to be the one to tell you and Hayden,” Whip said.

“But somehow, Wyatt’s whereabouts got out,” Logan interrupted.

“And Andrew Moss had his men hit this safe house,” Whip released with a heavy sigh.

“Is Wyatt dead?” Jaxon asked over the tightness in his throat. Hoping the fuck not was a pipe dream because he knew how the Moss crime family worked.

How the hell was he going to break the news to Hayden? And the thought of admitting his lie by telling him Wyatt was dead, plus not a criminal, suddenly turned his skin clammy.

“We don’t know if he’s dead or alive. We followed his exit path,” Axel rasped and stalked over to pull the door open.

With halting steps, Jaxon followed the big marshal out the door, along the hallway, and climbed out the fire escape after the man. When Axel climbed upward, Jaxon was right on the marshal’s ass with Ryder behind. They walked across the roof and Axel looked over the side to the metal shed-like building.

“I think he dropped down here and made it to the building next door. Instead of jumping, Axel went down the fire escape on this side of the building and up the ladder of the other building. Jaxon easily kept pace and soon they were standing at the far edge of the building next door and looking at a construction site.

“No way he could make that jump,” Axel pointed to the scaffolding about ten to fifteen feet from them.

Jaxon’s heart sank.

The jump did look impossible, and it took a few hours for them to search the area. They came up with no body, so they couldn’t be sure if Wyatt was dead or alive.

What they did find was blood.

Lots of blood.

# CHAPTER TWENTY



Hayden was still shaking.

Wyatt was or had been alive when he'd left those messages.

Hayden wasn't only distressed because of Wyatt. No, the main reason was because Jaxon had lied.

Lied multiple times to his face.

He settled farther into the cracked booth's vinyl seat of the off-the-beaten-path diner and kept his eyes glued to his phone. He gave his order to the waitress, but had no appetite. Sipping the hot coffee that she kept refilling in his mug helped with the cold. He couldn't get warm even though he'd grabbed his coat when he escaped out one of the two back entrances.

He'd memorized the security code when Felix had punched it in and he'd waited for everyone but Brick to go to sleep. Brick was on watch, but the man couldn't guard every single exit and it had only been a matter of timing the man's route before Hayden was able to get out and reset the alarm.

Beforehand, it had taken every single bit of his acting skills to act like everything was okay. At first, he'd walked on legs that felt like wood into the bathroom and sat there for

longer than he should have because Harrison had knocked on the door. A moment later, he'd come out and made an excuse that his stomach was feeling unwell.

From there, it hadn't taken much planning because none of them expected him to take off. That had been just after bedtime. It was dark now, probably after midnight, but he didn't check his phone.

He gazed blankly out the window as the sun began to rise and he wondered how many hours had passed. The freeway traffic in the distance made a muffled sound and he sighed. Making the decision he was putting off, he dug in his coat.

Just as he pulled out his phone, it rang. Jaxon's name flashed and he sent the call to voicemail before he flipped to his email app.

He scrolled through and found the email address he wanted before typing quickly and hitting send before he could change his mind. Several moments later, his phone lit up with the incoming call.

"Hayden?"

Hayden swallowed. "Yes. I...I need your help."

"Where's Jaxon?"

"Him? No matter how many times a snake sheds its skin, a snake is still a snake," he choked out the words on a ragged breath.

"Give me the address."

Hayden rattled off the nearby street corner about a block from the diner.

"I'll be right there," Wrath said and hung up the phone.

Wrapping up in his coat, Hayden paid his bill without eating and stepped outside. Sticking to the early morning shadows, he walked toward the corner. He ignored the tears dripping down his face and didn't even bother wiping them away because they'd only be replaced by more.

He was so fucking confused that Wyatt was alive, but beyond that, his brother's words didn't make sense. He'd grown so used to hating Wyatt for his dirty dealings working for a crime boss, so he never expected to feel so much hearing his brother's voice. Dashing at his cheeks, he stumbled, caught himself, and made it to the building on the corner. He knew the key Wyatt spoke about and it was hanging from a chain back at his place. He could still remember the day Jaxon had given the key to him.

“What's this?”

“Keep it. It's just something I picked up,” Jaxon had said gruffly.

Hayden had smiled and hung the chain with the key in his room, thinking of how thoughtful Jaxon was.

As soon as they reached home...scratch that, Jaxon's house, because he sure the fuck wasn't going to stay there longer than it took him to pack up his stuff.

He had one problem. Jaxon was the one that knew the location of the safety deposit box and he wasn't going to talk to Jaxon.

That was where Wrath came in. The assassin could get the location of the bank from Jaxon.

What was in that box that Wyatt needed him to see and what dirt had his brother been trying to keep from him? Wyatt had said that he needed to disappear for real this time, but Hayden wasn't going to let that happen until he got some damn answers.

Crap, that meant he'd need at some point to talk to Jaxon because according to Wyatt, Jaxon knew what was going on. But right then, he couldn't even contemplate speaking with Jaxon. The hurt went too deep and the pain had settled in his chest, like a constant ache that wouldn't go away no matter how much he tried to slow his breathing. At least the tears had stopped by the time Wrath reached him.

Instead of demanding answers, the assassin took hold of his bicep and guided him to a dark-colored SUV parked a



block from them.

Wrath blasted the heater after getting him into the vehicle and slid behind the wheel. The man pulled away from the curb.

They ended up in an apartment parking lot, and Wrath urged him out of the car, up the stairs, and inside a warm apartment.

Hayden walked to the window and stood gazing out while Wrath did something in the kitchen.

“Start from the beginning,” Wrath said, drawing his gaze from the window and the deserted street outside to the man who stood across the small room from him. The apartment, that Hayden suspected was where Wrath stayed when he wasn’t killing criminals of the worst kind, was relatively nice.

When a cup of black coffee appeared in front of him, Hayden wrapped his cold hands around the mug. And after taking a sip of the bitter brew, he pulled out his phone and played the voice messages from Wyatt.

“Okay, I take it you didn’t know that he was alive.”

“No, I was told he was dead.”

“Who told you that?”

“Jaxon.”

Wrath grunted.

“What?”

“Nothing. So, your brother is a criminal.”

“Yeah, he embezzled money from the Moss crime boss he worked for and when he was caught, he was killed.” Hayden waved his hand. “Or not, apparently.”

“So maybe he went into WITSEC?”

“What?” Why that thought had never dawned on him, Hayden couldn’t say. Since the phone call, he’d thought Wyatt had been hiding out somewhere, running from Andrew Moss,

and his focus had primarily been on the fact that Jaxon had kept his brother's secret.

"You know, witness protection?" Wrath said dryly.

"I know what WITSEC is," he snapped, irritated, and then sighed when Wrath lifted one eyebrow.

The man was gorgeous and there was really no other way to describe Wrath. With his steel blue eyes, shoulder-length hair, and chiseled jaw, Wrath could have stepped out of a movie—like one of those films where hot, ripped men were the focus.

"Maybe your brother's innocent?"

Shock tightened his chest and he couldn't formulate words to save his life. His phone rang before either of them could say another word and Jaxon's name flashed on the screen. He looked away from the screen and once again to the window.

"Not going to answer it?"

"I can't talk to him right now," he said on a half sob.

"Want me to see what's going on?"

His eyes burned and he nodded instead of answering. He couldn't speak to Jaxon or hear his voice right then.

As it was, he was holding on by a thread and he knew just the sound of Jaxon's voice...

Would break him.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



Jaxon remained sick to his stomach the whole way back to Denver the next morning.

Christ, how the fuck had everything gotten so screwed up and how the hell could he explain all this to Hayden? He tried the man's cell phone again, but it went to voicemail and he didn't leave a message.

He wanted a face to face with Hayden when he explained what he'd learned. Hayden's instinct would be to run, after all, the man was good at it, but Jaxon wanted to be able to hold him tight. So tight, in fact, that he would have to stay and hear him out.

Hayden had to learn the whole story about Wyatt being one of the good guys and in WITSEC from him. Nobody else would do, it had to be him because he'd been the one to lie to Hayden in the first place.

But he'd never got the chance.

"What do you mean he's not here?" he'd said in a ragged voice after arriving at the safe house and removing his coat.

He stared almost stupidly at Brick, who was looking kind of pale after telling him that Hayden was no longer safely tucked inside waiting for him.

“He snuck out while they were sleeping last night. He got by me, I suspect, from timing my rounds,” Brick said, rubbing a hand at the back of his neck.

Ryder had folded a very distressed looking Harrison into his arms and Jaxon heard the man assuring his husband that none of this was his fault.

Fucking hell.

Call it a gut feeling, but somehow, Hayden had found out about Wyatt.

Dread churned in the pit of Jaxon’s gut.

While he hadn’t known everything that was going on with Wyatt, he still felt responsible. Logan, nor the marshals, had bothered to fill him in on the fact that Wyatt was undercover before placing him in WITSEC, and he suspected they’d left the details vague on purpose. So, not only had Hayden believed his brother to be a criminal, but so had he.

None of that mattered now.

The only thing that mattered was finding Hayden and getting him to listen as he explained what had happened.

“What are we going to do?” Gunner asked, standing from where he’d sat on the couch.

Jaxon shook his head and gripped the phone in his fist. He tried Hayden’s number for the tenth time and finally, it was answered.

Only, the voice on the other end wasn’t Hayden’s.

“Who the fuck is this?” he growled.

“Wrath.”

“Put Hayden on the phone.”

“He said no. He doesn’t want to speak with you.”

“Fuck,” he muttered thickly and his eyes burned as he ran a hand through his hair, jerking at the tie that held it back so he could free the mass.

“He wants something from you, though.”

“Anything.” Jaxon froze as hope bloomed only to be crushed by Wrath’s next words.

“The location of a safety deposit box that Wyatt said you know of. Hayden has the key.”

The box’s location Wyatt had given him had been during the last contact he’d ever had with the man. Jaxon thought that maybe it was stolen funds tucked away in the event that Wyatt had needed them. It had turned Jaxon’s stomach at the time when he’d given the key to Hayden per Wyatt’s instructions. Jaxon had even lied about that.

Now that he knew Wyatt was innocent, the box made sense. It was a way for Wyatt to leave something behind for his brother.

“I’ll take you there,” he told Wrath.

“No, Hayden only wants the location.”

Jaxon clenched his jaw so tightly, his jaw ached.

“Give him this. You owe him that much,” Wrath murmured, and then his voice dropped to a whisper. “Give him time.”

“How much does he know?”

“Everything.”

“Fuck,” Jaxon said in a hoarse voice and gave the safety deposit box’s location to Wrath.

“It’s in Denver?” Wrath sounded surprised.

“Yes.” It appeared that Wyatt had thought of his brother the whole time and rather than inconvenience Hayden with getting a flight to Oklahoma, Wyatt had paid for a safety deposit box in a local bank.

“Keep him safe,” he croaked, because that was all he could manage through the lump growing in the back of his throat.

“I will,” Wrath promised and ended the call.

He stood in the middle of the common room staring into space, not seeing anything but Hayden’s beautiful face and imagining every bit of painful betrayal the man was feeling.

“Jaxon?” Gunner murmured, bringing him back to the room and the group of men all looking at him.

Felix stood, worried eyes on him, and Brick still looked guilty.

“What the fuck is going on?” Gunner said.

Jaxon closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and quickly filled the team in about Wyatt, Hayden, and the connection of the threat to all of them by Andrew Moss.

“What’s the plan?” Ryder asked after he’d responded to Gunner. Ryder stood next to Harrison with one arm slipped over his husband’s shoulders.

“Hayden is going for a safety deposit box that Wyatt left him a key for,” he said gruffly. “And we are going to be there as backup.”

They didn’t question him. Instead, they gathered in the tactical room.

Giovanni Rossi had left nothing to chance in this safe house. The man had thought of everything with his team in mind when designing this place. Jaxon hurriedly dressed in tactical gear and selected an FNX 45 tactical handgun with a suppressor before tucking it and extra ammo away along with a six-inch Claymore sharp blade, which he tucked into the sheath strapped to his thigh.

They met out in front of the building and Harrison waved as he pulled away with Ryder in the silver SUV. Ryder was taking his husband to the Cobalt building for safekeeping and would then join up with them as soon as the man was safe.

Brick set the alarm before the rest of them loaded into a black Suburban and pulled out of the parking lot with Felix

behind the wheel.

In one last ditch effort to get a response from Hayden, Jaxon sent a text.

*I'm sorry.*

Silence was his only response, but he'd written the words and now he needed to get Hayden to slow down long enough to hear him say them.

His phone rang and Whip's name flashed on the screen.

"What did you find?" Jaxon asked, answering the call.

"Hey, so, we tested the blood we found and it's a mix of Wyatt's and someone else's, so we figure there was a scuffle. Both Wyatt and his attacker were wounded," Whip said.

"I doubt they sent only one man to take out Wyatt," he said, staring out the window at the passing city.

"You're correct, there appeared to be two..." Whip said, his voice trailing off.

"What?"

"Wyatt's blood trail went one way, but we lost it a few blocks over."

"And the attackers?"

"From the blood trail, it appears that the one guy helped the one wounded get away in a car. I followed the attacker's blood trail to the street where it disappeared," Whip said.

"Who followed it?" Axel called out, the man's deep voice coming clearly through the phone.

"Yeah, okay, Axel followed the trail." Whip gave a heavy sigh.

"What have I told you about lying?"

Jaxon could still hear Axel clearly and Whip's groan of annoyance.

"What have I told you about interrupting me?" Whip snapped.

“Don’t lie and I won’t.”

“Jesus,” Whip hissed. “Give me strength.”

“Hey,” Jaxon cut in before the pair could ramp up their bickering. “Let me know if you find anything else.”

“We will,” Whip assured him and ended the call.

“Who was that?” Gunner asked.

“US Marshal Tauber. They think there’s a possibility that Wyatt is alive,” he said, and while Whip hadn’t said those exact words, Jaxon knew there was a chance that Wyatt could have survived the jump because there hadn’t been a body.

And yet, the Moss crime family thugs could have disposed of Wyatt’s body. But with the blood trail leading off to the street and Wyatt’s trail leading off the other way, it gave him hope.

If Wyatt was alive, Jaxon would find him and bring him back to Hayden.

If it was the last thing he did.



# CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



“You should talk to him.”

“No,” Hayden said.

“Do you really think it’s Jaxon’s fault that you were lied to? Don’t you think that your brother has some responsibility here?” Wrath asked.

Hayden gnashed his teeth at Wrath because the man was making sense, but he wasn’t ready to forgive Jaxon. He’d even lied to his face in the hospital.

Spinning to the apartment’s front door, he stalked over and grabbed the knob before tossing a glance over his shoulder. “Are you coming?”

“Well, since I’m driving, yeah,” Wrath said dryly.

It wasn’t until they were in the elevator and heading down that Hayden offered a begrudging apology. He was being an ass to a guy who had come to help him.

“Sorry.”

Wrath nodded and asked where to when they were both inside the man’s dark vehicle.

“Jaxon’s house,” Hayden murmured and glanced out the window. “I need to get the key.”

Jaxon’s home was deserted, of course, and he let himself in by way of the back door. Wrath was a silent figure behind him and he had to wonder why the assassin was suddenly so protective of him.

“You could have stayed in the car.”

“Don’t you think that they know about this place? That they would have taken you out the minute they found out that Wyatt was alive?”

“What?”

“Think about it. Wyatt goes into WITSEC and you’re told he’s dead. The Moss crime family has no reason to watch you nor want you dead. The minute they find out Wyatt is alive, you became a pawn they can use.”

“Oh.” Well, shit. He hadn’t thought of that and suddenly jerked his eyes around and toward the living room.

Wrath shook his head with a long sigh. “You disarmed the alarm coming inside. I doubt they have the code. How’d you become a bodyguard?” Wrath rubbed a hand at the back of his own neck.

“Ugh.” Hayden grimaced at his own stupidity and had to chalk it up to his anger at Jaxon. It wasn’t only anger and he knew it. He was beyond hurt and couldn’t see any way past this to picture any future for them.

Which posed the next question, if Wyatt was innocent, had Jaxon known?

Lifting the chain from the lamp, he studied the ordinary key that would, he hoped, provide some answers for him. That Wyatt was a good man was only a hypothetical from Wrath and Hayden needed to know if his brother was in fact a criminal or the man he’d looked up to growing up.

They’d always been close, but after Wyatt took a job with a Fortune 500 company, he’d rarely seen the man. That the

company had dealings with the Moss Crime family hadn't been known to Hayden at the time and he'd thought his brother had grown too busy with work to keep in touch. Oh, they had exchanged phone calls and the occasional lunch, but it had been nothing compared to before when they'd hung out routinely.

He missed that, and if there was the slightest chance that Wyatt was innocent and on the run, Hayden had to help him.

"Let's go," Wrath said, and he could hear the tiniest hint of anxiety in the assassin's tone.

They had been there too long for Wrath, and Hayden agreed. He was sure that if Jaxon had been thinking, the man would have been waiting for him here. The only reason Jaxon wasn't there was because he was trying to reach the bank before him and Wrath. It only made sense. And because he knew Jaxon as well as he knew himself, he could anticipate the man's every move.

Later, once they were in the SUV, he squeezed the key in his palm as Wrath parked in the filled parking lot of the bank. The double doors were open and several people came in and out.

There was no sign of Jaxon or any of the Cobalt security team, but he knew they were there.

"You ready?" Wrath murmured, and when the assassin tucked his weapon in the glove compartment, it dawned on him that they wouldn't pass the metal detector armed.

Placing his own weapons in the large space, he watched as Wrath locked it.

"Is that a gun safe?" He touched the front of the box.

Wrath grunted. "I had the regular compartment replaced."

"Makes sense," he said and got out.

They stepped through the front doors and out of the drizzle that had begun outside.

The woman at the desk checked his ID and asked him to follow her. When Wrath stayed put, Hayden turned back.

“I’ll wait here.”

After a moment, Hayden nodded and followed the woman through a locked door, through a vault door, and then into the vault. It took two keys, his own and hers to open the box.

She left him there with the box on the table and he reached out with trembling fingers to open the lid. He took out the laptop and a passport, as well as a flash drive, cell phone, and cash. The passport had his own picture on it and the name was Hayden Sanders, not Thorne. The laptop needed a charge before it could be used so he placed it along with everything else, except for the flash drive, into the black bag Wrath had thought to provide him. The drive he tucked into the front pocket of his jeans and left the room.

Back in the SUV with Wrath behind the wheel, he finally spoke.

“Is Jaxon following us?”

“Mhmm,” Wrath said, aiming a look at the rearview mirror. “You want me to ditch him?”

“No. I need to get back to my house...er, his house and see what’s on this laptop.”

“Sounds good. I think you’ll need his help.”

“Oh?” Hayden frowned. “Why would I need that?”

“Your brother’s message—”

Wrath was cut off when the glass on Hayden’s side of the SUV was blown out.

The impact from a large vehicle cratered in the rear door, but the force shoved them so hard that the SUV tipped sideways. Hanging onto his seatbelt, he watched as Wrath hung onto the wheel as they scraped across the asphalt. Only the driver’s side airbag deployed and Hayden found himself hanging by his seatbelt. The grinding noise ended when they came to a jarring halt and he shouted at Wrath, his voice hoarse.

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” the man grimaced.

And before Hayden could figure out a way out of the seatbelt without falling down on top of Wrath, his window was shattered. Hands reached inside and he was yanked and pulled through the opening. His first thought was to thank god help was there, but when he saw the hooded man, he knew that was not the case.

“Hayden!” Wrath yelled, but he couldn’t answer. He was dropped to the ground, and the black bag he still wore over his neck and shoulder was wrenched from him and as a last ditch effort, he grabbed the strap and held on.

The man’s gun came out, but before he got a chance to shoot him, gunfire erupted. Two big black SUVs and a suburban barreled onto the scene with engines roaring and tires screeching.

“Drop your weapons!” He would know that voice anywhere, the Cobalt calvary had arrived and for some reason, the gunman changed his mind and instead of shooting those coming for them, the masked man swung the gun around and pointed it at his head.

Hayden released the strap and fell back. When he let go, the man turned and ran down the street, weaving between cars until he jumped in the passenger side of a red, four-door sedan. Hayden couldn’t see the license plate.

Hard but tender hands were suddenly on him, and lifting him and brushing over him everywhere. His shoulders, cupping his face, his chest, and then his hips.

“Are you hurt?” Jaxon asked, sounding like he’d swallowed gravel.

“No.” He pulled away. “Check on Wrath.”

“Gunner and Brick are getting him out.”

“Where’s Felix and Ryder?” he said for something to say, because he was rattled by Jaxon’s touch and nearness and he hated that he was still affected.

“They are guarding the two other suspects.”

“Suspects?” Hayden stalked around the vehicle on shaky legs that had more to do with the brooding bodyguard following him than it did from the accident, and he found two men lying face down on the pavement with their hands locked on the back of their heads.

Wrath was standing near Gunner and drinking a bottle of water. Felix held out one for Hayden and he took it and drank, knowing the water would go a long way toward countering shock. He knew that from personal experience.

“What was in the bag?” Wrath asked him, and Hayden finished off the bottle before he spoke.

He told them of the contents, watching as Jaxon’s face turned into a thundercloud of anger and when the man stalked to the two on the ground and pulled his gun, Hayden stepped in.

He couldn’t, in good conscience, let Jaxon shoot the two men when the sirens in the distance were growing closer. He may be beyond angry with Jaxon, but he didn’t want him in prison.

Knowing that being face to face with Jaxon again was inevitable, plus finding out that the moment was today, gave him heartburn. *He and Jaxon were going to have it out before the day was over*, he silently vowed.

“We need answers,” Jaxon said, and then drew in a sharp breath when Hayden placed a hand on his arm. It was as if Jaxon hadn’t thought he’d ever touch him again and Hayden shook his head sadly.

“Let the cops arrest them, we need to get to your house.”

“We do?” The confusion cleared in Jaxon’s eyes when he pulled the flash drive from the front of his jeans.

“Yes, we do.”

# CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



It had taken almost three hours to answer all the questions at the scene of the accident. They'd been forced to call their boss, who arrived on the scene.

Logan called the mayor to have the cops not arrest them. After all, their team had pulled up on a scene with guns drawn and injured one of the suspects, so the cops were really nervous.

They were fucking lucky Jaxon hadn't killed them all for what they'd done to Wrath's vehicle. Jaxon could still feel the fear and sheer terror when the SUV Wrath had been driving with Hayden sitting in the passenger seat was suddenly slammed into by a truck. It was a miracle that neither men had been seriously injured.

The team entered his and Hayden's home and stood in the large living room.

"I need you back on the Baker job," Logan said with a heavy sigh at Brick when they entered Jaxon's home.

"What?" Brick looked like a thundercloud had taken over his face.

“Yeah. Mr. Baker needs a bodyguard on his son and since you’ve done it the last several times...”

“Why me?”

They all kind of froze when Brick pushed back at Logan. From what Jaxon knew, Baker’s son was in college and a self-centered, spoiled rotten brat, but honestly... he’d never seen Brick irritated. It was kind of funny to watch, but Jaxon was careful to keep his expression blank. Hayden avoided his gaze and instead looked between Logan and Brick.

“Because he asked for you. Apparently, you’re the only one who can keep the kid in line,” Logan said slowly.

“Fuck,” Brick muttered and raked a hand through his hair. That kid needed his dad to give him a good ass whipping. “Yeah, all right.”

“Take the SUV,” Logan told Brick and tossed the bodyguard his keys. Catching the keys, Brick gave them a nod and quickly went out the door.

Nobody said a word and Jaxon finally settled on the living room couch.

Hayden sat in one of the chairs and the rest of the team joined Jaxon on the couch, and Logan stood, arms crossed, leaning against the wall. They all waited for Hayden to insert the flash drive that would hopefully give them answers.

Wrath had not come with them and even before the cops could get there and take their statements, Jaxon had seen the assassin slip away as if he’d never been there. And that was the story they told. Hayden had been driving with Jaxon in the passenger seat and nobody, not even Denver PD, questioned them once Logan Cobalt and Mayor Jennings arrived.

The snick of the flash drive being inserted into Jaxon’s laptop brought his eyes back to Hayden. The man had showered upon arriving and was now dressed in dark slacks and a cream-colored, long-sleeved t-shirt that hugged his slender frame. His long blond hair hung loose and half of it covered his face. He knew what Hayden was doing by letting his hair fall forward, he was hiding from him.



He couldn't blame him. If he'd been lied to, he wouldn't have wanted to talk either. So, he sat there and took Hayden's silence, because he could do nothing else. Even though he hadn't known the full story, he was guilty as hell and would gladly pay any price if Hayden would look at him with any other expression except the pain of betrayal.

"It's a folder, but it's locked." Hayden's eyes lifted to him and that fast, Jaxon remembered a conversation he'd had with Wyatt just before he'd gone into WITSEC.

"I need you to take care of Hayden," the man had pleaded.

"Don't worry about him. I've got his back, always," he'd said through gritted teeth, annoyed at the criminal asking such a thing.

"I know you do. Do you remember his birthdate?"

Jaxon sneered, squeezed his hands into fists, and then let out a snort. Was the guy for real?

Wyatt sighed, grimaced, and then nodded as the US Marshals started to lead him away. "Don't forget his birthdate and give him the key!" Wyatt had shouted.

"Jaxon?"

He jolted when Hayden called his name and nodded to the screen. "It's some combination of your birthdate."

Hayden's eyes grew suspicious and Jaxon looked away. Fucking Wyatt. If the man was still alive, he was going to fucking kill him himself.

With fingers tapping on the keyboard, Hayden tried different combinations with day, month, year, and then typing it all out on the third try with the two digits for each, and the file unlocked and a plethora of folders opened across the screen.

"Shit," Felix said from where he'd taken up a lean on Hayden's chair and had been watching. "That's a lot of info."

"There's a video file," Hayden said softly and clicked the small icon.

His brother's face filled the screen and Hayden's heart leapt. He clicked the play button.

"Hey, baby brother," Wyatt said, and then released a deep, tired-sounding breath. "So, if you're listening to this, I'm probably dead."

When the sheen of tears hit Hayden's eyes and the man placed both hands over his mouth, Jaxon wanted badly to move and take him in his arms, but he made himself stay still. He no longer had any rights to that and a lump grew in his throat as he watched the younger man struggle for composure.

"If that's the case, you're completely safe. If not, that's what the passport is for," Wyatt said, and then his brother went on to relay what had happened. If Jaxon hadn't heard it from Whip first, he would have been just as surprised as Hayden when Wyatt informed his brother that he hadn't been nor ever was a criminal and that the only reason he had painted himself as such was to keep Hayden safe while he worked for the Moss crime family.

"And that worked for a while, but then Andrew Moss found out that I was an undercover agent. I knew that to keep you safe, he had to believe that I was dead and so did you."

Wyatt went on to name people in Moss's organization, and the proof of murders, extortion, and even child pornography were all in the files on the flash drive.

"You'll need to contact the marshals and hand that over. Have Jaxon keep you safe, and tell him that I'm really a good guy. I'm sorry, bro, I never meant to have Jaxon lie to you, but it was decided by the marshals and myself that it would be easier for everyone if I were dead."

Wyatt rubbed his hands together. "I stayed undercover as the bad guy and I let you believe that of me because I knew Andrew Moss wouldn't think twice about you—he knew you hated me."

Hayden ran a hand over his face as he stared at his brother on the screen.

"I love you."

The screen went dark and the room was so quiet, a pin dropping could have been heard.

Without a word, Hayden got up and walked out of the room. Gunner, who was sitting on the couch, let out a long sigh and rubbed at the back of his neck.

“That’s some fucked up shit,” the man muttered.

All Jaxon wanted was to go after Hayden, but he kept his ass in the chair. He would not crowd the man even though it took every ounce of willpower he had not to.

“Wyatt cleared you,” Felix said, gazing over at him.

Jaxon shook his head and finally stood to stride into the kitchen. He pulled a glass from the cabinet and the bottle of Jack Daniel’s from the cupboard, but before he could pour any into the glass, Ryder’s hand covered the top.

“Move,” he said, gritting his teeth.

“No. That shit isn’t going to help.” Ryder took the glass and held it. “You’ll need a clear head.”

“Trust me, I don’t,” he snapped and lifted the bottle to his mouth, but Ryder’s next words stopped him cold.

“Moss is still out there.”

Fuck.

Ryder was right. Jaxon lowered the bottle, recapped it, and shoved it away.

Andrew Moss was going to stop at nothing to kill Hayden. Or if Wyatt was alive, take Hayden so Wyatt would do a trade.

Jaxon knew that there was a slim possibility Wyatt was still alive and he needed to tell Hayden.

“Thanks,” he said and gripped Ryder’s shoulder on the way past the man and back out into the living room. From there, he headed down the hall and stopped at Hayden’s closed door. He leaned his forehead against it and it was only when he realized he’d thunked his head on the wood that he stepped back.

The door was wrenched open and a disheveled Hayden stood there. They stayed like that, holding each other's gazes until Hayden drew in a shaky breath and stepped back and turned to walk back and sit on the side of the bed. That the man hadn't kicked him out or told him to fuck off gave him hope and he stepped inside and gently closed the door.

Placing his back to the wood, he stayed there waiting, wanting to say something, anything, but not even knowing where to start.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



“You didn’t know, did you?” Hayden said, and slowly lifted his eyes from his twisting fingers to gaze at the man, who by all accounts, appeared to be glued to the door.

“That he was innocent? No,” Jaxon said, and because he had his complete attention on the man’s face, he didn’t miss the slight grimace and squaring of Jaxon’s shoulders before he continued. “But I knew he wasn’t dead.”

“It’s an odd situation, isn’t it,” he murmured, not really a question, but more of a statement. His words brought Jaxon one step away from the door.

“What’s that?” Jaxon said softly.

Hayden began trying to work the whole thing out in his head and in doing so, he had accidentally spoken the words, so he continued mulling things over out loud.

“You didn’t tell me Wyatt was alive because you knew I hated him for what he’d become and wanted me to let go.”

Jaxon’s throat moved and the bodyguard’s gaze burned with what, Hayden wasn’t sure.

“If you had known that Wyatt was innocent, would you have lied to me?”

“No, I wouldn’t have done it,” Jaxon replied, and Hayden believed him.

“What was your first instinct when they told you the truth, when they told you that Wyatt was undercover?” And because he now knew the details of where Jaxon and Ryder had gone, he had to know.

“I flew straight back to the safe house to tell you.” And the honesty in the man’s voice was not hard to miss and that was because Jaxon West, ex-assassin, former Marine, was an honorable man.

“But I,” Hayden whispered, “had already found out and left.”

“Yes.”

“Wyatt’s message was like a punch to the gut, but you keeping the truth from me has been devastating.”

“Understood,” Jaxon said, his voice low and devoid of emotion. “I don’t blame you for not forgiving me. What I did was unforgivable and I’m sorry, Hayden.”

“Is it true?” he said, simply looking at Jaxon. “Did you not know that Wyatt was undercover?”

“I did not know that until the marshals told me yesterday.”

“And why did they tell you?”

“Because there’s a good chance Wyatt is still alive.”

“What?” Shock dropped his jaw open.

“It was one of the things I was going to tell you when I got back. Wyatt’s safe house was hit, but he’s gone. We don’t know if he’s still alive or dead, but when I got back...”

“I was gone,” Hayden finished when Jaxon’s voice trailed off, and the man nodded.

Gazing down at his hands, Hayden locked his fingers together. “We’ve been best friends for forever, it seems like.”

“Yes,” Jaxon croaked.

“You can never lie to me again, ever.”

“I won’t.” Jaxon’s hands fisted at his sides.

“This thing growing between us,” he unlocked his fingers and gestured with one hand, “is that just a ‘friends with benefits’ to you?”

“Is that what you want?” Jaxon asked hoarsely, carefully.

He never got the chance to answer when a knock sounded on the door. With a sound of frustration, Jaxon whirled and yanked it open. Ryder stood in the hallway.

“We’ve got a situation.”

Gripping the “oh shit” handle near the top of the door, Hayden braced his foot when Felix took the corner fast and gunned the Suburban down the busy Denver streets. Ahead of them was SWAT with their sirens blaring and the honk, honk of the massive vehicle’s horn clearing the way. As long as Felix stayed behind the police force, he could easily keep up.

When he and Jaxon had been interrupted, they’d been told there was a situation at one of the Moss crime family’s dining establishments. The restaurant was in a nicer part of town and located on the bottom floor of an expensive hotel. Supposedly, and this was only because the team had heard secondhand through an anonymous source, Wyatt was at the hotel’s restaurant and shooting up the place.

Hayden suspected the source behind the phone call had been Wrath. The man had promised to find his brother for him and Hayden suspected that if anyone could do it, it would be the assassin.

Pulling up to the scene with every agency available, including local Denver PD, SWAT, the DEA, FBI, and US Marshals was mind boggling. And it dawned on him that they’d been waiting a long time to take down Andrew Moss. Each branch of law enforcement had a beef and a stake in taking him down.

The evidence Hayden had given to Logan on the flash drive was enough to send Andrew Moss and his gang of thugs

to jail for life, and since Colorado enforced the death penalty, the man was history.

If Wyatt was inside doing what Wrath said, then his brother was going to be in big trouble. There was no way in hell Wyatt, innocent or not, could get away with killing people of the Moss crime family in front of the public. He could, however, change his name and become one of Dave's assassins.

First, though, it appeared they had to talk Wyatt down. The SWAT commander had taken up the bullhorn and stood calling out in a deep, booming voice to drop the weapons and surrender.

Hayden finished clipping his bulletproof vest in place and loaded up his weapons; a Banish 45, the Sig Sauer P365, as well as an assortment of knives and ammo clips.

"I'm going in," he said and watched as every pair of eyes on their team turned in his direction. None of them spoke, which was surprising because he'd thought they would argue. Instead, as a collective whole, they turned to Jaxon, who was in charge at the moment, because their boss was en route.

The man finished sliding on his own vest, snatched up his weapons, and then spoke.

"I'll back you up."

A snarky comeback was on the tip of his tongue, but he held it back. They weren't at that place yet and he wasn't sure if they'd ever be. He'd gotten Jaxon's promise to never lie to him again, but the pain of betrayal still lingered.

The rest of Cobalt Security said nothing, but every single one of them pulled on vests, gear, and weapons.

"We'll need a distraction," Gunner mumbled, and gestured slightly at the array of agencies.

"Oh, you let me handle that," Felix grinned before turning to Hayden. "You get inside and save your brother."

Hayden nodded and as he began walking down the block in order to skirt around the building and come in from the



opposite side, he heard Felix yell.

“What is this? I say we take them by storm!” Felix whooped and approached the SWAT commander with the bullhorn.

Walking backward, Hayden saw Felix pull his gun and point it in the air before every agency standing nearby converged and the slighter man disappeared.

“Fuck,” Ryder gasped. “I didn’t think he was going to do that.”

Hayden laughed. “Seriously? That shouldn’t have surprised you.”

“Yeah,” Ryder huffed out a breath and followed as they stepped around the corner.

It took Ryder distracting a few more police in order for them to slip through a loading dock and inside the hotel.

Now, they needed to find Wyatt before his brother truly got dead.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



Jaxon watched as Hayden moved like silk through the darkened interior of the hotel.

In whatever capacity Hayden wanted him to be, that was what he'd become. If Hayden wanted a friend, lover, confidant, or to tell him to fuck off and disappear, Jaxon would do it.

Discovering that Hayden was the only man he'd ever loved had sent a thrill through him, yet knowing his discovery had come too late and he'd never have a chance to say the words was a crushing blow. He had thought he'd experienced love in the past and maybe he had, but it had been fleeting.

With Hayden, the love he felt was all-consuming.

Every shadow, noise, and change in the air charged his senses to hyperawareness and his vigilance became a living, breathing thing as he matched Hayden step for step, weapon up and ready as they approached a floor with several storage and conference rooms. With his focus so intent, it wasn't surprising that he saw Wyatt before anyone else and he lightly touched Hayden on the shoulder and pointed toward his brother.

“Wyatt,” Hayden said and stopped. He’d only breathed the name and his brother didn’t turn, so Hayden spoke louder. “Wyatt.”

The hissing whisper of his name turned Wyatt in their direction and the look of joy mixed with pain on the other man’s face was staggering. With a straight arm down by his side, Wyatt put his hand out flat and gave a sign that Jaxon took to mean to stay back.

Hayden, however, did not heed his brother’s warning and surged forward with a fluid motion. Jaxon followed, right on Hayden’s ass, gun up, at the ready.

What they hadn’t seen behind the pillar and row of boxes in the large storage room were the men Wyatt had been facing.

“Get back!” Wyatt shouted and lifted his gun.

The men, probably eight in total, he wasn’t sure, fired and sprang for cover.

Hayden charged forward, shooting repeatedly into the boxes. Jaxon emptied a clip and then reloaded. He jumped after Hayden when the man moved and together, they leapt over crap in sync. It was like old times. Fuck, he had missed this. He took out one guy before he could get off another shot.

Ryder and Gunner rejoined them after the gunfire and both men fanned out, racing after other suspects.

Wyatt caught up to them and grabbed at Hayden’s arm, but the man eluded him and kept firing until his gun clicked over and over, having run out of bullets.

Jaxon emptied his own clip and stopped to reload.

“Damn it, Hayden. Stop,” Wyatt said and Hayden turned, panting as he glared at his brother.

“Oh, now you have something to say!” Hayden growled, completely missing the perp coming down the aisle, but Jaxon didn’t.

He shoved the clip into the Beretta as the suspect’s own weapon came up. The fucker held a modified semi-automatic.

Not even thinking, Jaxon stepped in front of Hayden and shoved hard, sending the slighter man to the floor before he lifted his weapon, and he and the suspect opened fired at the same time.

Jaxon was punched back when a bullet entered his collarbone and another into his pelvis, as well as a few hitting the vest. The burn was instant, but the pain sat in the distance. He slammed to the floor just as Wyatt grabbed the gun from his hand and fired. Hayden jumped up, slammed home a clip, and fired over and over at the perp.

“I think he’s dead,” he coughed, and that was when the pain hit. Fuck. Jaxon met Hayden’s wide, scared eyes. The man dropped to his knees, pressing a hand to where his shoulder met his neck.

“God damned bodyguard,” Hayden hissed, and it hurt Jaxon that tears started streaming down the man’s face, and gasping, heaving breaths escaped like raw sounds of agony. The fear in Hayden’s eyes was blinding, but he saw the love and he choked trying to speak. The words came out as only a whisper.

“I’m so sorry, beauty,” he coughed. “I love you.”

There, at least he’d gotten to say it.

“Jaxon! Jaxon!”

He tried to smile when the panic in Hayden’s face dissolved into terror and tears.

Perhaps he’d been forgiven after all. Jaxon wanted to tell Wyatt to watch out for and take care of his brother, but he couldn’t get his mouth to work. The blood on the floor pooled out like a lake beneath his ass, he could feel the warmth, and he slid sideways before he was caught and lifted.

Hayden’s screams were the last sound he heard, the man’s ravaged yet still beautiful face the last thing he saw.



“Jaxon,” a voice whispered near his ears and he wanted to lift his lids, but they were too heavy. “You do not get to leave me in the middle of a fight. That’s not how this works. We need to make up and I need to look into your eyes when I tell you I love you back.”

The voice faded and the darkness took over.

“Please, Jaxon, don’t leave me.” The trembling, sobbing words came again along with a repetitive beeping sound—how much time had passed, he wasn’t sure, but he heard the voice full of tears, and wanted to comfort whomever was speaking. The need to nurture and protect the owner of that voice kept him from falling from the gray into the black.

“When you get out of here, I’m going to make you stay in bed for a month. Preferably with me, but we’ll discuss that over dinner.” The voice prattled on this time in a continuous stream along with a hand softly stroking his hair. It felt nice.

“Have I told you I love you today?” the voice went on. “No? Well, I do, and I got over my anger about Wyatt. I know why you lied to me. I know you did it because you love me and would protect me from trying to find Wyatt if I had known he was alive. Because even though I thought he was a criminal, I would have searched for him. I realize that now and you keeping the truth from me kept me from fucking up Wyatt’s life.” Fingers continued combing softly through his hair before trailing down to cup his cheek, and he turned into the hand.

The hitch of a sobbing breath was hard to miss and then the man was hovering over him, lips touching his ear before the whispered words caressed him.

“Jaxon, I love you.”

# CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



It had taken the former SecDef calling in a favor from the President and then the governor, who in turn called the mayor and police chief, to get them off the hook for the gunfight at the hotel.

Supervisory Deputy US Marshal Mac Mackenzie showed up from the California field office and Cobalt Security bodyguards had all been deputized as US Marshals that very day. As a result, the team was secure from any blame or wrongdoing.

Wyatt touched him on the arm, and Hayden turned to hug his brother as they stood together near the door inside of Jaxon's hospital room.

"He's going to be okay," his brother assured him.

"Yes, doctors say it's a miracle. The bullets could have done so much more damage."

"Jaxon definitely saved us." Wyatt gazed at him, but Hayden couldn't drag his eyes from Jaxon lying on the bed.

"He's my hero," Hayden whispered.

Wyatt smiled and tugged at the strands of his hair. His brother had been debriefed by the marshals and FBI over the

past two days and with Andrew Moss dead, and the evidence Wyatt had collected against the rest of the crime family, it allowed law enforcement to round up all of the criminals.

So, Wyatt no longer had to stay in WITSEC.

His brother was currently crashing at his and Jaxon's place until he could find an apartment. Hayden had hooked Wyatt up with Dave, who had offered him a spot on one of his specialty teams, but Wyatt hadn't chosen anything yet. His brother had come to him to talk about the possibility of Erebus. That surprised the hell out of Hayden because his brother was a former Fed. He was going to talk Wyatt out of it if it came to that, of course, but all that could wait until Jaxon was better.

"Love you, bro," Wyatt said and gave him a hug as Jaxon started to stir on the bed. When Hayden became distracted with Jaxon, he left his brother and opened the hospital door quietly. "I'll call you."

Hayden barely heard Wyatt leave and returned to the chair by the bed. But before he sat, he leaned over and looked into Jaxon's face. Yesterday, the man had squeezed his hand, waking briefly, and the doctors said that today Jaxon should fully regain consciousness.

Leaning closer, he softly whispered against Jaxon's ear, "I love you, I love you, I love you."

His throat was raw from crying over the past two almost three days, but he let the tears fall again.

Jaxon lifted the hand attached to the IV and Hayden linked their fingers. He'd been terrified he'd never get to feel Jaxon reach for him ever again. The amount of blood loss plus two surgeries later, Jaxon had been heavily sedated by the doctors, but it had still freaked Hayden the fuck out. He couldn't remember a time when Jaxon hadn't been healthy or picked up the phone when he called.

Even when Jaxon took that trip to California to help with Erebus, the man had still picked up the phone when he called.

When the fingers around his squeezed tighter, he flicked his eyes up to find that stormy gaze locked on him.

“Hi,” he breathed, wiping at his face, and took the cup to place a very small ice chip against Jaxon’s lips—the nurse had assured him it would be okay.

Jaxon took the chip, swallowed, and said in a raspy voice, “Hey.”

Hayden lowered down into his chair and held Jaxon’s hand for several long moments. Those storm-colored eyes didn’t waiver and Hayden swallowed.

“Did you hear me?” he asked, covering his sudden nervousness.

“What?” Jaxon croaked.

“I said I love you.”

Jaxon stared at him so long, Hayden felt obligated to tip his chin up. “And if you have any objections, you don’t get to voice them.”

“No?”

A slow smirk moved the man’s lips and humor crinkled the corner of his eyes. They’d trimmed Jaxon’s beard short, but as hairy as the bodyguard was, it would grow back thick within a week. Hayden had taken out the hair tie and brushed Jaxon’s dark-blond hair himself while the man lay still in the bed. The heavy mass now fanned out on the pillow.

“Nope,” he said, popping the P for good measure. “I’ll have you know that you took ten years off my life with that stunt you pulled.”

“What’d I do?” Jaxon grouched with a pout by poking his bottom lip out.

“You took a bullet for me. Scratch that...you took a few bullets for me. So now you belong to me.”

“You got that backward. I did the saving, so you belong to me,” Jaxon chuckled and then winced.

“This is not a laughing matter.” Hayden straightened the sheet and blanket before he lifted the cup of chipped ice and fed him another small piece. Once the ice disappeared into the



man's mouth, Hayden placed the cup aside and resumed his seat.

"Like I was saying, you belong to me."

"And what are you going to do with me?"

"I'm going to marry you," he mused, watching shock widen Jaxon's eyes. "It's only fair," he shot back. "For scaring me, you know."

"Yes."

"Because if you hadn't scared me then I wouldn't need to shackle you."

"Yes."

"Shackles won't really work, though, that's a hypothetical. That's why we need rings."

"Hayden?"

"Hmm?" He smiled.

"I said yes, I'll marry you."

"Oh, I know you will." He didn't try to hide the satisfaction in his voice or eyes. "Like I said, you belong to me."

"Has anyone told you that you're bossy?"

Hayden batted his eyelashes. "Like you didn't know?"

"I lied to you."

Hayden heard the shakiness in his big, bad, tough guy's voice and his heart broke for the pain that Jaxon had endured to keep him from finding out and potentially going after Wyatt, because he would have and Jaxon knew it.

"You had your reasons."

"I did."

"And you promised me you'd never do it again."

"As long as I live." Jaxon crossed his heart.

"Which is going to be a long time."

“Yes.”

“So,” Hayden said and pulled at his lips because the next part was tricky. “I think we should retire.”

Jaxon’s eyes went wide. “We can’t afford that.”

“Yes, we can.”

“How?”

“You already own your own home, all we need to do is find jobs where people don’t want us dead. There’s got to be tons of those out there and I think that Logan would help—”

“Hayden,” Jaxon cut through his barrage of words.

“What?” he pouted.

“I know you’re scared, baby, but this is what we do,” Jaxon murmured and lifted his hand to bring it to his lips. The scratchy beard rubbed against his hand and Hayden sighed.

“Then what we need to do is...” he waved his free hand around, “take a vacation because I’m having panic attacks just thinking about you laying on the floor bleeding out.”

“It’s going to be weeks before I can get back to work. How about we go somewhere?”

Weeks? More like months, but he kept that to himself and squinted at Jaxon before relenting. “Where would we go?”

“Jamaica for a honeymoon?”

He couldn’t stop his mouth from dropping open, but then excitement widened his lips into a grin.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, but first we need to tie the knot.”

“You bet your sweet ass we do.”

“Mhmm,” Jaxon agreed and tugged at his hand. “Now, come here and give me a kiss.”

“Why should I?”

“Because I love you.”

Hayden gladly went.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



*Two months later*

“Haven’t seen you in a while.” Jaxon shook Brick’s hand before the big man turned to shake Hayden and Ryder’s hand.

Ryder’s husband, Harrison, waggled his fingers from where he stood in the massive conference room in the high-rise Denver building of Cobalt Security.

“Yeah, the Baker job is taking all my time.” Brick snorted.

“So do you go inside as a college student?” Hayden grinned at Brick.

“Do I look like a college student to you?” Brick smirked.

“No, not really. How long will you be there?” Hayden patted Brick sadly on the shoulder while fighting back a laugh.

Brick rolled his eyes and squinted. “Until Baker no longer needs me to guard his son.”

“What’s his son’s name?” Jaxon asked, but before Brick could answer, Felix and Gunner came through the door of the

conference room. Gunner held a six pack of soda pop and Felix carried enough pizza to feed an army. The smell of pepperoni filled the room and everyone's attention went to the food.

Brick's phone buzzed with an incoming call, and he lifted it to his ear.

"What's up, Jenkins?" Brick said, standing to stride across the room. He ignored the curious glances from the bodyguards.

"I wanted to confirm about the dance scholarship," Chris Jenkins said.

"What about it?" Brick frowned.

"You noted music. Is the lump sum for both dance and music combined?"

"No, make them separate funding, one each," Brick ordered.

"I'm on it," Jenkins replied and ended the call.

Logan walked into the room with his husband, FBI agent Macy Cobalt, and one of their Rottweilers, Duke. Their other dog, Duchess, was expecting again so she was with Sara, the manager of Logan's training facility. Both men took seats at the table.

Once everyone had food and drinks, Logan gazed at Jaxon.

"What did your doctor say?"

Jaxon grimaced. "Light duty, but—"

"No buts." Hayden cut off Jaxon with a glower and the man wisely closed his mouth.

"So, I don't know where to start," Logan said after snorting at the standoff. "So, I'll just say it. I don't know how much longer I'll be keeping Cobalt Security open. Macy and I want to retire and see the world."

"Figures, right when I come back," Jaxon grumbled.

“Wait, what?” Hayden’s face went slack with shock.

Ryder’s husband, Harrison, nodded as if Logan talking about retiring made a lot of sense, but that was because Ryder was part-time anyway, so it wouldn’t be a leap for Ryder to fully retire.

“What’s going to happen to us?” Gunner frowned.

“It’s going to be another year before I close the doors,” Logan said, keeping his eyes from Brick. “But Whip said you could join the marshals.”

“I’ll probably go private,” Brick murmured.

“What?” Felix gaped at the guy, but Brick only shrugged.

Brick took a bite of pizza before glancing up to find every pair of eyes focused on him. Logan turned his head to hide his reaction from Brick.

Tyler Brick could buy this company three times over. The man was a billionaire and had financed part of Cobalt Security in the beginning. Brick had also forbidden Logan from saying a word about it, and Logan wouldn’t out his friend even now. Brick had to have his reasons. When Logan glanced back over, Brick was staring right at him. They locked gazes for a few seconds and when Logan nodded, Brick smirked.

“I’ll retire when you do,” Ryder told Logan, drawing his attention from Brick.

“What about you?” Logan turned to ask Jaxon.

“Me?” Jaxon reached out and took Hayden’s hand and linked their fingers together. “I’ll go wherever Hayden ends up.”

Hayden’s quick smile resembled a burst of sunshine that heated his skin.

Logan nodded and then turned to Gunner and Felix. “And you two?”

“Marshals,” Felix said with a grin and slid a glance at Gunner. “What about you, big guy? You feel like wearing a Tin Star with me?”

Gunner frowned and toyed with his soda bottle. “Maybe. I have my dogs to consider.”

“They can always retire with Macy and I,” Logan said.

Their boss did have a point, Logan owned one of the most well-respected dog training facilities in the state. Everyone tossed glances at the well-behaved dog. Duke was lying at Logan and Macy’s feet.

“I think having a dog with the marshals is doable,” Felix murmured. “We’d need to make a few calls.”

“For some reason, I thought you’d be expanding instead of closing the doors.” Jaxon gave Logan an up nod.

“It’s not about the money. This just isn’t something I want to do forever.” Logan lifted Macy’s hand to his lips. “And since Macy will be leaving the FBI at the end of the year, I want us to be able to do things we’ve been wanting to do for a long time.”

“What about if you had someone who was willing to run the day-to-day stuff?” Hayden asked.

“And who would that be?” Logan eyed Hayden.

After a moment of silence, every pair of eyes in the room turned to Jaxon. He snorted. Him? Really? Stunned, he turned his attention to Hayden, who was smiling like he’d just won the lottery.

“I can’t buy this place from you,” Jaxon mumbled, wondering why the hell he’d said that instead of a flat-out no.

“I wouldn’t sell it if that were the case. You’d be the man in charge, I’d just be the money man behind the scenes,” Logan said and then gestured to Hayden. “He could help you.”

“Partners.” Hayden turned a bit in his chair and squeezed his hand.

Jaxon looked into those beautiful blue-colored eyes and knew he was going to cave. Rather than fight the tide, he said the only thing he could say.

“Yes.”

At least this way, he'd know where Hayden was at all times and he could hand pick the jobs his lover handled. Yeah, so call him controlling, possessive, and whatever, he had no shame when it came to keeping Hayden safe.

“What about the rest of you?” Jaxon gazed around the table. “You all sounded like you have plans now.”

“I'll stay working for Cobalt if the doors stay open,” Brick said.

Felix lifted his hand. ‘I'm in.’”

“I didn't want to leave in the first place,” Gunner scowled, making everyone laugh.

“I'm out, guys,” Ryder said, slinging an arm over Harrison's shoulder. “We're going to go house shopping.”

Harrison smiled. “Something with a white picket fence. We've decided to adopt.”

“Wait...” Macy gaped at Harrison. “A baby?”

“Yep.”

Amidst congratulations, laughter, and holding their soda glasses high to toast, Jaxon took a moment to turn to Hayden.

“You really okay with this?” he asked.

Hayden turned his head to look at him, putting his face about two inches from his, their lips oh so fucking close that it drove Jaxon crazy thinking of kissing him. A soft light entered Hayden's eyes and his lips pursed.

“Yes.”

Fuck it. Jaxon caved and leaned in to take the promised kiss.

Whatever may lay ahead, he knew one thing and one thing only, he wanted this man by his side. But that wasn't the only reason to keep the gang together. Even though they weren't related by blood, they were family.

“So, with Ryder leaving, you'll need to hire someone.”



Jaxon nodded at Hayden's comment. "Got anybody in mind?"

"Wyatt?"

He searched Hayden's eyes for a moment. "Think he'll go for it?"

"Well...he did say he might want to work for Erebus, but we can ask him to come here instead."

"Okay, let's give him a call." Jaxon smiled.

Hayden grinned and slid an arm around his shoulder. They both turned to find the team gazing at them.

"Back with us now?" Felix said with a cheeky grin.

"I have the marshals' number on speed dial if you need it," Hayden smiled sweetly at Felix.

"Hey!" The bodyguard laughed. "Shut it."

"Sorry, I don't take advice from idiots," Hayden smirked, and shoved his chair back when a laughing Felix lunged across the table. The chase was on with Hayden leaping out of his chair and running around the large table to keep out of Felix's reach.

"You sure you want to take this on?" Logan gave Jaxon a pained sigh.

Jaxon chuckled watching Hayden. It had taken a few weeks for Hayden to slowly resume his teasing ways and laughter. He'd been afraid that what they'd gone through had stolen it away. To see Hayden giving Felix shit and the pair playing a game of tag might seem silly to the average onlooker, but to Jaxon, it meant the fucking world.

"Actually...there's nothing I'd rather do."

# EPILOGUE



*Three months later*

Jaxon laid the room key on the dresser and watched Hayden walk around the room of their honeymoon suite. He hadn't spared any expense renting the room on the top floor of the exclusive hotel.

He wanted to give Hayden the world.

Running his fingertips over the silk cover on the king-sized bed, Hayden walked past him on his way to the balcony doors. The look the man shot over his shoulder had Jaxon's dick pressing against his jeans and when Hayden opened and slipped through the patio doors, Jaxon followed.

Turning around, Hayden put his back to the railing and watched him.

The gold wedding band winked on the man's finger and pride swelled Jaxon's chest.

"And what do you think we're going to do here, Mr. West?" One of Hayden's blond brows lifted and he gave his

husband a soft smile.

They'd waited a few months after Logan's meeting to get married, and everyone had attended the small wedding. Ryder had stood by his side and Harrison by Hayden's when they'd exchanged vows that would tie them together forever. A few of the marshals had attended and of course, Wyatt had come.

Logan's twin brother Liam flew in with his husband, Spencer, and several of the former Special Forces unit known as Infinity drove up to the venue on the Californian coast. When the former SecDef showed up, Stone had hauled ass out of there after some brief words with Dave, but all in all, everything had gone smoothly.

And that smoothness was because it was him and his past with Erebus. Only two of the assassins stalked through their wedding, but neither one stayed long. The others sent him text messages from burner phones or emails from anonymous accounts with congratulations. Jaxon got it, he'd lived in that shadowed world for years. The only assassin who stayed the whole wedding was Ice.

Wyatt was still on the fence about what job to take and was currently straddling two worlds by working part-time for Cobalt Security and taking Erebus jobs on the side. It made Hayden happy and honestly, that was all Jaxon cared about.

Now, Jaxon lifted a hand to wave at the Jamaica beach and ocean beyond the balcony.

"Sand, sun, swimming, dinner, us."

"Sounds like a commercial," Hayden teased.

"Hmmm." He smiled and advanced.

"I don't have anything to wear. Our luggage was delayed." Hayden retreated, staying just out of arm's length.

"I grabbed this at the shop downstairs." Jaxon snagged something from one of the bags just inside the patio doors and then returned to him.

"Is that where you'd gone?" Hayden eyed the minuscule men's swimsuit in buttercup yellow hanging from one of

Jaxon's fingers.

"Yes." Jaxon caught him. "And I took a moment to order us suits to be delivered."

"Oh? I thought you'd gone for a walkabout." His words cut off when Jaxon placed his fingers over his lips.

"You are something." Jaxon shook his head and brushed his thumb at his bottom lip.

"I tried to be normal once." Hayden pouted, his heart racing. "It was the worst day of my life."

Jaxon's chuckle filled the room.

"Did you remember shoes?" Hayden inquired, catching Jaxon off guard.

"What?"

"Prada?" Hayden's pretty lips twisted as he tried not to smile.

"Jimmy Choo."

"Oh." Those lips made a perfect O and Jaxon eased closer.

"You didn't need to spend the money, I can rock sweatpants, you know." Hayden's chin tipped up.

"That, I know," Jaxon rasped through a tight throat, his palms sweaty.

"Have you been checking out my ass, Mr. West?"

"Indeed, I have, Mr. West."

Hayden wasn't done with the comebacks. Jaxon could see it in the man's challenging gaze.

"I don't need a suit to turn heads."

"No, you don't."

Of that, they were in agreement. Jaxon would take Hayden wearing a paper sack, but preferably naked was the way he wanted the man.

Yet, he also wanted to wine and dine Hayden even though he sucked at being romantic and shit.

“What has those smoky gray eyes so serious?” Hayden ran a palm up his chest, fingers smoothing out wrinkles in Jaxon’s shirt.

“Come dine with me, husband.”

He held his palm up and Hayden slipped his hand into his.



Glasses clinked in the dimly lit restaurant, music played in the background, and lights on the beach glowed beyond the surrounding windows that held the warm Jamaican night at bay.

“This is nice,” Hayden said, looking across the table at Jaxon and taking a sip of red wine. “Do you remember when we took that road trip up the coast to Oregon?”

“To visit Diesel and Triton?”

Hayden snickered and nodded.

“Yeah, why?”

“You promised me a night on the town back then.”

“Hey, getting food poisoning wasn’t part of my plan,” he griped with a grumble.

“And wiping your brow and cleaning your puke wasn’t mine.”

Jaxon made a face. “Your point?”

“If I get drunk tonight, you’re on puke duty.”

“Ah...um...er...okay?”

Hayden threw his head back and laughed loudly, and the sound turned several heads in their direction.

He didn’t blame the crowd...the suit fit Hayden like a glove and the dark coal color of the fabric complimented the man’s loose blond hair. Hayden’s eyes sparkled like sapphires

in the candlelight and Jaxon had spent more time staring into that beautiful face than he'd had tasting the food.

"Puke is not good dinner conversation," Jaxon mumbled, discreetly pushing a hand beneath the table as his dick hardened.

"Good thing we've already eaten then, isn't it?"

"Smartass."

"You say that like you don't already know."

Jaxon laid down his napkin, stood from his chair, and held a hand out to Hayden. The man's beautiful eyes widened and then a sneaky smile graced Hayden's lips before he was lightly taking his hand. With a hand on Hayden's lower back, Jaxon guided him to the dance floor where several couples were moving slowly to the soft music. Reaching the small hardwood floor, Jaxon pulled Hayden close, wrapped one arm around his slender waist, and brought their held hands to his chest.

The man gave a soft gasp when Jaxon dipped his head to rest his temple against the top of Hayden's bright hair.

Hayden's free hand lifted and his fingers curled around the lapel of his jacket.

"I love you, Jaxon West," his husband whispered.

*Yes*, was all he could think.

*Fuck, yes*. Swallowing several times, Jaxon gave a deep sigh and growled.

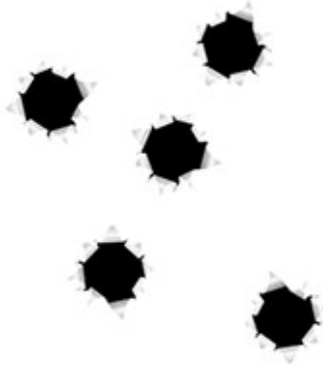
"I love you more."

THE END

\*Curious about Whip and Axel? They first appeared in *Bringing It Home* (Code of Honor book 3). US Marshal Mac Mackenzie is from my debut novel, *Ricochet*. Diesel and Triton mentioned at the end are also in *Bringing It Home*.

# SNEAK PEAK OF *CUTTING IT CLOSE*

## CHAPTER ONE



### *Maddox*

If Maddox Stone could have walked away and given it all up in that very moment, he would have. But that wasn't a luxury he could afford.

He drew a deep breath and let it out hard before he spoke between his teeth.

"I don't give a damn why you did it, you should have asked me first." He scowled at his business partner.

Bull Seeger frowned back. "I own half this ranch!"

He gave the man a narrowed look. "This ranch wouldn't even be solvent if it weren't for my grandfather."

"Well, thanks for that." Bull's face filled with hurt.

Not wanting to be pulled into Bull's manipulation, he steeled himself against the hurt in the old man's eyes. If he didn't get a

handle on Bull's erratic spending, the guy was going to be out of a home.

"The truth hurts."

"You know what, Maddox? You can go to hell," Bull said and stomped slowly into the living room. The cane held tightly by a gnarled hand thumped on the floor.

With an overly long sigh, he stalked after the cranky old coot. "Look. I really don't have time to be running back here every time Triton calls me because you have some half-cooked scheme up your sleeve."

Bull lowered slowly to the sofa. "Yes. You're very busy." The man turned his face away and stared out the wide window that graced one half of the room.

"I am very busy!" He clenched his teeth. "I can't get back here more than once a year, you know that. I'll stay until I have this mess sorted out and then I'm gone."

"Don't put yourself out," Bull muttered. "I can handle it."

"Yeah, I see the way you handled it. We'll be lucky if we pull out of this one." He threw up his hands.

Bull flinched but didn't say another word.

The one thing Maddox had done through the years was support this place. Yet, every time he turned around, he got a call about money problems. Frankly, he was sick of it. With the next few days free, he could look into the problem, but he didn't always have free time. He was a very busy man. More so than Bull realized.

Striding into the kitchen, his spurs rang on the hardwood floor as he strode past the kitchen table to the back door.

"Jim," he snapped at the ranch foreman just lifting a forkful of eggs to his mouth. Jim Lancaster had been the Triple R foreman since before his grandfather bought into the ranch. Jim shoved back his chair, the half-eaten food pushed aside.

"Yes sir?"

"I'm headed to the east barn," he growled on his way out the back door.



The man gulped, grabbed the toast from his plate, his coat from the hook near the door, and followed after him.

Stalking to the main horse barn, he looked over the state of the ranch. As things went, it wasn't in too bad of shape physically. The landscape around the main house looked good and the structure of the buildings looked sound. The livestock were healthy.

What wasn't good was the financial aspects of running the place. Every time he turned around, he was having to sink his hard earned money into the place.

"You know..." Jim said, running after him. The older man huffed and puffed a bit when he caught up. "Bull is getting on in years."

He ignored Jim and yanked open the east barn door and stepped inside.

"He didn't mean no harm."

"You'd do well to spend more time doing your job than defending Bull's actions," he clipped out.

Jim twisted his cap and nodded before turning away.

He closed his eyes, spun around, and stalked down the long length to the end of the barn.

Toward the rear door, the mare in the foaling stall stomped and pulled at the lead rope one of the ranch hands was holding.

"Fucking hold still!" The guy smacked the mare on the muzzle and she cried out in distress.

In two large strides, he fisted the back of the man's shirt. His other hand came around and clamped on the pressure point on the man's wrist. The guy yelled and dropped the lead rope. Spinning the man around, Maddox punched him in the nose before shoving him to the dirt.

"What!" The guy scrambled back on his ass, hands holding his nose.

Maddox towered over the guy. "Collect your check."

"Wait. She's -"

“She’s in pain. I won’t say it again. Collect your check and get off my land,” he snarled, taking a step forward.

Scrambling, the man jumped to his feet and ran.

He spun and eased up to the skittish mare in the stall.

“Whoa...” He caught the lead rope, careful to leave slack, and lifted a hand to smooth over the red gleaming coat of the skittish mare. She jerked beneath his touch.

“He had that coming,” his young cousin said from behind him.

Ignoring Triton, he ran his gaze over the mare. His mouth grew tight. She was only hours from giving birth. “Easy, girl, you’re going to be fine, you can do this,” he coaxed.

“You talk to her like she’s human,” Triton said, moving closer, almost to his shoulder.

Maddox sent his cousin a look and caught the quick flashing smile. His cousin was always smiling. People liked the young man and gravitated toward his happy disposition.

“She’s more human than some people I know,” he growled.

Triton snorted. The twenty-one year old was cute; all brown curly hair, big, bright eyes, slim, and stood around five feet eleven inches. Not as tall as he or bulky, but not everyone could be as big as him. There was a twelve year age gap between him and his younger cousin, but that never mattered to them. Triton, kicked out of his aunt and uncle’s house because he’d come out as gay, had moved to the ranch three years ago to live and go to college. Maddox had welcomed Triton with open arms and they’d grown close. When he was on leave, Maddox came home in the summer, teaching Triton the ropes of the ranch. The young man had taken to ranching like a duck to water.

“I heard you and Bull fighting earlier,” Triton said.

He gave a hard sigh.

“He did fuck up the finances again, didn’t he?” Triton asked, and then shook his head.

His cousin had been the one to leave the message at the base, the message that had brought him home. Maddox had called home and caught a flight out the very next day. Luckily, Major

Jones had granted his military leave. But that was only because the target of their next assignment had gone dark before they could deploy, leaving Maddox with enough time to deal with this bullshit.

“Bull took out a loan against the ranch to expand barn number three, so he could rent out the inside for storage.” Maddox removed the mare’s halter. Sliding it off her muzzle, he hung it near the stall.

“I saw the expansion. I wondered where he got the money. For a minute, I thought you okayed it. I didn’t know any different until you called me.”

“No, I wouldn’t have okayed something like that!” he snapped. “We had only enough to make it through this coming winter without adding a loan payment to the bills. He’s cut the ranch short. And I haven’t seen one payment coming in from the rental. That type of expansion needs to be planned for. And that’s why Tanner’s Feed Store called you about their unpaid bill.”

“Bull’s been having the hands buy cheaper feed over at Smith’s.”

A slow throbbing began behind his temple and he lifted a hand to rub at the spot.

“Bull took money out of the ranch account. A lot of it. I don’t know where it is.” It pissed him off and worried him. When he was pissed, he lost his temper, and when he lost his temper... well, the results weren’t pretty.

“Anything I can do to help? I can skip a few classes.”

“Keep your ass in college,” he snapped.

“Cuz. What the hell?” Triton said incredulously.

“You asked.” He squinted at his cousin.

“You don’t need to be an asshole to me.” Triton threw up his hands. “I didn’t borrow money against the ranch. Or wipe the account out. Don’t take it out on me!”

Maddox made a sound in the back of his throat.

“I wish River was here!” Triton said with a glare.

“You didn’t even know him!” he shouted, and the mare stomped away from him. He shut the birthing stall and stalked to the end of the barn.

“Mad!” Triton called from behind him.

He stopped in the open doorway.

“I’m sorry,” Triton said, drawing close. “I shouldn’t have said that. You’re right, I don’t know him.”

“Then why’d you say it?”

“Because Bull said you never used to yell when River was around.”

“Well, that was a long time ago,” he muttered. A lifetime ago since it had all fallen apart and he wished for nothing more than to step back in time and make it right. But he couldn’t. “And I have bigger shit to deal with. So either help me or take off,” he said through clenched teeth, angry as all hell.

Triton didn’t leave, he just stood quietly next to him.

“Think it’ll rain?” Triton wisely changed the subject.

“Nah, but you know what they say, give it fifteen minutes.” He took a long, slow breath and readjusted his hat before he tugged the brim down low and moved outside of the wide open doors of the barn. Triton followed and they stood together looking over his legacy. A lump grew in his throat and he rubbed a hand over his mouth. It was the only thing he had left of his grandfather, Andrew Stone.

It was also the only thing left to remind him of his mistakes. Mistakes that had come at a price. He still came home every summer, waiting and hoping for the chance to make it right. He didn’t think anything could do that and regret formed a knot in his gut.

What he needed to do now was keep Bull from running the ranch into the ground. His cousin was turning out to be a big help and when he left his part of the ranch to someone, he’d pick Triton.

Someday, this would all belong to Triton and River.

“How long are you staying?” Triton gazed up at him.

“Not long,” he rasped, and even though he’d been an asshole, the young man’s face fell. He couldn’t stay long. He had a mission to get back to.

“Have you been staying out here instead of the dorms?” he asked Triton.

“When I can, I do. I like helping with the horses, and the college campus is not far.”

Triton’s phone buzzed. His cousin made a face.

“Who’s that?”

“Clay, he wants me to pick up some dinner on the way back to town.”

“You don’t want to go?”

“Not really.” Triton shrugged.

“Problems?” He leaned a shoulder against the barn door.

“Just need some time alone.” Triton flashed him a quick smile, moving to stand beside him.

“Make sure he’s what you want,” Maddox said of his cousin’s boyfriend.

His cousin smiled and elbowed him. “I know, I know!”

Maddox grabbed Triton by the head and gave him a knuckle rub and then jumped back. He didn’t play around often, so he took Triton completely by surprise. So much so, the kid stood with his mouth gaping.

He jogged back into the barn in the direction of the foaling mare. Beyond her stall, the far barn door stood open allowing the small breeze to blow through the building. From there, he could see the other row of massive barns.

“The number three barn door is open.” He frowned at the newly renovated metal of the barn Bull had spent the damn money on.

“Yeah, it’s that monthly rental thing. I saw them pull up as I was coming to find you.”

“The big rig?”

“Yeah.”

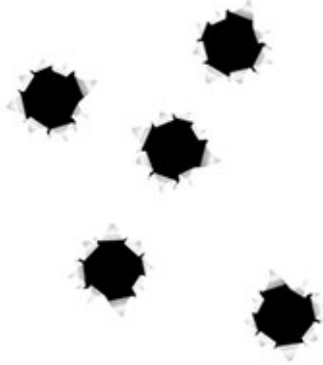
“They’re tearing up the grass.” He frowned at the deep tire marks in the green that separated each barn.

“I’ll go see about the open door and tell them to be careful,” Triton offered and took off out the back door toward the barn.

“Collect a payment if you can!” he called after his cousin. The young man gave a thumbs up before jogging away.

Once Maddox had the stall door reopened, he eased toward the mare. She danced away from him, and regret he’d frightened her tightened his mouth. It took him several long minutes to soothe and calm her down.

# CHAPTER TWO



## *River*

“Alpha team, what is your position?” Infinity’s dispatcher asked through the mic.

First Lieutenant River Seeger pressed the small mic in his ear. “Alpha team, south rear entrance.”

“Roger, Alpha team,” dispatch responded, and then after a moment, added, “Bravo, Charlie teams, confirm positions, over.”

“Charlie team, front entrance,” Sergeant Diesel Gannon replied.

Easing upward a bit, River took in the small porch and the closed backdoor. The paint on both the porch and the door was cracked and cratered. The wood should easily give way. He slowly crouched back down.

“Easy peasy,” Sergeant Isaac Thorne whispered and waggled his eyebrows through the eye slit in his mask. Then the soldier walked a knife through the fingers of one black gloved hand as casual as you fucking please.

Hunkered down next to them, Sergeant Blade Hammond rolled her eyes and gave Isaac a suffering look before she pulled down her face mask.

River pulled on his oxygen mask and the rest of the team followed suit.

From their left, Sergeant Ethan Caufield ran in a crouching run. When the man reached the house, he spider climbed up the side and crept across the roof.

“Attic entrance. Bravo out,” Ethan finally replied through the mic once he reached the entry point from above.

“Roger that. Infinity, mission is a go,” dispatch said.

Leaping to the porch, River kicked in the old door. Wood splintered with a loud crack.

River went in low with Isaac and Blade at his back. The house was small, maybe three bedrooms, and as a result, the floor shook when the rest of his unit slammed entry at once. It had the desired effect.

The windows blew in at the den. He ducked back for a moment. A loud crack from the flash grenade erupted and then he was moving around the corner and back into the room.

Drug addicts scattered, coughing and hacking in the smoke. Two long-haired, shirtless, skeletal-looking men flew from the hole-riddled couch. The glass from a mirror shattered and tumbled to the ground with a crash, razor blades flew, and white powder sprayed the air and the stained carpet. A lamp was kicked over in the fray. Three half-dressed women screamed and ran for various rooms.

One came right at him, and when she swung, he gripped her arms, twisted, and placed them behind her back before shoving her at Blade. In seconds, Blade zip-tied the woman’s hands and shoved her toward the back door where more of their team waited.

River kept moving, gun raised, and with one hand cupping the other, he moved swiftly across the living room and down the hallway. He reached the last bedroom door, yanked off his mask, and waited until Isaac and Blade were at the other two bedroom



doors. Ethan, having dropped down from the attic opening, stood in the middle of the hallway.

Giving a nod, River kicked in the bedroom door simultaneously as the other two kicked in the other bedroom doors. He went in at a roll as a shot was fired and punched through the wall above his head.

The obese gunman sat on the bed holding a young, terrified girl in front of him as a shield. She wasn't really big enough to cover much of the guy.

The man's gun was pointed at him. "Get back!"

River shot the guy in the leg and the man screamed and reached down, clutching his knee. River kept coming across the room, he had closed the distance before the guy could fucking blink.

Pressing the obese man's head down between his legs, River easily held the guy hunched over. Within a moment, he had completely disarmed him.

In the next instant, the tiny girl fell from the perp's grip and went scrambling up and running for the door.

"I've got her," Blade said, scooping up the crying child.

"Close the door on your way out," River told Blade quietly.

"Wait!" the man called out with a face turned red from being held hunched over.

The door closed and River put his boot to the guy's chest and shoved. The overly large man went toppling back onto the bed.

River field-stripped the suspect's gun while the perp rolled around and then finally managed to sit back up.

"What are you going to do?" Fear darkened the man's eyes.

"You like to hurt women and children. What do you think I *should* do?" River sneered, studying the man like a bug.

"You can't kill me."

"I can't?" He lifted his own gun and put it to the fucker's forehead.

Sweat trickled down the suspect's face.

“Where’s Lieutenant Seeger?” Captain Elijah Cobalt’s deep voice boomed through the house and bounced in his ear off the mic.

“He’s in the back room with the child abuser, Captain,” Isaac said like it was no big deal.

“Shit!”

The house jumped a bit when Elijah’s big boots pounded on the wooden floor. A few seconds later, the door was thrown open and Elijah’s large frame filled up the open doorway.

“You gotta help me!” the guy’s voice wobbled.

“You good, Lieutenant?” Elijah drawled.

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my fans, as always, these stories are for you.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Reese spends her time creating stories from the characters rattling around in her head. Her love of reading mystery, action and adventure, and fantasy books led to her love of writing. Reese works as a full-time writer. She loves to hear from her readers. Check out her website at [reeseknightleyauth.wixsite.com/mysite](https://reeseknightleyauth.wixsite.com/mysite). You can reach her on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [TikTok](#) and [Instagram](#). Her email address is [Reeseknightleyauthor@gmail.com](mailto:Reeseknightleyauthor@gmail.com)