

Brianne's
NEW PLEASURE SERIES
Secret

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USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BRIANNE'S SECRET

NEW PLEASURES BOOK 6

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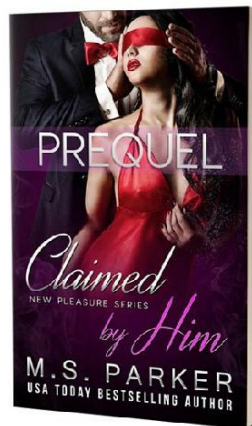
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ONE

CLAY

I DIDN'T CONSIDER MYSELF EVEN CLOSE TO MIDDLE-AGED, AND I ALWAYS thought I'd had decent recovery time, even after I'd turned thirty, but when it came to Tess Gardener, my cock was as insatiable as the rest of me. Even though I'd come not more than two minutes ago, I was already starting to get hard again.

We helped each other wash in silence, hands slipping over slick, wet skin in a choreography made to entice. I was tempted to bend my head and take one of those tight, butterscotch-colored nipples into my mouth, tease it until Tess begged for relief. I could almost hear the soft, sexy sounds she made when she was aroused. I'd spent years imagining what it would be like to take Tess Gardener to bed, and now that I had, I knew that my imagination hadn't even come close to doing her justice.

Even better than learning her sex sounds was the knowledge that I was the only one who'd heard them. When she'd told me she was a virgin, a primal, possessive part of me had wanted to tell her that I'd not only be her first, but her last.

That urge struck me again as I massaged conditioner into her scalp. Her dark brown curls were silk under my fingers, and I closed my eyes as I remembered what it had been like to see them spread across my pillow.

Well, not my pillow because we weren't at my place – or even in our country – but the sentiment stayed the same. Or at least it should have. My gut clenched as I thought of what it would be like to see her in my actual bed. Back in Denver. In the sad little apartment I'd rented. I still had half my things in boxes and spent more time at the office than I did home.

“Penny for your thoughts,” she said as she turned toward me.

The hard tips of her nipples brushed against my stomach, just below my breastbone, and my cock twitched in response. I was tempted to pick her up, put her back against the shower wall, and fuck her until neither one of us could walk, but as much as I wanted to take her hard and fast, I wanted something else more.

I wanted her writhing, mindless with ecstasy, unable to think or speak or do anything but feel until she couldn’t bear it. I wanted her screaming my name until her throat was raw and everyone in the entire hotel knew that she was mine.

Because she was mine.

She’d been mine since before that first kiss sixteen years ago. Mine before I’d seen her dancing and realized that I wanted my friend to be something else. Mine from the moment the two of us had met, from the moment of my birth. We’d been made for each other, and the perfect way our bodies fit together was proof of that fact.

She needed to know all of it, but not yet. Not until I made her come with my mouth, my fingers, my cock. Not until the two of us were spent and sated, lying together on the narrow hotel bed. Only then would I say the three words that had always been meant for her—

“Taylor MacIntosh!”

The shout pulled me out of my dream, but my brain was still too sleep-addled to figure out what was going on aside from the fact that Tess had just yelled another man’s name. On the heels of that thought came a pain in my chest and the realization that she’d hit me. Not a hit like she was pissed at me. More like her hand had just flailed out.

I mumbled something about giving me a minute, but when she grabbed my arm, I knew I needed to pay attention right away. I pushed myself up and reached over to flick on the light.

“Brienne is Taylor MacIntosh, the person you were sent down here to find.”

Right. *That’s* why I knew the name. It felt like a million years had passed since Ray had given me the assignment, and almost as long since Brienne had told me about her alias.

“I know.” I scrubbed my hands over my face. “Brienne told me.”

Tess’s face fell. I quickly explained what I’d learned about Brienne and

her connection to the Secretary of State's sister-in-law. Instead of easing Tess back into relaxation, my words seemed to spark something inside her. Her indigo eyes were lit with that fire I liked so much, and I was tempted to pull her into my arms and kiss her until that fire turned to one of a different kind.

Then she told me about the informant she'd met the day she'd gone missing and what he'd told her about the cartel's involvement with their local government while our own government was aware of it all. The sheer amount of information my brain tried to process during her explanation made my head hurt.

"I need to talk to Brianne."

It wasn't even six o'clock in the morning, but the two of us quickly got dressed and headed over to the room Brianne was sharing with her former-lover now-friend Sylvia Nuez. I didn't know what Tess was thinking her older sister would have to add to what the informant had said, or what she expected any of us to do about it, but I followed her. I'd follow her anywhere.

"She's not here."

My attention snapped to Sylvia.

Tess's face paled. "What do you mean she's not here?"

This had to be a bad joke. Sylvia couldn't be saying what it sounded like she was saying. A misunderstanding, then, if not a joke.

But Sylvia confirmed it. Brianne wasn't in the hotel room. Sylvia motioned for us to come in, but we all knew it wasn't so we could verify that she was telling the truth. Sylvia wouldn't have lied about this. Still, I couldn't help looking around when we went inside, as if Brianne was simply hiding somewhere, playing a joke on us.

"I would've called you..." Sylvia's voice trailed off as she sank onto the end of the bed. "Did something happen?"

The story spilled out of Tess as she paced, her words as frantic as her movements. I wished I could embrace her and take that energy away, let her rest. She deserved to rest. But there wasn't anything I could do. She was focused, and if I'd learned anything since we'd reconnected, it was that she wouldn't let go of something when she'd homed in on it.

It was what made her a damn good reporter.

"I've heard those rumors before," Sylvia said. "That the cartel had people higher up than just the cops, and not just here. It isn't out of the question that they'd have people in the United States as well. Maybe even in the

government.”

“You think that informant gave her something real?” I asked.

Sylvia’s expression was somber as she regarded me. “I think Brianne was hiding a lot more than any of us realized.”

Tess looked at me, her eyes wide with concern. “We have to find Brianne, and we have to find out what’s going on, because this is getting... crazy.”

“Any idea of where we can start looking for her?” I asked.

Tess shook her head. “But I think you can help with that.”

“Me?” I blinked at her. “Just because Bri and I spent the last couple weeks together looking for you doesn’t mean I know her well enough to figure out where she might have gone.”

“I’m not thinking personal connections,” Tess said, pushing her hair back from her face with both hands. “I think it’s time to start looking higher. I don’t think Brianne’s story about the alias is the whole truth. And I don’t think you were sent down here just to find a missing girlfriend.”

The answer dawned on me. “You want me to call Ray.”

“I think he’s more likely to have answers than anyone else.” She looked over at Sylvia. “We’ll head back to our room so you can go back to sleep.”

“I want to help,” Sylvia said.

Tess offered the smallest of smiles. “Thank you. Let us do some legwork, and if you think of anything that could help us figure out where Brianne is, call me.”

“You aren’t worried that something happened to her?” Sylvia asked. “Like it did before?”

It was a valid question, and one that I definitely wasn’t qualified to answer. I looked to Tess the same as Sylvia did, and it took almost a full minute for us to get an answer.

“I’m starting to wonder if what happened to Brianne before was something that happened *to* her, or something that she instigated in some way,” Tess said quietly. “She’s keeping secrets, and I think they might’ve finally caught up to her.”

TWO

TESS

MY GUT SAID THAT BRIANNE HAD LEFT THE HOTEL UNDER HER OWN POWER, and that it had something to do with whatever had brought her down to Costa Rica in the first place. My gut, however, wouldn't help me find my sister. I needed actual solid facts for that.

The first thing I needed to do was check a few other possible contacts, starting with the person I wanted to talk to the least right now. Or ever.

My old phone was gone, probably smashed to bits during the car accident that had stolen two weeks of my life, but I didn't need my contact information to dial my mother's number, not even from Costa Rica.

"Hello?" Milly Gardener's voice was blunted, but it was difficult to tell if it was just the connection or if I had caught her sleeping.

"Mom, it's Tess." I rubbed my forehead, the beginnings of a headache already starting. This one I couldn't completely blame on my mother. It seemed like from the moment I'd arrived in Costa Rica, I hadn't caught a break. Sure, I'd been able to find Brianne and get her away from the cartel once, but with all the other insanity going on, I was prone to chalk it up to sheer dumb luck.

"Tess? Hi, sweetie. I've been trying to get ahold of you for a few days."

Brianne and Clay must not have told her what'd happened to me. Smart move. She only called me a couple times a month as it was, but if she'd known something had happened to me, she might've hopped a plane, and that would've made things worse.

"I'm still in Costa Rica and I lost my phone." When it came to being honest with my mother, 'the whole truth' wasn't always the best option.

“Have you heard from Brianne today?”

“Today? No. I talked to her earlier this week though. Shouldn’t she be in Costa Rica with you? I mean, that is where you found her, right? She didn’t say anything about going somewhere else. Did Red Care move the group to another location?”

“Mom...” I jumped in before she could go any further on that tangent. “I just wanted to check in because I hadn’t talked to you in a while. I figured I’d ask if you’d talked to Brianne today while I was on the phone.”

I didn’t worry that Mom would ask why, if I’d called to check in with her, my first question had been about Brianne. Over the years, I’d become a master of knowing how to distract my mother.

“Everything here is fine,” she said, the tone of her statement making it clear that everything was *not* fine, and I was supposed to inquire further.

“Are you sure?”

“Of course,” Mom went on. “Why wouldn’t it be fine? I mean, it’s not the end of the world that your cousin, Mia, is having her third baby and I’m no closer to being a grandma than I was ten years ago.”

She was closer to having grandkids than she realized.

The thought popped into my head and heat flooded my face. I’d never talked to Mom about sex, so she didn’t know that, until recently, I’d been a virgin. I wasn’t about to apprise her of the change in my status, or the fact that I was pretty sure I was falling in love with the guy who’d de-virginized me.

Besides, Clay and I had been careful. No point in risking a baby if we were going our separate ways as soon as we got back to the US.

As Mom continued to talk about Mia’s handsome husband and beautiful little boys, I couldn’t help but imagine what it would be like to have a child of my own. I knew myself well enough to know that, even though I didn’t visualize the father in my head, there was only one person I could see having a child with. Only one person I’d ever imagined having a family with. When I’d walked away from Clay years ago, I’d told myself that I was walking away from that entire future.

A lump formed in my throat, making it almost impossible to speak. Just because he and I had reconnected didn’t mean that future was reachable.

“I have to go, Mom,” I cut her off mid-sentence. “Let me know if you hear from Bri.”

I hung up before she could say anything else. Closing my eyes, I leaned against the wall, then slid down until I was sitting on the floor. I pulled my legs up and rested my forehead on my knees. Every inch of me was exhausted, wrung out physically, mentally, and emotionally. Brianne couldn't have picked a worse time to go MIA.

Except...

The thought suddenly occurred to me. Maybe that was the point. She'd purposefully chosen to leave at a time when I'd been vulnerable but not in any danger. I could almost follow her logic. Clay would make sure I got back home safely and would promise to find Brianne. Maybe he'd look for a week or two, but he had to get back to his own job. His career meant too much to him to risk it for someone who didn't want to be found. And Bri would think the same of me, that I'd put my own career ahead of finding her.

"Dammit, Bri!"

I didn't hear the lock on the door click, but the sound of feet shuffling against the worn carpet was enough to let me know I was no longer alone in the room. Clay had a key, which meant it was most likely him. If it wasn't, I didn't think I could muster enough energy to care.

"Milly hasn't heard from her?" Clay asked as he lowered himself to the floor next to me.

I shook my head. "It was a long shot anyway. Bri had to know I'd call Mom, and there'd be no reason for Mom to lie to me, not if Brianne was in real danger." My mouth twisted into a parody of a smile. "Her protecting me wouldn't ever come at my sister's expense. Nor should it."

Clay's fingers curved over the back of my neck, his thumb kneading the muscles at the base of my skull. Some of the tension in my body eased, but the relief was only physical. The anger and fear warring for dominance didn't even pause. This was worse than before, and it took me a minute to realize why. When I'd originally come down to Costa Rica, I'd known only that Brianne was with Red Care and hadn't talked to my mom in a while. I'd thoroughly expected to talk to someone at Red Care and be told that cell service was down or something similar. I'd meet with Bri, then head home, calling Mom as soon as I was able. Even when it'd become clear that Brianne was missing, I'd only been mildly anxious, assuming her group had simply gotten lost.

Now, I knew the dangers of being here, both the ones we'd stirred up and

the ones that came with being in a foreign country alone. Brianne might've been a soldier, but she was still only one person. And that wasn't even taking into consideration that she'd only just recovered from injuries inflicted during her time as a captive.

Then again, she had managed to take out quite a few members of the drug cartel who had kidnapped Sylvia. Who knew what other tricks my sister had up her sleeves.

Unfortunately, that didn't make me worry any less.

Someone knocked on the door, and Clay got up to answer it. While he did, I pushed myself up the wall until I was standing. I'd had my time to freak out. It was time to come up with a plan and implement it.

"I remembered something," Sylvia said as she came into the room.

"You know where she went?" Even as I said it, I knew it was a long-shot, but I couldn't help myself.

"No." Sylvia shook her head and pushed her hair back from her face. "And I didn't hear her leave either. What I did hear was the phone ringing."

"She got a phone call?" I frowned. Bri didn't have her regular phone with her. It'd been taken and smashed by the cartel. Even though she'd retrieved information stored in the cloud, she didn't have the same phone number. "Who else had the new number?"

Sylvia shook her head. "I don't know. All I remember is the ringing waking me up because it sounded like my alarm clock. Brianne answered, but she didn't say a name. She talked fast and quiet, keeping her hand close to her mouth like she was worried I'd read her lips or something, even though I don't think she knew I was awake."

I waited for more, but after a few seconds, it became clear that she's said everything she knew. The hope I'd allowed myself to feel withered and died. Bri had gotten a phone call in the middle of the night. We didn't know from who or what was said.

Which meant we still had jack shit.

"Do you know what time the call came in?" Clay asked. "If you do, I can make a few calls, see if I can find out who placed that call."

Okay, so maybe we had a little more than jack shit. I nodded. "That's a good start."

"Let's all reach out to our contacts," Clay said. "Anyone who might possibly know anything, who might've heard something, no matter how

small.” He looked over at me. “We’ll find her.”

THREE

CLAY

“THANKS ANYWAY, JACK. I APPRECIATE IT.” I TRIED NOT TO LET THE frustration bleed through my words. “I’ll take you up on that dinner offer the next time I’m in DC.”

As I ended the third call I’d made in the past hour, I wondered if what I was doing was even worth the time. I had a few contacts outside of the United States, but none of them were in Costa Rica. The chances of someone knowing something were slim, but I couldn’t think of another way to find a lead. We were pretty much grasping at any straws we could find.

“The desk clerk didn’t see her,” Tess announced as she came back into our room. “And talking him into letting us see the security footage didn’t do any good either. The quality’s shit and the camera only offers one angle. We can see a dozen people leaving between eight and five, but it’s pretty much impossible to tell who’s who.”

“Perfect.” I sighed as I raked my fingers through my hair. The flicker of a smile on her lips made me wonder if my hair looked as crazy as it felt.

“Nothing on your end?”

I shook my head. “I’m going to try Ray again. He wasn’t answering his phone earlier. I think he might have his kids this weekend.”

“Want something to eat?” Tess asked as I pulled up Ray’s number. “There’s a little place next door that does carry-out.”

“That’d be great, thanks.” I watched her leave, appreciating the view of her tight ass encased in jeans as I tapped the call button. There were so many things I wanted to do to that ass.

“Clay?”

I jerked back to reality and focused on the voice in my ear. “Yeah. It’s me.”

A sigh crackled over the line, loud and clear even from thousands of miles away. “Please say you’re calling to tell me you’re on your way back.”

“I wish,” I said, pressing the heel of my hand into my eye. “The next time you tell me to take a ‘vacation,’ remind me to tell you to fuck off.”

He chuckled, but only for a moment. “What’s happened now?”

I made a snorting sound. “Is it that obvious?”

“The way this trip’s gone, I figure every time the phone rings, it means shit’s going sideways.”

I groaned. “That’d be a pretty good bet.” It was time to get down to business, so I didn’t hesitate to spill the latest complication. “Brienne skipped out on us sometime this morning. No note, nothing.”

“Damn.” Ray let out a whistle. “You think there’s foul play?”

“No sign of it.” I took a seat at the little table in the corner. “She was sharing her hotel room with a friend who doesn’t know when or where she went. Something could’ve happened outside the hotel, but my gut says that’s not what happened.”

“I haven’t heard anything.”

He’d said that a little too quick for my taste, but I wasn’t going to call him on it. I had a favor I needed to ask first.

“Listen, Brienne got a call last night. There’s a good chance that person might be able to help us find her. Obviously, I can’t go through the regular channels for this.”

“You want me to pull the number, see what pops up.” He made it a statement rather than a question.

“If I give you the number, can you do that?”

“If it’s a Costa Rican number, I can try. No promises though.”

“Trying’s better than what I have now,” I pointed out.

“What are you going to do if this doesn’t pan out?”

“I have no idea,” I said honestly. “I’ve got some feelers out, but we’re pretty much doing the waiting game until something pops.”

“Have you considered handcuffing the sisters to you until you get them on a plane? Might be worth the hassle.”

“No kidding.” The mental image of Tess in handcuffs was far too enticing, and I shook my head to try to get rid of it. “I know it’s the weekend,

but do you think you'll be able to get something back to me soon?"

"I'll make some calls today. I don't know how long it'll take though. All depends on the people on the other end."

"I really appreciate it." The door to the room opened, and my stomach growled at the smell of meat and spices. "My lunch is here."

"I'll talk to you later."

"Will he be able to help us?" Tess asked as she handed me a plate of food.

"He's going to try."

She didn't ask anything else as she sat down across from me. The two of us ate in silence, but it didn't feel awkward. If we'd been sitting in a house or even at a restaurant, it would've felt normal. Being at a hotel together would've felt more natural if it'd been some sort of vacation or something like that.

Maybe, when all this was over, Tess and I could go on a vacation together. Someplace nice. Somewhere she and I could spend all of our time in bed and never have to worry about the outside world.

"I'M BORED," Tess announced as she came out of the bathroom. "Seriously, Clay, I'm going to pull my hair out if we watch one more episode of reality TV."

"Hey, you're the one who vetoed every movie I suggested," I said as I re-folded my hands behind my head. I'd had to keep my hands restrained for the last couple hours because it turned out to be the only way I could sit on a bed next to Tess and not touch her. The need was almost a physical ache, and it just kept getting worse the longer we were cooped up in this room together.

"It's not my fault that your taste in movies sucks." She grinned at me as she bounced on the bed next to me.

"My taste in movies does not suck," I said indignantly.

She nodded, her eyes dancing. "It does. And here's a secret: it always has."

I sat up and put my hand on my chest. "You wound me, Tess. What about all those movie marathons we had together?"

“Nope.” She looked practically gleeful. “They all sucked. Every single one of them. Well, except *The Princess Bride*, but our friendship wouldn’t have survived if you didn’t like that movie.”

I laughed, thankful that I was able to add some levity to her life. I knew she was worried about Brianne, but things were different than they were before. We might not know where Brianne was, but this time we at least knew that she’d left under her own power. Okay, maybe not a hundred percent sure, but after what’d happened to the cartel, I was one hundred percent certain that Brianne could take care of herself. I hadn’t said anything to Tess, and I didn’t intend to stop looking for Brianne, but I wasn’t going to let either of us run ourselves ragged trying to find someone who might not want to be found.

“Seriously, though,” Tess continued, “we need to find something else to do besides watching TV. There has to be something to keep me distracted until we hear back from our contacts.”

When she put it that way...

I went up on my knees and cradled her face between my hands. I forced myself to wait a beat, to give her the chance to pull back, to say she didn’t want this. Her gaze was heated as it met mine, and the thrill of it went through me. What had I ever done to deserve to have this woman look at me like that?

I buried my hands in her hair as I claimed her mouth. Soft, sweet curls and soft, sweet lips. I took my time with the kiss, leisurely exploring her mouth, memorizing the curves and crevices. Her hands moved under my shirt, tracing the ridges of my torso and then up to my nipples. My muscles twitched under her touch as blood rushed south.

I could spend hours touching and kissing her and be content, but that didn’t stop me from wanting to slide into her. To come home. Because that’s what she was, in a way that no place and no person had ever been. I’d been untethered for so long that I’d almost forgotten what it had felt like to be this connected.

Our clothes came off bit by bit, without any real rhyme or reason, until we were both naked, skin humming every place we touched. I’d never been as aware of my own body as I was when all of my attention was focused on her. I’d always considered myself an attentive lover, no matter who my partner was, but with her, it was more than the consideration of wanting her

to enjoy herself or the mutual give and take that came with good sex.

I didn't know of any words that could adequately describe what this was like. Maybe Tess could, since she made her living with words, but I couldn't. All I could do was hope that she felt it.

I eased her down on her back and finally released her mouth. Her lips were puffy, and her eyes glazed, but I wasn't even close to finished with her. I kissed my way down her body, pausing to pay extra attention to her hard, little nipples. She gasped as I sucked on one, then the other, each pull of my mouth making her back arch. Her fingers scratched at my shoulders, digging deeper until I retaliated by fastening my teeth on the sensitive flesh in my mouth. I worried at it until she began to push at my head.

“Want your mouth.” The words came out in a near whine. “Clay...”

I grinned as I released her nipple with a wet pop and kissed my way down her stomach to that narrow strip of dark hair that waited for me. She spread her legs without the slightest hint of embarrassment, and my heart gave an unsteady thump as I took in how much she trusted me.

“Clay,” she whimpered.

That was all the reminder I needed. I took a tight grip on her hips and pressed my mouth against her. My tongue delved deep, running the full length of her slit before moving back up to flick back and forth over her clit. Then it was down to circle her entrance. I kept it slow, coaxing her toward orgasm with careful, deliberate strokes. My cock throbbed as I rocked against the mattress, desperate for any sort of friction. My own discomfort wasn't at the forefront of my mind though. Her taste, her scent, her pleasure, that was everything.

I kept going until she began to thrash, nonsense sounds pouring out of her mouth along with curses. Her muscles quivered beneath my hands, telling me she was close. I rubbed the flat of my tongue over her swollen clit, and that was all it took. She climaxed with a loud cry, her thighs clamping tight around my head. I held her, letting her ride out her orgasm until she finally went limp, limbs splaying wide.

Making my way up her body, I kept myself low enough to feel the heat radiating from her skin. My cock dragged along the inside of her thigh until it brushed against her sensitive entrance. She shivered, a lazy smile curving her lips. I brushed my mouth across hers and then looked into her eyes. Her pupils were blown wide, leaving only a thin ring of indigo visible.

I kept my gaze locked on her as I slid inside her, groaning as the tight, wet heat engulfed me. Our bodies froze, fighting the inevitable need to move as we worked to hold on to this connection as long as we were able. When we couldn't fight nature any longer, we moved together, her hips rising to meet me, thrust for thrust. It was like a dance, the way we moved. The best kind where no one needed to lead or follow because we both instinctively knew all the steps.

When we climaxed seconds apart, the familiar pleasure came with it, but so did something else. An ache deep in my chest that I knew wasn't like anything I'd ever felt before. Something I didn't yet want to name.

FOUR

TESS

FOR THE PAST FEW HOURS, MY BRAIN HAD BEEN WONDERFULLY AND blissfully blank. In the brief moments between bouts of mind-blowing sex, Clay and I talked, but only about unimportant things. He seemed to share my reluctance to broach anything serious, anything about the future.

The past was safe, and we went there often, reminiscing about things I'd forgotten, things I'd purposefully walled up because they'd hurt too much. Now, I could dust off those memories and appreciate them the way I always should have been able to.

"Do you ever go ice skating?" Clay asked suddenly, breaking the silence that had blanketed us for the past quarter hour.

"No." I didn't look up from where I was drawing patterns on his chest with my fingers. "I don't really have the time."

I didn't add that, aside from time, I didn't have anyone to go ice skating with, and going by myself had never been appealing.

"That surprises me," he said, playing with my hair. "You used to beg me and Brianne to take you skating. Indoor, outdoor, you didn't care. You were convinced you were going to be the next Dorothy Hamill or something."

"Kristi Yamaguchi," I corrected. "But I'm impressed that you know who Dorothy Hamill is."

He chuckled. "What can I say? Something must've rubbed off on me during those insanely long ice-skating competitions you used to make me watch."

"I didn't make you do anything," I argued. "I brokered an agreement that you accepted."

“Because you stole my *Star Wars* DVDs and held them hostage,” he countered.

I gave him my most serious look. “A girl’s gotta do what a girl’s gotta do.”

After another couple minutes of silence, Clay sighed and pulled away. “I need a shower.”

“Even though you’re just going to get dirty again?” I slid my hand under the sheet, resting it on one muscular thigh.

His blue-gray eyes darkened into something stormy. “As much as that tempts me, I think we should get out of the room for a little while. Dinner at least.”

“Are you asking me out on a date, Clay Kurth?” I asked with a grin.

He smiled back. “Yes, I am, Tess Gardener.”

Warmth suffused every cell in my body. “About damn time.”

“I agree.” He pressed a quick kiss to my forehead. “We better shower separately or we’ll just end up in bed again.”

While I didn’t think that would necessarily be a bad thing, the idea of actually going on a date with Clay was equally as appealing. I openly ogled his ass as he disappeared into the bedroom, then flopped back onto the pillows with a sigh.

I still couldn’t get over how gorgeous he was. And that he was mine.

My smile faded. Mine for who knew how much longer anyway.

That was something we hadn’t talked about either. When we were going home. No, not home. Homes. Plural. Because we had different homes. In two different states. With almost a whole country between us.

I wanted to say that we were going to stay here until we found Brianne again, but I knew that wasn’t an option. In fact, I should completely veto the dinner idea because we actually needed to not only leave the hotel but the country as well. It wasn’t safe for us to stay there. That wasn’t a surprise. In fact, we’d all known that we’d be leaving the country as soon as we’d figured out a plan. Brianne had told us we’d meet for breakfast and figure it all out.

It would’ve been nice if she’d bothered to show up to her own fucking meeting.

Clay and I needed to go, but I didn’t want to leave without knowing what had happened to Bri. I’d come here to find her, and now, weeks later, I was back where I’d started, not knowing where she was or what she was doing, if

she was safe.

Well, not *exactly* where I'd been when I first started. It'd taken Clay a couple days to get me into bed back then.

Damn, that seemed like a lifetime ago.

I'd come to Costa Rica as a favor to my mother, and my entire life had changed. The woman who'd left New York City the second day of January was not the same woman who would be stepping off that plane onto American soil again, no matter when we went back.

I shook my head as I swung my legs over the side of the bed. I shouldn't be sitting here, being all introspective about things I had no control over. What happened between Clay and I would happen no matter how much I thought about it. Finding Brianne depended a hell of a lot more on Brianne than on me. One thing about my life I could control was work. Sort of.

I hadn't called my office since landing here, and I had no doubt that the chances of me returning to a job were slim. Unless I had something to offer the *Times* that no one else could. I'd originally considered writing some version of a 'What I Did on My Summer Vacation' essay. I'd even thought up a headline: 'What I Did When My Sister Was Kidnapped by a Drug Cartel.'

Now, I was wondering if there might be something better. A bigger story. I'd been chewing over it earlier when I'd been talking to the desk clerk about Brianne. My informant had said something about government involvement in this whole expedition. If that was the case, then I could have a huge story on my hands.

That made the temptation to stay even worse.

But we couldn't. We had to go. Soon. Very soon.

My thoughts were interrupted by a phone ringing. Not my phone or the hotel's phone. Clay's phone. Even from where I was sitting, I could see it was Ray Matthews.

I wasn't the sort of person who snooped, but I couldn't wait for Clay to get out of the shower and call Agent Matthews back. Not when he could know something that could help me find my sister.

Needing no more justification for my actions, I answered the phone, "Agent Matthews?"

There was a pause, and then a man's voice came over the line. "Yes. Is this Tess Gardener?"

“Yes. Clay’s in the shower, but I figured it’d be more practical for me to answer the phone than wait for him to call you back.”

Even as I said it, I knew Clay wouldn’t be happy with what I’d just revealed to his partner. Just because Agent Matthews knew my name didn’t mean that Clay had told him the two of us were sleeping together, though I supposed the fact that I’d answered Clay’s phone would’ve given Agent Matthews a clue.

Another pause as he digested the information I’d given.

“I looked into the calls to and from your sister’s phone since last night,” Ray said. “Clay gave me her number, as well as numbers from you, him, and someone named Sylvia. I found a couple numbers that weren’t one of those three, all local, but none during the timeframe Clay gave me. None since then either. I did a number search on the unknown ones, and they were to restaurants, hotels, that sort of thing. Not a single personal number.”

I closed my eyes, trying not to let the disappointment crush me. “Dammit.”

“Sorry.”

He sounded uncomfortable but genuinely apologetic.

“It’s not your fault,” I said with a sigh. “My sister’s the one who took off. Since there’s no calls today, that means either Sylvia is lying or...”

“Your sister has another phone.”

“Dammit!” Immediately, I felt bad. “Sorry. I’m not annoyed at you.”

“I get it. I have a sister.”

In spite of myself, I felt the corner of my mouth tip up. I’d been wrong to suspect Ray was hiding things from us. I really needed to work on my trust issues. “I really appreciate you helping us out.”

“Glad to do it,” Ray said. “Especially since I’m the one who got Clay involved in this mess in the first place.”

“Yeah, but I’m glad you did. Otherwise, I would’ve been down here by myself when the shit hit the fan.”

“If there’s anything else I can do, let me know.”

“I will. Thanks again, Agent Matthews.”

“Call me Ray, kid. Looking forward to meeting you.”

The call ended, leaving me staring at the phone and wondering what he’d meant by that last comment. Had Clay said something to his partner about me coming to Colorado? Had he meant a visit, or something else? Maybe he

planned on looking me up if he was ever in New York. Or maybe Clay had given more thought to the future than I had.

I pushed the thought aside. The only future I needed to worry about was the immediate one where we didn't have any leads to follow. Clay had said he'd called a few contacts, so we did still have a chance of hearing back from them, but I knew that Ray finding that number had been our best hope.

Absently, I went over to Clay's recent call list to see who else he'd talked to. The combination of worry and anger that I'd been nursing against Brianne was leaning more toward anger the longer we went without finding her. Knowing that she'd either faked the call somehow or – more likely – had another phone that none of us had known about just reinforced the likelihood that she'd intentionally disappeared. There was always the chance that something had happened to her like it had to me. She'd gone somewhere based on information she'd received in that call, and something had kept her from returning.

Except my gut was telling me that wasn't the case.

I scanned the list of names next to the phone numbers. Jack Limon. Rachelle Sylvester. Andrew O'Dare. Donald Beau.

Fully aware that I was moving from relevant curiosity to something more like snooping, I moved from his recent call list to his address book. As I scrolled, a name caught my eye. I went back up to it. Sofie Harmon. That was the name of the woman who'd called in a favor with the Secretary of State to get Clay down here to find my sister. Brianne's girlfriend.

I frowned. Clay having the number wasn't strange. Once he'd gotten her name from Ray, it made sense for him to be contacting her directly rather than going through a round-about way. What was strange was that he hadn't called her today. Not to tell her that Brianne was missing, or to ask her if she knew where Brianne was.

I didn't know a lot about Sofie, but I did know she was the secretary's sister-in-law and had been in the army. I trusted that Clay knew Ray well enough to know he wasn't corrupt, but we had an informant saying our government was involved with what was happening down here and that we also had a government official with a tie to my missing sister. If I'd had this information when I'd first learned about Brianne's disappearance, I would've gone to DC rather than Costa Rica.

I didn't have the pull to talk to the Secretary of State directly, let alone a

private line to reach him. What I did have, however, was a number I could call and maybe get some answers.

I tapped the screen before I could talk myself out of it. One beat. Two beats. Three beats. My heart hammered in my chest. Ringing. Ringing. Ringing.

“Clay?”

The woman’s voice was husky and didn’t go with the mental picture I’d created of my sister’s girlfriend. I’d thought military-short hair, someone with an athletic body similar to Brianne’s, a stern face. Her voice, however, conjured images of some sultry sex kitten.

Dammit. That was the last thing I wanted in my mind. My sister with a sex kitten.

“Clay? Are you there?”

“Hi,” I blurted.

“You’re not...” There was a gasp of surprise. “Tess? Is this Tess?”

“You know who I am?”

She laughed, but it was a nice laugh, clearly meant in the best way a laugh could be meant. “Of course I know who you are. Bri talks about you all the time.”

I had no idea how to respond to that. All I could managed was a breathy, “Oh.”

“Is everything okay? I mean, I’m glad to finally get to talk to you, but I’m surprised you’re calling on Clay’s phone.”

“Is that my phone?”

Clay’s question overlapped the last of what Sofie was saying.

“Shit. Sorry, I’ve got to go. Everything’s fine. We’ll talk to you later.” I didn’t take my eyes off Clay as I ended the call.

This was not good.

FIVE

CLAY

I'D BEEN IN A FANTASTIC MOOD IN THE SHOWER. THESE LAST FEW HOURS WITH Tess had been incredible. Sure, we still had to figure out what had happened with Brianne, but after how she'd handled herself at the cartel house, I felt like she could probably handle anything that came at her, even if it was trouble she'd gone looking for.

When I'd been drying off, I tried to figure out how to approach Tess about returning to the States, at least for a short while. Ray had been running interference for me, telling my superiors that I was doing a special assignment for someone in DC, and Secretary of State Ganesh had provided whatever documentation Ray had needed, but I knew we were pressing our luck. I needed to get back to Denver and figure out how to help Tess find Brianne while still managing to keep my job.

Then I'd opened the bathroom door and found Tess talking on my phone. I stared at her as she ended the call, wondering what in the world had possessed her to do something so intrusive. Okay, so it was a burner phone, not my personal phone, but still.

"What the hell, Tess?" I asked tightly. I stalked over to my bag and pulled out some clothes. I didn't want to do this wearing only a towel.

"Ray called," she began. "And I figured it'd be okay for me to answer it."

"So you were talking to Ray then?" If that was the case, it was understandable, but the way she couldn't meet my eyes told me that she hadn't stopped at just answering my phone.

"No. Not anymore. I talked to him, and then I—"

I held out my hand for my phone, and she fell silent as she handed it over.

One glance told me what she'd done. "You called Sofie Harmon."

"I did." The words were soft but there was an edge beneath them too. Something flared in her eyes when she looked up at me again. "Because you hadn't called her. All the calls you made to your contacts back home, and you didn't call the one person who has a direct connection to Bri."

"How do you know who I called?" Even as I asked the question, I knew the answer. She'd checked my call history. What the fuck? "What gave you the right to go through my fucking phone?"

"It's a burner phone," she snapped back. "It's not like I went through your personal phone."

My eyes narrowed, anger and frustration warming my skin. "You're telling me that if our roles were reversed and you'd caught me going through your phone, you wouldn't care?"

"That's...that's not even the point." Heat flooded her face, and she folded her arms, a mutinous look taking over her expression.

"Like hell it's not!" I started to take a step toward her, then thought better of it. When I got too close to her, I tended to not be able to think. Not with my upstairs brain anyway.

"Why didn't you call Sofie?" she asked. "Is there something you're not telling me?"

"Like what?" I couldn't believe her. "Is she someone else you're going to accuse me of fucking? I mean, I must like fucking lesbians since I fucked your sister, right?"

She stalked over to me and pointed, her finger less than an inch from my chest. "Out of line, asshole."

"You're the one who was going through my phone," I reminded her.

"I told you why I was doing that."

"No, you didn't. You turned it around like I'm being the unreasonable one." I wanted to shake her. Wanted to kiss her. Wanted this whole thing to go away. "Maybe it's because you don't want to tell me the real reason you were snooping."

"The real reason is because I wanted to know who you were talking to about my sister. I just want to find her so I can get the hell out of this country!"

"Do you think I don't want to find her?" I asked, throwing my arms up in abject frustration. "I'm doing everything I can!"

“Are you?” The skeptical look on her face just pissed me off more. “Because I’d think ‘doing everything’ would include calling Bri’s girlfriend. Unless there’s something you’re not telling me.”

“Something *I’m* not telling *you*? You snoop on my phone, then accuse me of hiding things? What’s the phrase? ‘me thinks thou doth protest too much?’”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” This time, it was Tess who backed away.

“Maybe the reason you keep coming after me is because you’re the one hiding something.” A horrific thought came to me. “You kept saying there was some story here, but you haven’t found anything. Not anything real. But you can’t go home empty-handed, can you? An FBI agent operating on foreign soil would be a nice piece to make up for whatever you’ve been pitching your boss.”

Tess’s jaw dropped, but I couldn’t tell if her surprise was due to outrage over the accusation...or because she hadn’t thought I’d figure it out. I’d been wrong to think that I still knew her. Terribly wrong.

“You got into my phone to get a list of people who could give your story some credibility. Isn’t that right? You called Sofie to try to get to Secretary Ganesh. It’s the only thing that makes sense.”

The knot in the pit of my stomach twisted, and a little voice in my head begged me to stop talking. But she wasn’t denying anything. She wasn’t giving a logical explanation for what I’d caught her doing. I had to be on the right track.

“I just can’t decide if you’re that desperate or if you’ve always meant to make me your story. Some sort of twisted revenge for what you thought happened all those years ago. Ruin my career and maybe even shame your sister too. Get us both back with one swipe of your pen.”

Her face went white. “Leave.”

Her ghostly pallor surprised me. “What?”

“Never mind. I’ll leave.” She snatched up her bag and shoved things into it. “I’m getting my own room, and I’m going to find Brianne by myself too, so you can go back to your sad little life in Denver now. Brianne doesn’t need you, and I don’t need you.”

“Like hell you don’t.”

She yanked the door open, pausing to have the last word even though she

didn't look at me. "If I'd have known this was how things would end up, I never would've come down here. It wasn't worth it."

SIX

TESS

HOW HAD THINGS GONE SO WRONG, SO FAST? LESS THAN AN HOUR AGO, I'D been sharing a room with a man I'd trusted with everything. Sure, there had been things we'd still needed to discuss, and there was a chance that we could've decided to go our separate ways once we got back to the States, but we would've parted as friends at least. Instead, Clay had just proven that we never should have reconnected.

How could he accuse me of using him to get a story? And to throw revenge in my face? As if I'd been pretending this entire time, simply biding my time until I could finally make him pay for something he hadn't done. That was the other thing that pissed me off about his accusation. I'd told him that I believed him about what happened when we were teens, which meant he thought I'd lied about that. I was the one who'd been lied to, not the one who'd done the lying.

Okay, maybe I shouldn't have gone into his call list or called Sofie, but if he would've called her in the first place, I wouldn't have needed to. And I hadn't done any of it for a story. All I wanted was to find my sister and then go back to my life. I'd had a few wayward daydreams about what it would be like to have Clay in my life again, but I hadn't let myself give them too much ground, and now I was grateful for that. I could only imagine how furious I would've been if I'd actually thought what we had was going anywhere serious.

Even as I told myself each of these things, I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd royally fucked up, and I didn't like it. I kept trying to convince myself that the guilt was misplaced, but deep down, I knew I deserved it.

Knowing it, however, just made me angrier because it meant I was the one who needed to go back and apologize first. I'd started this mess.

I continued to pace the same path I'd been walking for the past half hour, one foot in front of the other, back and forth across the room. It didn't accomplish anything, but I kept doing it, hoping that it would eventually make me tired enough that sleep might be possible. All it did was put the thoughts in my head to an annoying rhythm.

"Dammit, Bri!" I kicked the dresser and immediately regretted it as pain shot through my foot. It would've been worse if I hadn't been wearing shoes, but it still hurt like a son of a bitch.

That was enough. I gave up and went into the bathroom. The shower was tiny, but the water was hot and the pressure good. I closed my eyes and let the water beat down on my tight shoulders. The noise reminded me of what it was like back home on the rainy days when I curled up in my favorite overly plush chair and read a book while listening to the gentle tapping on the window.

Growing up, I'd always loved the rain, especially during the summer, even thunderstorms. When I'd been a kid in DC, and the weather had made it impossible for us to go outside, Bri and I would spend the day playing together, even after she'd made it clear that she was too old and mature for games of make-believe. Those days we were trapped inside, they'd been special.

After we'd moved to Arizona, rainy days had been few and far between, but even if it'd rained constantly, things wouldn't have been the same. Brienne and I had been broken, and the worst part of that was something I hadn't wanted to think about: she'd let it happen. She'd *caused* it to happen. It would've only taken one word of the truth, and things would've been different. If she'd been the one to tell me, things would've been different.

But none of that had happened, and that was why I was currently in the shower, wishing that I would've gotten more than a few minutes of peace.

The hotel towels were rougher than I liked, abrading my arms as I rubbed myself dry. I wrapped the largest one around myself and trudged back into my room. My entire body ached and throbbed, sore from my earlier physical exertions, but also wanting more.

"Too bad," I muttered. "We're closed for business, got that? We went for thirty-one years without sex. We can manage until we find someone better."

I felt like a damn fool for talking to myself like that, but the sound was also soothing, reminding me that no matter how crazy things seemed, I had a life to go back to. A job that was important, not only to me but to the world.

I picked up a bottle of water and sat down in the armchair. I didn't know what to do next. We'd been waiting on Clay's contacts, but now, I didn't have access to that information. Even if any of them knew anything, they'd tell Clay, not me, and there was no way in this life I was going to beg him to share.

I would do it myself. I *could* do it myself. I'd intended that in the first place. Relying on Clay's help had been a mistake. It made me doubt my own abilities. I wasn't a soldier or an FBI agent, but I was an excellent reporter, and those were the skills I needed now. If rescuing Brianne was necessary, I'd figure things out then. I had to find her first.

I emptied half my bottle in one long swallow and sighed. I was hungry but wasn't sure I wanted to bother getting dressed to go get food. Except it was a nice Saturday night and the place across the street served delicious empanadas, which should have been incentive enough. I took another drink and wondered if it was better to order in. That would involve getting up as well, so I wasn't sure I wanted to do that either. Just the thought of standing up made me tired.

My eyelids felt heavy as I blinked. One. Two. That seemed like a long blink. One. Two. Three. Four...

My head jerked up, and I gasped, my heart racing.

"Easy. You're okay."

The familiar voice drew my attention before my brain had really processed my surroundings. Clay. What was he doing in my...wait, I wasn't in my room. I wasn't sitting in the chair. I was in a different chair. And so was Clay.

"What..." Color at the corner of my eye caught my attention, and I turned my head to find myself looking out a window and into a blue sky...above a layer of clouds. "Oh, fuck."

SEVEN

CLAY

“OH, FUCK.”

Leave it to Tess to say exactly what I’d first thought when I’d woken up about ten minutes ago.

“What the fuck did you do?” She practically shouted the question at me.

“Me?” I stared at her. “I’m here, same as you.”

“Yeah, on a fucking airplane instead of in my hotel room like I was supposed to be.” She glowered at me. “What did you do? Drug me and kidnap me?” A look of horror settled on her face, as if she didn’t actually mean the words until she heard herself say them.

“Really, Tess?” I tried to channel my hurt into anger, but it wasn’t easy. The fight we’d had had just about ripped my heart out. I hated even more that she thought I’d drug and kidnap her.

“Why would you do this? Why couldn’t you just leave me the hell alone? I told you I would find Brianne on my own.” She started to stand, but her legs wouldn’t hold her, and she collapsed back into the seat. “You just had to keep sticking your nose in my business.”

My eyebrows shot up. “You’re seriously going to go there? After the thing with my phone?”

She flailed her arms, indicating everything around us in one sweeping gesture. “What else am I supposed to think? I mean, I’m in my room one minute and waking up on a fucking plane the next?” She looked around, registering for the first time that we weren’t on some commercial flight. The wind seemed to go right out of her sails. “What’s going on here, Clay?”

“I don’t know,” I said honestly. “After you left yesterday, I went down to

the hotel bar to have a couple drinks. I swear, I only had two, and then the room was spinning. I barely remember getting back to my room and falling onto my bed. The next thing I know, I'm waking up here, with you sitting across from me, still sleeping."

"I wasn't sleeping," she snapped.

I would've been angry at the retort if I hadn't seen the flash of fear in her eyes. "You were out for about ten minutes after I woke up. Before you ask, I already looked around, and there's nothing here to tell us whose plane this is or where we're going. No one's been in here either. And no one will answer when I knock on the cockpit."

She pulled her legs up onto the seat and wrapped her arms around them. I was struck with a pang of longing so sharp it made my stomach hurt. I wanted to go to her, hold her, comfort her, and it pissed me off. I didn't want to forget about what she'd done, not until she admitted she was wrong.

We sat in silence for what felt like forever, even though I knew it had only been minutes. Then we heard the cockpit door open and both jumped to our feet. I put myself between Tess and whoever was coming without a moment's hesitation. I told myself I would've done it for anyone, but that wasn't true. Tess was special to me, and that was a fact that had been true from the first moment I'd met her, and continued to be true, no matter what we were arguing about.

The person who stepped into view wore military fatigues. Air Force, if I remembered correctly. I glanced at the place where a name would usually be and didn't see one. He was younger than me – not surprising since I'd passed up the average age of most enlisted men a few years ago – with dark hair buzzed close to his head and a patch of scar tissue on his jaw.

"Good morning." He had a low voice, the sort that people tended to listen to even if it wasn't raised. "I'm sure you have a lot of questions, and if you'll bear with me for a moment, I'll tell you what I can."

He paused, giving us both a moment to decide if we were going to give him the chance to explain. When neither of us spoke, he went on.

"I'm the co-pilot on this flight, and yes, I'm in the Air Force. I am not able to give you any additional information about myself. I can tell you that we are flying to LAX and will arrive at our destination in less than two hours."

I glanced at Tess and saw in her eyes a reflection of what I was thinking.

The trip from Costa Rica to California was about six hours. If we were less than two hours out from LAX, she and I had been asleep – or unconscious – for more than four hours, and we’d been deep enough under that someone had been able to remove us from our hotel rooms, take us to an airport, load us onto the plane, and then take off, all without us waking up.

“The pilot and I were hired to make a flight but weren’t given much in the way of details, so asking me a million questions won’t do you any good.”

I could almost hear Tess grinding her teeth.

“But I do have this.” The co-pilot held up a folded piece of paper. “I was told to give it to the female passenger once she woke.”

As Tess reached for the paper, I wondered if she’d understood the implications of what he’d just said. If he was supposed to give her the note after she woke up, that meant he had to have a way of knowing she was awake. There was always the possibility that he’d come out to check on us periodically, but I suspected something else. A plane like this probably had cameras that fed into the cockpit so that, unless they were instructed otherwise, the pilot and co-pilot could keep an eye on their passengers.

Whose plane was this?

“Help yourself to the bottles of water and fresh fruit,” he said. “If you need to contact us, there’s an intercom next to the cockpit door, but please only do so if it’s an emergency.”

He walked away before I could sputter something about how being kidnapped was considered an emergency. Then again, he hadn’t seemed concerned that once we landed in LAX, we would contact authorities to have charges of kidnapping brought against him. I supposed he could think that he’d simply get away before he could be caught, but my gut told me that the real reason was that he answered to someone a hell of a lot higher than the LAPD.

“Clay.”

Tess’s voice sounded hollow as I turned to her. She held out the paper and then returned to her seat, her face expressionless, as if what she’d read had taken away her ability to react.

I opened the note, already suspecting what I’d find.

Tess and Clay, I know you’re both pissed and me, and this is only going to make things worse, but it had to be done. You’d never have let me stay when I couldn’t explain to you why I needed to, and I knew you’d never leave

me behind, even though you both have every right to hate me after all I've done. I can't do my job if I'm worried about you two, which means you have to go home without me. Tess, tell Mom I'm okay, and I'll call her when I get a chance. Both of you, go back to your lives. Don't try to find me. I have things to do, and I need to focus on that. Be safe. Bri

EIGHT

TESS

“I NEED TO GO TO THE BATHROOM,” I MANAGED TO CHOKE OUT AS I stumbled out of my seat.

I didn't know if Clay heard me, but I didn't care. I needed privacy. Besides, it wasn't like I really had many places to go. My eyes burned with angry tears, but I managed to keep them back until I shoved the bathroom door shut behind me. As I let them spill over, I put my hands over my mouth to muffle a scream of rage and pain.

How could Brianne do this to me?! The note was bad enough, but what she'd actually *done*, that had been too far. I couldn't imagine coming up with a plan to drug and kidnap two strangers, let alone two people I was close to. If Brianne had done it to just Clay, I still would've thought it was out of line, but the fact that she'd done it to me cut deep. I'd just gotten used to the idea that Brianne hadn't betrayed me with Clay, and then she'd...I didn't want to think about it anymore.

I leaned over the sink, unable to face my reflection because I knew what I'd see. The heartbreak of someone who'd been made a fool of by someone she loved. I felt like an idiot, like I'd brought it all on myself because I'd given her a second chance after she'd spent sixteen years lying to me. I'd always believed I was good at my job because I never believed people's stories without proof. I'd been called a cynic more than once, but I'd never minded because I'd seen it as a way to protect myself from being hurt the way I was hurt as a kid. Except it hadn't protected me because I'd failed to keep my guard up around the one person I should have known would hurt me. Again.

“Tess?” Clay knocked on the door. “Are you okay in there?”

I didn’t answer.

“Okay, that was a stupid question,” he said a moment later.

Yes, it was.

“Can I come in?” he asked, his voice softer. “Talk to me, Tess.”

I yanked open the door and glared up at him. “Talk to you? How do I know you’re not in with Bri on this?”

Instead of fighting back, his expression softened, and he stepped into the bathroom with me. He didn’t say anything as he managed to shut the door behind him. He didn’t apologize for crowding me, but it wasn’t like he could’ve really given me space. There was barely space between us to breathe, and even though the bathroom had the antiseptic sort of scent that came with industrial cleaning, he was all I could smell now. That musky spice scent that had always turned my insides out.

He took my face between his hands and swiped his thumbs under my eyes. “I’m so sorry.”

“You didn’t do anything,” I said, my voice small.

Even though I’d accused him not more than a minute ago, I didn’t truly believe he was working with Brianne to get me out of the country. If he was, he wouldn’t have needed to lie about it. We were in the air, almost at LAX. There was no reason he couldn’t have simply explained that they were looking out for me. Even if he’d said Bri had been the one to drug me, there wasn’t any real reason for him to pretend to have been drugged too.

He brushed his lips against my forehead. “I can’t imagine what you’re feeling right now.”

I leaned into him, resting my cheek on his chest as he dropped his arms to hold me. His heartbeat was steady in my ear, grounding me even as it felt like everything else in my world was descending into chaos. Before I’d arrived in Costa Rica, my life wasn’t perfect, but it had at least made sense. Now, nothing made sense except the feel of him, the sound of his pulse, the scent I knew, and I clung to that.

His fingers slipped under the hem of my shirt, sending little feathers of heat across my skin. I curled my hands into his shirt and pressed my body closer to his, almost wishing it was possible for me to crawl inside his skin, to feel only him, to let him fill my senses until there wasn’t room for anything else.

“What do you need me to do?” he asked. “Just tell me.”

I tipped my head back to look him in the face. “Make me forget, even for just a little bit.”

He didn’t ask me what I meant. He didn’t even hesitate for a moment.

He kissed me hard, taking my breath away even as one hand worked between us to undo my pants. The other hand twisted in my hair, giving me the edge I needed to chase away every thought in my head. His tongue pushed my lips apart even as his fingers delved between my folds, making rough strokes over my dry clit. The burn made me gasp, but he swallowed the sound and kept working over that sensitive bundle of nerves until I was wet.

When my hips jerked, the pressure inside me building to near pain, he finally pulled his mouth from mine. His eyes blazed as he pulled his hand from my pants and then picked me up to sit me on the tiny sink. He yanked down my pants, leaving them and my panties hanging around one ankle. I moved my knees apart, and he stepped between my legs, pushing down his pants as he came forward.

I let out a little cry as he buried himself inside me with one thrust. We didn’t have much room to move, but we didn’t need it. Short, desperate jerks and strong, talented fingers pressed all the right places, keeping me speeding toward climax until I finally shattered. I was still lost in pleasure when he pressed his face against the side of my neck, using my body to muffle his shout as he came.

We stayed there, our bodies joined, and simply enjoyed the silence, both literal and mental. Before either of us summoned the energy to separate and clean up, a man’s voice came over the intercom.

“If everyone can return to their seats, we’re heading into a bit of a storm. Once we’re on the other side of it, we’ll be getting ready to start our descent to LAX.”

And that was it.

NINE

CLAY

STUPID, STUPID, STUPID.

Why couldn't I leave her alone?

Even as much as I'd liked being with Rona, there was always a point where I'd been ready to part ways and get back to my own life. When she'd broken things off with me, I'd thought I was upset because I was in love with her. Ray said I'd been in love with the *idea* rather than her. What he hadn't said, but I'd realized since then, was that part of my problem had been my pride being stung. It hadn't taken me long to get past wanting to be with her once I'd accepted that.

Tess, however, was different. It didn't seem to matter how much time I spent with her, it wasn't enough. When I wasn't with her, I was thinking about her, about what she was doing, who she was with. If she'd lived closer to Denver, maybe I would've been okay with having her monopolize so much of my mind, but when we got back to the US, we wouldn't even be in the same time zone.

I needed to get her out of my system, but what I was doing wasn't working. The more time I spent with her, the more I wanted her. Being inside her, feeling and watching her climax, knowing that I could make her come apart like that...it was addicting.

I had a sinking feeling that the only thing that would get her off my mind was to get away from her, but I hated the thought of not having her close to my side.

Shit. Talk about a catch-22.

As I went back to my seat, I fidgeted with the waistband of my pants. It

wasn't until then that I realized I had something *in* my pocket. To my surprise, it was my phone. I hadn't even thought to look for it, which was just further proof that just being around Tess messed with my mind.

I pulled it out and settled in my seat. It took a few moments to power up, but as soon as it finished, I connected to the plane's Wi-Fi and watched my messaging app load nearly a dozen messages from Ray.

Fuck. That couldn't be good.

Clay, just got called up to find out why my partner was in Costa Rica. I said you were taking a vacation and I asked you to look into something for me. Don't do anything else. Wait for me to call.

Message two.

There's something going on down there. Don't do anything. Seriously. I have a meeting in a few, and I'll get some more info there.

Message three.

What the hell are you doing down there?! This is so much bigger than one missing girlfriend. I'm going to try to talk to Secretary Ganesh. Stop whatever you're doing and have a drink. Do anything but what you're doing.

The next two were pretty close to the same thing, and the timestamps put them at about the same time Tess and I would've been in the process of being kidnapped, which made me wonder what we'd done that Ray had been going on about.

This is some serious shit, kid. Secretary Ganesh is saying a whole lot of nothing, so I can't tell if he knows something and is trying to hide it, or if he doesn't know shit and is trying to pretend that he does. Whatever it is, it's way too high for my paid grade, but don't worry, I won't leave you stranded.

That was surprisingly long for my partner. The next one, however, was much shorter.

Get out of Costa Rica.

Then...

Pick up your fucking phone and tell me you're not dead.

And the last one.

Come back and go straight to DC. Don't stop in Denver. Don't talk to anyone. I'll meet you there.

THE SILENCE between Tess and I was strained, but I didn't try to fix it. Instead, I stared at my phone and pretended to be checking important things. Anything to keep from having to talk about what had happened between us. I didn't want her reading too much into it...or too little.

"If I could have your attention." A man's voice came over the intercom again. "We'll be landing at LAX at one fifteen Sunday afternoon, and the weather is a balmy seventy-two degrees."

Was he really acting like we were on some sort of normal flight? Like he wasn't participating in a felony?

I sighed and finally put my phone away, bracing for a flood of questions from Tess. But they didn't come. I glanced over to see that she'd assumed the same position as me, head down, eyes focused on her phone screen. I watched her for a few seconds, but she didn't look at me. Apparently, I wasn't the only one trying to avoid talking about things.

I respected her silence as she'd respected mine, and the two of us didn't speak until we were walking down the steps into the bright Los Angeles sunlight.

"When's your flight back to Denver?" Tess asked.

"I'm not going to Denver," I said.

"What?"

I kept my eyes focused in front of me. "I'm going to DC."

I could feel her surprise and walked faster. I couldn't do this now with her. I couldn't have this whole goodbye scene with her and then think clearly to deal with whatever was going on in the capitol.

She came after me. "What does DC have to do with finding my sister?"

"Nothing," I said, making my voice hard. "Go home, Tess. Brianne doesn't want you coming after her. The mission's done. Go back to your life in New York."

TEN

TESS

“GO HOME, TESS. BRIANNE DOESN’T WANT YOU COMING AFTER HER. THE mission’s done. Go back to your life in New York.”

I actually took a step back when his words hit me, unprepared for both the attack and how much it stung. An hour ago, he’d been balls deep inside me, moaning my name as he came. What the hell had changed? It had to be something he’d seen on his phone. He’d been fixated on it when I’d come out of the bathroom, and he’d barely taken the time to put it down until we landed.

I pressed the heel of my hand against my chest, unsure what was hurting me more, what Brianne had done or how Clay was acting. Again, the two people I cared about more than anyone else were tearing out my heart, and this time, there was no chance of it being a misunderstanding or a lie.

Not again. I was through letting other people determine how I related to the world. I’d spent far too much of my life dwelling in the past and holding on to a hurt that I should’ve let go of a long time ago. If Brianne and Clay didn’t want me, that was their loss. I wasn’t going to let either of them keep me from a story though. Tough shit if it dug into things they didn’t want me to know. If they’d taken a few minutes to think about me as a real person instead of some problem they had to get rid of, maybe they would’ve realized I had skills to offer.

I kept telling everyone that I was an adult and they needed to treat me like one, but as much as I hated to admit it, when I was with Brianne and Clay, it was hard for me to remember I wasn’t the little kid tagging along anymore. I’d heard people say that going home made people feel like they were kids

again, but I'd always thought of myself as above that, especially since I refused to think of anywhere I'd lived as a child as being home. Now, I understood how foolish that assumption had been. Clay and Brianne were who I associated with home, however painful those memories were, and they were the ones who made me feel like a child. I'd thought we'd made progress, getting everything out in the open, but it seemed I'd overestimated my value to them.

Fuck them.

Brianne's actions reinforced my theory that she was hiding something, and my reporter Spidey-senses were pinging off the charts. I didn't know if Clay was involved in whatever Bri was into, but it didn't matter. If I was going to look into my informant's tip regarding government involvement, there was only one place to go. Clay and I would be heading to the same place after all. But not together.

I pulled out my phone and brought up the contact list I'd finally pulled off my cloud account. I'd spent more than ten years accumulating an impressive amount of contacts, and I rarely ever cashed in my chips. Now, I was glad I'd been thrifty with asking favors because I had a feeling it would take some strings to get an immediate flight to DC.

"Cathy," I said as soon as I heard the familiar voice. "It's Tess Gardener."

"Tess? It's been a while."

"It has," I admitted. "How have you been?"

"Good." Her voice was friendly, but I heard a note of curiosity in the tone. "Just had a kid a few months ago. But I'm guessing you're not calling to hear about my thirteen hours of labor."

I winced at the thought. "Ouch. And congratulations. You're right though. I'm calling to see if you still have a friend at LAX."

"I do," she said, her volume increasing in interest. "Are you chasing a story?"

"I am, and it might be a big one."

"Good for you," she said just as a baby started to whimper in the background. "What do you need?"

I gave her a quick rundown of just the basics, knowing she'd understand my reluctance to give out specifics. I met Cathy in college where she'd been a TA for one of my English professors. She'd been working toward a Ph.D. in American Literature when another graduate student had stolen her thesis.

I'd helped her prove that the thesis was hers, and she'd owed me a favor ever since.

I paused in front of the giant board with all of the flight information, scanning for different flights. I wanted to go directly to DC, but if I couldn't find anything today with that route, I'd be willing to take New York or Philadelphia, anything within a couple hours' driving distance. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of Clay on the other side of a large family who was arguing over gates, but I didn't acknowledge his presence.

Once I had a list of possible flights, I called the number Cathy had given me and started walking to the gate with the earliest DC flight. By the time I reached it, Clay was already there, but judging by the expression on his face and the way he was arguing with the woman at the counter, he hadn't been quite so lucky in his search for a ticket.

I should've gloated, given him a smug smile, and said that if he hadn't been such an asshole, maybe I could've gotten him on this flight too. Instead, I decided that him owing me was a better form of revenge. I called Cathy's friend back and asked for another favor. Fortunately, he was easy to please, asking only for an autograph from a celebrity I'd interviewed a couple years back. I'd be able to get that for him before my flight even left.

"Problems?" I asked Clay as I stepped up next to him.

"Tess?" The surprise on his face gave me great pleasure. "What are you doing?"

"I'm here to pick up my tickets." I gave him a polite smile before turning to the attendant. "I have two first class tickets being held for me. They should be in the system by now. The name's Tess Gardener."

"ID please," she said with a bright smile.

I dug in my purse, grateful that Brienne had at least thought to send my purse along with me. I retrieved my ID and handed it over, all the while aware of Clay's eyes on me.

"I only have a name on one ticket, miss," the attendant said. "What's the name on the second?"

I looked over at Clay and couldn't deny how much I was going to enjoy making my offer. "Would you like a ticket to DC, or do you already have one?"

He scowled, and I could see him working over everything in his head, all of the things he wanted to say and everything he needed to do. His pride

warred with whatever had captured his attention on the plane. I didn't hurry him. The fact that they were getting ready to board passengers would force his hand soon enough.

"Sir, if I may," the attendant put in, "there may be a seat that comes up empty, but if you want a guaranteed seat, this is your best chance."

"Fine," he muttered. "I'll take it."

"What name should I put on it?"

He dug into his pocket and pulled out his ID. "Clay Kurth."

"All right, Mr. Kurth, Miss Gardener, we'll begin boarding shortly."

"Great." Clay forced a smile as he looked at me. "Thank you."

I offered the briefest of nods. "You're welcome." I deliberately turned away before either of us could feel the need to fill the already awkward silence.

This was going to be a long flight.

ELEVEN

CLAY

IF RAY'S TEXTS HADN'T BEEN SO URGENT, I WOULD'VE WAITED TO GET A ticket on my own, but when I'd texted Ray back to say that I was trying to get a seat on the next flight out, his response had been to tell me to do whatever it took to get to DC. I'd offered to call him so he could get me up to speed before I arrived, but he'd said he didn't want to talk about anything over the phone.

All of that was the reason I'd spent five hours sitting next to Tess, all too aware of how soft the skin on the inside of her wrist was. The sounds that she made when she came. The color of her nipples and how hard she liked them sucked. What it felt like to have her legs wrapped around me.

I was the only person who knew those things, and there was a voice screaming in the back of my mind, telling me that I needed to make sure I was the only one who ever knew them. A male flight attendant had checked her out as he'd walked by to ensure everyone had their seatbelts on, and I'd been tempted to tell him that she was taken. The man across the aisle had chatted her up, and it'd taken more self-control than I'd known I had to keep my hands to myself.

By the time we landed in DC, my body was a mass of tension and my stomach was tied up in knots. None of it was related to what Ray had in store for me. I'd barely thought about it, even though I knew it was important. I didn't generally have a problem compartmentalizing, but when it came to Tess, all of my usuals went right out the window.

As soon as the seat belt light went off, Tess got to her feet, but the man in front of us was up too, blocking the aisle as he pulled a bag down from the

overhead compartment.

“I’m meeting Agent Matthews,” I said. “It’s official FBI business, which means no visitors.”

I didn’t think it was actually FBI business, but I needed her to understand that she couldn’t keep pursuing whatever this was with Brianne. She’d clearly come to DC to find out what was going on, and she needed to just go back to New York and her life. This was the only way I could think of to get her to go.

I didn’t expect her to be happy about it, but the icy gaze she leveled at me wasn’t like anything I’d seen from her before. She’d been furious at me before, but that heat had been something, at least. This was nothing.

She didn’t say a word as she turned and walked away. I watched her go and let other passengers fill the space between us before I stepped into the aisle as well. I told myself that it didn’t hurt to see her walk away because I’d always known this was where we would end up anyway. When I finished my meeting with Ray, I’d go back to Denver and Tess would eventually be in New York.

This wasn’t the first time I’d made a similar argument, but it didn’t make me believe it anymore now than I had the other times I’d made it. Nor did it make the sick feeling in the pit of my stomach go away. I ignored it and kept walking. Something big was going down, and it was my job to stop it. I needed to focus on that. Tess was gone, and it was time to move on.

I took a cab to the hotel where Ray was staying and texted him on the way. By the time the car pulled up to the front entrance, he’d responded with his room number and nothing else. I really hoped he wasn’t as pissed at me as he seemed because I was getting really tired of people being angry at me for things that were out of my control.

Besides, Ray was the one who got me involved in this in the first place. He couldn’t be angry for something he’d gotten me into.

I checked into a room of my own first, then headed up two floors to Ray’s room. He answered on the second knock, giving me a grunt in greeting before stepping aside to let me in. He looked about as exhausted as I felt, with dark half-moons under his eyes and dark stubble on pale skin. His slacks were wrinkled, and the white undershirt he wore had sweat stains that could’ve been new or from days ago.

“You look like hell,” I said as I closed the bathroom door behind me.

“Right back at you,” he said as he sat down in the armchair. He pointed at the desk chair. “Sit.”

I sat, rubbing the back of my neck. “All right, Ray. What’s going on?”

He scratched his head, the new lines on his face making him look years older than he was. “A shitstorm, that’s what’s going on. I don’t know what you guys stirred up down there, but it’s got some serious ripple effects. When you called me after you found Tess, I was already on my way out here for a meeting and decided to update Secretary Ganesh myself. He was twitchy, constantly looking over his shoulder. I didn’t think anything of it until I got back to my room here and found a note slipped under my door telling me to get my people out of Costa Rica.”

“Did they mean you personally or the FBI?” I asked.

Ray shrugged. “I don’t know, but no one’s contacted the FBI directly. Just me.”

“Right before Tess went missing, she met with an informant who said that the government was responsible for us being down there.”

“I did some digging thinking there was something more to the story,” Ray continued. “But every time I started asking around about Brianne, I hit a brick wall. The army kept telling me that her records were confidential. Then I got the idea that maybe there was something with the whole cartel angle. That’s when I got the warning.”

I was starting to understand why he’d been freaking out via text.

“I couldn’t get past assistants to talk to anyone, even Secretary Ganesh. And every time I got back to my hotel room, there were more notes telling me to get my people out of Costa Rica. Some serious shit is going on.”

No fuck.

TWELVE

TESS

I HADN'T BEEN BACK TO DC SINCE I'D LEFT WITH MY MOM AND BRIANNE, and I'd never intended to be here again, but my life was currently saying 'fuck you' a lot, so here I was.

I kept my head down in the cab, not wanting to see what was around me even though I wasn't near the neighborhood where I'd grown up. If I didn't see the Capitol Building, the Washington Monument, the things that identified the city as DC, I could pretend that I was checking into a hotel in some random city.

"First time in the capitol?" the cab driver asked.

"I grew up here." I knew my tone was short, but I couldn't seem to help it as I kept my eyes focused on the screen of my phone. "I'm here on business now," I added, anticipating his next question. "I'm a journalist."

"Since we're going to a hotel, I'm assuming you don't work for someone here."

I bit back a snarky reply and reminded myself that the driver was just being friendly. It wasn't his fault that I'd had a shitty day. "I work for the *New York Times*."

At least, I hoped I still did. It was too late to call anyone tonight, no matter how long it'd been since I'd last talked to someone at the office. If I called my editor this late, I definitely *would* be fired. I'd make the call in the morning and hoped the story I planned on pitching would make up for how long I'd been gone. I planned on sharing what had happened to me, so it wasn't like I wouldn't already have a good excuse, but I didn't want to only have excuses.

“Did you move straight from here to New York then?”

“No, I lived in Arizona for a while and moved to New York for college.” I risked a glance out the window and saw that we still had a couple blocks to go. “What about you? Are you from here?”

As I’d hoped, my question prompted him to begin his life story and stopped him from asking more about me. Normally, I didn’t mind a chatty driver, but I wasn’t in the mood to talk. Listening, however, *that* I could do. Or, at least, pretend to do. I smiled and nodded in all the right places, and by the time we pulled up to the hotel, he’d made it all the way through to the birth of his second child, Tami.

“Here’s my card,” he said. “If you need a cab any time you’re in the city, just call me direct.”

“Thanks.” I slipped his card into my purse. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

As nice as he was, I breathed a sigh of relief when I walked into the hotel by myself. There were people around, but they were all concerned with their own business, leaving me alone with my own. I just hoped they had a room empty. I really didn’t want to have to repeat this process.

“Good evening, Miss.” The desk clerk smiled, but I could see a hint of wariness in his eyes.

I didn’t blame him. Even though I hadn’t seen myself in the mirror, I had a pretty good idea of how worn I looked. When this was all over, I planned on sleeping for two days straight.

“I don’t have a reservation,” I said. “But I’ll take any room you have.”

“How long will you be staying with us?” he asked as he entered information into his computer.

“I’m not sure, but if I need to check out or change rooms later, that’s fine. As long as I have somewhere to sleep tonight.”

“I’ll need a credit card and some form of ID.”

Less than twenty minutes later, I was settled in a two-person suite that was more space than I needed, but I could have it indefinitely, so I’d opted for the bigger room. Besides, even if the *Times* didn’t reimburse me, I felt like I’d earned a bit of a splurge.

I was exhausted, but I didn’t even consider going to bed yet. I had work to do. Work that I should have been doing all along instead of spending my time with Clay. I refused to let him distract me anymore. I was going to get to the bottom of whatever it was Bri had going on.

I didn't have access to a printer, and I had no idea what Brianne had done with my laptop, but I'd spent the end of the flight reconstructing what little information I'd gathered, and now it was time to try and put some of it together. I'd picked up some supplies in the little gift shop, and now I set them out on the table. Different-colored post-it notes, two black pens, and two blue pens.

Piece by piece, I wrote down the facts I had evidence to back up. Then I moved on to a new color post-it and wrote down facts that didn't have evidence but that I knew were facts anyway. After that, I went to speculation, guess-work, and opinions. Color coding and then sorting out the post-its onto the table gave my mind something to latch onto. It was a relief to focus on lists and facts, things that had nothing to do with emotions. Even though Brianne and Clay had their places in those facts, this way, I could separate them into compartments, think of them clinically rather than as people I cared about.

This would've been easier with help, I knew, but I didn't have anyone I could trust with this. Other journalists would probably snake my story, and I didn't have any close friends. Which meant I was doing this alone.

I could do it, too. I was a kickass reporter, and I didn't need babysitters or assistants.

Besides, if I went to Clay for help, I'd have to deal with the drama of being around him, and what assistance he'd provide wouldn't be worth the distraction he'd become.

And I wasn't sure my heart could take being stepped on again.

THIRTEEN

CLAY

AFTER TALKING WITH RAY FOR MORE THAN AN HOUR, I'D GONE TO MY ROOM with the intention of getting into the mini bar and drinking until I forgot Tess. Forgot every single blissful moment we'd spent together and every agonizing minute apart. What made remembering worse was the knowledge that, though the first time we'd been separated hadn't been my fault, this last time had been.

My plans had been abruptly derailed when I'd found my room empty of alcohol, something that shouldn't have surprised me since this wasn't exactly a five-star establishment. A quick look through the worn flyer on the table had said that the hotel did have a gym. Physical exertion wasn't as fun as drinking, but it had been a better option than spending the night sleepless and obsessing.

At least, I'd thought it had been a good idea until I'd returned to my room well past midnight, bone-weary and soaked with sweat. I remembered standing at the foot of my bed and thinking that I needed to get in the shower.

The next thing I knew, I was yanked out of sleep by the annoyingly upbeat pop song that I'd assigned as my mother's ringtone. I rolled over, and my stiff muscles protested, but I reached toward my phone anyway. Grabbing it was the only way to shut the damn thing off. I fumbled with it, intending to send the call straight to voicemail. Instead, I answered it.

"Clay, it's about time I didn't get your voicemail."

I suppressed a groan. There was only one way for me to answer a phone call from my parents and I was now doubly glad that I wasn't hungover.

"Good morning, Mother." I rubbed my eyes. "Before you ask, I wasn't

ignoring you. I've been out of the country for the past few weeks."

I didn't mention that she hadn't actually left any voicemails. A comment like that was good for a ten-minute lecture on how impersonal talking to a machine was.

"Anywhere exciting?"

For a brief, insane second, I considered telling my mother exactly how exciting my time in Costa Rica had been, then my brain started working, and I fell into my usual habit of only giving her what she wanted to hear.

"I was in Costa Rica, taking some personal time. I just got back to the States today."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I always forget about the time difference."

No, she didn't. She just thought everyone needed to be up at the ass crack of dawn to accomplish anything. I'd probably been the only child to ever ask to open his Christmas presents *later* as a holiday treat.

"It doesn't matter, Mother. I'm in DC at the moment."

"I thought you said you just got back to Denver?"

"When I got into LAX, I got a message from my partner. He's here for some meetings and wouldn't be back in Denver for a while, so I offered to take a flight out here instead."

"That's wonderful, dear. Are you returning immediately, or will you have time for a meal with your parents?"

That was her passive-aggressive way of reminding me how long it'd been since I'd last spent any time with them. Now that I was in DC, it would've been rude telling her that I couldn't, especially since I wasn't pressed for time. I had absolutely no clue where to start with my current problem.

Then I realized that I could make her happy *and* maybe help out Ray at the same time.

"Is the House in session today?" I sat up, then wished I hadn't because my stomach *really* didn't like the movement.

"It is."

"How about I meet Father, and then we'll meet you for lunch?"

"Wonderful!" At least she sounded sincerely happy. "I'll let him know to expect you."

Wonderful.

I let her finish some small talk, then promised to see her in a few hours. After I ended the call, I flopped back on the bed, grimacing as I caught a

whiff of what happened when I fell asleep after working out but before showering. I needed to clean up before heading to the hill. Aside from the fact that it was just good hygiene, I wouldn't embarrass my father by creating anything less than a good impression.

I loved my parents, and I never doubted that they loved me, but I'd been aware from an early age of the importance they placed on appearance. Not in a superficial way, but rather how the respect we had for them reflected in how we dressed and spoke. The respect we had for a job or an event. Perfectly pressed suits and ties for every occasion. Hats to match dresses and shoes. Nothing scuffed. Everything shiny and new-looking. Anything worn, faded, or torn would be mended and sent to various charities. One or two 'old' items would be kept for the rare times we'd need to do something where we'd get dirty, but since those were usually photo ops – intentional or not – we usually wore plain clothes that we'd been seen in a couple times but weren't really ready to be sent away.

Tess and Brianne had referred to my family as Rockwellian, and I couldn't exactly disagree. My father had started as an intern for a local city councilman from Queens and progressed to running for the House of Representatives when I was three. For the past thirty years, he'd held on to his seat by being a decent, honest man. He wasn't perfect, and he'd made some compromises with policies that I wasn't too crazy about, but he'd never cheated on my mother, never hit us or berated us. He'd worked a lot, but so had my mother. She was a grade school teacher, the sort that made every student feel special. Over the past thirty-five years, she'd taught both first and third grade, as well as tutoring and summer school at various places.

Sometimes, I wondered if they would've been happier with my career choice if I'd chosen to go into education. They were proud of me and never diminished my accomplishments with the FBI, but they also never made a secret of their desire for me to follow in my father's footsteps, maybe not as a Congressman, but something in politics. They both said there weren't enough decent people in Washington, and I agreed, but I'd seen what it took to do what my father did, and I knew myself well enough to know I couldn't do it.

That didn't mean I hadn't learned a thing or two about how to be diplomatic or negotiate for the things I wanted. I just didn't like the song and dance.

After a shower, a shave, and a set of new – if simple – clothes, I was a

little more prepared for what I had to do. I didn't tell Ray where I was going or who I planned to talk to, mostly because I knew he wouldn't approve, but also because he needed plausible deniability if things backfired on me.

I made a couple calls to the people in the White House who knew everything: the secretaries. Lower case. They were the ones who took the calls, made the schedules, knew where the bodies were buried. Figuratively anyway. Then again, there were a few politicians that I wondered about...

It was about an hour before I was supposed to meet my father, which was the perfect amount of time to stop for a little pre-lunch lunch. The diner was the sort of out-of-the-way place that most people would barely look at as they moved on to one of the million places in DC that sold either kale or coffee. I'd been here a couple times growing up, but never with either of my parents. The food here was a walking health code violation, but damn if the apple pie wasn't worth it.

I took the seat in the corner and ordered a big piece of pie with ice cream on top. I might not be hungry for lunch, but after my work-out last night, I felt like I deserved a little something. I was three bites into it when two men in black suits came into the diner. I smiled at them, waving my fork when I saw recognition in one of the men's eyes. He'd done some security work for my dad a couple years back. He'd been a little surprised to hear from me earlier today, but we'd always gotten along. I'd given him a pair of Giants tickets for him and his dad when I'd heard his father only had a few months to live. He nodded at me and then turned to bring in his charge.

Secretary of State Fares Ganesh.

I continued eating my pie as the secretary was 'guided' to the booth next to mine. I let him settle in and place his order, using the time to finish my pie. As I pushed my plate back, I shifted in my seat so I could lean against the back of the booth and get a better look at the man I'd only previously seen on TV.

Ganesh was in his late fifties, with buzzed hair that was light enough that I couldn't tell if it was blond or silver. He was a few inches shorter than me and lean, though he still carried himself like the soldier he'd once been. The hard glint in his bright blue eyes made me think that anyone who underestimated him would be in for a surprise.

"Secretary Ganesh, it's nice to finally meet you."

"Do I know..." His voice trailed off as he turned to look more directly at

me. “Ah...Clay Kurth.”

I held out a hand. “I’ve heard a lot about you, Mr. Secretary.”

“And I you.” He shook my hand. “Your partner, Agent Matthews, speaks highly of you. As does your father.”

“My father was a great supporter of your appointment, sir,” I said honestly. “I’m actually on my way to see him in a little bit. I’ve just been craving apple pie for the longest time. It wasn’t easy to get where I’ve been.”

“I would imagine not,” he said carefully. “How long have you been back?”

“Just since yesterday.” I gave him a purposefully wry smile. “Though I didn’t return by choice.”

“Agent Matthews mentioned that he had to encourage you to return sooner than you liked.”

“It wasn’t his encouragement that brought me back but rather an old friend.” I watched his face for any hints that might tell me I was on the right track. “She drugged me, knocking me out before putting me on a plane. Me and her own sister. Strange, right?”

“I find it hard to believe that someone could knock you out, especially... pardon me for saying it this way...a woman.” His tone may have been nonchalant, but I saw the tightening around his eyes.

“This wasn’t me losing a fight,” I said. “This was someone who figured out how to drug two adults in two separate hotel rooms.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “Sounds like a smart woman.”

“She is,” I agreed. “But I think she also had great training.”

“Training?” The lines at the corners of his mouth deepened for a second.

“She’s in the army.” I leaned forward a bit more, conscious of the Secret Service agents standing close enough to grab me if they thought I was a threat. “But you know that because that’s how she met your sister-in-law.”

The secretary shifted in his seat, finally looking as uncomfortable as I knew he was. “Mr. Kurth, may I ask what the reason is for our coincidental meeting here today?”

I glanced at the Secret Service guys, then figured what the hell. “Brienne Gardener isn’t just a soldier, and we both know it. Something’s going on with her and the reason she was in Costa Rica. And I think it’s going to trace from her, to her girlfriend...to you.”

His eyebrows shot up. “To me?”

“Tell me I’m wrong,” I challenged him.

He considered the question. “You’re wrong about me.”

“Which means I’m right about something.”

“You are, but I can’t tell you more than that because I don’t know.”

“All right then.” I stood and tossed a few bills on the table. “I have a lunch appointment with my parents. I’ll tell them you said hi.”

I felt his eyes on me as I exited the diner, but I never looked back. I had a lead, and that was enough. It was time to do some real work.

FOURTEEN

TESS

I DIDN'T KNOW WHY I BOTHERED TO CALL BRIANNE. I KNEW WHEN I DID IT that it was pointless, but I supposed a part of me felt like I had to at least try to get her side of the story. As a journalist, I was supposed to be unbiased, report things without letting my own feelings cloud the story, and if I allowed my anger at my sister to keep me from reaching out to her, I wouldn't deserve to call myself a journalist. Despite that, I couldn't help feeling a bit of satisfaction when I was told that the number was no longer in service.

After ending the call, I considered calling my mom to see if she'd heard from Bri yet, but ultimately decided against it. I couldn't tell Mom all that happened, mostly because I wasn't sure whose side she'd take, and if I had to listen to her telling me why Brianne had done the right thing, I'd probably say something I'd eventually regret.

I also couldn't take the chance that Mom would try to talk me out of writing the story. At least now I could pursue it without the guilt that came with *knowing* Mom and Bri wouldn't approve. As someone who dealt in proven facts, it was a lot easier to discount my feelings without evidence to back them up.

I stood in front of my table, methodically eating a piece of toast with orange marmalade and working through a timetable in my head. If I wanted to get out in front of this thing, I needed to hit the big fish first, then look to fill in any gaps as I went. Hopefully, I'd get some names or other leads to build on so I could put this together fast and get it to my editor before anyone else got a whiff of what was coming. If I could be the one to break this story, it'd be huge for my career.

Despite everything, I felt a twinge of guilt at the thought of building my career on a story about my sister, but then I reminded myself that if she'd simply told me the truth and asked me to keep it to myself, I wouldn't have breathed a word to anyone. Instead, she'd drugged and kidnapped me to send me back home because she thought she knew what was best for me, just like she had when we were kids.

Yeah, I was going to write this story.

And I knew where to go to start gathering what I needed.

I wasn't crazy enough to rent a car and try to drive through DC traffic, and I wasn't going to pay an arm and a leg to sit in a taxi where a driver may or may not decide to spend all of our time together talking my ear off. That meant public transportation was my best bet. Fortunately, I could pull up a bus schedule on my phone and find when the next bus to the White House left.

Even though my hotel was only fifteen miles from the White House, it was nearly an hour before the bus made it through to the stop to let off most of us. I let the crowd take me with it as we moved down the sidewalk in front of the enormous structure. Most of these people were tourists who'd eventually take the usual tours through various buildings, but I didn't need a history lesson at the moment. I needed to get to Secretary Ganesh and not just to get a greeting or an autograph. I needed to talk to him.

As the others broke off into their smaller groups of families and friends, I eased away from the others and found a spot shielded from the brisk winter wind to try to decide the best way to get a private audience with the Secretary of State. I could try a tour and sneak away. I was good at making myself invisible, and if I was caught, I was good at pretending to be innocent. It wasn't the best plan, but it was all I had at the moment.

I'd gone a few feet down the sidewalk when I saw several men in black suits coming out of a diner. Not that uncommon a sight here. Two men were with them, one in a gray suit, the other dressed a little more casually. I recognized them both.

Secretary of State Fares Ganesh and my former lover slash best friend, Clay Kurth. Talking like they were fucking friends.

Okay, maybe that was a bit much. They weren't actually talking to each other, but I had no doubt that they'd already had a decent conversation, probably over lunch.

Dammit, Clay! Why was he fucking around with my story? He's the one who told me to leave Brianne alone, and now he was here, talking to the very person he claimed sent him to Costa Rica after Bri, however indirectly. Finding Clay here was no coincidence.

My strategy changed in a moment, and I ignored the secretary and his guards as they walked by. Clay went the other way, and I followed, curious to see where he would go next. Had the secretary given Clay the name of someone to talk to? Maybe a person who had something to do with whatever was going on with Brianne.

Maybe I was reaching. Maybe Clay had been simply telling Ganesh about how things had played out in Costa Rica, and now he was planning to go meet Ray. Maybe I was about to feel rather stupid for thinking this was more than it was.

I kept telling myself this as I followed Clay down the sidewalk. Whatever the two of them had discussed must've still been on Clay's mind because I didn't exactly take pains to hide myself, and he didn't notice. We'd gone probably half a mile before I realized that he wasn't going for a parking lot or one of the bus stops. He was going toward Capitol Hill.

I didn't know why it took me until that moment to remember that his father was a congressman, but it did. Figuring out that he was probably going to visit his dad should've made me turn around and return to my original plan, but it didn't. Now that I'd seen him, I couldn't walk away until I knew for certain.

Except when I saw the familiar figure of Clinton Kurth, a horrible thought struck me.

What if Congressman Kurth was the government official responsible for all of this? Granted, a congressman wasn't in a position of authority over the Secretary of State, but I knew enough about politics to know that, often times, the person who appeared to be in charge wasn't the one actually calling the shots.

My mind swam with dozens of possible reasons either man – or both – would have for sending Clay to Costa Rica. Had it truly been for Brianne because of her connection to Sofie Harmon? Was Sofie a part of this or just an opportunity that others had seized? Was the real motivation not Brianne but rather the cartel? Money and power were two very strong factors for a lot of people, and a Colombian drug cartel was definitely a way to get those

things.

I didn't want to believe any of it, but I couldn't deny how well the pieces fit. Clay and his father didn't hug, but they seemed friendly enough, and for some reason, that irked me more than anything. Almost as if Clay having a good relationship with his father was somehow unfair to me because my relationship with my sister was such a mess.

I needed to find out exactly what the Kurth men knew and how it connected to everyone and everything else. That meant conversation, and the fastest way to initiate that was to go straight to Clay.

My pulse sped up, and I couldn't lie to myself that it was in anticipation of writing the story. I wanted to talk to Clay. I wanted to make things right with him. I might end up having to use him to find the truth, but if that was the case, I'd go into it with my eyes open and accept responsibility. Just like I was going to do the right thing now – even if my motivation wasn't entirely pure – and apologize for going through his phone and calling Sofie. Besides, if I went over now, I'd be able to greet Congressman Kurth in a completely innocuous way.

I quickened my pace but made sure to keep my stride natural as I changed my trajectory to allow me to pass near the Kurths, but not be in direct line with them. I couldn't let Clay know I'd seen him with Ganesh and had then followed him here. Intentionally planning to deceive him didn't sit right with me, but I reminded myself that things between us would've ended even if I hadn't gotten into his phone. I'd let myself forget that for a while during those weeks in Costa Rica, and the hope that had started to take root at that time still tried to assert itself. It was a dangerous thing, that kind of hope.

And I didn't have time for it.

I pushed aside all thoughts that weren't about the story and let my gaze casually slide over to where Clay and his father were still standing, chatting. A smile spread across my face, and I was surprised to find that it was only partially fake.

"Clay!" I hurried over to them, suddenly worried that he'd pretend not to see or hear me. "Congressman Kurth."

A puzzled expression passed over the older man's face before recognition landed. "Tess, right? Tess Gardener."

I stuck out my hand. "Yes, sir. It's been a long time."

"That it has." He glanced at Clay, and I could see the wheels turning

behind those bright blue eyes. “What brings you to DC?”

“That’s a good question,” Clay said, his tone flat.

I let myself look at him but refused to let any emotion cross my features as I did so. “I was actually hoping to talk to Clay for a minute.”

“We’re meeting my mother for lunch,” Clay said, taking a hard look at his watch. “I don’t think I have—”

“I’ll call Barbara and let her know we’ll be a few minutes late.” Clinton gave me that charming politician’s smile, and I was hard-pressed to remember what I suspected him of. “Unless you’d like to come with us?”

“She’s busy,” Clay said before I could decline the invitation.

“I understand,” Clinton said, his expression warm.

For the first time, I was struck by how much Clay would look like his father as he aged. They had slightly different-colored eyes, and Clay’s hair was longer, wilder, but other than that, I could be looking at the same man nearly thirty years apart.

“Thank you for the invitation though,” I said.

“Do you have plans on Wednesday night?” Clinton gave Clay a look that I took to mean he wanted me to answer for myself.

“Not at all.”

“Wonderful.” Clinton patted my shoulder, a gesture that would’ve felt condescending and awkward from anyone else but managed to be just the right amount of affection from him. “We’re having a fundraiser on Wednesday evening at our DC home. Barbara is involved with a truly superb charity that provides school supplies to students in low-income areas as well as technology to those schools unable to afford it. We would love for you to come.”

“I’ll do my best,” I agreed before turning back to Clay. “A word?”

He clenched his jaw, the muscle twitching as he gave a single brisk nod. We moved a few feet away, and he motioned for me to continue.

“I’m sorry.”

Those were the important words to get out first. No matter how things played out from here, I needed to make sure he understood that I was sincerely sorry for abusing his trust like I had. It occurred to me that if he found out I’d come to the decision to apologize because of my suspicions regarding his father, nothing I could ever say or do would be enough to earn his forgiveness.

Nonetheless, I continued, “It doesn’t matter what reasons I had. Snooping on your phone was unacceptable. If I had questions, I should have just asked.”

I didn’t add that one of the reasons I hadn’t asked him the questions haunting me was simple...I hadn’t been sure I was able to trust him to tell me everything I needed to know. That would just start a whole other argument.

“Thank you,” he said begrudgingly. “And I could have shared more with you from the first. Maybe then you wouldn’t have felt like you needed to snoop.”

I nodded as we fell silent, the tension between us awkward. I’d said what I’d come to say, and I’d gotten an invitation to a DC fundraiser where I could investigate more than just Congressman Kurth. That was more than I’d hoped. Still, I didn’t walk away. Not yet.

It wasn’t business that made me blurt out the words that had been hiding in my head. It had nothing to do with my story and everything to do with the emptiness that had been gnawing at me since we’d fought in Costa Rica.

“If you want to stop by my hotel room to talk...or whatever, I’ll be back there in a couple hours and then stay in all night.” I gave him my hotel name and room number, then hurried away before I could take it back.

My heart was racing as I rubbed my sweaty palms against my jeans. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to hope that he’d come to see me or if it’d be better for him to keep his distance, but now that the invitation was out there, what happened next was in his hands. All I could do was continue my investigation and wait to see what happened next.

FIFTEEN

CLAY

“I DON’T MEAN TO SOUND AS IF I’M COMPLAINING, BUT YOU DON’T SEEM happy to be spending time with us.”

My mother’s words weren’t harsh, but I felt the sting of them all the same. Both of my parents were trying hard not to talk about the things that caused tension between us. Like why I was still working for the FBI and not cashing in on the notoriety I’d gotten for my work and starting a run for office. Any office. They loved me, but they didn’t understand me.

They deserved better than the half-assed attention I was giving them.

“Sorry.” I smiled at them both. “It’s not you guys. It’s just been a long few weeks, and the crazy isn’t over yet.”

My parents exchanged a look, but it was my father who spoke this time. “We’ve been hearing some strange rumors about some Americans getting into trouble in Central America. You wouldn’t happen to know anything about that, would you?”

I considered the question, then leaned forward, almost resting my elbows on the table before I remembered how many times I’d gotten scolded for doing that exact thing growing up. I set my forearms down instead and folded my hands to keep from fidgeting.

“I took a trip to Costa Rica as a favor to a colleague,” I said, choosing my words carefully. “When I arrived, I ran into an old friend.”

“Tess,” Father said. He glanced at Mother. “Tess Gardener. She’s in DC, and I invited her to the fundraiser on Wednesday.”

Mother frowned, but then recognition dawned. “That family from all those years ago? The ones who ran away from that cop?”

“The ones who were my friends. Who needed my help.” My words had an edge to them. “But we’re not talking about the past. Well, not the distant past anyway. Tess and I arrived in Costa Rica in January. We stayed there until yesterday when we flew into LAX. My partner messaged me and asked me to meet him here.”

There was silence for several seconds, and I realized that they were waiting for me to tell them more. I only had two more words for them on this subject though.

“Plausible deniability.”

They exchanged another look, and then Father nodded. Just like that, we moved on to a different subject.

THE AIR OUTSIDE had dropped several degrees by the time we left the restaurant, but I didn’t take up either of my parents on their offer for a ride to wherever I was going next. It wasn’t so much that I wanted to walk as it was I didn’t know where to go. I’d talked to Secretary Ganesh, and I knew I was on the right track, but I wasn’t sure what the next step was.

I said my goodbyes to my parents and started down the sidewalk on my own. I had things to do, but my mind wouldn’t let me focus on any of them. All I kept seeing was Tess’s face when she’d approached me earlier today. The smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. The apology that sounded sincere, that I wanted to believe, but didn’t quite accept.

And the invitation that every fiber of me wanted to take up even as I understood that I should approach her with caution. This bond we’d re-forged had come during a time of stress and chaos. Those sorts of things rarely survived in the real world.

But I wanted it to. I’d missed Tess for so long that I hadn’t realized how much the feeling was a part of me until I’d had her again.

I’d over-reacted about the phone thing. It wasn’t okay that she’d gone through my phone, but it hadn’t been as big of a deal as I’d made it. I could’ve made things go a whole different way, a way that would’ve allowed the two of us to still be together. Instead, I’d let something so small blow us up, letting me walk away as the wronged party, as if that would make things

hurt less.

It hadn't.

I felt like a part of me was missing.

And I knew where to find it.

I wasn't even consciously aware of making the decision to go to the hotel where she was staying. All I knew was I got out of a taxi, and there I was. I went inside and walked straight past the desk. I didn't need a reminder of the room number. It had been burned into my brain from the moment she'd said it.

I stood in front of the door for a moment, then raised my hand to knock. My stomach twisted into knots as I waited for her to answer. If she'd regretted asking me over, if she'd changed her mind, it was going to hurt like hell.

She opened the door, and some of the tension eased. Her cheeks were pink and her eyes down as she motioned for me to come inside. As I stepped past her, I caught a whiff of mint. She must've gone shopping since we'd gotten back and picked up her usual shampoo. She had different clothes too. With her hair down, feet bare, and wearing a long-sleeved, mid-thigh length t-shirt, she looked young. Too young. I reminded myself that she was only two years younger than me, which was still older than Rona.

"Did you have a nice lunch with your parents?" she asked, scuffing her feet back and forth on the carpet.

"I did." I closed the door behind me. "But I didn't come here to talk about my parents."

She looked up at me, her eyes wide, filled with the sort of hopeful light that made my heart skip a beat. "Why are you here?"

"Did you mean what you said?" I asked, feeling oddly vulnerable with the question. "When you apologized?"

"I did." She reached out and put her hand on my arm, fingers tightening. "I do."

My hand tangled in her hair as I pulled her to me. Our mouths crashed together, and something inside me clicked into place. She grabbed the front of my shirt, using it to pull her body as close to mine as she could. I dropped my hands to her hips, lifting her off her feet.

It never ceased to amaze me, how she seemed so delicate, so fragile, but was tougher and stronger than a lot of the FBI agents I'd worked with. Desire

vibrated from her, and I felt my own cells matching the frequency, as if the two of us were in tune, in sync, two parts of the same whole. The need to be inside her was overwhelming.

“Fuck...” I groaned into her mouth. “Tess, you drive me crazy.”

“Likewise,” she breathed before nipping my jaw. “I can’t get you out of my head.”

“I want...I want...I want...” Words failed me.

She flicked her tongue against my earlobe and whispered, “Tell me what you want to do to me, Clay. The things you’ve dreamed of since we were teenagers.”

I closed my eyes as the blood drained from my head straight to my cock. “Fuck, Tess, the things I’ve fantasized about...I want to fuck you hard and fast until you scream my name. Use your body for my pleasure. Keep you on the edge until you’re crying and begging for release. Make you come over and over until it hurts. Mark your skin with my mouth until everyone knows you belong to me. I should want to protect you from men who want to do the sorts of things I want to do to you, but the only thing I keep thinking is that I should be the only man who gets to know what it feels like to have your pussy wrapped tight around my cock. Hell, it makes me crazy, thinking of any other man touching you.”

She stepped out of my embrace, and I thought I’d gone too far.

Then she reached down, grasped the bottom of the t-shirt and pulled it over her head, revealing that she wasn’t wearing anything underneath.

Fuck, that was hot. Tight, high breasts tipped with pebbled nipples. A tiny waist and only the slightest swell of hips. The sparse covering of dark curls between slender but strong legs.

I’d never really thought of myself as being attracted to a specific physical type, but at this moment, I realized that I’d always dated tall, athletic or curvy women. Sometimes they were brunettes, but more often they were blondes or redheads. This wasn’t a case of me going against type though. No, I now understood that I’d actually been trying to avoid finding someone who reminded me of Tess. Not that I hadn’t been attracted to the women in my past, but I’d never wanted any of them the way I wanted her.

I moved toward her, a primal thrill going through me when she took a step backward. She was smiling, her eyes glowing with familiar lust, and I trusted that if she didn’t want this, she’d let me know. Her back hit the wall,

and I closed the distance between us quickly, immediately going to my knees in front of her when I was close enough. I kept my gaze locked on hers as I reached for her, my hands curling around her thighs. Her lips parted on a gasp when she realized what I was going to do, bringing a smile to my face.

I yanked her legs toward me, hooking her knees over my shoulders as I wedged my body between her thighs. The wall at her back supported the rest of her weight, and her head thudded against it, eyes closing as I ran my tongue up her slit. She tasted clean and fresh, without a hint of soap residue to mask her natural flavor. Damn, I could keep my face buried in her cunt for the rest of my life and die a happy man.

She whimpered as I moved my tongue between her lips, parting her folds to allow me access to her core. I circled her entrance, teased up near her clit, getting close to the places she wanted me most, but not giving attention to the more sensitive flesh. I'd meant what I'd said about wanting to take her hard and fast, but that was for later. Right now, I wanted to make her beg.

Her fingers dug into my hair, twisting and tugging as I worked. I let her moans and how hard she pulled my hair guide me to all the right places...or rather, I let it keep me from visiting those places too often.

"Clay..." she whined, trying to move her hips, to force me where she wanted me. "Let me come."

I smiled, then bit the inside of her thigh, chuckling when she yelped. "Beg for it."

"What?" Her voice was thick, muddled.

"I want you to beg," I said, raising my head enough to see her flushed face, her half-lidded eyes. "Beg me to let you come."

She shook her head. "Nope. Won't do it."

I laughed, letting the vibration move through my mouth and into her skin, her body. A shudder ran through her. I flicked the tip of my tongue against her clit, and she cursed. She wouldn't hold out long.

Her thighs tightened around my head, determined to keep me in place. I dipped my tongue inside her, felt the wetness of her arousal. She squirmed, and I gripped her hips harder.

"I'm not gonna beg." Her words slurred together and the muscles resting on my shoulders quivered.

She was fighting.

I wrapped my lips around her swollen clit, and her back arched. She cried

out, hands striking the wall, and I circled the nub of nerves with my tongue, pausing each time I felt her getting close.

“Damn you, Clay!” The words burst out of her in frustration. “Please, let me come. I need to come. I’m begging you...”

I sucked hard on her clit, and her whole body went stiff. I felt her orgasm rip through her with the sort of violence that could only be brought by a true *little death*. She made no sounds aside from the harshness of her breathing, as if it was all she could do to draw in air.

I held her in place until her muscles relaxed, then eased her into my arms. As she leaned her head against my chest, she murmured, “Payback’s going to be a bitch.”

“FUCK FUCK FUCK FUCK!!” I pulled on the sheets hard enough to strain the seams.

Tess laughed as she straightened, dark curls falling over her shoulders to brush the tips of her nipples. Her lips were swollen and her cheeks red; she’d earned every bit of both. She’d been going down on me for the last thirty minutes, taking me to the brink of climax and then backing off. My cock looked ridiculous, sticking straight up in the air, throbbing, nearly purple, and my balls ached, the pressure in my belly approaching the painful point.

“Not so much fun when the shoe is on the other foot, is it?” she asked, trailing her fingers over my stomach.

Muscles clenched as fire followed her touch. “Please, Tess. Now *I’m* the one begging.”

She smiled down at me as she moved to straddle my waist. She rolled a condom over my erection, and it took everything I had to not come all over her hands. As she rose up on her knees, she reached down and threaded her fingers between mine, leaning forward until she could brush her lips across mine. Then she sank down on my cock, engulfing it inch by inch in tight, wet heat. By the time we were completely joined, I was running through baseball statistics in my head to keep from losing it like some fifteen-year-old virgin.

I squeezed her hands, and she responded by tightening around my cock. I swore, sitting up and spinning us around so that she was underneath me. I

pinned her hands above her head, loving the way her eyes darkened as I held her down. I rolled my hips, and she moaned. I kept my eyes on her face as I pulled back, and still when I snapped my hips forward.

“Fuck, yes!” She dug her nails into the back of my hands.

I drove into her, setting a punishing pace that had us both panting, bodies straining toward the ultimate goal. It wasn't a race, not even with every part of me demanding I reach climax as quickly as possible. We'd get to it together.

We'd figure out the rest after that.

SIXTEEN

TESS

TWO FUCKING DAYS AND THE ONLY THING I HAD TO SHOW FOR IT WAS THE splint removed from my now-healed fingers. Well, that and a lack of sleep that came with having Clay staying in my room with me ever since he'd come to see me Monday evening. We hadn't been working together, and we hadn't been talking about what we were doing when we were away from the hotel.

Honestly, we hadn't been talking much at all. Not for real anyway. Aside from sex talk, we'd limited our other conversations to small talk about things we'd done during our time apart. With sixteen years, we had plenty of topics to cover without touching on anything serious.

Just because we hadn't been talking about what we were doing, however, didn't mean I couldn't account for Clay's movements...or that he hadn't been trying to snoop on me. Yesterday and today, we'd gone our separate ways after breakfast, or at least had appeared to anyway.

I'd suspected that he wasn't going to easily give up finding out what I was doing, so I'd walked slower than normal, pausing every few feet. I'd been pretending to window shop outside a jewelry store when I caught a glimpse of Clay's reflection in the glass. I continued on to a little café, acting as if I hadn't seen him at all. After ordering an espresso, I found a seat, took out my notebook, and started writing.

I'd cleared the story with my editor shortly after I'd talked to Clay and his father. I had a plan, but it never hurt to do a little extra preparation. I'd found that writing down questions as I thought of them was better than trying to come up with something off the cuff, and that's what I did until, out of the

corner of my eye, I saw Clay glance at his watch, look at me, and leave. It became my turn to follow him.

I repeated all of that this morning, and he did everything the same too. After leaving me at the café, he went to Capitol Hill where he met his father for an early lunch. After that, he headed back to the hotel for ten to fifteen minutes. I assumed he was checking to see if I'd returned since that wasn't really enough time to do anything else, and I doubted he'd forgotten something twice in a row. He then went to a different hotel and met with Agent Matthews. I didn't want to risk getting too close, so I sacrificed hearing their conversation for not getting made. Thirty minutes of watching them talk while a middle-aged waitress flirted with both of them was enough for me, and I left to pursue my own leads.

Unfortunately, none of those actually led anywhere. Not surprising since my attempts to speak to Secretary Ganesh had been met with polite but firm variations of 'his schedule is full,' and I still hadn't been able to track down Bri. Mom hadn't heard from Brianne, and Red Care continued to insist that no one by her name had ever been a part of their organization. In fact, they now said that the name Taylor MacIntosh wasn't on any of their lists either, even prior ones. When I asked about the group who'd been kidnapped by the drug cartel in Costa Rica, I'd been told that an 'incident' had occurred, but no one had been hurt. I asked about the two members who'd been killed, and that was when they inevitably hung up on me.

Granted, their responses would still be an important part of the story, but I'd hoped to speak to at least one person who wanted justice for the two people murdered by the cartel. One person in an organization known worldwide for helping those in need had to care that two lives had been lost.

The thing that kept nagging at me though was that I didn't think they were lying. Not the people I spoke to anyway. Something told me that what I was being told was exactly what it said in whatever record system they accessed to find the information. I didn't think Red Care was covering up what had happened to two of their workers – or the whole group for that matter. Whoever they answered to had been the one to alter the Red Care records.

And they were either the person Brianne worked for as well or someone close.

Bri might've been in the army at one time, but I'd kept the blinders on

long enough. Things just didn't add up, not the least of which was how Brianne had the knowledge and ability to drug both Clay and me *and* get us on a private plane before we woke up.

I wasn't sure which part interested me more, the who or the why. Either one would most likely make a good story, but I wouldn't be satisfied until I knew it all.

Tonight offered me the best opportunity I'd have to find out if I was on the right track with my suspicions about Secretary Ganesh and Congressman Kurth. Clay had been surprised when I'd reminded him this morning about the fundraiser his parents were having. He'd agreed we should go together, but I could tell he was curious about why I wanted to go. That house, after all, held a lot of memories, and not all of them were good. I knew it wouldn't be easy. Being back in DC had brought back a lot already. The worst part was that even the good memories would bring their own problems, particularly guilt over continuing to deceive Clay.

Butterflies fluttered in my stomach as I zipped up the side of my new dress. I wasn't sure how fancy this fundraiser was, but I was smart enough to know that if people were being invited based on the amount of money they would be willing to donate to charity, their income bracket was quite a bit more than my own.

The clothing stop I'd made when I'd first gotten to DC had been more about wearing something that didn't smell than about looking nice. Finding an appropriate dress for tonight had meant shopping for something nice but not budget-breaking. I'd just recently paid off my student loans, and I didn't want to run up credit card debt any more than I already had. That had meant a trip to a thrift store in the hopes that I could find something that didn't make me look like a child or a woman desperate to prove she wasn't a child.

I'd loved this dress from the moment I first saw it. Charcoal gray velvet, with long sleeves and a skirt down to my ankles, it would keep me warm tonight. A modest slit up to my knee on the right side would keep me from getting overheated. The neckline was a bit lower than I normally liked, but the light gray lace inset made up for the cut and gave me enough cover to be comfortable. A pair of inexpensive matching heels added three inches to my height, and a bit of light makeup finished everything off.

Since I felt self-conscious doing my hair and makeup, Clay was in the other bedroom, changing into the clothes his parents had sent over, and the

thought of going out there to face him set off another bevy of anxious butterflies. I'd gone to a couple school dances in DC and in Arizona, but never with anyone. Or, rather, I'd gone with a group instead of a specific guy. I'd been asked, but in Arizona, I hadn't ever found anyone I'd trusted enough to take me and not expect anything in return. In DC, it'd been a different reason that had kept me from agreeing to go with any of the guys who'd asked. As an adult, I'd even gone to weddings alone, dancing only when I hadn't had much of a choice in the matter.

For two years, I'd imagined what it would have been like to have Clay take me to a dance. I'd pictured a corsage that would match my dress and the suit he'd wear. Maybe he'd go all out and rent a limo, or we'd simply take his car. I wouldn't have even cared if Brianne had gone with us, as long as Clay was my date.

Now, we were going somewhere together, sort of like a date, and I felt like I was a teenager again, hoping that the cute guy I was crushing on would think I was pretty. I mentally scolded myself even as I poked at the simple style I'd swept my curls into. Yes, Clay and I were still having sex, and yes, we were going to the fundraiser together tonight, but this wasn't a date. Merely two friends with benefits who happened to be going the same place and deciding that it would be simpler to arrive and depart together. He hadn't even asked me to go with him, so it definitely wasn't a date. And I didn't really care that it wasn't. I was going for my own reasons that didn't involve Clay.

That thought brought along with it guilt that was harder to ignore than my nerves. I liked Clay, I really did, and I was enjoying our time together, but that didn't mean I had to put my career on hold simply because it might look bad for his father. Besides, I would've wanted to be with him these last few days even if I hadn't been looking into his dad. That meant I wasn't using him. My journalistic interests just happened to align with my physical ones.

I'd been giving myself the same pep talk a couple times a day ever since I'd decided to apologize to Clay with his father nearby, fully intending to do whatever it took to get the story. Almost whatever, anyway. As long as Clay was clean, his life wouldn't get screwed up. I'd get the information I needed and go back to New York. Clay could continue on with the life he'd had before Costa Rica. We'd both be happy.

"Tess, we need to get going." Clay's words were accompanied by a

knock on the door. “My parents don’t really do the ‘fashionably late’ thing.”

I opened the door and smiled. “I remember.” I would’ve added something else, but I was stopped by the slack-jawed expression on Clay’s face. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” The word came out hoarse. He cleared his throat and tried again. “There’s nothing wrong. You look...wow.”

I blushed. It seemed it didn’t matter how old I was, a compliment from him would always be enough to turn my head. “You look great too.”

For a journalist, my vocabulary sure sucked around him because there was no way ‘great’ was adequate enough a word to describe Clay Kurth in a tux that had clearly been tailored just for him.

He gave me a sheepish smile. “It’s been a few years since I’ve worn a tux. I’d actually been hoping it wouldn’t fit or would be out of style, but apparently, my mother not only had a new one made every year, she made a point of contacting my dry cleaners to check on my measurements.” He started to run his fingers through his hair but stopped himself before he made a mess of what I now realized was an expensive new cut. “She also made a point of telling me that she donated the old one every year to a charity that helps low-income high schoolers with clothes for their proms.”

Between the clothes, the haircut, and the lack of stubble that had been there just this morning, Clay looked less like an FBI agent who’d spent the last month and a half trekking through Costa Rica and fending off a drug cartel and more like the politician his parents had always wanted him to be.

I was overly and uncomfortably aware once again of just how far apart our two worlds really were. It had been easy to forget in Costa Rica when we’d been sharing the same hotels and searching the same dive bars. We might be sharing a bed at the moment, but reality had set in.

“They wanted to send a car and driver, but I told them it wasn’t necessary.” He held out his hand. “As you’ll see in a moment, they didn’t listen.”

We rode the elevator down to the lobby, pretending to ignore the stares of the other guests. It wasn’t hard since I was intently focused on his hand clasped around mine. A silly thing, since we’d been doing a lot more than hand-holding, but here, the gesture meant something to me. Something that I was sure it didn’t mean to Clay, so I didn’t let myself get carried away. I would enjoy it, but not allow enjoyment to become expectation.

It was a little hard to keep my head out of the clouds when we stepped outside, and I saw the sleek black town car waiting for us, complete with a uniformed driver who held the back door open. The whole drive to the Kurth house, I kept waiting for my life to turn back into a pumpkin, but we arrived at the house without any issues. Then the driver opened my door, and Clay held out a hand to help me from the car and the flash of cameras nearly blinded me.

This was going to be a weird night.

I'D BEEN MORE worried about fitting in than I'd admitted to myself. Even as Clay introduced me as an old friend, all I could think was that someone was going to say that they knew who my family was and that I didn't belong there. One part of my mind said it was irrational to think that anyone in DC other than Clay's family would remember a kid from sixteen years ago, but another part couldn't stop thinking about the different police benefits Darius had taken my mom to, benefits where people like this would have mingled.

After a glass of expensive champagne and an hour of polite small talk, I finally started to relax. It helped that Clay had been at my side the entire time, his hand occasionally resting at the small of my back. The warmth of his touch grounded me, kept the surreal nature of my surroundings from overwhelming me, and by the time he handed me a second glass of champagne, I found that I didn't need it. I sipped it anyway, not about to let a good glass of alcohol go to waste, but I was able to savor it better now than I had been.

"So, Miss Gardener, Clay says you're a reporter with the *New York Times*." A portly gentleman with a red nose and wispy gray hair gave me the sort of smarmy smile I associated with most politicians.

"I am." I offered a polite smile of my own.

"You must be a brave young woman, to enter such an uncertain field," he continued. "How did your parents feel about you becoming part of an industry moving away from print and into the electronic world?"

I'd met men like him before, ones who expected the naïve little girl to swoon over their attention, fawn all over their clichéd pick-up lines designed

to sound intelligent and remind the object of their affection just how fortunate they were to be graced by their presence.

If he thought I'd fall for any of that bullshit, he was in for a rather rude awakening.

"I haven't seen my dad in twenty years, but my mom was happy with my choice," I answered honestly.

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask him how his parents had felt when he'd told them that he was going into a soul-sucking line of work, but it was just then that I noticed Clay and his father making their way to an unobtrusive door at the back of the ballroom.

"If you'll excuse me," I said, not caring one bit if my newfound admirer wanted me to stay. I was here to work.

I smiled at the guests I passed but didn't make eye contact. One hint that I was interested in talking could cost me everything. I needed to know what Clinton Kurth was saying to his son, and if it had any impact on the story I was pursuing. As the pair exited, it was all I could do not to run. Only the knowledge that running would draw attention to myself kept me at the same steady pace. As it was, I felt like I was going to be caught any second.

My pulse thudded in my ears as I slipped through the door only a couple minutes after Clay and his father. It might have been sixteen years since I'd last been in this house, but I remembered where this corridor led because, aside from a bathroom and a closet, the only place it could go was the library.

I'd always loved the library. Clay had always preferred mysteries to my biographies and autobiographies, but we both loved a well-written book. We'd spent many a rainy afternoon in there, and hearing the voices coming from the end of the hall confirmed that the library was where father and son had gone.

I slowed my approach when I was only a few feet away from the doorway, not wanting to risk my shoes making any noise to alert them to my presence. I missed a few sentences as I got myself close enough to hear, but what I heard was enough.

SEVENTEEN

TESS

“...THAT’S A LOT OF MONEY. I DIDN’T KNOW YOU HAD THOSE TYPES OF connections, Clay.”

“Really?”

“Those are the sorts of people who can make or break a campaign. Especially if they’re the kind of people who fly under the radar. Unless there’s dirt there for the press to dig up.”

“Don’t worry. I know what I’m doing. No one’s going to find anything.”

I couldn’t get the conversation out of my head. Clay and his father had been talking in stiff, hushed voices, but I’d heard every word clear as day. Only a few minutes and then I’d scurried away, but everything had changed. Congressman Kurth, who I’d always admired even after we’d moved to Arizona, was as crooked as the rest of Washington, and Clay was involved in whatever it was.

I’d known I wouldn’t be able to pretend everything was all right, so I’d found Mrs. Kurth and given the excuse of a migraine. I’d told her I’d take a taxi, but she’d insisted the town car take me back to the hotel. I’d thought about getting a new room, but that’d definitely tip Clay off that something was wrong. If I wanted to get the whole story, I had to stick with Clay until I got enough evidence to support what my article would say. Rule one of journalism was to protect sources, but rule two was corroborate everything. Half of an overheard conversation at a party wouldn’t cut it.

When my phone rang, I breathed a sigh of relief and rolled over to grab it from the nightstand. I’d hoped to be sleeping by the time Clay got back, but that wasn’t happening any time soon. Maybe a distraction would help. The

screen showed a number I didn't recognize, but I answered it anyway.

"What the hell are you doing, Tess?"

My hand tightened around the phone as my heart stuttered in my chest. Torn between anger and disbelief, I managed to choke out a single word. "Brienne?"

"Yes, it's me." She actually had the gall to sound annoyed and impatient with me, as if I was the one causing all the problems we'd had the last few months. "And yes, I know you and Clay were looking for me. Yes, I put you on that plane. No, I'm not going to explain myself or tell you where I've been so just—"

"Stop." I didn't yell, but she must've heard something in my tone because she did as I said. "You're unbelievable, you know that? And not in a good way, Bri. I dropped everything to come down to Costa Rica and find you because Mom was worried. Then whatever the hell it is you're involved in nearly got me killed, but do I get a thanks from you?"

"Is that what you want?" she said with a barking laugh. "A thank you for rescuing me from the cartel? Fine. Thanks. Now can we talk about what it is *you're* doing?"

"No, we can't. You fucking *drugged* me and put me on a plane against my will. That's kidnapping, Brienne, and I'm pretty sure the army frowns on their people doing that to family members...or to FBI agents."

"Clay needs to hear this too."

I ground my teeth. "Hear what?"

"That you both need to stop."

"What are you talking about?" I was beginning to feel that migraine I'd lied about.

Brienne made an exasperated sound. "Let me spell it out for you. You're in danger."

"*I'm* in danger."

"Why do you think I sent you home? I was trying to keep you safe."

Of course she was.

Then I really heard what she'd said. She'd sent *me* away to keep *me* safe. Not Clay and me. Just me. Maybe it was just a slip of the tongue because she was talking to me. But maybe it'd been an intentional choice, trying to convey something she wouldn't want anyone else to overhear. Anyone who might be in my hotel room with me.

“Is it Congressman Kurth?” I asked. “Am I in danger from Clay and his father?”

“What?” She sounded too surprised to be acting.

I laid my cards on the table. “I had an informant tell me that the government was involved in what happened in Costa Rica, so I came with Clay to DC where I’ve been tracking his movements ever since I saw him with Secretary Ganesh. I heard Clay and Congressman Kurth talking about something Clay had done for his dad, something that would be dangerous if the press found out about it...something to do with money...”

“I’m not going to debate things with you, Tess. Go back to New York and find another story. Go back to the life you had before all this happened.”

She hung up before I could say anything else. I looked at the phone for a moment, tempted to call her back just so I could hang up on her. Then I heard a noise behind me and rolled over.

I was going to be sick.

EIGHTEEN

CLAY

IT WAS ALL A LIE. EVERY LOOK AND TOUCH, EVERY KISS. SHE'D BEEN USING me. Using me to find information for her article. Using me for my connections just like other people had done my whole life.

I was going to be sick.

"You heard." She at least didn't insult me by making it a question or denying what she'd said.

I nodded, not trusting myself to say anything. I'd come back here because Mother had told me that Tess left in a hurry, complaining of a migraine. Between the car accident and the drugs Brianne had given us, I'd been worried about Tess's health. She was stronger than she appeared, but she also wasn't very good at taking care of herself if she had something else on her mind.

Humiliation washed over me as I realized the entire time I'd been thinking and worrying about her, she'd been trying to get to my father through me.

"I suppose turnabout's fair play," she said as she got off the bed. "I overheard something that changed the way I looked at people in my life. Now, you overheard something that changed the way you look at me."

How the fuck was she standing there, next to the bed we'd shared for the past couple days, acting like any of this was okay?

My temper flared, and I came farther into the room. "Eavesdropping and assuming half of a conversation fits into whatever story you've already made up is shit journalism. I thought better of you, Tess."

"Me?" She crossed over to me and poked me in the chest. "You're the

one having secret meetings with your father, talking about money.”

I raised an eyebrow at the accusation. “I don’t know what part of that conversation you heard, but I do know that it’s not all of it because if you’d actually heard it all, you would have known what it was really about. Just because you weren’t invited into the conversation doesn’t mean we were up to something nefarious.”

She crossed her arms and glared at me, like I was the bad guy in this.

“My father heard about the ransom drop,” I explained, the words coming out of me like razors. “How he knew about it, I don’t know. He knows a lot of people in a lot of places. But that’s not the point. What you heard was my father and I discussing his concerns about where I’d gotten the money to pay the ransom. He wanted to make sure I hadn’t done anything stupid to get it, something that could hurt his squeaky-clean reputation. Then when he found out that I’d gotten it from Rylan, he wanted an introduction. A campaign donor without an angle is a big deal to people like my father.”

Tess had a shit poker face, and now, I watched as she processed everything I told her. I waited because I wanted to see the moment when she realized she’d made a complete ass of herself. Again.

I didn’t know why I bothered.

“Clay, I’m sor—”

I waved a hand at her. “I don’t care.”

I left before she could say anything else, barely taking the time to grab my bag of clothes. I didn’t care. Not anymore. I was done. Done with all of this. I’d tell Ray that I was going back to Denver. I needed to put a few more states between Tess and me.

As I walked out into the cold February night with only my bag and my phone, I needed to talk to someone. Not Ray. I needed a friend, not a work partner. For a few weeks, I’d thought I’d had two of my closest friends back, but now I knew it had been a lie, just like everything else.

I tapped a contact name and hoped enough time had passed that the awkwardness would be gone between us.

“Clay? Are you okay?” The concern in Rona’s voice told me that I’d made the right call.

“I’m okay,” I said before spitting out the truth a moment later, “No, I’m actually not.”

The story came pouring out of me, all of it. I didn’t give graphic details,

but I told her everything else. I hadn't realized how much I'd truly needed to talk through everything until I finished.

We shared a minute of silence, and then Rona spoke. "Wow."

"Yeah."

"It sounds to me like you really like this woman."

I sighed. I'd forgotten how well she knew me. "I do."

"But you're going to walk away without letting her explain what she was thinking?" There wasn't any accusation in her voice, just a matter-of-fact question.

"She lied to me. She did the same thing to me that she *thought* I did to her."

"Think about it, Clay," Rona said. "This woman drops everything to fly to a foreign country for a sister she believed betrayed her. Before she can even start looking, she finds herself face-to-face with someone she never thought she'd see again."

"I know what happened, Rona. I was there," I reminded her.

"Then you understand that she hasn't really had a minute to think in this whole thing. She's not a soldier like her sister or an FBI agent like you. She's a journalist who'd never been in a situation like that before."

Dammit, she had a point.

"Talk to her," Rona said. "You'll regret it if you walk away without giving her a chance."

It took me a few seconds to answer. "I don't know if I can do that."

"Then you might find yourself living a life you don't want." She paused, and her voice softened. "And you won't have anyone to blame for it but yourself."

NINETEEN

TESS

I COULDN'T BLAME ANYONE BUT MYSELF FOR HOW THINGS ENDED UP. CLAY had gotten the raw end of this deal as much as he had sixteen years ago with Brianne lying about him. This time, it wasn't her fault though, and I didn't even have her excuse of trying to protect someone. I hadn't been trying to protect anyone when I'd snooped on his phone, or when I'd purposefully inserted myself in his life so I could put myself into a position to talk to people I wouldn't otherwise have access to. No, there hadn't been anything noble on my part, despite the fact that I actually did want him. I'd wanted a story more, and no matter how many people that story might help, it didn't excuse what I'd done to him.

Two days had passed, and I hadn't heard from him or seen him. I hadn't expected him to reach out, and I wasn't going to attempt contact myself. I hoped he'd go back to Denver. Not because I didn't want to see him anymore, but because I wanted him to have his life back. He deserved to have someone in his life who wouldn't do shit like this to him. The Gardener women needed to stop dragging Clay down.

None of that made me hurt any less, but I wasn't going to try to stop the pain. After what I'd done, I deserved to feel every moment of it. The only objective I had now was to find Brianne so I could go home and have an answer for my mom. I'd write about my experiences and hope my editor took that instead of the exposé I'd originally pitched. Brianne would probably be pissed since I fully intended to reveal who she was and what she did for a living, but she hadn't given me any reason not to include it.

I pasted on a charming smile as I approached the customer service desk.

I'd been trying for two days to track down the number Brianne had called from but hadn't had any luck. Any calls I'd made to the cell company had been routed and re-routed until I didn't know if the people I was talking to were robots or real.

Today, I was trying something new and probably crazy.

"Hi." I leaned against the counter and hoped I could pull off a flirty co-ed. "I was wondering if you could help me."

The guy who turned around was easily seven or eight years younger than me, with ears sticking out from under a mop of bright orange hair. His dark eyes widened, and his Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed.

"What can I do for you?" His voice cracked as color flooded his cheeks.

"I have this ex, Riley, and he keeps calling me and harassing me."

"That's awful."

I nodded in agreement and batted my eyes, feeling like a complete idiot as I did it. "I'm afraid all the time that he's just going to show up at my place."

"I'm not sure what I can do?" The last word lilted up like a question.

"You see, it's easy to ignore his calls, and every time I change my number or block his, he finds a way around it. His sister told me that he moved to Tennessee, but I don't know if she's telling the truth. If I knew where he was, I'd feel a whole lot safer."

The kid's eyes lit up. "Does he have a Find My Phone app?"

I shook my head. "No, but isn't there another way for you to find out where someone makes a call from?"

He scratched the back of his head. "In theory. Do you happen to know the carrier?"

I wrote down the phone number and slid it across the counter. I let his fingers brush against mine when he took it. I didn't know if the store's computer would be able to do anything, but I was pretty much out of ideas that didn't involve me going to the offices of every major cell phone company in America in the hopes I could talk my way into Brianne's account. Since that had about a dozen different ways it could go wrong, and a whole lot of additional variables I couldn't control, going into a general phone store in the hopes that someone could do something seemed like as good a chance to take as any.

Despite my determination, I wasn't very hopeful about finding Brianne.

My sister had made it clear that she'd go to pretty much any length to stay away from me, and everything I'd seen in Costa Rica made me suspicious of exactly how she'd learned to go to those lengths.

"I did a reverse number search," the clerk said. "It comes up as a landline in Duluth."

I frowned. Bri wasn't in Duluth. Aside from the fact that there would be no reason for her to go there, she wouldn't have wasted the time and effort to send Clay and me away from San Jose if she was just going back to the States herself. It would've been a whole lot easier for her to come back to the US with us, then simply go her own way when we all left from LAX. There wouldn't have been a need for her to leave or to drug Clay and me. Hell, I probably wouldn't have even noticed if she'd fallen off the grid at that point. Not for weeks or months, anyway.

The clerk cleared his throat, his eyes darting around as if he expected to be caught doing something he shouldn't. "I don't really advertise this, but I'm a bit of a hacker."

"Really?" I didn't have to pretend to put some excitement into my voice. I'd known a couple of people at the paper who had hacker contacts, but those sorts of informants were closely guarded, and it would've taken a lot of time and effort to get ahold of one of them.

"I'm not like Pentagon-hacking worthy," he said with a pleased blush. "But I think I can crack into a phone company. I can't do it here, but I get off in ten minutes. You can come back to my place while I do it."

"I can't," I said, glancing at my watch. "I have another appointment to keep, but I can give you my phone number for you to call when you find something."

I MIGHT HAVE BEEN WAITING for my new friend to illegally obtain entry into some private files before I could continue my search for Brianne, but there was another angle I'd been pursuing as well. A link to Brianne, albeit a more indirect one.

I hadn't needed a computer hack to find this information, but it had required a lot of string-pulling.

It's said that everyone in the world is connected to everyone else by six degrees of separation. Will Smith was in a movie with that title, and a couple of bored college kids had turned it into a game called the Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon. However anyone wanted to spin it, the conclusion remained the same. Finding a path from me to someone else was simply a matter of finding the right set of connections.

Connections such as calling in a favor to Lanie that got me an introduction to an ex of hers who worked for a DC-based tabloid. A call from him took me to a lobbyist. Two cups of coffee later, I had the name of one of the White House groundskeepers who was married to the assistant to the Secretary of the Interior. A "Happy Birthday" call from a popular daytime TV actor I'd interviewed a year or so back was all it took to get me the information I wanted. Namely, a home address for one Sofie Harmon.

Nearly three hours of cutting back and forth across DC making deals and promising favors, but it was worth it. Clay might've had Sofie's number in his phone, but by the time I'd started looking for her, that number had been disconnected. I'd contacted the army but only gotten the runaround. I assumed that had been what had prompted Brianne's warning, but it could've been anything.

None of that mattered now. I had someone working on getting information from Brianne's phone number, and I was in a cab, on my way to the house of one Sofie Harmon, army major and sister-in-law to Secretary Ganesh.

Things were finally starting to go my way.

TWENTY

CLAY

RAY HAD LEFT FOR DENVER ON A SEVEN THIRTY FLIGHT THIS MORNING, AND his parting words had been a warning to mind my own business. I'd promised him I'd follow him home early Sunday morning – the first flight I'd been able to get – and neither one of us had acknowledged that I hadn't said anything about his warning.

I'd spent the last two days trying to figure out how to best handle things and trying to forget how angry I was at Tess...every single minute. Clearly, I'd tried and failed since I was currently gripping the wheel hard enough to turn my knuckles white. I needed to do something to find some closure. It was the only way I'd be able to go back to my life in Denver.

The thing was, the only way I could find closure was if I knew Tess was out of danger, and to do that, I had to find Brianne. It didn't matter how pissed I was at Tess, I wanted her safe. I'd made some discreet inquiries, but no one knew anything. Before Ray had left, I'd asked him to reach out to Secretary Ganesh and get me an address for Sofie Harmon.

Now I was on my way to Sofie's house, hoping that Brianne had reached out to her girlfriend in the last couple days. The house wasn't large, but it was big enough for a family to live comfortably. It was the sort of place a person could be proud to own. A place where I would've been proud to raise a family. I supposed it was still possible that I'd have one someday, but after the way things had gone with the last two women I'd dated, I wasn't holding my breath.

Then again, it wasn't like Tess and I had actually dated. We'd fucked and argued, and sometimes, we actually slept in the same bed, but we hadn't

dated, not really...

Dammit! I was thinking about Tess again. It seemed like every time I thought I was moving past her, there she was. I didn't understand how I'd been able to get over Rona so quickly when I'd been with her for months but being with Tess for less than two months had me in knots.

Except, I had to acknowledge that I hadn't been with Tess for just that short of a period of time. She'd been a part of me for my whole life, even when we'd been apart, the thought of her had always been there, though often unacknowledged.

"Fuck," I growled as I slammed my hands against the steering wheel. I needed Sofie to know where Brianne was so I could pass along the information to Tess and then get out of there.

I managed a smile when I knocked on the door, but it faltered as soon as the door opened, and I caught a glimpse of who was sitting on the couch behind the woman who I assumed was Sofie Harmon.

"Tess." The word choked off in my throat.

"You must be Clay Kurth."

The statement brought my attention back to the woman in front of me even though my awareness of Tess didn't change one iota.

"I am."

She put out a hand for me to shake, and I took it.

Sofie was forty-three, I knew that from the little I'd gleaned from her available file. Her blonde hair was longer than it was in her last ID picture, but those teal eyes were just as sharp.

"Come on inside." She stepped out of the way, giving me a clear view of Tess again.

I wanted to look away, but I couldn't. I was drawn to her the same way I always had been.

"Brianne's mentioned you, Clay," Sofie said to me as she took a seat in an armchair. "I'm assuming that you're here for the same reason as Tess, but as I was just telling her, I don't know where Brianne is."

I stuck my hands in my pockets and stayed standing. "And we're just supposed to believe you? No disrespect, but she is your girlfriend, isn't she? You did have your former brother-in-law pull strings to get someone – me, namely – down to Costa Rica to find her, didn't you?"

Sofie didn't seem fazed by a single word I said. If anything, she looked a

little amused. “It doesn’t matter to me if you believe me or not. I haven’t heard from her since the two of you found Tess.”

“And you’re not worried?” Tess spoke up, her voice sending a stab of pain through me. “You haven’t heard from your girlfriend for days. Why aren’t you concerned?”

“Bri and I met in the army,” Sofie said. “Danger has always been a part of our relationship. We’ve learned to deal with it in our own ways.”

“Wow, I wish I could be that blasé about someone I cared about possibly being in mortal danger.” I didn’t even try to conceal the annoyance in my voice. “Must be nice not to care—”

My words finally did the trick and got Sofie on her feet, eyes flashing as that cool façade slipped. “Don’t pretend you know anything about my relationship with Brianne. Now, I think the two of you need to leave. I don’t have anything more to say to you.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but then Tess was up and shoving me toward the door. The movement caught me off-guard enough that I didn’t manage to catch my feet until Sofie closed the door behind us.

“What the hell, Tess?” I snapped.

She shook her head. “I don’t think she knows anything, but even if she did, she wouldn’t say a word about it to either of us after the way you talked to her in there.”

“You really buy all that?” I stopped and shook off the arguments I wanted to make. “It doesn’t matter.”

I went down the steps and then moved toward the car Ray had rented. I was done here.

“Clay, wait.”

Dammit.

She shivered as I turned toward her, and I felt a stab of guilt at how miserable she looked. I wondered how much of it came from the weather.

“Get in the car,” I said gruffly. “Couldn’t even bother to find a coat? Dammit, Tess, we’re not in Costa Rica anymore.”

I turned on the heat as soon as I started the car and cranked it up as high as it would go. She rubbed her hands together, and I was tempted to reach out and take them between mine. I was just as tempted to drive her to the closest bus stop and drop her off before heading straight for the airport to wait on standby for the first available flight out of that damned place.

“I’m sorry,” Tess blurted out. “I just had to say it. I won’t even pretend that I’m asking you to forgive me. I know what I did was unforgivable. I just had to get it out there.”

I drove down two more streets in silence with Rona’s words echoing in my head, and then I parked at the curb. “All right, say it all.”

“Say it all?” She blinked at me, startled.

“You wanted to say something before, and I didn’t want to hear it. Say it now.” I leaned back in my seat and crossed my arms, determined to hear her out and still walk away.

“I knew I was wrong to look at your phone, and I should have apologized right off the bat.” She shook her head, her eyes glistening. “No, I shouldn’t have even picked up your phone. It didn’t matter how good my intentions were. I would’ve been furious if our positions were reversed.”

“The phone thing’s a hell of a lot more understandable than using me the way you did.” My words sounded as cold as she looked. “Lying to me.”

“You’re right. About how wrong I was and how I hid things from you. Not everything was a lie though. I’d been thinking of coming to you and apologizing almost from the moment I walked away,” Tess admitted. “I meant every word that I said, and my intentions...it’s not an excuse. There’s nothing to excuse me deceiving you like that. I had my suspicions, but I should have talked to you. Just like I should have talked to you that night, no matter what Brianne said.”

The pain in her voice squeezed my heart.

“I keep fucking things up between us. I blamed Brianne and you, and then Brianne again when I learned the truth, but I should’ve accepted the blame that was mine. I don’t know if I sabotage things intentionally or if I’m just wired to screw up.” Her voice cracked. “I’m sorry for all of it, and I’ll never forgive myself for ruining what should have been the best thing in my life.”

She reached for the door handle.

Shit.

I couldn’t do this. I couldn’t walk away. Not without giving us a real shot.

“We did this all out of order.”

She turned back to look at me, and I saw the spark of hope flicker in her eyes.

“We can’t really forget our history. We have too much of it, and we have more of the good than bad, so we shouldn’t forget it. But maybe we can put

the past behind us and start things clean, the right way.” I held out my hand. “Tomorrow is Valentine’s Day. Let’s go on a date. A real date. No talking about Costa Rica or Brienne or anything to do with cartels. Just you and me having fun.”

She slid her hand into mine, and the expression on her face told me that I’d made the right choice. I curled my fingers around hers, and the touch felt just as right now as it had the first time I’d touched her after realizing what she meant to me. This was what was important, what she and I could be. Everything else would wait.

TWENTY-ONE

TESS

A DATE WITH CLAY KURTH. ON VALENTINE'S DAY, NO LESS. FIFTEEN-YEAR-old me would've been thrilled.

Thirty-one-year-old me was thrilled but also terrified. I'd meant everything I'd said about how I was the one who'd screwed everything up, and I knew he was giving me a second chance here. I wouldn't get another one. I didn't deserve another one. Hell, I didn't deserve this one.

As much as I'd wanted to think of the fundraiser as a date, I'd always had it in the back of my mind that I needed to look for opportunities to search for information. This time, it was just Clay and me, nothing else. That, plus the fact that I was giving him complete control over everything made my mind race with all the possible scenarios that could come from an unknown number of variables.

I wondered if I'd even be able to eat tonight, what with my stomach churning the way it was.

Clay hadn't said where we were going on our date, but my clothing options didn't allow for much in the way of choices. I'd bought a fancy dress for the fundraiser, but I'd also picked up a couple simple dress outfits in case I needed to go into a meeting where jeans would be frowned upon. It was one of those dresses I put on now.

It was the definition of the simple little black dress with three-quarter sleeves, a fashionable but not revealing neckline, and a hem that hit mid-calf. I wore the same heels I'd worn to the fundraiser and only a hint more makeup. All in all, I thought I looked good, but that did little to ease my nerves. I knew Clay was physically attracted to me.

But I didn't know if he wanted to be *with* me anymore.

The thought of losing him again froze me to the core, and I knew I'd need to be careful to keep from showing Clay how scared I was. I didn't want him to feel any pressure from me. No matter how much I wanted to be with him, I didn't want it to be reluctant on his part. I wanted it to be a new start, just as he'd said tonight would be.

He knocked on my door right at six o'clock, and I had to force myself to count to five in an attempt to calm my racing pulse before I opened the door. He was dressed more casually than he had been the last time we'd left this room together, but he looked just as good.

"You're beautiful." He smiled at me and held out his hand, just like he had yesterday in the car.

"Right back at ya." I returned the smile and took his hand. My heart flipped as he threaded his fingers between mine. "I assumed we're going to eat, so I didn't have dinner. If we're not, I make no promises that my stomach will stay quiet." I felt like an idiot as I talked, but I kept going to fill the silence. "Not that we have to go eat. I'm okay if we don't. I'll be happy with whatever you have planned. It doesn't need to be anything fancy or—"

Clay stopped just before we reached the front doors to the hotel and yanked on my hand, tugging me against his chest. I barely had time to clutch his shirt before his mouth slammed down on mine. The kiss was brief, rough, and thorough, stealing the air from my lungs and turning my knees to rubber.

When he finally ended the kiss, I swayed on my feet.

"You were saying?"

The eyebrow arch and accompanying cocky smile heated me from the inside.

"I-I don't remember."

"Good." He kissed the tip of my nose. "Then my plan worked."

I WASN'T sure why I'd expected our first official date, on Valentine's Day, to be something as simple as dinner and a movie. Maybe if we'd been in Denver or New York we would've done something of that sort, showing each other our favorite places to eat, but this was DC, the place where we'd grown

up together, and Clay had something special planned.

“How many people have lived here since we moved away?” I asked as we stood in front of the house where I’d lived as a child.

It looked smaller.

“Three or four, I think,” Clay said as he wrapped his arm around my waist. “I lost count after I joined the FBI. They kept me moving around a lot.”

The night wasn’t as cold as last night, but it was still cold enough that snuggling into his side was equal parts for warmth and to be closer to him. I turned my face into his side and inhaled deeply.

Damn, he smelled good.

“Doesn’t look like anyone’s living here right now,” I said as I turned my face back to the house. “It’s sort of sad. Seeing it empty.”

“It is,” he agreed. “I know things weren’t always good for your family, but I also know there were fun times here. Times I was fortunate enough to share on occasion.”

“Most of the best times here were with you,” I said.

“Do you ever think about moving back?”

“Not really,” I answered honestly. “The things I missed about DC, I have in New York.” I squeezed his arm. “Almost everything, anyway.”

“I had a great first date planned back then,” he said, keeping his arm around me as we turned away. “And since we happen to be having our sort-of first date here, I figured, why not dust off the old plans.”

“I’m getting a second-hand date?” I teased.

“Not at all,” he said with a laugh. “Merely the date we should have had if things had gone differently.”

“You didn’t happen to enjoy this date with a girlfriend at a later date?” I kept my voice light, but I wasn’t sure if it would fool him, so I added, “It’s okay if you did. At least I know you would’ve worked out the bugs.”

He laughed and kissed my temple. “I never used it. I couldn’t visualize it with anyone but you.”

I didn’t deserve the relief that flowed through me, but I embraced it anyway. “Where to, then?”

“Well, after I picked you up from your house, I was going to have us take a bit of a walk.” He glanced down at me. “It was a warmer time of year, if you remember.”

“I remember.” I remembered everything.

“There’s this little family-owned restaurant a few blocks over that’s still around. I stumbled onto it a couple weeks before you moved. It’s got the best lasagna I’ve ever had. And the best strawberry rhubarb pie.”

Both of those were my favorites and had been back then too.

“After we eat, we’re going to go ice skating.”

“Wasn’t the ice rink closed at that time of year?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said. “But the water park’s closed right now.”

“You were going to take me to a water park?” I asked in amused amazement. “After eating lasagna and pie. Didn’t your mother ever tell you to wait an hour after eating to go swimming?”

He laughed. “I never said I was a smart seventeen-year-old.”

We’d hardly gone more than a few steps before it started to snow. Not some little flurry either, but fat, wet flakes that clung to our lashes and dampened our clothes. I heard kids squealing in laughter as they danced around, catching snowflakes, but they seemed far away from our little bubble.

I waited a few more minutes before saying what was on my mind.

“We could’ve taken the car, you know.”

“Yes,” he said, “but then I would’ve missed you snuggling close to me for heat.”

“True,” I agreed. I enjoyed a few more minutes of listening to the snow crunching beneath our feet, but the growing lack of sensation in my toes made me speak up. “Not to complain, but are we walking much farther? I don’t know about you, but I like having all my toes.”

“You’re a true comedian, Tess,” he said wryly. “It’s only another block. Though I can try to warm you up if you’d like.”

The look he gave me left no doubt about how he intended to warm me. Tempted as I was, tonight was about fresh starts, and falling right back into bed together without really thinking about it was a habit we needed to break no matter how good it was. Fortunately, the restaurant that Clay promised had the best lasagna ever appeared in front of us before I could argue myself into suggesting a return to my hotel room. I couldn’t say a part of me wasn’t a little disappointed, however, that he hadn’t tried to kiss me again.

The door opened, bringing with it a rush of warm, garlic-scented air. An elderly couple smiled at us as Clay held the door open for them. As she

walked by, the fragile-looking woman patted my arm and wished me a happy Valentine's Day. It wasn't until then that it really hit me. For the first time in my life, I had a date on Valentine's Day. I swallowed around the lump in my throat and gave Clay a watery smile as we walked inside.

"Mr. Kurth, how good to see you again! It has been too long." A plump, dark-haired woman came forward and grasped Clay's hands. When he leaned down, she kissed both of his cheeks. The surprise on her face when she saw me lasted only a few seconds, and then she was greeting me with the same enthusiasm.

"It's great to see you again, Mama Rosita," Clay said. "Work has kept me away for far too long."

With a knowing look in my direction, she said, "I do not believe it is the work that has kept you away. You have found a beautiful love."

I flushed and waited for Clay to explain that it was too early to use that word, but he didn't. Instead, he simply said two words that set my heart galloping.

"I know."

"You have brought her here to meet your parents, yes?"

Clay smiled. "Actually, they already know her. Mama Rosita, I would like you to meet Tess Gardener. We were high school sweethearts. Sort of."

Her face lit up with understanding. "She is the one you wanted to bring here years ago."

"Yes. It's taking us a while, but I finally have my date."

"Come with me," she said. "I have a special table just for you."

She led us to a cozy booth in a shadowed corner and then left before taking drink orders. When I looked puzzled, Clay smiled.

"Trust me, Mama always knows the perfect wine to go with every meal."

His comment didn't do much to help my confusion. "But she doesn't know what we're having yet."

"Yes, she does," Clay said softly. "With the exception of alcohol, I had a meal all picked out before. She's going to make it for us tonight."

I could spend the next sixteen years with this man and not deserve him. Some of that must've shown on my face because he reached out and took my hand.

"What's wrong?"

"This is wonderful," I said. "You did all this, and I treated you so badly."

“Hey, clean slate, remember? We’re moving past all that.” One corner of his mouth tipped up in a partial smile. “Besides, I’ve done my fair share of stupid stuff I’ve had to apologize for. We’re not perfect, but if the past couple days have taught me anything, it’s that I’d rather be imperfect with you than perfect with anyone else.”

Tears pricked at my eyelids, and I blinked them back. “Me too. I don’t want anyone else.”

“Ah, perfect timing,” Mama said as she came back to the table with a bottle of wine. “Declarations of love are always the best way to start any meal.”

I didn’t dare tell her we hadn’t gotten to that yet. What she didn’t know wouldn’t hurt her. Besides, I wasn’t sure her word choice was wrong.

“ICE SKATING WAS DEFINITELY BETTER than a water park,” I said as Clay and I walked back into the hotel lobby.

“You would say that,” he grumbled good-naturedly. “You weren’t on your ass half the time.”

“Aw, is your bottom bruised?” I patted the firm muscles beneath Clay’s slacks.

I had to admit, I never would have been this bold as a teenager, and I was thoroughly enjoying it now. Another thing that was definitely different from how our original first date would have gone was that when I’d been ogling the way Clay’s body had looked on the ice, I hadn’t needed to imagine what he looked like beneath his clothes. I remembered every inch of that gorgeous skin, those defined muscles.

“I’m glad you’re finding this amusing,” he said as we walked onto the elevator. The doors closed, and he was suddenly in my space, pressing me against the elevator wall. His hands rested on either side of my head, caging me in.

“Clay?” My voice shook, but it wasn’t from fear.

“I thought I could do this,” he said, his voice husky. “Go on a date with you and drop you off at your hotel room with a mere goodnight kiss.”

My breathing was ragged as I waited to hear the rest of what he had to

say.

He brushed his lips across mine. “A single kiss from you is always enough, and yet, at the same time, never enough. If you invite me into your room, into your bed...”

He let the sentence trail off, leaving it to my imagination. I didn’t intend to keep it that way though. His need was as great as mine. I could feel it radiating off him and understood that he knew what I would do when we got to the room. I would invite him in. Into my room and into my bed. And he would accept the offer.

Still...

“I don’t want to ruin things again,” I whispered.

The elevator doors opened before he could respond, but his tight grip on my hand kept me from panicking. My statement hadn’t sent him running. The conversation wasn’t over.

I pulled him into my room after me, that part of our talk taken out of the equation, but I didn’t go to the bed. Once we got there, I wouldn’t be thinking straight. Instead, I leaned against the desk, and he came to stand in front of me, taking both my hands in his.

“I don’t want to do this anymore.”

My heart sank at his words.

“Wait.” He squeezed my hands. “I mean that I don’t want to do this back and forth anymore. I want us to be together, the way we always should have been. No more lies, no more hiding things. We care about each other, and now we need to trust each other. If we have concerns, we talk about them, the way we used to when we were just friends.”

I smiled as I asked, “Were we ever *just* friends?”

He pulled me against him. “For a little while, I think. Before you realized that you wanted to kiss me.” His grin turned roguish. “And before I realized all the not-so-friendly things I wanted to do to you.”

A shiver of desire ran through me. “No more lies. No more secrets.”

Even as the last word was coming out of my mouth, our hands were on each other, yanking at clothes until they were scattered on the floor. I pulled his head down for a kiss, fingers digging into the back of his neck. His tongue parted my lips, and he picked me up, sitting me on the desk.

I parted my legs, using my heels to pull him to me. Strong, nimble fingers slid down my spine, then along my ribcage. Each trail of heat spread across

my skin, stoking the embers inside me. Then his lips made their way down my neck, and I tipped my head back, wanting more.

“I need to taste you,” he murmured a second before biting my collarbone.

“That feels more like eating me,” I laughed, but the sound died the moment he went to his knees.

“Not at all, sweetheart.” He grinned up at me. “*This* is what eating you feels like.”

My eyes rolled back in my head the moment he buried his face between my legs. His hands curved around my hips, holding me in place as his tongue explored every inch of me. I gasped and writhed, my nails digging into his shoulders.

“Clay!” I cried out, my hips jerking. “Oh...oh...fuck!”

He hummed in response, and the vibration traveled through my extra-sensitive nerves, making my muscles jerk and my blood pressure spike. I felt like I was going to explode, white-hot pleasure streaming out from my cells like my own private super-nova.

Or, judging by the volume of the noises I was making, a not-so-private super-nova.

Not that I cared. Everyone could hear me, and I wouldn’t want him to stop what he was doing. I never wanted him to stop.

Words poured out of my mouth in a flood without punctuation or space to breathe.

“Please please please yes yes Clay right there fuck yes there more more...”

One hand left my hip and Clay drove two fingers into my pussy, twisting them until they rubbed against that spot inside me that turned everything white.

When I became aware of my surroundings again, Clay had moved me to the bed. He was stretched out next to me, his fingers lightly sketching patterns on my stomach. The expression on his face was something I’d never seen before.

“You okay?” I asked, putting my hand over his.

He raised his eyes to my face. “I’m great.”

I waited for him to explain, but when he didn’t, I let it go. We’d promised not to hide anything, but that didn’t mean we couldn’t think before speaking. Or that we couldn’t take the time to do other things in the meantime.

I wrapped my fingers around his cock.

He hissed out a breath, his eyes going dark. "Tess..."

My name held a warning sound. "Yes?"

"If you keep doing that..." He let the threat trail off.

"If I keep doing what?" I asked innocently. I tightened my grip and worked my hand down his shaft, taking my time stroking back to the wide head. "If I keep doing this?"

He grabbed my wrist. "I don't want to come in your hand."

"Really?" I swiped my thumb across the tip. "You don't think that'd be the slightest bit hot? Watching your cum spill across my fingers, coating my skin? Watching me lick every last drop off?"

His breathing hitched, but he didn't release me. "I think you can do better than that."

I ran my tongue along my bottom lip. "I could take you in my mouth, as deep as I can. Swallow when you come down my throat."

He let go of my wrist and pinched my bottom lip between his finger and thumb. "Later. What else?"

I raised an eyebrow. "Why don't you give me something?"

He palmed one ass cheek, then ran a finger down my crack. "There's something I'd definitely like to give you."

It was my turn to suck in a breath when the tip of his finger rubbed over that pucker of muscle. "Seriously?"

"Not tonight," he said. "I'm too keyed up to go as slow as we need for a virgin."

I laughed. "Guess you get to take that one too."

He squeezed my ass. "I'm looking forward to it."

"I'm sure you are."

He pushed just the tip of his finger past that tight ring, and I jerked, eyes wide. Wow. That was intense.

"Just imagine what it'll feel like," he rocked into my fist, "when it's *this* inside there."

Fuck. Me.

He rolled over so quickly that I let out a surprised sound that made him laugh. It didn't stop him from pushing apart my knees and settling between them.

"Clay."

“Tess.”

And then he was sliding inside me, making me feel more at home than anything else had done since we'd stepped foot in DC. We breathed out together, holding still for a few moments before falling into the familiar – but never boring – rhythm, quickly building to that first explosion of pleasure. Clay kept me riding my high until we both tipped over the edge.

TWENTY-TWO

TESS

MY FIRST VALENTINE'S DAY DATE EVER HADN'T GONE AT ALL HOW I'D expected. It'd been better. Beyond better.

Once we'd regained our ability to carry on a coherent conversation, Clay had asked if I wanted him to leave, but I'd asked him to stay...only if he wanted to. He had, and we'd wrapped ourselves up in each other and fallen asleep with little problem. My last thought before going under was that it would be perfect to take Sunday slow, linger in bed, spend some quality relaxed time together while we figured out how this thing was going to work.

My plans were thwarted, however, when my phone went off. A glance at the hotel clock told me that it was barely seven, and while that wasn't earlier than I usually woke up for work, I hadn't mentally prepared myself for the sudden awakening. I reached for my phone, silently cursing whoever had sent me a text.

Unknown number.

I sat up, knocking Clay's arm loose. He didn't stir, but I barely registered him being there.

Tess, it's Brianne. I know you're probably – I opened the message and continued reading – upset with me after how we left things, but I need your help. I'm in trouble. I need you to come back to San Jose. Don't try to reply to this number. It's not safe to use it again. I'll contact you if I can get another phone. When you get to San Jose, check into the same hotel as before. I'll have an address delivered to tell you where we're going to meet.

Shit.

I read the message again to make sure I hadn't missed anything. It'd been

four days since I'd last talked to her and everything had seemed fine then. Well, sort of. She'd told me to back off my story, but she'd sounded more annoyed than frightened. In fact, I didn't think I'd ever seen Brianne scared, not even when we'd been kids and Darius had gotten violent.

I'd also never heard her ask for help. Not from me anyway. The fact that she was coming to me now meant that things had gone from bad to worse in Costa Rica.

So much for my slow Sunday.

"Clay." I shook his shoulder. "Wake up."

"Mmm..." he made an annoyed sound.

"Clay." I poked him in his side, hard. "Wake up! Don't make me have to dump water on your head."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." He rolled onto his side so he was facing me. "Why are you being—"

"Look." I shoved my phone at him. "Brianne texted."

He pushed himself up as he took my phone, sleep clearing away as he read the message. He muttered a curse, then read it again. He swore a second time and handed the phone back.

"How quick do you think we can get a flight down there?" I asked him. "It sounds like she needs us right away."

Clay shook his head, his expression serious. "Before you got us seats from LAX to here, I was told I'd have to wait on standby, possibly for a couple days."

"We don't have that kind of time, Clay." I managed to keep my voice from shaking. "I've got a really bad feeling about this."

He leaned over and rested his forehead on mine. "It's going to be okay. Get dressed and pack what you need. I'll take care of getting us a ride."

"How?" I clutched his arms, trying to take comfort in his warm skin, strong muscles.

"I might know someone who can make things go faster."

I nodded, but we didn't move for another couple minutes, trying to hang on to that peace we'd managed to make between us last night. When it became clear that we wouldn't be able to recapture that, I sighed and pulled back.

"I'm grabbing a quick shower," I said. "Who knows if we'll get the chance once the shit hits the fan again."

“Good idea,” he said. “I’ll call Rylan and ask if he can help us. If not, I’ll call Jalen.”

He didn’t even sound reluctant to call the new boyfriend of his ex-girlfriend. As much as I liked that, it wasn’t my main concern at the moment. “And if neither of them can help?”

“Then I’m sure they’ll know someone else I can talk to.”

His voice was even, demeanor calm, and it helped soothe some of my worry. I was sure I’d be in knots again soon enough, but while it lasted, I was going to use the time to do what needed to be done. Namely, showering and packing. Clay would take care of his side of things, and we’d be in Costa Rica before too long. Then I’d find out what was going on with Bri and what we needed to do to fix it.

TWENTY-THREE

CLAY

I'D ALWAYS HATED PEOPLE WHO USED THEIR CONNECTIONS TO GET OUT OF trouble or wanted to be my friend because they thought my dad could give them something. I'd never understood people like that, but it hadn't stopped me from calling in favors when I needed them. However, after Rylan Archer had given me the money to try to ransom Brianne and the rest of her Red Care group, I'd realized I hadn't been using him. He'd been my friend. And he'd been one again today.

“Tell me again how you ended up good enough friends with Rylan Archer that he'd not only loan you a ton of money but also let you borrow his private plane?”

If we'd been borrowing Rylan's plane to go on a honeymoon or even just a vacation, I would've loved the expression of awe on Tess's face as we climbed onto Rylan's plane, but neither of us could completely enjoy the luxury, not when we knew that we were heading into something difficult, if only because Brianne was involved.

“I was just thinking that before all this happened, I wouldn't have thought of myself as being good friends with anyone back in Denver, not since Rona and I had our friendship take an awkward turn.” I sat down in one of the plush chairs. “Now, I think I could be friends with all of them.”

If I stayed in Denver.

Those words stayed unspoken. After we took care of Brianne's latest drama, I planned on telling her to handle her shit on her own going forward. Tess and I couldn't move forward if we had to be constantly wondering if we had to take off at a moment's notice. We had our stuff to work out. One of

the first of which was deciding about our living situation. This wasn't a matter of driving from New York to DC or Philadelphia, or from Denver to Colorado Springs. We were more than a full day's drive apart, and neither of us had the sort of money – or time – it would require to fly back and forth on a regular basis. Long-distance would work while we figured out logistics, but we couldn't drag it out.

“This is definitely better than flying commercial,” Tess said as she sat next to me. “And it's nicer than the one Brianne put us on.”

“And yet you don't look relaxed,” I commented, gesturing to how she was sitting on the edge of her seat. “You're going to need to sit back to get your seatbelt on. We should be taking off soon.”

“Right.”

Even after buckling in, her leg bounced in rapid rhythm until I reached over and put my hand on her knee. She gave me a wan smile and gripped my hand tightly as the plane taxied down the runway. How Rylan had managed to secure somewhere to land and take off on such short notice, I didn't know, but if I'd learned one thing growing up in DC, it was that certain kinds of people could always get stuff done. Rylan was one of those people. One of the very best of them.

“We're not making any stops,” I said once we were in the air and able to unbuckle our seatbelts. “Which means we have at least four and a half hours before we have to be doing anything. You should try to get some rest.”

“I couldn't sleep,” she said. “My head's filled with all of the possibilities I don't want to think about.”

I put up the arm between our seats and shifted so that I was facing her. “I can't tell you that everything's going to be okay. I don't know why Brianne's in trouble or if we'll be able to help her.”

“You really don't get the point of pep talks, do you?” Tess shook her head.

I squeezed her hand. “This isn't a pep talk.”

“Good, because it sucks.”

I laughed as I reached out to pull her back to my chest and wrap my arms around her. Her body was stiff as she leaned against me, but she didn't resist the embrace, so I knew it wasn't reluctance to be close to me, just an inability to relax.

“There's a lot I can't do,” I continued, “but there is something I can do.”

I purposefully paused, waiting for her to ask. She didn't make me wait long.

"What's that?"

I slid one of my hands down her flat abdomen and flicked open the button to her jeans. She caught her breath but didn't tell me to stop.

"I can make your brain stop."

She squirmed, one arm reaching up behind her to hook around my neck. "You certainly think highly of your talents."

I took her earlobe between my teeth, worrying at it for a few seconds before releasing it to allow me to speak. "I haven't heard any complaints."

Her nails scratched my scalp, and she rested her head against my shoulder. "What are you waiting for then? Show me."

I slid my fingers beneath the waistbands of her jeans and panties, skin silk under my fingertips. My gaze dropped to the rise and fall of her chest, cock thickening at the sight of her nipples poking through the soft cotton of her shirt. She wasn't wearing a bra. My free hand made its way under her shirt and up until I palmed one perfect breast. I tweaked her stiff peak even as my lower fingers skimmed the top of her clit.

She moaned, that decadent sound I'd come to love over our weeks together. It wasn't like a controlled noise, but rather something that slipped out only when she'd allowed herself to become lost in sensation, drowned in pleasure. It was how I'd come to gauge a job well done.

I manipulated her nipple with one set of fingers and toyed with her clit with the other, alternating soft caresses and rough friction until she couldn't know what would come next. I'd wondered if being in a near-public setting would temper her enthusiasm, but it quickly became clear that wasn't the case. With her eyes closed, she completely trusted me to guard her, and while the idea of someone watching might have made things a bit more exciting, it was only ever in theory.

I'd never let anyone else see her like this, man or woman. This was for me. For how long, I didn't know, but for at least the foreseeable future, this was mine. *She* was mine.

The proprietary thought surprised me, not because I hadn't ever considered thinking of her that way, but because it'd taken me this long to acknowledge it. Even when we were younger, I'd always thought of her as mine. I bent my head to the side of her neck and latched on to the soft skin

there. She tasted faintly of the soap she'd used, and underneath that was simply her. I'd never had any problems with using my mouth on various parts of a lover's body, but with Tess, it was like some sort of oral addiction, a need to taste every inch of her, similar to the need I had to see her come.

"Are you close?" I murmured the question against her skin before using my teeth on the same spot I'd been worrying at.

She nodded, her grip on my neck tightening.

"Do you want to come?" I had a burst of pride as I saw the mark I'd left on her. When she didn't answer my question, I stopped both my hands. "Do you want to come, Tess?"

She whimpered and nodded again. Under other circumstances, I might have persisted in the questioning until she gave me a verbal response, but the entire point of what I was doing was to help her relax. Teasing was one thing; torment was another.

"Then come."

I resumed my attentions, relentlessly playing her body as she wound tighter and tighter, all that energy coiled inside her until, finally, she came with a sharp cry. I pushed her through her orgasm, wringing out every last drop of pleasure until she collapsed, panting, in my arms.

I didn't say a word as I held her, hoping I'd done enough to allow her a couple more hours of sleep before we returned to the insanity of Brianne's world. Tess might have been one of the toughest women I knew, but that didn't mean I shouldn't take care of her, especially when no one else was doing it.

As her breathing slowed and her body slumped against me, I kissed the top of her head. "Sleep, sweetheart. I've got you. I'll be here when you wake up."

Promises I hoped to keep for a long while.

TWENTY-FOUR

TESS

I'D WOKEN UP ABOUT A HALF HOUR BEFORE WE'D BEGUN OUR DESCENT INTO San Jose, my mind muddled, but my body pleasantly limp. One look at Clay and I'd remembered exactly why I'd been able to fall asleep. I'd dragged him to the bathroom to return the favor, after which we'd settled back into our seats in time to watch Costa Rica come into view.

We held hands while the plane landed, but neither of us said much of anything. I guessed he was getting his head into what we were here to do, just like I was. Not that either of us really had any idea what we were actually getting into. Brianne hadn't sent me any additional details before we'd taken off, and it was my hope that she'd been able to get us something more by the time we arrived. I didn't want to sit at the hotel and wait when we'd rushed around to get here quickly. Being subject to whatever whims that had brought Brianne here in the first place was wearing thin. Sure, Clay and Bri had spent time looking for me here, but I hadn't intentionally disappeared in the first place.

A nagging little voice reminded me that I *had* gone off to meet an informant, and that's when I'd ended up hurt, but I reminded my subconscious that I wouldn't have needed an informant if Brianne hadn't been keeping secrets in the first place.

"Let's make this our last trip to Costa Rica," Clay said as the plane came to a halt. "If we want to go somewhere, let's try Italy or France. Maybe the UK."

"That sounds good to me."

Neither of us mentioned how likely another trip together would be, or

where we'd be leaving from: New York or Denver. But I had to admit, I liked that he was thinking about our future. Some people might've thought that he was simply making conversation or just saying it to say it, but I knew him well enough to know that he never said anything he didn't mean. Not when it came to things like this.

I pulled my phone out and checked for new messages. There weren't any, which meant all Clay and I could do was wait for Brianne to make contact. I didn't even want to think about what we'd do if this turned into us waiting for weeks again.

"I'm thinking we grab a taxi and head straight to the hotel. We can order in food while we wait for Brianne."

I nodded and picked up my bag. We'd had a short respite, and now it was time to focus again. All the tension I'd managed to forget about for the last few hours had returned, twisting my stomach into knots. Wonderful.

This was the last time I was doing this. As soon as I saw Brianne, and we got everything sorted out, I planned on telling her that we weren't going to continue on this way. We could either go back to barely talking, or she could tell me what the hell was going on. If she wanted to keep me at arm's length, then I'd stay that far away all the time. No more back and forth.

"Are you okay?" Clay asked as the two of us went down the stairs and across the tarmac. When we reached the door, he grabbed my free hand. "Tess, are you okay?"

"I'm okay," I said. The skeptical look on his face made me smile. "Really, Clay, I'm fine. This isn't a vacation or anything, but I'm not freaking out."

His expression softened. "I never thought you would. You're not the freaking out type. But worry about your sister would be completely normal. Expected even, in a situation like this."

"I think we both know Brianne can take care of herself."

"That doesn't mean you can't worry about her," he said. "I'm pretty sure being family means you can worry about anyone at any time you want."

I snorted. "I'm pretty sure being family means I can kick her ass for being an idiot."

He laughed, then lifted my hand to kiss my knuckles. "I'm pretty sure I'd like to see that."

I rolled my eyes but couldn't stop a chuckle. "Thanks."

“We’ll get through this,” he said as we resumed walking. “And then we’ll get back to normal life.”

I appreciated his optimism, but I didn’t think my life would be normal anytime soon. Not when the woman who’d left New York wasn’t the one landing in Costa Rica for the second time. Things had changed too much for me to expect to get ‘back’ to anything.

Clay flagged down a cab and gave the hotel’s address. Neither one of us spoke on the drive, but that was only because our cab driver kept up a steady stream of questions and answers. Like he asked questions and then answered them before either of us could do more than open our mouths. And he seemed completely happy about it as he switched from English to Spanish indiscriminately.

The sun had already set when we arrived at the hotel, and the air held a bit of chill, but it was still tons warmer than it had been a few hours ago in DC. People were laughing and chatting in front of the hotel and along the streets where vendors were selling all sorts of food. Everything smelled amazing, and my stomach growled. At least it’d be easy for us to get something to eat once we’d checked in.

Except we never got that far.

Clay was half a dozen steps in front of me when someone grabbed my arm. I let out a yelp and struggled even as I turned...then froze.

“Bri?”

“We need to get out of here. Quietly.” The dark smudges under her eyes made her look worn down, but her grip was tight and her voice strong. “We need to go now.”

TWENTY-FIVE

CLAY

I HADN'T GONE VERY FAR WHEN I PAUSED TO SEE WHY TESS HADN'T CAUGHT up. I turned around just in time to see Brianne dart out from the shadows and grab her sister's arm. I started back toward them, quickening my pace when Brianne dragged Tess after her. The sounds behind us faded as we moved away from the celebration and into a more wooded area.

I could see the dim outlines of people moving along the twilight fringes, but we were essentially alone when Tess pulled free of Brianne and stopped, giving me the opportunity to reach them.

"Don't play, Tess. We don't have the time." Brianne sounded more exasperated than worried, and I knew that wouldn't go over well with Tess.

"Then you better talk fast, Bri, because I'm not going anywhere until you tell us what's going on."

Brianne moved closer, pitching her voice low. "How about you explain first what the fuck you two are doing back here?"

Tess frowned. "You asked us to come. Well, you asked me, anyway. I would've thought you'd like the fact that I hadn't come alone."

Brianne cursed and looked around. "It's a trap, which means we're not safe here either."

Tess glanced at me, and I nodded. I'd take my cues from her on this one. I'd come to help, but Brianne was Tess's sister, and Tess was my...well, she was mine. I'd support her however she wanted to do this.

"Then you take us someplace safe and close. Once we get there, we're going to talk," Tess said. "And by us talking, I mean you talking and us listening as you give us the entire truth about what's been going on down

here.”

Brianne’s shoulders slumped, and she suddenly looked years older than me even though, in reality, only a few months separated us. “Okay, but we need to get going. Once they realize you’re not coming, they’re going to be looking for us.”

As I followed the Gardener sisters, I tried to speculate about who ‘they’ could be. I’d never been one for conspiracy theories, but with everything that’d happened since the first of the year, I’d come to believe that there had to be some grain of truth to this particular fiction.

“Are you staying with Sylvia?” Tess asked her sister.

“No,” Brianne answered even as she continued scanning around us for any sign of trouble. “I sent her to Canada the same morning I sent you two back to the States.”

“Did you drug her too?” Tess tempered the fury in her voice, but I wasn’t sure if Brianne understood how much restraint her sister was using.

“I didn’t need to,” Brianne said matter-of-factly. “I explained the situation, and she agreed to go visit family for a while.”

Tess was silent, but I saw her hands curl into fists and knew she was about to snap at her sister. “Did you even consider trying to explain the situation to Clay and me, or were we just too much of a bother?”

Brianne didn’t answer, but I had a feeling this question would be where things started once we got where we were going. I had to admit, I was interested to hear the answer.

The house we approached had a ‘for sale’ sign in the front yard, but that didn’t stop her from opening the front door and leading us all inside. She flicked on a single dim overhead bulb, but the curtains were drawn so we didn’t need to worry about anyone seeing the light.

It was completely furnished with the sort of décor that made me wince. Large, loud floral patterns on every piece of fluffy furniture and on the rugs covering a shiny lacquered floor. Pinks and purples and greens screaming from every inch of the room. The tiny kitchen to the right held dozens of ceramic jars in shapes ranging from ladybugs to clowns to teddy bears. Almost directly across from me, I could see a short hallway with a door on either side. A bedroom and a bathroom, I assumed.

“Do I even want to know who really lives here?” Tess asked.

“No one,” Brianne said. “The person who lived here died a couple weeks

back, and her kids are trying to sell the place, but they live an hour away.”

Tess examined the space around us. “We’ve only been gone a couple days. How in the world did you manage to find this place that quickly?”

“I asked Sylvia if she knew any realtors,” Brianne said. “She gave me a number. I did the rest.”

“Okay.” Tess pointed at the couch. “Sit. Talk.”

To my surprise, Brianne sat down, then gestured for us to do the same. I took the armchair off to the side and let Tess have the one directly across from her sister. I *wanted* answers, but Tess *needed* them.

“Start at the beginning,” Tess said. “And no more trying to protect me or treating me like I can’t handle whatever it is you’re mixed up in.”

Brianne let out a brittle laugh. “I’m not mixed up in anything, Tess.” She held up her hand when Tess opened her mouth. “The two of you need to understand that I could get in serious trouble for telling you any of this. I’m talking court-martial or treason.”

I blinked and looked over at Tess. Her face was blank, but I could see the tension in every line of her body.

“Three years after I enlisted, I was on my second tour in Afghanistan when my convoy was hit by insurgents. During the firefight, I ended up in this shed where I found boxes of weapons. Ones that the insurgents shouldn’t have had. I can’t give you details about where the weapons had come from because it’ll put you in even more danger than you already are.”

Even though Brianne kept her attention on Tess, I knew those comments were directed at me too. I hadn’t been invited, but I was here, which meant I was involved.

“After what was left of my team was rescued, I reported what I’d found. Three days later, a woman showed up. This tough soldier a decade older than me who told me that I’d stumbled into something big and secret. A black-ops group made up of an assortment of military personnel from all the different branches had been running a mission to find who was funding the insurgents in the area.”

Sofie. Brianne hadn’t said the name of the woman, but the warmth in her eyes told me enough.

“She asked if I wanted to help. I did, and when the mission was over, she asked if I wanted to become a member of her team. I agreed.”

Shit.

“Three years after you enlisted,” Tess said quietly. “That’s when you stopped writing to me.”

Brianne nodded, a shadow passing over her face. “The things we do...the team I belong to...it’s dangerous. Most of the people I work with have no family, and none of them have close relationships outside the team. I had to distance myself from you and Mom to protect you.”

“Isn’t it dangerous for you to be involved with someone on your team?” I asked.

Both women’s gaze snapped over to me, but it was Tess who spoke. “What’s that?”

“The woman who recruited you, Bri, was Sofie Harmon, right? And I’m thinking she’s not just a teammate, but your boss.”

To my surprise, Brianne flushed. “Yes, and yes.”

Tess stared at her for a moment. “You’re in a government black ops group with your girlfriend, who just happens to be the sister of the Secretary of State’s late wife.”

“That pretty much sums it up.”

“I’m pretty sure that just brought up a lot of new questions,” Tess said, “the first of which is, were you investigating the drug cartel for your black ops team?”

“I was,” Bri admitted. “About five months ago, we received intel that someone in the US government was funding a Colombian drug cartel that had moved into Costa Rica. We tried sending an undercover into the cartel. He made it two months before he was killed, and he never got high enough in the organization to know anyone beyond the local players.”

“So you volunteered to go in next?” Tess’s voice rose. “Were you trying to get yourself killed?”

Brianne stared at her sister as if she’d never seen her before. While I understood why Tess was upset, I couldn’t deny that I now understood why Brianne had done everything that she had. Not in a detailed, lay-out-each-point kind of way, but something deeper.

“I joined the army right after my high school graduation.”

Tess clearly still didn’t get it. “I know that. I was there when you came home and told Mom.”

“What did you think I was doing all these years if not putting my life in danger?”

“I don’t know!” Tess stood, yanking her fingers through snarls of curls. “But I didn’t think it was crazy stuff like going undercover in a drug cartel!”

Brianne’s voice softened. “The day my convoy was attacked by those insurgents, I watched this guy I’d known since basic get a hole blown clear through his stomach. He was still trying to hold in his guts when he died. Six people in my squad died during that tour, and I can’t even count the number of times I almost did too.” She stood up and went over to Tess, a calmness about her that I recognized. “Insurgents overseas. Domestic terrorists. Drug cartels. They’re all just different faces of the same evil. An evil I fight to make this world a better place. To protect you, to protect others. It’s my job, and I won’t apologize for that.”

Tess crossed her arms, pulling her shoulders forward as she absorbed what Bri was telling her.

Brianne put her hand on Tess’s shoulder. “But I am sorry I hid so much of myself from you.”

And with that, the anger and tension went out of the room. We didn’t do tears and hugs, and there was still a lot the three of us needed to talk about, but this was the right start.

TWENTY-SIX

TESS

I WAS GLAD BRIANNE HAD MANAGED TO FIND A HOUSE WITH THE WATER STILL working because the shower was the only place I could be alone while I tried to wrap my head around everything Brianne had told me. When I wanted a distraction, I'd go to Clay, but first I needed to process.

None of it seemed possible. The journalist in me was torn between demanding evidence before believing something as far-fetched as my big sister being recruited to some secret government military group, and writing the whole thing off as being too ludicrous to even consider. Except the puzzle pieces fit. All the things that had seemed out of place now came together perfectly. Brianne's story explained everything. How she'd lost touch, how evasive she'd been the few times I'd seen her. And then there was all the recent stuff. Like why she'd taken off to Costa Rica to help Red Care seemingly out of the blue. Or how she'd managed to go up against a cartel and not only survive but accomplish her objective.

There'd be more questions to ask tomorrow, and I suspected they would continue to lead to still more of them. For tonight, it was enough to know she'd finally shared the big secret I'd been sensing from her.

Even as I toweled dry, however, I knew it wasn't enough to help me sleep. I'd need something else for that, and it wasn't much of a mystery as to what would work best, or where I could find it. I wrapped the towel around me and crossed the hallway to where Clay waited in the house's one bedroom.

Brianne had offered to sleep on the couch, whether out of some sort of sense of restitution for the lies she'd told or because she knew that I would

sleep better if I was next to Clay. Hell, she could have made the offer for some other reason that I hadn't thought of yet, I didn't know, but neither Clay nor I were about to turn the offer down.

"Did that help clear your head?" Clay asked from where he was stretched out on top of the most hideous green paisley bedspread I'd ever seen. The vision on top of that bedspread, however, was divine. Wearing only a pair of dark purple boxer briefs that left little to the imagination, Clay looked good enough to eat.

I, however, had something else in mind.

"A bit." I walked around the bed and sat down on the edge, close enough that I could feel the heat radiating off of him. "But I was thinking that no matter how many showers I take, I'm going to be thinking about all of that all night. I can't turn my brain off."

He pushed himself into a seated position. "I'm listening."

"There's something you could do to help me forget about all of this crazy, something that you promised you'd do at some point."

He looked puzzled but willing. "What's that?"

I leaned toward him and put my mouth right against his ear. "I want you to fuck my ass."

"Fuck." He whispered the word, but there was no denying the desire in that one syllable. "It would be my honor."

"All right then," I said, trying not to let my nerves show. "Tell me what to do."

CLAY and I had had sex that was spontaneous and sex that was a little more planned. Logically, I'd known that anal sex – particularly the first time and with such a size difference between the two of us – would need preparation, but the extent of it still surprised me. All of it made me appreciate Clay taking the time to ensure that this would be an enjoyable distraction for both of us.

Despite my appreciation, anxiety still had me glancing over my shoulder as the bed dipped with Clay's weight. I was laying on my stomach, naked, so when he ran his hand the length of my spine, I felt the heat all the way

through me, and it eased the worst of the nerves.

“We’re going to take this as slow as you need to,” he said as he pulled my curls over my shoulder and then leaned down to kiss the space between my shoulder blades. “If at any point you want to stop, just say the word.”

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. I didn’t want him to think that anything he heard in my voice meant I was having second thoughts.

“I’m going to talk you through this,” he continued. “Let you know each step as I’m doing it.”

I nodded again, then turned my head so that my forehead rested on my folded arms.

“Let’s get you relaxed first.”

The mattress shifted again, rising then dipping as he moved between my legs. He palmed my ass, spreading my cheeks, massaging the muscles with his thumbs. I gasped as his tongue ran along the seam, teasing my asshole even as his fingers moved down to slide inside me. I closed my eyes, letting the sensations wash over me. The pleasure as he stroked my walls, as his thumb made slow circles over my clit. The slick pressure of his tongue over that tight ring of muscle.

The sense of time thickened and congealed until it felt as if the world itself had ceased to exist. It was Clay and me and the web of pleasure snaking through my body. A body that barely felt real. The pressure low in my belly coiled and built until I was writhing, desperate for release.

“I’m going to start stretching you with my fingers now, sweetheart,” Clay said, his voice rolling over me like warm silk.

The fingers inside me left but reappeared a few seconds later a little higher. Already wet with my arousal, the tip of one pressed against my ass until it yielded. I gasped at the slight burn, but it wasn’t painful exactly. The deeper that finger went, however, the sensations shifted. Prickles of something like static electricity, painful but also not, somehow.

“Relax, sweetheart.” Clay kissed the small of my back.

I nodded and tried to remember how a physical therapist I’d had once had taught me to visualize each muscle and consciously unclench it.

“One more finger.”

I made a soft sound of protest, and he chuckled.

“Sorry about that, sweetheart, but trust me, if you think about how thick my cock is, you’ll appreciate it.”

I was fairly certain the last thing I wanted to think about at this moment was how big his cock was.

As Clay worked a second finger into my ass, his other hand dropped down to allow his thumb to sweep across my sensitive clit. Pain and pleasure fused inside me into one intense, explosive tangle that lit up every cell in my body.

The more his fingers moved in and out, stretching me, the more the fire inside me grew, consuming what I'd previously known as pain, as pleasure, and filling me with something else. My orgasm hit me without warning, without the sort of build-up I'd come to expect, and I cried out, my body stiffening.

"That's my girl," Clay murmured. He lightly bit down on the back of my thigh before removing his hands from between my legs.

I'd only just started coming down when I felt something blunt push against my ass. I blew out a breath and willed my muscles to stay loose.

"I told you you'd appreciate me using more than one finger," he said. "I'm going to take this slow, but if you want me to stop, just say the word. You call the shots here."

If I didn't stop nodding all the time, he was going to think it was my only possible form of communication.

Any other thoughts I might have had vanished as he eased the head of his cock into my ass, making me catch my breath. I panted as he moved forward, my hands curling into the bedspread as I sought for something, anything, to help relieve this impossible sense of fullness. Except I couldn't escape it, couldn't lose myself in my head, couldn't detach from it. It consumed me until I thought I would break...

...and then his voice was there, in my ear, in my head, filling me in a different way.

"You're doing so well, sweetheart. Just keep breathing. Your body will adjust, and then I'll make you fly."

I could hear the strain in his voice, but that didn't stop him. Nothing stopped him.

"It feels so good inside you," he groaned. "I don't know how long I'm going to last, but I'll do my damndest to make it good for you."

I reached back and found his wrist. Wrapping my fingers around it, I managed to say, "You do. You always do."

His lips brushed against my shoulder as I released his wrist and went back to clutching the bedspread. I still had no sense of how much time had passed before he informed me that he was all the way in, or how long he managed to hold still before nature took over and he rocked against me. One hand slid underneath me, and he braced himself with the other. Stroke for stroke, his fingers on my clit matched his cock, and at some point, I began to moan. Moans turned to cries which turned to wails and then I was shaking, soaring, and everything in my head became blissfully blank.

TWENTY-SEVEN

CLAY

TESS WAS STILL SLEEPING WHEN I LEFT THE BEDROOM FOR THE BATHROOM. The door was still shut when I came out ten minutes later. Since I'd taken clothes into the bathroom with me, I went out to the main room and let Tess rest a little longer. Brianne was already up, the bags under her eyes making me wonder if she'd slept at all.

She stood in front of a coffee pot, sipping from a mug that said "I love my pug." I assumed she'd found it in one of the pastel yellow cabinets fastened to the wall above the stove.

"Morning," I said.

The glare she sent my way had me hesitating to ask for access to the coffee. "What?"

"The walls in this house are fucking thin, asshole."

Heat flooded my face. "Oh."

"Yeah, *oh*." She stepped to the side and held out a mug with several lurid pink flowers on it. "You seriously couldn't control yourself one fucking night? Bad enough the two of you couldn't even sleep apart for one night."

I poured myself some coffee, then added a spoonful of sugar. I let a few swallows of the hot liquid slide down my throat before addressing Brianne in a deceptively mild voice, "Sorry we kept you awake, but you're the reason we're here in the first place, so you might want to check the attitude."

"I really don't like you anymore," Brianne said, sounding like a teenager again.

The toast popped up, and she picked it up, dropping it on a plate a second later. I opened a cabinet, looking for something to eat. For several minutes,

we moved around each other in silence. From down the hall, I heard the bedroom door open, then the bathroom door open, close.

“If you hurt her, I’ll kill you.” Brianne’s voice was flat as she picked up her plate and carried it over to the couch.

I shrugged. “I figured that went without saying.”

She arched an eyebrow at me. “I figured I’d say it anyway.”

“How did the two of you manage to spend two weeks looking for me and not end up killing each other?” Tess asked as she came into the kitchen.

“Finding you was more important than putting him in his place,” Brianne said, scowling in my direction. “Get some coffee. Find something to eat. We’ve got a lot to cover today.”

I took a sip of my coffee before asking, “Does this mean you’re going to explain to us how a Red Care group ended up being taken hostage by the drug cartel you were investigating?”

Tess turned toward her sister, one hand on the coffee pot. “Please tell me that you didn’t endanger that entire group just to get close to the cartel.”

“Get your breakfast and sit down,” Brianne said with a long sigh. “I’ll tell you the rest.”

Neither Tess nor I had to wait long for Brianne to start talking, because as soon as Tess sat down, Brianne opened her mouth.

“Sofie and I have been together for four years. We knew it wasn’t allowed, fraternizing within the unit, so we’ve kept things quiet. No one else knows.” Bri made a face. “Or, at least, no one else *knew*. With things all going to shit, I have no idea what anyone knows now.”

For the first time since all this started, I saw on her face the toll her choices had taken. She looked tired, and not only physically. Her eyes, a clear aquamarine color, were duller than I remembered from just a couple days ago, and she had new lines around her mouth.

“I told Sofie that I didn’t want our relationship to affect the missions she sent me on, and she promised it wouldn’t, but about two years ago, she started holding me back from the more dangerous assignments. When this one came up, I insisted she let me go. We had a huge fight.”

I didn’t see what this had to do with anything else, but we were safe here, and we wanted answers. I might as well let Brianne tell things at her own pace and in her own way.

“Doing work with Red Care was a great cover. My team set up an alias—”

“Taylor MacIntosh,” Tess interrupted.

Brianne nodded. “Yes. A lot of our aliases have names like that, ones that can be for either men or women, so only a gender has to be added once things are more settled.”

Smart. These sorts of units had to operate intelligently, or they’d never stay secret, or survive. Sofie, it seemed, had made some improvements even from what I’d ever heard of groups doing.

“It was only supposed to be reconnaissance at first. Talk to the locals. Find out as much as I could without rousing any suspicions. Sometimes, local gossip yields as much or more than speaking to the people actually involved.” Brianne sighed as she set down her empty plate. “But, sometimes, that’s not enough. I started going out on my own, exploring, but never going all the way to the cartel’s headquarters. That’s all I intended to do. Then two more members of my unit showed up at the Red Care office. They said they had new orders for us. We needed to go all the way in, get specific numbers, other information.”

I stood and collected all of the plates and utensils, taking them into the kitchen. The main area was close enough that I could still hear Brianne talking as I washed up.

“It was only supposed to be the three of us going into the cartel’s neighborhood, posing as Red Care workers. We’d had it all set up when the location the rest of the group was supposed to go to fell through. At the last minute, they all decided to come with us. We couldn’t tell them no, not without risking our mission.” She hesitated, pain on her face and swallowed hard. It was several seconds before she continued, “We thought we could protect them. We were wrong.”

Tess reached out and put her hand over Bri’s. I knew it’d take time to completely repair the rift between them, but Brianne was clearly torn up about what had happened.

“The two people who died...” Tess began.

“They were the other two members of my team.” Brianne’s voice broke, and it took her a minute to regain her composure. “Shawn Marshall and Amberlee Connell. Those were their real names.”

My stomach clenched as the memories of bodies flashed through my mind. I could almost feel the heavy weight of them, smell the blood and underlying scent of decay. I’d been around dead bodies before, but dragging

them into a vehicle, wondering if one of them was Brianne...those moments would continue to haunt me. I returned to my seat, wondering if I should stay up and occupied, or if the shadows would continue to be there, no matter what I did.

“The three of us spread out around the group when we went into the neighborhood, but we didn’t have any weapons, so when the cartel came at us with guns, we had to go. We couldn’t fight the way we would have if it’d been just the three of us. We tried to keep the others from getting hurt, drawing the attention to us and away from them.”

The words were coming more quickly now, as if now that she’d allowed herself to talk about things, she couldn’t get them out fast enough.

“They told us that they were going to kill two of us. Just flat-out said it, then walked out. They came back fifteen minutes later. Shawn and Amberlee put themselves at the front of the group, forced me to stay at the back. I argued with them. I didn’t want to be the one who...” She inhaled slowly, then let it out, but she didn’t look at either of us. “They knew...about me and Sofie. They knew, and they insisted on sacrificing themselves instead of letting me do it. I had to stay and protect the group as best as I could.”

“You did protect them.” Tess squeezed her sister’s hand. “You kept them alive and safe until we got you out.”

Brianne nodded, then seemed to collect herself. “Thank you, but that’s not what’s important right now. We need to focus on figuring out who’s behind all of this, who’s been pulling the strings. That’s the only way we’ll be safe.”

“Do you think someone tipped off the cartel?” I asked.

“I do,” she said. “The men who took us hostage tried to act like they were after a ransom, and maybe they were, but they wanted something else too. They kept asking us who we were, where we were from, what we did for a living, that sort of thing. The rest of the group thought that it was something the cartel would use to determine who were the most expendable, and we agreed with that assessment, but not for the same reason. We felt they were trying to figure out who they could hurt or kill to keep the rest of us in line, without killing the people their bosses wanted.”

“Weren’t you worried that fighting them would draw the wrong sort of attention?” Tess asked.

Brianne shook her head. “For this assignment, I requested an alias that

had a background or occupation that would allow me to have at least basic fighting skills without blowing my cover. Taylor MacIntosh had a dojo that specializes in self-defense classes. Staying quiet while my friends...it made sense for me to try to protect the others once Shawn and Amberlee were gone. When you guys came and got us out, I thought my cover was still intact.”

“But now you don’t think that,” I said.

“No,” she said quietly. “I don’t think that anymore.”

“Because they came after us.” Tess pressed her fingers to her temples. “That’s what it was, wasn’t it? They knew you were somehow linked to the escape.”

“Couldn’t that have been our fault?” I asked. “Tess and I were asking around about you. People who run this sort of massive business aren’t unintelligent.”

“I talked to the others in the group before they left the hospital,” Brianne continued. “Two of them said they’d overheard our kidnappers saying that I was the one their boss wanted answers from.”

“Shit,” I muttered.

“Yeah,” Brianne said, meeting my eye, “shit.”

“If Clay and I were walking into a trap, that means they know who we are too,” Tess said. “They know we’re connected.”

“That’s why I got you guys out of the country. You’re no safer here than I am.”

“It still doesn’t excuse drugging us,” Tess said, “but I can understand now why you felt the need to do it.”

“How did you know about the trap?” I asked.

“I have a friend at the airport. He called me about a private plane coming in from America. I saw the two of you get off and followed you.”

“Why didn’t you just meet us right when we got off the plane?” Tess asked.

I kept my eyes on Brianne as I answered for her. “Because if she followed us, she could find out where they were trying to lure us, which would give her a better idea of who she’s dealing with and where they’re based.”

“You used us as bait?” Tess asked, the hurt in her voice clear.

Brianne raised her head and looked her sister square in the eye. “You told me to stop protecting you. You can’t have it both ways.”

I hated to admit it, but she was right. I cut into the conversation before it went down the wrong path. “What did you find out?”

“After you two...left before, I contacted a friend at the police station to ask about Luis and the cartel members who were arrested. Luis was still in jail, but the cartel had been bailed out that same morning. I got the impression that it had been someone unexpected too. In the past week, all of the men who’d been arrested have been killed and left in some very public places.”

“What about Luis?” Tess asked.

I couldn’t tell if she was worried about him, but I told myself that it didn’t matter. She was with me. Concern over the life of a fellow human wasn’t the same as what she and I had.

“Still in jail and safe,” Brianne said. “From what I could find out, they’re trying to get him to flip on the cartel. Since he doesn’t have any family, they figure they can get him somewhere safe and not worry about any repercussions.”

“Were you able to figure out who the person was who bailed them out?” I asked as Tess processed the information she’d just been given.

“Someone from the US Embassy.”

“Fuck me.” I leaned back in the chair. “Was it the ambassador?”

“I don’t think so,” Bri said. “I made a few inquiries, and there’ve been a couple other people from DC down here on and off for the past couple weeks. I haven’t been able to figure out who they are though. Everyone’s being really tight-lipped.”

Between the kidnapping of a Red Care group and members of a cartel being murdered, I didn’t blame them for tightening their security.

“Do you know what anyone from the embassy looks like?” Tess asked.

Brianne pulled her phone out of her pocket and opened her photos. Tess and I moved to either side of Bri so we could all see them at once.

Three pictures in, Tess cursed. “I’ve seen him before.” She pointed at a young, stocky man in an ill-fitting suit. “I did a piece on some new legislation the Secretary of Commerce was trying to get passed, and this guy wouldn’t let me in to see Secretary Munroe. I can’t remember his name, but he was the secretary’s assistant.”

“Secretary Munroe.” Brianne frowned. “As far as I know, he’s not in the loop about our team.”

Suddenly, the secretary's face popped into my head. "Son of a bitch."

Both sisters turned to me.

"What?" Brianne asked.

"When I met with Secretary Ganesh back in DC, I saw Secretary Munroe nearby. He was talking to Secretary Ganesh's assistant, Kathrine something. They looked a lot friendlier than passing acquaintances should look."

"Munroe's having an affair with Ganesh's assistant," Brianne said slowly. "She could have access to classified files, including ones about my team."

"And Secretary Ganesh has been trying to draft deals with the Costa Rican and Colombian governments in regard to the penalties they place on drug cartels. There's bound to be information about the cartel in Costa Rica." I pinched my nose in an attempt to prevent the throbbing in my head from becoming a full-blown headache.

"If there's a leak in the Secretary of State's office," Tess said slowly, "how are we supposed to get the information to him without Secretary Munroe finding out?"

That was an excellent question.

TWENTY-EIGHT

TESS

“WE HAVE TO GO BACK TO DC,” I SAID, BREAKING THE SILENCE. “WE HAVE to talk to Secretary Ganesh face-to-face, alone. That’s the only way we’ll be able to ensure that none of this gets out.”

“It won’t be enough just to tell him that we know what’s going on,” Clay said. “We need evidence to prove what we’re theorizing. Because that’s all we really have. Theories.”

Brianne sighed. “You’re right. We need proof. Dammit.”

“These pictures are part of that,” I said. “We can connect the cartel to the assistant, and the assistant to the Secretary of Commerce. We can connect Secretary Ganesh to his assistant. What we need is evidence that Secretary Munroe and Secretary Ganesh’s assistant are having an affair. That will show the link all the way from the top to the cartel.”

“All that really does is prove that six degrees of separation is a thing,” Brianne said. “We need more than words and a college nerd game.”

I shook my head, knowing exactly what we needed to look for. “A money trail. When in doubt, follow the money.”

“We need receipts for that,” Clay said, thrumming his fingers on his knees. “And those sorts of things take time. A confession would be better, but I’m not sure one of those is likely.”

“I have an idea,” Bri said, leaning forward, something that looked like hope crossing her features. “But it involves the risk of being arrested, so I think I should handle it myself.”

“It’s not like I’m down here as an FBI agent,” Clay said wryly.

“Still,” I said, “we should keep you as far away from the more illegal

aspects of what we might have to do.”

He looked offended, his eyes narrowing as he studied my face. “I know how to maneuver my way around the law.”

I knew better than to argue with him about this. He was as stubborn as I was when it came to doing what he thought was right. Which meant we needed to set the guidelines up before we went any further, because if we didn’t cover it now, he’d do whatever he wanted and claim he didn’t know he wasn’t supposed to do it.

“Let’s break up what we need to do then,” I said, clapping my hands together before reaching for my pen. “Make sure we cover everything.”

“I’m staying here.”

My head whipped around to see Brienne looking at me with a placid expression on her face, as if she hadn’t said something completely insane.

“Excuse me?”

“I have a few things here I need to tie up. You guys can fly back to DC tomorrow morning, and I’ll follow as soon as I can.”

I stared at her. “Are you kidding me? You’re really doing this *again*?”

“I’m not doing anything *again*,” she said calmly. “I’m talking through a plan with you both and informing you of what my part of the plan will be. There are things here, parts in play that I can’t discuss, even after what I’ve already told you. This isn’t something I can pass off to either of you.”

I folded my arms and glared at her. “All right, but you’re telling Mom.”

Bri frowned. “This isn’t exactly something I can share with our mother.”

“That’s your problem,” I said, anger and frustration burning a hole in my gut. “Tell her whatever you want, and I’ll support it. I just refuse to be the one to call her and try to give her an explanation about what’s been going on the past two months.”

Brienne’s eyes locked with mine for a few seconds, and then she nodded. “Deal.”

“Okay then.” I looked over at Clay. “Let’s get started.”

TWENTY-NINE

CLAY

TESS AND I SETTLED ONTO RYLAN'S PLANE MUCH MORE EASILY THAN WE HAD the first time, maybe because we were going home now, or maybe because we had a plan to finally end all this shit. I didn't know what that would mean for Tess and me, or for Brianne for that matter, but anything was better than unending questions with no end in sight.

Even though Tess and I had actually slept last night, we were both exhausted enough that we fell asleep within minutes of the plane taking off and didn't wake until we were ready to land. While I appreciated the rest, sleeping on a plane tended to make my jet lag worse, but any time I spent with Tess at my side was good.

As the two of us walked across the tarmac toward the waiting car, my phone started going off with text alerts.

"Someone missed you," Tess said.

I shrugged, leaving my phone where it was until she and I were in the back of the car and the driver was taking us to a hotel. When I finally checked my messages, I wished I hadn't.

"Shit."

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"My parents." I skimmed the messages without bothering to check my voicemails. They'd say the same thing. "I didn't tell them I left DC again. They called a couple times yesterday to invite me to dinner, and I obviously didn't get those calls. Today, they've switched to text messages, which means they're pissed. They hate texting."

"Tell them you'll come tonight."

“I’m not going to dinner at their house tonight,” I said with a laugh. “We have much more important things to do.”

“Actually, we don’t,” she said. “We know Secretary Munroe won’t be back in DC until tomorrow. You can go to dinner at your parents’ place.”

“I don’t think so,” I said, squeezing her hand. “We do this together or not at all.”

The pleased expression on her face made me realize that I might have inadvertently made more of a dinner invitation than I’d intended.

My parents knew Tess, of course, and they’d met her again recently, but even though we’d been sleeping together, this was something different. We were something different.

“A home-cooked meal sounds really good.” She leaned against me.

“You do remember that my mother doesn’t actually cook the meals, right?”

Tess laughed. “I remember. Is the cook still Mrs. Trevino?”

“No, she retired about five years ago. The new cook is Levi Freema. He’s not as good at pasta as Mrs. T used to be, but he’s amazing when it comes to anything to do with chicken.”

We fell into a companionable silence, but my brain was anything but silent. My thoughts were chaotic, but they all centered around how my parents might react to the news that Tess and I were involved. Especially since there were still so many questions about the future. She and I hadn’t talked about what we would call each other, how fast we each wanted to go, if one or the other of us was going to move, where we’d move.

But I knew that wasn’t really what would matter to my parents. I didn’t know if my mother remembered telling me once that I wasn’t allowed to date Brianne, but I sure did. Brianne had never been the person I’d wanted, but all of my parents’ objections to her also applied to Tess. Was it possible that they’d grown as people? Or that they’d realized that they couldn’t control my life now that I was an adult?

Anything was possible, I supposed.

Not that it would make anything about the dinner easier or clearer. I supposed I’d have to just see how things went. At least I wouldn’t be going through it alone.

THIRTY

TESS

CLAY HAD BEEN ANTSY EVER SINCE WE'D LANDED AT THE AIRPORT, AND IT only got worse the closer we got to dinner with his parents. He refused to tell me what he was thinking; instead, he brushed off my questions and changed the subject. He wasn't lying, but I couldn't help wondering if things would've been easier for him if he shared. I could have called him on it anyway, if I'd wanted to, but a good portion of the issues we'd had so far had been communication-based...and my fault. He deserved to have time in his head if that was what he needed.

As we walked up the steps to the front door of the Kurths' DC home, I reached over and took Clay's hand. He offered a tight smile, then laced his fingers between mine, his grip almost hard enough to hurt. Whatever was on his mind, I suspected his parents were a part of it.

It was possible they'd changed their minds about their influence over Clay's romantic life, but it was more likely I would be walking into a veritable hornets' nest once Clay told his parents why I was with him.

If he told them.

He and I hadn't talked about what we'd tell people. It really hadn't crossed my mind in any sort of serious way, to be honest. Brianne already knew what was going on and she was really the only person I had to tell. I could've called my mom, but she and I didn't really have that close of a relationship.

All of those thoughts paraded through my mind in a flash, and then we were smiling at Mrs. Kurth as she opened the door. Her gaze flicked to me, eyes widening the slightest bit before she turned back to Clay and greeted

him warmly.

“Tess, what a surprise,” she said as Clay and I stepped inside.

I shook the snow from my hair, using it as an excuse to not respond right away. She’d never been mean to me, but I’d always suspected it was because she’d never thought Clay would look in my direction. Once she realized that he and I were together, things would most likely change, and probably not for the better. Still, I had hope that maybe now she’d judge me on who I was as a person rather than where I’d come from.

I would never be old money or move in the right types of social circles, but I wasn’t a screw-up. I had a good job at a respected paper. I paid my bills and took care of myself. I didn’t sleep around – though that wasn’t something I planned on discussing with the Kurths – and I didn’t spend time with the ‘wrong’ people, though more out of a lack of desire to be social than actually agreeing with the Kurths’ assessment of what the wrong person was.

“It shouldn’t be a surprise, Mother,” Clay said with a tight smile. “When I told you I was coming, I said she was coming with me.”

“Silly me,” Mrs. Kurth said with a little cough. “Shall we go into the parlor?”

Clay and I used to make fun of how they’d referred to their front room as the parlor because it’d always sounded so pretentious, and I found that I still found it amusing. Judging by the glint in Clay’s eyes as he gave me a sideways glance, he thought the same.

“It’s good to see you again.” Congressman Kurth stepped forward with an outstretched hand, and as I shook it, I had the strangest sensation of being on a campaign trail. Not in a bad way, but rather more like he just didn’t know how to turn off being a politician.

“You too.” I shook his hand, wondering if other people felt as awkward shaking his hand in what should have been a personal setting.

“So, Tess, when will you be going back to New York?”

Clay shot a glare at his mother.

“I’m not sure,” I answered before Clay could. “It depends on how long it takes me to put together the story I’m working on.”

“And what’s that about?” Mr. Kurth asked as we all sat down, the elder Kurths each taking an armchair while Clay and I sat side-by-side on the loveseat.

“Government corruption,” I said sweetly. Clay went stiff next to me, and

Mrs. Kurth's eyes narrowed, but I didn't let that stop me. "Specifically the growing drug problem in South America and what the US government is doing to try to keep it from coming into the States."

The Congressman kept smiling, but his face was impossible to read.

"I'm going to go check with Chef to see if he's ready for us." Mrs. Kurth stood again even though she'd only been sitting down for a couple minutes.

"If you don't mind me asking, how are you finding DC after being gone for so long?" Congressman Kurth crossed one long leg over the other and rested his hands on his knee. "I'm assuming that you haven't been back since your family left, right?"

"I haven't," I said. "It's been weird coming back as an adult, seeing places that I remembered from being a teenager."

Clay kept my hand clasped tightly in his but didn't say a word as his father continued to make small talk with me. Mrs. Kurth didn't return to the parlor for several minutes, and when she did, it was to announce that dinner was served. Privately, I wondered if she'd gone to hurry up the cook, wanting to shorten the evening rather than simply inquiring if he was ready for us.

"I'd like to wash my hands before we eat," I said.

Clay went to stand. "I'll take--"

"There's a washroom down that hall." Mrs. Kurth pointed. "Second door on the right."

"Do you remember where the dining room is?" Clay asked quietly.

I nodded. "I do."

"Don't be too long." He leaned over and kissed my temple.

Heat flooded my face, and I felt the Kurths' eyes on me even though I tried not to look at either of them. If they hadn't realized before that the two of us were more than old friends, I was pretty sure they did now. Maybe if I was lucky, Clay would explain things while I was gone, and I wouldn't need to be present for that conversation.

"Clay?"

I hurried down the hall before I could hear how they phrased the question. I ducked into the bathroom, wincing as I saw the fatigue in my reflection. It wasn't too evident, not for anyone who didn't know me. Fortunately, Mr. and Mrs. Kurth didn't know me, not well enough to tell how exhausted I was. I'd slept on the plane and had even taken a nap before we'd come here, but none of it had done much of anything.

When I emerged from the bathroom, I felt a little better, and a lot readier to face off with the Kurths. I turned to make my way down the hall when I caught a glimpse of a picture on the wall, one I hadn't seen at the fundraiser.

Congressman Kurth shaking hands with Secretary Munroe at what looked like a Christmas party.

That gave me pause, and those few seconds allowed me to see more. Two more pictures of Secretary Munroe with the Congressman, one of which appeared to be on a fishing trip. None of the pictures had Clay in them, and I let myself hope that meant he hadn't known that his father was on friendly terms with Secretary Munroe. No, not hope. I *knew* Clay didn't have anything to do with Secretary Munroe and he didn't know about the family connection. I was through not trusting him.

I wasn't, however, sure that this was something I needed to tell him. If it turned out to be something, I wouldn't hide it, but I wanted more proof than a couple photos that could've been taken any time in the last ten years. I fully intended to go to the dining room and save the investigating for another time, but I found myself in front of the partially open door to Congressman Kurth's office with no idea when I'd get this opportunity again.

I lightly pushed on the door and waited for any response that would tell me I needed to come up with an immediate excuse for my presence. No alarms. No one asking me what I was doing. No shadows moving from inside the office. Just the dim light of a small lamp from the far corner behind the desk.

Before common sense could talk me out of doing something stupid, I stepped into the office and carefully made my way to the desk. The carpet was thick, but I didn't know how well it would muffle sound. For all the time I'd spent in this house as a kid, I'd never been in this room before. I kept my hands clasped tightly behind me to avoid the temptation of touching anything and methodically scanned the desktop for anything that might be useful.

Minutes later, I was only a few feet from the dining room entrance, my stomach churning to the point where I doubted I'd be able to eat. I needed to tell Clay what I'd found, but I wanted to wait until we got back to the hotel room. Unfortunately, with dinner not even yet begun, I knew I had to do it sooner rather than later, if only because he'd notice that something was wrong the moment I sat down next to him.

I took out my phone and sent a quick text. I wasn't certain that he had his

phone on, but a few seconds later, I heard him excuse himself. When he came out into the short corridor, he looked puzzled, but not upset. I held a finger to my lips and motioned for him to follow me. I couldn't risk his parents overhearing, not when I didn't know what to do with the information I'd found.

He followed me into the library, and I eased the door closed behind him.

"What's going on?" he asked, keeping his voice low.

"Did you know that your dad knows Secretary Munroe?"

Clay frowned but didn't appear upset by my question. "They've both been involved in politics for decades. It makes sense they'd know each other."

I shook my head, twisting my fingers until the skin on my knuckles pulled tight. "Not just in passing. There are pictures in the hall by the bathroom of your dad and Munroe. They're shaking hands at a Christmas party—"

"In case you haven't noticed, my dad makes a point of shaking hands with everyone he sees." Clay crossed his arms, tension thrumming in the stiff lines of his body.

Shit.

The defensiveness in Clay's tone had me worried, but I needed to press on. We'd promised that we wouldn't have any more secrets. "There's one of them fishing together."

"Haven't you ever heard of publicity shoots?"

I sighed. The photos were circumstantial anyway. It was what I'd found in the office that had convinced me that I needed to talk to Clay.

"There's a suspicious letter on your dad's desk from Secretary Munroe. It talks about them meeting to discuss the work they've been doing together and how much Munroe is looking forward to collaborating on a new project as soon as the recent problems have all been taken care of."

"You're way off."

"I hope I am," I said honestly. "But the letter was dated as having been written three days after you and I arrived in Costa Rica."

"That doesn't mean anything."

I took a step toward him, trying to keep my voice as gentle as possible. "Munroe mentions a specific bill your father supports, one that deals with federal changes regarding drug trafficking offenses and how Munroe is

thankful to have someone like your dad looking out for him.”

Clay shook his head, a stubborn set to his jaw. “Munroe’s playing my father, making it sound like they’re working together when they’re not.”

“Is your dad really the kind of man who’d let himself get played?” I asked, already knowing the answer. “I’m sorry, Clay.”

“You’re sorry?”

The fury that filled Clay’s words made me take a step back.

“My parents aren’t perfect. I know that. But I also know that there are lines that they’d never cross. This is one of them. My father would never be involved in anything illegal. You know that. You know my parents.”

“I knew them sixteen years ago as a child,” I corrected. “People can change a lot in sixteen years.”

“Clearly,” Clay said. “Because back then, I never would’ve imagined you accusing my father of something like this.”

My heart was beating like a rabbit in my chest, but I couldn’t back down on this. “I can’t just ignore the facts because we’re involved. As a journalist, I can’t do that, and as an FBI agent, you know you can’t either.”

“Maybe I’m in on it too.” He practically threw the words at me. “I’m surprised you don’t think that considering all the other shit you’ve accused me of.”

I held up my hands, palms out. “I’m not accusing you. I don’t think you have anything to do with this.”

He let out a snort of derision. “You have a lot of nerve. You come into my family’s home, sneak around trying to find dirt, and then try to tell me that it’s my *father* who’s been up to illegal stuff.”

I tried not to let him see how much that hurt. “I came to you because we promised we wouldn’t keep any secrets.”

“No, Tess, you came to me because you want me to support this crazy idea of yours regardless of what it’ll do to my family. All you care about is your fucking story. Well, that and your own family. We both know that’s why you’re trying to make this about my father, so it’ll take the spotlight off of your sister.”

My temper bubbled just under the surface, and with every word Clay said, it became harder and harder to maintain control.

“I was an idiot for thinking this could work,” he said, plowing his fingers through his hair. “I can’t be with someone who’s looking for conspiracies

around every corner, who puts her own ambition above the innocent lives she's ruining."

Every accusation felt like a physical blow. I'd thought we'd moved past all of this to a place where we trusted each other. That's why I'd come to him even though a part of me had been apprehensive about how he'd react.

"I suppose I should be thankful that I found out before I turned my life upside-down for another woman. None of you are worth putting up with this shit."

I pushed back the tears burning in my eyes and straightened my shoulders.

"I'll leave your things down at the front desk so you can pick them up in the morning. I'm sure your parents will love to have you all to themselves tonight. They probably have your old room exactly the way you left it. I hope you enjoy your family time."

I spun on my heel and walked away.

He was right about one thing, I thought as I stepped out into the cold February night. It was better to have things settled between us before we'd uprooted our lives to be together. At least now I could go back to New York and move on without regrets.

THIRTY-ONE

CLAY

HOURS HAD PASSED SINCE TESS HAD LEFT ME AT MY PARENTS' HOUSE AND I still could barely believe it. Not that she'd left. I'd deserved that. What I didn't want to think about was the way I'd treated her. We'd promised each other that we'd be honest, and the first time she came to me with something important, I'd lashed out at her.

She was a reporter, and a damn good one. I could no more fault her for following her instincts than I could fault myself for following a hunch. I'd checked the hall for the pictures she'd referenced, hating myself for needing that proof. The moment I'd seen them, I'd known I'd royally fucked things up with her. It was impossible to tell if my father's interactions with Secretary Munroe were professional or personal, and since more than a story was on the line here, Tess's investigating further was justified. I would've done the same thing if our places had been reversed.

Which meant I owed Tess a huge apology...even if she didn't accept it.

"Idiot," I said aloud as I continued to pace.

My parents had accepted my explanation that Tess had gotten a call from her sister and needed to go, but I'd seen the look they'd exchanged and knew that they were hoping it had been something more. Neither one would come right out and say it, not after the arguments we'd had in the past about my dating life, but they both wanted Tess out of my life, if only to make room for whatever socialite they planned to send my way. I knew it was because they loved me and thought they knew what was best for me, but it still bugged the hell out of me.

I'd forced myself to make small talk when all I really wanted to do was

get some time alone and rage at the world. Thanks to Tess taking the car, I wasn't able to do that in the privacy of a hotel room unless I wanted to call for a ride, then deal with my parents about that too. Instead, I'd accepted my parents' offer of using my old room, then gone back downstairs when it'd become clear that I wasn't going to sleep any time soon.

Pacing helped burn off anxiety, but the monotony of it only fed into the hundreds of 'what if' scenarios clogging my mind, the majority of which involved Tess never speaking to me again and me hearing from Brianne that Tess was getting married to some douchebag who didn't deserve her but was still a hundred times better for her than me—

A knock at the front door broke into my thoughts, and I was halfway there before I realized it was two o'clock in the morning, and no one should be knocking on the door of a US Congressman's residence.

I automatically reached for my sidearm and then remembered that I didn't have it with me. My parents' house was one of the few places I'd thought would be secure enough for me not to need it. Still, I needed to see who was there. It didn't matter if I was off-duty or that I could press one of the many panic buttons my parents had installed and bring armed security in minutes. This was my family, and I'd protect them.

When I was close enough to see the small screen that showed who was on the other side of the door, I breathed a sigh of relief. It was Brianne. She'd made it back to the States faster than I'd thought she would.

As I opened the door, I made up my mind to offer her a guest room so she didn't have to look for a hotel. She wouldn't accept, but I'd be able to tell Tess when she came to get Bri. That would give me the chance I needed to appropriately grovel.

Brianne was two steps inside before I realized I'd mistaken the expression on her face. She wasn't exhausted. She was furious and trying to control it. I took a step back, raising my hands, but she knocked them aside and grabbed the front of my shirt, shoving me against a wall before I could truly process what was happening.

“You fucking bastard.”

Her voice was low enough that I doubted my parents would hear it, which was a good thing since I didn't want to have to explain to them what Brianne was doing here threatening me when it was only two hours past midnight.

“I can explain—”

Brianne's grip on my shirt tightened, and she put her face an inch from mine. "I don't want to hear it. I knew you'd hurt her. Guys like you, you're sons of bitches, no matter how much you try to pretend otherwise. I tried to protect her from you before, and now I see I was right to do it."

Every word cut me, not because Bri was wrong, but because she was right.

"I should have put you on the first plane out of San Jose the moment I saw you. Instead, I let myself listen to the two of you defend whatever game you were playing." Brianne wore a disgusted expression on her face, and I had the sense that the feeling was directed more at herself than at me. "No more. When we're done taking down the people responsible for two of my friends dying, if you're still in DC, I'm going to put you in the hospital."

I didn't doubt a single word she said, and she must have seen it on my face before she released me and took a step back.

"I'm heading back to the hotel to keep an eye on Tess. I have some instructions I'll text you, and then you can join us at the hotel to finish getting things ready. Until then, don't even think about contacting my sister. In fact, don't even think about her at all."

With that, she was gone, the entire encounter lasting only a few minutes. All the same, it had left me with an impossible task.

To not think about the one person who'd occupied my thoughts more than anyone else.

THIRTY-TWO

TESS

THREE HOURS OF SLEEP WAS THREE MORE THAN I'D EXPECTED TO GET, BUT I wasn't any less tired when I woke up a few minutes after five. Brianne had gotten in sometime around midnight, and I'd texted her with the hotel information but hadn't said anything about the falling out I'd had with Clay. She'd found out about that when she'd shown up at the hotel and had seen that I was there alone. We'd talked over things and then she'd gone back to her room, saying she'd come back just after sunrise and we'd get things started.

When I woke up, I stayed in bed, staring at the ceiling as I waited for the pain to hit me again. The hurt I'd felt yesterday on the drive, in the hotel, talking to Brianne, all of it was gone. Not in the sense that I had moved past it, but rather like it had been removed. And not only the hurt. Everything. I was numb. Empty.

Finally, I climbed out of bed and headed to the bathroom. I went through the motions of washing up, of getting dressed, and I felt nothing. Through a gap in my curtains, I caught a glimpse of early morning DC. The sun was up, but the weather reflected my mood: gray and dreary. I could have gone downstairs to get the free coffee and breakfast offered with my room, but eating what I had in the room seemed worth not having to be around people.

The smell of coffee woke me up more than the shower had, but even that didn't bring any sort of emotional response. I wanted the coffee, but the usual smile it brought to my face didn't appear.

I sat down at the desk and sipped the hot liquid slowly but steadily. As the caffeine made its way through my system, I made up my mind that I

would do whatever it took to get this thing resolved right away. I'd work with Brianne and Clay, do whatever they told me I needed to do, and get the job done. Once my part to play was done, I'd be gone, and not look back.

Even that thought didn't cause a single twinge.

I turned my head at the sound of the lock to the hotel room door clicking, unsurprised to see Brianne coming inside. Clay had left his key here before we'd gone to his parents' place so I'd passed it off to my sister. I told myself I'd done it to allow her access to my room, but I knew that part of me had done it to avoid having to deal with the fact of a second key.

"Morning," I said before turning my attention back to my half-full cup.

"I found someone waiting in the lobby," Brianne said.

I tensed, closing my eyes. I didn't need him to speak, didn't need the spicy scent of him, to know when he came into the room.

"Good morning."

I held up my hand without looking at him. "We have work to do, and I can do that, but this isn't going to be anything else."

"I understand."

"Nope." Brianne put her hand on my shoulder and squeezed. "The two of you need to talk."

My head snapped around to find Clay staring at her with just as much disbelief as I was feeling. "You were pissed at him last night."

"I was," she agreed. "And I still am."

"Thanks," Clay said dryly.

"I'm not doing this for you," she snapped at him. "I saw what happened to my sister when I didn't let her get closure, and I'm not letting you do that to her again. You two have ten minutes to hash out whatever you need to say so we can get down to business."

I appreciated what she was trying to do, but I didn't need to talk to Clay. Before I could tell her that, she left, and it was just Clay and me alone.

"It's okay," I said quickly. "We don't have to bring any of that up again. Let's just take care—"

He knelt in front of me and grabbed my hands, his touch shutting me up better than anything else could have. Heaven help me, I still wanted him.

"I'm sorry." His fingers tightened around my hands. "I was wrong to get defensive and attack you. I was the worst part of myself, and there is absolutely no excuse for my behavior."

As far as apologies went, that was a pretty good start, even if I didn't want to hear it.

"It was my turn to fuck up, and I did it gloriously." He kissed my hands. "And I can't promise I won't do something equally as stupid again, but I can promise that when I do, I'll admit to being an ass and do whatever it takes to make things right."

Tears burned a path to my eyes. "Dammit, Clay," I whispered.

"I was an ass, Tess, and I'll do whatever it takes to make things right. Give me another chance, please."

I knew what Brianne would say, and I knew that the old Tess would've agreed with her. Walk away and don't look back.

Except I'd lost so much time with Clay already because of unforgiveness and miscommunication. The only way to stop the cycle was to do just that: stop. Stop turning every disagreement into something that would destroy what we were building. And that was what we needed to focus on: building something with the two of us. That was the only way this would work.

And we'd have that talk...after I kissed him.

I leaned forward, practically throwing myself in his arms as he caught me. My mouth crashed into his and everything that had been chaos inside me calmed. His arms tightened, and I felt his relief as his lips moved with mine.

"Dammit, you two." Brianne glared at us from the doorway. "You know what, it doesn't matter. We have work to do. After that..."

She waved her hand in the air like it didn't matter, but I knew I'd hear it at some point. At least we had something to keep us all busy for a while.

THIRTY-THREE

CLAY

BRIANNE'S PLAN SOUNDED JUST AS INSANE IN DC AS IT HAD IN COSTA RICA, but I still hadn't been able to come up with anything better. Except, with the new information Tess had found, I had to admit that it might actually work. Before, I'd been going to see Secretary Munroe with some lame-ass excuse that probably would've gotten my ass beaten or killed. Now, I could say that I was there on behalf of my father and hope that it could get Munroe to open up.

"I'm still not loving this part of the plan," Tess said as she smoothed down my shirt, her hands lingering on my waist.

"The mic is undetectable," Brianne said. "And Clay's going to the secretary's office, not some back alley or shady restaurant. The worst that will happen is Clay will get escorted out by security."

"Or I'll get arrested," I added with a grin. When Tess just glared at me, I winked at her, trying to lighten the mood. "But you'll bail me out, right, babe?"

"Depends," she said, managing a smile. "Do I get to make you my bitch if I do?"

Brianne burst out laughing, and after a moment, Tess and I joined her. Laughter might not make Brianne approve of my relationship with her sister, but it did knock out some of the tension, and with us trying to take down corrupt politicians, that was a good thing.

Now that Brianne and I had assured Tess that she didn't need to worry about me, I didn't feel right expressing my own concerns about Tess's safety, especially since she was the only one who could pull this off. I was the wrong

gender to try to convince Secretary Ganesh's assistant that her boyfriend was cheating on her – though I supposed we could've gone that way if we'd needed to – and chances were that she knew what Brienne looked like. I hated to say it, but even if Brienne could have gone, Tess was still the better choice. Bri was too intimidating. We wanted anger, not fear.

“Do we need to go through the timeline again?” Brienne asked. “Because this only works if we time it right.”

“We know, Bri,” Tess said with a trace of exasperation in her voice.

“We've got it,” I added. “If we want to get this done today, we need to leave now.”

Brienne nodded, reluctance still in her eyes. This had to be killing her, sending Tess and me into danger, however small. She'd joined the army because she was a protector. Having her in the field now would be a liability at this moment. We had to pretend that she was still missing in Costa Rica. It was the only way we could maintain the element of surprise we needed.

I gave Tess a quick kiss, knowing that if I lingered, I might not be able to let her go. We might be going to the same place, but we had to take separate cars to avoid anyone seeing us together. We were even leaving at different times, just in case someone had figured out where we were and what we planned to do.

This was going to work.

It had to.

IT WAS HARDER to resist the urge to text Tess than I'd thought it would be. I could do it without Brienne knowing, but if it screwed up our plan, I'd never forgive myself. I had to just trust that the sisters were doing their parts right on schedule. As the alert on my phone went off, I sent up a quick prayer that things were going according to plan and then marched around the corner and straight up to the Secretary of Commerce's door.

“Excuse me!” The young man at the desk closest to the office called out to me. “You can't go in there!”

I stopped with my hand on the doorknob and half-turned, giving the twenty-something a polite smile that I didn't let reach my eyes. I recognized

him from the picture at the US Embassy in Costa Rica. Dark hair and eyes, a suit that didn't quite fit his frame. The plaque on the desk said his name was Bertrand Howell.

"Secretary Munroe will want to see me," I said, putting as much confidence into my voice as I dared. Coming across as arrogant would most likely get me kicked out just for having a shitty attitude.

"Do you have an appointment?" Bertrand asked.

"No," I admitted. "But my father is Congressman Clinton Kurth. If you let your boss know I'm here, he'll tell you to let me in."

"We'll see about that," he said stiffly.

I shrugged and waited for him to call Secretary Munroe. Less than a minute later, I was walking into the office.

"Secretary Munroe," I said as I walked up to the desk and held out my hand.

With salt-and-pepper hair and pale blue eyes, he looked a couple years younger than his actual age, but not so young that people would pay more attention to his looks instead of his politics. For a moment, I wondered if he'd always planned to be in this office or if his ambitions had been higher, then I pushed those thoughts aside and focused on the reason I was there.

"So, you're Clay," Munroe said with a campaign-trail smile. "Your parents speak very highly of you."

I couldn't have hoped for a better lead-in. "I'm actually here for them. Well, for my father. My mother is always careful about how much she involves herself in politics. She wouldn't even want a hint of impropriety."

"Of course not," Secretary Munroe said smoothly.

"That's why my father sent me." I laced my fingers together and set them loosely on my knee. The very picture of nonchalance. "Plausible deniability and all that. You understand."

He studied me for nearly a full minute before seeming to come to a decision. "Let's say I do understand."

Damn, he was careful. He was going to make me be the one to say it and keep his responses as vague as possible. He'd definitely been doing this sort of thing for a while. I was going to have to press harder.

"I had dinner with my parents yesterday." I picked at a non-existent piece of thread on my pants. "I just got back in the country, you see. I've been on vacation...in Costa Rica." I raised my eyes to meet his, but there wasn't even

a flicker of acknowledgment. I continued, "While I was at the house I couldn't help noticing pictures of you and my father. I hadn't realized the two of you knew each other."

"Washington is a smaller place than a lot of people realize."

I inclined my head in acknowledgment. "Still, imagine my surprise when I happened across a letter between the two of you talking about your support of a bill he's trying to get passed. One having to do with drug trafficking."

A corner of the secretary's mouth tipped up, as if he found this whole thing amusing. "I'm not sure I understand why you're here, Clay."

I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees. "Then I'll cut through the bull and lay it out for you. I want in."

"In?" he echoed. "I don't know what that means."

"I'm not as foolish as some people believe me to be."

"I am sure of that."

"Good," I said. "Then don't insult my intelligence by pretending that we don't both know about your contacts down in Costa Rica. I was just there, remember?"

His fingers tapped his chin, and I wondered how much of that gesture was deliberate. "Let's say, hypothetically, I was aware of a few...disreputable situations in Costa Rica. I would need to be extra careful in whom I entrusted this information. Such things could always have legal ramifications here, not to mention the publicity nightmare it would be should the story get out."

"Hypothetical story, right?"

"Right." He opened one of his lower desk drawers, and I stiffened. Instead of a weapon, however, he drew out a bottle of deep amber liquid. "Will you join me for a drink? It's Blanton's."

My gut told me that he wouldn't trust a man who didn't drink with him, so I accepted. After pouring us both generous amounts, he raised his glass and waited for me to do the same.

"To hypothetical stories and real friendships."

I tipped my glass in his direction and then took a swallow, letting the whiskey flow over my tongue. Rich flavor with hints of caramel and vanilla. Under other circumstances, I would've enjoyed taking my time savoring every last drop, but as it was, I knew I couldn't risk drinking too much more, no matter how well I held my liquor. As safe as Brianne and I had said I would be, neither of us actually knew just how dangerous Secretary Munroe

would be when cornered.

“The letter you wrote my father made it sound like you wanted to support that proposed bill as is, but I don’t think that’s the case, is it?”

“I think there are some ways that particular bill could be improved upon.”

I glanced at my watch and nearly cursed. I needed to move him toward a confession faster. “Ways that would hinder drugs coming in from places like, say, Russia or Mexico?”

He nodded. “That sounds as if it would be a good start.”

“But maybe this same bill could allow easier access for exports from a friendly country like Costa Rica?”

“Opening the American market to places like Costa Rica could greatly benefit that country,” he agreed.

“I believe you’re still waiting for a response from my father on your proposal.” This was where Tess and Brianne had put their faith in me, in my belief that my father couldn’t be working with Secretary Munroe, not if he knew the truth.

“I am.” Munroe drained the last of his whiskey. “Is that what you’re here to bring? His answer?”

“I haven’t talked to him about this,” I said honestly. “And I haven’t talked to him about what I saw in Costa Rica.”

“What you saw?”

That’s when I caught it. A slight change in the secretary’s posture, in his demeanor. The power between us had shifted.

“Namely, your assistant Bertrand leaving the US Embassy in order to bail out of jail a few members of a Colombian drug cartel that’s been working out of Costa Rica.”

Munroe stared at me, but I didn’t flinch. I let my words sink in, let him process not only the fact of them but the implication as well. As close as I was cutting it timewise, I couldn’t rush this part. He’d known everything up to this point, I had no doubt. The men in Costa Rica never would have come after Brianne, Tess, and I without approval from their bosses in Colombia, and without at least informing the secretary of what they intended to do. Now, however, he knew I could link the cartel to him.

He finally broke the silence. “I have no knowledge of what my assistant may or may not have done on his personal time.”

“I wouldn’t think otherwise, but you have to admit, if such a thing were

to be made public, well, some people might infer that your interest in my father's bill isn't entirely honorable."

"Are you attempting to blackmail me?" Munroe asked sharply.

"Not at all." I set down my glass. "I assume you know my line of work."

"I do."

"I think we could both benefit from working together."

He considered my offer for a moment, and then asked, "What about your friends? The women you were in Costa Rica with."

I waved a hand. "Two women I knew from my childhood. It was the damndest thing, running into Tess looking for her sister while I was there on vacation."

"Come now, Clay, we both know that you weren't in Costa Rica on vacation."

I feigned surprise. "I wasn't aware you had...inside information when it came to the FBI."

A sly little smile appeared on Munroe's face. "I didn't need to go to the FBI for that particular tidbit. An...acquaintance of mine happens to work in the Secretary of State's office, and she overheard Secretary Ganesh talking to your partner at the FBI about a favor."

And there it was, the connection to prove that Munroe had known both where I was and what I was doing. Any second now, the final nail in the coffin would be hammered down. While I waited, however, I figured I might as well see what else I could get him to implicate himself in.

"I'm glad you know," I said, letting false relief fill my voice. "It's been a hell of a time not being able to talk about everything that happened down there. You know what it's like, Mr. Secretary. You served in the Navy. There are things that only people who've seen the same sorts of things can understand."

His chest puffed up as he smiled indulgently at me. "Of course, son. You're always welcome to talk to me about things."

"Thank you, sir." I waited a beat before continuing. "I was supposed to find this Taylor guy who was working with Red Care, but I couldn't use any FBI contacts since, you know, the FBI isn't supposed to operate on foreign soil."

"Something I've never understood," Munroe said. "We should be allowed to send in whoever we want, regardless of their department."

“That would have made my job a lot easier.”

“I can only imagine how much easier it would have been to locate the local cartel’s drug house if you’d been able to go straight to the authorities and get them to tell you what they knew.”

“Definitely.”

“You probably could have found Tess a lot sooner as well, gotten her to a hospital and then gotten you all out in the time it took for you and Brianne to locate her.”

I didn’t acknowledge the fact that he’d just given details that I hadn’t yet shared. Everything either of us said was being recorded, which meant he’d be confronted by his words at some point. I didn’t need to be impatient.

Suddenly, the door burst open, and a tall strawberry blonde in her mid-twenties stood in the doorway. Behind her, Munroe’s assistant appeared to be at a complete loss as to what to do. The woman stalked into the office without even a glance in my direction.

“Miss Golding.” Secretary Munroe gave the young woman a stern look. “I am in the middle of a meet—”

“You cheating bastard!” She pointed at him, her cheeks flushed. “How dare you two-time me!”

I stayed as still as possible despite the almost overwhelming desire to remind Kathrine Golding that Secretary Munroe was, in fact, cheating on his *wife* with *her*. While Brianne planned to use Golding’s anger at Munroe as incentive to flip on the secretary, anything between them that I could record would be appreciated.

“I told you that if I don’t have sex with my wife twice a week, she’ll get suspicious.”

The blonde grew even redder. “I’m not talking about your wife! I’m talking about Cordelia Chase!”

I swallowed a laugh. Tess had said she’d come up with an alias of her own since it just had to be something she’d remember long enough for a conversation with Golding. I should have known she’d pull one out of her favorite TV show.

“Who?”

Clearly, the secretary wasn’t a fan.

“Tiny little brunette who you’ve been secretly seeing on the side. Ring any bells?”

“Kathrine, you need to calm down.”

I grimaced. Wrong thing to say. Even as often as I’d put my foot in my mouth over the last few weeks, I knew not to tell a woman to calm down, and definitely not in that condescending tone.

“Don’t you *dare* tell me to calm down!” She stamped her foot. “You told me I was special! That I was the only one you wanted to be with!”

“Kath—”

“No! I’m always the one listening! Listening to your speeches, to your complaints, to how much you love my tits...I’m sick of it! It’s your turn to listen!”

I heard a noise behind me that sounded like a scuffle, but I didn’t turn around. My part was done, and I intended to sit tight until the whole thing was over.

“I broke the law for you because you said we were in this together!”

And it was over.

Men in black suits passed by me on either side and one of the men spoke, “Secretary Munroe, Miss Golding, you both need to come with us.”

Kathrine whirled, seemingly stunned that there were more than her and the secretary in the room. When one of the men grabbed her upper arm, she wailed, “I didn’t do anything!”

That was my cue to leave. I quietly slipped out of the office and found people waiting for me. Tess immediately threw herself into my arms, and I pulled her close, finally allowing myself to feel all of the emotions I’d been holding back.

“It’s okay,” I said quietly. I pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “It’s over. We’re safe.”

“Nice work,” Brianne said as the Secret Service led a weeping Kathrine and a blustering Secretary Munroe past. “Munroe’s assistant is already saying he wants to cut a deal as soon as he can get a lawyer to make sure everything’s in writing.”

Sofie looked a lot friendlier than the last time I’d seen her. “Thank you. I’m sorry I kicked you out of my house.”

I laughed. “Don’t mention it.”

She glanced behind me and made a ‘wait’ gesture. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to speak to someone about processing the prisoners.” She looked over at Brianne. “I’ll meet you back at my place.”

“Don’t be too long.”

Tess shifted in my arms so she could face her sister while still keeping her grip around my waist. “If you and Sofie are here together, with everyone seeing you guys, does that mean your relationship is out?”

A shadow crossed Brianne’s face. “Actually, everything is out. Between Sofie pulling in the FBI to find me – even unofficially – and everything Kathrine told Munroe, it’d be foolish of either of us to try to go back to pretending to be just soldiers. Sofie and I talked, and we decided that it would be better for everyone if she and I played this off as being a classified, but Army sanctioned, mission.”

“Does this mean that you’re not...” Tess glanced around us and lowered her voice to a whisper, “black ops anymore?”

Brianne smiled, but I could still see a hint of pain in her eyes. “No, we’re not. I’ve got a lot of paperwork to do and decisions to make about what to do in May when my time’s up, but it should be standard military stuff.”

Though neither of the sisters said it, the expressions on their faces told me that a tentative truce had been called. Now that Brianne wouldn’t need to push Tess away for her own safety and all the past deceit had been revealed, the two could repair their relationship.

As for Tess and my relationship, I’d already decided where I wanted it to go from here. I just needed to find out if she felt the same way.

THIRTY-FOUR

TESS

IT WAS OVER.

There was always the chance that I'd be asked to testify, but Bri had said that she didn't think that was going to happen. To protect the identities of the black-ops team members who hadn't been burned, Sofie was going to do as much as possible to keep things quiet. The details at least. Our names would be redacted so that only a handful of people would know our identities.

I kept waiting for relief, for some rush of emotion that would be my body's confirmation that my life could finally move forward again, but all I felt was numb. The rush of adrenaline that had kept me going when I'd gone to confront Kathrine Golding was gone, but it hadn't been replaced with anything.

Clay seemed to be struggling with accepting the closure. He hadn't let go of me since he'd come out of Secretary Munroe's office. Maybe he'd realized the same thing I had: without this issue requiring us to work together, the decision of whether or not to see each other again rested solely on our shoulders.

"Ready to go back to the hotel?" he asked as Sofie called Brianne away from us.

I looked up at him. "You're not staying with your parents?"

His eyes met mine. "I'd like to stay with you, if you're okay with that."

"I'd like that."

We were tiptoeing around each other, and I didn't like it. I didn't say anything here – too many extra ears – but going back to the hotel would give us the chance to sleep and get clear-headed before we discussed where things

would go from here.

It took us another fifteen minutes to extricate ourselves from the melee, and another thirty after that to get back to the hotel. We talked on the drive, but only about our roles in what had just happened. Everything else would wait until we were behind closed doors.

Except when we were finally alone, I found that I didn't want to talk. I needed one night of knowing that we were on the same page, that we wanted the same things. We could deal with the complicated stuff tomorrow.

"We don't need to talk," I began.

Clay caught my hands, his eyes blazing with more intensity than I'd ever seen. The rest of what I'd planned on saying dried up in my mouth.

"We've waited long enough to be together," he said. "I'm not going to let any other possible craziness keep us apart."

My heart lurched, but I kept my expression blank, not wanting him to see the hope swirling inside me. We'd lost so much due to assumptions. I didn't plan on losing more.

"I should have told you how I felt about you before that night. I shouldn't have waited, too scared to make a move."

"I could say the same. I'd had a crush on you long before that night."

He smiled down at me. "Okay, it's on both of us. The point is, we lost too many years because neither of us spoke up."

"We're together now," I said. "Both adults who know their own minds and can make their own decisions."

"That's what I'm counting on."

Clay took a deep breath and then sank down onto one knee.

What. The. Fuck.

"I love you, Tess. I've loved you for so long that it felt natural when it progressed from friendship into more. I can't go back and change the way things played out before, but I can make the right choice now and say that I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

I swayed on my feet, only the grip he had on my hands keeping me steady.

"You're the only woman I want to be with. The only woman I want to fight with and make up with." He kissed my knuckles. "I don't have a ring, but I can't wait any longer to ask you to marry me. I want you to be my wife, Tess, and I will spend the rest of our lives making sure you know how much I

love you, even when I screw up again.”

This was really happening. Clay Kurth was asking me to marry him.

“We can have as long of an engagement as you want. I just need to know that my future has you.”

He wasn’t letting me get a word in edgewise. I went down on my knees, tugging my hands free. “Shut up.”

His mouth snapped shut, and I read the fear on his face.

“Yes.” I leaned up and brushed my lips over his. “Yes, I’ll marry you. Any time, any place. I don’t care about any of that. I just want you.”

He stared at me for a minute, as if he couldn’t quite believe it, and then he had his arms around me and his mouth on mine. He pulled me up his body until my knees were off the floor and my face was even with his. I barely noticed anything but the heat from his kiss and the strength in his arms.

The tip of his tongue touched mine, then slid across and into my mouth. I made a sound I’d never heard before and wrapped my arms more tightly around his neck. His hands moved under the back of my blouse, burning their way across my bare skin. He settled back on his heels, pulling me across his lap so that my knees were on either side of his hips. My skirt rucked up around my waist, and I ground down on him. He moaned, and the noise jarred me out of my haze enough to realize something extremely important.

I hadn’t said it back.

His lips moved down my jaw to my throat.

“Clay.”

No response.

“Clay, babe, look at me.”

I gave a light tug on his hair, and he raised his head, concern breaking through the lust. “Is something wrong?”

I put my hand on his cheek, my thumb brushing the corner of his mouth. “I love you too. I just realized I hadn’t said it back.”

“You said you’d marry me,” he pointed out with a grin. “I sort of assumed the love part came with it.”

I laughed. “Good point.” I kissed the tip of his nose, his cheek, his chin before pressing my lips to his. “But you deserved to hear the truth stated right out. I love you.”

Now it was his turn to laugh. I’d heard that sound a million times, but this one was different somehow. Deeper, richer. As if it meant more now. It was

like his touch. Before, I'd always felt it whenever we touched, but now, it was as if I was more alive, more aware.

"Until tonight, I never thought I'd get to hear those words from you." He kept one hand on my back but dropped the other one to my bare leg. "Honestly, I wasn't sure I'd ever get to hear those words at all."

I cupped his face between my hands. "Well, I'm going to make sure you hear them every day, maybe two or three times a day if you play your cards right."

"Even when I behave like an ass?"

I gave him a slow, languid kiss that stoked the fire inside me into an inferno and left me panting. I rested my forehead against his. "Especially when you behave like an ass."

"How did I get so lucky?" He slid his hand up my leg and under my skirt.

"Are you referring to me agreeing to marry you, or the fact that your wandering fingers are venturing into personal territory?"

"Both?" His voice had that low, husky quality that made my insides turn into goo.

"How about you put those fingers to good use?"

I took in a shuddering breath as his index finger pressed against the spot over my clit through my panties. My fingers tightened on his shoulders.

"You're soaked, baby." He pressed an open-mouthed kiss to the side of my neck. "Want me to make it better?"

"Please." I rocked against his hand, the friction making me whimper.

He moved his hand, knuckles pushing against me for a moment before he freed his cock. He pulled me down onto his thick shaft, both of us groaning as he sank deep. We held still for long seconds, then fell into a familiar rhythm. Back and forth we moved, the friction exquisite, but not enough.

Before I could tell Clay that I needed more, he surged upward, taking me with him. My back hit the mattress a second later, and then he was pushing my knees farther apart and sinking deeper inside me. I gasped as he immediately pulled back, and the gasp became a cry when he surged forward. Over and over he thrust into me, each stroke jarring and filling and exactly what I needed.

What I needed more, however, were the words he kept repeating until we came together in an explosion of pleasure.

"I love you. I love you. I love you."

EPILOGUE

Tess

THE SUN WOULD BE COMING UP SOON, BUT I'D DRAWN THE CURTAINS LAST night in anticipation of the weather forecast for today. Between the upcoming holiday season and the new additions coming soon, I intended to take as much time resting as possible before things went nuts.

Except I hadn't been able to sleep much tonight. In fact, I'd spent the last two hours staring at the ceiling and trying not to wake Clay. Not that he'd mind, and any other night, I might've been tempted to do just that. We loved spending time together, whether it was doing something we'd planned or just lying in bed talking.

Just not tonight.

We'd been living in Denver ever since coming back from our honeymoon, and I loved it just as much now in November as I had in July when we'd moved into the house we'd bought. Now that I knew Rona and Jalen, I felt bad that we'd missed their wedding, but they'd insisted we go on our honeymoon even after we'd had to move up our own ceremony.

I smiled as I ran my hand over my stomach. I would have been content with waiting until after the twins were born, but Clay had insisted we marry before their arrival. Then he'd gotten Brianne and Sofie on his side, which meant Mom had been on board too. I'd been easily out-voted.

Not that I minded. Our small, private ceremony had been perfect. Even Mr. and Mrs. Kurth had been pleased. They'd been less pleased with our decision to move across the country, especially since I was carrying their first

grandchildren. Still, they hadn't been angry about the two of us getting married, which surprised me. It might've had something to do with the fact that I'd helped their son crack a huge corruption ring and make a name for himself. I was pretty sure they were already planning his run for governor of Colorado.

Pain shot across my stomach, and I gritted my teeth as I breathed through it. The contractions had woken me up, but they'd been far enough apart for me to not worry about waking Clay just yet. Now, it was down to about five minutes between them, and they hurt...bad.

After the contraction passed, I reached over and shook Clay's shoulder. "Babe, wake up."

"Hmm?" He rolled over and blinked at me.

"We need to head to the hospital." I kept my voice calm and even, knowing that if he had the slightest hint of how anxious I was, it'd just make him nervous.

He'd been like that from the moment I'd told him I needed to take a pregnancy test. It hadn't been too long after we'd gotten engaged when I'd finally realized that it hadn't only been the circumstances that had been wearing me down. Clay hadn't freaked out, but he had been curious how I'd gotten pregnant when we'd doubled up on birth control. Until he'd remembered that we'd rarely used condoms since we'd been reunited after the car accident...and that's when I'd also remembered that I'd gone more than two weeks without my birth control while I'd been unconscious.

"Clay, come on. This isn't a drill. We need to go to the hospital."

"Hospital?" It took about three seconds for it to sink in this time and then he shot up. "Hospital!"

Ten minutes later, we were in our car heading for the birthing center we'd chosen. Clay was talking, but I let his voice become background noise while I concentrated on breathing my way through the next contraction. He wasn't really making much sense anyway, but I knew he was doing his best to reassure me that everything would be okay.

When the contraction eased, I pulled out my phone and texted Brianne. She and Sofie had stayed in DC, but they'd arrived in Denver a few days ago, planning on being here for the twins' birth and the holidays. Sofie had retired in August, and Brianne hadn't re-enlisted, which meant that as of September, they were no longer in the military. They were still deciding what they

wanted to do now but had held off making any permanent decisions until after their wedding in June.

A destination wedding in Hawaii that I...

“Fuck!” I slammed my hand down on the door.

“Are you okay?” The car swerved slightly as Clay leaned toward me.

I waved him off. “Just getting ready to give birth to your massive children. Keep your eyes on the road.”

He didn’t seem to find that as amusing as I did, but considering I was the one about to give birth not once but twice, I thought I deserved to be entertained as much as possible before I lost all time between contractions.

THE PAIN when I woke up wasn’t as bad as I’d expected, but it faded into the background even more when I saw Clay sitting in the chair next to my bed, each arm holding a wrapped bundle, one pink, one blue. I smiled as I pushed myself up.

“Good night,” Clay said. He frowned. “That doesn’t really work as a greeting, does it?”

I smiled at the sight of him and the two tiny bundles. “Not really. What time is it?”

“Almost ten,” he said, his voice low. “You’ve been sleeping for a couple hours.”

“How’re they doing?”

He managed to get to his feet, still holding both of the babies, the move more graceful than I could ever hope to be. He perched on the edge of my bed, leaning down to hand off our son.

“They’re perfect,” he said with a smile. “Ella May Kurth and Christopher Clinton Kurth.”

“I’m surprised our family and friends aren’t crowded in here,” I said as I smoothed my fingers across Christopher’s forehead.

“I sent them home,” Clay said. “They’ll all be back at visiting hours, I’m sure, but I wanted to have my family all to myself tonight.”

He kissed the top of my head, and I closed my eyes, savoring the love surrounding me.

“Thanksgiving is in two weeks,” I said softly. “But I already know what I’m most thankful for. What I’ll always be most thankful for.” I put my head on his shoulder. “This life, this family, it’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

I knew that life would throw things our way, but Clay and I would continue to face the future the way we’d always been meant to...together.

THE END

Don’t miss the other books in the Pleasure Series. Turn the page for a preview of *Forbidden Pleasure*, the book that started it all.

PREVIEW: FORBIDDEN PLEASURES

PLEASURE SERIES BOOK 1

ONE

IT HAPPENED DURING MY LAST SESSION WITH MY COURT-APPOINTED therapist. She'd given me two pieces of advice that I decided to follow. The first was to not let anyone define who I was, to be an individual who was comfortable in her own skin. The second was to have a healthy sex life. I remember thinking that was kind of strange, considering I was only eighteen at the time.

Somehow, I doubted this was what she pictured when she'd imparted those words of wisdom.

The man beneath me moaned as I rode him. The muscles in my thighs were starting to burn with each rise and fall, but I didn't slow. I kept my eyes open, my head down, but I barely registered the pretty-boy features of the young man I'd picked up just an hour ago. My hands splayed on his muscular chest, helping me balance.

“Fuck, babe, you're so tight.”

Okay, so I hadn't picked the guy for his eloquence, but he had a nice thick cock and no issues with me calling the shots. That's what mattered.

I flexed my muscles the way I'd been taught, and he swore again. “I work out,” I said and flexed again.

I leaned forward, and he pushed himself up on his elbows, his mouth latching on to a pale pink nipple. My eyelids fluttered as he sucked on it, his tongue and teeth teasing, but I didn't close my eyes. I always fucked with my eyes open... always. Lights on. No exceptions.

“Harder,” I said and ground down, the angle allowing just the right amount of friction on my clit. I was close. The pressure inside me was at the

point where I had to come or explode. “Come on... baby.” I almost tripped over not knowing his name, but I caught myself. “Suck harder. Make me come.”

Technically, I was doing most of the work, but he deserved a little credit for his nice cock and the wonderful things his mouth was doing to my breast, especially when he followed my directions. Never underestimate the importance of a man who does what he's told.

“Ah,” I moaned as the suction increased, sending jolts of intense pleasure from my breasts straight to my throbbing pussy. I moved one of my hands to the place where my body joined with his and my fingers found my clit. I rubbed it with quick, rapid circles, the combined friction and pressure making it hurt beautifully. I always needed that edge.

“Fuck, I'm gonna...” The guy's words turned into a loud grunt as his hips jerked up against me, his final thrusts hard and fast.

The hand not between my legs moved to my breast. Even as I felt my partner's cock begin to pulse inside the condom, it was my turn. A light pinch and twist to my nipple, and I was there. My muscles tensed and my pussy contracted around the thick shaft inside. The nameless young man swore again, his face a mask of pain-pleasure. As I descended from my high, I rolled off him, and his now-sensitive cock slipped out. I lay on my side, breathing heavily and enjoying the little bursts of electricity racing along my nerves, the aftershocks of a pretty good orgasm. Eight on a scale of ten.

He moved closer and I immediately stiffened, adrenaline flooding my system. I jerked upright, pushing myself back until I was well out of arm's reach.

“Easy, babe.” He gave me a smile, showing a set of deep dimples that went perfectly with his baby blues. He leaned on his elbow. “That was amazing.”

I nodded in agreement and climbed off the narrow dorm bed. College boys were easy, but their beds were generally shit. I picked up my underwear and bra.

“Leaving already?”

I glanced at him as I dressed. He hadn't moved, even to cover himself.

“Come back,” he continued. “Give me ten minutes and an energy drink from the mini-fridge, I'll be good to go again.”

It wasn't even remotely tempting since that would mean at least ten

minutes of small talk, but I didn't want to hurt his feelings. I wasn't a bitch, no matter how often I'd been called one. "Thanks, but no. I have to go to work."

He glanced at the clock, a puzzled expression settling on his handsome face. "It's three in the afternoon."

I smiled and shrugged as I adjusted my tank top. His eyes locked onto the bit of cleavage the tight black top exposed. I didn't say anything. He'd seen them bare. As long as he kept his hands to himself now, he could look all he wanted.

"Will I see you around?" He sat up, but didn't reach for me.

"Probably not for a while," I answered truthfully. While I liked coming to campus, I generally tried not to frequent the same places when I had an itch to scratch. No matter how good the sex, I rarely repeated. I knew society liked to pretend it was the women who got clingy, but I'd met plenty of men who thought a couple roles in the hay meant we were a regular thing.

I smoothed down my miniskirt and pulled on my nearly knee-high boots. I had two pairs, but these were my favorites. The four-inch heels raised me close to five-eight and I preferred being tall. Plus, if I ran into any trouble, they packed a hell of a kick.

"Where do you work?"

I gave him a small smile, but didn't answer. I scanned the carpet. One of my earrings had fallen out. I still had the other three in my right earlobe, but the hoop from the cartilage at the top was missing.

"Let me guess."

I rolled my eyes, knowing he couldn't see my face. I knew what was coming. I knew how people saw me. I'd dyed my hair several times over the years, but for the past six months, I had rocked a bright blue. It was cropped short, angled at my chin in a way that kept my heart-shaped face from looking too delicate. My eyes were a pale gray that most people thought were contacts though they were one hundred percent natural. Aside from the multiple piercings in my ears, I also had an eyebrow ring and one in my bellybutton. That, plus my numerous tattoos and the way I dressed, meant people generally made the wrong assumptions regarding my occupation.

"Dancer at The Blue Moon?"

At least he'd picked one of the classier strip clubs in the area. I had a feeling more than one of my conquests over the past three and a half years

had gone trolling clubs looking for me. The thought was amusing. What did it say about the state of feminism in society when a woman couldn't express herself through her appearance without people assuming she was a stripper?

I finally spotted the small silver hoop and slid it back into place with practiced ease. "It was fun," I said as I headed out the door.

By the time I reached the dorm lobby, I was already running through my schedule for the day, my encounter all but forgotten. I only had two jobs today, but the second had a long list of things I needed to do, most of which had to wait until everyone at the company had gone home. Those were my second favorite kind of jobs, because it meant I rarely had anyone staring at me or trying to talk to me while I worked. The best work was, of course, the kind I could do from home. I liked crowds at clubs and concerts, the anonymity that came with being part of the masses, but I wasn't a social person. There was only so much personal interaction I could handle at a time. I'd heard half a dozen psychological diagnosis as well as a multitude of reasons behind them. I had a simpler explanation that I preferred.

I didn't play well with others.

THE BRISK WIND that greeted me as I stepped outside was much chillier than it had been less than an hour ago. Autumn really had come to Colorado. I shivered and pulled my long-sleeved shirt more tightly around me. I'd been debating about stopping home before hitting my first appointment—the weather just cinched it. Coming home late tonight without a jacket would suck.

I headed toward the apartments that sat on the edge of the Colorado State University campus. They were a nice mix of graduate students, married students and recent graduates in the transition stage between college and real life. Age-wise, I fit in with them, even though I'd graduated three years ago. I didn't really hang out with any of them though. I preferred my own company. I could trust myself.

I didn't even give the 'out of order' sign by the elevator a second glance; it had only worked the first year I'd lived here. I didn't mind the walk up three flights of stairs most of the time. Less time I had to spend on the treadmill at

the gym. It was a real bitch when I had to carry stuff though.

The apartment was small, but I didn't need a big place. When you grow up with hardly any room to move, a one-bedroom with a kitchen, bathroom and living room all to myself was a luxury. The place was neat and simple, the furniture a mismatch of clunky college thrift store finds and the nicer pieces I'd been slowly buying. A bedroom suite had been my first purchase, a celebration of my first self-employment check. I didn't go in the bedroom though. I didn't need to. Still, I paused at its doorway and looked at my place, allowing myself to feel the satisfaction of knowing I'd accomplished all this on my own.

I swapped my outer shirt for my favorite leather jacket and headed back out. Nothing like a good fuck and then a little affirmation of how far I'd brought myself. I wasn't a shrink, but I thought I was pretty well-adjusted. Considering other people who'd gone through the same things I had were either dead, drug addicts or prostitutes, I felt a pat on the back was well-deserved.

I was still in a good mood when I strolled in to Khan and Associates, and the secretary glaring at me only brightened my day. She was a new addition since the last time I'd been here, which meant I was going to enjoy this.

“May I help you?”

If she'd had glasses, she would've glared at me over their rims. I plunked my backpack down on her desk just to see her eye twitch.

“I'm here to see Ms. Khan.” I kept my tone polite and professional. “She's expecting me.”

“Take a seat.” The secretary gave me one of those condescending looks that women like her seemed to reserve for people like me. “I'll get to you when I get to you.”

I laughed and the scowl deepened, creating an array of tiny wrinkles on her forehead. If she kept that up, she'd make herself look years older than she was. “Check your appointment book. Lang Tech Consulting.”

She didn't even pretend to look at her computer or the calendar on the desk. Instead, she pointed toward the chairs and looked at me like I was something to scrape off the bottom of her shoe. My mild annoyance started to turn into actual anger. I didn't show it though. Even as good as I was at my job, if I got too mouthy, people wouldn't overlook my appearance to hire me.

“Ma'am,” I spoke through gritted teeth. “I'm going to say this one more

time and then I'm going to make a call that you really don't want me to make. Let Ms. Khan know I'm here.”

“Excuse me?” She stood up, leaning toward me with her hands on the desk.

I was sure the look she was giving me had quelled plenty of people who seemed tougher than me. Unfortunately for her, my past was full of people a hell of a lot scarier than a middle-aged secretary with a superiority complex.

I sighed and straightened. “Don't say I didn't warn you.” I pulled my phone from my bag and scrolled through my business contacts. I tapped on the right name and waited.

“Yes?”

“Ms. Khan, this is Jenna Lang.”

“You're late, Ms. Lang.” My client's voice was sharp.

“Yes,” I agreed. “I've run into a bit of a snag and it doesn't look like I'll make it in.”

“Ms. Lang,” Ms. Khan interrupted. “Is there a point to this? You're far too professional to sound so flippant about canceling at the last minute.”

“Indeed,” I said. “Your secretary seems to be under the impression that my presence here is unwelcome.”

Ms. Khan muttered something under her breath that could have been a series of swear words. “I'll be right there.”

I ended the call, put my phone back in my bag and then gave the secretary a sugar-sweet smile. “It'll be just a minute.”

“Young lady,” she said, far from threatened. “And I use that term very loosely, if you don't turn around and start walking toward that door, I will call security and watch them haul your slutty little ass right out of here.”

A door at the end of the hall opened, then closed, and I took a step back from the desk. A flash of triumph crossed the secretary's face and I knew she thought she'd won.

“Sandra!”

I couldn't stop the smirk when I saw the secretary's face go pale. I didn't want her to get fired, but I'd have been lying if I said I wasn't looking forward to witnessing her bubble get popped.

“Ms. Khan.”

“Didn't Ms. Lang tell you that she had an appointment with me?”

The secretary glared at me, crossed her arms and turned back to her boss.

“No, ma'am, she just marched right in here and demanded to see you.”

My smile disappeared. She was seriously going to stand there and lie? I glanced at Ms. Khan. The woman was impeccably dressed, as always, the picture perfect business woman. She didn't look at me, but I could tell her face was blank.

“Your job, Sandra, is to make inquiries in situations such as this, not prevent work from getting done. Something to keep in mind for the future.” Ms. Khan turned back the way she'd come, making an impatient gesture over her shoulder. “Come on, Ms. Lang. I'm not letting you bill me for the time you've wasted.”

I pressed my lips into a flat line and followed. I'd done four jobs for Khan and Associates and had always thought she'd been at least indifferent about me. Apparently, I'd been giving her too much credit. As we walked down the hallway to her office, I realized she was just a good actress. She'd been tolerating me because I was good at what I did and still new enough to charge a lower rate than my competitors. I didn't feel any anger though, just resignation. It wasn't the first time and it wouldn't be the last.

Fuck them all.

I didn't care. I was who I was. No one would ever change that.

TWO

I FINISHED UP AT KHAN AND ASSOCIATES IN GOOD TIME, MY ANNOYANCE AT what had happened driving me to get done and get out as soon as possible. Fortunately, Ms. Khan left me alone to do my work, so I didn't have her condescending presence to deal with. Still, I was glad to leave. I wouldn't end my contract with the company over this, but I wasn't about to spend any more time than necessary hanging around.

The sun was going down as I stepped into the brisk wind. I headed for the bus stop, thankful it was only a couple yards away. I'd probably end up taking a cab home tonight. It was getting to be the time of year when I couldn't walk to all my jobs, which meant splitting my travel between cabs and buses. I wasn't fond of either, but didn't have enough money to buy a car yet, no matter how well I'd been doing financially. Still too much debt to pay off.

The driver gave me a once over and rolled her eyes as I climbed on board. I took the first empty seat and stared out the window as the bus made its way through Fort Collins. The software company I was going to was on the other side of the city, so I had at least thirty minutes, forty if traffic was bad. I ran through the checklist of everything I had to do. The repetition and familiarity of work kept me from thinking about anything else, and if there was one thing I avoided at all costs, it was thinking too much.

Archer Enterprises was in a fairly unassuming building considering it was one of the largest software companies in the country. I hadn't been here before, but I'd done my research when I'd gotten the call for the job. The place didn't look like much on the outside, but I knew the tech inside would be better than anything I'd ever seen before. Hell, their state-of-art badassness

was the main reason I'd wanted the job.

I walked to the glass doors and glanced around as the doors opened. Immediately inside the lobby were two security guards who looked like they'd once either been Special Forces or linebackers. Maybe both.

"Jenna Lang," I introduced myself. "Lang Tech Consulting."

The younger of the two guards gave me a doubtful look and I wondered if I was going to have another issue.

"Have you been here before?" the other guard asked. His dark eyes were warm, but his expression professional.

I raised an eyebrow. "Does it matter?"

"Actually, Miss, it does," he said. His tone was neutral, neither kind nor unkind. "Mr. Archer doesn't allow us to let people up unless they've been here before."

One corner of my mouth twitched up in a partial smirk. "Then how are they ever supposed to get in?"

The younger one smiled. "What Monty here is trying to say is that Mr. Archer insists on being contacted personally to come down for anyone who hasn't been here before."

Okay, that was surprising. What CEO came down to see every visitor? I mean, I knew a lot of those types had a lot of time on their hands, but I assumed the majority preferred to spend that time clubbing or fucking or spending obscene amounts of money, sometimes all at once.

"Wait here," the older guard instructed. He reached over and picked up a phone. He pushed a button, waited a moment, and then spoke again. "Mr. Archer, there's a Ms. Lang here for you." Another minute passed. "Yes, Sir. Thank you." He hung up the phone and turned back to me. "He'll be down in a moment."

I nodded and the older guard took a couple steps back. The younger one, however, stayed where he was. I didn't think he was concerned about me doing something crazy or anything like that. Based on the way he eyed me up and down, I was pretty sure he was deciding if he just wanted to ogle me or ask me out. He was kind of cute, but I wasn't interested in another fuck anytime soon. And I didn't do dates.

I looked around. The lobby was small, but that didn't surprise me. Archer Enterprises was large in terms of production, so their factories were massive, but one of the things that made Archer different from similar companies was

that the CEO hand-picked only the best and the brightest, believing in quality over quantity, and he was willing to pay what they were worth. Which made sense since he'd been the best and the brightest his whole life.

Rylan Archer. Twenty-eight and a self-made billionaire who'd started his software company while a freshman at Colorado State University. By the time he was a senior, he'd had enough money that he could've dropped out, but he finished his degree in computer science and then hired the number two in his field, a guy named Curt Stockard who'd end up being the public face of Archer Enterprises until eighteen months ago when a car accident put him in a coma for three weeks. When he woke, he cashed in his shares of the company and had taken off to the Bahamas with his wife. Since then, Rylan had been forced into the spotlight and, from what I could tell, he didn't like it. I'd barely been able to find any interviews with him.

I looked over when I heard the elevators ding and Archer stepped out. My eyes widened a bit. I had to admit the pictures I'd found didn't do the CEO any justice. Dark brown hair that was just a bit too long for the average businessman, stunning blue-violet eyes that, even from a distance, I could tell were intelligent. He was tall, easily six-two, six-three, with broad shoulders and a suit that showed off his muscular torso. Strong jawline, high cheekbones. Damn. He was hot.

But this was business. And I never mixed business with pleasure.

“Mr. Archer.” I stretched out my hand.

“Ms. Lang.”

Rylan's grip was firm, but not too much. He didn't try to do what most men did and make it caress, but he also didn't take the opportunity to prove his superiority by trying to crush my hand either. The men who attempted to do that generally ended up with an unpleasant lesson in the pressure points in the hand.

“If you'll follow me.”

He turned and started to walk without even looking behind him to see if I was coming. I wondered how much of that was the confidence that came from being the boss or if it was arrogance. I supposed I'd figure it out soon enough.

“I've done my research on you, Ms. Lang,” he said as he pressed the elevator button.

I was a bit surprised. I'd thought someone who insisted on personally

meeting every new arrival would want to talk to me one-on-one since we hadn't really had an interview. As we hadn't gone to his private elevator, I assumed he was putting me right to work.

“And I've done mine on you, Mr. Archer,” I replied.

I caught a hint of a smile, but he didn't look at me.

“I insist that all of my employees call me Rylan.”

Ah, one of those kinds of rich guys. I'd met them before. They wanted their employees to think of them as buddies. Thought it gave them some kind of equality, made them more like the “common man”.

“Am I an employee then?” I asked as I followed him onto the elevator.

“For the moment,” he answered and pushed the button for the top floor.

I frowned. Most central computer systems were kept on ground floors, sometimes higher up if a company didn't have the whole building. I'd never heard of a computer room on the top floor.

“You'll be accessing the server from my office,” Rylan said. “I don't allow anyone but myself in the main server room.”

“No private elevator?” The question popped out and I mentally scolded myself. That wasn't any of my business.

Rylan ignored my question and went back to his previous train of thought. “You have quite an impressive history.” He glanced at me. “Would you prefer I call you Ms. Lang, or is Jenna okay?”

I knew how it worked. If I said Ms. Lang, I was being stand-offish. If I said Jenna, he might take it as license to get too personal. In previous situations, I'd found the best way to handle it was to not make the decision. “However you address the rest of your employees would be appropriate.”

Again, a twitch of lips that said my answer somehow amused him. “All right, Jenna. As I was saying, when looking for a tech company, I was very thorough. I have to say, I was surprised when I reached you.”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. Of course he was surprised. Everyone was surprised to find out I ran a legitimate business and had the degrees to back it up. Not that I could blame them. I looked more like the freak the suits kept in the basement and never let out.

“You're young to have a masters in computer science,” he said.

Not the first thing I'd expected. I figured he was either building up to comment on my appearance or would let it go completely.

“Then again, you graduated at sixteen, went straight into summer classes

and didn't take any time off. Considering all that, getting a masters along with a minor in business by twenty isn't really odd." Rylan's voice was even, matter-of-fact.

I wasn't sure if I should be impressed or freaked out that he knew so much about me. Most employers dug, but not that deeply. The elevator dinged and the doors opened. Rylan motioned for me to step out first and then followed. We were on the top floor, which wasn't surprising, but what surprised the hell out of me was that there wasn't a hallway. It opened straight into his office. At least I assumed it was his office since that's where he'd said we were going.

It didn't look like any CEO's office I'd ever seen before. For one thing, it was one giant open space with three glass walls. Behind us, where the room would've gone out over the lobby, was a solid wall with a door on either side of the elevator door. One, I assumed, would lead to a private bathroom. The other, I wasn't sure, but wasn't too curious about. Not my business. What would be my business was the set up three fourths of the way into the room.

When we first walked in, there were two long conference tables on either side of the elevator door. All of the chairs faced an elaborate extension of about three or four desks had been placed together to create a long island that could hold the half a dozen computers currently set up. I already knew the kind of computer I'd be working on based on the software Archer Enterprises put out, and I wasn't disappointed. He had a tower and the newest, top of the line desktops as well as laptops and massive monitors. I had no doubt that his systems would be up to date as well. He didn't hire me for bugs or software upgrades.

"What I found most interesting was that you were able to get an investor for Lang Tech Consulting at such a young age. Banks have gotten wary about loaning money for computer ventures over the past couple years." Rylan barely glanced at the skyline view as he walked toward his desk.

"I didn't get a loan," I said, unable to stop myself from explaining. "One of my professors saw how good I was and convinced the college to hire me for a couple jobs. Helped me get my foot in the door."

It was a test. The look in Rylan's eyes as he glanced at me said he already knew that, but had wanted to know if I'd be honest about how I'd gotten started. From what I could tell, it looked like I'd given the right answer.

As I followed Rylan around the desk to the front of the monitors, one of

the non-elevator doors opened and a man entered. He was tall and lean, but not a cut and defined kind of lean. Rather, he had the build of someone fortunate enough to have a good metabolism, but didn't spend much time exercising. His jet black hair was slicked back in a style that was older than the early thirties his features seemed to fit. His eyes were the color of dark chocolate, but they weren't exactly warm. His gaze slid over me and I had to suppress the urge to glare at him. There were some guys I could just tell were undressing me with their eyes. Admiration was one thing; leering was something else.

“Jenna, meet Christophe Constantine, my assistant.” Rylan tapped on one of the keyboards and the screens all came to life. “Would you like tea or coffee? We also have water and fruit juice available.”

“Coffee, please,” I said. “Black. And decaf if you have it.”

I was close enough to see Rylan's eyes shine with humor.

“I thought caffeine was all computer programmers and techs drank.”

Despite myself, I smiled.

“Rylan,” Christophe spoke. His voice was much lower than I would've thought, almost gravelly. “Emmaline Kent wants to speak to you about some glitches in the program she's working on.”

“I'm booked until tomorrow,” Rylan said. I watched him scan a mental calendar, his eyes narrowing as he appeared to find an empty slot. “Schedule her an appointment for one o'clock and tell her to be ready to present a series of possible solutions for the issues she's having.”

“Will do,” Christophe said. “Did you want anything to drink?”

“My usual,” Rylan answered even as he pulled out two chairs. “And make sure the pots are full before you leave for the day.”

“Got it.” Christophe turned and walked out.

“Now, Jenna, what do you say we get down to business?” Rylan sat down in one of the chairs and I took the other. “Once you get started on the preliminaries, I'll have Christophe order us some dinner.”

“Excuse me?” I pushed my chair away from him as I turned.

“I assumed since we'd be staying late, you'd get hungry. I usually order when I'm working late, so I figured I'd get enough for two.” Rylan didn't seem put off by the edge in my voice.

“You're staying too?” I tried not to scowl. One of the things I liked about security system work was that I usually had to do it after the offices were

empty, which meant I only had the occasional security guard checking in on me.

Rylan gave me a small smile. “I know there are a lot of companies that give free reign, but no one gets on my computers or my server for the first time without me there. Sorry, Jenna. You're stuck with me for the duration of this assignment.”

THREE

I WASN'T HAPPY THAT RYLAN WAS STAYING WHILE I WORKED, AND EVEN LESS so when I realized he fully intended to be right there the entire time. He wasn't hovering, but it was close. It wasn't that I couldn't work with someone watching me. It was more that I didn't like to, especially when that someone was a man I didn't know. But, I was a professional and I'd do what needed to be done. Besides, he hadn't given me a reason not to trust him.

“You said you had a security issue.” I pushed my chair to the edge of where I needed to be and hoped I didn't offend him. “But you didn't mention specifics.”

Rylan nodded and leaned closer to pull up a program on the center monitor. I managed not to flinch or pull away, then mentally scolded myself for being so jumpy. It wasn't like I hadn't worked with men before or even good-looking men. And while he was definitely hot, that wasn't the reason I felt more nervous than usual. Not that I knew what the real reason was.

“I didn't mention specifics,” Rylan said. “Because it's a security issue with a prototype of brand new software I'm beta testing on our servers.”

Oh. That made sense. No one in their right mind would tell someone like me that their servers weren't secure. Even a company with a long-established reputation shouldn't be trusted with information like that. With a company like this, stolen information could be sold to the highest bidder for millions. Now I really understood why Rylan didn't plan to leave me here alone. This was practically the most vulnerable position a business like this could be in. In fact, that was usually why jobs like this were done from the inside.

“Why me?” I asked. “Why doesn't your security tech handle this himself?”

Or herself?”

A flash of anger went across Rylan's face. “He's no longer employed here.” The tone of his voice told me the matter wasn't going to be discussed any further. “So, what can you do to fix this?” He gestured toward the screen.

There was no attitude in his question, so I didn't snap off some smart-ass reply. Instead, I focused on the screen and let myself fall into the safety of ones and zeros, the cyber-world where I was in control and a single keystroke could change everything. That was one of the reasons I'd gone into a technological field. As an expert, I had power in a place where things were straightforward, even if I was using a backdoor. There were other reasons I'd chosen computers, but this wasn't the time or place to rehash any of them.

The program Rylan had opened was an impressive one. It was a multi-level operating system designed to exponentially increase speed and efficiency while offering a new, attractive appearance. Once all of the beta tests were done and this hit the market, it'd be huge.

If I could fix one, teeny-tiny, glaring error.

As I continued to read the code, I began to frown. Something wasn't right here.

“What is it?” Rylan asked. “You see something.”

I nodded. “I do.” I didn't expound, but kept reading instead. I half-expected him to interrupt and insist that I share, but he didn't. Instead, he let me keep going until I'd finished. Only then did I look away from the monitor and face Rylan.

“What did you see?” Rylan asked, almost holding his breath. This is the first time I saw a crack in his professional surface.

His face was carefully masked and I knew he was testing me.

“The security breach in the software was intentional.” I paused, and then made an intuitive guess. “Which is why your security tech got fired.” I glanced at the monitor nearest me again. “Do you know who he sold the information to?”

“No one,” Rylan admitted.

I was surprised. I hadn't expected him to admit the breach. I thought he'd just brush aside the question and move on.

“The day we installed the software to start beta testing, one of my other security personnel found an incriminating note that made me check the program. My former employee didn't have any time to let his contact know

he'd opened a window for them. We had him arrested and a friend at the police station promised to keep him away from a phone for twenty-four hours.”

“Which is why you needed me to come in right away,” I connected the dots. “You need me to fix the problem before this guy calls his contact and lets them know it's open season on Archer Enterprises.”

Rylan nodded. “Exactly.”

“Question. Why don't you just uninstall the software?”

He grimaced. “It's not that easy. It'd take a complete system wipe and reboot. And while the old software was re-installing...”

“You'd be vulnerable,” I finished. A question popped into my head, but I wasn't sure if it was a good idea for me to ask it.

“Whatever you're wondering, just ask.”

I blinked. I'd never had someone call me out like that before. I hoped it wasn't because I was getting easier to read. I didn't address that, however, but asked my question. “Why'd you install software without checking it first?”

He leaned back in his chair. “You mean why did someone who's supposed to be smart not notice there was something seriously wrong with the software before I installed it?” Rylan asked wryly.

I shrugged. “You said it, not me.”

“I trust my employees,” Rylan said. “They check their own work, ask for help when they need it.”

“And how's that working for you?” I closed my eyes as soon as the question came out. Shit. “I'm sorry. That was completely unprofessional.” I opened my eyes, guessing I'd be getting fired if he wasn't on a timetable.

“No need to apologize.” Rylan held up a hand. He crossed one long leg over the other and I couldn't help but admire how well tailored his pants were. “It's worked fine for years, but I suppose it had to catch up with me sooner or later.”

I managed to keep my opinion to myself on that one. Rylan was far too trusting, especially for a CEO. His eyes met mine and I wondered if he knew what I was thinking, if he could read the code that turned into thoughts inside my mind. I tried not to squirm. There wasn't anything inappropriate in his gaze, but it felt like he was seeing deep inside me. I didn't like it.

“Are you able to fix the problem?” Rylan asked, finally breaking the silence. He turned toward the monitor, the personal conversation clearly over.

Grateful for the shift, I nodded. “I’m basically going to have to re-write the code that your tech put in here. He didn’t just leave it out. He actually wrote an open door in its place. I’ll want to go through the rest of the code too, just to make sure he didn’t put in a back door or mess with anything else.” I didn’t look at Rylan as I added, “If you have a non-disclosure agreement for me to sign, I can do that now.”

He slid a piece of paper across the desk and I read through it quickly. I’d learned how to skim these things to make sure I didn’t get caught off guard without taking forever to do it. I signed my copy and the company’s copy and then Rylan initialed both. With that taken care of, I turned my attention to the task at hand.

I let myself fall into the rhythm of work, tuning out everything around me. I was vaguely aware that Rylan was watching me, but pushed it to the back of my mind. I was good at compartmentalizing when I needed to. I didn’t realize that Christophe had brought in coffee until I automatically reached over and a mug was there. It was perfect, strong and black. I sighed. Decaf too. That was good. I’d had enough caffeine today. Anymore would leave me on the wrong side of total control.

I didn’t know how much time passed, only that I was half-way through my system check when I became aware that Rylan had moved closer and was now looking over my shoulder. I inhaled sharply, catching a whiff of something masculine and spicy. My stomach clenched in a good way. I didn’t know what kind of soap or aftershave that was, but I liked it.

“You’re doing great work.” His voice was low and near enough that I tensed. He reached over my shoulder and pointed at a line of code. “That backdoor was virtually undetectable and you closed it while allowing for a passcode to grant access if necessary. Always important in case I get shut out of my system.”

I pushed back from the desk, moving away from him. My eyes narrowed. “How’d you know that was there?”

“I am a software designer,” he said mildly.

I looked around, the passage of time now registering. The sky was dark, the light coming in through the window now artificial. We’d been alone in Rylan’s office since the beginning, but now I knew we were alone in the building. Maybe there was a security guard somewhere, but I doubted he came up to the top floor when the boss was here. Especially if the boss was

up here with a woman.

“Why didn't you fix this yourself?” I stood as my heart started to race. “Why did you hire me to do something you could do yourself?”

I could feel my palms begin to sweat. I told myself that there had to be a reasonable explanation. Logically, I knew that had to be the case. Smoking hot CEO's of billion-dollar software companies didn't randomly hire tattooed and pierced computer techs just to get them alone. The panic that threatened to choke me told a different story.

The panic reminded me that Rylan had admitted to researching me, finding out about my past. He couldn't know too much, of that I was certain. I'd made sure Jenna Lang was impossible to trace to who I once was. But still, he'd looked me up. My mind raced. Was it possible he'd chosen me because I was alone? Did he think no one would believe me if I tried to claim he'd done something to me? Did he think he could get away with... what?

My breath was coming in rapid, short bursts of air now. I needed to calm down. Breathe. My imagination had taken on a life of its own and was running away, taking my brain hostage. If I didn't get control of it, I would hyperventilate. It didn't happen often, but I could feel a panic attack on the brink. It had been a while since I'd had one. I was due.

“Jenna, are you okay?” Rylan looked concerned as he stood.

He reached out, his hand brushing against my arm. Electricity shot through me, followed by a surge of adrenaline so strong I nearly roared. I could do nothing but act on instinct, my brain barely processing my actions.

My hand curled into a fist and my arm drew back. I turned my body like I'd been taught, putting everything into the punch. Pain flared through my knuckles and up my hand as I connected with the side of his face.

Then I did the only thing I could do. I bolted. I heard him call my name as I hit the elevator button and prayed it would close before he got too close. I didn't know if he wasn't chasing or if I was quick enough, but either way, I made it to the lobby without being caught, and then headed for the front door. It wasn't until I was halfway down the side that I finally slowed. Thank God, a bus. I picked up my pace and jumped on. I dug four quarters out of my pocket, tossed them in the collector and collapsed on a seat. I didn't realize I'd forgotten my backpack until I was at my apartment and had to use my spare key.

Fuck.

I would have to go back to Archer Enterprises and get it.
Double fuck.

End of Preview.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

M. S. Parker is a USA Today Bestselling author and the author of over fifty spicy romance series and novels.

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