

Finding
NEW PLEASURE SERIES
Brianne

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FINDING BRIANNE

NEW PLEASURES BOOK 4

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Reading Order

Thank you so much for reading Finding Brianne, the first book of Clay's story. It can be read independently of the previous books in the New Pleasure series, but if you'd like to read the complete series, I recommend reading them in this order:

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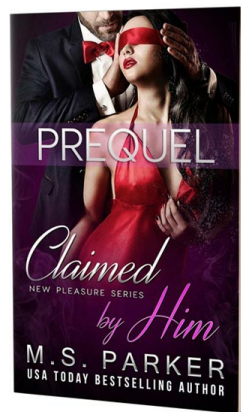
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Free Prequel

Get an exclusive prequel to the New Pleasures series! [Click Here](#) to subscribe to my newsletter and start reading the exclusive 50 pages prequel – NOT available anywhere else.



FREE PREQUEL

Sign up to my newsletter and get an exclusive 50 pages prequel to the New Pleasures series – not available anywhere else.

One

Clay

“Are you going to beat yourself up over this the whole way home? Because if you are, I’m going to listen to this new audiobook Janelle gave me. It’s called *Fifty* something or other. She says it’ll spice up our love life.”

Scratching the scruff on my chin, I looked over at the man next to me, hoping he wasn’t seriously going to subject me to that. Even though we’d only been partners for a few months, I knew he was purposefully trying to wind me up, and it was hard to say how far he’d go with it. He didn’t do it often, but whenever he felt like I was getting too far into my own head, he said shit to get a reaction.

Sometimes, it worked.

Sometimes, I responded by being an ass.

“I’d be careful trying anything you hear in that book. I don’t know if your ancient heart could handle it.”

He flipped up his middle finger in an easy gesture. “Your dick couldn’t handle it.”

This was the side of FBI Agent Raymond Matthews that my circle of friends didn’t get to see. He might’ve been a little more casual around Rylan and Jenna Archer, but there was a difference between casual and the sort of comradery that went on between partners.

Like flicking someone off and insulting each other’s manhood.

Normally, that would’ve pulled me out of the funk I’d been in since realizing that my stupidity had almost cost the life of one of the most important people in my life.

Rona Quick and I had known each other for five years, having met through her uncle, Anton. I’d promised him that I’d look out for her if anything happened to him. After he was murdered, I’d done my best to fulfill that promise.

I knew Anton wouldn’t have approved of the fact that, less than a year ago, Rona and I had been lovers for a couple months, but the relationship hadn’t been anything salacious. We were both consenting adults, and we’d

understood where things stood with us.

If anything, I'd been the one who'd been more invested in things between us. She hadn't even felt the need to tell me she was leaving when she was kicked out of Quantico, even though we'd been together less than twelve hours before.

Which brought me back to the fact that I'd been an ass. A monumental ass.

When I'd been assigned to the Denver office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, I'd known Rona wasn't too far away in Fort Collins, Colorado, working as a private investigator. I'd thought it was the perfect opportunity for us to have something more real than only sex. She hadn't felt the same way. I'd thought it was just because she was young, but I'd been wrong. Her age hadn't been the problem.

I'd been the problem.

Everything I'd thought I wanted with her, she'd only wanted with Jalen Larsen, a billionaire tech genius who also happened to be a great person.

It was hard to compete with that.

Back at Poudre Valley Hospital, seeing Jalen and Rona together hadn't been easy. Making it worse was the fact that I'd made mistakes in the investigation into Rona's disappearance, the biggest one of which had been not listening to what Jalen thought had happened. I'd put Rona in danger. I'd put Jalen in danger. All because I'd been jealous.

"They're good together, you know," Ray said quietly. "They remind me of Jenna and Rylan."

"I know," I snapped.

That wasn't exactly what I wanted to hear, that Rona had found her soulmate or whatever. I'd seen Jenna and Rylan Archer together, and there wasn't any other word to describe the two of them except soulmates. I didn't doubt that Rona and Jalen were the same.

"I don't have the best track record with women," Ray said as he turned on his windshield wipers to deal with the snow that had begun coming down a minute or so ago.

"Really? I never would have known that."

My partner gave me a withering look that said he didn't appreciate my sarcasm. He'd been divorced for eight years, and while he and his ex-wife co-parented their two kids pretty well together from what I understood, he didn't hide the fact that he'd been a shitty husband and an oft-absent father. Like a

lot of people in our profession, spouses and family too often took backseats to cases.

He'd been dating Janelle for four months, and according to him, it was the longest he'd been with someone since the divorce. Again, not something that really made me want to put a whole lot of faith in whatever Ray said next.

"But the one thing I know for sure is that it's never good to be with a woman who's in love with someone else."

Dammit.

He was right. I didn't want to be with someone who was in love with someone else. And I'd always known that Rona didn't love me that way. She'd been honest from the start about what she'd wanted in our relationship, even if she hadn't been entirely honest about other things in her life.

"I've been watching you these past months," Ray continued, "and I've realized something about you. You want to hear it?"

I was damn sure I *didn't* want to hear it, but I respected Ray, both professionally and personally. He was one of the best investigators I'd ever met, and I'd worked with men and women from various FBI offices all over the country. In his early fifties, he looked like he'd been around the block and then some, one of those unassuming kinds of guys who probably got underestimated all the time, allowing him to see and hear more than other people. No one really noticed him until he was nailing their asses to the wall.

"Let me have it," I said with a sigh.

"I don't think it's Rona you love." He held up a hand to stop me from responding. "I know you love her because you two are like family, but I don't think you're *in love* with her. I think you're in love with the *idea* of her."

Sometimes it really sucked having such an observant partner.

He shrugged. "No shame in it. I can see why you'd want that life. She's a nice girl. Pretty. Strong. She's smart and confident, but still has a part of her you can protect. And let's face it, Clay, you're a protector. You want a strong woman, but you want someone you can take care of too."

I scowled at him. "I think I'm ready for this conversation to be over."

"Doesn't change the fact that I'm right." With that statement, he reached over and flicked on the radio, fiddling with the channel until he found some country station that he knew would annoy me.

At least that meant he was done analyzing my love life. Or rather, the lack of it since Rona and I weren't together anymore.

Except we hadn't really been together in the first place. Not in any way that really mattered.

Fuck.

I closed my eyes and leaned my head back against the headrest. The stress of the last month had my head pounding. Rona's crazy father had escaped from prison. She'd been kidnapped and nearly sold at an auction. Well, she had been sold, but it'd been to her boyfriend, Jalen, who'd gone undercover when I hadn't listened to him and Jenna.

Our friendship had become strained, but I'd still busted my ass trying to find the men who'd taken her and her father. And I'd failed her. For the second time, Willis Jacobe almost killed his daughter. It had been thanks to Rona that her father had been the one in the body bag.

I'd promised her uncle that I'd take care of her, and I'd done a shit job. Was that why it was so hard to now see her with Jalen? Because he'd done what I hadn't been able to do? Or was it because she didn't need me anymore?

If I was being completely honest, I didn't think Rona had ever really needed me. We had the same strengths, which I used to consider a positive thing because it had meant that we had a lot in common. Now, however, I understood that we needed at least some differences, ways to complement each other, to balance each other.

She had that with Jalen. As much as the guy rubbed me the wrong way, I could see how good they were for each other. Just like Ray said.

Which probably meant that Ray was right about everything else too. Including the fact that I was more in love with what Rona represented than I was with her.

Fuck.

It made sense.

Dammit!

I was glad that Ray couldn't read my mind because I hated having to admit that I was wrong. The longer I thought, the more pieces clicked into place, and the more I was convinced that Ray was right.

I wanted to have something solid, someone I could count on. Someone who needed me, but who I needed too. I wanted a family to come home to. I was heading toward my mid-thirties, and I was getting tired of casual sex and dating around. I loved sex but having it with Rona had made me want it to be something more. She was my friend, and I'd convinced myself that she was

the reason why I wanted more. I wasn't jealous of Jalen having Rona. I was jealous that Rona and Jalen had something special.

Fuck. Fuck. *Fuck.*

I was suddenly glad I had a shitload of paperwork waiting for me. Maybe that would keep my mind off things long enough for me to move past all the awkwardness and get back to being Rona's friend.

Maybe I could even get to the point where I didn't want to punch Jalen every time I saw him. That'd be real progress.

Two

Tess

Even with the declining sales for newspapers and magazines, the *New York Times* kept a skeleton crew on staff during holidays, just in case something important happened. I'd interned here during college and had made major points with my boss because I'd always volunteered to come in on holidays. This year wasn't any different. Everyone thought ambition drove me to it, but while I didn't deny I was ambitious, I had ulterior motives. If I worked holidays, I had the perfect excuse not to fly home to Arizona and spend the time with my family.

Correction, with my mother.

My father left my mother when I was ten. He stayed in touch until I was eighteen, sending me gifts on Christmas and my birthday, but never coming to see me. A graduation card with a check for a hundred dollars was the last thing I'd gotten from him. None of his cards ever had return addresses on them, and with a name like Joseph Gardener, trying my luck with a simple online search had been like looking for a needle in three haystacks. I finally decided that if he wanted to talk to me, he could find me.

The guys my mom had dated after the divorce had generally been assholes, but the biggest bastard of them all, Darius, had sent us running from our home in Washington, DC, heading west to Arizona where my mom's family lived. Even though I'd spent two and a half years there before going off to college in New York, I didn't consider it home, and I wasn't close to the extended family I had there.

That left Brianne. Two years older than me, I'd idolized her most of my childhood and teenage years. When she enlisted in the army, our recently strained relationship became distant for a few years, and her letters had eventually tapered off to the occasional postcard to let me know she was alive.

Listening to Mom complain about how her daughters had abandoned her wasn't my idea of a pleasant way to spend any day, let alone a holiday. I liked her new boyfriend, even if he was a little dull, but even he wasn't

enough to keep her from being disappointed when Brianne and I both missed year after year.

Sometimes, I wondered how she didn't get it. No child wanted to listen to constant nagging about every aspect of their life.

"You get stuck with today too?"

A woman's voice drew my thoughts away from my family. I looked up to see a familiar face wearing an equally familiar expression. Lanie's dark eyes were bloodshot, and her usually perfect hair was pulled back in a simple ponytail. She was dressed professionally but lacked her usual style. It didn't take a genius to figure out what she'd been doing last night.

"Looks like you had fun," I said. "How late were you out?"

She shrugged, then winced, as if the simple movement hurt her head. "I was far too wasted to even bother looking at the time, but it was before dawn. I know that." She sipped from the coffee cup she had clutched between her hands. "At least it looks like it's going to be a slow news day."

Lanie was right about that. Politicians doing and saying stupid things wasn't much of a story anymore, and while we occasionally covered celebrity news, we tried to shy away from tabloid fodder. That didn't leave us with much to cover unless something big happened. Another reason low-rung reporters like me volunteered to work holidays was because it was often the only way we got the chance to cover anything important.

My first year as an intern, I'd seen a fledgling reporter who'd only been at the *Times* for less than two years scoop everyone on a massive scandal involving a lobbyist, the son of the Greek diplomat, and two underage prostitutes being arrested for indecent exposure in Times Square on the Fourth of July. The diplomat's son had also stolen a police horse while trying to flee from the cops, adding just enough humor to make the story stand out from the usual political crap.

We could all hope for such luck.

"Did you go anywhere last night?" Lanie asked. "I heard Jeff ask you to a party in his building."

I shook my head. "He asked, but I said no. I don't really like parties."

She rolled her eyes. "You don't have to like parties to hook up with someone as hot as Jeff."

I leaned back in my chair and picked up my stress ball, tossing it from hand to hand. "I don't date people from work."

"Who said anything about dating?" She flashed an overly bright smile.

“Have you seen Jeff’s ass? You could bounce a quarter off that thing.”

“I’m not going to sleep with anyone at work either.” I pointed at her, narrowing my eyes. “And don’t start with how you didn’t say anything about sleeping.”

She laughed, then sucked in a pained breath as she pressed the heel of her hand against her eyebrow.

“That’s what you get for making fun of me for staying home.” I squeezed the stress ball in my hand, the way I dealt with my need to fidget while I was at work. “My head’s fine this morning.”

“Bitch,” Lanie said without any real rancor.

I’d learned months ago that Lanie’s curses were more often used as terms of affection and friendship than they were of insult. She could come across a little rough, but she was a good person. We weren’t close, but I liked to think we were friends, even if only work ones.

“Who else is here today?” Lanie asked. “I know you were the first one here.”

“How do you know that?” I asked, startled.

She snorted and rolled her eyes to the ceiling. “Because you’re always the first person here.”

I hadn’t realized anyone noticed. I didn’t comment on it though, instead choosing to answer her question about who was here. I knew if I deflected, she wouldn’t turn the conversation back to me, not for something as mundane and uninteresting as my work habits, and that was what I wanted. I didn’t like talking about myself.

I was far more interested in the stories of other people and places. They were far more interesting.

* * *

It was late afternoon when my desk phone rang. The office had been so quiet that I jumped, my heart racing. I glanced around, but no one seemed to have seen me. I grabbed the phone and hoped my voice would stay even.

“*New York Times*, Tess Gardener speaking.”

“You’re not an easy person to get ahold of.”

I frowned. “Mom? Why’d you call work?”

“Because I’ve been calling your cell for the past hour and you didn’t

answer. I figured you must be at work. You're always at work."

I closed my eyes and pressed my lips together. I loved her, I really did, but sometimes, the way she thought drove me nuts. I inhaled slowly through my nose, calming myself before speaking. "Did you need something?"

"Have you talked to Brianne today?"

Her voice cracked when she said my sister's name, and I heard the concern in her voice. I sat up straighter. Mom might've annoyed me with her nagging, and I sometimes thought she was a bit overdramatic about some things, but this was different.

"No. We had a brief conversation on Christmas right before I talked to you, but that was it. I assumed she was deployed somewhere. You know she can't always call when she's with her unit."

"She's in Costa Rica," Mom replied promptly. "She's been there with Red Care since Thanksgiving. Didn't she tell you that?"

"No. We didn't really talk long." I didn't add that the few times I'd talked to Brianne over the last decade, the conversations had been stilted and awkward. We loved each other, but we hadn't liked each other in a long time.

"She's in San Jose, or at least she was the last time I talked to her. That was four days ago, and she's been calling me at least every other day." The concern was back, deeper now. "She wouldn't just stop calling for no good reason."

"That's exactly what Brianne would do," I said dryly.

"Tess, will you stop being snarky and listen to what I'm telling you? Something's happened to your sister."

I sighed, telling myself that Mom was overreacting. That was the only valid explanation. "Nothing's happened to Brianne, Mom. She's just caught up in whatever it is she's doing. That's all."

"Then why haven't the other members of the group talked to their families in the past four days?"

That got my attention. "What are you talking about?"

She didn't even try to not sound smug. "I remembered a couple of the names that Brianne mentioned and did some digging. I think you got your reporter instincts from me."

I chose not to comment on that subject. I preferred to think I wasn't like either of my parents.

"I managed to find the mother of one of the young men over there, and that led me to others...you know how it goes."

I pinched the bridge of my nose and reminded myself that if Mom wanted to compare herself to me, I didn't need to address it right then. I needed to focus on her idea that my sister was in trouble.

"A dozen people and not one of them has been heard from in four days."

Okay, that *was* a little concerning.

"We tried calling Red Care, all of us, and we all got the same runaround. 'When dealing with overseas networks, it's reasonable to expect outages.' Blah, blah, blah. You know how they are."

"Are you sure that's not what it is?" I asked, chewing the cuticle on my thumb. "A network outage."

"It's San Jose, Costa Rica, not the Middle East or the middle of a South American rainforest."

She had a point.

"And..." She paused, and I knew *this* was the real reason Milly Gardener had reached out to me. "Someone called me, all right," she said finally. "I got an anonymous call two days ago saying that the Red Care group Brianne was a part of had vanished."

"Who called?"

"I figured someone with a journalism degree from NYU would know the meaning of the word *anonymous*."

That was a nice reminder that I did get my sarcasm from her.

"The voice was muffled, as if the person was trying to disguise it. I couldn't tell if they were a man or woman. They didn't give their name, and they didn't answer any of my questions. They said what they had to say and hung up. That's what made me think something was wrong."

Shit.

Mom might've been prone to exaggeration, but she wasn't crazy, and she didn't make up stories. If she said someone called her, then that was what had happened. *Why* it had happened, that was still a mystery.

"Can you call her?" Her voice had grown small now. Quiet. Filled with an undercurrent I could feel, even from so far away. "Maybe I was getting on her nerves calling so much, and she'll answer a call from you."

She didn't believe that. I knew it, and she knew it, but neither of us was going to say it.

"You have contacts too, don't you? I mean, you meet people in all sorts of places, right? You can reach out to people that I can't. You can find out what's really going on."

This time, I heard something else in my mother's voice that I hadn't heard in a long time. Desperation.

It was that more than anything else that made me agree to help. I loved Brianne, but I really didn't want to talk to her. But, if she really was in the sort of trouble that Mom thought she was, I needed to find her. Nothing in our past could make me want her to disappear.

"I'll do whatever I can."

Three

Clay

I sighed as I looked at the stack of papers I'd finished filling out. I'd barely made it a third of the way through the shit I had to do, and as much as I liked how it numbed my mind, my hand was starting to cramp. Even though parts of this case were personal for me, paperwork still needed to be done. My own feelings had to be put aside until I was finished.

Bureaucracy.

Ray told me that I could keep my information limited to the things that had happened when I'd been working in an official capacity, but I didn't want even the slightest hint of impropriety in this case. I needed to provide every detail of my role in both the human trafficking case and the escape of Rona's father. Willis Jacobs wasn't going to be put on trial, but if anyone suspected Rona had killed her father intentionally, she could be in trouble. She hadn't, of course, but sometimes people saw what they wanted to see despite the evidence right in front of them.

I paused in the middle of a sentence. Shit. That's what I'd done with Rona. Seeing what I wanted to see rather than what the evidence told me.

I needed a vacation.

Before I could finish my thought, someone knocked on my door. I cursed under my breath as I stood and went to answer it. I wasn't in the mood to see people. Hell, that was the whole reason I'd brought my paperwork home with me. Even the handful of people in the office today was too much.

A quick peek through the peephole showed my partner on the other side. I frowned. Ray had been to my place before, but only ever after calling first and telling me why he was coming.

"Is something wrong?" I asked as I opened the door and stepped aside to let him enter.

"You could say that," Ray replied.

As I went to get our usual beers from the fridge, Ray followed. We stood in the tiny kitchen, me leaning back on the counter while he paced. Six steps one way, then six back the other. I watched him for a minute, wondering

what it was that had him wound so tight, and then I asked, “What’s going on?”

“I haven’t told you much about Ellie, have I?”

It took me a moment to place his ex-wife’s name. He talked about his kids, Abby and Steven, all the time, but he rarely spoke about Ellie.

I shook my head in answer to his question and waited for him to continue.

“Ellie’s cousin is Fares Ganesh.”

There was a name I recognized. A lot of people might not have been able to name the Secretary of State, but everyone in the FBI knew of him. Former army, he’d started running for office at the local level, campaigning as an Independent. He had a reputation for being a genuinely good guy, and no one had ever been able to dig up any dirt on him.

After he’d been appointed Secretary of State, a lot of people in both major political parties had tried to take him down, but his popularity had only grown. Rumor had it that he’d be the first Independent to win the White House if he ever decided to run. At this moment, however, he was in the news for his bold proposal to combine the CIA and the FBI. He wanted to eliminate a lot of the red tape, jurisdiction disputes, and miscommunications that happened between the two agencies by making them one unit, able to work both domestically and internationally.

The opinions on that were varied and rarely discussed beyond a quiet word here or there. Ray and I had never talked about it, not wanting to bring tension into our partnership if we happened to be on opposing sides of the issue, and I doubted he’d come here this evening to bring it up.

Still, his statement about his ex being related to Secretary Ganesh caught me off-guard.

“I didn’t know that.”

Ray gave me a sideways look. “I figured not since I don’t talk about it. They’re like second cousins or something. She’s not really close to him, but they’re not estranged either. They’ve kept in contact good enough for him to call her and ask her to reach out to me.”

I set my half-empty beer down, intrigued. Why would the Secretary of State need his cousin to talk to someone in the FBI?

Fortunately, Ray didn’t keep me in suspense. “The Secretary’s sister-in-law needs a favor. Off the books.”

Interesting.

“There’s a group of Red Care workers who haven’t been heard from in a

while. The sister-in-law is involved with someone in the group – a Taylor MacIntosh – and was worried enough to call Secretary Ganesh. He wants us to investigate it, but he can't send anyone to Costa Rica in an official capacity. As far as we know, there are no signs of foul play, but we both know that doesn't mean anything. Technically, as a member of the FBI, you can't be sent on an assignment to another country, which is why you're the perfect person to go. If something did happen, anyone involved would be looking for the CIA, not the FBI."

The expression on his face as he said the last statement told me what he wasn't saying. That if something happened, I was fucked. I would have no backup, and more importantly, no government support.

The best I would get would be an acknowledgment that I was a U.S. citizen. They might admit I was an FBI agent, but that'd probably only make things worse. Costa Rica wasn't China or Pakistan, but it sure as hell wouldn't be like getting in trouble in Canada or the UK.

What Ray was asking me to do was dangerous, no matter how he couched it, but I knew my partner well enough to know that he wouldn't have asked if it wasn't important.

"Look, it's probably nothing." He shoved his hands into his back pockets and turned to face me. "The group went somewhere that didn't have a network, and they didn't let their bosses know. Miscommunications happen. By the time you get down there, you'll probably find them right where they're supposed to be."

"Why aren't you going then?" I asked. "I mean, I know you've got a shitload of vacation time piled up, and you're always complaining about getting nagged to use up that time."

Ray came over to stand next to me. He mimicked my pose and stared straight ahead. "Look, kid, we both know that you've been through a lot since you got here, and you've handled it better than I would have."

I doubted that but didn't argue.

"When Danvers gets back, there's a chance he'll send you to the shrink to make sure all this shit won't lead to you snapping. I think if you decide to take a trip for a few days, use up some of that vacation time that you transferred in with, by the time you get back, Danvers will have forgotten all about you maybe needing to talk to someone."

Ray had a point.

"You know," I said slowly, thinking through all my options at lightning

speed. “I’m feeling a little burnt-out. A vacation might be exactly what I need.”

“Here.” He held out a few sheets of paper. “I took the liberty of filling out the necessary paperwork and backdating the submission date. Sign them, and I’ll hand them over to Danvers on Monday, tell him that it’s my fault they weren’t in on time.”

Ray bent the rules now and then, but only when necessary. The fact that he was willing to lie to get me to Costa Rica quickly told me that no matter how much he tried to downplay the seriousness of the situation, he was worried.

That, as much as anything else, had me taking the papers and scrawling my signature on every line. It would be difficult to get a flight, but I’d do what I had to. I was heading to Costa Rica as soon as possible.

Four

Clay

The flight from Denver to LAX had been a bumpy one, making us land fifteen minutes after our scheduled arrival time. Since my flight to Costa Rica was on time, I had to practically run from my gate to the next one. The woman behind the desk was making a last call when I slid to a stop in front of the ticket taker and pulled my ticket out of my pocket.

“You’re just in time,” she said as she scanned my ticket. “A few more minutes and you would’ve missed it.”

“Thanks.” I gave her the most charming smile I could manage under the circumstances, then rushed down the corridor and past the flight attendant who seemed to be waiting for the door to close.

I’d worried about being able to get a last-minute seat, but there’d been a single first-class one available. I would’ve taken economy if necessary, but my legs were grateful that there hadn’t been. I couldn’t imagine anyone over five and a half feet tall being able to fit into those seats.

I quickly shoved my bag into the overhead compartment and settled in the aisle seat next to a bored-looking teenager. With his earbuds in, I doubted the kid could hear the polite *hello* I gave, but I didn’t bother repeating myself. The flight attendants were walking up and down the aisle, checking for loose bags, which meant we would start moving soon.

I brought out my phone and turned it on airplane mode before tucking it back into my pocket. When I looked up, I saw that I hadn’t been the last one to get on the plane after all. A petite brunette with dark brown curls tumbling over her shoulders was moving to the window seat four rows ahead of me. I couldn’t see her face, but she had a grace in the way she moved, captivating my attention. She turned slightly, giving me a glimpse of her profile. Not so much that I knew what she looked like, but enough to tell me that she was an adult, though I couldn’t quite tell her age.

I kept watching her as various instructions were given, something about her drawing me in, fascinating me. I was dimly aware of the usual plane patter and then of the rumbling beneath me as we began taxiing into position.

Everything else was focused on her.

I supposed this meant what Ray had said was true. I couldn't have been in love with Rona, not if this other woman had captured my attention so soon. Not that I thought I was in love with a stranger, but at some point, during this six-hour flight, I wouldn't be opposed to saying hello, maybe some light flirting.

I smiled as I leaned back in my seat and closed my eyes. I hadn't slept well last night, and while there would be only two hours of jet lag to deal with, a short nap now would give me a clearer head when we landed.

Her skin was silky smooth beneath my hands, and my fingers trembled with anticipation, ready to memorize every inch of her amazing body. She was so small and delicate that I should have been worried about hurting her, but she was stronger than she appeared. I didn't know how I knew that, but I did.

Up, over her ribs. Small, firm breasts that fit perfectly in my palms.

My thumbs moved over her hard, little nipples and she gasped and writhed against me, her bare ass pressing against my stiffening cock. I pinched her nipples lightly, then brushed aside the soft curls that tickled my chest. I pressed an open-mouthed kiss to her neck, tasting the sweetness of her skin.

"Do you taste like that all over?" I asked, my voice a low whisper in her ear. "Like honey and sunlight." She moaned as I slid a hand down her stomach. "Shall I explore and find out?"

My finger dipped between her folds, gaining a squeak of surprise as the tip passed over that little bundle of nerves. As my finger entered her, I found her slick and hot, making my cock harder than it had ever been before. I traced the shell of her ear with my teeth, and she shivered. I pumped my finger once, twice, then removed it. She made a sound of protest, but I ignored her as I put my finger in my mouth. I licked it clean, savoring the essence of her arousal.

"Honey and sunlight," I repeated. "One day soon, I'll have you taste yourself on my cock."

She let out an unintelligible groan, and her nails dug into my forearm, telling me without words that she needed me as much as I needed her. I returned my finger to her tight heat, caressing her with firm, purposeful strokes.

Having my dick inside her was going to be pure bliss, and I didn't want to

wait anymore. I lifted easily, cradling her against my chest as I walked down the hall to where my bedroom was waiting.

“I’ve wanted this from the first moment I saw you,” I confessed. “I dreamed about what it would be like to be inside you, to have you underneath me.”

I put her on the bed, and she rolled over onto her stomach. Her hair fell around her face, obscuring her features, but I didn’t mind. The next time we made love, I’d look her in the eyes when I slid inside her.

Right then, I wanted to take her fast and hard, pounding into her until she’d feel me for days. For years. I never wanted her to doubt who she belonged to. She was mine. Always had been, always would be.

At some previous point in my life, I might have been freaked out by that thought, but not now, not with her. She was my past, my present, and my future. I’d never—

“Sir, we’re getting ready to land.”

A polite voice and a hand on my shoulder pulled me out of one of the best dreams I’d had in a long time. Pain shot through my neck as I unfolded myself from the awkward position I’d ended up in, and it helped clear my mind.

I gave the flight attendant a polite, if absent, smile and mentally pulled up my checklist of the things I needed to do. To keep my cover story of being on vacation, I couldn’t move as fast as I usually did. I needed to take the time to settle into my hotel, get a meal. If I started asking questions the moment I stepped off the plane, I might draw unwanted attention that could be dangerous for me and for the missing workers.

By the time we were allowed out of our seats, I was fully awake and ready to get to work, even if that work was to look like I was relaxing. My muscles protested the movement as I stood. Even first class didn’t stop stiff muscles after sleeping in the same position for hours, but stretching in here was an impossibility, even in the luxury section.

I pulled my bag down from the overhead compartment and turned to join the line of people in the aisle, each one shuffling forward every time an inch gave way. I hadn’t gone more than one row when the middle-aged woman in front of me abruptly stopped. I barely missed running into her, but it was impossible not to hear her cursing the cause for the sudden halt.

“If you can’t get your motherfucking bag yourself, at least have the fucking decency to get out of the damn way so the rest of us can get on with

our fucking lives.”

The woman’s grating voice practically vibrated around the plane, and I heard murmurs of complaint behind me, though I couldn’t tell if they were toward the woman swearing or the woman in front of her, trying to reach her bag. The tiny brunette was the same one I’d been admiring earlier, and a jolt of desire surprised me as I watched her try to snag the strap of a faded black bag.

The angry woman in front of me moved forward, pushing the smaller woman to the side. I automatically stepped into the gap, steadying the brunette with one hand and reaching for her bag with the other.

“Here,” I said, holding it out.

Then she turned, and I was suddenly seventeen again.

No. Fucking. Way.

Five

Tess

Five blocks. It was only five blocks from my house to his house, but times like this made it feel like more. Like we were separated by a whole world. My family wasn't poor, exactly, but our lower middle-class life didn't even come close to the life my best friend lived. The distance seemed even more pronounced now as I staggered down the sidewalk, half-blinded by tears. They weren't tears of pain, and that made me hate myself even more.

Mom and Brianne had both told me to leave, and I'd obeyed. I knew there was nothing I could have done, not when Darius was pissed like this. The littlest thing could set him off, and tonight it had. I'd dropped a plate, and he'd shot up out of his chair, reaching for me. Mom had gotten between us, and the slap meant for me had almost knocked her down. That's when they'd told me to leave.

I hadn't wanted to go, but Mom and Brianne were bigger than me, stronger. I was fifteen but looked younger. I was barely over five feet tall, and no matter how much I ran or lifted weights, I couldn't bulk up my slender frame.

Brianne was only two years older than me, but she was an athlete. The kind of athlete who could hold her own with the guys at our school and who scared the shit out of girls from other schools.

I flinched reflexively at the mental curse. Mom yelled at us whenever she heard us swear. Brianne never cared, but I hated when I disappointed Mom. The only thing worse than that was disappointing Brianne. She was the reason I wasn't turning around and running right back home. She'd told me once that if I was there when Darius got pissed, I was a distraction, and that might get her, and Mom hurt.

So I obeyed and left, knowing Brianne would find me when it was safe. I hadn't needed to tell her where I was going either. She knew. When things got bad, there was only one place I wanted to go, one person I wanted to be with.

I pulled the chain out from under my shirt and slipped it over my head.

The key hanging from it opened two doors. The first was the slightly hidden back door in the fence that surrounded the entire Kurth property, and the second was to the small side door that most of the employees used. I'd gotten the key a couple years ago because everyone had gotten tired of having to open the door for me at all hours.

The relief that flooded me the moment I stepped into the kitchen had little to do with the fact that Congressman Kurth's house was the safest place I could ever be, and it had everything to do with the boy sitting at the counter, eating from a carton of ice cream.

I didn't need to see it to know it was Caramel Ripple. That was his favorite, and the housekeeper always made sure some was in the freezer. As much as he ate, he should've been three hundred pounds, but he wasn't, partly because of good genes, but also because he played a ton of different sports. Whatever the reason, Clay Kurth, with his unruly dark brown hair and blue-gray eyes was drop-dead gorgeous.

"Tess?" He was out of his chair and in front of me before I realized he was moving. "What's wrong?"

For a few seconds, I'd actually forgotten why I was there. Then Clay's hands were brushing at my cheeks, wiping away the tears that lingered there. Despite all the craziness, his touch made me shiver, but with heat, not cold.

"Come with me."

He put his arm around my shoulders and led me through the kitchen to a little alcove where the family kept their boots and coats. He sat down next to me, his leg pressed against mine, his arm still holding me close. I couldn't tell if he even realized that he was still embracing me, but I wasn't going to draw his attention to it. Not when I desperately needed the comfort it provided.

"Now, tell me what happened and whose ass I need to kick." He brushed back a couple wild curls with his free hand, and his fingertips grazed my skin.

Instead of leaning into his hand the way I wanted to, I shook my head. "There's nothing you can do. It's okay."

"It's not okay," he said fiercely, his eyes darkening to a deep, stormy gray. "No one should ever make you cry."

I managed a wobbly smile. "Thanks."

"Hey," he cupped my cheek, "I mean it."

The air between us suddenly felt thick with potential.

His eyes locked with mine as his thumb traced my lower lip. My brain said this couldn't be happening, that the boy I'd had a crush on for years was looking at me as if he wanted...me. But I could feel the fire licking across my skin wherever he touched.

The hand not on my cheek rested on my waist now, his fingers moving back and forth in what should have been a soothing manner, but all it did was make me want him more.

In what felt like slow motion, he bent his head, and his mouth finally touched mine. I could taste the salt from my own tears on his lips, but as his tongue teased the seam of my mouth, all thoughts of what had caused those tears vanished. I clutched at his shirt, too needy to be embarrassed by my actions. I'd wanted this for what seemed like forever, and now that it was here, I could barely believe it.

My first kiss was over too soon, but then Clay rested his forehead against mine, his breathing as harsh as my own, and I knew things between us had only begun.

"Clay," I began.

A sound from the kitchen interrupted us, and it was immediately followed by a familiar voice.

"Tess!"

I started to pull away from Clay, but he caught my hand. I flushed and called out my sister's name. She appeared a second later, her pale eyes wild as they flicked down to the linked hands resting on my lap.

"We need to go," she said.

"Brianne, I..." I wasn't sure what to say. Did I tell her that it wasn't what it looked like? Or that it was none of her business? Did I act like nothing had happened?

"I'm serious, Tess." Her voice was hard as she stepped forward and grabbed my arm. "Sorry, Clay, but we really need to go."

Brianne practically dragged me out of the house, ignoring my stammered goodbyes to Clay. My head spun as we stepped out into the cool DC evening. I didn't understand.

"Bri, what's going on?"

"Mom called the cops," Brianne said, not slowing her pace at all.

"But Darius is a cop," I said. The grim expression on Brianne's face spoke volumes. "What's Mom going to do when he gets out?"

"We're leaving."

“It’s the middle of the school year. We can’t just up and leave for a week,” I protested. I pulled against Brianne’s grip, but she had me too tight.

“We’re not leaving for a week, Tess. We’re moving somewhere Darius and his goons can’t find us. Ever.”

It took me a few feet before I realized what she meant. “We’re moving?”

“It’s a good idea,” she said without looking at me. “We can have a fresh start.”

A flash of fear went through me. She was serious. She really thought we were leaving our home, our friends.

Clay.

“Where are we going to go?” I asked, trying to make my voice light, as if I didn’t believe her. Because I didn’t. It wasn’t possible.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said. “Anywhere that gets us away from Darius is better than here.”

I shook my head. “No, we can’t.”

She stopped suddenly, spinning around until we were face to face. “We’re moving. Tonight. You need to get that through your head and start thinking about what you can take, because we’re never coming back.”

I didn’t know what part of what she said finally got through to me, but all the warmth and good feeling from kissing Clay disappeared under a cold rush of reality.

Clay.

“I need to tell Clay,” I said. “I can’t leave without saying goodbye.”

“You’ll have to say it on the phone,” Brianne said, “because we’re not going back there. We don’t have the time.”

As if to prove her point, she turned to move again, tightening her grip on my arm. I pulled, planting my feet to keep her from moving me. “I need to see him.”

Brianne sighed. “Look, I didn’t want to say this before because I thought it was just a crush, but you need to forget Clay. He’s not worth it.”

I glared up at her. “What? He’s your friend too. I thought you’d be happy for us.”

Her eyes slid away from me, and she shifted her weight from one foot to the other, two of her tells that she was nervous.

“I don’t want to see you get too invested. Clay and I are friends. With benefits.”

“Bullshit.”

She tightened her grip on my arm, her eyes narrowing. “Grow up, Tess. Clay is a player. He hooks up with a different girl every week. You’re not that kind of girl. You need a relationship before you have sex.” She paused, then added, “Clay doesn’t. I don’t. We didn’t.”

We started walking again, but I barely noticed my feet moving. All I could think about, all I could feel, was my heart breaking.

Shattering, like glass.

Less than five seconds had passed, but in that time, I’d relived one of the worst memories of my life. A memory I tried my hardest to forget. A memory that, for some reason, was standing right in front of me, staring at me as if he, too, had seen a ghost.

At the worst possible time, without warning, Clay Kurth had stepped back into my life.

Six

Tess

“What’s the hold up now?”

A shout from behind Clay broke whatever spell was weaving between us, and I was suddenly aware of the eyes on us. I grabbed my bag and spun around, trying my damndest to walk fast without breaking into a jog.

It couldn’t be Clay. My mind had to be playing tricks on me. I hadn’t seen him since I was fifteen. He couldn’t possibly be here.

“Tess? Tess!”

Shit.

That voice. It was a little deeper than it’d been the last time I’d heard it, but I’d recognize the way he said my name anywhere. I couldn’t trick myself into thinking I hadn’t heard him. I slowed down and took a deep breath. I could do this. Once I faced him, I could move on and do what I was here to do.

“Tess Gardener, it is you!”

I found myself engulfed in a strong pair of arms. A sharp inhalation filled my lungs with a scent I’d thought I’d never smell again. Cinnamon. Leather. Books.

I was glad my arms were trapped against my body, taking away my need to decide if I should hug him back or not. This wasn’t the sort of greeting I’d ever imagined. Not that I’d imagined much. I hadn’t wanted to think about him, and I’d done my best not to, but the few times my mind had wandered, I’d seen us having a confrontation. Me giving him the cold shoulder. Him acting sufficiently embarrassed.

For a moment, I debated pretending like I didn’t know who he was, but in the end, I decided it wasn’t practical. I didn’t care that it would’ve been cruel. I’d just waited a few seconds too long for it to be believable and I didn’t feel like having the discussion that would’ve followed. I’d put that part of my life behind me, and I’d be damned if I let some freakish chance encounter get me all crazy again.

Besides, I wasn’t fifteen anymore. I’d learned all too well that a pretty

face wasn't worth the heartache.

No matter how well he'd filled out.

"Oh, sorry," Clay said, releasing me almost as quickly as he'd grabbed me. He took a half step back, so he wasn't crowding my personal space, but he was still far too close for comfort. "I shouldn't assume you're Tess Gardener anymore."

I gave him a puzzled look. It wasn't until his gaze dropped to my hand that I realized what he meant. I resisted the urge to tuck my hand in my pocket. I didn't have anything to hide. A lot of women my age were still single. Okay, not a lot of them were also still virgins, but Clay didn't need to know that. If anything, he was the *last* person who should get to know anything about my life at all.

"It's good seeing you, Clay, but I need to grab a cab before they're all gone. My hotel's too far away for me to walk." I had no idea if that was actually true, but I supposed I could make a case for pretty much anything since I didn't know much about the city. I'd tried pulling up information on my phone during the flight, but I'd been exhausted by all the last-minute planning and running around, making concentration a real bitch.

"Where are you staying?" He reached out as if to take my bag, then stopped as I glared at him. His smile faltered, and I waited for him to acknowledge the elephant in the room.

Nothing.

I hiked my bag a little higher on my shoulder and wished again that I'd bought the bag with wheels when Mom had suggested it. Oh well. There was no point in getting worked up about something that couldn't be changed. Yet another thing I'd learned from Clay.

"I'm sure your wife...girlfriend...boyfriend," I made a dismissive gesture, "wants you to help with their bags, so I'll just be going now."

I barely made it three steps before Clay was right there next to me.

"None of the above," he said, irritatingly cheerful. "It's just me, so I'm completely free to spend time with an old friend."

Friend.

All these years later, it shouldn't have hurt to hear him use that word. We had been friends. Good ones. Why couldn't I look at the dozen good years we'd spent together rather than that one awful night? I didn't know why I bothered with the question. I knew the answer already.

That one night, I'd lost both my sister and my best friend. I hadn't blamed

Brianne entirely, but I'd never forgiven her for it either. Her betrayal had been so much worse than Clay's because she'd known how I'd felt about him.

"Well, I'm sure you've got the sort of connections to stay somewhere more upscale than me." I tried another tact. "We probably aren't even going the same direction."

He shrugged, but I caught the hint of something wounded in the movement. "Believe it or not, I don't really use my father's name to get into nice hotels."

Shit. Now, I felt bad.

No, I reminded myself firmly. After what he'd done, he didn't deserve my guilt over an offhand comment.

"Where are you going?" A teenager with heavily accented English smiled at me. It wasn't a nice smile. "My friend here can take you anywhere in the city."

"We're here together," Clay cut me off before I could say anything.

I glared up at him, but he gave me the same hard expression he'd given when I'd tried to convince him I could walk when I'd broken my leg when I was twelve. I'd wanted to impress him and Brianne by playing basketball with them and some other 'big kids.' One of those kids had accidentally knocked me over, then fallen on my leg, snapping my tibia. Clay had been furious, both with the kid and with me, and I'd made things worse by trying to tell him I was okay.

Nothing I'd done had worked back then, and I knew it wasn't going to work now.

"Hotel Santo Tomas," I said reluctantly.

He grinned, and for a second, I could see the boy in the man standing there, like some strange time vertigo. "Looks like we still think alike. That's where I'm staying too."

I wanted to call bullshit, but then I'd look like an idiot when he proved me wrong. If he really was staying at the same place I was, the most likely explanation was that he'd gone through the same list of hotels I had, and it was the first one he'd found that had a room available.

"You are on your honeymoon?" The young man asked as he raised a hand to summon another cab.

The one with his 'friend' in it had taken a young man instead of waiting for us. I sincerely hoped I was wrong in suspecting some sort of con to take

advantage of unsuspecting tourists. It might have been worth following up on, but I wasn't here for a story, so I tucked the idea away for possible future use.

I was caught up in my own thoughts enough that I didn't hear the answer Clay had given. It would've been nice to know if he'd been appalled at the idea of us being married or if he'd simply laughed it off and said we were 'just friends.' I didn't know which would have hurt worse, but I hated the fact that it hurt at all.

"Tess?"

I blinked, mentally scolding myself for drifting off. I was a fucking journalist, for crying out loud! Paying attention was in the job description. How the hell was I going to make a career at writing hard-hitting, ground-breaking news stories if I couldn't concentrate long enough to realize that Clay was trying to put my bag in the trunk of a cab?

"Are you okay?" he asked as he opened the rear passenger door for me.

"Jet lag," I said tersely. "I flew in from the East Coast this morning."

The moment he slid into the back seat with me, I knew sharing a cab had been a mistake. The scent that I'd tried to replace with all the smells of a new country was impossible to get away from in here. It surrounded me, slid over my skin, bringing with it all the memories I'd worked to forget.

"Did you move back to DC?" he asked. "Or did you guys move somewhere nearby when you left?"

When you left without a word.

"We moved to Arizona." I pretended I didn't understand what he wasn't saying. "My mom's family was from there. I didn't stay there for college though. I went to NYU. I've been a New Yorker ever since."

"My parents still have a house there," he said. "New York, not Arizona."

"I assumed as much since your dad's still a congressman for New York."

Shit. I hadn't meant to reveal that I'd kept at least some track of his family over the years. I'd always told myself that it was because I lived in New York now, but I'd always known the real reason.

No matter how much I wanted to deny it, Clay had never been far from my mind.

Seven

Clay

I was staring, I knew, but I couldn't help it.

Tess Gardener.

She was sixteen years older than the last time I'd seen her, and even more beautiful than I'd ever thought she'd be. Her dark brown curls looked more tamed, but those unique indigo eyes of hers hadn't changed a bit. She also hadn't grown past five feet, or if she had, it was only an inch or two. She probably still got carded, but she didn't look like a child, for which I was grateful. The sorts of things I was thinking about her were definitely adult.

I couldn't even blame it on the erotic dream I'd had before I'd known who she was. I hadn't been in control of the dream, but I had found her attractive when I'd first seen her. Now that I knew who she was, I found myself trying to memorize every line of her face, looking for the places that she'd changed as well as the places where she'd stayed the same. My gaze traced the gentle curves of her lithe body, seeing the way she'd filled out while still keeping her tiny frame. I'd never really been picky about body shape when it came to women, but I'd never been with a woman so delicate.

"Have you been to this hotel before?" she asked, glancing out the window as she chewed the side of her thumb.

She was nervous, I realized. It was only then that I felt what had probably been there from the first moment we'd reunited.

Tension.

Not the good kind either.

"No, it's my first time in Costa Rica. What about you?" I watched her closely as she answered.

"First time." She dropped her hands into her lap, twisting her fingers together the same way she'd done when she had been trying to break the same habit as a kid.

"What brings you here?" As soon as I asked the question, I knew I should have avoided it. Once she answered, she'd most likely turn around and ask me the same thing. I didn't like the idea of one of the first things I told her in

years being a lie, but I couldn't tell anyone that I was an FBI agent working on foreign soil without permission from either government.

Finding a missing Red Care team sounded like something good, but politics made everything tricky. That was why I was here instead of the Secretary of State sending in anyone official. Still, a part of me felt like I was missing something about this request.

"I'm a journalist," she said matter-of-factly, like she didn't care what I thought.

"That's great!" I might've laid the enthusiasm on a little thick, but I needed to push her, to figure out if her personality had changed so much from when I'd known her before, or if her terse demeanor was something to do with me.

She gave a brief nod of acknowledgment and added, "I'm with the *New York Times*, and I'm doing a piece on vacation destinations."

I was about to give her another congratulations when she tugged on her earlobe. Just like chewing on her thumb was her anxious tell, that earlobe tug was another tell. One that told me she was lying, or at least not telling the whole truth.

Instantly, every red flag went up, and I went from wondering if she was pissed at me for some reason to trying to figure out why she'd lie to me about why she was in Costa Rica. While the details for reasons to deceive were numerous, the simple reasons were few. I just couldn't figure out what hers could be.

"What about you?" she asked. "Are you here on business or pleasure?"

She was tanned enough that most people probably wouldn't have noticed the slight flush that spread across her cheeks when she said the last word, but the same way I knew how to tell if she was lying or worried, I knew what her skin looked like when she blushed.

For a second, my mind was flooded with ideas of what she would look like flushing from pleasure rather than embarrassment. What other parts of her body would reveal that rush of blood? How would it look against white hotel sheets?

Fuck.

I needed to stop thinking like that, or I'd have a reason of my own to be embarrassed. I didn't mind letting a woman know how attractive I found her, but I also had standards regarding when I got up close and personal about things. While Tess and I had a history, we were still feeling around where we

stood with each other in the here and now.

And the fact that I was about to lie to her didn't bode well for any future friendship, let alone anything more than that.

"I'm taking a vacation." I hoped my words didn't sound as wooden as they felt. "I had a lot of time saved up, and I just closed a huge case, so the timing was right. I work for the FBI out of the Denver office."

"Field agent?" she asked.

I rubbed my hand across the back of my neck. "Profiler, actually. I ended up going the psychology route in college. I've done some teaching, but also worked cases too."

I needed to shut up before I slipped and told her my real reason for being there. It was too easy to forget that too much time had passed for me to be able to know how much I could trust her. I hated feeling that way, but I had to be practical. If I got caught, I wouldn't be the only one in trouble. I couldn't risk my career simply because I'd run into an old friend.

Half-truths and deflection would need to be the way I communicated with her until I learned more about the person my friend had grown into.

Eight

Tess

He was lying.

All right, so I hadn't been entirely forthcoming either, but I had a good reason. What could he need to hide about going on vacation? Unless he wasn't here alone. Or he was meeting someone.

Instantly, I flashed back to that last night and Brianne's comments about Clay being a player. Just because he was in his early thirties now didn't mean that anything about him had changed. Plenty of grown men still behaved the same way they had as teenagers, especially when it came to relationships.

I hated this. I hated that I felt the need to lie to him about why I was in Costa Rica, and I hated that he'd been just as deceitful. Even after what he'd done, I wanted to be able to trust him with the sort of whole-hearted trust that came with having known each other for years.

As much as I loathed admitting it, I still felt something for him. Attraction. Desire. Something stronger that was too laced with bitterness to be as pure as it once had been.

I needed to get away from him as soon as possible, or I was going to be in a shitload of trouble.

"That's a hotel?"

Clay's words turned my attention to the view through the car window, and I immediately understood his question. While far from unpleasant-looking, Hotel Santo Tomas looked more like an apartment complex or some sprawling mansion in one of the southwestern states, somewhere like New Mexico or Arizona. I hadn't really paid any attention to the pictures that had accompanied my search results when I'd made my reservation.

"Hotel Santo Tomas," the driver announced as the car came to a stop.

I reached for my purse, but Clay was too fast for me. He smiled at me as he paid for the ride, but there wasn't anything condescending or patronizing about it. If there had been, I could've felt justified in my desire to smack him.

"You can pick up a round of drinks with our meal," he said.

"Is that your way of asking if I'll eat with you?" I asked, giving him my

best insulted look.

If anything, his grin widened. “I figured if I actually asked, you’d say no.”

“I guess you don’t know me as well as you think you do,” I replied. “I wouldn’t have turned down a meal with an old friend.”

“In that case,” he responded smoothly, “will you go to eat with me? I promise to let you pay if you want to. Cross my heart.”

Damn him for knowing exactly how to get me to do what he wanted. He’d worded things too perfectly. I wasn’t competitive, exactly, but I hated being predictable. To me, predictability equaled unoriginality, and while journalism didn’t require the sort of wild creativity that brought fiction to life, reporters needed their own brand of unique thinking to produce standout work.

I wanted to get started on my search immediately, but I was tired and hungry. My body had yet to adjust to the time change, and my stomach was protesting. The fact that I hadn’t eaten much since I’d gotten that call from my mom didn’t help matters much. Not because I was convinced that something bad had happened to Brianne but because I’d been busy trying to find a flight and a room and everything else I’d needed to get here as soon as possible.

I deserved to take an hour or so to adjust, get something to eat, and clear my head. If anything, a clearer head later would produce better results than a muddled mind sooner. Besides, Clay’s father was still a US Congressman. Knowing the Kurth family might help me find Brianne faster. I planned on talking to some people at the embassy, and it was highly likely that name dropping would get me places I couldn’t have gotten on my own.

I knew I was talking myself into accepting Clay’s invitation, but I made good points.

“All right,” I said. “Once we get settled into our rooms, we can go grab something to eat.”

He didn’t know it, but this was a test to see just how pleasant our reunion was going to be. Sitting in a restaurant, discussing our lives, was one thing. If he suggested room service, I would have a few select words for him before I told him to never speak to me again.

“That works for me,” he said as he climbed out of the cab. When he turned around with his hand out, I was tempted to ignore it, but that would’ve been rude, and things were still polite between us.

I wasn't prepared for the sizzle when our hands touched, but I didn't think anything *could* have prepared me. Our palms slid against each other for a moment, and then his fingers closed around mine. He'd always had long, almost delicate fingers, but there was no denying the strength in them. The years since I'd last seen him had either been extremely kind to him, or he'd worked his ass off to maintain the athletic body he'd had in high school. Knowing the type of person he'd been, I was willing to bet it was some of both.

He held my hand a few seconds longer than necessary, then released it with a reluctance that I was almost positive wasn't in my head. Again, I reminded myself that the boy I'd thought I'd known had turned out to be someone entirely different. I couldn't let myself fall into the trap of thinking the man would suddenly become the person I'd wanted him to be.

We entered the hotel together, and I considered purposefully separating myself from him to make it obvious we weren't together, but then I reconsidered. As much as I was all about girl power, the fact was that a single woman traveling in a foreign country was in more danger than a woman traveling with a man. Especially when that woman was as small as I was.

I'd taken some general self-defense classes in college, but the first thing I'd been taught was that the best way to win a fight was to avoid one. Making it seem like Clay and I were traveling together, even if we were in separate rooms, would keep me safer than showing I was here alone.

Once we checked in, we headed to our rooms, which ended up being across the hall from each other. The more my day progressed, the more I was convinced that fate or karma or whatever was either having a hell of a time laughing at me, or someone was trying to play matchmaker a little too hard.

I unpacked, forcing myself not to hurry any more than I would have if I'd been getting ready for dinner on my own. Or lunch, maybe. With the time change, I had no idea what to call this meal. Once I'd finished getting everything settled where I wanted it, I freshened up, then headed back downstairs. I sent off a quick text to Clay to let him know that I was ready, but he was already waiting when I arrived.

"I hope you don't mind, but I asked the desk clerk for his favorite restaurant with local cuisine and I got a name. It's less than a quarter of a mile from here, which I thought would be the perfect distance for us to stretch our legs, but not far enough to tire us out." The smile Clay gave me was uncertain, the expression looking foreign on his face.

“Sounds perfect.”

Dammit. That sounded almost flirtatious. Being a polite friend from the past wasn't the same as being close friends.

I kept my mouth shut as Clay held the door for me, and I stepped back into the balmy January day. I'd lived in Arizona for three years before moving to New York, but mid-seventies and sunny the second day of January still weirded me out.

Clay made awkward small talk as he led the way to La Criollita, but I barely managed anything beyond nods and single word answers. By the time we were seated at the restaurant, I was more than ready to order some alcohol. I didn't usually drink much – my body size had always made me a lightweight when it came to, holding my liquor – but between the issue with Brianne and then this whole thing with Clay, my stress level was higher than normal, which meant I was seriously considering drinking more than normal.

When the waiter came, Clay spoke to him in fluent Spanish. His accent was a little different than the waiter's, but no more than an American-speaking person from Maine would sound different than one from Tennessee. Clay ordered a drink and appetizer for himself, then turned and asked me what I wanted. I didn't know if he intended to order for me, but it didn't matter because my Spanish was just as good as Clay's.

I hadn't liked my time in Arizona, but I had spent a decent amount of time with cousins who were only two generations removed from Mexico. As a result, my Spanish sounded more Mexican than Clay's, but again, it was close enough that the waiter understood me.

“I thought you took German in school,” Clay said as the waiter walked away.

“I did.” I straightened my silverware, so I didn't have to look at him. “Did you know that my mom's maiden name is Sanchez?”

He shook his head. “I can't say that I did.”

“Her father came up from Mexico on a college visa and became a citizen a few years after he married my grandmother. He speaks English with barely any accent, and Ita speaks Spanish fluently, so my mom and all my aunts and uncles were raised bilingual. Other than my mom, all the kids married people of Mexican descent and raised their children bilingual too. Brianne and I had to work to catch up.”

“Seems like you did that well,” he said.

He took a long drink of his beer, and I took the opportunity to gulp a

mouthful of margarita. My lips puckered as the taste registered. It was good, but I hadn't expected it to be quite that sour.

He continued, "Working with the FBI, it's always good to have a grasp of other languages. I took Spanish and Russian, though I'm not as fluent in that as I am in Spanish."

"It's made interviewing people for stories easier," I said, running a fingertip over the salt covered rim. "Spanish is close enough to French and Italian that I can generally get my point across, so that gives me a few groups I can usually talk to without an interpreter." I couldn't suppress a smile. "And you'd be surprised how much people give away when they think you can't understand the language."

He grinned in return, and I had to look away. "Yet another reason my employer encourages us to speak other languages."

I took another drink and reminded myself that it didn't matter how gorgeous his eyes were when he smiled.

I would not fall for Clay Kurth again.

No way in hell was that happening.

Nine

Clay

I should have wanted to rush through dinner and get back to my room where I could start working on the reason I was actually in Costa Rica. I shouldn't have wanted to linger over our beer and margaritas, making pointless conversation that never answered the real questions I didn't have the courage to ask.

Why hadn't she ever written to me? Called me? Hell, there had been a ton of ways to communicate, even sixteen years ago. She'd never found me on social media or reached out through the dozens of ways she would've known how to use. Considering she was a reporter, I wasn't sure what excuse would even be plausible.

Why hadn't she or Brianne told me they were moving? I'd found out three days after they'd left when I'd made an off-hand comment to a buddy of mine that I hadn't seen either of the Gardener girls around the past couple days. He'd lived across the street and had broken the news that they'd packed their things up the same night Brianne had come to get Tess from my house. No one knew where they'd gone, and Mrs. Gardener's boyfriend had been pissed.

When Darius had come to school to talk to me – no way would he have gotten past the security my dad had installed at home – I'd told him honestly that I didn't know where the trio had gone. I'd tried to get information out of him as well, but he'd simply walked away, muttering curses under his breath.

All this shit in our past should have made me avoid Tess in the first place, and I sure as hell shouldn't have kept finding ways to keep us together all day, but I hadn't been able to stop myself. It had been a compulsion, or worse, a need that only she could fulfill.

That was how I'd gotten myself in so deep with Rona, almost forcing myself to feel what I thought I should, or what I thought I wanted, to feel.

And here I was, leaving the restaurant and suggesting that we take a walk around. I said it would be good to familiarize ourselves with the area, so we wouldn't end up lost, but the reality of the situation was that I wasn't ready

for us to go our separate ways.

I'd done some general research on Costa Rica in the short time I'd known of my impending trip, but it'd been typical internet search stuff. I hadn't been able to request anything the FBI or any other government agency had on the country, and I hadn't had the time to use other means to get the less well-known stuff that I would've liked to have on hand. Taking a walk wouldn't give me the same level of pertinent information that I could've gotten with more time, but it would give me something.

As Tess and I ambled down the sidewalk, I told myself that having her with me was a great cover. That if flags had been raised when a known FBI agent had come into the country, seeing me having an after-meal walk with a beautiful woman should help sell my vacation story.

That reasoning didn't, however, explain my nearly unbearable need to kiss her. It didn't justify why I was currently turning us toward a small park I'd spotted, a place that had shadowed alcoves and a more romantic atmosphere than the concrete and steel of a city.

"Do you remember that day we skipped school and spent the entire time walking around the cherry trees?" I asked, stopping in the shadow of a pair of large trees.

Tess's face lit up, and my gut clenched with such a visceral response that it took my breath away. Seemingly unaware of my body's reaction, she answered my question.

"We were afraid we'd miss seeing them bloom. Whenever I smell cherry blossoms, I think of that day."

"Me too." I stepped closer to her, daring to reach down and put a hand on her waist. I kept my eyes locked with hers as I guided her forward until she was only inches from me.

"You never told me why you asked me to go with you."

Shit. I couldn't tell her that. I'd sound like an idiot. I'd thought it'd be so romantic to ask her to be my girlfriend while we stood under the cherry trees. It'd been a little more than a year before the last night we'd seen each other, before the night we'd kissed, but I'd liked her even then. I'd lost my nerve though, wondering what my friends would've thought if I'd started dating a fourteen-year-old. I considered it one of the biggest mistakes of my life. If I'd been her boyfriend that night, she never would have left without a goodbye.

I settled for a partial truth again.

"It was something I wanted to do with my best friend."

“Oh.”

The sound was so quiet that I wasn't even sure she was aware she'd made it, but it softened her face, giving me a glimpse into the past at the girl she'd been.

I hooked a finger under her chin and lifted her head until our eyes were able to meet again. I wanted this, but only if it was what she wanted too. Time stood still as I bent my head, moving at an impossible pace to allow her the time to decide if this was what she wanted.

The moment my lips brushed across hers, she stiffened, and I waited for her to pull away. Before I could even finish my thought, the tension was gone from her body, and she leaned into me, pressing her mouth more firmly against mine.

I wrapped my hand around the back of her neck, my thumb finding the soft place under her jaw where her pulse rapidly fluttered. I hoped her increased heart rate was because of me and not from our walk, and that she wanted me the way I wanted her.

I hadn't spent every day for the past sixteen years thinking about her, but the longer we were together, the more all those feelings came back. The most surprising thing, however, was that they were stronger rather than weaker, as if something inside me had been waiting all this time for us to come back together.

Her lips parted on a sigh, and I ran the tip of my tongue along her bottom lip before slipping it into the wet heat of her mouth. I wrapped my arm around her waist, every inch of me suddenly conscious of how delicate she was. What would it be like, having her beneath me, being inside of her?

My fingers flexed against the small of her back, and I deepened the kiss, exploring, probing, twisting my tongue around hers. I lost myself in the sweet taste of her, the gentle mint scent. Her shirt slid up a fraction of an inch and electricity shot up my arm as my fingertips grazed bare skin.

Before I could fully appreciate, what it was like to feel her skin against mine, she pulled back, and the contact was broken. Her cheeks were flushed, her breath coming in quick, sharp breaths. Even in the dimming light, I could see that her pupils were blown wide, leaving only a hint of near-purple irises.

She was as turned on as I was, and that was why I was shocked by the first words out of her mouth.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” She wiped the back of her hand across her lips, as if she could still feel my mouth and it disgusted her. “You haven't

changed at all! You're still the same asshole that you were sixteen years ago!"

My jaw dropped, and I stared at her, my brain unable to change gears before she hurried away.

What. The. Actual. Fuck.

We'd kissed, but I'd given her plenty of time to stop it. Even when I'd been holding onto her, I would've stopped if I'd thought for a minute she hadn't been enjoying herself. I had my faults, but I wasn't that kind of bastard.

And what had she meant by me being the 'same asshole?' Sure, the two of us had fought from time to time growing up, but it'd been over stupid, little things, nothing that was worthy of that sort of reaction.

As I thought harder, I became more confused rather than less. We hadn't been fighting that last night. In fact, it'd been a few months since we'd last disagreed over anything bigger than what movie to watch.

I was still trying to figure it all out when I arrived back at the hotel. A part of me wanted to knock on her door and demand answers, but another part was afraid of what she might say. I didn't want to find out that I'd somehow been her boogeyman.

Since I wasn't ready to confront her accusations, I went into my room and went to bed. My decision didn't, however, stop me from replaying things in my head. First, it was an unorganized mess, images and sounds and smells all tangled up together. The past and present a hopeless knot. The longer I stared at the ceiling, instead of becoming more tangled as I expected, things sorted out until my focus narrowed down to a specific set of memories. One memory, actually.

I could still taste my Caramel Ripple ice cream. That seemed like such a stupid thing to be thinking at this moment when I was sitting next to Tess, asking her whose ass I needed to kick for putting those tears in her eyes. I supposed it was my mind's way of making a memory, absorbing as much from my senses as possible, as if anything could solidify things more than the tension spinning between Tess and me.

She was my best friend, and we'd touched hundreds – thousands – of times in the years we'd known each other, but when I put my hand on her cheek, it was different. I saw it in her eyes then, the same longing that I'd been feeling for years. I ran my thumb along her bottom lip, hardly daring to believe that I was being allowed to touch her like this. My fingers were

restless against her waist, itching to know if I'd be allowed further liberties.

Not that I planned on trying to take them right here and now. We hadn't even gone on a real date. And I would never try anything she didn't want, and I wouldn't rush her into anything either. I'd lost my virginity two summers ago to Angela Rhodes, a cheerleader who was a year older than me. It made me popular when she'd bragged to her friends about how good I was, but I'd regretted it. Not because it hadn't been fun, but because I'd felt like I'd only done it because it had been expected of me.

No one went into a bedroom with Angela Rhodes at a party and didn't fuck her unless they wanted to become a social pariah.

I wouldn't let Tess make the same mistake and regret her first time. I didn't doubt for a moment that she was still a virgin. From the way she stared up at me, wide-eyed, as I bent my head, I wondered if I'd be her first kiss.

A thrill went through me at the idea that the only lips to have ever touched hers were mine. The bitter tang of salt from her tears blended with the sweet of my ice cream, and I knew I'd never eat Caramel Ripple again without thinking of this moment.

My mouth moved over hers, slow and gentle. Then my tongue brushed against the corner of her mouth, and she made the best sound. Her hands grabbed at my shirt, and a jolt of lust went through me, so sharp and so powerful that it took a shit-load of self-control to break the kiss and simply sit with my forehead resting against hers.

We needed to talk, but when she said my name, I wasn't sure if I was ready to admit everything that was knotting up in my chest. Fortunately, I didn't have to decide if I was courageous enough to do it or not because Brianne butted in. Tess must've left the gate and door unlocked.

I was so caught up in what had happened between me and Tess that I didn't realize something was wrong until she and Brianne were leaving. I went outside, but they were both gone, and that concerned me more than anything else. I mentally cursed myself as I hurried back inside and grabbed my phone.

I shot off a text, asking her if she was okay, but no answer came. I stared at my phone for an hour, and still, she didn't respond. I sent a dozen more texts, but none of them were even read.

There'd been rumors after people realized the Gardeners had disappeared, but nothing had ever been proven. Even now, I didn't know why she'd left or

why she'd never reached out to me. I'd always assumed the kiss hadn't meant as much to her as it had to me, that I'd completely misread her back then, but now I was completely confused.

As I'd said before...what the actual fuck?

Ten

Tess

If someone would've told me a week ago that I'd be spending the first week of the new year in Costa Rica, I would've laughed. But I also would've laughed at anyone who told me I would kiss Clay Kurth again.

I'd kissed him.

Dammit.

Why the hell had I kissed him?!

I didn't really need to ask myself the question. I knew the answer. I'd kissed him because, in sixteen years, I'd never found anyone else I wanted to kiss like that. It didn't matter what he'd done or how things had ended between us. The moment his lips had touched mine, I'd been lost.

The worst part of all of it was that I hated myself for stopping things between us almost as much as I hated the fact that I'd kissed him.

But I had to put all of that aside because I wasn't here to deal with my shit about Clay. I was here to find my sister...who, unfortunately, was linked to my shit with Clay. But, she was family.

Which was why I was currently standing in a parking lot, squinting up into the sun, my shirt sticking to my back, as I interviewed the first Red Care worker who hadn't walked past me when I'd asked for a moment of their time. Granted, there was a good chance that I should've asked in Spanish rather than English, but that hadn't occurred to me until the first three people had blown by me.

Once I confirmed that she spoke English, I started in on the real questions.

"Red Care sent out a group shortly after Christmas, and they haven't spoken to their families since."

Dammit. I needed more tact than that. Sure, some reporters got stories by bulldogging their way through people, and I completely understood determination, but I was looking to – as the cliché went – catch more flies with honey than vinegar.

"I'm sorry." I rubbed my eyes. "I just flew in yesterday, and I'm

exhausted. That came out harsher than I meant it.”

“You are asking about a missing group of workers?” The woman didn’t look annoyed or mollified as she asked the question. With her arms crossed and her gaze wandering all over the place, she looked bored.

A slow inhale followed by an equally slow exhale helped clear my mind and ground me. I could do this.

“Let me start again,” I said. “I’ve heard a couple people say they haven’t been able to get ahold of family members who were part of a group who arrived around Thanksgiving. I’m looking into it for them.”

I wasn’t quite ready to let out that one of those missing people was my sister. I’d hold that back until I needed it.

“What people are saying that?”

Her tone continued to be flat, but I caught a glimpse of something flash across her eyes.

“Is there a group that hasn’t been heard from since Christmas?” I ignored her question and gave her two of my own. “And why haven’t their family members been informed?”

“We do not provide information on the movements of our people,” she said slowly, as if she was remembering a party line she’d been told to give. “Doing so puts our people at greater risk in the field.”

“You wouldn’t even give family the information?” I pressed. “If someone called you and said they hadn’t heard from their daughter or wife or husband or brother, you wouldn’t tell them what was going on?”

The woman raised an eyebrow. “Who said something was *going on*? Perhaps their daughter or wife or husband or brother simply does not wish to speak with them.”

“Is that the message I should take back to their loved ones?” I said, my voice cracking on the last word. I’d thought I could do this, that I could be calm when I was talking to people about anything. Who knew the sister I’d barely spoken to over the last few years would be my soft spot. “That the people they’re missing probably just don’t want to talk to them?”

Before the woman could answer – if she even intended to answer at all – a familiar voice cut into the conversation.

“Excuse me, ladies, could I have a quick...” The rest of the question faded as I half-turned toward him. “Tess, what are you doing here?”

“I told you I was working on a story,” I said, glaring at him as my potential source walked off. I hadn’t been getting much of anywhere with

her, but she was still my source, and I didn't like Clay screwing things up for me. "Or I was until you interrupted me."

"What sort of story was it again?" he asked, his eyes boring into mine. "Because I don't remember you mentioning Red Care."

My defenses immediately rose, but I pushed them back down. Just because he still knew how to push my buttons didn't mean I needed to let him do it. My eyes narrowed as I scrutinized his face. He was more mature-looking now, but all the features that had made him a gorgeous teenager now made him an equally gorgeous adult. That wasn't why I was studying him. Something was up with him, and I needed to know what it was.

"This seems like an odd place to go when you're on vacation," I finally countered. I crossed my arms over my chest and hoped I looked like a stubborn adult rather than a petulant child.

He looked down, scuffing the toe of his shoe against the cracked blacktop, reverting to the teen he once was. "That doesn't answer my question."

I barely managed to keep the bite out of my voice. "I don't have to answer your question any more than you have to answer mine. We're old friends, Clay, that's all. We don't owe each other anything."

The flash of pain that crossed his face hit me harder than I liked. Maybe I was being too harsh on him. Okay, he'd done something awful, but he'd only been seventeen then. Not a child, granted, but still not an adult. Did I want to be held accountable for all the decisions I'd made as a teenager? People changed a lot between seventeen and thirty-three. Not all of them, but enough that I should have given him the benefit of the doubt.

"You're right," he said, his voice almost too quiet for me to hear. "We don't owe each other anything. If I want you to trust me with what you're really doing here, I need to trust you, even if it could get me in serious trouble."

I went from annoyed to intrigued. That sounded more like work than a vacation, but I knew enough about government agencies to know that the FBI wasn't supposed to be operating outside of the US. I assumed that's why he'd said that he could get in trouble.

"You can't repeat anything I'm going to tell you," he said. "I mean it, Tess. No articles, no gossip."

His expression didn't hold even the faintest hint of humor or sarcasm. He was one hundred percent serious, and no matter how pissed I was at him, I

would respond in kind.

“Not a word,” I promised.

“I’m not here on anything official,” he began, “but my partner back in Denver asked me to look into something for him. Apparently, there’s a group of Red Care workers who’ve gone missing.”

The ground went out from underneath me as his words registered.

Brianne. He was here for Brianne.

I’d always assumed that my sister had lost contact with Clay the same as I had, leaving our past in DC. I’d never completely forgiven her for betraying me by sleeping with Clay, but I’d done my best to move on. What had helped me was thinking that we’d both never see him again.

But she’d been in contact with him all along. That was the only possible explanation as to how he’d known she was part of this Red Care group in Costa Rica.

Unless...she hadn’t been the one keeping tabs on him. It was possible he’d found her through his job and kept an eye on her that way.

It still hurt to know that she was the reason he was here, but it was better than thinking that she’d hidden him from me.

“Now, I’ve told you why I’m here. How about the truth as to why you’re here?”

I gave him a puzzled look. Was he really that dense? “Same as you,” I said. “I’m here for Brianne.”

“Brianne?” Now, he was the one who looked confused.

I suppressed the urge to roll my eyes. Was he really going to play dumb? Or was it more that he thought *I* was that dumb?

I moved on without acknowledging the newest lie. “My mom called me on New Year’s Day and said she hadn’t heard from Bri in a while. She was worried, and I had some vacation time, so I decided to come down and see what I could find out. If I happened on a story too, my editor would be thrilled.”

“Brianne is with the same group.” He shook his head. “What a small world.”

Lying bastard. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to rail at him or cry because I hated how much it still hurt. The wound that I’d thought had healed was just as open and fresh as the day it’d happened.

“I can’t use my badge here,” he continued, “but I still have a better chance of getting information than you do.”

I ground my teeth together. Lying and arrogant.

“Go on back to the hotel, or maybe catch a bus to the beach,” he said. “I’ll make some inquiries and let you know what I find. Tomorrow, you can catch a flight home, and I’ll call when I find Brianne.”

Everyone had their own tipping point, that thing that caused them to snap. This, apparently, was mine.

“Go fuck yourself, Clay Kurth.” His jaw dropped, and when I poked him in the chest, his eyes widened. “I’m quite capable of taking care of things myself. I might’ve only been fifteen when we last saw each other, but I’ve been an adult for a while now, and more than capable of making my own decisions.”

“Tess—”

“No!” I snapped. “I can’t tell you what to do, but you sure as hell can’t tell me either. I’m not anything to you but an old friend. I don’t owe you a damn thing!”

Eleven

Clay

I'd met Brianne first.

Chance had put us next to each other the first day of school, since the two of us were in the same grade, and we'd hit it off. She'd invited me to her birthday party that year, and that was when I met Tess. From that first moment, even as children, I'd been drawn to her.

Since Brianne and Tess were so close, it had usually been the three of us spending time together, though by the time Brianne and I were fourteen, Tess and I found our conversations more focused on each other than including her. We'd never intentionally excluded her, but there'd always been something special between Tess and me, something that Brianne hadn't been able to touch.

That didn't mean Tess hadn't driven me nuts in the past, or that she wasn't driving me nuts right now in the present.

I'm not anything to you but an old friend.

How could she say that? How could she *think* that?

I hadn't had the chance back then to tell her how I'd felt about her, but I'd always thought it had been painfully obvious. Some people might not have thought that a person could be in love when they were a teenager, not in a real way, but what I'd felt for Tess back then had been more real than anything I'd ever felt before.

And if I was being honest with myself, I hadn't felt anything that real since then either.

I wasn't still in love with her, of course. That would've been ludicrous. Sure, some high school sweethearts lasted, but not ones who'd never become sweethearts, ones who'd been separated for nearly two decades before they could even see if there was anything real between them.

That hadn't stopped me from thinking about her on and off over the years. I hadn't gone out of my way to do it, but I hadn't been able to stop it either, no matter how much I might've wanted to, no matter how painful it'd been.

Sometimes, there'd been something that reminded me of her, but sometimes I'd just wondered about her, about where she was or what she was doing.

Now, I knew both where she was and what she was doing, and I wished I didn't because she was driving me crazy. Not like she'd driven me crazy last night when we'd kissed, but more like *I want to pull my hair out and run screaming through the street nuts*.

Didn't she understand that I was trying to keep her safe? She was a journalist, for fuck's sake! I was an FBI agent; I should be the one to ask questions and take risks. She was right that she was an adult and could make her own decisions, but she didn't have the same skillset I did.

Hell, Rona had almost been an FBI agent, and I still wouldn't have felt comfortable with her coming to Costa Rica alone to investigate missing workers. The thought of Tess being here by herself, going around Costa Rica asking questions that might lead to unsavory places...

Fuck. No.

"Let's go somewhere a little more private so we can talk," I suggested. A quick glance around the parking lot showed that no one appeared to be taking an unusual amount of interest in us, but all it took was one word to the wrong person, and I'd be screwed.

Tess shook her head. "Really? That's the line you're going to use to get me alone?"

The longer I was around her, the more bewildered I felt. Sure, she could think that I'd drastically changed in the time we'd been apart, but that wasn't the vibe I was getting. She was angry at me, and I had no clue why. It wasn't just me not telling her the whole truth either. She'd been giving off this same vibe since the moment she'd recognized me.

"We can go somewhere private with plenty of people around," I said. "I just don't want to have this conversation out here in the open where we can be overheard."

She considered my words for a moment, then nodded. "How about the courtyard back at the hotel?"

"That will work," I said. "Meet there in twenty minutes?"

Another nod, but she didn't move. After a moment, she spoke again. "You first."

Twelve

Tess

I made it back to the hotel with several minutes to spare thanks to slipping the cab driver some extra cash to go a little faster, but Clay was already in the courtyard when I arrived. I cursed under my breath, then fixed my expression in what I hoped was a casual smile.

“You made good time,” I said as I slid into the seat across from him.

Under the table, our knees brushed, and I immediately pushed my chair back to put some distance between us. No matter how pissed I still was at him, his touch messed with my mind, and I needed a clear head for this conversation.

“I took a defensive driving course,” he said with a shrug. “It’s useful for more than car chases.”

Apparently.

“All right,” I said, “you’re the one who wanted us to find somewhere to talk. Here we are.”

He glanced around, the gesture itself innocuous, but because I had a general idea of the sort of training he must have received when he joined the FBI, I knew he was getting a read on our surroundings. For some reason I really didn’t like, his actions made me feel safe. I shouldn’t have felt safe with him at all. That was why I hadn’t wanted to go somewhere alone with him. I couldn’t trust him.

Except, I thought as I allowed myself those few moments to really look at him, it wasn’t him I couldn’t trust. It was my own treacherous body and heart. I’d found guys attractive over the years, but never anything like what I’d felt when I’d seen Clay for the first time. Hell, it wasn’t anything like what I felt right now sitting across from him. Desire thick enough to coat my tongue and warm my skin.

“You said your mom called you about Brianne?”

“She said she hadn’t heard from Bri in four days, and when she started contacting the families of people Brianne had mentioned, she found out that they hadn’t heard anything either. Red Care gave her the party line about

possible outages but wouldn't say anything else. When I pressed Mom more, she said she'd gotten an anonymous call two days before New Year's saying that Brianne had been part of a group of Red Care workers who'd disappeared." I leaned back in my seat as I finished my summary. "Your turn."

"I can't tell you who contacted my partner, but I can tell you that the person who started the whole thing is involved with someone in that group. The way things came through Ray – that's my partner's name – makes me suspicious that there's more to this than a missing lover."

"You really think they're missing," I said, my stomach churning at the thought. "Not lost, but in trouble."

His grim expression gave me the answer first. "You're right, I don't think they're lost. I think something happened to them."

The first real flicker of fear made me shift in my seat. I could barely get my question out. "Do you think they're dead?"

"I don't know."

Really? *Now* was when he chose to be honest?

"What do you think, then?" I asked, not caring how sharp my voice had become.

"I think they're in too much danger for you to be out looking for them alone."

"You're a real bastard, you know that?" I lowered my voice as a couple walked by hand-in-hand like they didn't have a care in the world. "I thought we were coming here so you could tell me things that you didn't want to say in the parking lot. Like you had, some top-secret information that couldn't be overheard."

He gave me a searching look, then scratched at the scruff on his jaw, clearly considering his next words. "I think someone might have found out, that one of the group, has a lover with far-reaching connections, but they didn't know who, so they took the whole group."

My eyes widened in horror. "If they only need one person in the group, that means, when they find out who that person is, everyone else is..."

He said it for me. "Expendable."

"Brianne's life could be in danger, and you want me to, what, sit here by the pool and wait for you to find her?" My temper flared. "No way. As I said before, fuck you."

"Do you really think Brianne would want you to risk getting hurt? You

know your sister would do anything to protect you.”

I stared at him, disbelieving. I couldn't believe that he didn't know that Brianne had told me what'd happened between them. Or was it that he didn't know about my crush back then? It would've been embarrassing for him to have known all that, but it was worse knowing that my feelings had never come up in all the time he'd been talking to Bri. Had he never asked about me? Had she never talked about me?

“Tess are you okay?”

The concern in his voice took my hurt and turned it into anger. “I'm fine, Clay. And it's not Brianne's business or yours what risks I take. She might not have told you, but we live separate lives. We rarely talk or see each other. I have my work, and she has hers.”

I didn't add that he'd given up the right to have a say in my life when he'd decided that having sex was more important than our friendship.

“I need to tell you something.” He folded his hands and rested them on the table.

Here it was. He was finally going to confess what he'd done all those years ago.

I cleared my throat. “Go on.”

“About five years ago, I met a lawyer in New York, and the two of us became friends. He had custody of an orphaned niece and, while she wasn't a child anymore, he made me promise that I'd look after her if anything happened to him. Two years later, he was killed outside the courthouse.”

I was confused by the abrupt change in subject, but I didn't interrupt. I'd hear him out, then say all the things I still had bottled up.

“I kept an eye on his niece, Rona, and eventually recruited her to the FBI. The two of us became...involved while she was in training.”

I'd thought nothing he could say would piss me off more, but that was before he started talking about his girlfriend as if she was relevant to what was going on between him and me.

“Without going into details, let's just say that things were awkward between us when they ended, and I wasn't happy with the choice she'd made.” Color stained his cheeks. “But instead of protecting her anyway, I acted like an ass and almost got her killed.” He finally raised his gaze so that our eyes met. “I'm not taking that risk with you.”

I ignored the bite of jealousy at the fondness I heard in his voice when he talked about Rona. Hearing that he wanted to protect me should have made

me feel good, but it just annoyed me. Who in the hell would protect me from him when he showed his true colors again?

“I’m not going home without finding Brianne,” I said.

He sighed and rubbed his forehead, not even trying to hide his exasperated expression. “All right. If you won’t listen to reason, will you at least consider working with me instead of on your own?”

“Working with you?” I didn’t know which of those words I was having the most difficulty with.

“I won’t be able to concentrate on finding Brianne if I’m worried about you getting hurt.”

My heart gave an unsteady thump at his words, and I chided the wayward organ. He didn’t mean anything special by it. He was an FBI agent. It was his job to protect the American people. Plus, he thought Bri would be mad at him if he ‘let’ something happen to me. That’s all it was.

Still, the entire reason I was down here was to find my sister. If working with Clay made that happen sooner rather than later, it would have been foolish of me to decline.

“All right,” I conceded. “We’ll work together. Where do you want to start?”

Thirteen

Clay

The knock on my door came not long after the sun rose. Two sharp knocks that I would've missed if I'd been sleeping more deeply. With Tess across the hall in her own room, however, deep sleep wasn't anything that I'd be experiencing soon. I wasn't about to let my guard down when her safety was my responsibility – whether she liked it or not.

I rolled off the bed, blinking sleep from my eyes. I didn't need to open the door when I reached it, and I was actually pretty sure that I wasn't supposed to. A small piece of folded paper had been slipped under the door, I assumed when someone had knocked on my door.

I picked it up but didn't open it right away. I needed to clear my head first. The note could've been something simple, like a reminder about breakfast, but I didn't think that was the case. Someone had come up here around dawn to slip this under my door, then knocked to make sure that I wouldn't miss it.

I took a few minutes in the bathroom, and when I came back out, I felt a little more capable of dealing with whatever information was in that note. I sat on the edge of my bed and unfolded the paper.

At first glance, the words appeared to be Spanish, but as I read them, I noticed that something was off. The words were correct, but they sounded more like the formal Spanish I'd taken in high school than any of the many conversational dialects of Spanish I'd heard in various cultures. Whoever had written this note, I was willing to bet, didn't have Spanish as their first language.

Still, I was able to make out what the note said, and that was what was important.

No one will answer your questions. They're too scared. Go to The Black Cat bar and look for a man with a birthmark on his left cheek. Follow him, and you will find what you are looking for.

This felt like something out of a spy novel. A mysterious note from an anonymous source. A stakeout at a bar. A suspect with a distinguishing mark.

Still, it was the best lead I had this morning.

It didn't take me long to dress, but while I did, I wondered if I should leave without waking Tess up. I could lie to her later and tell her that I'd wanted to let her sleep, but I had a feeling whatever tentative truce the two of us now had wouldn't survive if I didn't go get her.

As much as I told myself it was only to keep her safe, a little voice in the back of my head spoke up, reminding me that if I messed up with her, I'd lose her again, this time for good. And I didn't want that, no matter how many times my brain said I shouldn't care.

I knocked on her door and tried not to imagine what Tess was wearing on the other side. As kids, both Gardener girls and I had slept over at each other's houses, but I doubted she still wore shooting star pajamas. By the time she'd been old enough to start wearing anything more...mature, the sleepovers had stopped.

I sent her a text and then knocked again. This time, I heard a muffled voice from inside. I couldn't quite make out what she said, but it was enough to let me know that she was awake.

"If you want to come with me to follow a lead, you'll need to get up now," I called, pitching my voice low enough that anyone else on the floor wouldn't be able to hear me.

"Do I have time to shower?"

I heard the words clearly that time, and I wished that I hadn't because they conjured up images of bare skin, slick with soap and water. Her hands moving up to cup small breasts and caress pebbled nipples. Palms sliding down her stomach to dark curls between her legs.

"A quick one," I answered. "I don't know what time the bar opens."

I heard the lock click, and then the door opened. Her hair was a wild mess, and I had the sudden urge to tangle my fingers in the curls and see if they were as soft as they looked, as soft as I remembered. Her cheek bore the faint red lines of a raised pattern, and her eyelids were still half-closed. My gaze automatically dropped, and I saw she was wearing a simple t-shirt and a pair of shorts, neither one tight or sexy, but desire still clenched my gut hard enough to hurt.

"Did you say we're going to a bar?"

I forced my eyes up to hers. "Do you want the explanation before or after you shower?"

She sighed. "After." She took a step back but didn't close the door. "You

can wait in here if you want. I won't be long."

That was a horrible idea.

"I need to get directions," I said. "I'll grab us some coffee too. Meet you at the rental out front?"

* * *

From the outside, The Black Cat looked like a dingy little hole in the wall, and the inside wasn't much better. Dim lighting and a haze of smoke made it difficult to see much as Tess and I made our way inside. I was a little surprised that it was open so early, but I didn't know what alcohol laws there were here, and considering how shady things looked, this place could've been operating outside of those laws anyway.

Tess walked next to me, close enough for our hands to brush, but I suppressed the urge to take hers. I wasn't sure how she'd respond, and the last thing we needed to do here was draw attention to ourselves. People would probably still think that we were a couple, and that worked well for a cover, but we didn't need physical contact to make it believable.

It didn't stop me from wanting to touch her though.

We claimed a little table in a shadowed corner, and I pulled my chair closer to hers to make it look like we were angling for privacy. I had to admit, the two of us being here together was probably less conspicuous than me alone. We'd probably also have a lot less interference. There weren't any other couples here yet, but if I was here by myself, the scantily dressed women at the fringes probably would have come over to offer me the same thing they were offering the other men here.

The waitress who came by the table looked exhausted, as if this were the end of her shift rather than the beginning. As Tess ordered a beer, I wondered if the bar was open twenty-four hours a day. I didn't ask though. It wasn't important, and I needed to conserve my questions. Too many and we'd alienate people. We didn't know how long we were going to be here, and I didn't want to ruin things simply to satisfy my curiosity.

Fourteen

Tess

When Clay had said we were going to track down a lead, I'd assumed we'd be interviewing people, interrogating suspects. At the very least, I'd thought we'd be *doing* something. Sitting in a corner in a dim bar, pretending to be Clay's girlfriend while we both breathed in the stench of cigarettes, was not what I'd had in mind.

"It's been hours," I said finally. I spoke in English though I didn't doubt there were plenty of people in here who could understand me. We were clearly American tourists. Using too much Spanish would be suspicious.

"The note didn't say how long it would take," Clay said. "Stakeouts can last for days before something useful finally pops up."

Days?

I shook my head. "We need to start thinking of some alternate solutions. This isn't going to work for days."

"What do you mean?"

"Do you think anyone is going to believe that a couple of American tourists are going to spend days on end in a bar like this?"

His face grew tight. "Shit."

"Yeah, shit," I said. "Haven't you done a stakeout before?"

"Not in a while," he admitted, scratching at the stubble on his jaw. "And it's generally been waiting in a car for twelve hours at a time, then being relieved by the next guys on shift."

"We need to sell our cover," I said. "Something to give us a reason for being here."

"I have an idea," he said after thinking for a minute. "I'll be right back."

I watched him walk across the room and tried not to think about how good his ass looked in those jeans. He leaned across the bar and said something to the bartender. The other man shook his head, but Clay reached into his wallet and pulled out a couple folded bills. After a moment's hesitation, he took the money and pocketed it. He disappeared into the back and Clay looked over at me as he leaned on the bar. The easy grin he wore

made my heart give an uneasy thump.

I was here for Brienne, I reminded myself. Brienne and Mom. This was not a vacation, and it definitely was not an excuse to fall head-over-heels for Clay again. When we were done, we'd go our separate ways, and I didn't intend to have a broken heart when that happened.

The bartender returned and handed something to Clay. The latter came back to the table and held out a hand.

"Come with me," he said.

I didn't want to take his hand, but I knew it'd look strange if I didn't. I braced myself for the shock and then slid my hand into his. As his fingers closed around mine, the electricity that ran through sent goosebumps racing along my skin. He threaded his fingers between mine like he'd done dozens of times growing up, but this time I knew his motivation behind the gesture wasn't romantic. Still, it didn't keep the heat from spreading through me, but it did keep my mind from going down a road I'd vowed I'd never take again.

Instead of Clay taking me outside, he led me through the doorway a few feet from our table. By the time my eyes adjusted to the darker hallway, we were going through another door and into the women's restroom. Clay checked both the stalls, then locked the door.

"What's going on?" I asked.

Clay pulled a small bag of white powder out of his pocket, and for one terrifying moment, I wondered if he'd been lying to me again.

"I wasn't just watching for the guy with the birthmark," he said. "I watched everyone who's come in and out of here since we arrived. Participating in the local economy seemed like a good way to maintain a cover."

"You bought drugs."

He went into one of the stalls, and a couple seconds later, the toilet flushed. When he came back out, his hands were empty. "I made us seem like a couple of American tourists who wanted to party but had to work up the nerve to make a purchase."

I didn't like it – and I doubted that he did either – but it was brilliant. We weren't here to bust dealers, so if we kept our heads down and didn't ask too many questions about where the drugs came from, we shouldn't have any issues.

"When we get back out there, you need to pretend to be high," he said. "We're going to dance for a bit and see what happens. This bought us some

extra time, but not all night.”

I nodded my agreement, but my brain was stuck on the word *dance*. I’d danced with a couple guys at various weddings, but never with Clay. I’d wanted to, imagined it numerous times as a teenager, but it hadn’t happened until now.

The song playing when we emerged from the restroom was in Spanish, but the sultry tone and rhythm transcended language. It wasn’t just a slow song. It was a slow song made for sex. If I needed any further proof of that, all I had to do was look at the three couples who’d arrived less than an hour ago. They were already dancing, their bodies plastered together without a sliver of space between them.

Clay swung me around without a word, his hands coming to rest on the small of my back. My own arms went up, hands resting on his shoulders. I was wearing two-inch heels, but that didn’t really do much when there was a foot of height difference between us. Still, it didn’t feel awkward like it should have. Instead, it felt like the entire world had narrowed down to just the two of us, moving together now as naturally as we had before.

The years fell away, and I found myself wanting to lean against him. My head on his chest, the sound of his heart beating in my ear. What would he do if I acted on what I wanted? Would he take advantage of the situation or would he push me away?

Through the next two songs, I tried everything I could think of to keep myself distant, but my treacherous body was responding to his proximity like it had never done with anyone else before.

Desire twisted tighter and tighter in my stomach. My pussy throbbed in time with my galloping pulse. The soft cotton of my shirt rubbed against my hard nipples until everything in my body felt as if it would explode with the slightest provocation.

Clay pulled me closer, reducing the space between us to only our clothes. He lowered his head until his breath ghosted over my ear. I closed my eyes and tried not to breathe too deeply. Even the acrid smell of smoke couldn’t overpower the scent of him.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

I nodded, not trusting my voice to stay steady if I spoke. I wanted him too much. For years, I’d assumed that I simply had a low sex drive. I’d had no desire to have sex with any of the men I’d met, even the ones I’d found attractive. I didn’t even masturbate that often.

Now, I knew that my previous assumption was inaccurate. It had nothing to do with me and everything to do with the man holding me. His body was the only one I wanted...and the one I could never have.

“Excuse me,” I said as I extricated myself from his embrace. “I need some air.”

I walked away at a natural pace, but it didn't fool me. No matter the speed, I was running away.

Fifteen

Clay

What the hell just happened?

Things had been going well, I'd thought. We'd passed hours talking about nothing much, but it had been friendly conversation, almost as if we'd slipped backward in time to the place where we'd been the closest of friends. A time when I hadn't been able to take my eyes off her and didn't know how to tell her how I felt.

I kept making excuses to touch her. A brush of fingers as I passed her salt. Knees bumping when I turned to offer her some of my sandwich. Holding her hand. Asking her to dance.

Even under the smoke, I could smell the clean mint scent of her shampoo. She liked flowers well enough, but she'd never gone with floral shampoos or soaps. No, she'd always smelled like mint. Peppermint, more specifically. Even after more than a decade, there were certain things I couldn't eat because they'd reminded me of her.

Our dancing wasn't anything special. In fact, it was little more than swaying, but it wasn't the movements that had my body at attention. It was her. It had always been her.

Maybe we were picking up where we'd left off, erasing our time apart and seeing the path we could have taken. The path we *should* have taken. Having her in my arms felt natural, right, and I was certain she felt the same. Then the expression on her face changed, and I asked her if she was okay.

Instead of talking to me and telling me what was bothering her, she ran. Not literally but running all the same. I went after her, our business in the bar momentarily set aside.

I reached her side just as the cab she'd flagged down pulled up in front of her. We'd driven here, but I could come back for the rental later. Losing her was a bigger risk for me than the car getting stolen or broken into.

"Hotel Santo Tomas," she said to the driver.

I caught the door before she could close it and gestured for her to scoot over. She didn't look happy about it, but she didn't complain either.

Something twisted inside me when she moved as far away from me as possible, and I searched for something to say to fix whatever it was I'd broken.

Finally, I sighed. "I can't help if you won't tell me what's wrong."

Silence met my statement, and she continued staring out the window. Whatever it was that had gotten between us wasn't something she wanted to get into.

Tough shit.

I was tired of her going back and forth, fine one moment and angry the next. If I'd done something, I wanted to know what it was, and if I hadn't, I wanted to know that too. If she was being like this and I hadn't done anything, then I'd quit trying to go back to something that hadn't existed in the first place.

The one thing I would give to her, however, was a quiet car ride. Even if the driver didn't speak English, having an audience for this conversation wasn't something I wanted any more than she did.

I followed her up the stairs, then over to her door rather than to my own. She opened the door, and I stepped forward, putting my hand on it before she could close it behind her.

"We need to talk, Tess," I said. I didn't speak loudly, but I was firm. "If we're going to keep working together, we need to discuss whatever's going on."

I expected a resigned sigh, but what I got instead was a glare and a scowl.

"Fine," she snapped. "You want to do this now? I suppose it's long past time."

I went into the room confused by her comment, but I hoped whatever it was we had to talk about would explain things. I leaned against the dresser and waited until it became clear that Tess wasn't going to sit down. From the expectant look on her face, she was waiting too.

"You're going to need to start, because I have no idea what's going on," I finally said.

She rolled her eyes and crossed her arms. "I'm trying to decide if you're lying, or if what you did didn't even register. If you'd done it so many times before that it wasn't a big deal."

I rubbed two fingers across my forehead. "Tess, I need you to speak plainly. I don't know what you're talking about."

"Fine," she snapped. "You want it plain? You fucked my sister and

wanted to fuck me. How's that for plain?"

My jaw dropped, and I stared at her. I had to have heard her wrong because there was no way Tess thought I'd had sex with Brianne.

But it was the only thing that made sense.

The moment that realization hit me, everything snapped into place. Well, not everything, but enough that I could speak.

"Is that why you never contacted me after you moved? You thought I slept with Brianne, and then I kissed you that night?"

Color appeared in two spots high on her cheeks. "She told me about you and her being 'friends with benefits,' and then she told me that you were just trying to get in my pants. It seemed pretty pointless to try to carry on a long-distance, one-sided friendship."

I pushed myself off the dresser, anger at Brianne burning up my frustration at Tess. No wonder things between Tess and I had been strained. Brianne had lied.

A lot.

"I didn't have sex with Brianne." That was the first lie I needed to set straight. "I've never done anything with your sister that's remotely sexual. Neither one of us has ever been attracted to the other. She lied to you."

Tess's arms dropped to her sides, and her hands curled into fists. The fire in her eyes had turned her irises nearly black.

"Brianne wouldn't do that."

I raised an eyebrow and took a step toward her. "You think Brianne would sleep with me, but not that she'd lie to you about it?"

"Why would she?" Tess asked. "What reason would she have to lie?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "But I swear to you that I didn't have sex with your sister."

Something shifted in her this time, and I watched her expression fall. "What about me?"

I remembered now the other part of what she'd said, about how I was going to fuck her. Since she'd said it alongside the accusation about Brianne, I knew she hadn't meant anything positive by it.

I'd fix that now too.

I reached out and brushed back some hair. "I'm not going to lie and say that I didn't want to have sex with you back then. It was pretty much all I thought about for two years."

Her head shot up, eyes wide with surprise.

“That night, Tess...I’d been trying to get up the nerve to tell you how I felt about you for such a long time. I almost couldn’t believe it when I kissed you, and you kissed me back. I wanted to tell you then, but Brianne came in before I could.”

“Clay...” Her voice shook. “Why...what...”

“Why did Brianne come to get you?” I asked. “Maybe the reason she told you those things was related to why you had to leave so suddenly.”

She tilted her head, studying my face. “Why do you think we moved? I always wondered what the story was about why we left.”

“Most people knew Darius was a piece of shit. We all assumed it was something to do with him.” I didn’t tell her how many nightmares I’d had about Darius killing them.

She nodded. “He used to rough Mom up, and that night, he hit Bri too. Mom finally called the cops, but we knew he wouldn’t stay in jail for long. We had to leave right then.”

I still couldn’t believe Brianne had done this.

“Shit,” Tess breathed. “That’s why. That bitch.”

I touched her shoulder. “Care to share?”

“When she told me we were leaving, I wanted to go back to you. That’s when she told me that she’d had sex with you, and that you were just trying to get me into bed.” She shook her head, her lips in a tight line. When she looked up at me, her eyes were wet. “Bri knew the only way I’d leave you and never look back was if I thought you’d betrayed me, used me.”

“She was trying to protect you,” I said softly.

“She did a shit job of it. I lost you both that day. I never forgave her for what I thought she did.”

I moved closer and brushed my thumbs underneath both eyes, ready to catch some of the tears that threatened to escape. “When we find her, the three of us are going to have a talk. That’s something to look forward to, right? Getting to yell at your sister?”

She laughed, a weak, watery sound, but it was better than her crying. “I’m sorry, Clay.”

“For what?” Any anger or frustration I’d had toward Tess had vanished. What had happened was Brianne’s fault, whatever her reasoning. All I wanted to do now was take care of Tess, touch her, taste her.

“For thinking you’d use me that way.” She took a slow breath and seemed to collect herself. “We were friends. I should’ve believed in that.”

“Believe now,” I said with a smile. “Believe that I want you as much right now as I did that night we kissed.”

The skeptical look on her face was what drove me to do it. I couldn’t stand the idea that she didn’t believe that I wanted her.

So I kissed her.

Sixteen

Tess

This wasn't supposed to be happening.

None of it.

I wasn't supposed to find out that my sister had lied to me all those years ago. I wasn't supposed to feel bad when Clay and I finally had this conversation. This was supposed to be my closure.

It wasn't supposed to be his mouth on mine, his lips parting mine. My body wasn't supposed to be burning with the need for more.

But all of it was real. Of that, I had no doubt. Nothing felt more real in this moment than the slide of his tongue over mine, the hard heat of his body leaning into me.

When he broke the kiss, he didn't pull away. In an echo of our first kiss, he rested his forehead against mine. "Damn, I missed you."

I closed my eyes as I admitted, "I missed you too."

"I want you to know, that night," he said, his breath warm on my face, "I wouldn't have tried to get you to sleep with me. I planned on taking things slow with you, easing us into things. I just couldn't stop myself from kissing you."

"I'm glad you didn't," I said. "I wouldn't have wanted Johnny Ashmore to be my first kiss."

He raised his head. "I was your first kiss?"

I tried not to feel like that fifteen-year-old again as I answered him, "Yes."

Suddenly, he frowned. "Who's Johnny Ashmore?"

I ran my fingers through Clay's hair, something I hadn't dared to do before. It was as soft as I'd always imagined. "I went on a couple dates with him my senior year, and we kissed a couple times. He wasn't very good at it. Neither was Park Stateson." I gave him a partial smile. "But I could just have really high standards."

He went still, an unidentifiable expression on his face. "If I ask you something really personal, do you promise not to hit me or get pissed at me?"

I knew what was coming, but I went with it. “Go ahead.”

“Who else have you kissed?”

“Just you, Johnny, and Park.” I waited for the next logical question.

“Which one of them was it?” he asked. “I don’t have the right to ask, I know, and feel free to tell me to go to hell—”

“Neither one,” I cut in. “No one, actually.”

“How? I mean, why?” His fingertips traced my features, leaving streaks of fire on my skin. “You’re beautiful and smart and—”

“I just never saw the point,” I said. Heat flooded my cheeks when the smirk on Clay’s face alerted me to the innuendo I’d unintentionally said. “I mean, I never found anyone who made me feel...I never found anyone who could take care of my needs as well as I could.”

He raised an eyebrow, the heat in his eyes warming every inch of me. “Should I take that as a challenge?”

This was my chance to ask him to leave if I didn’t want things to go any further between us tonight. He’d respect my decision, and we could discuss where things stood with us before we moved any further.

Or I could fulfill a lifetime of fantasies and go for it with the one person who’d ever made me want sex.

“Do you think you’re up to the challenge?” I asked. “Because if you are—”

The rest of my sentence died when his mouth slammed down on mine with bruising force. I gasped, and his tongue slipped between my lips. My fingers dug into his shoulders, every cell in my body desperate to get closer to him. His hands dropped to my hips, and he pulled me tight against him.

The noise in my head faded away, and for the first time in a long time, I didn’t think.

His tongue stroked mine, drawing it into his mouth, and he tasted like coffee, the bitter dark roast that the two of us had ordered throughout the day to keep ourselves sober. I could taste the alcohol too, just underneath, the earthy hops that had defined the drink he’d chosen.

Suddenly, he straightened, lifting me up and wrapping my legs around his waist. I moved my hips, rubbing against him even as he walked us the few steps to the bed. When he set me down, I clung to him, not wanting to lose the connection. He chuckled, nipping at my bottom lip.

“I need to move if I’m going to get rid of those clothes of yours,” he said, his voice husky. “I want to see you.”

“Yes,” I breathed as I loosened my grip. “I want to see you too.”

He moved up onto his knees, and I pushed myself up on my elbows to watch him pull his shirt over his head.

Damn.

We’d spent enough time together growing up that I’d seen him without his shirt before, but he wasn’t seventeen anymore. He’d had an athlete’s build back then, but clearly, joining the FBI had kept him fit. The faint dusting of dark hair on his chest was new to me too, driving home the fact that he wasn’t a teenager anymore.

I was suddenly aware of how little I’d changed since I was fifteen. I’d made my peace with my figure, but I couldn’t help wondering how Rona was built. What the other women he’d been with looked like.

And if he’d be disappointed with me.

“Hey,” Clay said, frowning. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I lied, turning my head.

He reached out and caught my chin, waiting patiently until I looked at him. The intensity of his gaze made me shiver, his blue-gray eyes darker than I’d ever seen them.

“If you don’t want to do this, I won’t push you into it,” he said.

“I want to,” I said quickly. Heat flooded my face. “I just don’t want you to...”

I couldn’t say it, but the thing about knowing someone for a decade was that, sometimes, words weren’t needed.

“I meant what I said.” He put his hands on my hips, fingertips teasing bare skin. “You are beautiful, and I want you, Tess. Nothing about you will make me change my mind.”

Without taking his eyes off mine, he pushed up the hem of my shirt to just under my bra. Lowering his head, he kissed my stomach, sending butterflies flying through my entire system. My anxiety went with them, and I raised my arms, asking him without words to do what I didn’t have the courage to do myself.

He undressed me slowly and without a word, pausing every minute or so to kiss a newly exposed inch of skin. With each press of his lips, the fire in me burned a little higher, a little brighter. Only when I was completely naked did he finish undressing himself, dropping his clothes next to mine.

The butterflies returned as he climbed up on the bed, giving me a good look at everything he had to offer, which was quite a bit. Even more so

considering our size difference. He leaned over me, his head blocking my view, but the moment he took one of my nipples between his lips, all I could focus on was the wet heat of his mouth.

I moaned as he sucked on the sensitive bit of flesh, worrying at it with his teeth until I squirmed. I couldn't keep my hands to myself and ran them over every bit of skin I could reach, loving how his muscles tightened under my palms. He wrapped his fingers around my hip, squeezing as his teeth and tongue played with my breast. The ache between my thighs grew with each pull of his mouth, and when his hand slid around to that throbbing place, I whimpered.

"Fuck, Tess." Clay raised his head, his eyes blazing. "Make that sound again."

"Touch me again," I countered.

The slow smile that curved his lips was more wicked than anything I'd ever seen on his face before. I gasped as he slid a finger inside me. My own fingers never felt anything like that, and neither did the smooth silicone toy I'd bought a few years ago.

"Come on, Tess, make that sound for me again." He brushed his thumb over my clit, and that gave him the results he wanted.

He crooked his finger rubbing against my g-spot, turning my whimpers into cries. The fire in me roared to life, burning through me until I came with an explosion of heat and light. My legs clamped down on Clay's hand, and my pussy spasmed around his finger even as his thumb continued to stroke my swollen clit until I'd reached as high as I could.

"Please," I begged, squeezing his hand. "No more."

He smiled down at me as he removed his hand, and I couldn't even find it in me to chide him for the self-satisfied expression on his face. He'd earned it.

My arm felt limp, boneless, as I reached up to put my hand on his cheek. The faint stubble I could see in the dim hotel lighting scratched against my skin, reigniting the banked desire deep inside me. We weren't done yet.

"Do you have a condom?" I asked.

"Are you sure?" He caught my hand and turned his head, placing a kiss right in the center of my palm. "Watching you come...I'd be satisfied if that was all I got to experience tonight."

"I won't." I lightly touched his mouth, still not quite believing that I could take such liberties. "If you don't have a condom, there are other things I'd

like to try.”

His eyes darkened, and he nipped at my finger. “Let me check my wallet. I usually keep a couple in there.”

I didn’t want to think about the other women who’d been able to take advantage of his planning nature, but I couldn’t be anything but thankful when he held up a little square packet. If he wasn’t thinking about anyone other than me right then, I could ignore his past. The only person I never could have gotten over him being with was Brianne, and I believed him when he said they’d never been together.

As he took care of the protection, I went up onto my knees, moving back to give him plenty of room to get on the bed. When he gave me a puzzled look, I patted the mattress next to me.

“On your back,” I said. “Several women I interviewed in college for an article said that being on top is good for couples where the woman is a foot or so shorter than the man and they haven’t had sex before. It lets her control how deep he goes and prevents accidental pain.”

He sat down on the bed, his mouth twisting as if he was trying to hold back a laugh.

“I said I was a virgin,” I pointed out. “I never said I didn’t know what I was doing.”

His laugh broke free, and the sound turned me on almost as much as his body did. He’d always been good-looking, and I’d understood that even before I’d started crushing on him. It had been his laugh, though, that had made me start thinking of him differently. It’d been my favorite sound for the longest time, and I’d believed I’d never hear it again.

He settled back on the pillows and then held out a hand to me. I took it and let him steady me as I moved to straddle his thighs. As impatient as I was to have him inside me, I had to satisfy at least one curiosity.

The latex was smooth under my fingertips, and I wished I’d asked to touch him before he’d put the condom on. I could feel the heat of him, but not what his skin felt like.

Later.

We’d be here for at least a day or two more. I didn’t know what would happen beyond that, but we’d have time to explore each other more thoroughly soon.

Right now, I wrapped my hand around the thick shaft and Clay groaned, his head dropping back to thud against the headboard. It was surprisingly

heavy, and I wondered if it would feel the same when he was soft, or if the blood coursing beneath the surface added extra weight? I pushed the question back and stroked him a couple times, loving the way his hands fisted in the sheets and the muscles underneath me bunched as he tensed.

“Tess, please, you’re killing me here.”

It was my turn to laugh, but I did it while moving. His hands moved to my hips, helping me balance as I reached beneath to guide him to my entrance. My orgasm had left me wet and relaxed, but the sheer size difference between the two of us made it a tight fit. I put my hands on his stomach and closed my eyes, putting all my concentration on slowly lowering myself onto him.

He didn’t rush me, his hands remaining a source of strength without trying to direct me. When I finally had him completely inside me, I breathed a sigh of relief. I was full, almost uncomfortably so, but there’d been no pain.

I opened my eyes to find him watching me. Not my breasts. Not the place where we were joined. My face. He watched to see if I was okay, and that confirmed that I’d made the right choice doing this with him. No matter what happened after, the part of us that had always cared about the other was still there.

We took that care with each other as we moved together, easily finding that rhythm we’d always seemed to have. Any worry I might’ve had about this being awkward disappeared. Time hadn’t changed how well we knew each other, how well we understood each other. Even though these weren’t things we’d ever tried before, finding the ways to bring pleasure happened naturally between us as we touched and stroked and teased.

When his expression tightened, and I knew he was close, I took his hand and brought it where I needed it. Together, our fingers found that sensitive bundle of nerves and I showed him how I liked to touch myself, wanting us to come as close together as possible.

We didn’t need to wait long.

I came twice in quick succession, the first triggering his climax and the second making him cry out my name. I collapsed on his chest, too exhausted to even whisper his name, but I knew he’d understand.

He’d always understood me.

Seventeen

Clay

I was aware of a weight on my chest before I was even awake. Memories flashed through my mind as I rose to consciousness.

Soft golden skin that glowed in the dim light.

Curls the color of good coffee.

Small, firm breasts tipped with butterscotch-colored nipples.

Indigo irises that held such heat and desire that I felt my body responding to just the memory.

By the time I opened my eyes, my usual morning erection was excruciatingly hard. The delicate hand on my chest shifted restlessly, as if, even in sleep, Tess couldn't stop moving. She had always been like that, even as a kid, but not in a hyper sort of way. More like she'd always felt as if she had so much to do, she couldn't take a moment to rest.

I'd seen her sleep before, but not as an adult, and definitely not naked.

Which she was right now.

I looked down at where her cheek rested on my chest, then lower to the sheet and comforter that one of us had pulled around her shoulders. I couldn't see much in the way of bare skin, but I could feel it. The heat of her body seemed to increase with my awareness of it. Or maybe it was simply the temperature of my own body rising as my arousal increased. It was impossible not to be turned on when I was lying next to her.

I brushed some hair back from her face, and she didn't stir. I wondered how well she'd been sleeping these last few days, because I knew I hadn't exactly been well-rested myself. In fact, right now, I felt better than I had in a while, and I knew it was thanks in large part to her.

She murmured something, her breath sending goosebumps racing across my skin. Almost automatically, my arms tightened around her, and she pressed herself closer against me.

The temptation to wake her with my mouth, take her high until she broke underneath my tongue and lips, then slide into her pussy, feel her clench around me, it was almost overwhelming.

I'd wanted women and had women. Hell, after I'd realized that Tess wasn't going to call me back then, I'd fucked half the cheerleading squad and almost as many members of the girls' cross-country team just to try to make myself feel better. It hadn't worked.

But I'd never wanted anyone the way I wanted her right then.

If it had been merely lust, I might have given in and spent the morning satisfying some creative fantasies, but I'd experienced lust before, and this was different. The things coiling inside my stomach were deeper and more real than anything I had a right to feel.

And the more awake I became, the more I realized that these weren't new feelings. These were emotions I'd tried for so long to pretend I didn't have because I hadn't wanted them. When she left that night and essentially disappeared, I'd told myself that the kiss hadn't meant as much to her as it had to me, that she'd simply been upset, and I'd comforted her.

Now, I knew different. I knew the reason she'd walked away and never looked back. I also knew that if she'd never left, the two of us would've gotten together and stayed together. That everything I'd felt for her wasn't only real but in the present. Nothing had disappeared or faded with time. I'd pushed everything down, but I hadn't been able to get rid of any of it.

The longer I thought about all of it, the more awake I became, and the brighter the panic inside me grew.

We'd finally had it all out, but that had been our past. It didn't tell me where we would go from here. It didn't tell me what she expected or wanted. And *I* didn't know what I wanted, not for real. Tess wasn't some one-night stand or a friend with benefits. She wasn't Rona.

Fuck.

I needed to go.

I couldn't be here when she woke up, not when I didn't have any answers to the questions I knew she'd have. I didn't have answers for my own questions.

I eased out from under her and the covers at the same time, moving carefully until she was all alone in the bed. She made an annoyed sound but didn't wake up as she burrowed under the covers. I didn't take any chances though. I grabbed my clothes, pulling on only my pants before heading back to my room.

I needed to go back to The Black Cat and keep looking for the man with the birthmark. Tess would want to go with me. I didn't need to wake her up

to know that. She'd get dressed and come with me. We'd spend another day at the bar, talking, waiting. And then we'd end up right back here. In bed again.

I'd enjoy the sex part, but I wasn't sure it would be safe for both of us to go back to the bar. My drug ruse had worked yesterday, and maybe it'd work today too, but I wasn't sure it was something I wanted to risk.

It'd be safer if I went alone. For everyone.

Eighteen

Tess

I was trapped.

The thought pushed panic through me until I emerged from what I'd thought to be a nightmare to find it to be true. My eyes were open, but I couldn't see. My arms and legs were pinned in place, with barely enough space to wiggle a finger. I wasn't claustrophobic, but waking up in the dark, unable to move, would've made most people freak out.

I was already gasping, as if I couldn't get enough air, but as my brain began to process my surroundings, I realized that the air, while warm, wasn't disappearing. It smelled like laundry detergent.

And Clay.

Everything from last night came back to me in a rush that had me gasping for a whole new reason.

I'd had sex.

With Clay.

I wasn't aware of a curse strong enough to convey what I felt at that moment.

I didn't regret being with him, but I'd have been lying if I'd said I wasn't nervous about what came next.

All those thoughts processed through my brain in less than two minutes, which meant that it hadn't taken long for me to realize that I wasn't trapped. I'd merely wrapped myself in sheets and blankets, which was something I did at home from time to time. It usually happened when something interrupted my sleep patterns. Losing my virginity to the guy I'd had a crush on since middle school counted as an interruption.

I twisted to get my bearings, and once I knew which way I could roll without falling off the bed, I did exactly that. As I'd hoped, the blankets unraveled as I went, giving me the space I needed to get completely free. It wasn't until I was lying on my back, looking up at the ceiling, that I realized the main reason it had worked was that I was alone in the bed.

The room was small, and all I needed to do to see that the bathroom door

was open was turn to the side. I didn't hear anyone moving around in there, which meant that Clay hadn't simply forgotten to close the door. That didn't necessarily mean anything though. With Clay's room right across the hall, it made complete sense that he'd go over there to shower and dress. After all, it wasn't like he'd brought a change of clothes in here with him last night.

The memory of seeing him naked for the first time rose up in my mind, and I let myself drown not only in the sight of him, but the recollection of what it had felt like to run my hands over his muscled body, the scent of him and sex, the sound of him saying my name, the taste of his kiss.

I sighed and went back to staring at the ceiling.

One night and everything had changed. This time yesterday, I'd been furious with Clay for the way he still made me feel and even angrier at myself for not being able to stop those feelings. I'd believed that Brianne had betrayed me and that Clay had used me.

Now, I knew the truth. Brianne's betrayal had come from good intentions, and Clay hadn't done anything wrong at all. She and I were still going to have it out when Clay and I found her, but knowing she'd lied to protect me was completely different from sleeping with the guy I liked simply because she'd wanted to.

I got up and headed to the bathroom to clean up. A glance at my phone showed that it was still early, but still later than we'd gotten up yesterday. I appreciated him letting me sleep, but it was time to get back to searching for my sister. We were probably heading back to the bar, but today I was going to bring up the possibility of coming up with another way to find our mysterious suspect. Sitting around drinking and trying to look inconspicuous had been hard enough yesterday. If we went back today and did the same thing, people would start wondering what we were doing.

I was clean and dressed, ready to open the door and go across the hall to Clay's room, when I saw the piece of folded paper right in front of my door. My name was on it, but it wasn't Brianne's tidy handwriting, which meant it had to be from Clay.

Tess, you looked so peaceful, I didn't want to wake you, just so you could spend another day in a smoky bar. Enjoy yourself, and I'll see you later today. Clay

I read it twice, as if the abrupt message would change into something that revealed last night had meant something to him. That would've made the rest of it easier to bear. I could've convinced myself that he really meant what

he'd written. That he'd left me behind because he'd wanted me to be able to keep sleeping rather than spending the day at a bar, but no matter how much I wanted to believe that last night hadn't just been about the culmination of two unfulfilled childhood crushes and the manifestation of several stressful days, Clay's note held no hint that he thought otherwise.

I crumpled it and tossed it toward the wastebasket. That was it then. We'd finished what we'd started as teenagers, and now the only unfinished business between us was Brianne. Once we found her, we'd go our separate ways, and I wouldn't think of Clay Kurth ever again.

That was my future, and I was going to do whatever it took to make it come to be as soon as possible. Which meant the quicker I found Brianne, the better it would be for all of us.

Clay had gone back to the bar, and since that was where the man with the birthmark would be, I had to go there too. I couldn't only focus on finding him though. I needed to avoid Clay while I did it. If he saw me, he'd be pissed, I didn't doubt it, and it would just make things harder.

I'd have to come up with another way to find the man, but I had no doubt that I could do it. I'd make my own way, and if Clay happened to find Brianne around the same time I did, he'd be forced to work with me.

I wasn't sure I could stomach that.

I wanted to be done with this. All of it. All of *him*.

Nineteen

Clay

I'd been at the bar for a couple hours, and I'd seen only the same people I'd seen yesterday. Since I was alone, one of the women had ventured over to make me an offer. Or, rather, to ask me to make an offer. She hadn't been happy that I'd refused, and now she sat on the other side of the bar, glaring at me. The burly man next to her didn't look pleased either, and I wondered if he was her pimp.

Even if I hadn't been in Tess's bed less than twelve hours ago, I wouldn't have taken the prostitute up on her offer. Aside from the fact that it'd be stupid of someone in my occupation to hire a hooker, I'd never had a problem finding women willing to hook up, with no strings attached.

Now, however, I didn't even appreciate the working girl's looks. She was pretty enough, but all I could see in my mind's eye was Tess, lying on her stomach in her bed where I'd left her.

I was sure she was awake by now and had gotten my note. I hadn't known what to say to her, so I'd kept it simple. I hoped that a day apart would help me figure out what I wanted so when the inevitable question came up, I'd have an answer.

The problem was, I hadn't gotten any closer to understanding than I'd been when I'd first sat down here.

I signaled the bartender for another beer even though mine was still half-full. I'd purposefully ordered beer that came in a dark bottle, so I'd be able to nurse at it for a while, then throw most of it away without anyone suspecting I hadn't drunk as much as it appeared. I also made sure to eat enough that the alcohol hadn't even really given me a buzz. I wasn't technically on the job, but I still needed to keep my wits about me.

"You wait for wife?" The man asked in broken English as he set down my beer.

I shook my head without bothering to explain that Tess wasn't my wife. Something low inside me twisted at the thought of her with my ring on her finger, but I didn't know if it was pleasure or nerves. It was strange how

similar the two of them felt sometimes.

“You want more drugs?”

Right. My ruse from yesterday. Partying American tourists was a good cover in a lot of countries.

“Maybe later,” I said. “The stuff from yesterday wasn’t bad.”

I’d spent a year with a joint task force between the FBI and the DEA. I knew what quality heroin looked like, and what had been in the small bag I’d purchased yesterday had been impressive for a place like this. I’d assumed people here were small-time dealers, but there was no way that stuff had been small time.

The bartender glanced toward a bearded man in the far corner, then leaned closer to me, pitching his voice low. “Colombians.”

I raised an eyebrow and switched from English to Spanish, keeping my own voice quiet so others wouldn’t hear. “*Colombianos?*”

The bartender nodded. “*They moved into the neighborhood a year and a half ago and took over the drug trade. The man over there had been in charge. They killed his family but let him live.*”

Shit.

I wished I would’ve known that before I’d bought the drugs. Purchasing from a local dealer to protect a cover was one thing. Getting involved with Colombian drug runners was nothing I would have done had I known.

“*They do bad things,*” he continued. “*Even to good people. Your people sent a group to the city two months ago. Everyone told them to stay away, but they insisted on going in.*”

“*My people?*” I frowned. Then it clicked. “Americans?”

He nodded. “*Sí, estadounidenses. La Cruz Roja.*”

It took a moment for the translation to process.

La Cruz Roja. The Red Care.

Fuck me.

I worked to keep the adrenaline from showing on my face. I needed to keep up the American tourist act, and if I sounded too interested in a Red Care group, I’d alert all the wrong people. Fluent Spanish probably wasn’t a good idea, but I’d already started, so switching back to English now would be weird.

“*Do-gooder Red Care,*” I said with an eye roll. “*I hope when they came back, they felt stupid.*”

The bartender shrugged. “*They didn’t come back.*”

My stomach dropped, and it was all I could do to take a sip of my beer like I didn't feel the sudden urge to throw up. *"What happened?"*

"No one knows. We aren't stupid enough to ask."

Shit.

Shit!

I supposed it was possible that the Red Care group he was talking about wasn't Brianne's group, but the odds weren't in my favor. It was also possible that the Red Care group had wised up and left the cartel alone. It wasn't like the neighborhood only had one street in and out...shit, unless it did.

I needed to come up with a plan of how to proceed from here. I needed confirmation that this was the group I was looking for, as well as confirmation that Brianne had still been with them when they'd gone into the cartel's neighborhood. I refused to leave anyone to the Colombians' mercy, but Brianne was my top priority, even more than Taylor MacIntosh, despite his government connections.

The last thing I wanted was to get Tess involved in this, but I needed stuff from my room, and I wasn't sure if I could get in and out without her seeing me. Besides, Brianne was her sister. Tess deserved to know what I'd discovered.

And she deserved to hear it from me that I was going after the group alone.

I sighed and pulled out my wallet. It was time to pay my bill and face the music.

The entire way back to the hotel, I tried to think of the best way to approach the situation. Once, I would've known exactly what to say and do. There'd been a point, right before she'd left, where I'd sometimes felt like I'd known her better than I'd known myself.

Now, I realized what a joke that was because it hadn't been until I kissed her that I even believed she cared about me the same way I did about her. But I'd been wrong about that too. If she'd really known me the way I thought she did, she never would've believed I'd do anything to hurt her.

A little voice in the back of my mind told me I was being unreasonable, that Tess had only been fifteen and her emotions had been in shambles that night. She'd seen her mother hit, gotten her first kiss, then was told by her sister they had to leave DC immediately.

What I kept coming back to, was the fact that after things had settled

down, Tess should have figured it out. Once she took what she knew about me, about Brianne, and looked at it with a calm, clear head, she should have known the truth.

By the time I reached the hotel, I'd steeled myself for the conversation Tess and I were about to have. The one where I told her in no uncertain terms that my FBI training trumped her journalist skills when it came to a Colombian drug cartel. She would be staying in the hotel, or at least in the area, until I came back with more information. I'd keep her informed, but she would in no way be accompanying me anywhere near that situation.

I went to her room first, thinking I could accomplish two things at once by having her come into my room while I gathered a few things and explained what was going on. I knocked and waited, but she didn't come to the door. I knocked again, louder this time. Maybe she'd gone swimming or shopping or was in the shower. When she didn't answer the second time, I called her name, assuming, if nothing else, she'd be pissed enough at me to open the door.

After another minute, I was convinced she wasn't in her room. It was mid-afternoon, so that wasn't surprising. The weather was gorgeous, and this neighborhood wasn't bad. There were plenty of places she could have gone and been completely safe. Or, at least as safe as she would have been back home. She might not even be away from the hotel. If I went down to the courtyard, I'd probably see her next to the pool, tanning or doing laps in the cool water. Hell, she could have been down there flirting with the pool boy for all I knew.

I ignored the stab of jealousy that thought elicited and reminded myself that Tess was an adult who had no obligation to tell me where she was or what she was doing. She was free to swim and flirt and even have sex if she wanted.

I clenched my fist hard enough to make my knuckles pop.

No, I wasn't going to waste my time looking for her. She was thirty-one years old, for fuck's sake, and she lived on her own in New York City. She'd survived the last sixteen years without me looking out for her. She'd survive vacation in San Jose. Maybe she'd write that travel piece she'd tried to use as her cover.

I needed to stop thinking about her.

I had a lead I needed to follow up on as soon as possible, and my focus had to be on that.

It took more self-control than I liked to pull my thoughts away from Tess and onto the list of things I'd need for recon. I was beginning to wish I'd never agreed to do this fucking job. If people's lives weren't on the line – and my gut told me, they were – I would've called Ray and told him to get the embassy involved.

Since that wasn't an option – or at least not one where I wouldn't feel like a total bastard – I had work to do.

Twenty

Tess

Watching, The Black Cat from the outside had been a great idea, and not just because it'd been mine. I'd originally taken up a post at a questionable-looking café across from the bar simply because I hadn't wanted to risk running into Clay there.

The weather was nice enough that I was able to take a table outside, which gave me a better view of the bar's entrance, even if the smell was worse. I drank my awful coffee as slowly as possible, in part because I *really* didn't want to have to choke down another one, but also because if I went back inside, I might miss something important.

As the sun passed overhead, I found my attention wanting to wander. I'd never had to do a stakeout before this trip, and without Clay here to talk to, I was getting bored. I didn't consider myself an impatient person, but I'd never liked not doing anything, and no matter how important I knew it was to keep an eye out for the man with the birthmark, it still didn't make me feel productive.

I took out the small notebook I carried with me pretty much everywhere and started to make notes. There really wasn't a method to it, nothing I was specifically trying to remember, but I did this often when I was stuck waiting somewhere.

I observed the things around me, recorded them. Sometimes my notes even sparked a thought or a question, led me to something I wanted to investigate further. I doubted anything like that would come from these notes, but they'd keep me from going crazy.

I'd jotted down a few generalities about my environment when a familiar figure came out the front door.

Clay.

I shifted in my seat, forcing myself to keep the motion natural. It'd ruin the entire point of me sitting out here if he saw me now. I waited a couple minutes, more than long enough for Clay to get away from the bar, then turned myself back toward it. My gut wanted me to go after him, see where

he was going, what he was doing, but I wasn't here for him. I was here for my sister.

Twenty minutes later, I was glad that I'd stayed. A tall, thin man with a raspberry-colored mark from his temple down to the middle of his left cheek strolled down the sidewalk and into the bar.

I was half-way to my feet before I realized that if I followed him into the bar, I wouldn't be able to follow him out again, not without rousing suspicion. What he did in there wasn't important. I supposed there was always a possibility that I'd overhear something that might lead me to Brianne, but I suspected that wasn't what our anonymous friend had meant when he – or she – had sent us to find that man. We'd been told to follow the man with the birthmark, and that was what I intended to do.

It took him half an hour to come back out, but I was there, waiting. I'd never followed anyone before, but it was surprisingly easy to play the entitled tourist, walking wherever I wanted, ignoring people who tried to talk to me, pretending I didn't speak the language.

I took on a slow, ambling sort of stroll, like I didn't have a destination in mind. The sidewalks weren't crowded, and that helped me keep an eye on my quarry as I paused every so often to keep my cover.

We walked for at least fifteen minutes, passing two more bars that the man ignored. It left me wondering what was so special about The Black Cat that he'd go farther than he had to for a drink. He hadn't been in there long enough to get more than a couple drinks, even if he'd been going through them fast. Judging by the way the guy was walking, I didn't think he'd had very much, though he could just be a guy who could hold his liquor really well.

I didn't realize how bad the neighborhood had gotten until a barking dog startled me, and I looked up to find the snarling creature behind a chain-link fence riddled with signs reading *cuidado con el perro*. Beware of dog. The dog wasn't what made me realize I might've taken on too much. The inch-thick bars on the windows and door of the house the dog was guarding did that for me.

I looked around, trying not to show how startled I was by my change of surroundings. The shops and bars had given way to houses at some point, but these houses didn't look like the ones around the hotel. I'd lived in New York long enough that I knew the signs of a neighborhood I didn't want to be in when the sun went down. This was one of them.

I clutched my purse a little more tightly, but I didn't turn around. The woman I was portraying wouldn't have admitted that she'd made a mistake. She'd pretend this was exactly where she intended to be.

Fortunately, I didn't have to spend much time wondering how long this would hold up. The guy I was following turned to the right, stopping at a gate to punch a code into an electronic pad. Before I could think too much about why a place in this neighborhood would have an expensive security system, movement across the street caught my eye.

The man's back was to me, but I didn't need to see his face to know it was Clay.

Shit.

I took a step back, my mind racing to recall a place I could hide, but it was already too late. His head turned, and I knew the moment he'd seen me. His eyes widened, then narrowed. For a moment, I thought he'd ignore me and then yell at me later, and I was fine with that. I glared at him, silently warning him to stay where he was. Instead, he stalked toward me, not even bothering to disguise where he was going or how pissed he was. I supposed it went along with the 'couple' lie we'd had at the bar yesterday, but I doubted that was his reasoning.

His words came rushing back to me, the brusque note he'd left hitting me again. By the time he was close enough for that familiar scent to wash over me, I was prepared.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he hissed as he towered over me. "I specifically told you to stay away."

I raised an eyebrow and put my hands on my hips. "I must have missed the part where you had any authority to tell me to do anything."

He gritted his teeth. "I'm an FBI agent."

"In a foreign country on an illegal and unsanctioned op," I reminded him.

"This isn't some story where you have the Constitution and police and your family to protect you." He took another step forward, our bodies nearly touching. "I'm the only one here to protect you, and I can't do that if you don't listen to me."

"I don't need your protection," I snapped, resisting the urge to poke him just to make my point. "I'm an adult. And not some fresh from college coed who doesn't know the way the world really works. I've taken care of myself for more than a decade."

He scoffed, cutting off whatever I'd planned to say next when a rush of

anger drove the other words away.

“Don’t pretend you know anything about my life, Clay.”

He crossed his arms. “I know a lot more than you think. I know that your mom and Brianne protected you from a lot.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yes, they protected me from Darius and some of Mom’s other shit boyfriends. That doesn’t mean I’m naïve, or that you know so much.”

“I know that if they would’ve told you the truth, you never would’ve believed that Brianne and I had sex,” he countered.

“Oh really?” It was my turn to scoff. “What great secret about my family would’ve changed everything?”

His gaze pierced through me, a combination of anger and something else I couldn’t name. Finally, he said, “Brianne’s gay.”

Twenty-One

Tess

No. Fucking. Way.

It wasn't that I had a hard time believing that my sister was gay, or that I had any sort of problem with it. I just didn't want to believe that Clay had known this about Bri for more than sixteen years while I hadn't had a clue.

The pain was worse than when I'd thought they'd slept together. There shouldn't have been any reason for Brianne not to have told me before she'd ever told Clay. It shouldn't have been something she'd felt she needed to protect me from. I'd known plenty of kids in DC who'd been out, and when we'd moved to Arizona, I'd had a couple friends who were gay and bisexual.

Sure, after she lied to me about sleeping with Clay, she probably didn't feel like she could tell me about her sexuality. She would have known that I'd figure out that she'd lied. But why keep the lie up for so long? Why had she let her lie continue to come between us for years rather than admitting the truth?

I should have known.

She should have told me.

Or maybe it was something I should have seen.

Knowing it now, I could see all the little signs that I'd missed, the pieces I hadn't put together despite how obvious they'd been at the time.

I wanted to scream at her, but she wasn't here for me to yell at, which meant everything I was feeling had to be focused elsewhere. Fortunately, I had a perfect target right in front of me.

"Just because she didn't feel comfortable telling me about her sexual orientation doesn't mean everyone's been sheltering me my whole life."

"Come on, Tess," Clay said, a patronizingly asshole expression on his face. "Your mom and sister protected you from your father's abandonment, from the financial problems you had. They never told you no. And that was before you moved to Arizona. I bet things were worse there. They felt guilty for taking you away from DC and your friends. Bri felt guilty for lying."

I poked him in the chest. Hard. "You're a bastard, Clay. If my family has

been lying to me, that's between me and them. It's none of your fucking business. Besides, I've been doing just fine on my own. We're not exactly close." My stomach twisted. "Which I guess you just proved. Bravo."

I made as if to step past him, a move that would've taken me right in front of the gate. When he grabbed my arm, I thought it was because he felt bad about what he'd said, but one look at his face told me he was only concerned with me going off on my own.

"You can't go walking around here alone."

"Fuck you, Clay."

I tried to shake his arm free, but he only tightened his grip.

"I'm serious, Tess. It's not safe here."

"Let me go," I said tightly. "I'm serious."

"I'm not letting you get yourself killed because you're too stubborn to take my advice."

"You don't give advice, Clay. You give orders. I don't work for you, and I'm sure as hell not married to you, not that I'd follow orders from a husband. I didn't come here with you. I came here on my own, and I can do this on my own."

Our voices had been gradually rising, and only then did I notice that we'd begun attracting attention. A handful of people now stood on their porches or in their yards, not even pretending that they weren't watching us arguing.

"We're going back to the hotel, and we'll finish this conversation there," Clay said.

I gave a hard yank, and he let go fast enough that I stumbled. My face burned as our viewers laughed. I wondered how many of them thought I was drunk. That'd be a great story to be a part of: drunk American woman makes scene in San Jose while husband tries to calm her. I could even see how I would've written something like that.

"You really aren't getting the fact that you can't tell me what to do." I put as much venom in my voice as possible, which wasn't hard considering how furious I was in the moment. "Fucking me doesn't give you the right to boss me around. How about you try asking nicely, and I might consider it."

"Dammit, Tess," he growled. "I don't have time for this."

I opened my mouth to tell him that he was the one wasting time and that if he'd just stop being an ass and let the two of us work together, things would be moving along a lot faster, but all that came out was a surprised squeak as he picked me up and put me over his shoulder.

Over his fucking *shoulder* like he was some caveman.

“Put me down!” I just barely kept myself from yelling. We had enough attention right now, but if I started screaming, the people in that secured house were going to come take a look, and I doubted it’d be a good idea for them to know what we looked like.

“Not until we get out of sight,” he said, “and only then if you’re good.”

I seethed as he walked, staying quiet even as I mentally cursed him for treating me like a child. I’d ‘be good’ until we got back to the hotel, and then, all bets were off.

Twenty-Two

Clay

I was surprised when Tess held her tongue as I carried her down the street and flagged a cab. I was shocked when she stayed silent the entire ride back to the hotel. When I closed the door to my room, however, I saw that she'd merely been waiting for some privacy.

"What the fuck?!!"

She shoved me hard, and I took a step backward. When she came toward me again, I put up my hands, palms out as if I could calm her that way. She smacked my hands out of the way and pushed me again, using far more force than I would've expected from someone her size.

"Tess let's talk calmly about this."

My words had the opposite effect than I'd intended.

"Don't you dare talk to me like that, Clay Kurth! You have no right to talk to me like that!"

Her eyes were strangely shiny, and it took me a minute to realize that she was struggling to hold back tears.

Shit.

"I didn't mean to make you cry."

Her entire face transformed into a mask of pure fury, and she grabbed something off the dresser and threw it at me. I managed to duck, and it crashed into the wall behind me. It fell to the ground in two pieces, and I realized it was the television remote. There was another charge on my bill the FBI wouldn't comp. Wonderful.

"I'm not crying, you *asshole!*"

I knew it was a bad idea to point out the tears running down her cheeks as contradicting her statement, so I didn't. I let her rage, waiting for her to calm down enough to have a rational conversation.

"When did you turn into one of *those* men?" She practically spit out the last word as if it left a foul taste in her mouth. "You used to tell off any guy who treated Bri or me with anything less than respect."

I couldn't hold back from defending myself against that accusation. "I

respect you.”

“Bullshit,” she retorted. “You’ve been treating me like a misbehaving child – well, when you’re not fucking me, anyway – and I don’t think either of those things constitutes treating me with respect.”

My jaw dropped, and my mind scrambled to find the words I needed to prove that she was wrong. I couldn’t though, because as much as I hated to admit it, she had valid points. I’d taken her virginity, then left her alone in bed with nothing more than a brief, terse note essentially telling her to stay out of my way while I did the work.

“You’re right,” I said. “I didn’t treat you with the respect I should have.”

She crossed her arms, looking slightly mollified. “Apology accepted.”

I didn’t point out that I hadn’t apologized because it was finally my turn to say my piece.

“I’m trying to protect you.”

As soon as the words came out of my mouth, I knew I should have found a better phrasing.

“*Protect* me?” She barked a harsh laugh, a foreign sound for her. “You just told me how my mom and sister have been sheltering me my whole life and now you expect me to say it’s okay that you’re behaving like a chauvinistic asshole because you want to protect me?”

“I’m not a chauvinist,” I protested. “I know plenty of women who could have handled themselves in that neighborhood.”

Her arms dropped to her sides, hands tightening into fists. “Like your girlfriend Rona?”

“She’s not my girlfriend.”

Tess made a dismissive gesture. “I don’t give a shit if she is or if she isn’t. If you cheated, it’s on you. It’s none of my business. Just like me and what I do aren’t any of your business.”

I couldn’t win. Every word out of my mouth was wrong. I rubbed my hand over my face, exhaustion flooding my body. “I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“No, you don’t, do you?” she said quietly, her shoulders suddenly sagging. “You used to know though. You used to know me, and you think you can talk to me like I’m still that girl. I’m not fifteen anymore.”

“I know that.” I took a step toward her. “I wouldn’t have slept with you last night if I thought of you like a kid.”

Her laugh was brief and bitter, shiny shards of glass that cut at my heart.

“Let’s be honest here, Clay. I think we owe each other that. Last night was about a seventeen-year-old boy and a fifteen-year-old girl who never got a chance to see what the two of them could have been. That’s all.”

“Don’t say that,” I demanded. “Don’t stand here in front of me and act like you didn’t want me as badly as I wanted you.”

“I wanted you,” she said, “because I thought you were the man I’d always imagined that boy would become. You’re not him though. He never would have talked to me like I was some stupid, naïve child who didn’t understand where I was or what I was doing.”

My own temper finally snapped. “You had no idea where you were or what you were doing! Did you see that neighborhood? Couldn’t you tell that wasn’t a place you should have been alone?”

“But it was okay for you to be there alone?”

“Yes!” I paced to the window and back again, not trusting myself to get any closer to her. I never wanted to hurt her, but the urge to shake some sense into her was overwhelming. “I might not have jurisdiction here, but I am an FBI agent. I know how to scout a location. I know what to look for. And I sure as hell know what *not* to do when tracking a member of a Colombian drug cartel!”

The color drained from her face, confirming my suspicion that she hadn’t known as much as she’d thought.

“I didn’t know.”

“Which is why you should have done what I told you to do and stayed the hell away!”

Her head snapped up, a flush flooding her cheeks as anger sparked in her eyes. “Or you could have let me go with you in the first place so that when you found out that information, I would’ve heard it too.”

That was a good point, but not one I cared to acknowledge. We weren’t talking about my choice to leave her behind, but her choice to get in over her head.

“I was assigned this case,” I said. “Which means I’m in charge and what I say goes.”

She rolled her eyes. “You were *unofficially* given this ‘case’ and will get in a lot of trouble if anyone finds out you’re here. Me, I’m just a regular US citizen here to find my sister who was working with a Red Care group that’s gone missing. Even if the local authorities have an issue with me snooping around, I won’t start an international incident.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. “I have the skills needed to find that group and your sister.”

“The same skills that led you to the exact spot I found not too long after you got there? *Me*. By myself. The non-FBI-agent journalist who you’re so worried about fucking everything up, managed to do the same thing as Mr. Big-Shot-Fed.”

She didn’t get it at all, and she needed to. I stalked over to her, backing her into a corner without a word. She glared up at me, telling me without words that she might have her back literally against a wall, but she wasn’t going to submit.

It was that last bit that pushed me over the edge.

I grabbed her arms as I claimed her mouth with bruising force. Her body went stiff for a second, then she leaned into me, pushing her tongue between my lips with the same raw passion that was coursing through my body.

Our discussion was done. For now.

We tore at each other’s clothes without any of the patience or gentleness we’d had last night. Her nails scratched my back as she yanked my shirt over my head, and I hissed but didn’t protest. I welcomed the pain, let it give me permission to rip her shirt to get at her skin. As my hands slid around her ribcage, then up to push her bra over her breasts, she bent her head and took my skin between her teeth.

I groaned as she bit down, sending a pleasant shock of pain through me. I’d never really been into anything rough, not even with Rona who I’d always sensed would have liked me to be more that way, but now I wondered if it wasn’t a matter of preference in my case, but more about the person. As much as I’d enjoyed sex with other women, including Rona, I’d never felt this all-consuming *need* for another person.

Need didn’t even feel like a strong enough word to describe what I had clawing in my stomach as I took her mouth again. I pinched her nipples, opening her mouth with my tongue. Her small hands slipped between us, cupping my erection through my jeans.

“Fuck, Tess,” I growled the words against her lips, my blood rushing south. My cock thickened, stiffened, and she continued to rub me, lightly squeezing until I was panting. I curled my fingers around her wrist. “I want to come in you, not in my pants, babe.”

“You sure know how to sweet talk a girl,” she said, her voice breathless.

“If you think that’s sweet, just wait.” I picked her up, bringing her breasts

to mouth level. I wrapped my lips around her nipple, and she moaned my name, the sound making every part of me go impossibly hard. I worried at the sensitive flesh with my teeth as I walked us over to the bed.

I dropped us both onto the bed, catching myself on my elbows to keep from crushing her. Her legs locked around my waist and I rocked against her, letting friction work for both of us.

“I meant it when I said I want to come in you.” I lowered my head and lightly bit her jaw. “I’d like nothing more than to take you right now, a few quick movements and then buried inside you, skin to skin.”

She whimpered, and I rocked harder against her, giving her a quick, hard kiss. She trembled beneath me, and as I raised my head, her eyes were wide and dark.

“Can you come like this?” I asked her, my voice rough. “Come for me, Tess. Let me see that beautiful face of yours when you orgasm.”

My cock rubbed painfully against my zipper as I ground down on her, but then she shuddered, my name coming out in a gasp. Fuck, she was gorgeous when she came.

By the time she came back to her senses, I had us both naked and my face between her thighs. I’d missed this last night, and I wasn’t about to make that mistake again.

“Clay, what – fuck!”

The musky, salty taste of her burst across my taste buds, and I immediately wanted more. My tongue moved between her soft, silky folds like it had in her mouth a short while ago. Her fingers tightened in my hair as she pulled and pushed, seemingly unable to decide if she wanted me closer or farther away. I simply tightened my grip on her hips and buried my tongue deeper inside her.

My cock throbbed as I pressed it against the bed, wanting relief, but not willing to give up my position just yet. I needed to feel her come again, taste her when she exploded on my face. Only after that happened would I slide inside her. Not skin to skin like I wanted, but I’d still feel her take me in, grip me.

One hand disappeared from my head, and a moment later, I heard a muffled scream. Her back arched and her thighs clamped down on my head. I flicked my tongue against her clit in rapid back-and-forth movements that had her thrashing on the bed, hands smacking against the bedspread as her entire body shook.

When her body finally went limp, I raised my head and looked up the slender line of her. Her skin glistened with sweat, her lips swollen and nipples hard little points. I'd always thought she was beautiful, but when she was like this...I'd never seen anyone like her before.

I kept my eyes on her as I grabbed a condom and rolled it on. It was probably a good thing I wasn't going in bare. I doubted I'd last more than two strokes that way.

"Wow," she said with a laugh. "I never thought it'd feel like *that*."

"What?"

"Oral sex." Her cheeks were flushed, but I didn't think it was from embarrassment. "I didn't think it would feel like that."

"I take that to mean you enjoyed it." I couldn't help but sound a little smug. It wasn't every day I got to introduce a beautiful woman to the pleasures of oral sex.

"You want me to return the favor?" Her smile was suddenly shy. "I don't have any experience, but I'm sure you could teach me."

I was suddenly torn. I wanted to be inside her, but the thought of being the first person in her mouth, teaching her all the ways to use her lips and tongue, seeing how deep she could take me...fuck if it wasn't a real bitch to choose between the two.

"As tempting as that is," I said as I crawled up her body, "I'm not sure I have the stamina for both your mouth and your pussy."

"Then the lesson will have to wait," she said, reaching up to pull my head down for a kiss. As her tongue slid along mine, she made a surprised sound, and I knew she tasted herself. She didn't pull away though.

Without breaking the kiss, I reached down and lifted her hips. With one smooth thrust, I buried myself inside her, and the two of us froze in the moment, our bodies coming together in a way that was different from last night, but still felt perfectly right.

"Clay," she gasped into my mouth. "Move, please."

I took her bottom lip between my teeth, tugging on it as I made careful, deliberate strokes.

"More." Her hips rose to meet mine. "Don't hold back."

I grasped her thigh, holding her in place for a moment. "I don't want to hurt you."

Something flashed across her eyes and then was gone. "You won't."

She was telling the truth. I could see it on her face, feel it in her body. She

wanted me, all of me, and I wanted all of her. And for the next few hours, I'd see that neither one of us held back.

Twenty-Three

Tess

I had bruises on my hips, and every muscle in my body ached, even ones I hadn't realized I possessed. I closed my eyes as I moved under the hot water, letting it work into my sore muscles. Images from last night flashed through my mind rapid-fire, all of them reasons why my entire body felt like I'd been taken apart and put back together.

After I'd asked Clay not to hold back, he'd taken me hard and fast, rocketing me to a climax so explosive that I'd, passed out. That hadn't been the last time we'd fucked either. And that's what it had been for hours. Fucking. And that was exactly what we'd both needed.

When I wiped the steam from the mirror to allow me to finish getting ready, I was surprised at the dark smudges under my eyes and how swollen my lips still were. Some of the swelling had been from rough kisses, but a portion was the result of him showing me how he wanted to use my mouth.

I needed to stop thinking about that. About the taste and weight of him on my tongue. The feel of his hand in my hair, guiding me into taking him deeper. The soft cotton of the sheets against my nipples as he took me from behind.

"Fuck," I whispered, dropping my head forward. I'm not here for Clay. I'm here for Bri. I can have fun with Clay, but that's all it is. Fun.

I took a couple steadying breaths and then finished getting dressed. I'd left Clay's room around midnight, and we hadn't said anything about what we were going to do today. I, however, had already come up with a plan of what I thought should be our next step. I didn't think Clay was going to take off on me again, but I refused be passive about this and just wait and see. If everything Clay had said yesterday about my family was right, I was through going along with things. I was through being passive in my life.

My heartbeat was more rapid than I liked as I walked across the hall and knocked on Clay's door. I didn't want to bring back up everything that we'd been yelling about yesterday, especially not after the night we'd had together, but I needed him to understand that we were going to work this through

together.

I stared as he opened the door, momentarily forgetting that I wasn't supposed to be distracted by washboard abs and sexy bed-head.

"You're up early." He stepped aside to let me come into his room, then shut the door as he rubbed his eyes.

"We need to go back to that house."

Watching him try to clear the sleep from his brain was annoyingly adorable, made even worse by the fact that I couldn't drop my eyes from his face because that just led me to his defined chest and the dark hair I'd felt on my cheek last night when I'd rested my head there. Lower still was even worse now that I knew exactly where that trail of hair led when it disappeared under the waistband of his boxers.

"Say that one more time," he said as he grabbed a pair of jeans from his duffel bag.

We were going to need to do laundry if we were here much longer, I realized. The days had passed a lot more quickly than I'd anticipated.

"The house we both were doing recon on yesterday, we need to go back there." I didn't mention the fact that we hadn't gotten much recon done yesterday. If I could avoid an awkward morning-after conversation, I would.

"How did you find the house?" he asked.

"I followed the guy with the birthmark."

Clay frowned as he put on a shirt, and I tried not to be disappointed at the loss of scenery. He sat down on the edge of the bed and motioned for me to join him. The bed had far too many memories of last night, so I chose to take the chair, but that just gave me a view of him on the bed, which didn't help anything.

"How did you find him?"

The question helped me focus. "He came to The Black Cat not long after you left yesterday."

"I didn't see you there."

I flushed and looked away, grateful that my skin tone hid most of the color. "I was across the street." A moment of awkward silence passed before I continued, "Anyway, he was in there about thirty minutes, and when he came back out, I followed him."

"That doesn't seem like much time for a drink," Clay said. "Why walk all the way to a bar, go in for half an hour, then leave? It takes almost that long to walk from the house to the bar."

“There are also two other bars between the two,” I said. “We walked right past them, and he didn’t even pause.”

“That makes sense,” Clay said, nodding. “I’ll bet it has something to do with the fact that the guy who ran the former dealers in that neighborhood drinks at The Black Cat.”

“Where’d you hear that?” I asked.

“The bartender. He’s the one who told me about the cartel moving in.” Clay paused, and I could tell he was considering whether to tell me something. “He also said that a group of Red Care workers went into that neighborhood around the time Brianne’s group fell off the radar.”

I pressed my hands together and hoped my expression didn’t betray the cold knot that had just settled in my belly. Brianne’s group being missing was bad enough. Thinking that they’d encountered a Colombian drug cartel was a scenario I’d never even considered.

“I worked with the DEA on a couple joint tasks forces a few years back,” Clay said. “Even then, the Colombians were moving into other South American countries to give themselves access to different ports and customs officials.”

“Do you think they...” I swallowed hard. “Do you think the cartel killed them?”

Clay’s expression was grim, but not hopeless. “I think chances are on our side that they’re alive. My guess is that the cartel is biding their time, trying to figure out the best way to use the hostages.”

I really didn’t want to think about all the ways that statement could be taken, but they rushed into my head anyway. Thoughts of human trafficking, sex slaves, drug mules, came one right after the other and I staggered under the weight. Black spots danced in front of my eyes and my lungs burned with the need for oxygen.

Suddenly, Clay was there, kneeling in front of me, one hand on my cheek, the other on my knee.

“Breathe, Tess,” he said calmly. “Close your eyes and listen to my voice.”

I did as he said.

“Slow, deep breaths. You don’t want to hyperventilate. Nice and easy.”

I fell into the soothing rhythm of his voice and let it hypnotize me. Gradually, the iron fist squeezing my lungs eased, and I breathed easier. Clay’s hand had moved to the back of my neck at some point, and his fingers

massaged the tight muscles there. The heat that radiated out from his touch should have made me more tense, not less, but despite everything strained between us, he grounded me.

I straightened and opened my eyes to find him peering anxiously at me. “Better,” I said, managing a small but genuine smile. “Sorry about that.”

“Don’t be.” He stood, then bent and kissed my forehead. “I’m actually surprised it hadn’t happened sooner.”

“Because I’m so sheltered?” The question came out more plaintive than insulted, and I wondered if I’d always known, deep down, the truth that Clay had opened my eyes to.

“No,” he said. “Because you’re a journalist who’s worried about her sister, not someone who’s been trained to handle these sorts of situations.”

A small masochistic part of me wanted to ask if he thought Rona would have had a panic attack, but I didn’t want to know the answer, so I kept my mouth shut.

On that topic anyway.

“I’m still going with you back to that house.”

He sighed. “Believe me, I figured out that nothing’s going to keep you from doing what you want to do.”

Inside the annoyance, I also heard a bit of admiration, maybe even some pride.

“We need a plan,” he said. “And we need to stick with that plan. No improvising without talking to the other person.”

I opened my mouth, but he beat me to it.

“Yes, that goes both ways. I’m more familiar with this sort of operation, which I think makes me the logical choice to lead the recon.” He waited, clearly expecting me to argue with him about it.

“As long as you don’t cut me out or treat me like a child, I’m good with you being in charge.”

He looked pleasantly surprised, and it was on the tip of my tongue to tell him that I wasn’t as difficult as he thought. Better to show him than tell him, I decided. Anyone was able to say the words. Action was what really mattered.

* * *

It was late afternoon, closing in on sundown when we left The Black Cat and headed back to the hotel. We'd been all over the neighborhood, continuing to play up the ignorant and obnoxious tourists, while gathering whatever information we could. Sometimes, we'd drifted away from each other to better talk to someone who probably wouldn't have confided in a couple, but we always came back together, careful to make our interactions look lazy and unplanned. By the time we'd arrived at the bar to compare notes and keep up appearances, Clay had looked as exhausted as I'd felt.

Still, it had been worth it.

"Do you think the authorities here know?"

I'd been waiting for hours to ask the question, but I'd kept it to myself until we were in Clay's room. That wasn't the sort of thing we wanted someone to overhear.

"It's hard to say," he said as he kicked off his shoes. He gave a sigh of relief and sank down in the chair. "There's definitely corruption. The fact that it's a well-known secret that the Colombians have settled in the city and barely any arrests have been made tells me that someone pretty high up is shielding them."

I shook my head, repressing the desire to kick something. I'd just hurt myself, and that wouldn't do anyone any good. "I worked a story on police corruption in New York my first year out of college, and I thought it would change things. Some people got fired, trees were shaken, that sort of thing, but less than a year later and everything I'd helped dismantle was back in place with new people calling the shots."

"It's frustrating," Clay agreed. "I've seen this same cycle in drugs, prostitution, money laundering, organized crime, you name it."

"What's the point then?" I asked as I sat down on the floor and leaned my head back on the foot of the bed. "Why bother?"

"For people like Brianne," he answered simply. "For her and the rest of that group who are suffering simply because they'd wanted to help people. We do what we do to keep others safe for as long as possible."

I let his words sink in. He was right. I'd gotten into journalism because I'd wanted to make a difference. Sometimes that difference was just to entertain, to get readers' minds off all the shit the world had to offer. And sometimes, it was the tough stuff everyone else wanted to sweep under the rug.

"I know we didn't get close enough to see the group for ourselves," Clay

said, breaking the silence, “but I think we have enough confirmation from people to say we know for certain that a group of American Red Care workers are being held hostage by the cartel in that house.”

“I agree.” I rubbed my forehead. “What if it’s not Brianne’s group?”

“Then we stay here to look for her after we get this group out.”

I liked that he’d said *we* like it wasn’t even a consideration that I’d go home without my sister.

But first thing’s first. “How do we get the group out?”

Clay sighed. “If I had a team of agents or even was here on official business, we could take an aggressive stance. Take in a team to neutralize the cartel, hand them over to local authorities, and then send our people home.”

“But we don’t have a team of agents,” I said, looking up at him. “Unless that’s what your plan is, to call in reinforcements. Now that we know what happened, couldn’t you go through official channels?”

“I could,” he said, “but I don’t think that would be a good idea. It would take time to get them here, and it’d be the CIA, not the FBI, which would mean both of us would be out of the actual process.”

I didn’t like the sound of that, but I had to think of what was best for Brianne and the others with her.

“And I could still get in a lot of trouble for looking around here. I mean, I’ll take it if it means getting those people out, but if Brianne’s not one of them, I don’t know how I’ll be able to stay in the country and keep looking.”

Valid point.

“Where does that leave us?” I asked.

“I think we need to find out what the cartel wants and offer it to them in exchange.”

“I thought we didn’t negotiate with terrorists,” I said skeptically.

“The US government doesn’t,” he agreed, “but that’s why there are businesses that specialize in kidnapping for ransom cases. And a lot of those happen in South America, especially Colombia. Their priority is always getting the hostage back. They don’t worry about arrests or evidence or due process.”

“Okay,” I said slowly. “I get where you’re going with this, but there’s a huge difference. We don’t have the resources to hire one of those firms *or* pay a large enough ransom for a group that size. And that’s not even counting if the cartel wants something other than money.”

Instead of agreeing with me or telling me not to argue with him, Clay

smiled. *Smiled.*

“What?”

“Actually, I think I know a couple people who can help out with the ransom part of things.”

Twenty-Four

Clay

“You understand this is all hypothetical, right?” Ray sounded tired even though it was barely evening. “One friend answering another’s questions about a non-existent situation.”

“Yeah, I know,” I said. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, yeah.” He gave a heavy sigh. “Some ass-hat overheard Steven saying how he wanted to be a part of the New York Ballet, and when the ass called my boy a fag, Steven punched him. Kid lost three teeth and needed stitches in both his lip and tongue.”

“Good for Steven,” I said. “Please tell me he didn’t get in trouble for it.”

“He almost did. I spent three hours at the school with Ellie convincing the principal that I’d make his life a living hell if he suspended my kid.”

“What did the principal say to that?” I knew we had things we had to talk about, but I could tell Ray needed to debrief.

Ray gave a coughing laugh. “He said that Steven shouldn’t be so sensitive. That if he was going to be involved in something like ballet, people were going to assume he was gay.”

“Homophobic asshole,” I muttered.

“My thoughts too. But when Steven came in after school let out, he told us that he hadn’t hit the kid because he’d been called gay. Turns out, Steven’s friend Jason just came out as bisexual and was getting hassled a lot. Jason is a scrawny kid, and the guy Steven hit is a linebacker. Steven was just protecting his friend.”

“Please tell me that made the principal see the light.”

“Enough of it anyway,” Ray said. “He said he couldn’t let Steven off with no punishment, but changed it to a Saturday detention, and also punished the kid who’d done the name calling.”

“He was probably worried the story would get out, and he’d have protests at the school.”

“Probably,” Ray agreed. “But that’s not why you called me. You need me to tell you what I think about your plan.”

“My hypothetical plan,” I corrected with a half-grin.

“Right,” he said. “Your *hypothetical* plan.”

He was silent for a minute, but I didn’t rush him. He’d be honest with me, which was why I’d called him first, but he wouldn’t rush into an assessment based on gut reaction. He was a combination of instinct and experience, and that was what made him a top agent, even if he didn’t have the flash of some of the guys higher up.

“As an employee of a government agency, I have to say that the correct course of action would be to involve local authorities,” he began. “As your friend, I can say that I think your best chance to get that group out safely is to pay whatever the cartel asks.”

Some of the tension in me eased. If Ray thought I was heading in the right direction, it was good enough for me.

“Kidnapping is a business with groups like these,” he continued. “If they make a demand and don’t hold up their end of the bargain, people will stop paying. But, the opposite is true. If they don’t get what they want, they’ll kill the hostages to make a point.”

That was what I’d been afraid of. “Have you heard anything about ransom demands for this group? They’ve been with the cartel for more than a month, and from what information I’ve gathered, they’re all still alive.”

“Nothing’s come through the agency,” Ray said. “I’ll check with a couple contacts in the State Department and CIA, see if they’ve been playing it close to the vest.”

“Can you check with Red Care too?” I asked. “I’m going to check with the one here in case the Colombians reached out to them rather than the main headquarters.”

“Good idea.”

“What about using a private citizen rather than trying to get one of those ransom companies involved?” This was the part of my plan where my confidence wasn’t one hundred percent. “I’m not asking him to come here, so he won’t be in physical danger, but am I asking him to take a risk anyway? If these guys know that a rich American paid for the freedom of a group of Red Care workers, will they be more likely to target people he cares about to extort him directly?”

“Possibly,” Ray said. “But Rylan’s the kind of man who considers all angles, so if he agrees, he’ll understand the risks.”

I was going to take Ray’s word on it. He’d known the Archers much

longer than I had.

“If things go sideways, you need to get yourself out. Regroup, call me, and we’ll get the big guns involved, diplomacy be damned.”

I didn’t doubt for a minute that he meant it. This wasn’t a case of a group who’d lost their way. They’d been held hostage for more than a week, and no one back home had done a damn thing. We’d figure out a way to get them home, even if it meant burning bridges and possibly fucking up our careers. Even if I didn’t have a personal stake in this, I would’ve done the same thing.

“Anything else I can help you with?”

“No. Thanks, Ray.”

“No problem, kid.”

I let things in my mind settle before I made the next call. I was nervous enough about what I was about to do. I needed to present things in a professional and succinct manner. I might have considered Rylan a friend, but it was still a new friendship, and one that had been based in part on my relationship with Rona.

True, I had the connection to the Archers through Ray, but I’d done a couple really, idiotic things that had put Rona in danger. Everyone involved had said they forgave me, but this was a huge favor to be asking of someone who’d given me a second chance after a major fuck-up.

I leaned back in my chair as I made the call.

“Hello?”

“Rylan, hey, it’s Clay. Clay Kurth.”

“Hey, Clay.” He sounded surprised but not annoyed, which I took to be a good sign. “I heard you were on vacation.”

“Sort of,” I said. I gave him a quick rundown of the important points and then a minute to process it all.

“Wow,” he said finally. “What can I do to help?”

“I haven’t talked to anyone in the cartel, but these sorts of groups don’t keep people alive without a reason. I think they want money, but I don’t have access to the kind of funds needed to get one person out, let alone a whole group.”

He didn’t even hesitate. “How much do you need?”

“I’m not sure,” I admitted. “My plan is to make contact and offer them something to at least talk to me.”

“Something that will get you out as well as in, I assume.”

“Exactly. If I can convince them that I have the clout needed to get them

what they want, I won't be another potential hostage."

"Unless they find out you're FBI."

"That's a risk I'm willing to take," I said. "I don't know if they'll take the bait, or if they have something different in mind for their ransom, but if it's been this long and they haven't directly contacted anyone from the States, I think I can convince them it's in everyone's best interests to get things tied up."

"Do you think fifty thousand will be enough to get you in and out of the door?"

Relief rushed through me. "That would be great. I don't want to tip my hand about how much I can get them for each person, but too little will make them think it's not worth talking to me."

"I agree," Rylan said. He paused for a moment, then asked, "Have you asked Jalen for help with this too?"

I shook my head, then remembered that Rylan couldn't see me. "No. I didn't want to ask them for anything right now. After all they've been through the last couple months, I want to give them their space."

"If you need more than I can pull together quickly, I'll talk to Jalen."

That was more than I'd anticipated him doing for me. I would've called Jalen if I had to, but it would be a lot easier on everyone if I didn't need to make direct contact.

"Thank you."

"Where do you want me to wire the money?"

* * *

Tess opened the door and motioned for me to come inside. She looked frustrated, and I was glad I had good news to give her.

"I'll have the money to get a meet first thing in the morning," I said without any preamble. "I'll go straight from getting the money to the cartel. Ray agreed with me that giving them something up front will establish me as a reliable source of income. From there, I'll be able to negotiate a price for all the workers. Once I have the number, I'll reach out to my contacts back home and get what we need to pay for everyone to get out."

She stared at me. "You know someone with that sort of money?"

"Two people," I admitted. "But I'm only dealing with the one. If he needs

to reach out to the other, he will. Hopefully, that won't be necessary. Unless the cartel gets way too greedy, Rylan should be able to have enough on hand to pay the whole ransom as soon as I give him a number."

"Rylan?" She frowned, then her eyes lit up. "Rylan Archer? As in the CEO of Archer Enterprises?"

"You know him?" I asked, surprised.

"Not personally, but I cover enough society stories to know who some of the richest men in the country are."

"His wife knows my partner, Ray." I gave her the simplest version. "He's a good man."

Tess gave me a look that said she didn't entirely believe that's all there was, but she didn't pry. Instead, she kept focused on the mission. "What's our next step?"

She wasn't going to like this one bit. "I'm going to reach out to the cartel and give them my offer. Hopefully, between this and tomorrow, I'll be able to get some information about the building and the cartel itself. How many people there are. How many hostages. The type of firepower and security they have in place. That sort of thing."

"I can record the whole thing," she said. "If they're talking to you, I doubt they'll pay much attention to me."

I shook my head. "No. I need you to stay here tonight. Even if they agree to meet, I'm going to put together a secondary rescue plan, and I might need to move around quickly."

"You said we'd do this together." She crossed her arms and glared up at me.

I couldn't tell her how her presence would keep me from concentrating. It bothered me how strongly I felt about keeping her safe, because that annoying voice in the back of my head kept insisting it wasn't just because she was an old friend.

"Brienne will kill me if something happens to you," I said. "If having you there is necessary, I'll do it, but for this part, it'll be fine with just me."

For a moment, I thought she'd argue, but then she shook her head. "Fine, but if you think you're leaving me behind when you actually go in to get them, you're delusional."

I nodded but didn't give her an actual agreement. I'd make that decision when the time came, and it'd be based on what was best for everyone involved, no matter how much I wanted to protect her.

Twenty-Five

Tess

I understood Clay's reasoning for not wanting me to go with him to contact the cartel. This wasn't the sort of thing that could be explained away if things went sideways. Before, we could have played dumb, said we'd accidentally stumbled onto the house, or even carried over the lie about us wanting drugs. What he was doing now was deliberate. There'd be no backpedaling if we had this wrong or if the cartel took offense to the offer.

Which meant, as much as I hadn't liked it, I'd accepted Clay's decision. That wasn't what was bothering me now though. Now, I was worried about Clay. Sure, he'd been involved in dangerous cases before, but he'd always had people covering his back, as well as a weapon and probably some Kevlar. Here, he had none of that, and the cartel would know it.

I hadn't eaten much for dinner, and now my stomach was in a knot too tight to take anything other than water. If I didn't find something to do, I'd soon start climbing the walls.

I paced from the window to the desk and back again. The internet here was surprisingly good, which meant I could contact work and see how things were going. If I still had a job, that was. I'd had plenty of vacation time, but if my absence showed my boss that my role was unnecessary, well, I doubted I'd last much longer there.

Unless I found a way to prove that I had what it took to find the sorts of stories that mattered.

I stopped suddenly, an idea popping into my head fully formed.

Red Care workers taken hostage by Colombian drug cartel rescued by FBI agent despite the risk to his own safety.

If things went well, I could write the entire piece up as a hero article, focus on how Clay had heard about people in need and went to help for no other reason than it was right. My boss would probably want me to find a negative angle on Clay's involvement, I knew. US agency overstepping its bounds, that sort of thing, but I could work around it since he wasn't here in an official capacity.

I wasn't sure how Clay would feel about me writing an article about him, but I had a feeling it'd go over better if I could show him a rough idea of what I wanted to do, that I wasn't going to make the FBI out to be the bad guys. With Brianne being in the army, it would be easier to convey a positive bent on US involvement.

My mind raced, thoughts of what I'd write and the information I'd need to gather to get there. My research might take me in different directions eventually, but I had to start somewhere.

Red Care, I decided. That would be the best place to start. I hadn't gone back to the one here since that first day, but we hadn't needed them. I was willing to bet that they wouldn't have been much help anyway. I doubted the group had told their superiors where they'd gone in the first place, and it wasn't like they'd be able to do anything to get their workers home.

I pulled my laptop from my bag and pulled up the contact information for the local Red Care. Surprisingly, they were still open for another half hour, so I placed the call. It took me nearly half that time to get to someone who could answer my questions, but it didn't take long for me to realize that the answers I received weren't the ones I'd expected.

"Miss Gardener."

English. Okay, that would give my brain a bit of a break.

"You understand that we cannot officially comment on the whereabouts of our teams, or the names of those workers."

I waited. If she'd just wanted to give me the same line everyone else had, she could've rattled it off in Spanish and then hung it up. She'd chosen her words as carefully as she'd chosen her language.

"Unofficially, I will tell you that the missing group is made up of twelve individuals. All are American. Six males, six are female."

That was a start. "Will you give me names?"

"I cannot, but I will confirm any names you may have."

I didn't even hesitate. "Brianne Gardener."

I heard the tapping of computer keys and waited with my heart in my throat.

"I do not have a Brianne Gardener listed."

My stomach fell. "Is she with another group?"

Clay had said we wouldn't leave Costa Rica without her, and I believed him, but hearing that she wasn't one of the people he was risking his life to free was a blow. We'd get the person Clay was here to find at least, and then,

once today was done, we'd have to do it all over again. The searching. The planning. The waiting and worrying.

"Just a moment."

The longer it took, the more I had to remind myself not to worry. Whatever happened, Clay and I would find her.

"We have no record of a Brianne Gardener serving with the Red Care division in this country."

That brought me up short. How was that possible? "You mean she left already?" I knew that wasn't what she meant, but I had to clarify.

"No, miss. We have no record at all. Is there another name you would like to confirm?"

Had my mother gotten the country wrong? Was it possible that this whole time, Brianne had been in Puerto Rico or Cambodia or fucking Venezuela? I should have made sure the country was right.

"Yes," I said when I realized the woman was waiting for an answer. "Taylor MacIntosh."

After a few seconds, she answered, "Yes. There is a Taylor MacIntosh on the list."

At least the person Clay was looking for was with the group he was working to free. That didn't help me any, but at least he wouldn't have to choose between finding MacIntosh and helping me find Bri.

I moved on. "Are you able to tell me if anyone else has been asking questions?"

"I have not answered questions myself."

That didn't really help. I grasped for another of the questions I'd planned. I couldn't let Brianne's absence keep me from telling the story that was here.

"What has the organization been doing to locate your missing team, and have you reached out to the Americans to help?"

"When a group works here, we tell them what areas to avoid as we would not be able to guarantee their safety." The halting way she spoke told me that this was why she'd wanted to talk to me. "We are told that should a team venture into unsafe areas and not return, we are to deny that they are missing and advise anyone who asked questions that we are not able to give out information."

"Told by who?"

"It comes down through the organization, but I do not know who the top person is who gives the order."

Dammit.

“How many other teams have you had go missing like this?” My fear for my sister was quickly morphing into anger. “How long has this been going on?”

“I can only tell you that within San Jose, we have had three similar situations in the past two years.”

Shit.

This was a bigger story than I'd originally thought.

“I must go now,” she said. “Please do not tell anyone where you heard any of this.”

“I won't,” I said absently. My mind was already thinking ahead to what I needed to find next. I barely noticed ending the call.

The information that had brought me down here had been inaccurate, but that didn't mean that Clay's intel had been bad. He'd technically gotten the 'assignment' from his partner at the FBI, but he hadn't gotten a specific name, and he hadn't asked for one either.

Was it possible that the whole story of us being sent to find someone's significant other was a smokescreen for what Clay had really been sent here to do? Did someone in the FBI or perhaps another part of the government know what was going on here? Had he been sent to find one of the missing groups as proof?

I needed to know who Clay's partner had really been talking to.

Twenty-Six

Clay

I picked up the money Rylan had wired to me, and the look on the man's face as he put it all in a bag told me this wasn't the first time he'd handled cash this way. I just hoped that he cared enough about his reputation that he wasn't going to do anything stupid like send some goons after the clueless American. I needed this to go smoothly.

When I arrived back at the hotel, Tess was waiting outside my door, the impatient way she was tapping her foot telling me that she'd been out here longer than she liked. I needed to cut this off before it got started.

"I wasn't leaving you behind," I said as I opened the door. "I just went to get the money Rylan sent."

"Bri's not there."

I stopped only a few feet into the room and put the bag of money on the floor. "What are you talking about?"

Tess came inside and closed the door behind her. "I got ahold of someone at the Red Care here."

"Okay?"

"She said there was no one named Brianne Gardener in that group. Six men, six women, all American, but no Brianne."

"The number's good to know," I said. "It doesn't mean that she's right about Brianne though. Your mom said your sister was here."

"I think the woman with the database is more reliable than my mother."

She had a point. I might've only been a teenager the last time I'd seen Mrs. Gardener, but I remembered enough to know that Tess's assessment of her mother's reliability was accurate. "Did the lady with the database know where Brianne is?"

Tess shook her head, cupping her elbows as she crossed her arms. "She says no one with that name has worked for Red Care in the whole country."

"You think your mom told you the wrong country?"

Tess shrugged. "Possibly."

"We'll find her," I promised, going over to her to put my hand on her

arm.

“I know,” she said, leaning toward me. “I did confirm that Taylor MacIntosh was part of the group.”

“That’s great,” I said, sending a smile her way. “Once I can let Ray know that MacIntosh is safe, we can pick up looking for Brienne again.”

I picked up the bag and set it on my dresser. Before I could begin counting the money, however, she spoke again.

“That’s not all I found out last night. How much do you know about why your partner sent you here?”

“Just what Ray told me,” I said, “but I trust him completely.”

She licked her lips, clearly anxious. “Are you sure you should?”

I gave her an incredulous look, then turned my attention back to the stacks of cash in front of me. She’d never met Ray, so I had to cut her some slack on the mistrust. Especially since she’d recently learned that her sister and mother hadn’t exactly been honest with her.

“Did you know that he took two trips from Denver to DC in the past week?”

I shook my head, only half-listening to what she was saying. “FBI agents travel.”

“You’re telling me that you don’t think it’s at all suspicious?” she asked. “Your partner asks you to do him a favor for the sister-in-law of the Secretary of State, who happens to be your partner’s ex-wife’s second cousin, even though he knows that you could lose your job and possibly get arrested. And while you’re doing this job, your partner travels across the country to DC, twice.”

I looked over at her, frowning. Was she seriously implying that Ray was involved in something shady? Anger sparked inside me. “Maybe he wanted to give the Secretary an update in person. Try to avoid someone overhearing him and selling the story to some journalist who cares more about making a name than finding the truth.”

Her eyes narrowed, and I felt a little flash of guilt, but I pushed it down and met her gaze with a steady one of my own.

“That’s not what I’m doing,” she said quietly. “I want the truth. Are you sure you do?”

“Why are you here?” I asked.

“What?” She looked startled, thrown off balance by the question. “You know why. To find my sister.”

“Even if Brianne’s not with this group, do you agree with me that those people need help?”

“Of course.”

“Then can we put aside everything that isn’t directly linked with what I have to do tonight? When we get MacIntosh back, then you can see if your theories still hold up.” I didn’t mean to sound flippant or dismissive, but I was only one person. I couldn’t do it all on my own. I needed her to understand. “I’m an investigator, so I get wanting to put all the pieces together, but we’re not here to solve a crime.”

The mutinous expression on Tess’s face was so familiar that it almost made me laugh. She’d gotten like that as a kid whenever someone told her she couldn’t do something that she wanted to do.

“Look, Tess, I get it. You want the truth. And I can’t say that I know one hundred percent that Ray’s on the level. I’m a profiler. I know that there are people who’ve done horrible things, and their loved ones had no idea. But, I also like to think I’m a good judge of character, and while I think Ray might bend the rules, I don’t think he’s corrupted.”

After a minute, she sighed. “All right. I’ll hold off on doing any more investigating until we have the group safe.”

We. Right.

“The ransom drop-off is simple.” I put the cash back into the bag and pretended it was the reason I wasn’t looking at her. “I go in with the cash. They send out the hostages. We get into the car, and that’s that.”

A shadow fell across my hands, and I didn’t have to look up to know that she was standing right next to me now. My awareness of her seemed to grow with every passing day.

“And what if it doesn’t happen that way?”

“Then we go to Plan B,” I said, keeping my voice even.

“What’s Plan B?”

I hesitated, but then told her the truth. “I’m still working on that.”

“Will we all fit in the rental car?”

Shit.

“No.”

She nodded. “All right, I’ll take care of transportation.”

“I’ve got it handled,” I said. I didn’t, not really, but I wasn’t going to make it her responsibility. Despite all our heated words about her involvement, and as much as I respected her, my gut instinct was still to

protect her.

“I’m saying this once, and after that, you’re going to learn the hard way,” she said. “I’m coming with you. Tonight for the exchange, and then, if necessary for whatever Plan B turns out to be.”

I really wanted to pull rank, tell her she’d sit here, but I already knew how she’d respond.

“You’ll show up on your own if I tell you to stay behind.” It wasn’t a question.

“I will.”

I sighed and nodded. “You win.”

Twenty-Seven

Tess

I really didn't need to take another shower, but here I was.

Clay and I had basically been sitting next to each other for the past few hours, writing down everything we'd observed and remembered, putting together a mental picture as well as a literal drawing of the neighborhood. When Clay had joked about not having the time to build a full-scale model, it'd almost felt like we'd gone back in time and I was trying to tell him and Brianne how to fix their social studies project by taking it from 2D to 3D, and he'd quoted *Back to the Future*.

I'd thought that the more time we spent together, the more he'd end up annoying me, especially since it seemed like every plan he came up with as a backup if the ransom went wrong was a plan where I was barely involved at all. Instead, I'd found myself wanting to move closer to him, to find that space where the two of us had always existed when we were together. A space I hadn't realized was exceedingly rare.

I closed my eyes and raised my face into the spray. The warm drops pelted my face hard enough to sting, but I absorbed the sensation, allowed it to distract me from the other sort of heat that had been steadily growing between my legs. I'd spent thirty-one years of my life not having sex, and it'd never seemed like a big deal. Sure, there'd been times I'd felt the need to relieve a little tension myself, but it'd never been forefront in my mind.

But now that Clay and I were here together, my sex drive had suddenly made an appearance.

Since that first time with him three days ago, I hadn't been able to stop thinking about him. About what we'd done. Then we'd had sex again the other night, and it'd made my appetite grow even more. Even when he pissed me off, I wanted him.

Sleeping with him hadn't been a good idea the previous times we'd done it, and it still wasn't a good idea now, but it didn't stop me from wanting it. I'd tried distance. I'd tried thinking of all the ways I was angry at him.

And now I was taking a shower in the hopes of it cooling the ardor.

Instead, it just made matters worse.

My hands slid over my skin, slick with soap and water. I could take care of things myself. It'd be easy. I knew exactly what I needed to do. I'd done it plenty of times before. Fingers between my folds, finding my clit hard and throbbing. Other hand on my breast, pinching and plucking a nipple until the sensitive skin pebbled. A few hard circles and then a steady back-and-forth motion until I came.

Easy enough, but not what I truly craved.

I wanted bigger hands, stronger ones, fingers a little rougher than mine. I wanted arms around me, holding me up when my knees got too weak. Dammit! I didn't want to get myself off because now I knew how good it felt to have someone else do it.

I heard the door open, and a shiver went through me. I told myself he just needed something, but then the shower curtain slid aside, and I knew the choice was mine. I could let things continue along the way they were going, or I could turn around and tell him that this needed to stop. We needed to focus on tonight, and then on finding my sister. We didn't have time for any of this.

Except I was so wound up, I didn't know how I'd be able to focus.

The moment Clay's hands came down on my shoulders, I knew I wouldn't be able to turn him away.

Energy practically radiated off him, filling our small space with an arousal as thick as the steam that had gathered.

As his hands skimmed over my shoulders and down my arms, he pressed his lips to my skin, setting it on fire. Neither of us said a word as he pressed his front to my back, his cock brushing against the top of the swell of my ass. He wasn't completely hard, but he wasn't soft either, and I rolled my hips, eliciting a rough sound.

His tongue flicked out, as if he was tasting my skin, and I closed my eyes. I didn't want to think anymore. I just wanted to feel. So I did.

Arms. Threading fingers together. Joined hands under my breasts, down to my bellybutton. Guiding, leading, coaxing. Fingers stroking, rubbing, every pass sending a new ripple of pleasure through me. A moan fell from my mouth and was lost in the white noise of the shower.

I pushed back against him, his erection pressing into my spine as I encouraged him without words. I wanted more. More touching. More of him.

He took my earlobe between his teeth, tugging on it even as he slid two

fingers inside me. One was his, the other mine, and the unfamiliar sensation had me squirming, grinding down until his palm was pressed hard against my clit. I cried out, the sound lost again.

His mouth fastened to the side of my neck, sucking and worrying at the skin until I knew he'd marked me, and the knowledge, combined with how our hands worked over all that sensitive skin, pushed me over the edge.

The hands between my legs held me up even as he wrapped his free arm around my waist. Then he was swinging me up into his arms like I weighed nothing. I curled against his chest, shivering as the cool air hit my wet skin. I didn't have the chance to get cold though, because in a few long strides, we were next to his bed and he dropped me onto the sheets.

"Your bed's going to get wet," I protested, my heart racing.

He grinned, his eyes dark. "Only if we're doing something right."

My mouth went dry even as my pussy grew even wetter. Without looking away from me, he snagged a condom that he'd obviously set down before he'd joined me in the shower. He rolled it on, then grabbed my ankles and pulled my legs straight up until my heels rested on his pecs.

As he entered me, he leaned forward, pressing my legs down until the backs of my thighs burned. The position made the head of his cock rub over my g-spot, and I shuddered. I grabbed onto his forearms with a grip that surprised even me, then nodded, knowing he would be able to read on my face what I wanted.

He drew back, paused, slammed forward, driving the air from my lungs. My nails dug into him, and for a moment, I wondered how many of my scratches he'd wear before we went home. Then he was pushing into me with slow, deep thrusts, each one feeling like it was splitting me open and making me whole at the same time.

I didn't think I'd ever felt complete, not since I'd been a child and my family had been together. Even then, I wasn't sure. Maybe it was only how my memory had colored things because I'd naively assumed that life had been better when we'd all been together.

I needed to stop living in the past, trying to find that feeling again, if I'd ever had it in the first place. I'd thought I'd spent my life moving forward. College. Work. Not letting Mom and Brianne pull me back. But I'd been wrong. All of that had only been me chasing something I'd never get.

This was real.

Clay wasn't my future, and our search here wasn't my future, but it was

the present, and that I could handle.

Suddenly, he wrapped his arms around me and pulled me up. Our mouths fused together, tongues tangling as he held me tight. His body moved up into mine with short, jerky movements, the base of his cock rubbing against my clit until the friction was almost painful.

Tears burned my eyes, all the sensation and emotion and tension coming together in a whirlwind of chaos and pleasure that burst out of me with a climax hard enough to make everything go completely and blissfully blank.

Twenty-Eight

Clay

I was walking into an insanely dangerous situation without a weapon and only a petite journalist as backup, and all I could think about was how I'd spent the last few hours wrapped up in her.

Things between us were happening too fast, going too far, but I wasn't sure I had the strength to stop. Not when losing myself in her body was the only thing keeping me sane. Too much could go wrong with this plan, and none of it was anything I could control.

Being with Tess had made things simple for a while, but I knew that once all of this was over, simple would quickly become complicated. It hadn't changed my decision to join her in the shower though, and despite how it affected me now, I couldn't bring myself to be sorry for it.

My phone buzzed against my leg, the alarm I'd set to tell me when it was time to finally put things into motion. The man I'd spoken with, Gerardo, had set the time and place, but I had no doubts that the cartel had been watching me from the moment I'd left them. I'd been tempted to scout the location beforehand anyway but decided that the information Tess could pull up on her laptop would be enough.

I moved to open the door, but before I could open it, Tess reached over and grabbed my hand. My eyes met hers, and she tightened her fingers around mine. She didn't say that she didn't want me to go or to be careful because we both understood that what we were doing was dangerous, but that look told me she felt both of those things.

I leaned over and kissed her cheek, then got out of the van. I mentally shook off everything that wasn't the job and moved forward. I'd done my fair share of field work, but as a profiler, my area of expertise was more brain than brawn. I could handle myself in a fight, but without a weapon, I wasn't as confident in my abilities to handle more than just Gerardo. If he didn't come alone, I was fucked.

Each step I took was deliberate, not showing an ounce of hesitation. I kept a firm grip on the bag that held the rest of the money Rylan had wired

me, shoulders squared as if daring someone to try to take it. The price Gerardo had given me was obscene, even for twelve people, but Rylan hadn't even blinked when I'd told him. I'd known he was wealthy, but the ease with which he'd gathered that much had been mind-boggling.

Evening was quickly fading to night around me and shadows filled in every corner of the abandoned warehouse, giving Gerardo and his companions plenty of places to hide. I'd told Tess to stay in the van where they could see her, but where their access to her would be limited. If something happened to me, she would need to go contact the police, and I had no doubt she was recording everything on her phone to give us some leverage.

Being bold was our best tactic, but Gerardo had numbers on his side. He could afford to hide people throughout the building to make sure I did exactly what they wanted.

I'd arrived ten minutes early, preferring to watch Gerardo arrive rather than giving him that advantage, but I'd barely been there more than a minute or two when I heard a vehicle pull up. I shifted the bag higher onto my shoulder and blew out a breath. I could do this. Give them the money. Take the hostages back to the van. Drive to the hospital Tess had located ahead of time. Make the call to Ray.

It could all be over in a matter of minutes.

Still, I couldn't rush things. I was walking a fine line here.

Gerardo had to feel like he was in control, or at least that his boss was in charge, but not that they had too much of the upper hand. They could easily have discovered that I worked for the FBI, but even if they knew my occupation, they had to believe that I was acting alone, here for someone who meant something to me personally. If they thought I was here on behalf of the US government, or if they thought someone they were holding was important enough to send down a government agent, things would go south quick.

"You have the money?" His English was accented, but clear.

I nodded, my gaze taking in every detail as Gerardo stepped out of the shadows and into the dim light offered by the lone naked bulb fixed above the doorway I'd just entered. He wasn't the man with the birthmark. That guy had answered the door when I'd originally gone to see the cartel, but he'd simply led me to Gerardo, who I assumed was the cartel's normal point of access. The person who deals with things to give the higher-ups plausible deniability. He was tall and solid, with a scar under his right eye and meaty

forearms covered with tattoos.

I didn't really care about any of that. I wasn't here to take down the cartel. I was here to rescue people.

"Put the bag down."

I did, not taking my eyes off him despite the movement I saw out of the corners of my eyes. He hadn't come alone, but that wasn't exactly surprising.

"Any weapons?"

"No," I answered honestly. I probably could have found a gun easily enough but carrying one into the meeting was more dangerous than coming without anything. I didn't want to give them any reason to be aggressive.

"I will check."

I held my arms out, hands loose. Gerardo was thorough, but not overly rough, as he patted down my arms, legs, then around my torso. I'd purposefully worn a t-shirt and shorts to make things easier.

If something went wrong, it wouldn't be because I'd tried to make things difficult for them.

"I will check the money now."

I gritted my teeth to keep from coming up with a smart-ass response. I needed to let them do their thing. It didn't make it any easier to see Gerardo pick up the bag and start walking toward the back of the building. It wasn't until I couldn't see him any more that I finally protested.

"Count it but stay where I can see you." I fought to keep my voice from being too aggressive. "This is an exchange, right? Money for people?"

Before the last word finished coming out of my mouth, two men stepped forward, guns already trained on me. One of the men held the gun sideways with one hand, like he'd learned how to shoot by watching some stereotypical gangster movie, but the other one had a two-hand grip on his gun and a serious expression on his face.

Shit.

"We have money. We give you people." The wanna-be thug sneered at me, light glinting off a silver front tooth.

Another man walked backwards toward me, dragging something behind him.

Two somethings.

Someones.

My throat closed, and my heart thudded painfully as my brain processed the scene in a series of snapshots.

Zip-tied hands.

Khaki shorts and plain t-shirts.

Scraped knees.

Black hoods covered both of their heads, blocking not only their faces but their hair as well.

One was female, the other male, but I couldn't see anything distinguishing about either one.

I took a step forward, but one of the gunmen made a noise that I took to mean *stay the fuck where you are*. I could only hope and pray that Tess would stay where she was until I prepared her for the two bodies.

"You pay for these," thug man said, gesturing at the bodies with his gun. "Boss says you want more, you pay more. Double if you want them alive."

It took all my self-control not to go after them. One, I could've taken, even with the gun, but there were three guys, two with guns, and if I tried anything, I had no doubt that I'd be beaten at the very least, killed more likely. And if I was too badly injured, or worse, I wouldn't be able to protect Tess.

And nothing in this world – not even watching millions of dollars walk off while two bodies lay on the ground in front of me – could make me put Tess at risk.

The other men backed out, leaving me standing in the middle of the warehouse, two bodies in front of me, and Tess in the van outside. Waiting.

And then I heard it. The creak of a door. The shuffle of shoes against concrete.

I turned, my arms going out to catch Tess even as she ran forward. I held her back, knowing that if that woman's body was Brianne's, Tess would be in no condition to leave, and that's exactly what we needed to do. We'd take the bodies, then check them when we were safe.

"Let me go!" She struggled against me, but I held her tight. "Clay! Let me go!"

"We need to get out of here," I said calmly. "We have to take those bodies and get in the van and leave before they decide to come back and take us."

She took a shuddering breath.

"Remember, the woman at Red Care said Brianne wasn't with this group," I reminded Tess.

"But she could've been wrong." Tess's entire body shook. "That body, it

could be...it could be...Clay, it could be her.”

“Tess, sweetheart. Please.” I pressed my lips to her temple. “Don’t think about that. Focus on how we’ll find Brianne after we take care of this, okay? How you’re going to yell at her for making us all worry.”

The laugh sounded more like a sob, but Tess nodded and stopped fighting.

“Now, let’s get out of here.”

Twenty-Nine

Tess

From the moment I'd been told that Brienne wasn't with Red Care, a part of me had hoped that the information was wrong. That someone had made a mistake and that when Clay paid the ransom, Bri would be with the group anyway. But another part of me hadn't wanted to hope that it'd be over, hadn't wanted to face the disappointment when the hope was shattered.

But then I'd walked into that warehouse, and there'd been two bodies on the floor. Not moving. Hoods over their heads. A man and a woman.

In that moment, all my hopes for a mistake swamped me, and the only thought that screamed through my mind was *I killed her*.

I'd wanted her to be here so badly, and for once in my life, the fucking universe had listened – she'd been here, and I'd killed her.

I was barely aware of Clay grabbing me or even of what he was saying. It wasn't until he called me *sweetheart* that the hysteria receded enough for me to think again.

"Now, let's get out of here," Clay said. "You go back to the van, and I'll be right there."

I shook my head. "You can't carry them both."

The thought of touching the body that could be my sister made me sick, but he was right that we needed to leave.

"It's all right." His voice was quiet. "I can take care of it. Go ahead back to the van. Keep an eye out for anyone coming back."

I nodded, hating how relieved I felt that I wouldn't have to touch the bodies. I couldn't stop myself from glancing at them again, but I managed to get my feet moving before I could linger. No matter how calm I was pretending to be, I still had that spark of fear inside me that I'd see something that would make me recognize her.

When I got into the van, more than anything else, I wanted to just put my head down and close my eyes, but Clay had specifically asked me to watch, and I wasn't going to let him down. The back doors to the van opened, and I heard a thump, but I didn't look.

“I’ll be right back.”

I twisted my fingers together in my lap as my gut churned. I’d never considered myself squeamish but knowing that a dead body was stretched out behind me was making my skin crawl. Another dull thump told me the second body was inside, and then Clay was climbing into the driver’s seat.

Neither one of us said anything as he drove us back to the motel. Instead of going into one of the empty spots closer to the entrance, he took us to the farthest corner of the parking lot before parking and turning to me.

“We have a decision to make,” Clay said, his expression serious. “Two, actually. The first is what to do about the bodies.”

I swallowed hard.

“We can call the Red Care office or the US Embassy, let them do the identifications and notifications of both bodies.” He reached across and took my hand. “Or I can take the hood off the woman’s body and make sure it’s not Brianne.”

“I need to do it.” I squeezed his hand, but my voice didn’t shake.

“Tess...”

I shook my head. “It’s not her. My brain knows that, but my heart is still arguing. I need to see.”

He didn’t look happy about it, but he nodded, and I moved into the back of the van with him following close behind. The hand he put on the small of my back bled warmth into my skin, heating the parts of me that were chilled by what I was about to do. Steadied by his presence, I reached down and took the edge of the mask between my finger and thumb.

A slow breath, and then I lifted it with one quick yank.

The moment I caught the gleam of pale hair, everything in me went limp. I closed my eyes and slumped back against Clay. He caught me and held me against his chest, murmuring words I couldn’t register. The words weren’t important though.

It wasn’t Brianne, and that was what mattered. I’d let myself have the moment of relief before we moved on to new shit we had to deal with.

* * *

We’d rented the van with the intention of using it to transport twelve people from the cartel’s house to the Red Care or US Embassy – or the hospital, if

necessary – but we obviously hadn't told the rental place of our plans. If we'd told them about the Colombians' involvement, they most likely wouldn't have let us have it. Having it found in a hotel parking lot with two bodies in the back would definitely piss them off.

After some debate, Clay finally made a call back home and had Ray contact someone from the embassy. The two of us now waited outside the van, each wrapped up in our own thoughts. I didn't know for certain, but I suspected Clay was thinking about the same things I was.

What had happened. Who those two poor souls were. What we were going to do next. If everything we'd done would be for nothing. If the cartel would simply kill the others or wait to see if we'd come up with another ludicrous amount of money.

We'd have to talk about all those things soon, especially if we still planned on helping the rest of the group, but right now, we stayed silent. The noises of the city buzzed around us, amazing me with how similar it sounded to home. With the warm humidity leaving a sheen of moisture on my skin, I could almost close my eyes and pretend it was late spring or early summer in the Big Apple rather than mid-January in Costa Rica.

The moon was already starting its downward journey when a car pulled into the parking lot. As it came closer, I saw that it wasn't a car. It was a hearse. Appropriate, but it still sent a chill down my spine.

Two men got out of the car and came straight over to Clay. The three of them had a quick conversation in Spanish that I probably could've followed if I'd had a mind to, and then the men moved to the back of the van.

I continued to stare straight ahead while the men did their thing. They didn't acknowledge me, and I didn't speak to them, though I wasn't sure if their reticence was because they weren't sure I spoke Spanish or because of the nature of why they were here.

Only after the hearse pulled away did Clay come back to my side. He held out a hand, and I took it, letting him lead me back to the hotel. We went to his room, but I didn't need him to tell me that we weren't there for sex. No matter how much I liked having my hand in his, I knew that his thoughts were as far from sex as mine were.

"I need to go back tonight," Clay said as he sat on the edge of the bed. "This isn't going to stay quiet for long now."

"Can you get more money from Rylan on such short notice?" I asked, taking the seat in the chair. "Will he even give more? That was a lot."

“I’m not going to ask him for it,” Clay said, shaking his head. “Even if I could get it, the cartel will just give us two more bodies, maybe three. I don’t know what made them decide to kill those two people or go back on the exchange, but I don’t think they will honor any arrangement.”

I’d already been thinking it, but hearing Clay say it made it all too real. “What are we going to do then?”

“We?” He raised an eyebrow.

“Do you really want to waste time having this argument again?” I asked. How long would it take for him to see me as someone who could handle things? Someone he could trust at his side?

I shook off the questions and reminded myself that none of it mattered. I wasn’t here to become his partner...in any sense of the word.

“No,” he said quietly. “We is fine. It’ll be easier with two of us.”

I was relieved to hear him say it, but the relief didn’t last long. “What will be easier with two of us?”

He blew out a long breath. “Breaking us in and them out.”

I blew out a long breath too.

I’d been afraid he’d say that.

* * *

The plan was simple. No dramatics. No killing. We’d sneak in, and once we found the rest of the group, we’d sneak them out. It sounded easy anyway. Whether or not the practicality of it would be that way, we had yet to determine.

As I followed Clay through the hole he’d cut in the fence, I resisted the urge to scratch at the knit cap holding my hair. Between that, the long sleeves and pants, I was already sweating, but I’d take being overheated over getting scratched up by the fence or the thorny plants on the other side.

The yard around the house was overgrown, grass, bushes, and weeds giving us surprisingly good coverage as we took a few steps forward. Suddenly, a pair of ratty-looking dogs came around the house, heading straight for us. I stiffened, fighting the urge to run.

Clay had said he could take care of the dogs, and I trusted him. He tossed something at the dogs, and they stopped, their attention caught by whatever it was. I thought it was strange they weren’t barking, but then one turned its

head, and I saw the scars on its neck.

I'd done a story once about some dealers in Queens who'd cut their dogs' vocal cords, so they couldn't scare people away. The dogs hadn't been used as a deterrent but rather a threat. The dealers had wanted the dogs to sneak up and attack without warning. It looked like these assholes had the same idea.

As the dogs continued to eat whatever treats Clay had thrown them, the two of us made our way forward. By the time we reached the house, the moonlight had helped me navigate around a rusted bike chain, a chunk of concrete the size of Clay's fist, a couple plastic bags, and more broken and used needles than I wanted to think about.

Clay crouched near the back wall of the house and brushed aside some grass to reveal a window. A grimy, cracked window, but still a window, and one without bars. I wondered if that was because they'd forgotten the window was even there, or they thought no one would dare break into the house. Because of the dogs, I was guessing the latter.

I watched as Clay pulled a roll of masking tape from his pocket and tore off several long strips. With quick, sure movements, he put the tape on the window, then tapped it with a small hammer that he apparently had in his pocket.

Who the hell had dog treats, masking tape, and a *hammer* in their pocket? Apparently, *he* did.

He set aside the tape and glass, then peered through the new hole. Once he was satisfied with what he saw, he held out a hand to me. Since I was smaller, he would lower me down first, then join me.

We were both wearing gloves, but it didn't stop my heart from skipping a beat when I took his hand. He helped me through the window, then leaned over to lower me down. The adrenaline flooding my system left a sharp taste on the back of my tongue even as it sharpened my senses. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust, and by the time they did, Clay was standing next to me.

The basement appeared to be divided into rooms, and this one was full of junk. Broken tools and buckets and brooms and other things I couldn't quite make out before Clay opened the door. I followed him into the next room and saw that we'd hit a bit of luck.

Ten figures sat against the far wall, all looking back and forth between where Clay and I stood and another door. I couldn't make out their expressions, but I got the impression that they were as shocked by the door we'd come through as they were about the fact that we were there at all.

“We’re here to rescue you.”

The moment the words came out of my mouth, I wished I could take them back. I sounded like an idiot.

“Tess?”

I froze even as one of the figures stood. I couldn’t take the disappointment again. I was hearing things. But Clay was staring too.

I didn’t break free of my paralysis until she was close enough for me to confirm that she was actually Brianne. Then I threw my arms around her and pressed my face into her shoulder, barely registering her sound of pain. All the things that made me angry at her didn’t matter right now. I’d address it later, but at this moment, I was just happy that she was alive.

“What the hell are you doing here?” she hissed in my ear.

“Really?” I asked. “*That’s* your response?”

“Tess,” Clay said softly as he put his hand on my arm.

“Who the hell – Clay? Clay Kurth?” Brianne seemed to give herself a shake, then winced.

“Are you hurt?” I asked, taking a step back. I couldn’t see details, but I could make out enough to see that she was favoring her right arm and there was something dark on the side of her face, something I suspected was blood.

She looked over at Clay without answering my question. “How are we getting out?”

I gritted my teeth but didn’t push the matter. This wasn’t the time or the place. We were working on borrowed time. Clay explained things quickly to my sister as I went to the closest hostage and asked if they were able to walk. There were bruises and cuts, but nothing bad enough to make escape a problem.

“All right, people,” Brianne said as she turned from Clay toward the others. “We’re getting out of here. You’re going to follow these two and do everything they tell you to do.”

“You’re coming with us,” I cut in.

“Of course I am,” she said with a sigh. “I’m bringing up the rear just in case someone comes in before everyone’s out.”

I figuratively bit my tongue and started for the door we’d come through. Apparently, I wasn’t the only one my sister insisted on protecting.

“Follow me.”

Thirty

Tess

I was still on edge when we arrived at the hospital. We'd gotten everyone through the window and across the yard without any issues. Through the hole in the fence and to the van without anyone noticing us. The closest thing to a problem we'd had was that the dogs had wanted to follow Clay. It had all felt too easy, like something was waiting to go wrong just when we'd decided that we were safe. If we could ever really be safe in that place.

Nurses and doctors stared at us when we walked into the hospital together, ten people who looked like they'd been through hell and two people who look like they might've worked in hell. The surprise only lasted a few seconds, however, and then they got to work.

Clay and I hung back, waving off any concern that came our way. I had a couple muscles that would protest tomorrow because they weren't used to moving in certain ways, but no worse than I'd experienced after a hard workout. Other than that, neither Clay nor I had anything wrong with us.

"I'm going to step out and call Ray's Embassy contact to let him know that we got the others out safely."

I nodded to let him know that I heard him, but I couldn't stop looking at Brianne. She'd always worn her hair short, and her eyes were the same aquamarine color, but something was different. It wasn't the cut on her temple or the dirty Red Care t-shirt, or even the way one of her shoulders was not in the right place.

As the nurse started to take Bri back to a room, she glanced back at me, and it clicked.

Brianne wasn't different. *I* was.

I knew that her looking in my direction wasn't to reassure herself that I wasn't going to leave her. She was checking to see if I was okay. She'd been held hostage and injured, but she was acting like I needed her protection. As if I hadn't been part of the team that had rescued her.

Everything Clay had said was right, and I could see it on my sister's face.

"You okay?" Clay asked as he stepped up next to me. His hand cupped

my elbow, guiding me down the hall after Bri.

“Fine,” I said. “Just processing.”

“I think I know what happened,” he said. “I think two Red Care lists got switched somehow. Wherever they think Brianne’s group is, that’s where Taylor MacIntosh’s group is.”

I nodded, barely hearing what he was saying. I really didn’t care about why Brianne was there. Now that I’d found her, I needed to figure out what came next. Well, beyond the obvious. I had to call Mom, but I wanted to wait until after I spoke to Brianne because Mom would want to know when we were coming home. That was the part I wasn’t clear about.

“You won’t believe this,” Clay said. “I called Rylan to let him know what happened with the ransom, and in the middle of me apologizing, he started laughing. Turns out, Jenna put a tracker on a couple of the bills, figuring when we had the hostages safe, she’d use the money to track the cartel and give the information to the authorities.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Wasn’t that a huge risk?”

“Jenna’s good at what she does,” Clay said. “Trust me, she never would’ve put any of us in danger. In the short time I’ve known her, I’ve seen that she cares about saving people first. After that...let’s just say that her methods of justice aren’t always the most legal options. If someone here doesn’t take care of the cartel, she’ll figure out a way to do it from home.”

Normally, the idea of vigilante justice would’ve sent me into full reporter mode, but right now, I was just glad that the people who’d done this wouldn’t get away with it, no matter how many people they paid off.

“Miss Gardener?” The nurse’s English was impeccable. “Your sister would like to see you.” She looked at Clay. “If you are Mr. Kurth, then she would like you to come as well.”

Even though I was a grown woman, I felt like a child as I followed the nurse down the hall. Funny how there were certain people who, no matter how old you became, one word or look from them reduced you to a stammering kid. Brianne had always been that to me, even more than our mom. I supposed it was because Bri had often seemed like the adult more than Mom ever had.

As we followed the nurse, Clay asked, “Will I be able to speak to the others soon?”

“Are any of them family?”

“No. I’m just thinking it’ll be good to get started contacting family

members. I'm sure people back home are worried."

The sideways look the nurse gave him said that she didn't believe him any more than I did. He wanted to know if Taylor MacIntosh was here or if he would need to start from scratch. He had a theory, but he wouldn't act on it until he knew for certain MacIntosh wasn't here.

"Who are you, exactly?" she asked. "A representative of Red Care? From the US Embassy?"

"Just concerned family," I said quickly, grabbing Clay's arm. "We know what it's like, not knowing what's happened to someone we love, and we want to do whatever we can to make sure other families don't suffer."

I felt Clay's surprise but didn't look up at him. I trusted that he'd be able to hide whatever he needed to, and I focused on smiling at the nurse.

"That is kind of you," she said finally. "I am sure that if you return during visiting hours later today, you will be able to speak with the others, and if they have not yet contacted their loved ones, they can provide you with the necessary information at that point."

She stopped in front of a door and motioned with her clipboard. "Normally, you would not be allowed to speak with her outside of visiting hours, but the only way I could convince her to stay for a few hours of observation was to grant an exception. You must be quick though."

"Thank you," I said as I stepped away from Clay to enter the room first.

I wasn't sure what I'd been expecting, but Brianne with her arm in a sling and a bandage on her head wasn't it. Why, I didn't know. I'd known she was hurt. Maybe it was because she'd always been so indestructible in my mind.

"What the hell are you doing here, Tess?"

Her personality clearly hadn't been affected. "Finding you, Bri. Mom's been worried sick."

"Shit," she muttered. "I should've told her I might be off the grid for a while."

"Off the grid?" I echoed. "Brianne, you were being held hostage by a drug cartel. That's not off the grid. That's fucking kidnapped!"

"I'm fine," she said shortly. "Call Mom and tell her I'm fine. I'll give her a call myself when I get out of here."

I waited a few seconds, expecting her to fill in some blanks. When she didn't, I decided that was permission for me to ask questions.

"What happened?"

Brianne picked at the hospital blanket, keeping her gaze on her fingers.

“We went into the neighborhood to help and were grabbed by the local dealers. They held us in that shitty basement until you found us. That’s all there is to it.”

“How did you get hurt?” Clay asked quietly.

Her eyes flicked up to him, then back down again. “I tried to keep them from taking two of the others. Rachel was taken first, and they dislocated my shoulder when I tried to stop them. When they came for Tyler, I went after them again, and they hit me with the butt of a gun.”

Rachel and Tyler. Knowing their names made my stomach churn. I didn’t ask when the two were taken because I didn’t want to know if their deaths had been quick or drawn out.

“Did you know Tyler’s last name?” Clay asked. “And are you sure it was Tyler, not Taylor?”

Brianne shrugged, then winced. “We tried not to talk about personal stuff. It didn’t seem like anyone was listening in, but none of us wanted to put our loved ones at risk by giving the cartel information about us.”

“How did you end up here?” I asked. “I mean, I know you volunteered, but why spend your leave in Costa Rica with Red Care instead of going to see Mom?”

She leveled a knowing look at me. “When was the last time you visited Mom?”

I shook my head. “We’re not talking about me.”

“Now, who’s trying to avoid the subject?”

I held up a hand. “I know what you’re doing, and it’s not going to work. You can’t distract me and hope I won’t figure out what’s going on.”

“Let it go, Tess,” she said softly, the expression on her face oddly vulnerable. “It doesn’t matter.”

I didn’t understand, and I wouldn’t let it go until I did. I couldn’t imagine anything keeping Bri from at least stopping by to see if Mom was okay. It’d been years since Mom had found herself another asshole boyfriend, but I knew Bri and I both were waiting for it to happen again. That was why Brianne checked in with her so often. I’d offered to help, but Brianne had always insisted on doing it herself. That was why it didn’t make any sense for her to—

Oh.

“You came here because of a woman,” I said, the words spilling from my lips.

Brianne's head jerked up, her eyes wide.

"That's why you don't want to tell me anything. You're worried I'll freak out if you admit you're a lesbian."

Her jaw dropped. "What?"

"It's okay, Bri. It doesn't change anything." That was a lie, but now wasn't the time to bring up the whole Clay thing. I'd wait until Brianne was out of the hospital for that.

"I..." She shook her head. "I'm sorry I never told you."

Some of my anger dissipated with the apology. We could work from there.

I put my hand on her uninjured arm. "Don't worry about it. We'll talk later. Right now, you need to rest."

The fact that she didn't argue told me just how exhausted and hurt she was. As she leaned back on the pillows and closed her eyes, I took Clay's arm and led him out of the room. Our part in this was over. Tomorrow – well, later today, actually – we'd see where things stood and decide then what to do next. Right now, it was time for us to go back to our hotel and try to get at least a few hours' sleep.

I just didn't know how I was going to accomplish that when my entire body felt like I'd grabbed a live wire. I'd never be able to relax enough to rest.

Thirty-One

Clay

I kept waiting for my adrenaline rush to wear off and the exhaustion to set in, but as Tess and I rode the elevator to the second floor of our hotel, my nerves were still humming. I glanced at the woman next to me, wondering what was going through her mind, wondering if she was experiencing the same rush of electricity, the same inability to be still.

We walked off the elevator together, pausing in the hallway between our two doors. She looked up at me, expression carefully blank as she waited for me to make a move. We had hours before we could return to the hospital, and during some of that time, we needed to sleep, but if she was as keyed up as I was, that wouldn't be coming any time soon.

All that reasoning went into the choice I was about to make, but there was another influencing factor, one that was stronger than I cared to admit. Once Brianne was released from the hospital, there would be nothing keeping Tess here. I'd offered to help her when I'd thought my reason for being here would be gone after today, but as an FBI agent, that made sense. I couldn't imagine Tess, as a journalist, feeling the necessity or the ability to stay in Costa Rica to help me. Once she left this country, I didn't know if I'd ever see her again. We lived with almost the entire country between us.

This could very well be the last chance I had to be with her, and I couldn't pass that by.

I stretched out my hand to her and held my breath as I waited to see if she'd accept it. Then her fingers touched mine, curling around them as I pulled her to me. I bent my head and brushed my lips across hers.

"Can we stay in the here and now?" she asked as she put a hand on my chest. "No talking about any of what happened or what comes next. Just this between us in this moment."

I nodded, grateful that she'd been the one to say it. I didn't want to ruin this by saying that I didn't know what I wanted to happen between us next. One wrong word and we'd go from sex to arguing, and that wasn't how I wanted to spend what would probably be our last day together.

I opened the door and led her into my room. It wasn't until we'd both taken off our shoes and turned to face each other that I realized the energy between us was different than it had been before. I still wanted her with the same intense desire, but instead of it making me tear off her clothes and take her hard and fast right there, it fueled a need to take things slow. To take my time. To commit each moment to memory.

Her hair was like silk between my fingers as I twisted a curl back over her ear. I couldn't even count the number of times I'd wanted to do this exact thing when we were younger, and I allowed myself the luxury of savoring it. Her lips parted, and I slid my hand around the curve of her skull, holding her in place as I covered her mouth with mine.

She clutched my shirt, pushing herself up on her toes to deepen the kiss. My tongue stroked hers, and I tasted the peppermint she'd eaten at the hospital. I slid my free hand under the back of her shirt, fingers moving over soft skin, and she leaned into me for a moment before her hands flattened against my chest, giving me a slight push.

I stepped back, wondering if I'd crossed some line, but the heated look in her eyes told me that wasn't the case. She put her palms on my stomach, nudging me back until my legs hit the bed, and then her hands dropped to my pants. Our eyes stayed locked as she undid my pants and tugged them down my thighs. My cock was half-hard as she lowered my boxer briefs and it twitched as the tip of one finger ghosted over my sensitive skin.

Pressure on my hips urged me to sit on the bed, and then she was on her knees in front of me. Small hands slid up my thighs, pushing them apart until she could insert herself between them. My pulse raced as she wrapped her fingers around me and then her lips closed over the tip, and I moaned.

She fisted me with firm strokes, her tongue slicking the way, and I watched, fascinated by the look of fierce concentration on her face. I knew she hadn't done this for anyone else, and that, somehow, made me want to watch her as she put that inquisitive journalist mind of hers to work and recalled the things that I'd enjoyed before.

I was only a little bigger than average, but she was so small that her lips stretched wide as she struggled to take as much of me as possible. One hand worked around the base of my shaft, twisting to cover as much surface as possible even though her hand couldn't close. The other hand dropped lower, cupping my balls, rolling them between her dexterous fingers.

The muscles in my stomach jumped as the pressure inside me built,

stoked by the sweet heat of Tess's mouth and the feel of her fingers playing over my skin. My hand went to her head, dug into her hair, torn between pulling her off before I came and pushing her down farther, forcing her to take me deeper.

The choice was taken from me as, without warning, Tess pushed a finger into my ass. My hips jerked up at the sudden intrusion, my muscles tightening even as my cock moved toward the back of her throat. The sensations of all those things pushed me over the edge, and I came with a shout, emptying myself into her mouth as I fell back on the bed.

My brain cleared of every thought, every distraction, leaving me with... bliss. I was dimly aware of the mattress shifting under as someone – Tess, I remembered – climbed onto the bed. She snuggled against my side, and the scent of her skin pulled me back into myself.

I'd never really been a person who thought much about the way things smelled, at least not pleasant smells. The absence of something bad was enough for me. But her scent tugged at me, drew me to her. It was the type of smell that I could imagine myself waking up to in a future beyond this hotel room.

The future.

I couldn't think about that now. After all, I'd promised Tess that we'd exist in the moment.

I rolled onto my side, kicking off my pants so that I was completely naked when I pulled Tess against me. She laughed softly as I pulled her hair off her neck and pressed my mouth to her skin. I peppered her neck and shoulder with kisses even as I removed her clothes, leaving us skin to skin.

My hands moved over her body, letting my palms absorb the heat and sensation of her. She let out a breathy moan as I cupped her breasts, thumbs strumming her nipples as they pebbled into hard little points. Her firm ass pushed back against me, the pressure and friction almost painful on my post-orgasm cock.

I scraped my teeth down her throat, then ran my tongue along the same path. Damn, she tasted as good as she smelled.

I slid my hand down her stomach, fingers moving through thin curls to find that slick space between her legs. She whimpered, and her body jerked against mine, one hand coming back to grab my hip. I rocked against her, resisting the urge to slide inside her like this, feel her clench around me without any barrier between her flesh and mine.

“Just returning the favor, sweetheart,” I whispered in her ear. “Lie back and enjoy.”

My fingers played across her body, strumming pleasure from every nerve until she was a writhing, mewling mess. I traced the shell of her ear with the tip of my tongue, and she shuddered against me. I closed my eyes, summoning up every bit of self-control. My cock was full and aching, already painfully hard despite having come not too long ago, but I was determined to make her climax before I took her.

I pressed the heel of my hand against her clit and stretched my fingers down to slide inside her. The position didn't let me get too deep, but I didn't need to, not to make her come. Short, rough jerks of my hand against her clit had her screaming in no time, but I kept going until she started twisting in my arms, trying to shove my hand away. When I released her, she curled up tight, panting, but when I reached over her, she grabbed my wrist.

“Don't leave,” she said.

I didn't remind her that this was my hotel room, but instead smiled down at her. “Just grabbing a condom.”

She watched as I retrieved one of those square packets, not relaxing again until I was wrapping myself around her again, sliding my latex-sheathed cock inside her with one smooth stroke.

“Ahh...” She let out a low groan as I filled her. “So good.”

“You feel amazing,” I said as I moved in short, slow thrusts. “Touch yourself, Tess. Make yourself come.”

I'd always thought of passion and intensity as something rough and almost violent, an explosive sort of thing that consumed with an insatiable hunger, but this spell we wove between the two of us now, it burned stronger than anything I'd ever felt before. I didn't want to overthink it, make more of it than what I knew it had to be, but as Tess cried out my name, I had to wonder if I was too late. If I'd be able to return to my regular life now that this was all over. If I'd even want to.

Then, white-hot pleasure blew apart every thought and gave me the peace I'd been craving. A peace I'd hold on to for as long as I could, no matter what it cost me.

Thirty-Two

Tess

The jolt from my half-dozing state to full wakefulness was jarring enough to disorient me, and for a few seconds, I didn't remember where I was or why I wasn't in my studio apartment back in Hell's Kitchen. Then I heard my phone ring again and scrambled out of bed. It wasn't until I dug it out of my pocket that I remembered I wasn't alone.

"Hello?" I pitched my voice low as I answered, glancing back at Clay to make sure I hadn't woken him up.

The sex between us was amazing, but the whole 'after' part of things was still awkward, and I really didn't want to deal with that while taking a call too.

"Are you the reporter?"

No accent, at least not one I could get from the question. "I am," I said as I moved to the bathroom. "May I ask who's calling?"

"No names," he said quickly. "I can't have anyone knowing that I'm talking to you."

I closed the door behind me and leaned against the sink. "All right. John Doe is fine. How can I help you?"

"It's how I can help you."

I rolled my eyes. If I'd gotten a big story even half the time some informant gave me a tip that started with that line, I would've won a Pulitzer by now.

"All right, I'll bite. How can you help me?"

"That cartel you stole from isn't just a bunch of thugs. They're in deep with the government. Colombian and Costa Rican. That's why your government sent you to get its people out."

I frowned, straightening. "My government didn't send me."

"I have proof," he said. "But I can't talk about it over the phone. Meet me."

I didn't even hesitate. "Where?"

"The Black Cat. Do you know it?"

Unfortunately. “Yes.” I glanced at the door but couldn’t tell if Clay was still sleeping or not. “When?”

“Can you come now?”

I glanced at the time on my phone and counted out the hours until I could go back to the hospital and get Brianne at four o’clock. If I left right now, I could get to the bar, and then back here in enough time to be at the hospital just when visiting hours started.

“All right,” I said, mentally calculating how long it would take me to find a cab and get through the city at that time of day. “I can be there in a half hour.”

“I’ll be waiting at the table closest to the door.”

And then the call was over. I stayed where I was, my mind racing with all the possibilities. Chances were high that this was just someone trying to extort money from me. He could have heard about the money the cartel had gotten and assumed that I had access to those sorts of funds. That was probably all I’d get out of it. A wasted trip.

But, there was still a small possibility that he knew something important. The fact that he’d claimed the government had sent me brought back up the things I’d learned about Clay’s partner. I might’ve come on behalf of my mom, but Clay’s involvement had come through Ray and his government connections. I’d already been suspicious about Agent Matthews. What I learned from this informant could either confirm that I was on to something or tell me that I was looking in the wrong place.

I needed to get dressed quickly and find a cab. I had no doubt that if I was late, my informant would leave. I just hoped that the bit of cash I had on me would be enough to pay him to talk because there was no way I would ask Clay to reach out to his friend for more money.

In fact, I didn’t intend to involve Clay in this at all. Not when he’d most likely tell me to let it go because it was dangerous and there was no story there anyway.

He was going to be pissed if he found out, but I planned on getting back here before he knew I was gone.

Which meant I needed to get going.

I rushed as quietly as I could and managed to make it to The Black Cat within twenty-five minutes. Just as my informant had said, the place was open. I got a few strange looks from the men already drinking, but no one bothered me as I took a seat at the table closest to the door.

It was only a few minutes later that a new customer slinked in, his skin and hair dirty enough that it took me a moment to realize that he was a pale-skinned blond. His light blue eyes were blood-shot, and his hands shook as he pulled out the chair opposite me. It was all I could do not to gag at the fumes of alcohol coming off him in waves.

“Get me some rum,” he ordered, his fingers twitching against the tabletop.

American. Maybe Canadian. I raised my hand to call over the lone waitress and ordered a rum for the stranger, water for me. Other people could do whatever they wanted, but I wasn’t the sort to do much drinking so early.

“Now that I’m here, can I get your name?” I asked, hoping I looked more nonchalant than I felt. I didn’t want to rush him, but I wasn’t in any mood to stay here longer than necessary, especially since I had to get back to the hotel before Clay woke up. I didn’t want to think about how he’d react if he knew what I was doing.

“I think John Doe works just fine for me.” He drank half of the glass in front of him. “But since you’re interested in names, here’s a name for you: Taylor MacIntosh.”

My spine stiffened and the hand under the table clenched. “If that’s not your name, whose is it?”

“You don’t know?” he asked. “You’ve never heard it before?”

I narrowed my eyes. “I don’t have time for games, *Mr. Doe*. Who is he?”

The corner of the stranger’s mouth tipped up. “Who said MacIntosh was a man?”

Shit. Had Clay said that MacIntosh was a man, or had I just assumed? For that matter, had Clay assumed? It made sense. Taylor was one of those neutral gender names, but since we’d gotten the name as the person being involved with the Secretary of State’s sister-in-law, it was very possible that we could have jumped to the conclusion that MacIntosh was a man based on that.

“Taylor MacIntosh is a woman?”

The stranger shrugged and emptied his glass. “I might have seen a list of the names of the twelve people who were part of the group who got grabbed. Five names that were definitely women. Seven that looked like guys names. Unless there’re girls named Steven, Charles, or Harry, my money’s on Taylor being the sixth woman.”

“You saw a list of the people who’d been kidnapped by the cartel?” I

leaned forward, knowing I sounded too eager, but unable to stop myself. “Do you remember any other names?”

“Maybe.” He gave a pointed look to his empty glass.

I gestured to the waitress who came back over and filled the stranger’s glass again. Before she’d gone more than three or four steps away, another half of a glass of rum was gone.

“Names,” I said.

“Any name in particular you’re looking for?” he asked.

I didn’t want to give him the whole thing. “A woman’s name that starts with a B, maybe?”

He appeared to think for a moment, then shook his head. “Nope. Cathy, Denise, Tara, Lisa, Helen. All broads.”

Damn. Maybe Clay was right. Maybe someone at Red Care had screwed up and switched lists. Once he talked to everyone, we’d know for certain that’s what happened.

But was it possible that there was another explanation?

“You said something about the government,” I reminded him. “Does that have to do with Taylor MacIntosh?”

“I have a friend,” my informant said. “Works for some government fuck. Anyway, he’s there when his boss gets a call saying that there’s some reporter poking around about some missing Red Care group.”

Heat flooded my face. He might not have meant me, but I didn’t know that for sure.

“Isn’t that the sort of thing the government should be interested in?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Not really my thing. Anyway. Friend’s boss hangs up and starts ranting about how there are people keeping an eye on this cartel situation, but one hand doesn’t know what the other’s doing.”

This sounded more like a conspiracy theory than something real, but he’d known MacIntosh’s name. “This doesn’t really give me much,” I said.

He held up his hands, and I cringed at the filth on his palms. “All I know is my friend said his boss was calling some army bitch and then the White House or wherever, trying to clear up what he said was a clusterfuck involving people who were where they weren’t supposed to be.”

People who were where they weren’t supposed to be.

Was he referring to me and Clay...or was there something more going on?

Pieces clicked. A missing name or a missing person. Both. A mistake in a huge organization. A government unwilling to get a little egg on their face to save its citizens.

Shit.

What if *Brianne* was Taylor MacIntosh? What if she was involved in something shady? What if the ransom had never been the point?

And what if rescuing her from the cartel didn't mean she was safe?

Thirty-Three

Tess

“Where is a damn cab when you need one?” I muttered as I paced in front of the bar. It was a Wednesday afternoon, not a Friday night, for fuck’s sake! This wasn’t the best part of the city, but I’d seen cabs around here before. Of course, the moment I needed one, none was around.

I looked at my phone again to check the time, reminding myself all over again that my battery had died at some point during my conversation with John Doe and I’d left my emergency charger back in the States. I’d asked the bartender if I could use the bar’s phone to make a call, but he’d told me that the phone wasn’t working. I’d even picked it up to make sure he was telling the truth, but all that had gotten me was a dirty look and absolutely no help when I’d asked him about calling a cab.

My mind raced, trying to piece together all the new information I’d gotten with the things I’d already known, as well as my own theories, no matter how half-baked. This, I knew, was what made me good at my job.

While I never printed wild speculations, and I always triple-checked my facts before handing in a story, I had the imagination to make impossible connections as well as the tenacity to track down the truth. I didn’t need facts to come up with ideas, and the ideas filling my head ranged from the mundane to the insane.

The problem was, some of those insane ones were becoming saner the longer I considered them.

Like this idea of Brianne being Taylor MacIntosh. Her using an alias was, at first glance, ludicrous. But then, after applying the other fact I knew about MacIntosh – that he / she was involved with the Secretary of State’s sister-in-law – the use of an alias made sense.

Traveling to a foreign country could be extremely dangerous for people close to those in power. If Brianne had wanted to do some volunteer work outside the US with Red Care, using a name that couldn’t be connected to the sister-in-law of a powerful member of the US government was a good idea.

And that was only one possible theory. A romantic angle wasn’t

necessarily the right one. Most of the time, the simplest explanation was the correct one, but that didn't mean the more elaborate, obscure sorts of things didn't happen at all. No matter how many cut-and-dry, one-spouse-killed-the-other murders, there was bound to be a one-armed man at some point.

A cab finally pulled up to the curb, and I barely waited for it to stop before hopping in the backseat. I rattled off the hotel's address, then told the driver that there'd be a fifty percent tip if he could make it there in half the estimated time.

He hit the gas, and we shot forward, the rapid acceleration throwing me back against the seat. I scrambled for the seat belt as the car went around a corner, tipping us up far enough that I was pretty sure we'd been on two wheels for at least a few seconds. A thrill went through me as the driver swerved around slower-moving vehicles and a nervous laugh bubbled up inside me. Wouldn't it be my luck to have survived going to The Black Cat by myself, only to be killed in a car crash?

In the space of a few blinks, everything changed.

The driver looked in his rearview mirror and yelled.

Blink.

Something hit the cab from behind, and my head snapped forward.

Blink.

The front driver's side wheel caught on a metal ramp.

Blink.

We went airborne, flipping upside-down.

Blink.

The roof crumpled with a crunch.

Blink.

Pain.

Blink...darkness.

Thirty-Four

Clay

“All right, Tess, where are you?” I muttered as I paced next to the front door of the hotel.

She’d been gone when I’d woken up, but I’d assumed she’d gone back to her room to get cleaned up before we went to get Brianne from the hospital. Or maybe she’d been giving me some space. Or she’d just wanted to be alone for a bit. There were half a dozen plausible reasons to explain why she’d disappeared on me, most of which I couldn’t really be annoyed at her for.

Not responding to my text and being late, however, was a different story.

We’d been told to come back to the hospital around four o’clock, so Tess could start the discharge paperwork and I could talk to the other victims, but I’d figured we’d probably be so impatient we’d get there early. Except it was nearly a quarter after four and Tess still wasn’t down here.

I looked at my phone again, this time seeing what I hadn’t noticed the previous four times I’d looked. The message I’d sent didn’t show as having been read.

Dammit.

Her phone must have died, and she hadn’t realized it. She was probably sitting up in her room wondering how long I planned on sleeping.

“Excuse me,” I said to the front desk clerk. “I have a bit of a problem.”

It took some convincing before I managed to get him to let me into Tess’s room. Well, convincing and fifty bucks. I was pretty sure he thought I was some pervert looking to steal her panties or something, but I didn’t bother trying to explain myself. Once he saw the two of us leaving together, clearly friendly with each other, he’d know I’d told him the truth.

I waited until he went back down the hall before pushing the door open. I knocked as I stepped inside, calling her name.

No response.

I let the door close behind me and crossed to the bathroom door. It was partially open, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t in the middle of a shower or whatever. Except I didn’t hear water running.

“Tess?” I called again. My stomach sank as I realized I couldn’t hear anyone else in the room. No one moving around, no one responding to my voice.

All the same, I opened the bathroom door to confirm that the room was empty.

A dozen possible scenarios ran through my mind, and I forced myself to go through them one by one to consider how likely each one was.

She wouldn’t have left the country or even checked out of the hotel since her things were here. Not all her things, since I didn’t see her purse, but she’d left her clothes, toiletries, and her laptop here. The laptop was the most convincing proof that she hadn’t left.

She could have gone down to the pool and fallen asleep, but a look down into the courtyard revealed four adults and three children, none of whom I could have mistaken for Tess.

The most logical explanation now was that she’d gone to get Brianne on her own, either because she hadn’t wanted to wake me or because she was trying to keep me at a distance after we’d slept together again. The reason why wasn’t nearly as important as finding her.

I scribbled out a note in case she returned, asking her to text me or just wait here until I came back, and then went back downstairs. The whole way to the hospital, I kept trying to convince myself that nothing was wrong, that I’d show up in Brianne’s room and Tess would be there. Things would be awkward, and she’d be annoyed that I’d come. Maybe Brianne would even realize that something had happened, and everything could come out so that there wasn’t anything hidden.

The problem with that was I didn’t actually believe it. No matter how hard I tried to tell myself how much sense it all made, a little voice in the back of my mind insisted that something was wrong. That this wasn’t one of those times where the easiest explanation was the correct one. Something else was at play here, but I couldn’t quite put my finger on what.

I bypassed the nurses’ station and went straight to Brianne’s room. I opened the door, and for a moment, saw Tess standing by the bed, smiling at her sister. Then I blinked, and it wasn’t Tess. The nurse was about Tess’s build and had dark, curly hair, but that was where the resemblance ended.

“Clay.” Brianne’s eyes slid over me to look beyond, and the confusion on her face confirmed my worst fear. “Where’s Tess?”

“Have you talked to her?” I asked my own question rather than answering

hers. Though, I supposed, that was an answer in itself.

“Not since you guys left here earlier,” Brianne said. Worry creased her face as I muttered a curse. “What’s wrong?”

I ran my hand over my hair, tempted to rip it out to see if it would lessen the agony in my chest. “Tess is missing.”

Thirty-Five

Tess

I floated in the black, alone but not frightened. I was safe here. I felt nothing, thought nothing, knew nothing.

Any time my mind tried to reach for answers, the black stopped it. I didn't mind. It was nice here. The black surrounded me, cradled me. It would protect me from things that could hurt me, and I knew without really understanding *how* I knew it, that there were a lot of things that could hurt me out there. Better to stay where I was safe.

I didn't have a body in that place, at least not what my mind told me was a body. I could stretch my arms, feel the black slipping over my skin like silk. I could turn my head, blink my eyes. If I concentrated hard enough, I could even hear the steady beat of my heart. But here, I wasn't limited to those things. I could turn and flip and dance and climb and fly. All I had to do was want it, and I could do it.

There was no time here in the black, and at first, I liked that. No schedules to keep, no hurrying to get somewhere. I just existed, never moving forward or backward in time.

Every so often, a little tugging at the back of my mind suggested that I was missing something, but I didn't know what that could be. I had everything I needed in the black. Warmth. Safety. Security.

At some point, I became aware that the black was fading, given light, becoming gray. A throbbing pain crept into my consciousness. My body was hurt. I didn't know how or why, and I didn't understand what that meant. The body here in the black was healthy and whole. Why was there pain? Why did I know that my body hurt when nothing hurt in the black?

Gradually, the tranquility of the black bled away, leaving me with jarring fear and pain, the knowledge that something was truly wrong, and nothing I could do would fix it.

I needed to open my eyes. It was the only way I'd learn what had happened and how to fix it. But the thought of even such a small movement terrified me. Once I did it, I wouldn't be safe anymore. I'd have to face the

pain and danger that came with leaving the only haven available to me.

I could bring back the black, but I knew if I did, I'd likely never leave it. The person I'd been, the one who existed outside of here, would cease to exist in any meaningful way. The bad things would go with her, but so would all the good. I'd leave people behind, leave questions unanswered, dreams unfulfilled.

Still, I was tempted.

It would be easier to let it all go, but I'd never been one to shirk away from something just because it was hard. Staying in the black would mean letting down people I cared about, even if I couldn't remember why or who those people were right now.

I came back to myself in fits and starts, catching glimpses of an unfamiliar ceiling, hearing strange sounds, feeling the tug of something in my arm. My body was heavy, weighed down, and it didn't want to obey the commands I sent. I was physically weak, each breath taking more of an effort than I'd remembered.

Finally, I managed to open my eyes and keep them open. I looked around, hoping my brain could make sense of what was around me. A single bulb overhead rather than the fluorescent lights I'd expected. No odors of illness or cleaning supplies. It didn't smell bad, wherever I was, but it didn't smell like a hospital either. I had an IV stand next to me, and my eyes followed the tubing down to my hand where a needle was lodged in my vein.

Where was I?

What had happened to me?

“Estas despierto. Maravilloso.”

I slowly turned my head toward the voice, wondering why it had spoken in Spanish. A young man leaned over me, his handsome face lined with worry.

“¿Cómo te sientes?”

I blinked at him, trying to process the words. I knew Spanish. It took a moment, but I was able to understand that he'd asked how I felt.

“Thirsty,” I croaked, my voice rusty. I swallowed, and the words came more easily this time. *“¿Me puede dar un poco de agua?”*

“American?” he asked.

I nodded, then winced as pain shot up the back of my neck and across my skull.

“Careful. You hit your head.” He held a cup to my lips, and to my

embarrassment, I needed his help to drink.

“Where am I?” I asked.

“My apartment,” he said.

That didn’t help me. “What happened?”

He sat down on the edge of my bed and reached for my hand, stopping just short of touching me. “I found you hurt and have cared for you these past two weeks.”

Two weeks. I’d been unconscious for two weeks.

“What do you remember?” he asked.

I searched my memory, finding black spots where I knew information should have existed. Instead of panicking, I continued looking for the most recent thing I could remember.

“I called my mom to wish her a Merry Christmas,” I said. “After I hung up, there’s nothing. Was I attacked in my home?”

“Where do you live?”

“Hell’s Kitchen,” I said. At his blank look, I clarified, “New York City.”

His eyebrows shot up. “You are not there any longer. You are in San Jose.”

“California?”

He shook his head, his obsidian black eyes locking onto my face. “You are in Costa Rica, and today is the first Sunday in February.”

I stared at him, trying to find something to tell me that he was lying. My gut told me he was being honest, that I’d lost more than a month of time, during which I’d traveled to another country for a reason I didn’t remember.

Shit.

THE END

The New Pleasure series continues in Saving Tess, coming November 23.

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M. S. Parker is a USA Today Bestselling author and the author of over fifty spicy romance series and novels.

Living part-time in Las Vegas, part-time on Maui, she enjoys sitting by the pool with her laptop writing her next spicy romance.

Growing up all she wanted to be was a dancer, actor and author. So far only the latter has come true but M. S. Parker hasn't retired her dancing shoes just yet. She is still waiting for the call to appear on Dancing With The Stars.

When M. S. isn't writing, she can usually be found reading– oops, scratch that! She is always writing.

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