



HELL HATH
NO FURY

PHOENIX RISING

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SKYE JORDAN

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1

*T*ruckee, California

Five years ago

That could not be Jessica Fury's husband. Not the man hanging upside down, fifty feet off the ground over unforgiving asphalt, prepared to perform a midair flip, hoping—*hoping*—to grab that ladder and scale down to safety. Not all in the name of some spontaneous, reckless, madcap training drill. Sure as hell not after he'd just been coaxing her into making a baby with him hours ago.

Only it was. It so was. Goddammit.

The catcalls and laughter from the other members of their hazmat team usually filled her with joy. Tonight, the boisterous encouragement egging her husband on in his latest stunt made her teeth grind.

She stood at the base of a ladder, securing the structure for what should have been Quaid's execution of a simple bailout maneuver during one of their standard team training sessions. But what kept flashing in her mind—over and over, like the repeat of a movie clip—was the love of her life, her brand-freaking-new husband, diving out that fifth-story window headfirst, wrapping his leg in the safety rope instead of avoiding it, and pushing off the rungs of the ladder he should be holding tight, then...letting go.

Just *letting go* fifty feet in the air.

Beads of sweat burst across her forehead. The building spun in her vision against the darkening sky. Jessica swayed and used the ladder to steady herself.

He looked amazing, she couldn't deny that—his strong body evident even

covered in heavy turnouts and silhouetted against the evening sky. That mischievous, full-of-himself grin lit his handsome face. Confidence, courage, and challenge electrified the air around him.

No doubt about it—Quaid Legend was in his element.

“Hey, buddy,” Teague called from where he stood on the other side of the ladder. “Hope your life insurance is paid up. If you don’t die from this stupid stunt, you can bet your ass Jess is gonna kill you when you touch down.”

Another round of laughter erupted through the group, but Teague wasn’t joking.

Quaid’s red helmet gleamed in the early evening sunset. His concerned gaze darted to hers.

“Legend!” Ty Ryder, their captain and hazmat team leader, barked at Quaid from so close beside Jessica, she jumped. “What the *fuck* do you think you’re doing?”

“Cap.” One more crack to her heart and it was going to explode. “Scream at him *after* he’s on the ground. Please.”

Ty’s attention jerked from Quaid’s precarious swaying to Jessica’s face, and damn it, pity crept into his eyes.

The sting of tears pressed across the bridge of her nose, but she would not cry. She would *not*. Damn him for putting her in this position with their team.

Ty approached the building. “Get your ass down here, you sonofabitch. A simple bailout, Legend. What part of that didn’t you understand? You’ve only done it a million fucking times.”

“Well, yeah, Cap,” Quaid said with his typical ease. “That’s why I wanted to work on something new.”

This was classic Quaid—going rogue. Quaid the adventure seeker, the adrenaline junkie. Once upon a time, and not all that long ago, it had been sexy. Exciting. Only occasionally annoying. Now married, with him nudging her toward a family, it was terrifying.

“Goddammit, Quaid,” Jessica whispered.

“It’s what happened with Kellan,” Teague said at Jessica’s side. “He hasn’t been able to shake it.”

Her thoughts turned to their friend, another firefighter, who was still in a coma with severe brain damage. Kellan had recently found himself right where Quaid hung now after being blown out a window at a structure fire, leg wrapped in a safety line. He’d been trapped there when the building collapsed, taking their friend with it.

“I know.” Her heart felt too big for her chest. “But if he wants to practice getting out of a bad situation, he has to plan for it. He needs an air pad out here. He needs to start lower and build up. He needs—”

“He’s been doing this for weeks, Jess. He’s gone higher—”

“*What?*” Her gaze broke from Quaid and cut to Teague. His blue eyes shone bright beneath the brim of his helmet. Bright with guilt.

Teague shrugged.

She followed Teague’s gaze as it shifted back to Quaid and wondered what other risks her husband had been taking without telling her. But she wasn’t going to ask and put Teague in the middle. She didn’t need to put any more pressure on their friends. As it was, she and Quaid were lucky to still be on the team together.

At the base of the tower, Ty stopped yelling at Quaid and started coaching him to safety. Quaid’s grin was back. Mischief sparkled in his velvet-brown eyes again as he prepared to defy gravity like the rebel he was. Rebel to the core. Which was one of the things she loved about him. One of the things that shot heat through her veins and pumped adrenaline straight to her heart. The very damn reason she loved him so much sometimes it hurt to breathe.

But she wasn’t breathing now—as Quaid pushed his body backward for momentum, then swung toward the ladder. Every muscle in her body tensed. She leaned into the metal and held tight. Quaid twisted, then flipped like a gymnast, and righted himself. His gloves slapped steel. His single free boot found traction on a rung. But momentum tugged at the other leg still wound in the rope, and that planted foot slipped.

Jessica sipped another breath. Then Quaid regained his footing. Only when he unwound his other leg from the safety rope—the one he’d turned into a death trap—did she start breathing again.

“I thought he’d grow out of this kind of shit when you two got married,” Teague muttered. “But it’s not lookin’ good.”

Quaid couldn’t even do something as simple as descend a ladder without flash. Instead of climbing down the rungs, he straddled the metal, settled his boots on either side of the vertical supports, and started a stealthy slide toward the ground. He released one side of the ladder and turned to look for her. As soon as his gaze found hers, he smiled. A big, warm, intimate smile just for her. A smile of shared excitement, that said everything from, “Hey, babe, I’m back,” to “Did you see that?” to “You’re not really mad, right?”

And dammit, she didn't want to be mad when he looked at her like that. But she was. Which led to an onslaught of guilt. Followed by a burst of unrestrained anger.

By the time his boots came within a foot of the ground, his smile had vanished, and concern made that cute little V appear between his brows. The one she loved to kiss away. Before he touched down, Jessica headed toward the station's engine bay.

"Jess?" he called. "Hey, Jessie. Wait."

He jogged up beside her, but didn't touch her, didn't try to slow her down or force her to look at him. He knew better.

"Come on, baby," he crooned in a voice that should have been outlawed. Deep and smooth and so damn sexy. "I know, I shouldn't have surprised you like that, but I did good, right?"

She clenched her teeth.

He bent forward, trying to look into her eyes. He'd taken off his helmet and in her peripheral vision, she saw the dirt smudges on his face, his thick black hair mussed. She bit the inside of her cheek to keep a flood of tears from pushing over her lashes.

He never, ever looked better than after he'd been working. The light in his eyes, the excitement on his face, the raw life buzzing over his skin, and that smile... Never was he more pure Quaid Legend, the man she loved heart, body and soul, than after he'd been working.

"Jessie, stop for a second." They passed through the huge bay doors and in one swift move, he darted in front of her, then blocked her every attempt to get by with a simple shift of his body.

"Quaid, knock it off."

Whatever expression she wore shocked him. He jerked his head back as if dodging a punch, and the playful frustration drained, replaced with something dark and far more serious. Something that made Jessica's chest cinch down tighter.

He dropped his helmet. The *thunk* against concrete caught her off guard, and she jumped, frantically searching for the gear as if he'd dropped a child. She'd never seen him drop anything, especially not a piece of equipment.

He slipped his hands beneath her turnout jacket and around her waist, pulling her up against him.

"Hey." He lifted a hand to her face. "What's this? I've never seen you like this."

“Quaid...” She glanced over her shoulder for the rest of the team. “Don’t —”

“Screw them. Look at me. You’re scaring me, Jess.”

“Scaring you? No, scaring you would be more like me deciding to jump out a fifth-story window on the spur of the moment while you were watching.”

Guilt flooded his eyes. “I’m sorry, Jess. I didn’t think—”

She pushed back, breaking his grip, her anger, terror, pain renewed. “You can’t just say you’re sorry and make it all go away. Do you have any idea, *any* idea, how it felt for me to stand there and watch you? *Watch you* roll out the window and *let go* of that ladder?”

“I know. I—”

“No, you don’t know.” Tears spilled over her lashes before she could stop them. “I thought I was going to stand there, helpless, and watch you fall to your death.”

“Oh, shit. Christ, don’t cry. That’s not what I was... I was trying to... With what happened to—”

“Kellan.” She pulled the hem of her shirt up and wiped her face. She hated how he caved when she cried, how he completely lost focus on the argument at hand. How he’d promise her anything just to get her to stop, which would not help in this situation. “I know, but that doesn’t—”

Their pagers went off at the same time, and a stereo of beeps echoed in the bay.

“Shit.” Quaid glanced at the display hooked to his belt and Jessica silenced her unit. “Just a warehouse.”

His turnout jacket fell back into place, and he reached for her again.

She stepped back. “This is serious, Quaid. I need you. I depend on you. You’re—” Her throat closed. “You’re everything to me. *Everything*. If you really want a family, you *cannot* be pulling shit like that. Do you understand?”

“Absolutely.” He nodded, his eyes serious and intent on hers, and so very clear. She knew he meant what he was saying. “Yes.”

The tension inside her shifted from heavy despair to blessed relief. She threw herself into him, knowing he’d catch her. He held tight, pressed his face to her neck, and wiped his damp eyes on her skin.

“I’m sorry, baby,” he murmured at her ear. “I love you so much. I worry all the time, you know? Shit like what happened with Kellan... I just want to

know how to stay safe. How to keep you safe. I want us together forever.”

Footfalls sounded on the concrete, and for the first time since she and Quaid had started dating, she didn't care who saw them together at work.

“I told you she wouldn't stay mad at him longer than ten minutes.” Keira's voice cut into Jessica's moment of relief, which was just as well. She was ready to melt into her husband and let him take over. Let him do whatever he damn well pleased just to see him smile, which was exactly how they'd gotten here.

“You're one to talk, sweetness,” Luke, their teammate and Keira's new boyfriend, teased with a tousle of her hair. “You can't stay mad at me for two.”

“Knock that shit off,” Ty grumbled, passing them on the way toward their hazmat rig. Jessica pulled away from Quaid just before Ty slammed Quaid's helmet against his chest with a glare of steel. “Watch your gear, Legend. And one more epic act of stupidity like that, and I'll kick your ass to Iceland. Load up.”

2

Quaid's ass could have already been in Iceland, despite his close seat alongside Jess in the back of the truck with her fingers curled into his. The look he'd seen on her face earlier still chilled him. It was the same look he saw on Kellan's wife's face whenever a doctor entered Kellan's room in the ICU. And Quaid didn't want to see that look in Jess's eyes again. Ever. His efforts to master that damn drill had been for exactly that purpose—to keep that look *out* of her eyes.

He pulled his hand from hers and sat forward in his seat, leaning elbows on knees. She might think he was everything to her, but she was his goddamned universe. And the road noise and others talking wasn't helping him think. Wasn't helping him figure out where his fucking defect was or how to repair—as Ty had so perfectly put it—his act of epic stupidity.

Jess's fingers combed through his hair, and she leaned into him. Love, rich and warm and sweet, pushed wetness into his eyes. He closed them, pressed his fingers against the lids to ease the sting, and let his mind wind around every possible way he could make this up to her.

They'd been riding twenty minutes, now well into the desolate mountains of the Sierra Nevada, when Ty called attention and started giving information.

“This is a government storage warehouse,” he said, reading from his iPhone, where he stored data on all buildings in the county. “It houses machinery and supplies. We shouldn't run into weapons or biohazard, but we'll have petroleum-based products and cleaning supplies. May have high combustibles burning toxins and, no doubt, our beloved plastics.”

The vehicle slowed and bounced onto a rough road. Quaid grabbed a handlebar above Jessica's head and braced her with his body.

"I'll take the entry team with Teague and Luke," Ty continued. "Keira, Jess, Quaid, and Seth take second in. The hazmat team from Carson City will be there as backup."

Quaid saw an opportunity for redemption. The first step toward taking that look out of Jess's eyes forever. And after Luke and Teague popped the vehicle's doors and the team dropped into the cool night, he went in search of Ty.

The scent of pure mountain pine mixed with smoke. One deep breath and excitement rushed his system. Adrenaline fueled his muscles and pumped his energy. His thoughts sharpened. His reactions quickened. He was high and ready to take on the flames.

But he couldn't do that tonight. He couldn't play that reckless cowboy anymore.

Local firefighters already had their ladder truck positioned alongside the building, their hoses pouring water on fiery tongues popping through a hole in the metal ceiling. Three other engines were positioned near the main door. Firefighters pulled hose from the back of the trucks, the thick tan canvas unfolding like accordions and slithering along the asphalt like snakes. Floodlamps cascaded over the surrounding terrain, providing light. The aspens' flat leaves sparkled gold among the dark towering pines.

Quaid followed Ty to the opposite side of the vehicle and stopped close. "Cap, I'd like to be on the entry team."

Ty yanked open a compartment. "As if."

"I know I fucked up. Give me a chance to fix it."

"If you can't act like a professional in training—"

"Give it a rest, Ty. We've worked together for eight goddamned years. Do you want me to remind you how many times my unorthodox ways have saved your ass?"

Ty shot him a heavy-lidded look around the metal door, but his silence said he was considering. Quaid held his breath, waiting. Hoping. After several seconds, Ty finally said, "Fine, you're on the entry team. But Quaid? I want you to think about how ball-shriveling glacial it is in Iceland right now."

"Yes, sir."

"If you make even half a misstep, you're off this team. You got me?"

Quaid released a breath of relief. “Yes, sir.”

With purpose and a plan, he headed back toward the truck. He found Jess on the far side, unloading gear while studying the fire. He smiled to himself, a little surprised at the new sense of maturity and pride rising inside him.

“Lucky this didn’t spread,” she said, her gaze straying to the tree line as she pulled her yellow hazmat jumpsuit over her shoulders and zipped up. “If it had reached the forest, we could have lost thousands of acres. And look at those aspens. They’re so pretty. God, I love this time of year.” She set her oxygen tank on the ground at her feet. “Where’d you go?”

“To talk to Ty. I’m on the entry team.”

“Quaid, you don’t have to do that.”

But her little smile and the way her eyes softened reinforced his decision. She was proud of him for taking this step in leadership too. Maybe this growing-up-and-flying-right thing wouldn’t be as vanilla as he’d thought. There were definite perks to seeing that soft pride in her eyes. Like the way his heart was somewhere up in the stars right now.

“I want to do it.” He pulled on his own hazard suit, then reached for her breathing apparatus and hoisted the tank off the ground. “Turn around.”

She turned and slipped her arms through the straps. He settled the tank on her back, then spun her around and snapped her fittings closed, double-testing their security before pulling on his own tank.

He took his time getting the rest of his gear together, knowing Jess would wait. The team drifted toward the warehouse, where flames dimmed and smoke billowed through the holes in the roof, signaling a dying fire. As soon as everyone was out of earshot and their backs were turned, he grabbed the collar of Jess’s turnout jacket and gently backed her against the rig.

“What?” she asked, looking up at him, gaze worried. “What’s wrong?”

Lights from all around made her face glow. With her auburn hair pulled into a ponytail, those big, soft brown eyes looked doe-like. He released her jacket and cupped her face with both hands.

“Do you know how much I love you?”

The worry in her eyes eased. “I love you more.”

He brushed his thumbs over the smooth skin of her cheeks and those delicate freckles and stared at her perfect lips before he kissed her. “I know what you need, Jess. You can depend on me.”

“I believe you.” Her lips curved against his, and her arms locked around his neck. “I have an idea for your birthday next week.”

“Yeah?”

“You and me, a weekend away, somewhere isolated where we can spend the entire forty-eight hours doing nothing but”—her grin widened, her eyes sparkled—“making a baby.”

A bubble of joy slid up his chest and burst from his throat in laughter. Those words coming from her mouth were sheer heaven to his heart. Yes, he could do this. He could take that next step toward stability—for her, for him, for *them*. He leaned in and kissed her hard. She opened to him, all sweet and hot. Quaid groaned and lost himself, just for one blissful moment.

“Ready for your boys, Captain Ryder.” The shout to Ty came from a distance and signaled the beginning of a new chapter in Quaid’s career.

Time for their team to get to work. And the sooner they got started, the sooner they could finish, and the sooner he could sneak his bride into a corner or a closet in the station, where they could practice more baby-making. If practice made perfect, their kid was going to be utterly flawless.

Quaid stepped up to the entrance of the warehouse with Teague and Luke at his side and waited for the last hose team to pull out. He spotted Gary Hernandez from Truckee Fire dragging hose. His turnouts were soaked, and the mask of his breathing apparatus had been tugged aside and hung askew.

“Gary,” Quaid called to get his attention. The firefighter looked his way, and Quaid lifted his chin in greeting. “What’ve we got in there?”

Gary walked over to the group. “A pallet of something plastic caught.” He pushed the brim of his helmet up with his thumb, leaving a soot ring on his forehead. “Probably a load of dildos from China.”

Keira stepped forward, making a show of peering into the wall of smoke. “Dildos, huh? You think anything’s salvageable?”

Luke gave the strap of her oxygen tank a playful jerk, sending a ripple of laughter through the group.

“But that’s not why we pulled out.” Gary’s expression turned serious again as he addressed Quaid. “There’s real methel-ethel bad shit in there, dude.”

The all-inclusive slang referring to highly dangerous chemicals made Quaid’s stomach tighten with a mix of excitement and dread. “Methel-ethel” bad shit did not include simple toxins produced by burning plastics or regularly encountered mildly explosive petroleum products. Methel-ethel bad shit was the kind of chemical that ate through skin or blew a body clean apart.

Gary turned, crouched, and pointed beneath the smoke roiling across the ceiling. “See that glow?”

Quaid squinted toward a faint yellow-orange radiance. “Yeah.”

“Metal canisters of something. They’re secured to a concrete wall by thick metal straps and bolts as big as fucking silver dollars, off all by themselves like they’re contagious or something. And whatever’s inside them is as hot as molten lava, ’cause look at them, brother, they’re fucking *glowing*.”

“What do the hazard symbols show?”

“Couldn’t get close enough to see before those plastics went up. Fire’s almost out.” Gary pulled off his gloves and slapped them against the arm of Quaid’s yellow hazmat suit. “Watch your ass in there, my friend. My gut tells me those fancy threads aren’t going to save you.”

Hernandez returned to his company and started cleanup.

“Still want entry team?” Ty’s voice was quiet and right next to Quaid. “You’ve got someone else to think about now.”

He took a breath to ease the sting of fear tripping along his spine. Quaid needed to demonstrate his commitment—for Jessica and Ty and the others. Hell, for himself. He had to prove, with actions, that when he took responsibility for something, he wouldn’t shirk it at the first sign of trouble. He was in this—firefighting and his marriage—for the long haul. He was in this till death did they part.

Quaid met Ty’s eyes. “I *am* thinking about her. *She* is why I still want entry team.”

Ty held his gaze for a long moment, then stepped back. “Luke, Teague,” he called, “Quaid’s your lead. Go.”

When Ty huddled with the others, Teague grinned at Quaid. “All right, hotshot. Let’s mop up your mess.”

The three secured their Plexiglas face shields. When Quaid turned to shoot Jess a wink, Ty tossed him a thermal-imaging camera. He caught it against his chest. Instead of throwing it back at Ty, as he had in the past, Quaid gritted his teeth and held on to it.

He’d always bitched about TICs being pieces of shit, but the truth was he wanted to seek out the source of a fire on his own, with eyes and ears and *instinct*. He had built killer instincts over the years, and he got a thrill out of using them. He didn’t want a piece of machinery stealing all his fun.

Only, he was in this for more than fun now.

He walked into the muck with his Maglite in one hand and the TIC in the other. He turned on the device, and despite his fear of losing his edge, no monster threatened to steal Quaid's fun. Adrenaline still trilled through his body. Excitement to nail those wicked chemicals still lightened his head.

Jess never failed to lead him in the right direction in life. God, he loved that woman. He'd follow her to the ends of the earth.

Thick smoke immediately smothered his vision. Even though he knew exactly where the threat lay, he had to force himself to think by the book and follow the rules. The impulsive Quaid would head straight for those glowing tanks, do not pass go, do not collect two-hundred dollars. But the responsible Quaid made the requisite methodical sweeps of the area for suspicious contents.

Teague and Luke flanked him twenty feet back on either side. The thermal detector was used to identify hot spots and possible trouble within the smoke, but as Quaid suspected, the TIC was useless to him here. He already knew where the trouble lay. Today, the TIC only caused Quaid to waste valuable time.

When he reached the tanks, Quaid almost believed they were alive. Their glow had intensified from yellow-orange to vibrant vermilion. Looking directly at them threatened to sear his retinas. In what had to be an effect of the extreme heat, their metal encasings appeared liquid, rippling like the disturbed surface of a lake. Quaid swore the damn things were breathing, expanding and contracting in a slow, steady rhythm.

"What the fuck?" Luke's voice was little more than a husky whisper in Quaid's earpiece.

"This is way beyond us," Teague said. "Let's get the numbers off the hazard symbol and get out."

"I'll get them." Quaid gestured for them to stop. "Stay here."

Excitement escalated to fear. He gave his TIC to Luke and used his hand to shield his face from the glare. Their suits were designed to protect them at extreme temperatures, but Quaid could swear his skin was roasting right through the material as he neared.

His fear escalated to alarm. A huge part of him wanted to call it off. To back out without the information. But he couldn't take one more failure tonight. Not in Jess's eyes. Not in the team's eyes. Not in his own eyes.

He crouched to the level of the diamond symbol showing a number at each of the four corners, indicating the chemical's characteristics. Once

outside, he could compile those numbers with an index of chemicals and figure out what they were dealing with. Then if they needed to call in the big guns, they could do it without looking like total fuckups.

Inching forward, he thrust the flashlight as close to the sign as he could, peering through the illuminated smoke and against the glare, but still, the numbers shimmered in and out of sight. In his hand, the Maglite's black housing changed shape. At first, he thought it was the rippling heat waves altering the atmosphere—until the casing slid over his gloved hand and the flashlight shorted out. Then he realized the damn thing had melted right off its metal frame.

A sharp crackle brought Quaid's gaze back to the diamond-shaped sign. To the tank beneath the sign. To a dark, linear crack sliding along the canister from the floor upward.

Oh, fuck.

Terror struck like lightning. He pivoted and launched himself into a sprint. Opened his mouth to yell *run*, but didn't have time. He wrapped an arm around each of his teammates' necks and dragged them toward the ground.

Before they made it down, the blast hit.

Heat slammed Quaid's back. Pain, ripping and raw, consumed him. They hit the cement. Bounced. Broke apart. Hit a pallet of boxes. Ricocheted in all directions.

Then it was over. The blast dead. The fire gone.

Quaid knew nothing but pain. Engulfing, snarling, ferocious pain.

His eyes were open, but he didn't know how. He should be dead. But he could see Teague and Luke lying nearby, unmoving, hazmat suits burned and torn. Bodies black and twisted.

Voices bled through the deafening ring in Quaid's ears. Not the words, but the terror, the anger, the shouted orders.

His fear flooded back. *No. Don't come in here.*

His mind circled around that second tank. Fear turned to terror. He put all his concentration into moving his mouth.

"N... No." Shit, pathetic. He focused his thoughts to Jess. To saving Jess. Gathered energy and tried again. "Don' come in...'nother tank..."

Shit, did his headset even work?

He fought to move some part of his body. Got a few fingers to wiggle. Then a few toes. The cement rumbled under his cheek—the clomp of boots.

No.

He forced himself to lift his head, as heavy as an oxygen tank, as dizzy as a tornado. Just as he recognized Jess's silhouette headed straight for him and the team fanning out toward Luke and Teague, a familiar *crackle-fizz* penetrated Quaid's fuzzy brain.

"No. Get...out."

He tried to push himself up, but his arms wouldn't work. Another *crackle-crackle-crackle* sounded. An angrier, heavier *fizzzzzz*. Panic rushed his chest. *Jess.*

He pulled one knee under his body with strength born of sheer terror. The move knifed pain through his leg and hip. Jess crouched before him, and time slowed. He watched her beautiful mouth form his name, her tortured expression peer at him through the Plexiglas facemask.

Love you, Jessie. Love you so much.

He pushed with every ounce of power in his damaged legs and thrust himself at her. He knocked her over and covered her body with his. Absorbed the feeling—the very last time he'd touch her, he knew.

She grabbed his arms. Called his name. The blast came a second later. Ripped him away and speared him across the warehouse with the speed of a rocket. But his mind kicked into a time warp, slowing the seconds, drawing everything around him into something from a slow-motion, action-movie sequence.

Including the sound of his voice screaming Jessie's name, until he slammed into a concrete wall and felt his body shatter like sheet glass.

3

*P*resent day

Washington, DC

Jessica Fury paced the length of her office, trying to concentrate on the men's voices coming through her Bluetooth headset. Even though the space was quiet at seven a.m., her mind was frayed at the edges.

She hadn't gotten over the jet lag from a recent conference in Italy and couldn't cope with this agonizing build of endless days toward the fifth anniversary of Quaid's death.

Out her expansive windows, the Capitol building stood strong, regal, and righteous against a crisp blue sky. Golden, amber, and fiery-red hues of fall lined the streets leading from her office building to the gleaming white dome.

The whole vision was so postcard perfect, she thought she might just snap.

God, she *hated* this time of year.

Emotions stirred like acid at the cellular level. Emotions that would consume her if she let them. She'd made that mistake already. Repeatedly.

"Jessica." The voice of Stan, Congressman Wyle's senior aide, vibrated in her ear, bringing her to attention. "You've been awfully quiet."

She rubbed at the burn in her eyes, but pushed her voice into a buoyant tone. "No need to add anything to an already brilliant presentation. Morgan is handling this legislation beautifully. He's beyond capable. I'm only here for support."

"I agree your new associate is sharp as hell, and I'm glad you and Daryl finally pulled some help aboard, but you know I'm going to get my ass

handed to me if I take this to Wyle without your opinion.”

The truth was, at the moment, she couldn't even scrape the bottom of her soul for a sliver of enthusiasm about this initiative. But then, waking up tomorrow seemed rather pointless right now too. Out of habit, she glanced at the wall where her calendar normally hung. She'd taken it down the last week of October, unable to face the word *November* for thirty damn days straight.

Focus. Inspiration. Purpose. Shit, she needed help.

She looked around her gorgeous office and mentally catalogued all its material comforts. She envisioned their private lobbying firm's bank account with the National Air Transportation Safety Association's multimillion-dollar retainer tucked away. This was the first time they'd branched out from their pinpoint focus on firefighter health and safety, and it had been a lucrative move. But not an inspired one.

She flipped open the NATSA file on her desk, and a heart-crushing image of plane wreckage glared up at her. Real lives had been taken in this crash. In so many crashes like this. Lives as precious as those with whom she'd shared her flight home from Venice two days ago. She still remembered a friendly couple and their baby daughter who'd been sitting in her row.

“My opinion is”— Jessica closed the file and made small circles at her temple to release the tension—“that this proposed hazardous materials addendum to the air cargo security legislation should have been drafted into the original 9/11 security objective. Had our leaders confronted the threat with foresight instead of fear, we wouldn't all still be taking off our shoes at the airport.”

Stan chuckled. “Well said. Decades later and we're still playing defense instead of offense.”

“Exactly. They put a bomb in a shoe, we inspect everyone's shoes. They mix chemicals for explosives, we limit the toiletries in carry-on luggage. They use an ink cartridge to build a bomb, we ban all ink cartridges over one pound in cargo. It's all reactive.

“Our research was conducted by specialists from around the world who have projected every possible threat. They've developed a standardized method for properly labeling, packaging, and storing all hazardous chemicals for air cargo. This initiative is part of the offensive we've been missing to ensure safe air travel with hazardous chemicals.”

“Bravo, Jessica,” Stan said with an appreciative lilt in his smooth, deep voice. “Wyle will eat that shit up.”

Morgan, based in Sacramento, California, where it was barely four freaking a.m., picked up the ball and started tossing in powerful commentary supporting NATSA's position. Jessica let out her breath and turned her mind to standby.

Her gaze followed a row of young aspens, freshly planted throughout Capitol Hill by some restoration society—just another secret plot to torture her, she was sure. The trees swayed together, standing strong in the gust of a mystery breeze, reminding her of the soldierlike camaraderie she'd once shared with her firefighting team. Of that night she'd lost Quaid.

She turned from the window only to have her gaze land on the wide dark expanse of the flat-panel television mounted in the corner of her office. Usually, she kept it on and muted, but today, she couldn't face the news or the Hill's bullshit. Only now, the massive, silent, black screen turned into a threat, just like every other smooth reflective surface—mirrors, ponds, rainwater on asphalt. If she stared too long, shadows began to dance, take shape, and not just show her events in other locations, but open doorways into other realms, beckoning her to take one dangerous step closer.

That fucking fire had destroyed everything good in her life—stolen her husband, split her team, annihilated her sense of security and purpose, and imposed haunting powers upon her. Powers Jessica didn't want, need, or understand.

She reached for the television remote on her desk, hit the power button, and soaked in a split second of anticipated relief—before her screen lit up reporting on some obvious disaster. Angry flames snapped across her screen, and hope for a respite to her agony dissolved.

Damned if she did, damned if she didn't.

She was so sick of this. She yanked open her top drawer and grabbed the Xanax she left there—just in case. Even though she knew *just in case* meant weakness, plain and simple. This drug was no different from the others she'd used. It might be legal, but that didn't make it any less of a crutch.

But shit, if she ever needed one...

Do you know how much I love you?

...it was now.

She closed her eyes on the memory. Picking up the locket lying against her chest, she fisted it in her hand and fought back the pain that could pull her so deep, it took days to recover.

With the Xanax bottle clutched in one hand, her locket in the other, she

tuned in to the phone conversation again, this time with an ear toward getting off the line.

She needed to make a call to her sponsor.

Arrange an appointment with her therapist.

Check into the local asylum.

Now there was the best idea she'd had in months.

Jessica opened her eyes and released the locket. Outside, the mystery breeze had turned into a full-fledged wind, buffeting the tender aspens until they bent to its will. The turn in the weather could have been just another fall storm blowing in, only the forecast for this week had been the polar opposite—record highs, clear skies.

The way her inner turmoil could wreak havoc over her location didn't happen often. At least not after she'd jailed herself in a rehab center for a month over a year ago. With regular therapist visits, meditation, and a heavy workload, she'd been able to hold her emotions steady. Mostly.

But now, she knew her mood's bizarre effects on the weather would probably cause miscalculations in the forecast for the next two days.

Just one more thing she could blame on that fucking fire.

She shot a quick glance at the television screen, even though she knew she shouldn't.

It's not clear yet what caused the explosion...

The words popped up on the screen in closed captioning. Fire still undulated in various wide-angle video shots. But what riveted her vision and halted her breath was the color of the flames—a shifting kaleidoscope of orange, blue, and purple.

Jessica squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head so hard, the bun she'd thrown her hair into that morning uncoiled. But when she opened her eyes again, the flames on the screen continued to change color and spit cobalt-blue sparks. The text on the bottom right of the screen read: *Rachel, Nevada.*

"...the government facility reportedly housed a state-of-the art laboratory..." Jessica lunged for her desk, trading the Xanax for the remote, and hit the Mute button to enable audio.

"...run by the Department of Defense. The building, originally built back in the early 1900s, was a rather majestic structure of concrete and stone resembling a castle you might see in Ireland or Scotland and was referred to by workers and locals alike aptly as The Castle. The fire broke out sometime in the middle of the night. No word yet on the extent of the damage, though

sources say this was no accident. Speculation among locals is that a homegrown terrorist cell may be responsible for today's disaster..."

Discomfort tightened the muscles along Jessica's shoulders. The flames were eerily familiar. Like the ones that had erupted from those chemicals stored in that warehouse five years before. In the fire that had taken Quaid's life. The fire that had poisoned the entire team and left them all with bizarre paranormal abilities. Chemicals Teague—her fellow firefighter and friend—had traced back to the Department of Defense.

How *dare* they blame this bullshit on a fake terrorist cell of traitorous American citizens to cover their own sick screwup.

This was no different from the lies Schaeffer had created about the incident to cover the true cause of Quaid's death. No different from the way that bastard—the director of DARPA's Biological Sciences division then, a senator now—had declared the warehouse fire and the chemicals within classified and then barred her team from ever understanding what had really happened.

And then he had the audacity to follow them all like members of the FBI's top ten most wanted.

Teeth clenched, she tossed the remote onto her desk too hard. It clattered against the cherry surface, tipped over her pencil holder, and sent her cell phone and the Xanax skidding across her blotter and onto the floor.

"Jessica?" Morgan's voice floated through her fog. "Everything okay?"

She tore her eyes from the television. Holy shit. She'd forgotten she was still on the phone. Had completely tuned the men out.

"Yes, of course." Her shields came up. Her discipline took over. She hurried to the other side of her desk and crouched to scoop up her things from the carpet while still talking into her headset. "What you need to stress to Congressman Wyle is that in a recent poll, eighty percent of his constituents in the beautiful state of California had high concerns over this topic, and a whopping seventy-six percent voiced being in favor of *immediate action* to remedy the problem.

"Listen..." She wiped a palm over her damp forehead. Her hand was shaking. Her mouth was dry.. God, she hadn't had a craving like this in months. "Something's come up. I've got to get going. I'll talk to you both soon."

Already pulling the Bluetooth off her ear and dropping it on her desk, she barely heard the men's goodbyes.

She gripped the remote and refocused on the screen, where a beautiful Black woman reported, the fiery scene as her backdrop. Pillars of smoke spiraled from the decimated remnants of concrete buildings and turned the sky an angry iron. *“...sixteen confirmed dead with thirty-eight still missing, including a high-ranking official of the Department of Defense...”*

Jessica pulled in a shocked breath and wrapped her arms around herself. “Jesus.”

What did this mean? Her mind strayed to Ty, their former team leader, and his ability to sense when the team was in danger. Surely, he or someone on the team would have alerted her. She and Ty had their issues, but still...

An unfamiliar fear vibrated deep inside her. *Deep breath in. Slow breath out.*

She dialed Keira’s number at the FBI field office in Sacramento, where she’d become a special agent after leaving the fire service.

After only three rings, Keira’s voicemail picked up, and a sickening sensation stabbed at the very pit of Jessica’s stomach. As an active member of the FBI SWAT team, Keira always carried her cell and *always* answered.

“Shit.”

She and Keira had remained close despite much of the discord Jessica’s move had caused with both her family and the other members of the team. Jessica sucked in a pained breath and stabbed End. She refocused on the television as if the news would tell her what to do next.

“...the United States military has taken control of the scene and is receiving much of its investigative and search and rescue support from personnel and resources housed at Area 51, the highly secure military base in the middle of the Nevada desert. Secrecy and speculation have surrounded Area 51 for decades, and with the lack of information coming out of its neighbor, the Castle, that reputation won’t be changing any time soon.”

A pained, worried sound bubbled up from Jessica’s throat as she dialed Teague’s cell. God, she hated to bother him now, with his new wife, Alyssa, nearly eight months pregnant. But aside from Keira, Jessica was closest with Teague and Alyssa, and spoke with them and their daughter, Kat, often over Skype. Teague had suffered the most at DARPA’s hands and kept his fingers on the DoD’s pulse. If anyone knew what was happening, Teague would.

As the fire raged on the television, Jessica listened to the news anchor drone in one ear and Teague’s phone ring in the other. He’d recently joined the ATF alongside Luke and had always been as available by phone as Keira.

When Teague's voicemail answered, she disconnected, clutched her phone, crossed her arms again, and swiveled toward the window.

"Shit," she whispered, holding tight to the panic that tried to spill over. Outside, the smooth blue sky was gone, replaced by sleek storm clouds, mirroring her emotions. "What's going on?"

Maybe Alyssa had gone into early labor. Maybe everyone had joined her and Teague at the hospital. But if that were the case, why hadn't they called her? Teague had promised to call the minute Alyssa went into labor so Jessica could plan to be there. Maybe she should check into available flights.

She wiped at her forehead again. Her throat felt thick. Her heart beat fast. Her breathing came shallow and quick.

Just because ninety percent of addicts and alcoholics relapse within the first year doesn't mean you have to be one of them. Her sponsor's encouragement whispered in her head. *You will be the one out of ten who makes it. I have no doubt.*

Jessica closed her eyes and focused within. After a year of daily meditation, she centered quickly. Her mind and body aligned. Fused. Settled. Now, she just had to hold herself there.

Trying again, she lifted her phone and tapped into her contacts. But she had to brace her arm against her body to control her shaking as she dialed Alyssa's number.

She put the phone to her ear, vowing to give the rest of the day over to yoga, meditation, the spa, whatever she needed to get back into complete balance.

A hard knock sounded on her office door. Jessica startled, and outside, the clouds burst and poured. She was alone in the office, the other staff taking Friday off for a long weekend. She turned, a scowl and a scolding ready for whoever had scared the shit out of her, only she found Teague standing in the doorway.

Teague?

Jessica's mouth dropped open, but before any sound emerged, Keira pushed past him and into the room carrying a very big, black, and terrifying rifle. For a split second, she wondered how they'd gotten the gun in here without someone seeing it, though Fridays were often quiet, and Keira was wearing a hip-length black jacket.

"Jessica." Keira's voice was steady and even, but cold. So very cold. "Is anyone else here?"

Jessica shook her head, unable to form even a basic question. “What... Why... How... *Shit.*” She covered her face with both hands, half believing her mind had finally cracked and that when she took her hands away, she’d be alone in the office. “What the fuck is happening?”

“Please, Jess.” Damn, the Keira replica was still there. Still talking. Still sounding exactly like her friend. “I need to know. Is there anyone else in the office?”

Hands still on her face, Jessica shook her head.

The door to her office clicked shut, and the room fell silent.

For a surreal moment, Jessica wondered if asylums really had padded cells. If pink was truly a calming color. Whether or not they still made patients wear straitjackets. Surely modern medicine had advanced beyond such barbaric treatment. Hadn’t it?

A strong arm circled her shoulders. Teague. His body was tall and steady and warm alongside hers. “Hey, Jess. That glad to see us?”

His touch, his voice—she couldn’t deny the reality of it any longer. Terror gripped her lungs, making it hard to breathe. She turned to him and clutched his soft cotton T-shirt. “Alyssa?”

His fingers tucked a strand of her hair behind one ear. “She’s fine.”

“The...baby?” She almost couldn’t get the word out, terrified of the response.

“He’s fine too. Almost here.”

Relief softened Jessica’s bones, and her knees gave. Teague tightened his arm to keep her upright. When she looked up at him, a soft smile curved his lips, and the condition of his handsome face registered for the first time.

“What happened to your—” Another wave of fear crested. “What in the hell? Why are you here?”

“We need your help, Jess.” Keira put a warm, firm hand on Jessica’s arm. When she glanced at her friend again, she got her first real look at the scrapes and bruises she hadn’t been able to absorb in her panicked state.

Keira’s sweet freckles and striking, nearly turquoise eyes seemed to make the damage to her beautiful face that much more severe. “We need to talk—now and privately. Can we do that here?”

Their expressions were so much like they’d been that day five years ago when they’d come into her hospital room to tell her Quaid had finally succumbed to his injuries. That he’d passed in the night, alone, because the staff at the military hospital wouldn’t allow Jessica to stay in his room.

She stepped away from Teague, suddenly afraid to maintain contact, and pressed both hands against her chest as if she could help herself drag in air.

“The others?” Her voice came out tight and feathery. “Luke, Seth, Ty? Are they hurt? Are they . . .?” Jessica couldn’t bring herself to ask if they were dead. “Just tell me.”

Keira’s stern expression softened, and she slid a wry smile at Teague before returning her gaze to Jessica. “They’re all a little too fine. Bitching, moaning, complaining, and harping on each other as usual. We’ll see them soon.”

“They’re *here*? All of you are here? Together?”

Keira hadn’t spoken to Luke since their breakup three years before and wasn’t particularly chummy with Ty, who’d moved to Nowhere, Wyoming, about the same time.

“Shit,” Jessica said, “this has to be really bad.”

“Shh.” Teague squeezed Jessica tight to his side. “Listen to Keira now, honey.”

The last time Teague had called her “honey” had been at Quaid’s funeral. Jessica wished she’d downed a triple dose of Xanax.

“It’s *that*, isn’t it?” She waved at the television, her voice edging toward hysteria. “That DoD lab in Nevada.”

“Whoa, whoa.” Keira put her hands on Jessica’s arms, a gentle touch. “Sweetheart, slow down. I know this is a shock—”

“You could have all been killed.” Jessica’s veneer of control cracked. Keira’s lack of denial was as good as a confession. “My God. What would I have done if that had happened? Did you even *think* about what getting that news would have *done to me*?”

Suddenly cold, Jessica hugged herself again. She was always left out. Always alone. The irrational, childish hurt welled up beneath the fear and tangled with her growing anxiety. She couldn’t pull the emotions apart or control them.

“Maybe I’m no federal agent like all of you or a military contractor like Ty or even a damn firefighter anymore like Seth. Maybe I couldn’t have helped with whatever the hell you were doing—not that I would have even wanted to—but you could have at least *let me know*. Not blindsided me like this.”

Keira pulled Jessica into her arms. “Okay,” she whispered, compassionate, understanding, but not coddling. Not enabling. “Shhh, now.”

You can handle this. Hear us out.”

“We didn’t forget you, Jess,” Teague said. “You were in Venice.”

“So, you couldn’t let me know what was happening?”

“Ty called your hotel, but didn’t want to leave a message.”

“Ty?”

Of all the team members to call, Ty would have been the last she’d expect to pick up that duty. Ty was the source of her deepest hurt. The one who’d been angriest with her inability to move on after Quaid’s death. The one who’d taken the greatest offense to her relocation across the country. And aside from Jessica, Ty was, ironically, the one with the most guilt over Quaid’s death, the least able to accept or deal with the tragedy and the last to admit it.

“Something’s\ has to be terribly wrong for Ty to call. He hasn’t talked to me for four years.” She crossed her arms, squeezing them over her stomach and the new burn there. “Shit, *what* did you do?”

“Long story,” Teague said. “And we don’t have a lot of time.”

“Jessica,” Keira said, “do you remember the coin we all received for our work at the warehouse fire?”

The question came so far out of left field, it could have been a meteor. “What could that possibly matter?”

“Humor me.” It wasn’t a request.

Jessica clenched her teeth and rolled her fingers into fists. This was a bitter, bitter subject. In a bitter, bitter month. “The meaningless scrap of metal they gave us for ruining our lives? For *killing* Quaid?”

Keira took both of Jessica’s arms, her expression imploring. “Do you still have yours?”

“No. I had it melted down and donated the gold to the Joseph Still Burn Center. How could you even think I’d keep something symbolic of the worst day, the worst pain of my life?” She didn’t wait for an answer. “They said a high-ranking official of DoD is missing. Who is it?”

Teague shared a look with Keira before he said, “We’re pretty sure it was Jocelyn Dargan.”

Jessica pulled in a surprised breath, her mind spinning so fast, she could have levitated. The deputy director of DARPA had worked under Schaeffer while he’d been employed there. Even after Schaeffer had become a senator, Dargan continued to run his black ops and had been dogging their team for years.

“What does this mean?” she asked. “Will they finally leave us alone?”

“Doubtful,” Keira said. “What about Quaid’s coin, Jess? Do you have it?”

Out the window, the storm clouds had descended upon the streets of the Hill, obscuring the Capitol building. Rain fell in sheets now, flooding the gutters, and her mind felt just as congested. She could barely think around the confusion, the loss, the memories.

Keira’s eyes narrowed as she looked out the window at the foul weather. “You’re doing that, aren’t you?”

“I’m not *doing* anything.”

“This is important, Jess,” Teague said. “Where is Quaid’s coin?”

“They said they buried it with him despite me specifically asking them not to. Bastards do whatever they want.”

“Look at me, Jessica. Listen to me now.” Keira took hold of her arms again, her fingers so tight, they stung. Outside, the wind grew stronger, slamming the rain against the windows. “The fire in Nevada was in a military laboratory, and I’ll tell you everything we found later. Right now, what you need to know is that we went into the facility to rescue a prisoner. But when we got in, we discovered he wasn’t the only one. They were holding another man too.”

A million questions circled in Jessica’s mind. Before she could form even one, Keira said, “And we found a matching coin.”

Jessica’s mouth froze halfway open. Her brain froze in mid-thought. “Do the others have theirs?”

“Yes. Quaid’s is the only coin unaccounted for. And this coin was found in a cell used by the other inmate.”

“They didn’t bury it with him? Someone stole it?”

She pushed past Keira without hearing her answer. At the windows, she turned and sought reassurance from Teague. But she got just the opposite. The look on his face—tortured, filled with anguish and guilt, burned through Jessica’s heart like a live wire.

“Teague?”

When he didn’t answer, she pressed her fingers to her temples.

Logic. Logic or she’d crumble.

“Okay.” She looked up, stared straight at the wall across the room. “It obviously can’t be the same coin. They must have given out similar coins for other incidents.” She turned her gaze on Keira, then Teague. “I don’t understand—”

Teague pulled his hand from the front pocket of his jeans and opened his palm. The sight of the coin that symbolized so much pain, such unfathomable loss, stopped her in mid-sentence.

“Why do you have that? Is that yours?” Her gaze clung to the gold piece centered in Teague’s palm, glinting in the light. Her hand floated to her neck, and she slid the chain there through her fingers until her locket rested in her hand again.

“No,” Teague said.

“We came because we were hoping you could scry with it to help us find the other prisoner, the one who had this coin.”

Jessica’s brow pulled, and she looked from Keira to Teague and back. If the coin was indeed Quaid’s and she scryed with it—she risked seeing things she couldn’t bear. Things that would drag her under.

“You know my powers are worthless.” She worried the locket’s engraved platinum surface between her fingers. “I’ve long since killed whatever abilities I might have had with the drugs.”

“If you’ve killed your powers, Jess”—Keira lifted a hand toward the window—“I’d say they’re rising from the dead.”

Jessica glared out at the sheeting rain and slashing trees. “That’s just a response to my bad mood.”

“Only because you’ve never tried to control it.”

“There’s no point.” Jessica didn’t want to argue. But she didn’t want to relapse either. “They’re chaotic and erratic and unreliable. I may as well try to calm the sea.”

Keira clenched her teeth and pressed her lips together. Pain joined the frustration in her eyes, and she cast a look at Teague before turning away.

On a heavy breath, Jessica looked at Teague. “I’m sorry, I just—”

“There’s more, Jess,” Teague said.

She let her hands fall and slap her thighs. “It doesn’t matter—”

“We believe the other prisoner is Quaid.”

While she tried to get her mind around that declaration, the office went stone silent and dropped ten degrees. “*What?* How could you... How could you even *think* those words let alone *say* them?” The mere idea shattered her already-brittle state. “*Stop.*”

Keira spun around, her eyes crystalline and sharp. “They call him Q. He’s been there at least four years that we know of, probably more. They’re testing him, experimenting on him in a program *Dargan* was managing for

Schaeffer.” She took two meaningful steps forward. “You know we wouldn’t bring this to you unless we were sure. We *believe* this man is *Quaid.*”

No. No, no, *no.* She wanted to put her fingers in her ears and sing *la, la, la, la, la.* She couldn’t do this. Couldn’t let herself hope. Hope always led to despair.

In her world, despair led straight to alcohol, cocaine, and heroin.

And just one more time down that road would lead her straight to the grave.

No one will take care of you if you don’t take care of yourself first.

This was possibly the hardest thing she’d ever done short of rehab. To give herself the strength she needed, she envisioned a steel pole replacing her spine.

“We’re done here.” She crossed her arms, squeezed herself tightly against the slicing pain of her next demand. “Get out of my office.”

Jessica met Keira’s stare with her own expression of rock-solid conviction.

Teague took Keira’s arm and guided her toward the door. Keira’s gaze turned worried, even a little panicked.

Teague simply nudged her out the door with, “I’ll be right there.”

It took everything Jessica had left to hold on to that steadfast commitment to her own needs, her own safety when Teague turned back to her.

“I’m so sorry, Jess.” He came toward her, head down with that pitiful, sorry-I-brought-a-frog-in-the-house remorse and the coin turning over and over between his fingers. “We don’t mean to hurt you. Really, we...”

He lifted his head and met her gaze. The anguish and hopelessness there twisted the knife already stabbing her heart.

“No. *I’m* sorry.” She reached out and grabbed hold of his forearms. Tears she’d been holding back flooded her eyes and spilled over. “I’m sorry for a million things. But I can’t do this to myself. It would break me.”

“I understand.”

He took her face between his hands and kissed her forehead. Then he laid his palm over her heart. The thermokinetic abilities he’d acquired at that terrible fire infused heat and healing. The pain dimmed, but didn’t disappear. It would never disappear.

“Take this.” He pressed the coin into her hand. “It’s rightfully yours.”

Teague kissed her head one more time before he turned to leave.

The coin pulsed with heat and energy. Powerful, vibrant sensations

shimmied up her arm and spread through her body. Sensations of love. Of hope. Both so long forgotten, they stole her breath. She turned toward the windows, moved around her desk, and slumped into her chair. Blue lightning crackled across the sky, making the charcoal clouds glow.

A roll of ground-rocking thunder passed through the streets. A millisecond later, one quick strike of lightning split the sky. The jagged bolt speared the glass and smashed against the coin, refracting directly into Jessica's eyes.

She yelped and shaded her face, but the luminosity intensified, showering her with heat, engulfing her in a cone of golden light. Sizzling tingles traveled across her body, matching the effervescent sound rising in her ears. A sense of weightlessness made her dizzy. Then she was moving, a rush of air and pressure and prickles over her entire body. She grabbed for the arms on her chair, but found nothing.

Panic seized her chest. She gasped for air, but her lungs clamped down tight. And just when she thought she'd lose her mind to the hovering terror, she slowed. The pressure eased. The light's intensity faded at the edges. The fizzing in her skin calmed.

Her heart thudded hard. Air scraped in and out of her throat. She squinted past the light still shining off the coin, and the foreign sight of pine trees drifted through.

"Oh, no," she whispered.

Shit, no.

She'd found a doorway. The kind of doorway she deliberately avoided creating. Only this time, instead of just seeing the doorway and turning away, she'd gone through the damn thing.

Hell, no. She hadn't signed up for this.

4

Beneath the tires, the ground turned from cracked asphalt to gravel. The car's front right tire took a deep divot at forty-two miles per hour. Q could calculate their speed by feel. His body jerked side to side, his shoulders knocking the men flanking him in the backseat of what he guessed was a Ford Taurus, judging by the construction of the bench beneath him. His wispy, feather-like thoughts of *her* evaporated.

“What the hell, Davis?” Moist heat from his breath filled the black cloth bag covering his head, making it even harder to breathe. “Are you taking this piece of shit off-roading?”

His question went unanswered. They rarely spoke to him, and Q normally preferred it that way. But this was no ordinary transport to just another testing center. Those he took in the back of a windowless van, cuffed to a bench, alone.

Now, he was stuffed into a sedan with their four best men—Davis, Samuels, Pike, and Green. And the Castle he had called prison for as long as his memory stretched lay in rubble behind them.

That brought despair over Cash's fate, Q's friend and the only other prisoner at the Castle. He hoped and prayed Cash had gotten free before the explosion, but Q would probably never know.

Another tooth-knocking jolt killed any idea of Q returning to his thoughts of *her*. And that really pissed him off, because she was the only thing that put a spark in his life. And in a life of darkness, one spark could feel like a spotlight.

He didn't know anything about her—not her name or age, where she

lived, or even if she was alive or dead. He used to be able to find that sweet spot in his mind and virtually will her in. Those moments with her brought Q peace and joy. And he continued to try because the mere memory of her had a way of holding him together.

He'd stopped dreaming about her over a year ago now. Every time he closed his eyes, he hoped and prayed the fiery redhead would appear. But he was losing hope of ever seeing her again.

Now, after so much time without a fresh memory, her barely-there footprint was fading from his mind.

"How long have we been driving? Three, four hours?" He knew exactly how long—five hours, forty-two minutes. He shifted his numb ass on the bench seat. "Can't you take this hood off now? I'm having a hard time breathing. Wouldn't want me to keel over, would you?"

Nothing. Not even a grunt.

Fuck this. He'd had enough. He lifted his cuffed hands toward the mask's edge and dragged it up.

Before he cleared his eyes, Samuels, on the left, knocked Q's hands down. "Leave it."

Q shoved the asshole's hand back. "Or what? You'll kill me?"

Samuel's backhand connected with Q's cheekbone. His head snapped sideways. Pain launched through his face. "You couldn't get that lucky."

Q shook his head to dispel the burn. "Not my fault you got dragged out of bed. Beat up on Dargan for a change."

Complete silence swelled inside the car for a heavy second, followed by a simultaneous *shhhhh*—the brush of skin against dress-shirt collars as the men turned their heads and looked at each other.

"I wish you'd just left me in that dungeon to burn with the others." He paused and listened closely. More looks among them. Tension within the car thickened. "The lab is dust, isn't it? How many died in there?"

In the remaining silence, Q built enough nerve to ask the dreaded question.

"How about that other guy?" He finally got it out. "The one in the cell next to me? I heard someone in the sally port saying he escaped."

Q held his breath. *Please let him be alive. Please make all this hell worth something.*

A furious heat wafted off Green in the front passenger's seat, making a new layer of sweat break out over Q's covered face. The other three men

tensed, their muscles emitting a low-pitched moan that only he could hear as the fibers contracted and slid against tendon and bone. He had his answer.

Q relaxed, then laughed, a low chuckle he hadn't known was coming. But as reality and deeper relief poured in, the chuckle grew into a full, hearty laugh. Getting one over on these pricks was the most satisfying thing he'd done since he'd messed up Gorin's latest experiment with a food strike.

But the best part was knowing Cash was somewhere laughing too. Somewhere free. A rare and delicious joy flashed in Q's veins.

Samuels's elbow landed square in Q's side. Pain ripped through his abdomen. A faint click hinted that Samuels had just broken one of Q's ribs. His laughter died. His momentary joy faded, but not his bubbling sense of success or his hope for Cash.

"Jesus, Samuels." This from Pike on Q's right. "Lay off."

Q liked Pike. He was young and raw, which was why he still had a soul.

Pike yanked the mask above Q's mouth and nose. "Stay quiet, it stays off."

Q took a deep breath of uninhibited air, sat back, and shut up.

"Pussy," Samuels shot across Q toward Pike.

"Scab," Pike shot back.

"Shut up," Davis snarled from the driver's seat. "All of you."

Green said nothing.

In the volatile silence that followed, Q thought of Cash out there, free, headed toward a reunion with his son and sister. Q couldn't be happier for his friend. And at the same time, something unsettling nagged inside him. Questions about his own past—one missing from his memory banks—crept out of the shadows. He didn't allow himself to think about this often, but now he wondered what, exactly, these bloodsuckers had taken from him, and his mind veered to the fiery redhead in his dreams.

The gravel road gave way to dirt. Q tuned in to the sounds around him. More smells. Sensations. All their fucking with his brain had given him advantages even their best scientists didn't know about. His hearing had grown as accurate as an owl's. His sense of smell as keen as a bear's. His eyesight as sharp as a raptor's.

They had developed other abilities within him. Paranormal abilities. But those were a mystery to Q, and he only knew about them because he'd overheard them talking when they thought he was unconscious.

He often wondered if the woman in his dreams came to him because of

those powers. He'd never interacted with her, never been ordered or asked to interact. And if one of his powers was to bring her to him, he sucked at it. His dreams of her always began in watery distortion, like viewing a scene through a rainy window, only becoming progressively clearer as the dream went on until he was left watching her sleep in clear, crisp Technicolor.

Technicolor. Q made a quick search of his mind, but found no reference for the word, and tucked it away in the mystery file.

Just the thought of watching his gorgeous redhead fast asleep warmed him. Relaxed him. Filled in all those empty spaces inside him with contentment. Which was the main reason he didn't think those dreams were one of the sick fucks' imposed abilities—because seeing her made him happy. But also because he remembered every dream. Every moment with her. And when Gorin tested him, whatever he used to put Q under wiped out his memory upon waking. He desperately wanted to find a way to bring her back.

He was damn sure she was the only reason he hadn't killed himself yet. That flickering sense of *maybe*, the same hope Cash had of being reunited with his son and sister.

If he focused and took advantage of this rare opportunity with his captors, maybe he could learn something that would help. Minimal security equaled maximum possibility.

The car slowed, and Q tightened every muscle in preparation. For what, he had no idea. He was working completely on the fly here, but with no past to remember and no freedom in his future, he had nothing to live for. And with nothing to live for, he had absolutely nothing to lose.

He picked up the scent of salt through the air vents and grew restless to feel the direction of the wind, to listen for animals, vehicles, planes, voices. Anything to give him a better feel for their new location. Nearing Salt Lake—definitely. But how close to the city?

"I have to take a piss," he said.

"Keep your dick on," Ice Man Green growled from the front seat.

"He speaks," Q said. "Thought you'd had a coronary."

"You wish."

"Hell, yes."

The engine cut out, and all four doors clicked open. Q sucked in the air—dry, hot, salt-laden. And thin. They were in the mountains of Utah above Salt Lake.

“What’s this place? Not one of your rat labs. I’ve been to them all.”

Facts about the Salt Lake area clicked through his mind. There was no government testing facility that he knew of in this area, so unless they were going to use some private laboratory they’d cooked up like Colombian drug runners...

His mind took one of those bizarre hairpin turns, the ones it made whenever he stumbled upon information he had no way of knowing, but did. And the endless questions followed: Was he from Colombia? Had he worked in Colombia? Did he have relatives in Colombia? How did he know Colombia had a drug problem? Why did the phrase “Colombian drug runners” instantly materialize in his head?

And the questions were inevitably followed by doubt. What kind of man would know such people? Who was he to be so well acquainted with such behavior? Had he harmed others in his involvement with or knowledge of these people?

Ultimately, all the questions boiled down to one: Was this information leaking into his consciousness from his stolen past life or his hidden present one?

That uncomfortable ripple up the back of his neck continued over his skull. The scars there caused the skin to stretch unevenly, and pain burned across each thin raised line.

Q pushed the useless musings away. He’d save those for the long hours he spent alone, caged—or, if he succeeded in the next few moments, running. To make that happen, he forced his mind to the present.

Pike hooked a hand around Q’s bicep and pulled him across the bench seat. The other three started toward a building several yards away.

He knew the structure was there by the way sound traveled around it, by the way the atmosphere felt denser in that direction.

Sure enough, their feet pounded up wooden steps, then trotted along a wooden deck and inside over wooden floors. He detected no other presence—no other voices, no other movement, no other body heat. They were alone. As for technology, he sensed no fences, no all-terrain vehicles, no helicopters, not even a garage on site. He heard no buzz of high-tech security systems, no electrified boundary, no listening devices, no satellite dishes, not even a damn two-way radio system.

No props—aside from the weapons, of course.

Now, Q let a smile tip his mouth.

It was one against four.

His best odds ever.

“I really have to piss.” Q kept his voice low so the others wouldn’t hear. “Come on, Pike, just show me a tree.”

“Can’t you wait?”

“They’re going to take forever to case the house.” And every moment lessened Q’s chances.

The nearly inaudible swoosh of Pike’s skin against his shirt meant he was contemplating the request as he turned his attention toward the house. Pike let out a frustrated breath just before his feet crunched mulch. He pushed Q toward a thick copse of trees—pines by the density, size, and scent.

“Make it quick,” Pike said. “I don’t need Green chomping on my ass.”

Q pulled the bag off his face, letting it rest on his forehead for fear if he tossed it to the ground, he’d snap the filament of Pike’s good will. He squinted, allowing his eyes to make the adjustment. He’d been right—pines. But they were interspersed with aspens. The round gold leaves of the thinner, white-trunked deciduous trees shimmered in the warm fall air. The sight of them pulled at something inside him. He walked toward the copse, wondering if the natural beauty he so rarely experienced at the concrete prison and industrial testing sites caused this longing in his chest or if it was something else.

Reaching out, he fingered one of the beautiful golden leaves and studied the interesting white bark. An aspen. That he knew from reading—the only thing they allowed him. The leaf was surprisingly soft and supple. Nothing sparked in his mind, but nothing ever did. The only way he’d ever learn anything about himself was to get away from these people.

Without moving his head, Q surveyed the area, gaze keen, hearing perked. One small cabin-style structure sat on the secluded property, covered in trees as far as Q could see—which was damn far. A hawk called overhead. Something small rooted nearby. By the distance they’d traveled on dirt and gravel roads, Q guessed he was two-hundred miles from any type of civilization.

Didn’t matter. He didn’t need civilization. He’d been jailed in a ten-by-ten concrete box forever, exposed to only Gorin, the psycho scientists’ assistants, Castle guards and Cash—Q’s lifeline for the last three of Q’s unknown number of years at the Castle.

Please get Cash to his family.

Q let the prayer float out to the universe as he unbuttoned his jeans with his left hand, leaving his weaker arm in the sling he always wore. He hadn't needed the aid for months, but the guards didn't know that. Gorin still thought he'd permanently disabled Q's entire right side. It was weak, yes, but not completely worthless.

In his peripheral vision, Q saw Pike looking back at the cabin, hands on hips, sport coat pushed back, revealing the standard-issue Glock nine mm in his belt holster.

The sight of the weapon made something click in Q's mind. As quick as he closed off his emotions, something else shut down inside him. Something he couldn't explain or describe or even understand, but internally, he went cool, hard and sharp.

Now or never.

Before the thought had dissipated, Q was moving. He pivoted, raised his good elbow, and whacked Pike in the cheekbone.

Time braked into slow motion. Pike's head jerked sideways, eyes closed, spittle flying, arms flailing. Q felt himself reach out. Felt the butt of the weapon in his hand. Felt his biceps tense and jerk the weapon from Pike's holster.

For an extended instant, Q stood over the unconscious Pike, gun in hand. The steel-cast man inside Q tensed his finger on the trigger. If the man lying at his feet had been any of the other three, Q would have let whatever this instinct was take over. He would have emptied the gun into the bastard's brain. Since it was Pike, Q turned toward the trees and ran.

He stripped the sling from his weaker arm and let the canvas trail behind him. He pushed a swing into his gait to aid his bad leg forward. It felt as stiff as the tree trunks as he dodged through the obstacle course of pines, aspens and shrubs. The trickle of a creek sounded somewhere below. Q ran scenarios through his mind as he moved. Get to the bottom. Follow the creek. Find a hiding spot. Hold out till nightfall. Head out again before they brought in dogs. Choppers. Crews.

"Q!" Davis bellowed, still near the structure. "Get your ass back here or you're a dead man."

He was already a dead man. A dead man walking. He had no past. He had no future. His present amounted to existing in a cage, tormented, abused. Used. Escape was his only chance at life. His only chance of recovering his past. One that tugged at him, but he had no idea why.

The mountain air exhilarated his lungs with every inhale. The earth underfoot infused him with life. Had he loved the outdoors in his past? Had he hiked, fished, camped as a kid like the stories Cash had told of his childhood? If Q got out, he'd sure as hell give them all a try.

Voices echoed at Q's back as the men fanned out into the forest. Davis was in the lead, Pike somewhere behind and to Davis's right. Samuels was three hundred yards to Davis's left.

But Green... Q heard nothing from Green. No threats. No footsteps. No breathing.

Q's bad knee buckled. He hit a tree with his lousy shoulder. Pain stabbed through his arm. He gritted his teeth against the need to cry out. Chest heaving, determination renewed, Q lunged forward.

The crunch of a boot on the forest floor behind him sounded a split-second before a crack landed on his skull and a sharp jolt of heat seared his brain.

He hit the ground on his injured shoulder, rolled to his stomach, and pulled a knee under him. Before he could push off again, that boot smashed between his shoulder blades. He hit the dirt face-first, took a mouthful of mulch, and turned his head to spit. That's when he saw the gun centimeters from his cheekbone.

"Do it," Q rasped through harsh pants. "*Do it, you sorry sonofabitch. Fucking shoot me already. Shoot me!*"

"I'll shoot you, asshole."

Green put something between his teeth and pulled it out with a soft *pop*. Dread created a hot geyser in Q's chest. *No, no, no*. He pushed and twisted against Green's boot, a rock in Q's back.

Green's arm swung down. The needle stabbed into the muscle of Q's biceps. And the sedative—that fucking sedative that signaled his torture was about to begin all over again—burned through every tissue.

And the idea of reaching his fiery redheaded beauty again faded along with his consciousness.

5

Jessica stepped back and something crackled. She looked down and found dirt, twigs, and pine needles carpeting a forest floor beneath her bare feet.

“This isn’t real,” she whispered.

She’d worn sandals to the office and kicked them off as soon as she’d walked in the door. Plush carpet had snuggled against her feet just seconds ago. But the prickly stab of those pine needles wasn’t her imagination either.

The blinding light faded, and other objects in the distance came into focus—a small house in front of her. A car parked to her right. More trees in every direction, and above them, towering mountains.

“What the hell?” Her mind scrambled to understand. The coin tingled against her skin, and she looked at it, remembering Teague pressing it into her hand.

Anger nudged her fear aside. “That bastard.” He’d known that if this coin was Quaid’s, she would feel something. See something. “Bet he didn’t expect this.”

Shit, she hadn’t even expected this. Whatever *this* was. She needed a way out, but the light was gone, and instinct told her the door leading back to her office had closed.

She scanned the area for an escape, but only saw trees. Nothing but trees.

“I can’t believe you let him take your gun, Pike.” A disgusted voice cut through the silence, and Jessica jerked her head in that direction. “If I don’t find it, I’m gonna let Q stuff mine in your mouth.”

They call him Q. Keira’s words echoed in her head and confirmed Jessica’s worst fear—she’d gone and somehow freaking transported to Q’s

location. She ground her teeth as some small part of her psyche laughed at her and whispered, *I told you not to get near those doorways.*

A man stepped out onto the porch. Dressed in slacks, a white button-down, and a tie pulled loose at his neck, he looked fortyish and fit. He unbuttoned one cuff and rolled it up his forearm, then the other. The butt of a gun rose from the holster at his waist.

Jessica sucked in a breath and froze while her mind spun for some excuse for her sudden presence out in the middle of nowhere. He put his hands on his hips and frowned down at her where she stood at the bottom of the steps.

“I... Hi. I was...camping nearby.” Words stuttered from her mouth before she thought them through. “And I must have gotten lost....” *Right, wearing no shoes. Brilliant.* “But I’m sure my family is right nearby...if I could just, um, use your phone?”

The man looked up, scanned the tree line, and muttered, “Such an idiot.”

He jogged down the cabin’s narrow front steps, heading directly toward Jessica with a brisk, purposeful stride. She cringed, tried to sidestep, but his left side collided with hers. Yet...didn’t. The entire left side of her body sizzled like a shaken bottle of soda, as if he’d *passed through her.*

Holy shit.

“I hope that dipshit gets canned for this,” he muttered, stalking away as if he hadn’t seen her. “I’m so fucking sick of that pussy.”

Disoriented, Jessica swayed and reached for the stairway railing. The rotted wood snapped, and the crack echoed in the dense silence. She jumped back just as two other men came out on the porch, weapons drawn and aimed in her direction.

“I just was lost and...” *can’t breathe* “...wanted to use your phone...”

“Piece of shit,” one of them said, then, “I’ll check on Q, out back. You look around out here.”

Body bunched with tension, Jessica held her breath, waiting for them to see her. The first man headed back inside. The other jogged down the steps.

Jessica gasped and tensed, but he strode right freaking past her too.

Oooo-kay. She’d experienced some weird shit in her life, but this topped it all.

She was so killing Teague when...if...she ever made it back to her office.

She stuffed the coin in her jeans pocket, eyed the man’s retreating back, then the stairs. Q was here. Great, she’d found him. Only she hadn’t. Not really. She didn’t know where in the hell she was. She didn’t know how the

hell to get back home.

Maybe Q did, but did she want to see who this mysterious Q really was? He had some connection with Quaid, or he wouldn't have had her husband's coin. But more importantly, he was a prisoner here, which meant some other family was suffering without him, the way Jessica was suffering without Quaid.

She didn't want that. No one deserved that kind of pain.

Jessica took a focused breath and eyed the stairs. Lifting her foot, she tested the wood to see if she'd slide through like a ghost, or if it would snap like the railing had. When neither happened, she hurried into the house and quickly checked rooms as she passed.

The space was small and dark and dank, as if it had been closed up for years. A flimsy table set up with cards and poker chips sat in the middle of the living room. She passed a tiny kitchen, an ancient bath, and at the end of a short hall, she paused to glance into a small, empty bedroom.

Dim light filtered through the trees, barely illuminating the gray space. A dirty, tattered mattress lay on the floor in a corner, and—oh, shit—the room was *not* empty. A man lay on the mattress, turned toward the wall, one arm cuffed to a metal ring bolted to the wall above his head, the other thrown over his eyes.

An icy chill washed Jessica's body, freezing her in place for a moment. Her gaze darted down an adjacent hall. It was empty, but men's voices sounded just beyond.

"Hey," she whispered to him from the doorway, keeping an eye on the hall. "Can you hear me?"

When he didn't move, she slipped inside the room and dropped to her knees beside him, taking him in with a sweeping, panicked glance. His dark hair was cut military close. A bizarre techno pattern of short, linear scars covered his scalp. Bruises and scrapes in various stages of healing marred the arm covering his face, and his jeans and plain gray T-shirt hung loose over a malnourished frame.

They're testing him, experimenting on him in a program Dargan is managing for Schaeffer.

"Those fucking animals," she whispered, then leaned over him. "Hey, wake up."

He didn't respond. Didn't move.

Shit. She stared at a blotchy bruise on his bicep. The others had passed

through her. She probably couldn't touch him to wake him, but...

She brought her index finger down on the purple edge of his bruise—and met solid flesh. *Yes!* She gripped his arm and shook him lightly. “Hey, Q, you gotta wake up.”

Still no response. She shook harder and tried to lift his arm, but it was dead weight, so she checked his pulse instead. Slow, but strong.

Footsteps sounded, and Jessica turned. A man filled the doorway. She fell back on her butt and scooted away, but he seemed oblivious to her presence. He was older than the others, his face stern, eyes cold and completely emotionless.

He stalked into the room and kicked the unconscious man's foot hard enough to shake his whole body. Jessica watched for a reaction, but the man didn't move.

“He's still out,” the older man called as he turned out of the room. “I gave him a shitload of that tranquilizer. He'll be out for hours.”

Jessica's shoulders sagged. “Shit.”

Now what? She squeezed her eyes shut and rubbed them with her palms, letting her head rest there a moment while considering her options. It didn't take long—there weren't many. She had to find a doorway and go back. Maybe she could somehow take him back with her.

As if she knew how this whole freaky doorway thing worked.

Jessica lifted her head and looked at the man's back, his shoulder blades stretching the cotton. It was worth a try. Not a lot to lose at this point.

She drew up close beside him and pulled the coin from her pocket. Rising up on her knees, she leaned in to speak softly near his ear. The very warm scent of a man's skin rose through a thin veil of soap. For his condition and surroundings, she hadn't expected him to smell so good. It had been a long time since she'd enjoyed the scent of a man's skin.

Jessica closed her eyes and breathed him in. Oh, yes, he had one of those scents that made a woman want to burrow her face in his neck, snuggle naked under the covers, wear his clothes....

We believe this man is Quaid.

No. Her eyes popped open, and she leaned away, her stomach fluttering. She could look at this man's size, his build, and know this wasn't Quaid. Her husband had been heavily muscular, thick in his chest, arms, and thighs. He'd lifted weights and easily retained mass. This man's smaller frame couldn't begin to hold that amount of muscle.

A futile and far-too-familiar brew of anger and loss tightened her chest. How could her closest friends have even *voiced* such a wicked possibility as Quaid still being alive?

She curled her fingers around Q's wrist and held tight. With the other hand, she tilted the coin toward the small window, trying to catch a sliver of daylight to open a doorway.

"Come on, baby," she murmured to the coin. "Bring us home."

The man shifted on the mattress. The movement pulled at the cuff on his wrist, and muscles flexed from his shoulder down his arm, rolling beneath the cotton fabric. She reassessed the sinew in his forearms and biceps. Maybe she'd mistaken extreme fitness for malnutrition.

Her gaze traveled from his biceps to his face, and the sight of his jawline, now exposed, shot a tingle of awareness across her chest. Before her mind had time to wander to places it didn't belong, he yanked at the cuff again.

"Shhhh." She leaned close, her mouth just inches from his ear, her gaze darting toward the door. "They'll hear you."

A noise issued from his throat, and he turned his head in a languid, sleepy way that made familiar currents sweep through Jessica's belly. His eyelids fluttered and his head turned toward her voice. When his dark eyes found hers through that thick screen of lashes, Jessica's whole world stopped turning.

Velvet-brown eyes. Sexy. Molten.

We believe this man is Quaid.

Self-protection raised a barrier on her thoughts to keep out the what-ifs. Hope pulled on that barrier, searching for a miracle, while all Jessica could do was stare.

His lashes lifted a little more, and Jessica's heart caught in her throat. "Oh...oh, my God."

She sat back to get a full view of his face, then took his head in both hands and turned it toward her, so she could see his features all at once. One side of his face was scraped and raw, the cuts still harboring dirt.

No, this isn't Quaid.

Wait...

No.

But...

She scoured his face, forehead to chin, over and over, trying to convince herself one way or the other. He didn't have Quaid's nose, and there was

something different about his mouth. But, damn, those eyes just sucker-punched her.

His face was as handsome, rugged, sexy and well-proportioned as Quaid's had once been, but also just a little too off to be Quaid.

They say everyone has a twin somewhere. But what were the chances Quaid's twin would be here?

Nil.

She focused on his eyes once more, and the breath left her lungs in a quiet swoosh. How many times had she dreamed of looking into his eyes again? Millions. It had to have been millions.

This isn't reality. You're not really here. This man's eyes look like Quaid's because you want them to look like Quaid's.

And she did. God help her, she did. She so badly wanted for these eyes to be Quaid's, she would have sold her soul to the devil. Which was exactly why she'd told Teague and Keira she couldn't do this.

"Shit..."

Then he smiled, or tried to around the cuts. His lips curved, and his deep brown eyes glinted beneath those heavy lashes, and...Jesus, Mary and Joseph, that was *her* Quaid in those grinning eyes.

"Haven't..." He licked dry lips. "Seen you in so long." His voice was rusty, not altogether different, but not familiar either.

He rolled toward her, and the chain above his head clanked. She lunged to grab the metal and keep it quiet. The move pressed her body against his, and an instant, deep hit of tingling awareness penetrated everywhere they touched. His free arm curved around her hips as he made a sultry hum that sent fireworks through her body, and pulled her in until her breasts were snug against his chest. With his head tilted back, his gaze on her face with an expression of awe and pleasure and affection, it was clear this man was a little gone. Drugged like the other man had said, and he showed no fear, as if her presence didn't pose a threat to them both.

"You have to be quiet." Her breaths came quick and shallow—because of the fear, she told herself, not because of the way her body lit up being pressed against him.

"I miss seeing you." His hot gaze slid down her throat, lower to her chest, and rested on her breasts. She knew that look. The hungry one. The one that made her skin tighten and her nipples harden. Like now. "Why were you gone so long?"

Confusion. Desperation. Suggestion. That's what this was about. Because if this was truly Quaid, those comments didn't make sense.

"Look at me." She lifted his chin. When those brown eyes were on hers again, she quickly just pushed out the words before she couldn't. "Who am I?"

His smile grew wider. His lids grew heavier. The man was half out of his mind. This was a ridiculous effort. Then his arm tightened around her again. "Woman of my dreams."

She frowned. This was crazy. She was starting to believe *she'd* gone crazy, or she was about to. Those eyes had to be a fantasy. A trick of the mind. Something she saw because she so desperately wanted Quaid, or because she so desperately didn't want this to be just another dream where she would wake up to the stone-cold reality that her husband was in the grave and she'd never touch him again.

"Who's with you?"

His whisper brought her gaze up from full lips surrounded by several days of stubble to find his eyes filled with a liquid heat that made her body ache in ways she'd forgotten.

"No one." Which reminded her of what a mess she was in. "It's just me."

"Then..." His smile faded. His gaze darted past her, scanned the room, and came back. "Why are you here?"

What kind of question was that? And why the hell *was* she here? And where the fuck was *here*? Her mind wobbled on a razor-thin tightrope wire.

"To find you," she only half lied. "I came for you."

"You came...for me?"

The astonishment in his voice, the surprise in his eyes, made her feel ten shades of guilty for having refused Keira and Teague. "Yes."

"I've waited so long to hear you say that."

The sexy timbre of his voice was still caressing her when he lifted his face and pressed his lips to hers. Jessica pulled back, an instinctive move made out of confusion. But his free hand slid up her spine and cupped her head. And his lips moved over hers, firm and warm and oh, just so right.

His lids closed, and those long lashes lay just millimeters from her own. Her brain clouded. Her body softened. A fresh undercurrent of power flowed between them, sending adrenaline to her heart and energy to every cell in her body.

His kisses lengthened, deepened, until his lips caressed and suckled hers

as if he were exploring them for the first time. And like waking from a deep, refreshing sleep, everything inside her lifted, stretched, and filled. Each press, pull, or slide of his mouth erased a shadow from her past.

A sound floated from her throat, one of pain and loss, disbelief and hope. When the slow sweep of his tongue along her bottom lip stole her breath, she tried to remember if Quaid had ever kissed her so perfectly. Then he tilted his head, opened his mouth on a groan, and fully tasted her.

And she knew.

This was her husband. This was Quaid.

Jessica whimpered, tightened her arms around his neck, and kissed him hard and deep while a tidal wave of emotion flooded her chest. She couldn't stop, couldn't let go, couldn't open her eyes for fear he'd evaporate into the mist of a fading dream. Nor was she able to conceive of what she'd done to him by believing he'd been dead all these years.

Guilt and pain and fear prowled like starved beasts waiting to attack, but she had to do whatever it took to remain strong long enough to get Quaid out of here. Then she could feel all she had to feel. Deal with all she had to deal with. Then she could spend the rest of her life making it up to him.

When she broke for air, Quaid's dark eyes burned with lust beneath heavy lids. His lips were wet, his mouth open and ready for more. He breathed hard, his muscles straining as he pulled against the chain to bring her closer. "I knew you'd taste amazing."

"Don't talk." She pressed her fingers against his lips. His words were messing with her head, and she needed to stay focused. "You're not making sense right now. It's the drugs. I just want to get you out of here, and then we can talk, straighten everything out."

All those emotions crashed in another heavy wave. She took his face in both hands and pressed her forehead to his. "Then we can be together forever. I won't ever leave you again."

He grinned—all straight, white teeth and uneven crescents curving deep on either side of his mouth. *Her* Quaid. She'd never forget his grin as long as she lived. Her heart blossomed, so big, so beautiful, she was sure her ribs would crack.

"I knew it would be like this with us," he whispered before taking her mouth again with vital, life-affirming passion.

She was completely lost in Quaid when he turned his head sharply, breaking the kiss.

“What the fuck are you doing awake?” Another man’s voice came from the direction of the door.

The man lifted his foot and kicked out. A tingling rush zipped through Jessica’s whole body as his boot passed through her. She gripped Quaid tighter, trying to protect him, but the boot hit his chest, dead center, as if she wasn’t even there. He jerked hard.

“Quaid!” She reached for him. The coin flew from her hand, hit the wall, and rolled across the floor.

The man stood over Quaid where he’d slumped onto the mattress, coughing and wheezing.

“No!” She froze, torn between going after the man and saving the coin. Deciding she couldn’t harm the man, she scrambled for the coin. On hands and knees, she crawled and lunged just as the thin metal dropped into a gap between floorboards. She pulled at it with her fingers, but it had wedged itself into the tiny space.

“Shit.” She pried at the metal, dug at the wood, grasped the coin’s edge. It wiggled but didn’t come free.

Quaid coughed, then groaned. She glanced over her shoulder in time to see Quaid roll to his side and fall still.

“I’m here, Quaid. I’m right here. Hang on, baby. I’m going to get us—”

The big man kicked Quaid again. Jessica screamed. Dropping back on her heels, she covered her mouth with both hands, unable to breathe.

Quaid groaned again. Jessica let out the air she’d been holding. Relief eased the sting of terror, but rage grew in its wake. She was going to kill that man—she didn’t care who he was. She was going to find him, hunt him down, and kill him when this was over. But she had to get Quaid out first. She went back to work on the coin.

The man rolled Quaid onto his back and pressed his boot to his sternum. “You know what I think, Q? I think you’re just more goddamned trouble than you’re worth.”

Pain chewed at Jessica’s fingers until the coin popped free. Before she could reach Q, hoping she could take him with her, the scene flickered, and chaotic horizontal static patterns blocked her vision.

“No, no, no!” She raced toward Quaid, but static overtook the scene just as her body went weightless. “No!”

6

“No, no, no...” Jessica choked out the words and rubbed the coin like a genie’s lamp, even though she knew that wasn’t how it worked.

Her throat burned from screaming. Her mind turned inside out. The gapped wooden floor of the cabin had transformed back into the dove-gray commercial carpet of her office, to the water-streaked floor-to-ceiling windows facing the Capitol building.

“Jess, what’s wrong?” The voice startled Jessica, and she jerked her head in that direction. Keira crouched next to her on the floor. “What happened?”

Jessica stared at Keira, her mind chugging to a stop. She looked up. Around. Her office. She was in her office. Kneeling on the floor. With the coin in her hand.

“Jess?” Teague’s big hand pressed against her shoulder from behind. “Honey, are you okay?”

What in the hell just happened? That hadn’t been merely a vision. Had it? It had all been too vivid. Too *real*. She couldn’t have glimpsed Quaid only to have him taken again. That couldn’t happen. It just *couldn’t*.

“I have to get back,” she murmured. “I have to...” She pushed to her knees, lifted the coin toward the window, and screamed, “*Take me back!*”

“Back where?” Keira squeezed her arm. “Where are you trying to go?”

Jessica didn’t answer. She didn’t know. God, she didn’t know anything anymore.

The coin was dull, and the dismal weather outside didn’t provide any reflective light. Even the furious desperation whipping up inside her was answered by nothing more than a distant roll of thunder.

“We can’t stay here,” Teague said to Keira over Jessica’s head, but she let it drift past her aching brain. “I didn’t think it would take this long.”

Sweat broke out on Jessica’s chest, her face. Her heart thudded against her ribs, and she couldn’t get enough air. She didn’t know what was happening. Her brain wasn’t working, and it hurt.

A cramp tore at her stomach, and Jessica doubled over, clutching her belly. She could only stare at the carpet until the gripping pain passed. Her gaze caught on a pill bottle at the foot of her desk. Her mind turned, searching for its identity, and it hit her just as the cramp released and the shakes kicked in. Her Xanax.

And that’s when she knew what this was—withdrawal. This was one of those rare, bizarre, phantom withdrawal episodes. She’d had two others since rehab, and even her doctors didn’t understand them. But it was as if the mere consideration of taking drugs had twisted her system into believing she’d actually taken them, then had to deal with going dry all over again.

“This isn’t fair,” she moaned, closing her eyes and sinking into a ball.

Still, she struggled with questions from every angle. Had the entire episode been a withdrawal hallucination? A stress-induced vision? Or had she actually seen a man held prisoner? And had that man really been Quaid? Or was that part of the hallucination too?

“It’s okay, sweetheart,” Teague murmured. “I’ve got you.” He dragged her up from the floor and into his arms. “Easy now.”

The movement brought on a wave of nausea. Jessica moaned, squeezed her eyes tight and pressed her mouth against Teague’s shoulder.

“One minute,” Teague said, “and I’ll get you to the car.”

Car? She pried her eyes open, but couldn’t focus on anything, which made her head swim again.

“*Fuck.*” She clamped her head between her palms and squeezed her eyes tight again. “My head.”

“Hold on, Jess.” He jostled her down stairs. “Just hold on.”

“Teague.” The splitting sensation grew worse by the second. She’d never experienced this kind of sharp, biting, all-consuming pain. “*Stop, dammit!*”

They passed from dry warmth into freezing rain. Jessica gasped and curled into Teague. The movement sent the pain in her head stabbing down her neck. “I hate you.”

“I know,” he said. “I’m a prick. Ask anyone.”

“He is,” Keira said.

“Is your name anyone?” Teague shot back at Keira. “I think not.”

He stepped inside a darkened space, and the rain stopped pelting her. Teague eased her into a seat. Jessica forced her eyes open to slits, but everything spun.

“What’s happening to me?” She couldn’t clearly remember why Keira and Teague were there.

“We’ll talk in a second.” Teague leaned over and pulled a seat belt across her body. “Let me get your head settled first.”

The engine rumbled, and they started moving.

“Teague,” Keira said from the front, “brace her. I’ve got two shadows I need to lose.”

Groaning, Jessica fisted her wet hair and planted her elbows on her knees. There was no way she could handle a swerving car right now.

“Come here.” Teague gripped her shoulders and turned her toward him.

He sandwiched her knees between his, then pried her hands away from her head. An instant later, his big palms and long fingers covered her skull. Warmth instantly penetrated her head, and like an eraser, Teague’s touch wiped out the torment, calmed overzealous nerves, and relaxed bunched muscles. Blood rushed into her head, opening constricted vessels and feeding her brain.

The jostle of the vehicle as Keira braked, turned, gunned it, swerved, and then did it all repeatedly didn’t cause even a ripple of discomfort. Without Teague, Jessica would have been curled on the floor, puking.

She didn’t understand how Teague was able to heal with his hands, but she’d seen or heard about the positive thermokinetic effects from nearly every member of the team, his own wife and daughter included. Now, she appreciated them firsthand.

“What just happened?” She stood on the cliff edge of sanity. “Someone might want to start explaining before I go postal.”

“Tell us what you saw, Jess,” Teague said, his voice soothing but insistent. “Let’s start there.”

“Let’s start with that sleazy stunt,” Jessica told him, her head too heavy to lift from the seat.

He shrugged, but sincere regret showed in his eyes. “It was a last resort. I was desperate.”

Desperate people did desperate things. Jessica knew that fact all too well.

“It was still wrong.” But she couldn’t stay mad about it. She hurt too

much—physically, mentally and emotionally. Jessica leaned forward in her seat and rested her head in her hands. “Where are we going?”

“Speaking of sleazy,” Teague said with a smirk, “Mitch has a place for us to use as a base camp for the moment.”

“Mitch?” She lifted her gaze to Teague’s. “As in your brother-in-law Mitch?”

“Is there another Mitch?”

“Not like him, that’s for sure,” Jessica muttered and returned her stare to the carpeted floor, trying to sort out and prioritize all the main events with a low thud rolling behind her eyes and fragmented memories of the hallucination, vision, whatever thrumming through her heart. “Why is Mitch here?”

“Because he has abandonment issues,” Keira said, “and can’t be left out of anything.”

Teague laughed. “Save the good ones for when he’s around.” Then to Jessica, he said, “Mitch is here because he’s in this up to his eyeballs, and he’s a worrywart about Alyssa’s pregnancy, and he”—Teague shrugged and grinned— “can’t be left out of anything.”

“Thank you,” Keira said.

Their banter carried on in one ear, but Jessica’s mind drifted.

I knew you’d taste amazing.

The memory of that kiss created an ache down the center of her body. She pressed her fingers to her lips, unsure if they were tingling because of the freezing rain or—

She stopped herself and looked out the window where droplets darted diagonally along the glass. *This* was reality—the rain-soaked streets of Washington. Teague. Keira. This trouble. Her lips had to be tingling from the rain, or maybe a lack of blood supply to her head, because if she believed she’d actually kissed a real man, let alone her dead husband, she really *did* need that asylum she’d been considering in jest earlier.

Leaning on the armrest, head braced in her hands, she said, “Who are you running from?”

“That’s not entirely clear yet,” Teague said. “What happened with the coin, Jess?”

She lifted her gaze to his. Road noise filled the silence for long seconds as Jessica tried to form an answer. She finally exhaled a heavy breath, slid her hands over her face, and groaned, “I have no fucking idea.”

“Then just tell us what you saw,” Keira said.

Jessica sat back and closed her eyes. The weight of hopelessness that always came when she thought of Quaid’s loss slowly filled her chest even as she battled it back.

This was why she did everything she did—the move, the job change, the drugs, avoiding her abilities—because after coming so far in both life and rehabilitation, her pain still pushed her toward the edge of giving up and giving in.

But she wouldn’t have to face that—because the man she’d seen imagined or envisioned had not been Quaid. She could recognize that now in hindsight. And she could even understand why she’d thought—for that blissful moment—it had been.

“One car,” she said, closing her eyes to aid the memories. “A few men, three, no four, wearing dress pants, shirts, and ties. They were working together, but arguing like they didn’t get along. I saw another man, and he was a prisoner. But before you ask, I can’t even believe I’m having to answer this question seriously.” She straightened and held up a hand in warning. “No, it wasn’t Quaid.”

Keira and Teague shared a look.

Keira opened her mouth, and Jessica cut off her next question with the answer, “Yes, I’m sure.”

Jessica glanced out the windshield as Keira turned toward an upscale neighborhood. Teague leaned in and took her hands. “How do you know?”

She pulled her hands away, pushed them between her knees, and held tight to her last frayed nerve. “I know because Quaid is dead. I know because I’ve been living alone for *five years*.” She paused and banked her temper. “The man I saw had a shaved head covered in scars and a small frame. Even if Quaid had lost fifty pounds, he’d still have a big frame.

“His nose was too straight, his chin and cheeks too square—” She shook her head, the prisoner’s image flitting out of her memory when she tried too hard to recall. “His face... It just was all wrong. Dammit, I would have recognized my own husband.”

“He’s been gone a long time,” Teague said. “I know my memories of Suzannah started to fade as early as six months. By the time she’d been gone a year, I had to look at a photograph to remember the details, the unique things that made her Suzannah.”

Jessica couldn’t remember the last time Teague had spoken of his former

wife. Suzannah's depression-induced suicide would always be a deep wound for him, which made his mention of her now especially unsettling.

Keira glanced in the review mirror, meeting Jessica's gaze before saying, "You told me you hadn't looked at a photo of Quaid—"

"In four years. No, I haven't. It's too painful." She wouldn't be able to hold her temper much longer. Or the pain already tearing at her heart. "And what about *him* not recognizing *me*? Do you have an excuse for that too? Because he didn't know who the hell I was. Why do I feel like I should be tied to a chair under a spotlight? I'm not the one acting crazy here."

Keira and Teague fell silent, and Jessica's mind drifted right back to that cabin.

I miss seeing you. Why were you gone so long?

The more Jessica thought about it, the more surreal the memories became. She had scryed a time or two early on, when she'd been developing her abilities, but whatever she'd done today had not been scrying. And she'd never interacted with others when she'd scryed. But that man had seen her, engaged with her.

Or she'd been hallucinating.

Judging by the dryness of her mouth, the uncontrollable trembling in her limbs, and the deep craving for a hit, Jessica held on to the withdrawal-induced-hallucination explanation. This felt a lot like withdrawal to her, and that wasn't something a person forgot.

The car slowed, then stopped.

"Did you leave your body, Jess?"

The seriousness of Keira's voice pulled Jessica's head up even more than the crazy question. Keira stared over her shoulder at Jess from the driver's seat. A red traffic light shone through the rain-splashed windshield behind her.

"Did I...*what*?" Quick bursts of sensation, like sparkles, flashed through her body, making her feel light and dizzy like a head rush.

"You looked like you..." Teague started. "It's hard to explain, but it was like you were gone and your body was a place holder. There's a power called astral projection—"

"Holy shit." Jessica leaned away like he might be contagious. "Like I don't have enough to deal with?"

"Okay, you're right," Teague said in his ever-patient voice. "Listen, Jess, there is a lot we need to tell you, but you're going to have to keep an open

and clear mind to hear it, and it's important."

"Fine." Jessica sat back in her seat and crossed her arms, her gaze intent on Teague even though she was exhausted and wanted nothing more than to close her eyes and fade into oblivion. "I'm ready."

7

“Incoming!”

The marine’s yell brought Owen Young’s gaze up from his path of charred concrete chunks and twisted rebar. An army Black Hawk floated overhead, with another bundle of supplies wrapped like a cocoon and swaying at the end of a rope.

Owen squinted and held his hard hat down as the chopper’s rotors whipped the air. The supplies hit the ground with an earthshaking *thud*, the rope snapped free, and the Black Hawk angled back into the blue Nevada sky, just starting to peek through the spiraling pillars of smoke.

His eyes burned and watered, but he’d stopped paying attention long ago. He was numb. At least for now. As soon as night fell without word of Jocelyn or they had to suspend the search because of the site’s instability or, God, forbid, they found her body, then he would be in deep-ass shit. Which was why he couldn’t think of that now. He had to continue to hope. And search.

Military personnel crawled over the new supplies like ants on a sugar cube, and Owen continued his slow trek over the rubble, looking for signs of life. Or death. He would find Joce.

His gaze rose and scanned the vast devastation again. The one-hundred-thousand-square-foot, four-story, state-of-the-art military laboratory was now a fifty-foot crater in the desert floor. Military firefighters poured water on still-burning sections and dug through debris for hot spots. Military investigators pored over every inch of rubble and ash. The military personnel were aided in every fathomable facet from medical care to administration.

Something big was going on here, but nobody would talk. He still didn’t

know why in hell Jocelyn would have been here, but he'd been told half a dozen different times from half a dozen different sources she'd been here immediately before the disaster.

Owen didn't know of any business she'd have to warrant a site visit to a place like this—one of the darkest government testing facilities in the country, surrounded by rumors they used human subjects for testing.

Decades-old images from a village halfway across the globe floated out of a dark corner of Owen's mind. Men, women, children, even babies with their open wounds oozing pus and exposing bone. Their cries of agony tore through his head. All that pain, suffering and loss of life to shortcut the strict drug trial laws within the US.

“Colonel Young!”

Owen startled at his name. His vision sharpened as if he'd just woken, and he wondered for a dizzy second if he'd fallen asleep on his feet.

“Colonel!” the man called again. He waved from fifty yards away where he stood beside a crane dragging cement pilings off a mountain of rubble. “We've got a survivor here.”

“Yes,” he murmured. “Yes, yes, yes...”

He picked his way over crumbled mountains of cement, broken glass, and rebar prongs until he was at the rescuer's side, peering into the newly discovered darkness. Holding his breath, Owen crouched at the mouth of the cavernous space and shone a flashlight inside.

Come on, Joce. Be here. Be here.

His beam joined the others shining into the hole from rescue workers rimming the opening, waiting for the okay to go in. Down in the rubble, something moved.

“There.” Owen pointed directly below him, and the light beams followed, illuminating a dust-covered hand. To the right, he spotted the top of a head, the hair caked with ash. “Right there!”

Owen pocketed the flashlight, yanked off one glove, dropped to his stomach, and stretched out over the edge toward the cavernous center of the hole.

“You can't go in there,” someone above yelled. “It's not stabilized. The whole thing could cave in if you—”

“Screw stabilized, someone's alive in there. Grab my legs.”

Two strong pairs of hands gripped his calves. He dropped the top half of his body into the hole and stretched for the victim's hand. But it had stopped

moving, and Owen couldn't reach it on his own.

"We're here," he yelled. "My hand is right above you. Reach for me and I'll pull you out."

Movement. Just the fingers at first.

"Come on. I'm right here. Just a little more."

The victim—*please let it be Joce*—finally seemed to get the idea. The arm pushed through the rubble, and the hand gripped Owen's.

In that second, he knew it wasn't Joce. The hand was too big. Too rough. Too strong.

Disappointment choked him, but he put all his energy and focus into the survivor and dragged him upward. As the rock fell away, the head and torso of an older man appeared. He blinked, squinted, and choked on ash and debris. Several men ran off in search of stabilizing equipment and first aid.

"Take it easy," Owen said, his voice too shaky for reassurance. "Nice easy breaths. We're going to get you out. Just stay still."

The man sputtered, took in the chaos surrounding him, and panicked. He gulped air as if he were drowning, clawed at the rock still surrounding two-thirds of his body and tried to scream, but the sounds came out as guttural scrapes. His movement shifted the already-unstable rock walls.

"*Stop.*" Owen's command voice automatically came out and the man froze. "You're making it worse," he said in a more even tone. "Hold still and talk to me while the crews bring the equipment they need to get you out."

The man's eyes flicked toward Owen. "O—Okay."

"What's your name?"

"D—Dawes. Com—mander Kenneth Dawes."

"Do you remember what happened?"

Dawes's eyes had taken on that glassy look of shock. He didn't answer.

Owen squeezed the man's hand to hold his attention. "There was a very important member of the Department of Defense here. A woman. Tall, blond, beautiful. You couldn't have missed her." He swallowed, his throat dry in anticipation. "Deputy Director—"

"Dargan," Dawes said before Owen could. "She was here."

Fuck.

"Where? *Where* did you see her? Was she here? Near you?"

"She was, but then..." Dawes's eyes closed, and his head fell sideways. Owen yanked on his arm again, and the man perked up. "Then she went back to the cells. Wanted to look for something. A key. She thought O'Shay..."

stole the key. . .”

O’Shay?

“Keira O’Shay?” Owen twisted his mind to figure out where she could possibly fit into this picture. “Why was she here?”

“Not she. He. Cash O’Shay.” Dawes coughed. Wheezed.

Cash O’Shay?

According to Keira O’Shay’s file, her brother, Cash, died in a house fire when they were both young.

Dawes’s ash-covered eyelids closed. This time when Owen tried to rouse him, Dawes didn’t respond.

Owen dropped the man’s hand and let the other rescue workers take over. He pushed to his feet, this new information rolling around in his brain. Owen had heard rumors there was a prisoner here, trading his biomedical experience for a shorter sentence.

But this... He shook his head, at a total loss. He was starting to feel like he’d jumped into an alternate reality.

Owen glanced around the site, spotted a major searching floor plans rolled out on the open tailgate of a truck, and jogged toward him.

“We found Commander Dawes,” Owen said. “He said Director Dargan was headed back to the cells to look for something. I want you to get rescue crews to that area immediately, start a full-scale search—”

“Colonel.” The man’s expression suddenly registered with Owen. He’d seen it before—on the battlefield. He reflexively tightened his gut for the hit. The man turned and gestured toward the lowest part of the crater, where everything had been pounded deep into the earth and incinerated. “That’s where the cells were located.”

Owen’s stomach dropped. His knees went out, and he had to hold on to the truck to remain standing.

When he didn’t respond, the major said, “We’ve got rescue teams in every area of the site, sir. The deputy director is our top priority.”

Owen got his legs under him and wandered away. His mind circled and circled on his next plan of action, but couldn’t land. He’d seen this type of controlled chaos before, but that had always been during war, after senseless slaughters, misaimed bombs, a rebel insurgent attack. He’d always been prepared, and Jocelyn had always been by his side. Never under the rubble.

The thought of her slim, fragile body beneath all that jagged, harsh material pushed a sound of anguish into his throat. He forced the idea from

his mind. She was strong. She was tough. If Dawes could survive, Joce could survive.

Another Black Hawk set down away from the main carnage. A young air force sergeant climbed out and spoke with a member of the ground crew, who pointed in Owen's direction.

Goddammit. He wasn't ready—not to take over her work. Not to give up searching. Not to give up hope.

His pain brought up anger, which quickly rallied rage and fury for the fuckers who'd done this. And by the time the sergeant had jogged the distance and stood in front of Owen, saluting, he was ready for the order he knew was coming.

“Colonel, sir,” the sergeant said. “I've been assigned to escort you to the airstrip at Area 51. A C10 is waiting to take you to the Pentagon.”

8

Q could do this. If he'd brought her to him once, he could do it again. He sure as hell had never needed her as much as he did right now.

His face throbbed. His chest ached. His belly screamed. Green had beaten him just short of killing him. The animal would never give Q the reward of death.

In this case, Q hoped the pain would be a gift, because it pulled him from the void of unconsciousness just enough to use his mind. Or at least try.

Remembering her was easy. He swore he could still feel her mouth on his. That kiss had been amazing. Absolutely amazing. Whatever he'd experienced with her had most definitely been different from seeing her in his dreams. In his dreams, he never touched her, never smelled her. In his dreams, visions of her dissipated over time. But today, he'd had all of her, and she'd been crystal clear—right up to the moment Green had nailed him in the chest.

Fiery hatred bubbled up from deep inside him. Q didn't waste energy on anger. It never served him. But this was an involuntary rage that coiled hot in his belly when he remembered her panic, her fear. If he'd been able to speak, he'd have told her he'd be fine. Not to worry. But Green had stolen his air on the first kick, and then she'd vanished.

Q could still see her, on her knees, searching for something on the floor. Could hear her screaming...

The sound tore at him. His thoughts hazed. Images faded. He fought the pull of darkness. He dragged his mind backward in time, to the moment he'd first opened his eyes and seen her. She'd been holding something shiny.

Gold.

A coin.

He envisioned her there, sitting beside him, tilting the coin toward the window. God, she was more beautiful every time he saw her. Her deep red hair fell over her shoulders in a shiny fall. The skin of her face was so creamy and perfect, her lips... His mind transitioned from the sight of them to the feel of them as she'd kissed him. Pleasure and relief replaced the tension in his body and he drifted. . . .

No. No, he wanted to remember. To bring her back.

"Bring us home."

Her soft, sweet voice filled his head. His mind homed in on the coin again until the gold disk filled his mind. The surface blurred, then shimmered like a reflection on the water.

Control over the direction of his thoughts slipped away. When the shimmering reflection stilled, Q stared at many coins, not one, and he wasn't envisioning anymore, he was seeing. A box of *real* coins in many shades of silver and gold and bronze sat at his feet where he knelt on sandy ground beneath harsh sunlight.

Q tensed. His mind scavenged for traction. He was fully conscious. Fully in control of his mind again. If he could call this *in control*, because he didn't know what the fuck was happening.

He was no longer at the safe house. No longer restrained. No longer drugged. And he knew this was not an illusion or a dream. He didn't know *how* he knew, but he had no doubt that this new situation was real.

External sensations hit him—hot, dry air and sweltering sun on his skin, the scent of oil, gasoline, gunpowder and sweat, and the sound of angry voices.

"It's about fucking time." One of those angry voices shot toward Q from behind. "What the hell is going on with you? You can't go disappearing anytime you fucking feel like it."

Everything inside Q clicked on. He pulled his gaze from the coins and looked over his shoulder toward the voice.

A man stood twenty feet away. About the same age as Q, the other man held an M90 assault rifle on a group of six young men with dark hair, dark eyes, and dark skin. They stood with their backs to a crude canvas structure, hands up.

Q took a quick survey of the camp. Small, temporary, apparently deserted

but for the men standing at gunpoint.

“Q?” The man holding the weapon called to him. “Come on, man. What’s going on?”

Q stood and turned, squinting from the strength of the sun. His ribs groaned. His head swam. Sweat broke out across his body. “I...don’t know.”

But he recognized the new weight on his shoulders as his burden of responsibility to this man. He was Q’s partner. They were in the desert. Judging by the desolation, the sandy soil, the bare mountains, and the dark look of the men, it was a Middle Eastern desert.

“Those fucking sons of bitches.” His partner wiped a hand over his wet face. He wore a tan T-shirt turned brown with sweat, desert fatigue pants, and boots. “What are they doing? They know I need you. Why do they keep sending you away? Do they want these weapons or not?”

Q started toward his partner. He knew his name, but couldn’t remember. As he approached, Q studied his face—strong features, gray eyes, short brown hair, but not as short as Q’s. And no scars on his head like Q. “Where are we?”

His partner stared, his eyes like stone. Then a slow smile turned up one side of his mouth, but there was no humor in the expression, only irony. He shook his head and looked at the six hostages again. “Fucking beautiful. The first time I get within choking distance of Gorin, I’m gonna—”

“Gorin?” Q took another quick look in every direction. “This is another test? I’ve never been tested with anyone else before.”

When he refocused on his partner, the man was looking at Q with more pity than anger. His partner’s shoulders sagged. He glanced down at the ground, shook his head, and wiped his forehead again. “This is not a fucking test. This is the real thing.”

One of the men, the one on the end of the line closest to Q, moved. Barely. Just a shift of weight. But the sound of the sandy ground moving beneath his foot raked across Q’s brain. When the man broke from the line, darting toward the darkness of the nearest tent, Q was already on the balls of his feet, and took off after him.

Q had the back of the man’s shirt gripped in his fist before he ever reached the shade of the tent. He was already anticipating attack when the man twisted and kicked out, throwing punches and elbows. Q reacted without forethought. Without afterthought. He easily dodged the blows and hit back. One strike to the nose. One to the gut. One to the jaw.

The guy went down, sending up a puff of sand.

Q stood over him, shaking out his punching hand, holding his aching ribs with the other arm, breathing hard. “Fuck, that hurt.”

“At least you’re still good for something.” His partner, Q still couldn’t remember his name, or what they were partners in, sounded defeated. “Gorin didn’t send you, did he?”

Q didn’t know what that meant. “What makes you say that?”

“You’re still in civvies.”

Q recognized the term for civilian clothes and glanced down at himself. Gray tee, worn jeans, bare feet. Bare feet on hot earth. The burn suddenly registered, and Q moved into the shade of a tent.

“How are you getting here if he’s not...?” His partner squinted, his gaze suddenly intense. He seemed to forget the prisoners for a moment, lowering his weapon to take two steps toward Q. But he raised it again when one of the men shifted. “Wait. Do you have control over that now?” He spoke like he was sharing a secret. “Cause you gotta tell me how to do it.”

“I don’t know what I’m doing. I don’t know where I am.” He glanced around. “I know I should be here with you, but I can’t remember who you are or why I should be here.”

The tiny flicker of hope in his partner’s eyes disappeared, and his hard, gray expression returned. The other man darted a look at the prisoner, still unconscious on the ground, then refocused on Q. “Well, you may as well be of use for as long as you’re here.”

His partner pulled the strap of a second M90 over his shoulder and tossed the rifle to Q. He caught it in one hand, positioning the trigger beneath his finger without ever looking directly at the weapon. It felt good. It felt right. Even when Q knew this whole setup was very wrong.

“Take his shoes,” his partner said. “And help me move all the weapons and food into one tent. If I’m lucky, we can finish this mission before you disappear again.”

9

Jessica glanced out the SUV's window toward the top of the luxury condos, some twenty stories high, while Keira punched the security code into the gate for the underground parking structure. Above the modern building, the sky remained broody and gray, spitting snow flurries, but the lightning, thunder, and wind had dissipated.

"This is a pricey building," Jessica said. "Condos start at a million bucks. But you always told me Mitch runs with a unique crowd."

"Heh." Teague smirked toward the rearview mirror where Keira met his gaze. "That's a creative way to put it."

"I don't recall ever using the word *unique*." Keira paused just inside the gate, and both she and Teague took keen interest in watching the gate close all the way to the cement.

Keira's intensity remained on high as they rolled past a bevy of luxury vehicles. She lifted the lid on the center console, pulled out a Glock and laid it on her thigh. And the way her gaze swept every shadow of the subterranean lot sent a shiver across Jessica's skin.

"What are you expecting to happen in a secure parking structure?"

Jessica found herself whispering and felt stupid. This whole situation seemed so melodramatic.

"You know enclosed spaces make me jumpy," Keira murmured as she backed into a parking spot with cement walls on two sides.

She turned off the vehicle, rolled down her window, and leaned toward it, listening. When only silence filled the space, Keira released her seat belt and turned sideways so she had a good view of Jessica.

“We can talk here for a few minutes. Then we’ll head up.”

“Why not just go up?” Jessica asked.

“It’s busy up there,” Teague said. “We can’t talk about some of this in front of the kids.”

“Kids? What k—” Her confusion turned to shock. “*Kat’s* here? Why is... Is *Alyssa* here too?” She didn’t even need an answer. Wherever Teague and Kat went, his wife, Alyssa, went. “She should be home, near the hospital where she’s going to deliver.”

“That’s not possible.” The stress of that fact showed in the tight lines of Teague’s face. “She’s fine, and she’ll tell us if she needs anything. As for Kat, she thinks we’re on vacation.”

Jessica shivered, her rain-soaked clothes suddenly cold against her skin. Gooseflesh rose in painful sheets across her arms and legs. “I feel like I’m on a roller coaster. You know I hate roller coasters.”

“Teague,” Keira said, “grab her a jacket from the back.”

Teague pulled a heavy navy-blue jacket from the cargo space, clicked Jessica’s seat belt loose, and dragged the jacket around her shoulders. But nothing would warm her now. Alyssa and Kat and this new baby meant everything to Teague, and for him to put them at risk meant none of this was at all haphazard on his part. Which meant this was all very real, because no one on the team would support Teague in putting Alyssa, Kat, or the baby at risk.

“Okay.” She stuffed her arms into the jacket and pulled it tight around her. “I’m officially, completely, totally *freaked out*.”

Keira let out a heavy breath and leaned forward, resting her elbows on the seat’s armrest. “We’ll condense this for you. You don’t need to know all the gritty details right now, just what will keep you grounded, informed, and safe. The rest will come in time.”

Jessica fisted her hands in the arms of her jacket and nodded.

“I have a brother,” Keira said. “That’s who we went into the Castle to rescue.”

“A *what?*” Jessica searched her memory for this information, but it was absent. “You never told me about a brother.”

“I thought he’d died in a house fire when I was five. Turns out, he’d run away to escape our abusive mother. How we found each other is a story for later. What I want you to know is that he’s the one who told us about the other prisoner, the man he’s known all these years as Q. We tried to get Q out

of the lab too, but his cell was empty. When we went through his things, we found the coin.”

Jessica’s barriers went up, and she sat back. “I thought this was about you and the team. I’ve already told you—”

“Let me finish,” Keira said, firm but compassionate. “There’s a lot to get through.”

Jessica pulled her lips between her teeth and forced herself to keep quiet.

“A few days ago, I went to retrieve a child in what I’d been told was abduction by a noncustodial parent. In the end, it was another twisted attempt by Dargan’s team to get access to this boy. The boy turned out to be my nephew, which was how I discovered my brother was alive.”

Keira paused and all Jessica could do was shake her head. She heard Keira, trusted Keira, yet found it difficult to assimilate all this bizarre information. “Why did they want the boy?”

“He’s gifted, like us.”

Jessica’s mouth dropped open. “But how? Our powers came by chemical exposure, not heredity.”

“That’s a little more complicated,” Teague said.

“I just wanted to explain that much,” Keira said, “because my brother and nephew are upstairs too, so you’ll meet them.”

Jessica blew out a breath, already uncomfortable with the idea of reuniting with her entire team. But just as Jessica loved Alyssa and Mitch because they were Teague’s family, she would love Keira’s brother and nephew.

“There’s something I want you to consider, Jess.” By the serious tone of Keira’s voice, Jessica could already tell she wasn’t interested in considering. “When you think back to the man at the cabin and compare him to what you remember of Quaid, take into consideration that Quaid was thrown against a cement wall at a hundred miles per hour. Nearly every bone in his body was shattered.”

Jessica sucked in a sharp breath. The words, the memory, caused a burst of agony at the center of her body.

“We all have some ability to heal ourselves,” Keira said, “so Quaid would have too. But his injuries were so extensive that he might not have been able to heal himself perfectly. It’s important for you to rethink whether or not that man could have been Quaid.”

Keira climbed out and shut the door. Heavy silence followed as Jessica

felt the blood drain from her face.

“She’s just trying to—” Teague started.

“What? What *exactly*? Convince me that my husband *hasn’t* been dead for five years?” Jessica clenched her teeth around the need to lash out. “I know how much you all loved Quaid. I know how badly his death hurt all of you. I can even understand, considering all the bizarre things that have happened to us, entertaining this crazy notion. Hope springs eternal, right?”

She reached for his hand. “You just have to be able to understand why I can’t join in. To do that, I’d have to believe it was possible, and to believe it was possible, I would be setting myself up for relapse. I can barely face the calendar as it is. I wouldn’t survive reviving a hope that would only bring back that loss.” She searched his eyes. “Do you understand what I’m telling you?”

“I do.” His clear blue gaze never left hers. “So, think of it this way: there is a man being held prisoner and tortured by these sick fucks. He’s a human being, he’s important to Keira’s brother, and he deserves his freedom just like we deserve ours. If we could find him and get him back and didn’t at least try, we wouldn’t be able to live with ourselves.”

Jessica squeezed Teague’s hand and nodded. When she opened the door, she found Keira waiting, gaze scanning the parking lot, weapon held tight to her thigh.

Silence filled the cherrywood-and-mirror-lined elevator for the ascent of the first several floors, and Jessica tried to remember the man from the cabin. But her mind was so full, his image had faded, and she gave up.

“Everyone is here,” Teague said, “except Seth. He’s doing some research and will catch up with us when he can.”

Jessica lifted a brow at Keira. “How’s your reunion with the—and I quote—‘pissant-asshole-arrogant-sonofabitch Luke’ going?”

To Jessica’s surprise, Keira’s mouth kicked up at one corner. She shared a look with Teague before saying, “Better than expected.”

A burst of hope, an emotion Jessica hadn’t felt in a long time, tingled in her chest. “What does that mean?”

The elevator doors slid open on floor sixteen, and before Keira answered, Mitch stepped in front of the elevator. She’d “met” him over Zoom for the first time a few weeks back when she’d checked in on Alyssa.

Today, he wore a black button-down open over a white tee and faded jeans. His feet were bare. He would have looked urbanely stylish and

handsome if he hadn't been carrying a semiautomatic, with every knuckle on that hand scraped and raw.

"Looks like you have matching injuries," Jessica said, taking in the slash on his temple and the scrapes coloring his opposite cheekbone.

"Told you," Keira said, passing Mitch with a light jab to his stomach. "He can't be left out of anything."

"I'd love to be left out," Mitch called after her as she followed Teague down the hallway of plush fawn carpet, cherry walls, and alcove lighting. "But some people who *can't count* keep calling me with urgent requests like, 'Can you trace Keira's phone? And, yeah, one more thing, I need a plane *and* a pilot.'"

"Pfffffft." Keira dismissed him with an absent wave of her hand. "Whatever you gotta tell yourself, Foster."

When Mitch's gaze returned to Jessica, he was grinning that perfect my-parents-spent-a-fortune-on-braces-as-a-kid smile. "Finally, we meet in person. I should have known you'd be just as much trouble as the rest of them."

She didn't like the implication that this trouble had anything to do with her, but smiled anyway. "Good to know I still fit in."

"Oh," Mitch sighed and swung an arm around her shoulders in a friendly gesture. He walked her toward the open door where Teague and Keira had disappeared. "I'm not so sure that's such a *good* thing."

As they neared, the sound of laughter drifted out. A child's laughter—sweet, light, filled with innocence. Jessica stopped.

Mitch's arm tugged against her shoulders until he realized she'd stopped moving. He eased back and looked down at her. "You just lost two shades of color."

She pulled in a slow breath, then blew it out, but the tightness in her chest remained. Children often brought up a bittersweet pain. A reminder of exactly how much she'd lost when she lost Quaid. "Just need a minute."

"Alone? Or...?"

She darted a look at him, then the door. "I might not make it inside if you leave me alone."

He nodded, leaned against the doorjamb, and slid his fingers halfway into his front pockets. His phone rang three different times, but he didn't answer. Just waited. Silently. Patiently. Only this wasn't helping. The more time that passed, the harder it became for Jessica to move her feet forward.

“Ty isn’t here,” he finally said, his voice low and mellow, “if that’s what’s making you—”

“No. I mean it is, but not really.”

Another peal of laughter hit her, and she flinched and then laughed, the nervous sound making her unease even more obvious. “Guess it’s been a while since I’ve been around kids. Didn’t realize...” *It would bring back such gut-churning regrets.*

“That’s Mateo,” Mitch said. “He’s quite a kid. One of those you can’t help but love, you know?”

She nodded, then took a deep breath and looked at the carpet as she blew it out.

“What’s this I hear about you having three shadows?” Mitch asked.

“What about it?”

“Everyone else only has one,” he said.

A slight smile turned her mouth. “I learned how to lose them early on. I think they had a problem with that. I also have powerful connections.”

“Ah.” Mitch nodded, a sly grin tipping his mouth. “You scare them.”

She gave a one-shouldered shrug. “I have been known to hunt for dirt on Schaeffer. Some people knit, some play golf, I stalk Schaeffer.”

“Yeah?” His dark brows rose. “Get anything good?”

“Depends on what you mean by good. I haven’t got enough on a man of his standing in Washington to have him investigated or thrown out of office yet, but it is my goal in life.”

“It’s good to have dreams. Where do you have your dirt stored?”

“On my laptop.”

Mitch’s face fell. “Don’t tell me your laptop—”

“Is at the office. Yes, it is.” Jessica waited, letting Mitch grimace and squirm for a moment, then said, “Luckily, I also have the information stored on three different servers with full mirror backup.”

Mitch’s face registered shock, then slid into a sly grin. “You’re clever. I’ll bet you’ve got some dirty dirt in that library.”

“Dirty is my favorite kind of dirt. It’s not worth getting if it’s not dirty.”

“Agreed.” He took her hand and tugged her gently toward the door, then stepped aside so she could go in first. “I knew I’d like you.”

She glanced over her shoulder. “You just said you knew I’d be trouble.”

“That too. Let’s work on downloading that Schaeffer stash ASAP. The sooner I get him off our backs, the sooner we can all relax. And I’d really like

to have that happen before my nephew decides to pop into the world.”

“Agreed.”

Mitch put a hand on her shoulder, keeping her from stepping forward. “Do you have any cash with you?”

She shot another look over her shoulder. “Uh, no. I don’t have anything with me. We left the office kind of fast. Why?”

“Because Alyssa has the swearing jar out.” Mitch pointed to a small, nondescript jar stuffed with dollar bills sitting on the bar between the kitchen and the dining room. “Just a heads-up. And”—he grinned—“it’s always good to know where I can go to borrow some cash.”

Jessica patted Mitch’s hand with a smile. “Thanks for the warning.”

Her chat with Mitch had distracted her from her anxiety, and she walked into the white marble foyer feeling stronger.

The vastness of the apartment struck her first, but after a second glance, she realized the space was quite small and it was the white furniture, carpet, and walls with floor-to-ceiling windows looking out over the rainy city of Washington, DC that gave the living space its airy feel.

“Wow,” she said, glancing over her shoulder at Mitch. “Your friend must not have kids.”

Mitch laughed and shook his head, closing and locking the door behind her.

“Jessica.” Alyssa’s voice called from somewhere around a corner, and Jessica’s nerves eased a little. “Don’t make me heave this huge belly off the sofa.”

Mitch put a hand on her shoulder and guided her a few more steps into the apartment. “Make yourself at home.”

Then he started for the kitchen, where she could see Keira. Jessica turned the other way toward Alyssa, who had no trouble getting up and giving her a long, tight hug despite her big belly. A web of emotions spun inside Jessica, and tears filled her eyes.

When she leaned back and looked down at Alyssa’s belly, Jessica had to wipe her eyes, and a fresh wave of concern hit her. “You’re so big. You really shouldn’t be here, Lys.”

“Two strikes right out of the gate,” she said and wiped at more of Jessica’s escaped tears. “Watch your step, Jess.”

When Alyssa dropped back to the sofa, Jessica’s gaze found a man standing nearby who could only have been Keira’s brother. He had the same

black hair and striking blue eyes. Tall and fit, he was an attractive man, and he held an adorable little boy in his arms. This had to be his son, but the boy hadn't taken after the O'Shay side of the family. Olive skinned, with a headful of endless golden-tipped brown curls, he had brown eyes and a toothy little smile that made Jessica's heart feel uncomfortably gooey.

"Jess," Alyssa said, "this is Cash, Keira's brother, and his son, Mateo."

Cash smiled, but he seemed preoccupied, and Jessica had the uncomfortable sensation of being studied. She was probably guilty of the same curiosity. This was a man who'd been rescued from a lab where they experimented on people.

He had apparently been this mysterious Q's friend for years. Q, who'd somehow gotten hold of a coin that should have been buried with her husband. And now Cash stood before her, one hundred percent real, which seemed to take the entire situation from an elaborate, twisted tale into the unbelievable-but-possible range. And all the holes in her information lit up like floodlights, spurring a million questions and even more fears.

She stepped forward and offered her hand to Cash. He took it, his grip firm, steady, and warm.

"Hi." She released his hand and crossed her arms. "We're not meeting under the best circumstances, but after what you've been through, maybe this doesn't seem so bad. Welcome to our highly dysfunctional little family."

He gave her an easy "Thanks."

Her gaze shifted to Mateo. His big brown eyes seemed to absorb everything. "How old is he?"

"Five." Cash didn't take those invasive blue eyes off her. "Six soon."

"Cute." So cute, it hurt to look at him. "Is he always this happy?"

"So far."

"Aunt Jessica!" Kat's exuberance made Jessica jump.

She returned the girl's hugs with her heart beating twice as fast as it should. The next few minutes passed in a blur of Kat's excited chatter about Mateo, her almost-here baby brother, and first grade.

Finally, Mitch shepherded both kids toward a corner of the living room stacked with Legos, and Jessica settled on the love seat beside Alyssa. While Teague and Mitch found places among the other sofas and overstuffed chairs, Cash and Keira held a private meeting near the windows. Jessica didn't like the confirming nods from Cash or the way they both looked directly at her when they finished and started toward the group.

Jessica grabbed hold of her paranoia and her emotions and shoved them into a very dark corner. Logic—she needed logic now. Reasoning, decision-making and risk-assessment skills.

She curled her feet underneath her, but her body was strung wire tight. This was all so much to take in after so much time. “Where are Ty and Luke?”

“They’re picking up supplies,” Keira said as she and Cash took chairs across from Jessica. “Okay, stay with me, Jess. This is going to get convoluted, to say the least.”

“I work with politicians. I can do convoluted.”

Keira flashed a grin before growing serious again. “Like I told you in the car, Mateo is the reason Cash and I found each other again. A member of DARPA, a Russian scientist who’d come to America to advance the DoD’s paranormal warfare program, was involved in our team’s case after the warehouse explosion. His name was Rostov. He was trying to recreate our abilities with test subjects, but having little success.

“He had a theory about how genetics could add to the success rate, but the DoD wanted a direct approach, and Rostov wanted to go off on tangents. They came to an impasse, and Rostov left the department to start up his own in-vivo testing site. He bought cheap land in the Nevada desert and covered his activities with the façade of a religious group.”

“This is the compound near Las Vegas that caught fire last week?” Jessica asked.

Keira nodded. “Because Rostov had worked on our team’s case, he had all our personal information. At that time, Teague and I were the only members of the group who had young children carrying our genes. Mateo lived with Cash and his wife, Zoya, in Greece, which of course, I didn’t know, and Kat lived with Teague and Suzannah in Truckee.”

Alyssa, a physician, picked up the medical thread. “Suzannah’s suicide was depression induced. Depression has been known to run in families. We think Rostov chose not to take Kat because he wouldn’t have wanted the possibility of a genetic disadvantage tainting his experiments.”

“Which left Mateo,” Keira said. “And to get to him, Rostov...” She stopped, swallowed, and darted a look toward Cash.

“Rostov,” Cash followed through where Keira stumbled, “killed my wife, Zoya, and kidnapped Mateo.”

Jessica gasped. “Oh, my God.” Horrified by the images popping up in her

mind, she couldn't find anything appropriate to say to Cash for his loss. "When?"

"Three years ago," Cash said. "Either Rostov or someone from DARPA would have killed me too, to keep me from searching for Mateo and uncovering Rostov's history, but Dargan saw my background as a military chemist, and she and Schaeffer decided I was worth more alive. That's how I ended up at the Castle."

She closed her eyes and covered her face with both hands. "Can someone stop this ride? I want to get off."

"I agree, this is getting boring. Let's jump on another." Mitch pushed himself from his chair and sauntered toward the kids. He dropped into a crouch next to Mateo, ruffling the boy's curls. "Hey, little man. Let's play find the hostage."

"Mitch," Alyssa reprimanded. "Sometimes you are so blatantly inappropriate, I don't think you belong in mainstream society."

Mitch smirked and took Mateo's hand to lead him toward the dining room table, an expanse of glass and chrome looking out over the city below. The storm had settled into a gloomy sky and light mist.

Mitch stopped at the table, where a pile of maps sat in the center, a laptop off to the side with Google Earth already pulled up on the screen.

"What's he doing?" she asked. "What is Mateo's ability?"

"He's a remote viewer, among other things. We're still finding out because he only spoke Greek up until a week ago and still only knows a few basic English phrases. And since he's so young, he thinks all this is normal."

"Then let's find this Q character," Mitch said. "The longer that takes, the less chance it will ever happen. And I've got a pathetic life to live and violent criminals to free. Ain't that right, Creek?"

"Do you ever wonder why we don't invite you up for dinner, Foster?" Teague asked.

Mitch laughed.

Their banter was both amusing and annoying, and it brought back her melancholy memories from her life as a firefighter. Her life belonging somewhere. To someone.

"What are you doing?"

Holding Mateo by the hands, Mitch swung him over the back of the chair, and the boy squealed with glee. Once on his feet again, Mateo turned around, every little tooth showing, arms stretched up to Mitch. "'Gain! 'Gain!"

“Again,” Mitch said, stressing the “a.” Then he turned to Jessica. “Can we have the coin?”

Her chest tightened. *No*, rang in her head. She reached up to find the chain to her locket and slid it through her fingers. It was stupid to feel possessive of something that had meant nothing to Quaid. Still...

“You had the coin and you had him.” Jessica gestured to Mateo. “Why didn’t you just have him use it to find Q and leave me out of it?”

“We did,” Keira said. “When he tried to read off the coin alone, he got nothing, like it’s empty.”

“Then what are we doing?”

“We’re learning that we can combine our powers,” Keira said, “and we think by combining yours and Mateo’s, we could have a shot at finding Q.”

Jessica pulled the coin from her pocket, but didn’t hand it over. “I don’t know what that episode was earlier. It could have been nothing but a hallucination.”

“Or it could have been a clue to Q’s location,” Keira said. “We won’t know until we work on it some more.”

She didn’t want to work on anything and closed her hand tighter around the coin, but Teague’s concerns over the fate of a tortured man kept Jessica trapped in an impossible situation. “I can’t do that again. I can’t go back—”

Keira put a hand on her arm. “Mateo will view the location. All you have to do is hold his hand. We’re hoping that your previous vision of the property will guide him.”

“I’ve waited so long to hear you say that.”

Jessica remembered the joy and affection in Q’s eyes. Those beautiful eyes. If he was real, she wouldn’t be surprised to discover his eyes weren’t even brown. That she’d just superimposed her memory of Quaid’s eyes onto Q’s out of sheer desire.

She held the coin out to Mitch, and he took it, giving her hand a reassuring squeeze. But it didn’t help. She was scared. Scared of what they’d find. Scared of what they wouldn’t find.

And that was when she realized, what she’d been fighting to avoid had already happened. By the team simply being who they were and believing what they believed, some part of Jessica had jumped on board too.

The rain picked up outside and lightning sparked within the charcoal clouds. Jessica crossed her arms and pressed her lips together in determination. It was simply a game of the mind. She’d just have to find a

way to adjust her thoughts to deal with that tiny sliver of herself that would always wish things could have turned out differently.

“That is really cool,” Mitch murmured, looking out at the flashing sky, “but in a really creepy sort of way.”

Mateo bounced on the chair, his dark eyes sparkling, his face alight with energy. Jessica’s polar opposite. He grabbed the coin from Mitch’s hand, held his other hand out to Jessica, grinning with the kind of enthusiasm only a child’s innocence could produce, and said, “Find Q!”

“I think this kid was born ready.” Mitch pried one of Jessica’s hands from the crook of her elbow and guided it to Mateo’s. “Just visualize the house, Jess. That’s all you need to do.”

Jessica took the boy’s tiny hand in hers. The fingers of her free hand curled into a fist and her lungs shrank, making it difficult to pull in a full breath. She closed her eyes—not because she needed to, but because she couldn’t stand seeing everyone stare at her. They all went silent, except for Mateo. He murmured something in Greek and held Jessica’s hand so tightly, sweat formed where their palms met.

After about two minutes, he let go of her hand. “No work.”

Jessica blew out a relieved breath and opened her eyes, only to find Mateo reaching for her again. With a determined frown pulling his brows and puckering his cupid’s bow lips, he pushed the coin into Jessica’s hand, then he covered it with his, sandwiching the metal between their palms.

As soon as he turned his attention back to the map, heat flowed up Jessica’s arm. Mateo bounced on his toes and pointed to the United States. “There.”

Mitch pulled a bigger map of the US from the pile and set it on top. The current grew stronger and heated Jessica’s whole body. The boy pointed to Utah. *Utah?* Mitch changed the maps again. The room grew warm. Stifling.

“Way to go, little dude,” Mitch said.

Jessica’s heart thumped against her ribs, as annoying as someone popping gum in her ear.

Haven’t seen you in so long. Who’s with you? Why are you here?

She would say he’d mistaken her for someone else, but that would be admitting that she’d really seen and heard and felt everything she swore had been a vision. For him to have seen her, she had to have been there. To have been there something really freaking crazy had to have happened with her powers.

“Q is here!” Mateo’s excited cry brought Jessica’s attention to the map—and to the way a cold film of sweat had developed over her face, neck, and chest.

His palm lay flat over Salt Lake. Cash was already at the laptop, pulling up the area on Google Earth.

“Good job, buddy.” Mitch patted the boy’s head and looked at Jessica. “I really need you to focus here. This is where it counts.”

She came out of a trancelike fog she hadn’t realized she’d fallen into. An enlarged map of Utah lay on the table now, all the elevations marked in thin lines. Her head felt dizzy enough to spin off her body, and the fear she’d suffered when she thought she was leaving that cabin without Quaid grabbed her by the ribs.

“I...I...don’t...” She put a hand to her chest with panic crawling up her throat. Lightning flashed beyond the window. Full, thick bolts piercing the sky, followed by the thrum of thunder. “I can’t breathe.”

Teague appeared in front of her. He put his open hands on either side of her head. His touch melted the anxiety like warm honey over ice. Her muscles relaxed. Her lungs expanded.

“You’re okay,” he murmured. “I know this is hard, but we’re right here. Better?”

She took a few deep breaths, then nodded. Teague stepped aside. Jessica didn’t close her eyes this time for fear the darkness would bring back the vertigo. Instead, she tried for that hundred-yard stare where everything blurred into a monotone waterscape.

She visualized the forest surrounding the cabin, the break in the trees where the building stood, the porch. She didn’t let her mind go inside the house, but remembered the part of the floor plan she knew—the living room, hallway, kitchen, bathroom, bedroom....

You came for me? I’ve waited so long to hear you say that.

“Q!” Mateo yelled, jerking Jessica from the confusing memory. “Q is here.”

Mateo’s little finger traced a ridgeline along Salt Lake. Cash roamed the area with Google Earth, Mitch hanging over his shoulder, scanning a barren wilderness where nothing but acre after acre of forest filled the screen.

“There,” Mitch said. “Go back.”

Cash manipulated the computer to Mitch’s instructions until a tiny structure filled the center of the screen. From the overhead view, she could

gauge certain elements of the property. The house was the same size, with the same silver metal roof. The same fence around the front yard. The same blue sedan sitting out front.

“That’s it,” she said, voice shaky. “That’s the house.”

She hadn’t imagined it. She hadn’t imagined the man inside. Had she imagined his eyes? The kiss? The way her heart filled with the belief that her husband had survived?

How would she protect herself from the disappointment of finding another man, and not Quaid, in that house?

“Good work, kiddo.” Mitch touched buttons on his phone and raised it to his ear while he swung his other arm around Mateo, pulling the boy up and out of the chair.

Mateo squealed and laughed. Mitch carried him into the open living room, tucked his phone between his ear and shoulder and swung Mateo in circles by the hands. The boy’s unadulterated joy made a warm spot open in Jessica’s chest.

“It’s a go,” Mitch said, drawing Jessica’s attention. “Get the guys to the airstrip. I’ll call the pilot.”

Fear, pure and hot, smashed Jessica. “What?” She searched the room of faces. “What do you mean? What guys? What pilot? What are you doing?”

“We’re going to get your man, Jess.”

She gripped the chair in front of her before turning. Ty and Luke stood behind them, and she read Ty’s smile as overzealous. Her gaze skipped to Luke. If Ty looked strung out, Luke looked almost Zen-like, the two men a study in opposites.

“Hey, Jess,” Luke said with that easy, sexy grin—not at all the snappy, irritated demeanor he’d had in the years following his and Keira’s breakup. “Lookin’ good.”

“Back at you.”

Jessica caught Keira grinning at Luke like a love-struck idiot.

Keira met her eyes, tried to stifle her smile, and raised her eyebrows and her shoulders. “What?”

“You know what.” Jessica’s fear fell away for one beautiful moment as she realized Keira and Luke had found each other again. Tears of joy stung her eyes.

Since she’d lost Quaid, the breakup of two people who belonged together hurt a deep place inside her, and she was thrilled these two were together

again. They were perfect for each other.

“When did that happen?”

Keira pulled her lower lip between her teeth, darted a look at Luke, then returned her attention to Jessica, unable to keep the smile off her face any longer. “Last week, during, you know, this mess.”

“I guess meeting up again *did* go better than expected,” Jessica said. “Much better.”

Jessica looked at Luke, put two fingers to her eyes, and pointed at him.

He laughed and saluted. “I’m on my best behavior.”

Bracing internally, Jessica met Ty’s eyes. “Hey, Ty.”

Ty’s intense gaze trapped Jessica. His beautiful hazel irises were so bright, his grin so sharp, he reminded her of a junkie on a high, but she knew Ty wasn’t high on drugs. He was high on this ridiculous idea of Quaid being alive.

He advanced on Jessica and took her into a sweeping hug that pulled her off her feet. “He’s alive, Jess,” Ty said against her hair. “He’s *alive*.”

Emotions of love, loss, confusion, grief, and too many more to name twisted through her like a tornado, and she pushed away from him. He put her down and leaned back, his smile so extreme, he looked a little crazed.

“Ty, this is insane.” She pulled out of his arms, her anxiety growing. “This is *insane*. Yes, there is a man being held prisoner in this house. Yes, in some ways, he looks like Quaid, but there are more differences than similarities. One coin, a few coincidences, and you’re all ready to believe Quaid has come back from the dead.”

An eerie sensation swept over her, and she sought out Cash, then Keira. “Unless you know something I don’t. What aren’t you telling me?”

“It’s not what we’re not telling you,” Keira said. “It’s what you’re not allowing yourself to consider. You have all the same pieces we do.” She brought up a hand and started ticking off fingers. “The classified chemicals at the fire, our paranormal abilities, all our shadows, Teague’s false conviction of murder, DARPA’s attempt to duplicate our powers, Mateo’s abduction, Mateo’s testing, Zoya’s murder, Cash’s imprisonment.”

Keira dropped her hands, but her eyes implored Jessica to walk off that cliff edge, just as if a dealer were holding out a dime of coke. “I think the real question is, why *couldn’t* Quaid be alive? And if he is, how are we going to get him out?”

10

The pilot announced their imminent landing at Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling, and Owen straightened and stretched his neck, back, and legs. The movement brought his brain back online, and he was instantly wrapped in all the unknowns, suspicions, and doubts again.

He'd showered off the filth from the site in a locker room at Area 51 and dressed in the uniform from his go-bag, but inside his mind and heart, the grit created by the carnage he'd witnessed earlier in the day remained.

The plane's landing gear rumbled into place, and Owen did what he'd done for the last two decades when he needed to focus—he closed off his emotions and operated on logic. At least, it was the best he could do under the circumstances.

A car waited to take him to the Pentagon, and on the drive, Owen thought of the Castle's destruction, the three downed Apaches, the dozens of deaths, the lost years of experimental data, and the millions of taxpayer dollars in ruined equipment.

Then, like a ghost, Dawes's words floated into Owen's mind. "*Thought O'Shay stole the key.*"

The only key Owen could think of was the one that had been in the envelope that had come just last week from Jason Vassar's attorney. Since Jason had left his assets to Jocelyn in his will, Owen could make a fair guess that the key probably fit either a building or a safe-deposit box. Stephanie, his secretary, was looking into both possibilities. How O'Shay could have gotten possession of the key...

Owen rubbed a hand over his mouth. *Don't go there.*

Of course, he couldn't *not* go there. How Jocelyn could have possibly had a reason to interact with O'Shay was completely beyond him.

But then there was the other little bomb Dawes had dropped. "*Wants O'Shay's formula.*" Clearly, Jocelyn had been harboring secrets.

"Doesn't fucking matter," he told himself.

But it did.

He wanted answers. He wanted justice. And by the time he walked the long, cold halls of the Pentagon toward the office Schaeffer inhabited as a member of the Armed Forces Committee, Owen was itching to lead a team of Special Forces soldiers toward an assassination of whoever had committed this act of terrorism. And after mulling over the possible culprits for hours on the flight, he'd pretty much narrowed it down to one group.

He entered the outer office and greeted Schaeffer's secretary, a pleasant, middle-aged Asian woman named Cherry.

"Yes, sir." Cherry stood with a friendly smile, smoothed her straight navy skirt, and opened the office door for him. "The senator is expecting you."

But Owen wasn't expecting the senator. At least not *this* version of the senator.

Gil Schaeffer paced the room. The man never paced. His never-touched, two-hundred-dollar cut was mussed and standing on end. His expensive suit jacket lay crumpled in a heap on a couch, and his shirtsleeves were rolled up to the elbows.

Owen slowed his step, donned mental body armor, and stood at ease in front of Schaeffer's desk. It took every ounce of patience he still possessed not to open with an attitude-laden *You rang?*

Instead, he waited. As soon as the secretary closed the door, the older man turned his way. "Any sign of her yet?"

Damn. All Owen's fears surrounding Jocelyn's status slammed against his shields. They held, but barely. "Not yet, sir."

"All right, then." Schaeffer picked up a stack of files and dropped them on the desk in front of Owen. "Sit. We have a lot to go over."

Schaeffer squeezed his overfed, under-exercised frame into his desk chair and pulled out a tablet.

Owen eased himself to the edge of the chair across from Schaeffer's desk, already uneasy. "What, exactly, are we going over, sir? I can't stay for an extended amount of time. I have to get back to the site and rejoin the search. And I'm in the middle of a project at DARPA—"

“I’ve already cleared your current duties with Cox. He’s delegating. As for Jocelyn, if they haven’t found her by now, they aren’t going to.” He waved Owen off with the flick of one hand. “We’ve got serious damage control to get ahold of.”

Schaeffer’s comment about clearing Owen’s duties with the director of DARPA, Carter Cox, went right over his head. It was the allusion to Jocelyn’s death that hit him in the chest with the force of a sledgehammer. For a moment, Owen couldn’t breathe.

“We?” he finally asked.

“Yes, Owen, *we*. You’re directly under Jocelyn in the DoD org chart.”

Jesus, she hadn’t even been confirmed dead, hadn’t even been missing more than a few hours, and life was already moving on as if she’d never existed. What kind of life was that? To be forgotten before your body was even cold?

The kind you lead, dipshit. Who would care if you died?

Not his soon-to-be-ex-wife. Hardly his kids. And certainly not the man across the desk. Schaeffer cared about one person, and one person only.

“What do you know about this op?” Schaeffer asked, looking up from beneath manicured salt-and-pepper brows. “And don’t bullshit me. We need to go at this straight up. What has Jocelyn told you about the work at the Castle?”

An eerie chill had Owen positioning his feet to stand, pivot, and run. As always, he braced himself for battle instead.

“I’m realizing I had very little knowledge of what Jocelyn was working on. I know nothing about the Castle or the projects there. Now, why don’t you bypass the bullshit on your end and tell me *exactly* what the fuck was going on that made someone angry enough to want the facility blown into Arizona. And don’t try to pass it off as a fucking homegrown terrorist cell.”

Schaeffer’s lips parted in surprise. His gray-brown eyes glazed over. Owen basked in the satisfaction of getting under the asshole’s skin until Schaeffer pulled himself together.

He sat back in his chair and regarded Owen with eyes positioned too close together. “You’re a smart man. I expected you to have that figured out by now.”

“With what? No one on scene will talk to me. I have no history of the activities at the Castle. Jocelyn obviously wasn’t sharing information.”

“Make an educated guess.”

Schaeffer chose a shitty time to play power games. Owen had come on strong, so Schaeffer needed to take control back. Owen had mastered this game a long time ago. And mastery included knowing when to lose a battle for a better shot at winning the war.

“I’d guess Jocelyn did something to piss off the Phoenix team and they went there to break Cash out.”

“Phoenix team?” Schaeffer asked.

Owen shrugged a shoulder. “Their scars resemble the shape of a phoenix. That’s what Jocelyn called them.”

Schaeffer didn’t respond, but by the look on his face, Jocelyn hadn’t shared that with Schaeffer. And that only confirmed just how many secrets she’d been holding.

“If you know they caused this catastrophe, why aren’t they in custody?” Owen asked. “I don’t understand why this homegrown terrorist rumor is floating out there.”

“That’s not all you don’t understand.” Schaeffer’s arrogant tone grated on him, but Owen let it pass. “This is one time I wish Jocelyn hadn’t been so goddamned good at keeping secrets. Now, tell me what you know about the team.”

Owen’s anger built like steam in a kettle. “They were exposed to classified chemicals in a fire that altered their DNA, resulting in paranormal abilities. One man died. The others recovered from their injuries, and all but one left the fire service. All are intelligent and skilled and formidable. I know they have agents assigned to shadow them, to monitor them and their powers as they develop, and I know hell broke open when Creek escaped prison.”

Now hell was nipping at their heels again because O’Shay was free. Clearly, this team had information that could take Schaeffer down.

“I know O’Shay’s and Ransom’s powers are enhanced when they’re together, and I know Mitch Foster is all kinds of caught up in this because Creek married his sister.”

His gaze dropped to the thick files in front of Schaeffer. Files that were far more in-depth than those he’d been given. “Sure as hell not enough information to fill all those.”

Schaeffer pushed himself from his chair using considerable effort, and then paced in front of the windows. “I’ll give you the highlights. You take those folders back to your office and get yourself up to speed on the details *tonight*. This is a matter of national security.”

Owen's brow fell. National security? Like hell. Who the fuck did this guy think he was talking to?

Before Owen let his temper loop a noose around his own neck, Schaeffer said, "There was another prisoner at the Castle in a similar situation to O'Shay. He's participating in a trial in lieu of a death sentence."

"What kind of trial?"

"That's classified as need-to-know."

"If you want me managing this, don't I need to know?"

"Maybe. In time. Right now, all you need to know is that he has abilities even stronger than those in that team. Out in the world, he is a very dangerous man. Inside the Castle, he has been utilized to gather military intel from all over the world—Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Syria, China, Hong Kong, Egypt. His intel comes in at ninety-eight percent accuracy."

Owen's mouth dropped open, but he was speechless. He couldn't even form a coherent question from the thoughts flying around his brain.

"The recent arrests of eleven al-Qaida-linked terrorists with bombs ready to blow up the Western Diplomats' Conference?" Schaeffer said. "The prisoner. The Hezbollah cell arrested in Mexico with truckloads of C-4 smuggled into the States through undiscovered tunnels meant for the Golden Gate Bridge? The prisoner. Rescue of eight Marines in Afghanistan scheduled for beheading? The prisoner. Rescue of the Atomic Energy Coalition's CEO from terrorists with plans for a dirty bomb? The prisoner. Every single one of those incidents had been stopped because of this prisoner."

Holy. Fuck.

Schaeffer glanced over his shoulder at Owen's stunned face. His mouth barely turned, but a condescending smile played at the corners of his eyes. "And those are only a sample of the ops he's been involved in. He's saved an untold number of American lives, both here at home and overseas, civilian and military."

Owen didn't know what to make of this. The information was probably true. The incidents were too high profile for Schaeffer to pull them randomly. He'd know Owen had the clearance to find out if he was telling the truth.

But Schaeffer was painting a rosy picture. Owen had been around too long to forget the flip side of every op. Things no one liked to talk about. Things like how many people died for the information this prisoner pulled in. Like what this prisoner did or said to gain access to such sensitive

information. Like what else the prisoner was doing that didn't necessarily benefit the American people, only Schaeffer specifically.

"How?" Owen asked. "How was he performing these miracles from a cell in Nevada?"

Schaeffer turned toward the window and clasped his hands behind his back. "That's need-to-know as well."

"If he was at the Castle, isn't he dead?"

"He was getting ready for transport to another facility for testing when the chopper hit the lab. We got him out, detoured him to a safe house in the mountains of Utah with a transport team until we get this mess settled."

Owen narrowed his eyes. "Transport team?"

"Four of our best agents are on him."

"That's it? A four-man team for a prisoner with that kind of power?"

"That's why I called you in. I want you to take whatever measures you feel are necessary to secure him. We have other testing facilities, but their security systems would need to be updated and maximized."

Owen felt like he was playing hot potato and Schaeffer had just tossed him a grenade, pin pulled.

"And what budget am I using, sir?"

"The black budget," Schaeffer said.

Owen had done his share of black ops, but there was something very wrong about this one.

"Does Cox know—"

"No one is in on this unless I say they're in on this." Schaeffer turned on Owen with a gaze so fierce, he almost flinched. That would have been a very poorly timed submissive move. "This is a need-to-know operation. Do you understand?"

This was why Schaeffer had everyone scared shitless of him—he had a frightening ice-cold streak that gained teeth whenever something he wanted was at risk. And a man like Schaeffer didn't waste his time with anger unless he had something important to lose.

"You still haven't explained what any of this has to do with the media spreading disinforma—"

He didn't need to finish the leading comment before he saw below the surface of Schaeffer's fury. Owen stood, grateful for the desk between himself and the other man or he'd already have his hands around the fucker's neck. "What do they have on you?"

“It’s not just me.” Schaeffer’s indignant tone only intensified Owen’s anger. “There are a lot of important people whose reputations and careers would be damaged or ended if Mitch Foster leaked the information he’s got. And the American public will go ape shit if they discover some of the projects going on at DARPA.”

“What information?” Owen demanded, then asked, “Is this prisoner Cash O’Shay?”

“No. But Cash O’Shay escaped last night, undoubtedly aided by that team.”

Owen straightened. “How does this other prisoner play into it?”

“The team may have knowledge of the other man. Knowing their self-righteous attitude, it wouldn’t be a surprise if they tried to locate and free him as well. So, get him on lockdown. Now.”

When Owen didn’t immediately agree, Schaeffer said, “Don’t think you’re an exception to this exposure, Owen. A breach of this magnitude would irreparably damage the DoD’s current ability to work in the dark. And your projects are as deep in the devil’s lair as the ones taking place at the Castle.”

11

The rumble of engines cut out. Large, well-tuned engines. Some type of heavy-duty truck, but not industrial. Doors clicked open, then whispered closed on another faint click. Boots touched down. Careful. Quiet.

The distant sounds drifted into Q's head as he struggled through layers of consciousness to reach that perfect balance—where he could find *her*, but not get trapped in that bizarre world where he'd been earlier. Only, he was fighting a shitload of drugs, and his brain felt like it had melted.

When he managed to part his eyelids, he couldn't see straight or sharp. Couldn't hold a thought more than a few seconds. Couldn't control his mouth to speak. And the ribs Green had broken were mending more slowly than usual, their creak and moan a distraction all their own.

Whispers met his ears. Disjointed murmurs from a distance. Not the guys. Davis and Daniels played cards in another room. Pike paced out front. Green sat on the back steps, whittling wood with a pocketknife. Those sounds came in as clear as if Q were inside their bodies.

He must be hallucinating. They were too far from civilization to pick up voices, even for him.

Q's mind slipped off the thought and descended into the dark.

"...two in the living room, one at the front, one at the back..."

"...stay low, move fast..."

"...grab and go..."

The fragments brushed through his thoughts like a bird's wings. Green must have given him a triple dose of the sedative after *she'd* been here. Q wanted to laugh. He must have been revved. Must have scared Green. Q saw

it sometimes, a quick dark flash in the man's eyes.

Q had reason to be plenty revved—she'd *kissed* him. She'd fucking *kissed* him. His mouth wouldn't smile, but he felt it at the center of his body. The joy. The excitement. And while their first kiss hadn't been anything he'd expected, it had been everything he'd secretly hoped for. Filled with passion, free of gratuitous lust. Because that's how she kissed the others—with a careless, thoughtless, meaningless slide of her mouth.

No. She'd kissed him with purpose. Desire. Emotion. She'd kissed him like she *cared*. He'd tasted it all. And, yeah, he was seriously high. It was possible she hadn't been here at all, but he still thrilled at the possibility of being able to bring her to him instead of having to hang in the shadows and watch her with another man.

Boots shuffled in the mulch. Soft, swift, careful.

"Jess, stay close to me."

A different voice, closer. Familiar? Alarm sizzled along Q's skin. His muscles tightened. At least they would have if he could control them. The fact that he didn't have control over his body, couldn't see, couldn't think, made the apprehension ratchet higher. Which brought him closer to the surface.

He didn't want that. He wanted to relax. Sink deep. Find her again.

...on three..."

"...two, three..."

A burst of activity sounded outside. Just outside. Q broke through the film of consciousness, and his body reacted instinctively. His arm jerked against the restraint, and he rolled to his side but couldn't sit up. He peered through barely open eyes, but saw only darkness.

Think, dammit. Why couldn't he think?

From the front of the house, a grunt was followed by the quick, hard *smack, smack, smack* of flesh—knuckles to cheek. Then quiet. From the back, more struggling. The crack of bone. A muffled expression of pain.

Q smiled. Whoever was out there had cracked Green's skull. Q knew the distinctive sound because he'd had his own skull cracked. He just hoped the bastard didn't pass out, so he was in a world of hurt. Q wished he'd been the one to cause Green's agony.

Q's mind started to fade again. He struggled to hold on to consciousness. He needed to know what was happening. Who knew where they were? Who would risk attacking these guys? Why? How much more danger was Q in

now?

The answers hovered like shadows just outside his reach.

Splintering wood joined shouts. The guys must have gotten into another fight over their card game. They argued a lot. About everything. Maybe Samuels was just bitching at Pike again for letting Q get his gun.

That's all the work his mind could do before his semiconsciousness slid slowly back toward that abyss. Q let himself drop into the coldness, keeping warm inside with thoughts of her—replaying her words like music: *I came for you.*

Doors slammed, furniture toppled, and footsteps echoed on the wood floors, thinning the lacy black veil shielding Q's mind, and alarm resurfaced, but Q couldn't sustain it for more than three seconds. Behind his closed lids, tiny streams of light bounced around the room. *Flashlight* flickered through his mind.

"That's him." *Her* voice. There. Right there next to him. One he recognized instantly, a blend of sweet and strong and, tonight, scared.

She was back. *She's back.* He'd done it. Excitement tingled through his body. He pooled all his strength to hold himself there, in that state where she could reach him.

Light hit his face. He wanted to wince, to put his hand up and shield his eyes, but his limbs wouldn't obey his mind.

"My God," she said, her voice wavering and rising. "What did they do to him? He didn't look like that when I left. He was hurt, but not this bad."

Her voice grew closer until she had to be kneeling beside him. And, oh, yeah, he could smell her now. Why hadn't he noticed her scent before? So delicious. He didn't have words to describe it. Only random thoughts came to him, like beautiful, safe, peace, warm, happy. Everything. She was his *everything.*

Q used all his strength, but couldn't pull his eyes open. Tried to form words with his mouth. Had to speak. Had to keep her close.

"I'm...here," he managed to whisper. "Don't...go."

"We're not going anywhere without you, buddy."

The male voice hit Q like a hammer. Familiar, but his fuzzy mind categorized it as dangerous. A guard, maybe. His body reacted as if it was a separate entity, as if it had a mind and soul of its own. Q's free arm swung up. The man ducked, but Q anticipated and twisted. He caught the back of the man's neck in the crook of his elbow, wrapped his forearm around his throat

and yanked upward.

But the fucker turned his head and escaped a broken neck. Q didn't want her here. Didn't want her to see this. Didn't want her in danger.

"Get...out, girl," he rasped. "Run. Hide. I'll...find you."

"No, stop," she told him. "Let him go. You have to let him go. We're here to help you."

The man bent back Q's wrist and loosened the hold on his neck enough to speak. "Q, it's me—Cash. It's Cash."

Q froze. Something happened inside him, a strange fusing of mind and body. The strength that had come out of nowhere slowly drained. His hold on the man slipped.

"That's it," he said. "I told you I'd come back for you. It's okay now. The four guys are down. It's just us."

Cash.

"Cash?"

Q's chest surged with excitement and relief, but also fear. If it was Cash, Q could be rescued. But if it was Cash, Q would fall out of this place where she could reach him. Only it didn't seem he had any choice, because he'd returned to that place where his body was worthless and his mind slushy. He slumped back to the mattress, boneless.

"Q?" Big hands grabbed Q's face. "Come on, man. I'm here. Look at me, buddy, its Cash."

Another, harder slap on his face stung. A flash of anger gave Q enough strength to open his eyes. A man filled his wavering vision. Camouflage paint. At first, that was all Q could see—a face covered in green and brown patterns surrounding bright blue eyes.

A flicker of a memory flashed in his mind of Cash sharing a picture of his sister. She'd had blue eyes, and Cash said they looked alike.

"You made it out," he slurred, his heart lifting. "They wouldn't tell me."

He heard and felt the presence of other people, but couldn't see them. The scent of smoke touched his nose as the links on the chain binding his wrist glowed orange, then dropped away.

His arm came free, and the chain clinked against the floor.

"Come on, Q." Cash jostled him. "We've gotta get you out of here."

"No, she's...here." He pushed the words through his throat. His cement lids closed. If he left here, would she be able to find him? "Saw her... The woman...in my dreams... Want to...stay with her."

“She’s still here,” Cash said. “Her name is Jessica. Isn’t that pretty? Do you remember the name, Q? Jessica. Does it feel familiar?”

Q smiled. He wasn’t sure if his mouth turned, but inside, he was smiling. Jessica. Yes, that was beautiful. It fit her perfectly. “Jessica.” It felt good in his mouth, on his lips and tongue. And he wanted to kiss her again, so badly. “Jessica.”

“I’m right here,” she said from somewhere behind Cash, her voice was unsteady, as filled with emotion as her kiss.

He loved that voice. He wanted to tell her how sweet it sounded. Wanted to tell her to keep talking. To never stop talking. The other men never let her talk. Never wanted to listen. They only wanted her body. Q wanted *her*. All of her. He didn’t know why. Only knew it was right. Perfect.

“Jess-ca.” He slid under again. “Don’ go.”

Jessica pressed her hand against his chest, and the heat of her body soothed him.

“I’m right here.” She put her cheek against his and whispered in his ear, “Right here. We’re taking you home.”

Joy and relief and about ten other emotions he couldn’t name swelled up inside him. His eyes grew wet behind his closed lids.

“Do you remember me?” she asked, emotion choking her voice. “Do you know who I am?”

“Woman...of my...dreams...”

“All right, buddy,” Cash said. “I hope you haven’t been packing on the pounds at this resort, because I’m going to be lugging you out of here. Can you put your arm around my shoulders?”

“Drugged,” Q slurred.

“Yeah, I figured that out.”

Q tried to laugh. “Genius.”

Cash pulled him into a quick, fierce hug and gratitude flooded Q. What he’d done to earn a friend like Cash, he didn’t know. “Thank you.”

Cash smacked one hard thud on Q’s back with a murmured “Love you, man.”

Then he hefted Q over his shoulder.

12

Jessica worried her locket between her fingers as she left the dingy, musky cabin behind for fresh mountain air. But she didn't feel any relief. In fact, as unbelievable as it seemed, her heart and mind were even more twisted than when she'd entered.

Her heart had skipped two full beats when she'd heard him utter the words, "*Want to stay with her.*" Yet, he still didn't know her.

On the flight here, Cash had explained all about the loss of his memory prior to his time at the Castle. She shouldn't have been surprised that Q didn't recognize her as anyone other than just what Cash had described—a woman he'd dreamt about.

What she hadn't realized until now, watching Q hang like a limp doll from Cash's shoulder as they descended the back steps, was just how deeply she'd been hoping something about this visit to the cabin would be different from the last. That he would recognize her. *Her* of all people.

"Choppers inbound," Teague called from the forest line. "Get your asses in gear."

Cash stopped at the base of the stairs, waited until Jessica was beside him, and turned to her, his arm tight around Q's legs. "What do you think?"

Her mind zinged in ten directions. Her heart broke in a dozen different ways. The night seemed so much darker than it had been going in. So much colder. The black hollow beneath the trees seemed more like a wormhole and less like a path to safety.

"About what?"

He gestured to Q with a *what the hell do you mean what?* look on his face

shining in the flashlight's side beams. "Him. Q. Does he look any more like Quaid to you this time around?"

She opened her mouth, but the tightness in her chest choked her answer. She was already crushed, and she didn't want to smash everyone else's hopes right now, especially not with so much turmoil still ahead of them. That could wait, couldn't it?

"I don't...can't... It's dark. He's covered in cuts and bruises"

And, no, he still didn't look or sound any more like Quaid than he had the first time. Yet, there was still something about him that pulled at her heart. The smell of his skin, those damn eyes, the sentiment behind his words. Or maybe it was just his situation.

She didn't know anything anymore.

"Is there a problem?" Keira stood three yards away, shining her flashlight at their feet. She looked like one of those anime warriors, her features harsh in the flashlight's reflection. Dressed in fatigues, decorated in camo paint like the rest of them, Keira carried three weapons, one over her shoulder, one strapped to her thigh, and one in her hand.

"Come on, Cash. I'm starting to think you were lying about Special Forces. Grab and go means *grab and go*. Sort out all the other shit later. Don't you hear those choppers?"

Jessica cleared enough shit from her head to tune in to the sounds around her. In the distance, the metallic whap of blades set off the burn of panic.

"Looks like you may be in for a run tonight after all," Cash said, already moving toward the trees. "Move, Jess."

She dropped her locket and pushed her legs forward. The sprint to their waiting trucks was a blur, her mind occupied with incredibly random thoughts inappropriate for the moment and the situation.

How could she simply return to her work like nothing had ever happened? Where would this Q go? What would the team do now? What had Q been through? How had he gotten Quaid's coin? What would this do to her rehab?

She was already showing about eight of the ten warning signs of relapse. She craved the euphoria coke brought, and she would claw someone's eyes out for a soothing shot of heroin.

"I'm so fucked." Her whisper vanished in the swoosh of passing air.

Voices, then shouts came from the direction of the house and echoed through the trees.

Fear exploded at the center of her body and burned into her limbs. She increased her speed. Keira stayed close to her and Cash. Teague and Luke flanked them several yards out. Mitch, Ty, and the four soldiers Mitch had rummaged up from God only knew where were ahead and behind them. Jessica was damn sure she'd never run this fast, and hoped she'd never have to again.

“Took them long enough”—Mitch said between pants for air—“to figure it out. I have serious concerns about national black ops security.”

Mitch and his four guy pals bantered over something completely inane—lack of leadership, guys in the trenches winning battles and wars or some such shit.

Until Keira said, “If you don't shut the fuck up, your asses are going to end up in a trench, and I won't be pulling them out.”

After a mutter or two, they all went silent for the rest of the run.

God, she loved Keira. Wanted to be just like her when she grew up, all kick-ass and taking names. Just maybe in a different life, because Jessica couldn't even consider how many men were in those choppers, or how many of them were hunting them down right now, or what her partner, Daryl, would be told when she was found shot in the back in the mountains of Utah when she'd told him she was home with the flu.

No. She couldn't go there. She was not Keira.

Her mind, heart, and body were numb by the time they finally reached the trucks. But she must have been feeling something underneath because the sky, which had been clear when they'd set out on this mission, was now thrashing the treetops with wind and rain.

“They're gaining,” Keira said in a hushed but urgent voice. “Load up. Go, go, go.”

Mitch's men got behind the wheels of both trucks and started the engines. The guys threw open the camper shell doors and let the tailgates fall, and everyone scrambled in—Mitch and his men in one, everyone else in the other.

Cash went in with Q first. Ty gripped Jessica's waist and hoisted her to the edge of the truck bed before jumping in after her. The rest of the guys were onboard, Keira still on the ground, ready to throw the tailgate into place. But the truck took off too soon.

“Fucking morons,” was all Keira said as she sprinted after them and grabbed for the open tailgate, as if this was just one more irritation in her

regular day.

“Dammit, Keira.” Luke sounded more concerned than his words implied. He held on to the truck with one hand and lunged for her with the other. He grabbed a strap of her backpack and held her steady as she climbed on, secured the tailgate, and closed the camper shell.

He pulled her into his lap with an incredulous “Seriously? The way you’re going, sugar, I’ve only got about five years left to live.”

“But you’re gonna be so happy for those five years,” she cooed, smiling up at him, hand against his face.

“Gag me,” Ty said while rummaging through canvas bags.

“Love to,” Keira said without looking at him. “But let me make Ransom happy first.”

And she kissed him. Or he kissed her. Or...whatever. The sight shot a burn of awareness straight through Jessica’s chest and into her belly, where it sizzled. Her heart rolled back in time to when Keira and Luke were happy together. To when she and Quaid were happy together, aside from a few adrenaline-laden stunts.

Jessica wondered how she’d looked earlier that day kissing Quai—

No, not Quaid. Q. She turned and looked at the man lying on the truck bed.

She didn’t know what to think. Or how to feel. Or how to act. She didn’t even know who the hell she was anymore, running around the mountains of Utah, risking her life to rescue unknowns from the captivity of the Department of Defense.

“What the hell happened to my life?” she muttered.

“Does he have a chip?” Ty asked. “We’ve got to get it out or cover it up, quick.”

“A what?” Jessica focused on Teague who was running his hands over the man’s arms.

“A GPS—” Teague started, then, “Yep. Left triceps.”

“All right.” This seemed to make Ty happy, and he pulled something metallic out of the canvas bag. “That’s an easy fix. Make sure he doesn’t have more than one.”

Ty unrolled something that looked suspiciously like...

“Is that *Reynolds Wrap*?” Jessica asked, disbelieving her eyes.

“Yep.” Ty’s smile widened as he wound the foil around Q’s upper arm, then secured it tight with bandaging tape. “You know how I love low-tech

solutions.”

“I can’t find any more,” Teague said.

A chill shimmied over Jessica’s arms, and she hugged herself. “A tracker? They *track* him? Like *property*?”

Still unconscious, Q’s head tipped to the side, his body rocking with the truck’s motion as they moved fast over rough road. With her stomach floating toward her throat, Jessica leaned over him and took his face in both hands to turn it toward her.

“Where’s the light?” Keira asked from behind her.

Someone flipped on a flashlight, then aimed it at the side of the camper shell, where it diffused and filled the space with dim light.

“God damn them,” Jessica whispered when she got a better look at what they’d done to him after she’d disappeared. “He was chained to a wall. Drugged half out of his mind. He couldn’t fight back. He wasn’t giving them any trouble. They did this for the hell of it.”

Teague repositioned himself at Q’s shoulder and laid his healing hands on Q’s face. Ty threw a duffel to Cash, who drew a penlight from a pocket and lifted Q’s lids, illuminating rich, warm, coffee-colored irises.

Jessica held her breath, looking for what she’d seen in that cabin the first time to make her trip over the line from suspicion to belief. It had been something in his eyes.

But now they were fixed and blank, and once again, she didn’t see Quaid.

She reached for the bag of first aid supplies as Cash cut Q’s T-shirt up the middle with a pair of emergency shears.

She’d been wrong about Q’s body. He wasn’t skinny, nor was his frame small. His body was an incredibly honed mass of sculpted muscle. Lean, tapered, sleek, powerful. If she’d mistaken something like that, could she also have misconstrued his face?

“Hey, buddy.” Cash peeled off Q’s shirt, revealing more cuts and bruising. “Looks like you’ve gone a little OCD on that workout routine we set up. I think you can back off some. Can you hear me, Q? There are a lot of people here who want to say hi. Wake up for us. I’ve told them all about how smart you are, so don’t make me look bad by acting stupid.”

Q didn’t stir.

“Jessica.” Keira’s voice was soft beside her, filled with awe and emotion. She knelt close, inspecting Q’s face, then smiled up at Jessica with tears in her eyes. “Oh my God.”

“What?” She leaned in, searching for what brought the look to Keira’s eyes. “What is it?”

“What is it?” Her voice rose with disbelief. “It’s Quaid.” Keira gripped her arm and gave it a shake of excitement. “It’s *Quaid*, Jess. Look at him. That’s *Quaid*’s handsome face.”

Fear and excitement stung her ribs. Her heart kicked up and hammered her breastbone. Jessica looked at him again. Searching. But she still saw the same man: Q.

“I...” She shook her head, helpless to make her eyes see the husband who lived in her heart. “I don’t see it.”

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Ty’s anger vibrated through the space and took Jessica by surprise. “It’s obviously Quaid. One look at his face and I can see it’s him.”

Keira jabbed Ty’s arm with a fist. “Don’t be an asshole.”

“You haven’t lived through the death of a spouse,” Teague added. “You have no idea what’s involved in that grieving process. Give her some time.”

Jessica’s eyes shot to Teague, and she saw the lingering pain of Suzannah’s death so long ago. Even deliriously happy with his new wife, daughter, and soon-to-be son, he was still haunted by his former wife’s death.

Jessica knew without any doubt, she couldn’t do what he’d done. She wasn’t as strong as Teague. Just as she wasn’t as strong as Keira. This event brought the reality home: she couldn’t go on without Quaid, no matter how much time she was given. She’d tried her best. Made it five years. But this shattered her, just like she knew it would from the beginning.

She ignored the heavy silence weighting down the rocking vehicle in the wake of Teague’s order, pulled gauze and hydrogen peroxide from the bag, and started wiping the blood from Q’s face.

Cash cut the sleeve of Q’s shirt and peeled it away. “Here’s his mark.”

Jessica focused on the purplish-blue scar curved over the round of his shoulder, and her breath caught. It looked like the wing of a phoenix brushing the top of his shoulder before disappearing behind him.

“God,” Keira murmured, “it’s beautiful.”

Jessica’s heart stuttered with hope. How many people could have that matching mark? But they’d said Mateo had one because he’d been exposed to those chemicals. They also said Q had been used in experiments.

She put a hand to her stomach, burning with confusion, knotted in a fight between fantasy and reality.

Luke straightened from where he'd been leaning over to see the mark and repositioned himself behind Jessica and Keira again. "Incredible."

Jessica looked over her shoulder. "Luke, does he look like Quaid to you?"

Luke rubbed her shoulder and nodded. "He does, but even if he was a little off, which I'm not seeing, he looks a hell of a lot more like Quaid than Quaid himself would have looked after that explosion, based on what they told us."

They'd told them all that if Quaid had survived his trauma at the warehouse, he would have faced a life of painful surgeries, skin grafts, and disability. They should have all been distorted and scarred from the explosion, but the only mark left on their physical bodies was the phoenix.

They'd all been told Quaid hadn't healed like the rest of them. But maybe he'd healed better than all of them. If the others saw Quaid, then it had to be Quaid. There was no one else in the world she'd believe more than the people surrounding her now.

She pressed a hand to her hot, damp forehead. "What's wrong with me? Why can't I see it?"

Teague lifted his gaze to Jessica while scanning Q's body with his hands, searching for injuries beneath the surface. "The mind plays strange games during trauma. You know that. For months after Suzannah died, I'd find myself starting a conversation with her, only to realize she wasn't there."

A fine tremor started in her arms. She swallowed. Her throat burned. "You think it's Quaid too?"

Complex emotions stormed in his blue eyes. Finally, he nodded.

"Well?" Ty's irritable bite raised the hair on Jessica's neck.

"Would you shove the attitude already?" Luke told Ty. "This isn't easy on any of us, and you're making it a whole lot worse."

Cash looked at Teague, worry clear in his expression. "Is he okay? Or going to be okay?"

Teague sat back on his heels. "I've never...felt anything like this. He has...dozens and dozens of old injuries. I can feel the previous breaks in his bones even though they're healed. It's like running my fingers over a crack in the sidewalk." Teague looked back down at Q with anguish in his expression. "He has them everywhere. All over his body."

"I told you." Ty started to stand up, realized the space was too confined, and sat back on his butt instead. "I told you it was Quaid. Those are from the explosion. Remember, at the hospital, they said he had breaks in almost every

bone in his body? That he'd shattered—”

“Ty.” Jessica hadn't realized the yell was coming until it was too late. Her stomach squeezed, but she looked Ty in the eye. “You can be the biggest asshole on the planet, and it still won't alleviate your guilt. So just *shut up*.”

The truck went quiet.

I did not just say that.

But, oh God, she had.

And she'd meant it.

And hated herself for meaning it.

Loathed herself for causing that ripple of grief and pain crossing Ty's handsome face.

But it was too late. She'd just have to add that outburst to the list of things she shouldn't have done in her life, the list that gave her those million and one reasons to hate herself.

Ty dropped his head against his arms where they rested on upturned knees. The sight pushed the wetness in her eyes over her lashes, and she grabbed hold of herself before the dam broke.

She refocused on Teague. “What else?”

Teague looked at Cash when he spoke this time. “His head...his brain... is... I don't know how to describe it other than a mess.”

“Try,” Jessica said.

“It's like...” He lifted his hands and made small circles as if nudging the words free. “I don't know, like scrambled eggs.”

Jessica stopped breathing and dropped her gaze to the man at her knees, to the roadmap of scars on his scalp. “Those fucking animals.”

She wiped at another streak of blood on his temple, uncovering a scar. An inch-long scar. It puckered gently, the skin lighter than the surrounding tissue. She scooted close, cleaned the area again and ran shaking fingers over the scar.

“Oh, God.”

“What?” Cash moved first, leaning over Q, looking for the problem. “What's wrong?”

Keira peered over her shoulder. “What is it?”

“The scar.” But Jessica wasn't looking at the scar anymore. She was looking for signs of Quaid in this man's face again. “Quaid had one just like it—”

“That snowboard stunt,” Keira said. “I remember.”

“You mean the one when he was bored during a slow winter shift,” Luke said with a grin in his voice, “and got the grand idea to snowboard off the roof of the station, down the stairs, and through the parking lot? Fucking lunatic.”

The sheer absurdity of Quaid’s renegade madness made a laugh jump from Jessica’s throat, only it sounded like a sob. And, honestly, she couldn’t tell which it had been.

Teague chuckled too. “And rammed that snowboard right into his forehead. Dumbshit.”

“Thirty stitches.” Ty’s voice had leveled. “I had to cancel the hottest date of my life to sit in the ER with him.”

Another sob caught in Jessica’s throat, this one more pain than laughter.

“Didn’t he…” Keira reached around Jessica and tugged at the right side of Q’s waistband. His jeans were loose and lowered easily to reveal a diagonal scar near his hipbone. “Have his appendix out?”

Jessica’s lungs tightened, and she struggled to pull in air. She thought back, fighting to remember Quaid’s other scars.

“Remember when we were at the Painted Cave fire?” Luke said. “And he went all soft for those horses—”

“Penned up at that ranch.” Keira took over the tale from Luke, reaching for Q’s arm. “We told him to wait for Animal Control, but they were in the path of the fire, and he couldn’t stand the thought of leaving them, so he opened the gate—”

She lifted his right arm, exposing another long, thin scar down the inside of his forearm. Everyone went silent.

Jessica’s fingers traced the line. “One huge black mare spooked and slammed him against the gate.”

“He got blood all over the front seat of my vehicle,” Ty said, his voice melancholy now. “Another damn trip to the ER and a reaming by my battalion chief. He and the ER docs were on a—”

“First-name basis,” Jessica finished.

Silence again. Thicker. Heavier.

The pressure of an impending emotional tsunami crushed Jessica’s chest, and she didn’t know what to do.

Keira’s hand rested on her shoulder, and she murmured, “Remember that thing with his hand, Jess? His left hand?”

Jessica’s gaze tore from Q’s right arm and held on his left hand, laid out

by his side. Her fingers found the locket beneath her shirt. More tears spilled down her cheeks. Her throat closed. Her chest constricted. The most bizarre blend of fear and hope twisted her inside out.

“What happened to his hand?” Cash asked.

“We were at a vehicle accident,” Keira said. “A car had been hit and crushed by a gasoline truck, and our hazmat team was called out. It was just a few months before the warehouse fire. We’d used the JAWS to open the roof of the car to get the driver out. Quaid was keeping track of her vitals, and they started to dip. The tool caught up on something, I can’t remember what, but Quaid, in his typical zeal to get the woman out before she died, used his hand to free up the metal jamming the JAWS. The cut edge of the metal sliced into his glove and caught on his wedding ring—”

“He shouldn’t have been wearing it at work,” Jessica said, her voice rough with emotion. “But we were out to dinner, celebrating our six-month anniversary, got called in, and...” She laughed through the tears. “When I reminded him about it, he got all pissy. Hated taking it off anyway and said he wasn’t taking it off on our annivers—”

She choked and couldn’t continue.

“He’s lucky he didn’t lose his finger,” Keira said. “He never argued about taking it off again.”

She was suddenly terrified the scar wouldn’t be there. It was so specific. So unique. And if it wasn’t there... God, if it wasn’t there...

Keira wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pressed her forehead to Jessica’s temple. “We’re here, Jess.”

A hand closed around the back of her neck, sturdy and reassuring. Ty. She knew that gesture. Knew that touch. “That goes for me too, Jess.”

She shivered. The support she’d needed, craved, ached for now surrounded her. The man who made her whole was possibly lying before her. And she was frozen with fear.

Cash reached across Q and covered her hand where it lay on his arm. “It’ll be there. He told me about it.”

The surety in his voice gave Jessica the strength to reach for Q’s hand. She held her breath, turned it over, pulled his fingers open, and lifted his hand toward her.

The air left her lungs as she squinted and rubbed her thumb at the grime. Blood and dirt and... “Someone give me some water.”

Keira uncapped a bottle and poured water over Q’s hand. Jessica

scrubbed at the dirt with both thumbs. Her heart pounded. Her lungs throbbed. Her eyes scoured his finger for that telltale scraggly white line against his tanned—

It appeared. As if she'd rubbed it into existence, the irregular line created by Quaid's dedication to their marriage, his all-consuming love for her, glowed up at Jessica.

Her head went light. A sob escaped her throat. She sat there frozen, for how long she didn't know—three heartbeats, ten, a hundred—while the emotions swept in and overwhelmed her.

Joy, relief, gratitude, love, excitement, pain, guilt... They rushed in, slammed against her heart, and pushed a gush of tears down her face.

She couldn't think. Couldn't talk. She could only touch him and kiss him and sob against his chest, welcoming every last detail—shaved head, scars, unfamiliar face, changed body.

This *was* her husband.

13

Owen had to take a piss, but he didn't have the energy to pull himself from the corner of his office sofa where he'd planted his ass—he looked at his watch and grimaced—six hours ago.

He pulled his aching legs from the coffee table and sat forward, tossing down the file he'd been reading. His gaze had long since blurred over the type anyway. He rubbed his eyes, greedy for sleep, but he knew that even if he allowed himself to lie down, his mind would never stop spinning.

He glanced over the piles again—spread out on the sofa, the coffee table, the floor. The deeper he'd delved into the information, the more careless he'd become, scattering files everywhere. The depth of deception astounded him, which said something, because he was no stranger to the dark ways of the government.

He was also a firm believer that lives weren't saved, suffering didn't end, and fighting wasn't stopped by following a shitload of rules. Dictators weren't overthrown, weapons weren't seized, murderers weren't eliminated by coloring inside the lines.

But this was a whole different level of wrong. This was *wickedly* wrong.

Owen wasn't sure yet if Schaeffer had trusted him with this information because he was sociopathic enough to believe Owen would immediately bend to his corrupt will or if the fucker knew Owen would see the house of cards constructed over his own damn head, ready to tumble and bury him with one wrong breath.

If Owen lost his job, if this went wrong and he was court-martialed—he'd seen it happen to better men—he'd lose his income. His pension. And his

kids would lose their financial support.

He and Libby had always had big hopes and dreams for them. That was one goal they still shared, despite the divorce. A goal they'd instilled in the kids. He'd already done a bang-up job of fucking up their emotional support system with the divorce. He hoped someday, maybe when they were older, they could understand and forgive. If he screwed them over financially too? Not only would he not be able to live with himself, but he'd be dead to his kids. They'd loathe him.

He was involved in this up to his neck. He'd signed orders Jocelyn had told him to accept. She'd hidden just enough of the details to make him believe the Phoenix team was the root of the evil they fought. She'd gaslighted him, played him, used him. Without a doubt, she'd planned on laying this all on his shoulders if it went sideways.

He stared blankly at the paper, still dazed by the gravity of this sick situation.

Owen's gaze drifted to the painting framed on a wall to his left. One Jenny had given him maybe five years ago now. One of those typical sunshine-and-rainbow watercolors with stick-figures dancing on a bed of green grass. All innocence and joy.

To put his problems into perspective, he opened Cash O'Shay's file. O'Shay had lost three years of his life. Three years of his son's life. He'd lost his wife permanently.

And Quaid Legend had been turned into a warrior of the future and used against his will to further the American military's political agendas through warfare. The ops also hinted toward technical developments Owen would bet his precious pension coincided with Schaeffer's manufacturing corporation, Millennium's discoveries and their military contracts. Legend had also lost his wife. And his freedom. And his memories.

Then there was Teague Creek, who'd been framed for the murder of his supposed girlfriend, an assistant district attorney. Framed and sent to prison for the rest of his natural life so all his questions into the cause of the warehouse fire and the chemicals involved would go into the hole with him.

Owen's building anger exploded, and he pushed up from the sofa and dug both hands into his hair. He'd believed Creek guilty of the murder. Jocelyn had made sure of that. She'd known Owen would never have stayed quiet while men rotted their lives away unjustly, and he'd kept information secret that could have freed them. He'd done favors for Jocelyn that had drawn

complete innocents into this vortex—Alyssa Foster for one. Kat Creek for another. And Mitch Foster at the crux of everything.

Owen dragged his hands over his face. Fucking Foster. When that man discovered just what part he'd ultimately played in this clusterfuck...

“Christ. What is the farthest point across the world from here?” he wondered aloud. Might be a good time to consider retirement there.

He dropped his hands, slid them into his pants pockets, and wandered to his window, where he let his gaze blur over the lights of Arlington.

Foster was too damned smart for his own good, just like Creek. He asked too many questions, dug too deep. Only, Foster was savvy as well as smart. He'd fashioned himself a sweet little safety net out of blackmail, and it had kept his ass on the right side of the grass. At least so far.

Owen didn't need paranormal abilities to see he was headed down the same path. He could only hope he was as smart, if not smarter, than Foster. He certainly wasn't too proud or too arrogant to take a play from the man's playbook. He'd need some heavy counterammunition if Schaeffer came gunning for him, which Owen could predict with ninety-nine-point-nine percent accuracy because, no, he would not play by Schaeffer's rules.

But neither would he risk his children's future.

“Joce,” he murmured, staring out at the night, “if you're not already dead, you're going to wish you were when I get ahold of you.”

He picked up his cell from his desk, hit speed dial, and waited as the phone rang at the crash site.

“Sir.” The sergeant in charge keeping Owen informed about the recovery answered with the latest data. “Another three tons of rubble have been removed from the main building. We've cleared the floor underneath, checked every cell, all the hallways. We've recovered sixteen additional bodies. But not Deputy Dargan yet. I'm sorry, sir.”

“Thank you, Sergeant.”

He pulled the phone away from his ear, heard a faint “Sir?” and brought it back. “Yes, Sergeant?”

“I thought you'd want to know that the lab manager, a Mario Abrute, was off-site during the explosion. He's in detainment at Area 51 now.”

“Isn't the investigation team handling staff interviews?”

“Yes, sir. But the security logs show—”

“I thought the security system and all its files had been obliterated.” Owen rounded his desk, sat, and picked up a pen just to have something to

stab at his blotter.

“Everything within the Castle, yes,” he said. “These logs were from the gate. They only show official entries and exits.”

Still not a sliver of evidence of who had gone into that site and broken O’Shay out. That was a good thing for Owen, because without it, he couldn’t officially, legally or morally go after the Phoenix team.

They may have suffered, may have been manipulated, their lives ravaged by Schaeffer and Jocelyn’s deception, but their actions had destroyed the building and killed dozens of people.

Or rather, the Air Force Apaches had destroyed the building and killed dozens of people—while trying to catch the team. While they’d been helping someone escape who’d been wrongly imprisoned. Alongside their teammate who’d been claimed dead, had his memory erased, and turned into a human military weapon.

He rubbed his temple. “This is a shit show.”

“What was that, sir?” The sergeant raised his voice over the roar of a Black Hawk’s engine in the background.

“Abrute, Sergeant,” Owen said. “The logs. What did they show?”

“They show a Sergeant Decker entering the premises approximately an hour prior to the explosion, then exiting again just twenty minutes before. When he heard the explosion, he held on to Abrute and secured him at his house. But with all the commotion, that information wasn’t relayed until just now.”

“Which is important because...” Owen hurried the sergeant along.

“Because, sir, Decker was dispatched to bring Abrute back to the site for questioning related to O’Shay’s project.”

Owen straightened. His mind sharpened.

“He said,” the sergeant went on, “Deputy Dargan directed him to take Abrute back to his residence to retrieve some notes. These notes were reportedly in a secure briefcase of some kind. He reported that Deputy Dargan told Abrute that if she received the briefcase that night with the notes intact, and I’m using Decker’s words here, sir, he would ‘suffer no harm.’”

Owen looked at his watch. Another flight to and from that godforsaken desert? No way.

“Sergeant.” Owen firmed his voice. “Get Abrute’s ass on a C10 and get him to my doorstep. *Yesterday.*”

“Uh...I mean, yes, sir. I just, there are forms—”

“I am well aware of every goddamned fucking form this military creates, Sergeant. And I’m an expert at completing every goddamned fucking one.”

Owen paused to breathe to control his temper. This information should have been relayed to him while he’d still been there this morning. This was completely unacceptable, and someone’s ass was going to burn for the oversight.

“And make damn sure that briefcase with every page of notes is on that plane with him, Sergeant, or your career will look like your current environment.”

He disconnected, slammed his phone on his desk, closed his eyes, and pinched the bridge of his nose. Deep breath in. Deep breath out.

Damn Jocelyn.

Damn Schaeffer.

Owen had to force himself not to call the sergeant back and apologize, but he did redial the man.

“Yes, sir,” the man answered in a brusque, guarded tone.

“Well done, Sergeant.”

A moment of shocked silence, then, “Thank you, sir.”

“Abrute and his information are need-to-know.”

“Absolutely, sir.”

“Senator Schaeffer is *not* in the need-to-know category.”

Another second of silence. “I understand, sir.”

“If you get any static, send it my way.”

“My pleasure, sir.” A hint of humor played in his voice and relieved Owen’s guilt.

“Thank you, Sergeant.”

He set the phone down again and stared at it for a long time.

14

Jessica had been drifting in and out of sleep for the last hour, lying curled beside Quaid on the floor of another truck, her head on his shoulder. She secured his body against the hard bumping and rocking over the rough Vermont roads leading into the Appalachian Mountains with an arm tight across his abdomen.

Thank God they were approaching their destination. They only planned to stay a day or two because no one really knew what life held in store for any of them from day to day at this point.

After they'd evaded whoever had been sent to keep them from rescuing Quaid, they'd picked up Alyssa and the kids and driven back to the plane. From there, they'd flown sans-flight plan to the border of New Hampshire and to yet another private airstrip in the middle of nowhere.

Two trucks had been waiting, loaded with supplies, not a human in sight. They'd parked the plane beneath a shelter built under a heavy covering of forest that looked as if it would crumble in the next high wind and headed toward the Vermont border.

After the second flight and this second long drive, all while helping to carry Quaid, nursing him with liquids, stressing over his physical and mental well-being, his future, *their* future...Jessica was exhausted. As was the team surrounding her. Everyone dozed in the darkness.

The entire landscape of her life had changed, and she had no idea what skills or knowledge she would need to navigate this new terrain. Considering that Quaid might truly not remember her, Jessica wondered if she'd be making all these changes alone. And whether the end result would earn her

what she needed most—the love of her husband.

Finally, *finally*, the truck slowed.

“We’re here.” Ty put his hand on Jessica’s arm. “Wait. I’ll be back to help you with him.”

Everyone piled out, and as she waited, she pressed kisses to Quaid’s face and ran her hand over his soft bristle of hair. The scars rasped against her palm and stirred anger and sadness. “We’re here, baby. Can you wake up for me?”

She didn’t get any more response this time than any of the other eight hundred times she’d tried.

When Ty returned, Jessica helped move Quaid toward the end of the truck bed so Ty could hoist him over his shoulder. She walked beside them toward a building—an old barn shining in the trucks’ headlights. Other than a covered carport, nothing but thick forest shone in the side beams. They were on thirty acres of uninhabited land owned by a “friend” of Mitch’s, the same man on Mitch’s four-man team, Brody.

The air was crisp and clean, the night as silent and dark as the dead. Until Mitch slid open a panel beside one of the doors, revealing a power grid hidden beneath something that had looked like just another piece of weathered siding, and flipped a switch.

Three different floodlights swamped the area with warm illumination. Jessica winced, shielding her eyes. The rest of the group groaned in unison.

“Dammit, Foster.” Teague worked three padlocks on the doors. “Would you warn us before you do that?”

“Bitch, moan, complain.” Mitch put both hands against the edge of one of the doors and leaned his weight into it. “Ransom, get your lazy ass over here and help.”

Luke sauntered to Mitch’s side. “Bitch, moan, complain...”

Keira laughed.

Cash put his sleeping son into his sister’s arms. “I’d better get over there too. God forbid I catch that wrath.”

Jessica had her hand wrapped around Quaid’s dangling wrist, her fingers on his pulse. The feel of his blood beating steadily through his veins was the only thing that kept her calm.

She searched for Alyssa and found her standing off to the side, one hand around Kat’s shoulders, holding the exhausted girl to her side, the other pressed to her big belly.

“Alyssa?”

Her friend’s response was slower than usual, the turn of her head too languid, the look in her eyes too glassy. Jessica stepped in that direction, and her hand tugged against Quaid’s wrist. She glanced between them, torn.

“Go,” Ty said. “I’ve got him.”

Jessica took in the sight of Quaid lying limp over Ty’s shoulder and swallowed the knot in her throat. She rubbed her hand over his prickly head again before going to Alyssa. Jessica crouched in front of Kat. Finding the girl asleep on her feet, Jessica lifted Kat into her arms.

“Lys, you need to sit down. Let’s go over to that boulder, get you off your feet.”

Alyssa shook her head and propped her shoulder against a tree. “If I sit down now, I’ll never get up. I’m okay for a few more minutes.”

At the barn, Teague and Cash pushed aside one door, Mitch and Luke the other.

The sight of them made her remember the four military men who’d been with them since the rescue. “Where are those other guys?”

“Forming a secure perimeter,” Alyssa said, rubbing her belly with a wince.

Jessica repositioned Kat’s slumping weight in her arms. “Alyssa, tell me you’re not having labor pains.”

“No. He’s kicking me in the ribs. Little shit.”

Jessica laughed. “It’s so funny to hear you swear.”

“If you can’t beat ’em...” Alyssa shrugged. “I’ll add money to the jar in the morning. Word of advice, Jess. Don’t make a baby in a wine closet. They’re a little wild.”

Jessica’s smile widened. Her brows rose. “Wine closet, huh? I want to hear that story.” Jessica turned to check on Quaid. He still lay as limply over Ty’s shoulder as Kat did in Jessica’s arms. “And honestly, if I ever get the chance to make a baby with Quaid, I’ll make one however, whenever, and wherever I can. Waiting to get pregnant is one of my greatest regrets.”

Jessica watched as the barn turned into an entirely different kind of building. “What in the hell?”

“It’s a bunker,” Alyssa said. “I haven’t had time to sit down and grill Mitch on what this is all about, but his work has given him not only endlessly grateful and generous contacts who have amazing resources and skills, but these contacts also seem...”

She paused to consider. “At one time, I would have called them paranoid extremists. But with everything that’s happened to us, and as much help as we’ve gotten, the larger ramifications are overwhelming.”

Jessica tightened her arms around Kat. “Is your house going to be okay?”

Alyssa nodded, watching the guys work on the locks along the metal doors. “Teague, Luke, and Mitch set up an elaborate security system complete with booby traps. We’ve got neighbors watching it, a few friends in the police department doing drive-bys. A few of Teague and Luke’s ATF coworkers are keeping an eye on it. We’ve got insurance. I’m not worried about the house.”

Alyssa turned her gaze on Jessica, her gorgeous amber eyes serious. “But, I *am* worried about Quaid. And I’m worried about you.”

Alyssa’s directness was nothing new, but it had never been so completely focused on Jessica. And never on such a painful subject at such a vulnerable time.

Jessica exhaled. “You’re not the only one.”

“Has Keira talked to you about Mateo? About the chips in his brain?”

Shock unhinged Jessica’s jaw.

“Obviously not,” Alyssa said. “We can talk about this in depth tomorrow, after you’ve had some sleep. For now, I just want you to consider hypnotherapy for Quaid.”

“Okay, but what does that have to do with Mateo and brain chips?”

“When we got Mateo back, we discovered he had a tracking chip in his neck, which was why they looked for one—and found it—in Quaid.”

Jessica’s stomach turned a little when she remembered Alyssa removing the chip from Quaid’s arm earlier in the night.

“Mateo’s chip was different. It was also a type of computer interface, a control chip, if you will, that connected many other chips, which are still imbedded in his brain tissue. Teague searched for those in Quaid when he did the exam and didn’t find any. But the scars on Quaid’s head and the fact that Teague senses a mismatch or scrambling of sorts in Quaid’s brain makes me think they may have attempted to use them. Maybe they didn’t work and they were removed. I don’t know.

“Because of what’s happened with Mateo, I’ve done a lot of advanced research on the brain. I’ve also been consulting with a psychiatrist who specializes in hypnotherapy. When I saw the potential benefits, I got certified so I would be able to help whoever wanted or needed it, but I didn’t want to

go outside the family. When we learned of Q, I proposed a hypothetical situation to this doctor to gain some insight into how we might best help him once we had him.”

Jessica waited. Found herself leaning forward in anticipation. But Alyssa’s expression had grown increasingly tight, and now she glanced away, toward the bunker, lips pressed tight.

“Alyssa? What did she say?”

She took a deep breath of the cold night air, winced, and rubbed her belly near her ribs again. “Trauma victims are unpredictable. Those with more severe trauma and longer exposure have, understandably, the lowest success of recovery. Now—”

Alyssa held out a hand, silently asking Jessica not to panic, but her heart rate was already rising. “Mitch said almost these exact same things to me about Teague’s chance of recovering from his time in prison. And Teague’s a perfect example of how resilient humans can be. So, I don’t want you to lose hope, but I do want us to approach Quaid’s recovery carefully.”

Jessica tried to slow her breath. “That’s fine.”

“It probably won’t feel fine. Because the best form of recovery is slow. One Quaid brings on himself. In fact, telling him of his past before his mind is capable of adjusting has the potential of shocking his brain into shutdown, and could do more harm than good.”

“If Cash is right and Quaid has no memory from before his time at the Castle, he’s going to want to know who the hell we all are. He’s going to want to know how this all happened. How do we handle that?”

“Slowly, with a lot of finesse.”

A new tightness squeezed Jessica’s chest. “Are you saying that if he doesn’t remember me, I can’t tell him I’m his wife?”

“I’m saying it would be best to wait and see how he handles the smaller pieces of information he needs before we give him the bigger, more emotionally charged ones.

“You need to remember, the loss of memory isn’t the only major issue he’s going to be facing, Jess. He’s used to living alone, being treated badly, controlled, and abused. We’ll have to see how he adjusts to being here with all of us. How he adjusts to sounds, schedules, food. How much stimulation he can handle before it’s too much. What physical issues come about like headaches or pain. He has a lot of adjustment in his future. For him, it would be best to limit the information we share until he’s ready to receive it.”

“You know I can’t lie.” Truth was the foundation of Jessica’s rehab—of all addicts’ and alcoholics’ rehab. And at this point, it felt as if the truth was the only rule of rehab she hadn’t broken. “I especially can’t lie to him. I’ve already broken every good habit I’ve spent the last year establishing. I just... I don’t know what will happen....”

“I understand. Let’s just take it one step at a time.” Alyssa gave her shoulder a squeeze. “Go on back to him. I’m fine.”

She carried Kat back to Ty and managed to position herself to hold both the girl and Quaid’s hand. And as soon as his blood pulsed beneath her fingers, relief spilled through her. She had to maintain hope. She had to believe in Quaid the way Alyssa had believed in Teague.

Tears stung her eyes. She pressed them against the back of Ty’s shoulder and felt him turn to look at her.

“I’m sorry about earlier,” she told him. “I didn’t mean—”

He turned and wrapped an arm around her shoulders and hugged her, careful not to squish Kat, and pressed a kiss to her head. “No. I’m sorry. I’ve been an ass, Jess. Worse than an ass. I’m going to make it up to you. Both of you.”

She wanted to say more, but everything was jumbled in her head, in her heart, and all she could get out was, “I love you.”

“Love you too.” He pressed his cheek to her head and squeezed her tight. “Love you so much.”

“Come on,” Mitch called. “Everyone inside. Alyssa, sit your ass on a couch and don’t even think about getting up. Jailbird,” he called to Teague, “help me move the trucks under the carport.”

The inside of the building was as simple as the outside, but with flair. Unfinished block concrete made up the walls, stained, polished slab concrete covered the floors, and a slanted metal roofing created a cathedral ceiling. One large living space held several leather sofas and lounge chairs, coffee tables, side tables, and lamps. It looked like the small lobby of an upscale urban hotel.

A long island separated the living and kitchen spaces, where an industrial-looking kitchen took up one corner, two wooden dining sets another. The kitchen included restaurant-sized, stainless-steel appliances and granite counters. In an alcove opposite the kitchen, a dozen flat screen monitors lined a portion of one concrete wall. Beneath those, a workstation sat covered in electronics.

“This *bunker* is nicer than my house,” Ty muttered on his way to a sofa, where he and Jessica laid Quaid on his back.

Jessica lifted Quaid’s head onto her lap and settled into the comfort of the soft sofa. Mitch and Teague returned, and Mitch took the floor like a seasoned speaker, with supreme confidence and utter control. Jessica could see how he would grab hold of a jury and never let go.

“Okay,” he started as everyone found seats and sprawled their tired bodies out across the furniture. “The property is thirty-two acres surrounded by other multi-acre parcels, the smallest of which is eighteen acres. We have no neighbors, so if you hear or see something or someone, that’s a problem. The property is surrounded by electric fencing. My guys are out patrolling the perimeter now. One of those guys, Brody, is the owner of said property, so if we have problems, we’ve got the expert on site.”

He pointed to the corner with the monitors and electronics. “That is the brain of the security system. That brain will keep us *alive*. If you’re better with people than you are with electronics...” He stared pointedly at his sister. “Leave. It. Alone.”

“Ha-ha,” Alyssa said from where she sat with her head on Teague’s shoulder.

“There are several buildings on the property. All the roofs are covered in a material that hinders infrared detection. There are several scramblers distributed throughout the property centered near the bunker to interfere with cell phone and internet tracking. That *does not* mean we can use these electronics casually.”

“Meaning,” Ty said, “your three-hundred-and-two girlfriends will have to suffer without hearing your voice for a few days.”

Mitch gave him a heavy-lidded, long-suffering look. “There are thirty-six video cameras set up around the property and the house. They have a rotating image display on those monitors—”

“Waaaaait a minute,” Luke said. “Exactly *where* are these cameras? None in the bedrooms, right?”

Mitch let his hands fall and slap against his jeans-covered thighs. “Can’t you guys think about anything other than sex?” He put his hands out wide as if eliciting a response. “Anything?”

A grin lifted Luke’s mouth, and he looked down at Keira. “Someone sounds jealous.”

“The day I’m jealous of your sex life, Ransom—no offense, Keira, you

know I think you're totally smokin'—just put me in the ground.”

“No offense taken,” Keira said, grinning back at Luke. “I happen to be damn impressed with Ransom’s sex life.”

“Can we get on with this,” Alyssa said, “so some of us can *have* a sex life?”

The room filled with a shocked silence, and everyone turned and looked at her.

Her head came off Teague’s shoulder. “What? I’m pregnant, not dead.” She gestured toward Teague with both hands. “Do you not see this fine specimen of man sitting here?”

Everyone laughed. Teague tipped her head back and kissed her on the mouth.

Mitch, the drama queen, slapped a hand over his face and stumbled back a few steps. “It burns. It burns!”

Everyone laughed harder, and the kids slept through it all.

Jessica’s spirit rebounded. She looked down at Quaid and ran her thumb over his lips. He looked so obviously like her Quaid now. She couldn’t imagine how she’d denied it before.

“The refrigerator is stocked and there are linens in the closets,” Mitch said. “The bedrooms are down that hall. Save the two at the end near the other door for Brody’s guys. Now go, you heathens, get out of here. We’ll unload the trucks and try this again in the morning when we can all think straight.” He pointed at Ty. “Not you, sucker. You don’t have a girl or a kid. You and I are setting up and testing this electronic masterpiece.”

15

Gil Schaeffer pulled a fresh roll of antacids from the outer pocket of his briefcase. The morning's infinitely boring Senate hearing drowned out the rip of the wrapper. He popped three of the chalky tablets into his mouth.

His phone vibrated at the same time that someone approached his row of seats. He glanced at the caller ID first. Gorin. *Fuck*. Only the eighth time the psycho had tried to get ahold of him this morning.

He pressed Ignore and took the note from the staff member waiting patiently at Gil's side.

Colonel Young to see you. He's waiting in the foyer. Urgent.

Gil's blood pressure climbed. He gave the attendant a terse nod, crunched another trio of antacids, and picked up his briefcase.

In the grand, domed foyer of the Russell Senate Office Building, Owen Young paced between two pillars, hands clasped behind his back, head down. He glanced up just as Gil crossed the seal inlaid on the lobby floor, and his expression told Gil he would need both a refill on antacids and his blood pressure meds.

He glanced at those close by, making sure no one important stood within hearing distance, then stopped two feet from Owen. "What's wrong?"

"They got Q."

The words bounced off Gil as if he were made of rubber. Still, the shockwave vibrated through his body. "That's not possible. Where did you hear that? Your intel is wrong."

"I heard it directly from one of your four *best agents*—Davis." The edge in Owen's voice matched that glint of superiority in his eyes. "They were

ambushed by at least nine others, knocked out and restrained. Q is gone.”

The beat of Gil’s heart tripped and stumbled before recovering at a far quicker pace. Legend couldn’t be *gone*. He had enough information on the Pakistanis’ smart weapons to keep Millennium Manufacturing in military contracts for the next ten years. Contracts that would easily net six-hundred-billion dollars.

A veil of black darkened Gil’s vision and his head grew as heavy as concrete.

“Senator.” Owen’s voice sounded very far away. Muffled. A hand gripped Gil’s arm. “*Senator.*”

The compression on Gil’s brain released. He shook off Owen’s hand. To keep his voice under control, he scraped words through clenched teeth. “You were supposed to handle that. How could you screw up such a simple job?”

“You pulled me in too late.” Owen’s voice took a tone of controlled condescension. “By the time I sent reinforcements, your team had already been overpowered and Q was gone.”

Gil had known Owen would be a problem—in many ways. That thought had been among his first when he’d heard of Jocelyn’s probable demise. Gil could have chosen to use someone else to lead this op, but of the available choices, Owen was by far the most experienced, the most focused, and had the best track record. But the characteristics that made Owen so successful also made him difficult to handle—his intelligence, his confidence, his need to be in control.

“*Where. Are. They?*”

Owen hesitated and stared at Gil as if he were as dumb as a dirt clod. No, this man would not be as easily controlled, swayed, or bribed as Jocelyn.

“Are you aware, sir, of Mitch Foster’s resources?”

“Of course, I’m aware—”

“Then you know they could be anywhere in the country by now. And they’ll be guarded by the highest technological devices and the best trained forces, all of whom owe Foster their freedom, their lives, their first-fucking-born, or all of the above.”

“And it’s your job to find them. *So do it.*”

Owen straightened. His hands dropped to his sides, and something cold and sharp glinted in his eyes. Schaeffer’s hands fisted in an unconscious effort to grasp hold of his slipping control. He needed to keep Owen on his side, and he preferred not to threaten unless every other avenue had been

exhausted. He'd play the patriot card, always a winner with a vet.

"Q has been making headway in uncovering a stash of smart weapons in Pakistan," Gil said. "Weapons that have the potential to annihilate our troops. We have to get him back to Punjab in two days, or all the intelligence, the weapons themselves, and the men who designed the weapons will be history. That's months and months of work down the toilet and an increased risk to our troops overseas. This is totally unacceptable. You're a decorated colonel. You've pulled off shit far more difficult than finding two men with a billion-dollar budget at your disposal." Gil's vision split horizontally, a haze coloring the bottom portion like a red tide. "*Get. Them. Back.*"

He pulled a piece of paper from the outside pocket of his briefcase. "This is the name of an asset I've used in the past. He's good. And discreet. I dispatched him yesterday to locate O'Shay. But since we suspect O'Shay and Q are together, update him on the situation."

One side of Owen's face scrunched in distaste as he read the information. "Asset? You just said—"

"The others on their team will never let them go. If they're taken and the others are left, they'll never stop searching. The asset will capture O'Shay and Q and eliminate the others without a trace."

"Now hold on, Senator. You're taking this awfully far, awfully fast. It's a little soon to be setting up assassination orders. Give me a couple of days to —"

"No. We don't have a couple of days." His face felt like it was too close to the sun. Sweat leaked from his hairline. "As I said"—Schaeffer shook out his shoulders and pulled at the hem of his blazer—"in a couple of days, Q needs to be back in Punjab. The asset has already been activated. Just let the man do his job. That's an order."

16

Q hit another shallow pocket of consciousness and clawed closer to the surface, desperate to hear her, see her, feel her. He'd bubbled up from that abyss several times, though he didn't know in what span of time. It didn't matter, because Jessica was always right there. Always touching him. Or kissing him. Or lying against him.

The last time he'd surfaced, she'd been wiping his body with a warm, wet cloth and some kind of clean, spicy soap that made him feel refreshed. She'd dawdled over every inch of his chest, arms, neck, and face, dipping and wringing the rag dozens of times. At some point, she'd shaved his jaw and trailed kisses over his skin after she'd cleaned him, sending him into wild fits of pleasure he couldn't act on because he was still trapped in semiconsciousness.

Now, he brushed the surface and found her right where she always was—by his side. Her warm hand lay against the center of his chest, her hip against his side. Whispers touched his ears, but she wasn't talking to him. She was talking to another woman. The other voice was also familiar. From the vehicle that had brought them here.

Wherever the *hell* here was.

"You need to rest, Jess," the other woman said. "You're going to get sick. Then you won't be doing either of you any good."

"I'm not going to be gone when he wakes up."

He was close. Almost there. At the surface and ready to break through.

"Will you eat something?" the other woman asked. "It's after lunch, and you didn't touch your breakfast. Ty has been making crazy power smoothies

for everyone—”

“Not right now.”

The other woman sighed. “Need anything?”

Her fingers closed, scraping gently against Q’s chest. Sensation skipped across his skin. Caused his hands to flex.

“Just for him to wake up,” she said softly. “And remember.”

“Give him time.”

The room fell silent again. He felt Jessica’s stare on his face and fought to open his eyes, but only got a flutter of lashes.

He pushed his mouth and tongue around. “Jess...” came out in a rasp. He cracked his lids as she pushed up on her knees.

“Right here.” She reached for something beside him. Slid one hand behind his head and lifted, bringing a straw to his lips. “Take a sip. It’s orange juice, your favorite. We need to get some sugar into your blood.”

Q sucked at the straw. The tangy, sugary liquid hit his tongue and lit off an immediate unquenchable thirst. As if he’d been fueled with instant energy, Q opened his eyes.

“Hey, there.” Her voice was so soft, so sweet, it made his chest ache. “Are you really awake? Or is this just another temporary visit?”

The straw dried up, and a slurping sound came from the glass. She set the empty drink on the ground, laid his head back carefully on a pillow, and remained leaning over him, her hands caressing his face.

“Feel like heaven,” he managed, finding it easier to talk with a moist throat, though his voice didn’t sound any smoother. “So beautiful.”

A slow smile turned her lips. Her eyes grew wet.

He managed to get one of his hands up and over hers. The orange juice seemed to be hitting his bloodstream. “Missed you so much. Don’t leave.”

“Never.” Her whisper sounded rough as she shook her head. Tears dropped from her eyes and hit his cheeks. “I’ll never leave you.”

Relief and excitement surged like a tidal wave and rocked him. No words could ever bring him this much joy. She lowered her head and kissed him. Just a touch of her lips, but Q needed more. He strained toward her, waiting for her lips to come back, but they didn’t.

Need gave him the strength to slide the hand covering hers around the back of her head. Gravity did the rest. When her mouth met his, he took as much as he could, unsure of how long he’d have her. She gave with generous lips that caressed his in ways that made his mind twist and his body want.

The sounds she made, emotional, heart-wrenching sounds, shivered through his mouth and ignited need in every cell of his body.

She tasted sweet, so sweet. Or maybe that was just the orange juice. But she was fresh, warm, succulent. She was a drug. But nothing like the drugs those bastards used on him. She didn't suppress him, she lifted him. She was ecstasy. He was completely high. His entire body buzzed with excitement. Bright white light pulsed in his chest.

He felt alive.

Finally felt *alive*.

He rolled toward her and tried to wrap his free arm at her waist, but it was his bad arm, and he didn't have the strength. He managed to fist the fabric and drag her with him as he rolled back. She moved easily, sliding on top of him and aligning their bodies. And, oh, she was so much more than he'd dreamed. Soft and strong. Lush and lean. Alive and warm. She was heaven. Absolute heaven.

His hunger intensified to starvation, and he tasted her with a stroke of his tongue. She immediately responded, and the sensation of tongue against tongue diverted blood from Q's brain straight to his cock. The pressure was so intense, he lifted his hips and rubbed against Jessica for relief.

She groaned, long and deep, before lifting her head and breaking their kiss. Tears shimmered in her eyes. They were so big. Such a soft, warm brown. Her rich, tawny hair spilled around her face, silky against his bare shoulders.

She gazed down at him, her lips turning in a tentative smile. "Am I hurting you?"

"Only if you stop." His voice sounded so hideously rough compared to hers. "I can't tell you...how long I've dreamt of this."

He gently raked his hand through her hair, absorbing the feel of it between his fingers. She closed her eyes, those long lashes, which were the same gorgeous color as her hair, curving gently against her cheeks. A soft spray of freckles lay beneath, barely visible.

His chest had grown so incredibly tight, ribs squeezing his lungs until every intake of breath burned. Emotion welled inside until it overwhelmed him. Thoughts swirled in his mind without consent. Words pushed at his lips.

I love you.

The realization floated close as he held her face in one cupped hand. Fear encircled the warmth and excitement. How could he love her? How could he

feel so overwhelmingly attached to her? And if Gorin found out how he felt .

..

Gorin.

Years of self-preservation and logic battled with the new and powerful emotions. His mind drifted to the man in the desert with the weapons and the hostages. Q still didn't know what that had been. A test? And this, was this a test?

Or now that he'd escaped, was this a *trap*?

The word vibrated in his head. Internally, a thin, cold veneer slipped into place, pushing his emotions into the background, bringing instinct and intellect to the foreground.

The orange juice? Had it been drugged? Was this some new experiment? Something they'd been prepping him for? Was Jessica a fictitious idea they'd implanted in his subconscious in case they ever needed to pull it out and use it as a weapon against him?

"What's wrong?" Her voice brought his gaze to hers. They were worried. No. Frightened. They were definitely frightened. "Quaid, baby? Are you—"

Muscle memory took over. Q had no idea where he found the strength or the coordination, but he flipped her and closed his hand over her throat.

"Stop," she rasped, clawing at his fingers. "Quaid, please. Stop. You're hurting—"

"Why are you calling me Quaid?" And why did holding her down like this make him want to put a gun to his own head? "Who are you? Who do you work for?"

"Quaid." She turned her head and dragged in air, squirming beneath him. "I can't breathe."

"What the fuck is going on?"

The deep, angry voice sounded in the doorway. Q's body reacted again, his thoughts only a hum in the background. He pulled them both to their feet and kept the woman in front of him with an arm around her neck. The man at the door was big, with an authoritative presence, but he wasn't holding any weapons.

"Teague, take it easy." A woman appeared beside him. Mixed race, part Asian, with long black hair, light eyes, very pregnant. Unless that was fake too.

More people rushed through the door. He didn't know anyone. Didn't know where he was. Didn't know what the hell was going on. His body

hardened. His mind sharpened. Fear pumped in his veins, preparing him for action.

Finally, a weapon appeared—pointed at his head. Yeah, now he knew where he stood. Only it was held by another woman. That was new.

Always kill the female terrorist first. They're the most unpredictable, the most unstable.

Q's gaze locked on the barrel of the Heckler & Koch Mark 23, his mind struggling to find the source of that terrorist trivia—until he realized he'd recognized the type of weapon pointed at him. Then he chalked it all up to a crazy-ass medicated hallucination.

But the woman holding the weapon ruined that idea when she spoke. "Let her go, Quaid."

This was shaping up to be a perfect training scenario. *Training for what?* another part of his brain asked, which was when he considered this might not even be a hallucination. Maybe Gorin had finally split one too many brain cells and Q had gone schizophrenic.

"Should have known." One of the men spoke, and Q's gaze darted toward him. He was leaning against a wall with one shoulder, arms crossed. Q narrowed his eyes, then cut a glance toward the Asian woman. They were family. Definitely. "This kind of shit is par for the course with you people."

"Mitch," the Asian woman snapped with more force than her appearance suggested she commanded.

This Mitch put both hands on his hips. "Out of all the people here, dude, she is the last one you want to hurt."

Q's gaze held on the woman holding the weapon. Something about her... Black hair, blue eyes, pretty. Something seemed familiar. He repositioned his grip on Jessica.

"Don't you dare." The brown-haired man next to the woman with the weapon obviously recognized the dangerous hold Q had on Jessica's neck. He put a hand up and stepped forward with fear and fury in his eyes. "If you hurt her, you're going to wish you were back in that fucking hellhole, Quaid."

"Stop calling me Quaid." His chest felt like a time bomb.

"Ty," Jessica rasped from beneath Q's arm. "Shut up."

A crawling sensation started low in his belly. One he definitely didn't understand. He only knew he had to escape. Get away from these people. This situation. "Get out of my way."

“Q.” Another man pushed through the crowd. Where were they all coming from? “What are you doing?”

Cash’s voice. Finally, something that resonated with Q. He froze and focused on his friend. Black hair, blue eyes... Q’s gaze flicked back to the woman holding the gun—his sister, Keira. Cash had shown him a picture of her while they’d been in prison together. Just days before the explosion.

Q didn’t know whether to feel relieved or not. “Cash, what is this? What’s happening?”

“Cash,” Keira said from in front her brother, her voice raised and worried. “Make him drop that damned neck-breaking hold on her. Quaid, don’t make me shoot you, you asshole.”

“Listen to her, man.” This came from the blond man next to Keira. “She won’t kill you, but she’ll make you wish you were dead.”

“Keira,” Cash said, “put the gun down. You’re making this worse.”

“Not until he releases that hold on Jess.”

Cash glanced back at Q and evaluated his grip. “Where the fuck did you learn that? Come on, Q, you’re not going to hurt her. You’re scaring everyone. Just take her out of that hold.”

Q didn’t move. Didn’t like his odds or his options.

“Quaid,” Keira said. “I love you, and I’m thrilled you’re alive, but if you don’t release Jessica’s neck, I’m going to *take off your fucking ear*.”

The blond next to Keira lifted his brows and said, “Listen to her, Quaid. She’s a sniper in her day job.”

“This might go better if you called him Q,” Cash said.

But Q was still stuck on the *I love you* and the *I’m thrilled you’re alive* statement.

“Qua—Q.” Jessica faltered on his name. The fact that she’d deliberately called him Q, even though they all clearly thought of him as Quaid, softened something inside him. “Please.”

That damn voice did it. He took his hand off her neck and wrapped it around her waist, then loosened the arm at her throat.

Keira lowered her weapon, turned toward the blond—Luke, they’d called him—and dropped her forehead against his shoulder. “Asshole is so going to pay for that as soon as he remembers enough to make it worth my effort.”

Luke put his arm around Keira and turned her toward the door. “You can beat up on me until that happens.”

Q backed away from the group, pulling Jessica up against him. The

perfect curve of her lower spine cradled his erection, which was incredibly distracting. As distracting as her scent. Her hair smelled like flowers and sunshine, though how he knew that was a mystery. He'd never seen real flowers, let alone smelled them. A spicy scent rose with the heat of her body and another layer of something earthy, musky and deliciously seductive lurked beneath.

Cash turned to the others. "Can we have a few minutes?"

The quiet dark-haired woman, whose name still hadn't been mentioned, took Teague's arm. Teague glanced at the one they called Ty, who was still glaring at Q.

"Come on, Ty," Teague said on his way out the door.

Ty was the last man out. He paused in the doorway, turned halfway back, and set fierce green eyes on Q. "I'll still kick your ass to Iceland, Quaid. I don't give a fuck what you do or don't remember. You hurt her again, I'm driving you there myself."

Once they were gone, Q muttered, "What the hell did I do to him?"

A second of heavy silence broke with Jessica's raspy "You died. On his watch."

He hadn't realized he was still holding her. She was small and warm and fit him so perfectly, like she belonged right there. But self-preservation forced his arms open before he backed across the room alone, scanning his peripheral vision for escape, for weapons, for something that said *safety*.

"Q, relax," Cash said. "Let's sit down and talk. We'll straighten everything out."

Q's gaze came around and he found Cash. Then Jessica. She stood at the door, one hand on her throat, one wrapped around the end of a necklace, tears wetting her face. She wore shorts and a fitted top with thin straps over her shoulder, her arms and legs bare. Her sweet little feet bare. And that hair, that glorious hair he'd dreamt of touching for years, falling everywhere.

His gut squeezed with guilt and confusion. He still wanted to touch her. To kiss her. To hold her. Yet he didn't trust her. Different parts of his brain warred and pressure built in his head.

He lifted a hand toward her, but spoke to Cash. "How'd she get here? Out of my dreams?" He lowered his voice. "I think she's Gorin's. You know how he gets me addicted to things and then takes them away to fuck with me."

Cash turned to Jessica. "Let me straighten him out, Jess."

She pressed her lips together and lowered the hand at her throat, but

continued stroking whatever lay on the end of the chain around her neck. She turned for the door, but before she closed it behind her, she glanced back and met Q's gaze.

“No one can take me away from you.” Her voice was soft but serious. “I make that decision, and I made you a promise. I'm not going anywhere.”

The door clicked closed behind her.

The only thing Q knew about promises was that there were no such things.

He moved to the window of the small room, stood to the side, and peered out, his heart thudding beneath his breastbone. His mind and body pulled toward Jessica, even though instincts pushed him to escape.

“Where are we, man? How far to the nearest road? Is there a car close by that we can steal? I have no fucking idea how I know, but I could rig or punch almost any kind of ignition—”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about getting us the hell out of here.”

Q scanned the terrain. In the distance, two men in fatigues carrying Colt M4A1s passed. They spoke for a moment and then moved on. For a reason he couldn’t begin to comprehend, the sight settled him. Men with high-grade weapons, he understood. But women who battled with the insanity of emotion? It was no wonder his mind told him to kill female terrorists first.

“How many guards do they have?” he asked. “And who the hell armed these guys? They’ve got better weapons than the Castle guards. Doesn’t matter. We can take them out. We just need a plan.”

“Q.”

“What?” A wash of exhaustion weakened his muscles, and he used the wall to hold himself up. The drug’s aftereffect was right on schedule. “Stop jabbering and start using that genius brain of yours. I’m fading. If we’re going to get out of here, we’ve got to break now—”

A hand gripped his arm and spun him around. Q looked into Cash’s still-unfamiliar face. Even features, strong jaw, straight nose. His blue eyes were

striking against his black hair and lashes.

“We’re not going anywhere.” Cash spoke deliberately, his eyes sparking with frustration. “Slow *your* genius brain the hell down so I can talk to you.”

“No time. Can’t you see this is another trap? Gorin must have planted Jessica in my subconscious, pushed her into my dreams, so when they needed leverage, they could send her in person to manipulate me. If I let her in, I’ll walk right back into their hands. We both will.”

Q flipped the lock on the window and hauled it open. Hands on the sill, he ducked and leaned out, scanning the field and the trees beyond, searching for threats and an escape path. But the sweet taste of the air hit him. Crisp and alive, it filled his senses like the first bite of that rare, real apple Gorin gave him once a month. But only if he’d been cooperative.

Q sucked in a big, beautiful lungful of the stuff, wondering if they grew apples here. He imagined sitting at the base of a tree, eating apples right off the branch.

Cash gripped the waistband of his jeans and hauled him back. Q smacked his skull on the window frame, and pain cracked through his head.

“Shit.” He ducked into the house, rubbed the back of his head, and turned, glaring at Cash. “What the fuck, man?”

Jaw tight, Cash pointed to the bed. “Sit.”

Fine. Q couldn’t hold it together anymore anyway. That smack on the head brought all his exhaustion and pain into acute focus, and his whole body sagged. His bad side, which had pulled its weight for a while in the heat of things, now ached.

Q slumped to a seat on the bed. He wanted to close his eyes and fall into this fatigue, but knew he couldn’t. Cash took the only chair, sitting on the edge. Elbows planted on his knees, his only friend looked at Q with a gravity he’d often imagined during their conversations at the Castle.

“Relax. Just long enough to listen for a few minutes,” Cash said. “You won’t get anywhere by passing out.”

Q fought to sit still, even though instinct urged him to act. “You’re not what I expected. Not like I had pictured in my mind.”

Some of the distress left Cash’s face, and one side of his mouth lifted. “You either.”

“I thought you’d be...I don’t know, smaller for some reason. Less bulky.”

Cash narrowed his eyes, but the stare completely lacked menace. “You calling me fat?”

Q huffed a laugh. Let the smile come. Let the tension ebb. “Hardly.”

“And you.” Cash lowered a brow and scanned Q’s chest. “What’s up with all the muscle, bud? That didn’t come from my workout plan. And there’s no difference between your right and left sides, like I expected from the injury you described.”

Q glanced down at himself, but didn’t see anything unusual.

“Listen, I know you’re freaked. I know this is all foreign to you.” Cash adjusted his seat, pressed his hands together, and aligned his palms and fingers. “But you’re among friends here, Q. There is no reason to run. Nothing to escape.”

Q glanced at the closed door, remembering the anger, the bottled emotions, and shook his head.

“Q, look at me.” When he did, Cash asked, “Do you trust me?”

Q’s stomach tensed. He stared hard at Cash and opened his mouth, but couldn’t answer. His intellect told him, yes, he trusted Cash above all others. His instincts told him, no, he trusted no one.

“You know no one understands what you’re going through more than I do,” Cash said.

Q nodded.

“You need to get your head straight on a few basic things before you go out there.”

Q stiffened.

Cash put up his hand. “You *are* going out there, Q. That’s the first thing you may as well just accept right now. These people risked their lives to get you out of that safe house. *I* risked my life to get you out of there. You will damn well not throw that back in our faces by running away.”

“That’s not...” He slid toward the end of the bed and leaned against the footboard for support. “I’m not trying to hurt anyone. I just don’t belong here.”

“After what you’ve been through, you wouldn’t feel as if you belonged anywhere. There is nowhere on earth you belong more than *right here*, with *these people*. This is what you’ve always wanted. You have it all right here, within reach. A family. A place to belong. People who *love you*.”

“Love me? They’re all pissed off at me. Your sister was going to *shoot* me. I may not understand much about real life, but I know that’s not love.”

“You put her in an impossible position. You forced her to choose between two of her best friends. They all love Jessica too. And there’s also something

called tough love. When loving someone means giving them hard limits, making them live up to certain standards, forcing them to be the best they can be, even if that means being hard on them. Kind of like me telling you to stop acting like an asshole. And if you don't pull your head out of your ass pretty quick, I'll be using that tough love a lot more."

Best friends. The sentiment tugged deep in his chest, yet nothing moved in his memory.

"Besides," Cash said, voice downgrading from anger to annoyance, "she wouldn't have killed you. She would have just maimed you—enough to get you to let go of Jessica. She's an FBI sniper."

"FBI? Does she realize the people who sign her paychecks are in the same family tree as the people who had us locked up?"

"As a matter of fact, she does. And yet she's here." Cash spread his hands wide. "What does that tell you?"

"That she didn't get your IQ?"

Cash laughed, a tired sound, reminding Q of his friend's long hours in the lab. "I wouldn't suggest saying that to her, unless you're willing to give up that ear."

Q stood and paced across the room, trying to find some safe place to ground himself before he started with all the questions waiting to explode in his brain. But he just kept seeing all their faces, yet not getting one flicker of recognition. They were all completely blank canvases. Absolute strangers. All except Jessica.

"I don't understand *anything*." His gut felt heavy, as if he'd swallowed a truckload of cement. "I don't remember them. I don't know any of them except Jessica. And how do you explain her?"

"You know I can't answer that any more than you can. All I can tell you is that these people are the kind of friends who become family over time. Each person in the other room has made a conscious sacrifice to be here—for *you*. They dropped everything in their lives when they found that coin in your cell. They took leaves of absence from their jobs and spent every waking moment searching for you. Pulled in favors. Set up a rescue operation. Executed it. Saved your sorry ass. Brought you here, where you're safe, where Gorin *can't* get you. And what are you doing?" Cash's voice turned sour and disappointed. "Trying to escape."

His only friend's disapproval stung. Then something else registered. "What did you say? About my coin?"

“I didn’t get out of the Castle on my own, like you and I had worked out,” Cash said. “Keira and her friends had a plan to rescue us and surprised me halfway. They went to your cell to get you, but the guards already had you on the road for testing. That’s when they found your coin, and they knew there was a real possibility that you were alive. Their dedication to finding you from that moment on never wavered. They were two hundred percent on board to get you back.”

“They risked their lives *twice* for the *possibility...?*” Q trailed off as a staggering realization hit him, one even deeper than the astounding insight he’d just made. “They did that for Quaid, not for me.”

“You *are* Quaid.”

Q’s stomach dropped. His mind spiraled. He thought of the planning and coordination and resources this type of operation must have required. He remembered the love in Jessica’s eyes, the emotion in her kiss. *I made you a promise.*

All the fight drained out of him. Q leaned forward, elbows on knees. Who must this Quaid have been to win that kind of loyalty, that depth of feeling?

Someone Q was not. Someone Q could never be.

The weight of that realization made him sick to his stomach. He dropped his head and rubbed his face. “My God.”

“Look, this is going to take time. We’re safe. We have everything we need: food, clothes, communication, weapons. We can stay here for a while. Figure out our next move.”

Q wasn’t listening, his mind still searching, questioning. He lifted his head and met Cash’s eyes. “Who are they to me?”

He hesitated. “The doctors think it’s best for you to remember things on your own—”

“Psycho doctors are the reason I’m so fucked up.”

“Q, don’t yell. There’s enough tension here already. And watch what you say about doctors. Alyssa is a doctor. A very good one who cares about you.”

“Which one is Alyssa?”

“Teague’s wife. Long dark hair, pregnant.”

“The quiet one.”

Cash’s mouth lifted in a wry smile. “Oh, she’s plenty good at getting her point across when she needs to.”

Q scraped his fingers over his scalp, feeling his scars. “Who are they to me, Cash?”

“Some are members of a firefighting team you were on. Alyssa and Mitch are Teague’s family.”

The words fell into a black void and faded until they disappeared. Nothing pinged to life—no memories. No sensation.

“I was a...firefighter?”

“Yes, on a hazmat team—a special hazardous materials team.”

Q waited. Searched his mind, his body. Shook his head. “I get nothing from that.”

“That’s okay.”

“What about names?” Maybe that would spark something. “What are their names?”

Cash took a breath and watched Q as he said, “There’s Teague Creek.”

Q shook his head and made a keep-going motion with his hand.

“Ty Ryder was the captain of the team. Luke Ransom, Seth Masters, my sister Keira.”

“Was Seth in the room? I didn’t hear that name.”

“He’s not here.”

When Q just shrugged, Cash said, “And just one more: Jessica Fury.”

His entire body tingled, twisted, throbbed. Hell, yeah. That name did all kinds of shit to him. “Jessica Fury. Fury. Fury.”

He repeated the name, closed his eyes, reached and searched. And came up empty. He pounded his palms against his eyes. “*Fuck*. I remember *nothing*. I swear to God”—he lifted his head and met Cash’s eyes—“Gorin better hope I never find him.”

“Let’s hope Gorin never finds you.” Cash sat back and then stood. “And let’s get you something to eat, or you’re going to start losing all that muscle. Do a meet and greet while we’re at it, because, hell, we’re so good in social settings. And you may as well get used to them calling you Quaid, because that’s your name, buddy—Quaid Legend.”

18

Gil patted his mouth with the three-hundred-thread-count white linen napkin and refolded it on his lap, still laughing appropriately at Senator Perino's fishing tale.

"I kid you not," Perino said, his balding head red from laughing at his own story. "I smelled like fish for a week."

Gil's phone vibrated just as his fork plunged into another bite of quite possibly the best macadamia nut encrusted salmon he'd ever eaten. He kept his smile in place, but ground his teeth and pretended to listen to Perino and two other senators from the Armed Forces Committee debate the pros and cons of various fly-fishing reels.

Since Gil didn't fish—what a damn waste of time—he glanced at his phone and read the name he'd expected to find—Abernathy. Gil tapped the Ignore button on General Abernathy's third call of the day.

He glanced up with the thought to call Owen after lunch to see what strides he'd made in tracking down Legend and O'Shay and realized the men at the table had gone silent. The hair on Gil's neck rose. He cast a quick glance at each of their faces, then followed their gazes to the man standing beside their table.

Gorin stared back at him, looking a little crazed, with mussed hair and glazed eyes pinning Gil from behind thick-lensed glasses.

Gil set his fork down, put his napkin on the table and offered a controlled, polite "I'll be right back, gentlemen."

Standing, he took Gorin's arm and walked him toward the exit, meeting every gaze that turned his way with a smile and an apologies-for-the-circus-

sideshow nod.

“You told me you’d find him.” Gorin spoke quickly as they moved. “You don’t understand how difficult it will be for him to cope in the real world. I don’t have him programmed for that. You promised me there was no way for him to escape. You said I didn’t need to worry. You didn’t want me to take the time to code him to go out there, do his job, and come back under *normal conscious conditions*. Now he’s out there alone—”

“Wait until we’re outside,” Gil said through a smile of clenched teeth.

“But, but anything could happen. He could snap and go insane. He could turn into a mass murderer. He could come searching for us. He could remember everything we’ve trained him to do. All he’s already done on missions. *Everything*, Gil.”

Gil pushed the outer door to the restaurant open. Finally, fresh air and privacy. After one quick glance around uncovered no immediate witnesses, Gil fisted the front of Gorin’s button-down shirt and slammed him against the nearest wall. “Shut. Up. Max.”

The shocked look on Gorin’s pale face and the blessed silence gave Gil a moment to collect his temper. “There.” He said on a deep breath, “Better.”

Gorin jerked out of Gil’s grasp and leaned in. “I need him back. He was in the middle of two important missions. General Abernathy and General Cochrane are calling me every hour because you’re not answering your phone.”

Great, it was only a matter of time until Cochrane was jumping down Gil’s throat too.

“Don’t you think I know that? I’m doing all I can. I’ve got Owen Young searching for them, and an asset on Q’s tail. What more do you want, Max? Magic tricks? My future depends on him too. And I want that fucking formula from O’Shay. I notice you haven’t mentioned that. All you care about is your little protégé.”

He pushed Gorin back again, more to get the man out of his face than to intimidate.

“You’d better remember that it’s O’Shay’s formula that’s going to finance all the games you like to play with Q,” Gil said, “especially if his escape costs Millennium those weapons contracts.

“In fact, this is a good time for you to refocus on Millennium, Max. You know, the company that lets you play with your science, something no other company would allow.” Schaeffer put a rigid finger against Max’s bony chest

and poked hard. “The company that’s been backing you on your badass plan of cloning the invincible soldier.”

“And I will. I will. Q was coming along so nicely. You know Q will be the prototype for a whole new army of the future—”

“Not if we don’t *get him back*. And I can’t strategize plans with the people searching for Q if I’m getting calls from you every hour of the fucking day.” Gil sucked air into his lungs. “I’ll handle my end of the business, Max. You stay out of it.”

19

Q fisted his hands as he followed Cash down the cement block hallway with a cement slab floor. While those were the only similarities to the Castle, they were enough to set Q on edge.

He tried to focus on the amazing scent of food. His stomach was doing a great job there, rolling and growling like a monster. There were so many new smells, they overlapped and mixed. Strawberry was the scent that dominated, but he detected other fruits too—pineapple, orange, melon, kiwi, mango.

He had no memory of ever eating those fruits, which made him wonder how the hell he knew how they smelled.

But beyond fruit, other foods sent olfactory messages too. Bread, spices, meat.

And while his salivary glands were operating on high, his mind cataloging foods he craved, it was also untangling the multiple voices carrying on several different conversations. Voices of people who'd apparently risked their lives to rescue him. Voices of people who thought they knew him. Voices of people he had absolutely no recollection of and wasn't sure he wanted to get to know now.

Cash turned a corner and disappeared into another room. Q's feet came to a stop. The scents and sounds faded into the background and fear jumped forward. Fear of what, he wasn't sure, but his hands tensed and flexed. His teeth gnashed. Sweat broke out across his forehead and shoulders. A buzz grew in his ears.

“Q?”

He focused on Cash, who'd returned to the middle of the hallway, but

couldn't speak. What was he going to say?

The simple change in Cash's expression from confusion to compassion told Q he understood, which was bizarre in itself, because he'd just seen Cash for the first time twenty minutes ago, and now, he could read his expressions.

Q dropped his face into his hands and rubbed hard.

"Hey." Cash's voice was low, gentle. He put a hand on Q's shoulder and squeezed.

There had been a guard who'd done that once in a while. One who used to sneak Q extra food and bring him old Clive Cussler novels.

"I know this is hard and confusing," Cash said. "Take your time. Just know these are the good people. They would go to the ends of the earth to keep you safe."

Q just couldn't grasp the existence of that kind of loyalty, especially toward him. And the noise from the next room was already rubbing his nerves raw. Talking, laughing, things banging, doors opening and closing.

Eventually, his curiosity over these mysterious people from his past surpassed his fears, and he followed Cash.

The size of the room registered first. Enormous with high ceilings. Then Q catalogued the doors. Windows. Layout. Furnishings. Then the fact that Jessica wasn't there. *No one can take me away.*

"Where is she?" he whispered to Cash.

"Don't know. Outside, maybe."

Outside? He glanced at the glass doors again, restless. Could he go outside?

"Later," Cash said as if he'd read Q's mind. "Focus."

No one had noticed him yet, so Q took the opportunity to observe and take a quick head count. Four men and two women, not including him and Cash. Teague and Alyssa sat on one sofa, Luke and Keira on another, the two couples talking. Ty and Mitch stood in an area off to the left, where every horizontal surface was covered with food.

Q forced his gaze away from the sight of Ty cutting some type of fruit and moved to the middle of the living room floor, where bins of colorful things surrounded two...

"Are those...?" Q realized what a ridiculous question he was about to ask. "I mean, I know they're kids. They're just so...small."

"Kids generally are." Cash grinned. "Mateo, come here and meet Quaid."

Q tensed and stepped back. Everyone in the room turned or looked up,

and he felt the pressure of eight new pairs of eyes.

The boy popped to his feet and sprinted across the space, rounded a couch, and ran right into Cash's legs. "*Baba!*"

From where she still sat on the floor, Kat said, "Hi, Uncle Quaid. Do you like Barbies?" And without waiting for an answer, she returned her attention to whatever gadget she held in her hand.

Uncle Quaid?

Q's throat thickened until it became uncomfortable to swallow. The boy bounced at Cash's feet, reaching up, babbling about winning a video game—whatever the hell that was—distracting Q from the sudden and unfamiliar emotions.

"Mateo," Cash said, his voice smooth and patient. "English, son, English. My Greek isn't—"

"He beat the cat at the video game?" Q said, questioning his translation, wondering how a cat could play a game. "They bet...nail polish?" Q tilted his head, utterly confused by all this information that made no sense to him. "And he won. He wants to...put that polish on your hands?"

Cash started laughing. A deep, rolling, rich laugh, but the rest of the room had gone completely quiet.

"He beat *Kat* at a video game," Cash said, grinning. "I didn't know you spoke Greek."

Another surge of fear pulsed through him. Translating the words had been automatic, as if he thought in multiple languages. "I didn't either."

Cash's smile didn't just fade, it dropped, and concern etched lines between his eyes. Then he lifted the boy into his arms and his expression changed again. He looked at his son with so much love, Q experienced a sense of yearning as deep as the longing he'd felt to remember his past. Which made as much sense to Q as the fact that those with knowledge of his past filled the room and all he wanted to do was run.

He looked at the big glass doors, then beyond, as far as the trees allowed. But he couldn't even catch a glimpse of Jessica.

Cash smiled at Q. "This is my son, Mateo. Mateo this is—"

"Q!" He drew out the sound as if in celebration, throwing his arms overhead. Then he fell forward. Would have fallen right out of his father's arms, but he stopped himself with his hands on Q's shoulders. Mateo lifted his head and smiled up at Q with big, warm brown eyes filled with joy and innocence. "Thank you for my daddy, Q."

He turned his head, planted a kiss on Q's shoulder, and squirmed out of Cash's arms and to the ground. "Love you, *baba*."

He shot off toward the back of the house again, leaving the room silent and Quaid trembling with a sense of blissful possibilities and tormented loss. His time at the Castle was starting to look positively serene in comparison to his first few hours free.

"Bet you're hungry." The voice came from the kitchen behind Q. He turned just as Ty set down a knife and picked up a bowl of strawberries piled beyond the rim.

He came around a counter toward Q, and the scent that came with him was so strong, so absolutely, deliriously amazing, Q's head went light. Fresh, ripe, pure strawberry. Saliva filled Q's mouth. His stomach rolled with hunger. Longing tugged deep inside him.

Ty plucked one huge, perfect strawberry from the bowl and popped it in his mouth. The damn thing was so big, it barely fit, filling one cheek as he chewed, while he was already dipping into the bowl for another. "These are amazing, even out of season."

Ty took one and held the bowl out to Q. "They used to be your favorite."

Q tore his gaze from the bowl. "They were?"

"We used to have to hide them from you if we wanted any." Ty popped another in his mouth. "You'd eat an entire flat in one sitting. Try 'em."

Q took the bowl and found himself frozen. The scent was overwhelming, as was the fear.

Trap.

He glanced at Cash, who nodded, so he pushed the fear aside and met Ty's gaze. "I know why you wanted to kick my ass, but why to Iceland?"

Surprise flashed in his eyes, and then he grinned. "It was the farthest, coldest place I could think of."

"Actually, Antarctica is the coldest place on earth, and Turkmenistan is the farthest place from—"

"Shut up, man." Ty laughed and shook his head. "You always had a smart mouth. Hell, I know I shouldn't, I know you're totally freaked out, but I'm so happy to see you, what the hell, I don't even care if you try to choke me."

And before Q could think to react, Ty pulled Q into a tight hug. A sudden, sharp sense of claustrophobia closed in on Q. He was about to break away from Ty when Cash patted his back and took the bowl of strawberries from his flailing hand.

You're among friends.

“Shit, man,” Ty rasped, still holding Q bound, which felt both frightening and awkward. “I’ve never been so glad to see anyone in my whole life.”

Q didn’t know if it was the words or the emotion behind the words, but something reached into his gut and yanked hard. Then something else swept in. Overwhelming affection. Crushing gratitude. An awesome sense of brotherhood.

He didn’t even know what the hell *brotherhood* was. And Q wasn’t sure if the emotions were coming from Ty or from inside himself. But it didn’t matter. They were short-circuiting Q’s overtaxed psyche.

He pushed at Ty’s chest.

“Sorry, man.” Ty immediately stepped back, rubbing his eyes with the back of his hand, the other hand on Q’s shoulder, his expression both relieved and pained. “Welcome back.”

Q’s chest ached. Part of him wanted to hug the man back, which was just too weird. Part of him was crawling out of his skin to dive through the nearest plate glass window to escape.

Ty turned and walked back to the sink, where he started working with the fruit again, sniffing and wiping his face.

Cash held the strawberries out to Q with a smile. “You okay?”

“I don’t know what I am.” He took the strawberries back, but didn’t dive in, even though he wanted to do a face plant into the bowl and devour the fragrant fruit. He’d conditioned himself not to show any level of desire for anything. Especially not anything he really wanted. As soon as Gorin identified something Q desired, he used it as a reward, a punishment, a bribe, a threat, anything to get Q to perform to the scientist’s standards.

Cash took a strawberry, murmuring, “Eat them. No one will take them away. I promise.”

Only the sight of Cash pushing one of the berries into his mouth, two others cradled in his hand, pried Q’s self-control loose.

Q picked up a strawberry and bit it in half. Sweetness burst into his mouth, cool and fragrant. He chewed, slowly. Juice pulsed from the fruit and coated his tongue. “My God.”

“We’ve got three more flats of those.” Ty waved a dismissive hand. “We’ll all be sick of them by tomorrow. Eat as many as you want.”

Q wrapped a possessive arm around the bowl and found a wall to lean against while he savored every precious berry.

“Q has questions,” Cash said to the room in general.

“Who doesn’t?” Mitch said. He stood at another counter shaking spices onto slabs of beef and rubbing them in. “We’re all here for the same thing.”

“The same thing?” Q said. “How can that be possible?”

“Freedom. Justice. Security,” Mitch said. “They’re inherent human desires.”

Q shoved another berry in his mouth, gauged the risk of asking the question hovering at the forefront of his mind, then gave up. “Did I know you?”

“Nope, not me. You and me, we’re starting with a clean slate. I didn’t come on scene until after Alyssa hooked up with jailbird over there.”

“Watch yourself, Foster,” Teague said, “or you’re gonna find some of those strawberries where you least expect them.”

Keira snorted a laugh. In the living area, all four people on the sofas watched him. All four grinning with a peculiar look in their eyes that made Q decidedly uncomfortable. At least, Keira didn’t have a weapon in her hand. The fact that both Teague and Mitch appeared amused eased Q’s tension. They must be joking, the way the guards often did.

“Why do you call him jailbird?” Q asked Mitch.

Mitch’s grin faltered and concern flitted through his expression. “It’s just a nickname. He was in prison for a while, that’s all.”

Q’s gaze veered back to Teague. “Why?”

Teague sighed. “That’s kind of a long story.”

“No it’s not,” Mitch said. “Teague was pushing for answers and the same people who abducted you and Cash got Teague thrown in prison for a murder he didn’t commit.”

Q’s hand froze halfway to his mouth. His gaze sharpened on Teague before cutting a questioning look at Cash.

“There’s a lot to unpack,” Cash said. “Be patient.”

“Quaid,” Teague said, “you should slow down on those berries.”

Even though Teague was all the way across the room and the strawberries were almost gone, Q tensed.

“You probably want to go light and bland for the first couple of weeks,” he said. “Those are pretty acidic. They might be hard on your stomach.”

Hard on his stomach? Teague’s concern was ridiculously disproportionate to all Q had suffered. That realization made it hard for Q to swallow the berry he was chewing.

He nodded, dropped the berry he held, and sucked at the red stains from his fingers as he tried to get his thoughts and emotions back in line.

But he was swelling up like a balloon. Like he might burst.

Even though he wanted to down the berries left in the bowl, he set them back on the counter.

“Where’s Jessica?” he asked, suddenly yearning for the sight of her.

“She went for a walk.” The pregnant woman’s voice flowed over Q like cool water. She’d risen from the sofa and now set two drinking glasses on the counter in the kitchen, then walked toward Q with one hand on her big belly.

“I’m Alyssa,” she said. “Teague’s wife. You and I didn’t know each other from before either, so we’re starting fresh too.”

She put her hand out. It was small, but looked strong.

“We’re both a little rusty on the manners,” Cash said, then elbowed Q’s ribs.

Q braced himself in preparation for...whatever came...and reluctantly took Alyssa’s hand. The same sensation her voice brought, one of calm waters, spread through his body at her touch and eased his tension.

She was smiling. A real smile, warm and sincere. And she was beautiful, with a perfectly balanced face, wide, unusual eyes, and full mouth. Her black hair seemed to stand out against the creamy paleness of her perfect skin. Yet he felt no interest. No attraction. No arousal.

Nothing like what he felt when he touched Jessica.

“How’s your pain?” she asked.

He withdrew his hand and checked in with his body. It only ached for one thing. “Fine. Which way did Jessica go?”

“Out the back, through the sliders. But it’s a huge property—”

“I need air.” He started toward the big glass doors.

On the porch, Cash stopped him with a hand on his arm.

Q turned. “I can’t do this. I’m ready to crawl out of my skin.”

“I understand,” Cash said, his eyes serious, devoid of pity. Q realized that was one of the emotions he saw in everyone else’s eyes, and it was grating on him. “I want you to get some space. I’ll buffer you and run interference, but you have to promise me, Q, give me your word, friend to friend, that you won’t leave without telling me.”

His jaw pulsed. He didn’t want to give that promise. He wanted to be free to cut ties if he needed. But this man had kept him going for years.

He started for the stairs leading to the open land and forest beyond.

“Quaid?”

Q clenched his teeth, but stopped and turned. Keira and Luke stood on the porch, their expressions serious. He tensed.

“We, um...” Keira glanced over her shoulder at the blond standing close, hands in the front pockets of his jeans, his easy-going smile replaced by a tight set to his mouth. “We have to leave.”

Q turned fully toward them, a new sense of alarm burning along his spine. “Why?”

“Remember that key I pulled from the necklace around Dargan’s neck?” Cash asked at Q’s side.

Q thought back to the night Jocelyn Dargan had surprised Cash at the Castle in the middle of the night. She’d come to incentivize Cash to finish his formula by showing him a photo of Keira and Mateo and alluding to the threat of killing them if Cash didn’t finish the project fast.

Cash had lunged at her, gripped her jacket collar, and broken her necklace, which he’d then hidden until she’d gone. By the time she’d realized it was missing, Cash had escaped.

“Yeah,” Q said. “I remember.”

“It fits a safe-deposit box,” Cash said. “We’ve narrowed down the banks it could belong to, and Keira and Luke are going to try to find the box it matches and see if there’s anything in it that can help us.”

Q searched his memory, but came up empty. “What’s a safe-deposit box?”

Keira’s mouth opened as if to say something, but nothing came out. Keira, Luke, and Cash shared a look. Obviously, a safe-deposit box was something Quaid would have known.

“Never mind,” Q said, suddenly irritated and wanting Jessica that much more. “How long will you be gone? You’re coming back?”

“We’ll be back as soon as we can,” Keira said, both of them smiling as if he’d said something amusing. “You didn’t think you were getting rid of us that easy, did you?”

She stepped toward him at the same time that he moved toward her, and they walked into a hug that felt natural and comfortable. A completely different sensation than he’d had with Jessica. Holding Jessica made Q restless in a very sexual way. Made Q’s heart tighten and twist and turn.

With her arms wrapped tightly around his neck, Keira whispered, “So good to have you back.”

That damned annoying wetness pushed at his eyes again. He gave her a squeeze and said, "Watch your six."

Keira released his neck and pulled back. Tears wet her lashes and made her eyes shine a brilliant blue. "What?"

"Be careful."

He let her go and turned to Luke, who maintained a lazy stance. His easy grin had returned. Q didn't know how or why, but his gut told him Luke could be one of the most intense in the group, but he was obviously content and deeply happy right now. And Q had no doubt that had everything to do with the blue-eyed sniper, the same way Alyssa made Teague smile. And maybe, Q was growing to realize, why he kept seeking out Jessica.

Q took a few steps toward Luke, not sure what to do. Luke held out his hand, so Q took it. And they fell into a comfortable handshake followed by a tight hug, as if he and Luke had done this all their lives.

Q wondered if they had.

"Good to have you home, buddy," Luke said, his voice thick with emotion, then he slapped his back and released him.

"Be careful," Q repeated to Luke, then turned and headed down the stairs in search of the one person he needed most.

20

Jessica stared out over the small ravine that bordered two sides of the property from her seat on the flat, rough surface of a sun-warmed boulder. Charcoal-colored rock lined the ravine walls. Down in the shallow valley, a creek flowed through a meadow dotted by multicolored trees. The same trees painted the hillsides as far as Jessica could see with a kaleidoscope of fall colors from mellow yellows to fiery reds. And the heavenly landscape pressed up against a pristine robin's-egg-blue sky, with distant, cotton-ball clouds.

She couldn't help but smile, even though the sheer beauty of it sliced her insides. The perfection seemed so...wrong...under the circumstances. And if she didn't adjust her emotions, those clouds in the distance would be overhead and pouring rain before she had time to get back to the bunker.

Jessica shook her thoughts away, then closed her eyes and took a deep cleansing breath—in through her nose, out through her mouth. In with clean, crisp perfection, out with ugly, chronic pain. She purposely relaxed each muscle, starting with her face and working her way down her body.

She centered her mind. Then her core. Visualized herself grounded to the rich earth through roots that grew out of her crossed legs and stretched around the boulder, sinking deep into the ground. There, they tunneled to the white-hot core of the earth, drew its energy up through the roots like water, and pulled that soul-mending source straight into her body directly to her heart, where the organ then pumped that magic back through her system.

And for a moment, she felt it—a euphoric sense of total well-being, as if she were floating. Her body light, her soul bright, her future open. A

sparkling haze drifted over her mind, wiping out all her problems. Bringing love and generosity and hope.

She soaked it in, tucked it away, and stored it in every muscle, fiber, tissue, and cell.

“Jessie?”

A hole pricked the bubble of her serenity. Her peaceful inner world pulled away from the walls of her mind like ripping wallpaper.

She opened her eyes, her chest burning with the sting of fear, and twisted toward the voice. Quaid stood ten feet away, hands on hips, still bare-chested, jeans still unbuttoned, breathing hard as if he’d been running.

Had he just called her...*Jessie*? “What’s wrong?”

She darted a glance behind him while scrambling off the boulder. When she realized no other frantic members of the team waited, a burst of hope exploded, searing her lungs until her breath caught. He was the only person who had ever called her Jessie. Could he have remembered? She turned her gaze back to Quaid, searching his face for a clue. *Please, please, please.*

“Are you okay?” she asked.

He dropped his head. “I’m...” He raked his fingers over his scalp. “I’m confused. I’m really confused.”

The torment in his voice pulled her a step closer, but also kept her out of reach. She was confused too, not sure whether to go to him or keep her distance and give him room to work things through first.

Clasping her hands, she squeezed them tight, wringing out the tension, and took another step closer. “What can I do for you?”

He laughed, the sound dry and bitter. “Why would you want to do anything for me?” He shook his head. “I don’t know how to apologize. And I can’t even say I didn’t mean to hurt you or that I wouldn’t have, because...” He lifted his hand, then let it fall, the gesture helpless and vulnerable. “Honestly, I don’t know what I would or wouldn’t have done.”

He didn’t have to say the words for Jessica to know he regretted what had happened. Cash had explained enough about his time at the Castle for Jessica to understand his response had been an instinctive reaction to fear.

He turned his back to her as Jessica opened her mouth to tell him not to go, took another step toward him, but stopped. She had to let him walk away if that’s what he needed. Give him room to adjust at his own pace. But he didn’t go. He just wandered toward the cliff and stared out across the ravine in silence.

His phoenix was gorgeous. Covering the right two-thirds of his back, the fierce bird's tail tapered at his waist. One wing crested over Quaid's shoulder and decorated the back of his right arm. The other wing stretched across the other third of his bare back.

His body was so different from before. Her eyes slid over the curves of muscle and sinew. The bulk she'd known was gone. In its place, sleek, tapered muscle contoured beneath tight, tan skin. He was truly sculpted, and her hands were restless to touch and explore this new man, even while a big part of her heart and mind feared him.

"Your mark," she said, "is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

A deep sigh lifted and lowered his shoulders. "Jessica..."

She waited, smiling at the sound of her name in his voice, something she never believed she'd hear again.

But when he didn't go on, she said, "Yes?"

"What am I to you?"

She pulled her bottom lip between her teeth while her mind and heart bellowed *I'm the person who loves you most in the entire world. I'm the woman you chose over all others. I'm your wife.*

"You don't remember anything yet?"

"Not in my head." He turned and faced her, and she almost wished he hadn't. His expression was so tortured, he seemed almost angry. "But I have all these emotions, all these feelings I don't understand. I have no memories, no basis for them."

She nodded, unsure of what to say.

In two steps, he stood in front of her. His scent surrounded her, soap and heat and Quaid. He took her chin in his hand. A thrill teased her heart in anticipation of him tilting her face up and kissing her. But he turned her head to the side and swept her hair off her neck with the other hand.

She pulled in a breath of shock and tried to push his hand away, but he was too strong. "Quaid..."

He took her face in both hands, this time tilting it up until she looked directly into his eyes. She grabbed one of his wrists, but he wasn't hurting her, so she didn't pull away. And, God help her, she just wanted his mouth back on hers.

"Why is this tattoo on your neck?"

Her gut tensed. She raised her gaze from his lips to his eyes. Those deep brown, demanding eyes. And hated the way she immediately wanted to lie.

“It’s a Chinese sym—”

His hands tightened on her face. This time, the pressure did hurt, and she teetered on that line between anger and patience.

“It’s the name you’re all calling me. Quaid—*my name*—in a Chinese symbol.”

She opened her mouth to ask how he knew. No one knew. She’d gotten the ink after his death and never told anyone what it meant, not even Keira. But his gaze dropped to her lips, and the words died in her throat.

“Were you mine?” he asked, his voice softer, his gaze slowly rising from her mouth with a look so heated, so hungry, her control nearly slipped right through her fingers. “Were you mine, Jessie?”

She swallowed. “Y-yes.”

His gaze held hers a long moment, filled with shock. She held her breath, fearing and anticipating his reaction at the same time. Shock shifted to confusion. Confusion into disbelief. He let go, dropped his arms, and stepped back.

Jessica watched his eyes. Those eyes she’d once been able to read so well, now seemed like rich pools of mystery.

“Are you...? How...?” He shook his head and shifted from foot to foot, staring at some unknown spot on the ground. He mumbled something Jessica didn’t catch. He rubbed his head.

She feared she’d said too much, pushed him over some cognitive line. When he finally lifted his gaze from the ground and met hers again, more questions floated there than doubt. “We were together?”

She wrung her hands, trying to smile through all the distress. “Yes.”

He chewed on the inside of his lower lip, something he used to do when he was thinking or right before he’d admitted to a change of heart about something. The sight made the threat of tears sting across the bridge of her nose.

His eyes glistened with wetness, and he cleared his throat. “Were we happy?”

Oh God. She tightened the muscles in her abdomen to hold back the sob that wanted to come. “Yes. We were *very* happy.”

He closed his eyes, and wetness clumped his long, dark lashes. He looked away, nodded. Sighed. Shifted on his feet, one step back, one step forward. One step back. A torturous tease to Jessica, who had to fight not to beg him to come to her.

When he searched out her eyes again, his gaze had grown sad. So painfully sad. “And who do you belong to now?”

For a moment, she didn't understand the question. Then she realized what he was asking, and the look in his eyes clicked. She couldn't take it, that broken, defeated expression. She couldn't stand knowing he suffered the belief he'd lost someone he'd loved. Whether he remembered her or not, that pain floating in his eyes was real.

She closed the distance between them. Quaid's shifting stopped as soon as she took her first step, his entire demeanor flipping to defense mode. She didn't let that stop her from getting within an inch of his body. Reaching up, she slid both hands over his head, letting them rest at the base of his neck. When his eyes closed and a look of relief eased his expression, her stomach did little somersaults.

“Quaid.” She smiled through the volatile mix of pain and hope. “My heart will always be yours. That's why I'm here.”

He opened his eyes slowly, cautiously, and gave her that long I'm-not-sure-what-to-believe stare.

When she couldn't take the silence any longer, Jessica smiled and threaded her fingers together at the back of his neck, easing forward and pressing her body against his. He felt so good, a wall of warm muscle. “I haven't changed my mind in five years. I'm not changing it now.”

Still, he hesitated, as if calculating risk factors. His gaze flicked away. He shook his head. Then, without warning, he covered her mouth with his, wrapped an arm at her waist, and sank the fingers of the other hand into her hair. He kissed her fast and hard. She made a noise of surprise in her throat, but Quaid swallowed it.

The sudden roughness, the blatantly erotic thrust of his tongue, the raw hunger flowing from every part of him, they all shocked her as much as they excited her. Her world narrowed to the man holding her. Her attention was limited to his taste, his scent, the feel of his lips, the heat of his body.

He pulled his mouth from hers, but his lips slipped right to her jaw, his breath fast and hot against her neck. Both arms tightened around her, bringing her into full contact with his body and the long, hard erection pressing into her pelvis. A delicious sensation burst at the center of her body and washed outward. She couldn't remember when a man had felt so good. Probably over five years ago.

“Quaid...” She hadn't realized she'd said his name until he responded.

He raised his head and gazed down at her with so much need, so much desire, she choked on her emotions. “God, I’ve missed you.”

Those rich eyes she loved so much filled with gratitude, love, humility, relief, and so much desire, she would have dropped to her knees if he hadn’t been holding her close enough to be a second skin.

She fisted the waistband of his jeans and held on, letting his passion overpower her. His mouth was hot, his body forceful, his hands demanding. He was rough, graceless, and primal. Jessica had never been so damn turned on so damn fast.

Without warning, he broke the kiss. His head jerked up, and he glanced left. Then he went still. Amazingly, stone still.

Jessica took the moment to gather air. Her body sizzled. Her lungs burned. Her head spun. “What—”

“Shh.” He pressed gentle fingers to her lips, a startling contrast to his unleashed desire.

The sting of fear cooled her passion. She struggled to control her breathing, strained to listen. But all she heard were the same sounds of the wind in the trees, birds, creek. The deep, soothing silence.

“Go inside.” Quaid lowered his hand from her lips and gripped her upper arms, bending to look directly into her eyes. The fierceness of his gaze sent a chill across her shoulders. “Do you understand? Inside. Lock the doors. *Everyone. Inside. Now.*”

He pushed her toward the bunker, and she stumbled several steps. “Quaid.”

He was already running in the other direction, his feet bare as he sprinted into the trees. Fast. Agile. Powerful. Not a hint of his limp.

She covered her heart where it beat fast and hard in her chest and turned toward the bunker. Ty and Cash came crashing through the trees, weapons up and aimed. Jessica jumped, sure her heart would triple-time itself right into a heart attack.

“What’s wrong?” Ty asked, his compact automatic rifle already panning the area.

“Where’s Quaid?” Cash took Jessica’s shoulder and pinned her with those piercing blue eyes so much like Keira’s.

“He—he—” Jessica couldn’t make her mouth work. She pointed in the direction Quaid had run. “How did you know?”

“I felt it,” Ty said. “He sent out a spike of fear and anger so strong, I

knew it had to be something bad.”

Jessica pressed her hands to the new burn in her cheeks.

Cash followed Ty into the forest, yelling, “Send the others this way.”

21

Q paused on the edge of a copse and cocked his head to the right, where he'd last heard the footsteps. He had to filter out the sound of his breathing.

The person's footsteps scraped along dirt and crackled over limbs and leaves. A tread too heavy for a woman. Whoever it was wore boots—lightweight, thin-soled, military-grade canvas boots. Something he had about as much random chance of knowing as how to read the Chinese symbols on Jessica's neck.

Unease created a cold track down his spine. Whoever wore those boots was nowhere near the bunker, still about two miles away. But definitely on the property. From the various *clicks* sounding when he walked, he carried weapons and equipment.

We have no neighbors. So if you hear or see someone, that's a problem.

Mitch's words pushed Q back into a run, veering right to come up behind the intruder. The trees' colorful leaves blurred in Q's vision. The man's footsteps and clicks from his gear directed Q through the forest, down hills, into the ravine.

Q's mind shifted into some cool, serious, determined mode that felt both surreal and familiar. He easily weaved through the trees and maintained even, regulated breathing. Only a slightly elevated heart rate thumped in his ears. After the first few stabs of pain in his feet from rocks or limbs, they'd gone numb.

Behind him, near the bunker, Jessica's voice touched the edge of his mind's filter, then the voices of others. A sense of urgency pushed even more adrenaline into Q's veins.

I have to get to him before he gets to them.

The desperate need drove him forward. He couldn't stop. No matter how hard he tried to interrupt his automatic actions, his body continued to function on autopilot.

Anger and fear fueled his muscles. He wanted—needed—to keep these people safe. People he didn't know, but who should mean everything to him. That goal infused him with extreme strength and incredible stamina.

After another mile of the consistent, driving run, his vision wobbled, turning everything in his line of sight watery. Q recognized an aftereffect of the drugs and checked in with the rest of his body.

His mouth had run dry, and his ribs burned. But the bodily exhaustion from lack of food and water didn't register with this disconnected inner drive. And if he didn't stop now, he'd collapse when he needed his strength most.

He put both arms out in front of him and steered himself toward a tree, braced for impact. But his arms still failed, and he hit with his chest. His lungs compressed. He bounced off the tree and landed on the ground ass-first.

He froze, grimacing at the stab of pain singing up his tailbone.

The vulnerable position had Q reaching for his weapon. When his hand hit nothing but a jeans-covered hip, he looked down at himself.

His mind seemed to split in two, one side confused to be reaching for a weapon he'd never even touched before, the other frustrated not to find that same weapon where it should be. Where he always carried it. *Always*.

He turned his hand over and stared at the palm as if he expected the Ruger he'd been reaching for to appear.

He looked up at the kaleidoscope of treetops, then he glanced around at the isolated forest. What in the fuck was he doing? Who in the fuck was he?

“Schizophrenia?” His rational mind struggled for a logical answer for the bizarre behavior. He sure as hell felt as if he had two different people working inside him. “Psychotic break?”

More like programmed, his subconscious told him.

For a millisecond, Q stared into the trees and wondered if this was another hallucination. Or a dream, like his dreams of Jessica. Only, Jessica was real. Wasn't she? Or maybe an alternate reality, like that little side trip to the Middle Eastern desert. If that's what it had even been. Q didn't know. He felt like he didn't know anything.

Shuffle. Click-click-click.

Whether dream, alternate universe, or reality, he wasn't safe. His team

wasn't safe. Jessica wasn't safe.

Very slowly and silently, Q rolled to his stomach, did a quick push-up, and jumped to his feet. He used a tree for cover and peered around the trunk, just enough to look into a distant clearing.

The intruder stepped into view, and Q's vision brought him in with crystal clarity. He was about Q's age, dark hair, drab olive T-shirt darkened by sweat, black cargo pants.

The guy held up a small electronic device with a map on the screen and panned it around the area. As he twisted away from Q, a rifle came into view—an HK416 strapped over his back. German engineering, 5.56-millimeter round, seven hundred to nine hundred rounds per minute, non-jamming gas system. The weapon that had nailed Osama bin Laden.

Whoever the hell that was. However the hell he knew that.

Q wished he could claw his brain out of his skull and stomp on it. This had never happened before. At least not that he could remember. But that was probably because Gorin always had control of his mind. Now, nothing regulated his thoughts.

Q skirted the edge of the ravine, moving in quick sprints between rocks and brush. Part of him wondered what the hell he was going to do when he caught up with the stranger. Another part knew he'd take care of that when it happened.

Q's body felt light and strong, his brain alert and sharp. He crouched behind a boulder, assessing the other man's position as he approached a particularly steep area of the ravine ahead.

Q darted from boulder to brush. From brush to boulder. The intruder moved closer to the ravine wall—right where Q wanted him.

He eyed the last boulder he planned to use for cover before he attacked. A sound pulled his attention left. He scanned the ravine and the brush beyond, but saw nothing, not even a rodent. Then he peered farther, to the edge of the forest, and his stomach dropped.

Ty and one of the guards Q had seen patrolling the grounds earlier crept through the trees, crouched, holding semiautomatics.

Shit. Q looked right, across the ravine and found Teague and another guard skirting boulder clusters. And Q would bet a trip back to the Castle that Cash, Mitch, and the remaining two guards were on his ass. He didn't even need to look.

The intruder found finger and toe holds along the ravine wall and hoisted

himself onto the rock. Q skipped the cover boulder and sprinted for the guy.

This time, the man heard Q coming. Not a huge surprise. The intruder dropped from the wall, maintained his crouch in a twist, aimed and fired, all in fluid, split-second movements.

Q dropped, rolled, and popped back to his feet behind a boulder. Bullets hit the rock, and it splintered, the shards flying in every direction.

He was still trying to figure out how to get the jump on this guy when a *chunk* hit his ear. The immediate curse that followed told Q the man's weapon had jammed, and Q came out of hiding to sprint toward the intruder, who was now taking cover behind other rocks. He'd dropped his backpack as he struggled with his rifle. Before Q reached the guy, he pulled his backup weapon. When gunfire shattered the stillness, it hadn't come from the intruder.

The other man screamed, and Q charged. He grabbed the man's wrist, shoved his arm wide, and planted three hard shots to the left kidney while pushing the man's wrist back to the breaking point. The guy dropped the gun and struck out. Q blocked and caught the guy's jaw with a cross. He ducked a jab and blocked a body shot, blood flying from somewhere. Quaid was able to get in a double shot to his gut, and when the intruder bent toward the pain, Q kned him in the face.

The intruder flailed, stumbling backward, and Q advanced with wild fury burning inside him. He grabbed the man's throat and slammed him up against the rock wall, only to haul him forward and drive him back against the rock again. And again, and again, and again, punctuating the beating with a very clear message: "*I'll...never...go...back.*"

With the man's spine wedged against the rock, Q squeezed the intruder's throat with all his strength. The man wheezed, gagged, brought up bloody hands to pry at Q's fingers.

That's when Q saw the bullet hole through the palm of the man's shooting hand. He was sure the only person capable of making a shot like that was Keira. His mind veered toward Luke, then to each member of the team. To Jessica. He thought of all they'd sacrificed, and something deep inside him glowed white-hot.

He leaned close, tightened his fingers until the spy's eyes bulged, and vowed, "You'll never get *them* either."

22

Jessica came to an abrupt stop at the edge of the ravine. When Keira and Luke ran up behind her, she said, “I thought you left.”

“I heard Quaid’s thoughts.” Keira lifted the rifle and took what seemed like a second to aim and fired. A man’s screams echoed up from the ravine.

“Stay here, Jess,” Keira told her. “We’ll figure this out.”

Keira and Luke climbed down the rocky embankment toward the valley. Jessica peered past them, stepping toward the edge of the ravine, and the sight below froze her plans to descend.

Quaid held a man by the throat, and was repeatedly smashing him up against the ravine wall. The man twisted, clawed, and kicked, but Quaid had complete control.

Jessica’s mind refused to absorb the scene. It seemed flat and unreal.

Quaid. Violent.

Those two words just did *not* link up. Yet she couldn’t mistake all that blood. It coated Quaid’s chest and arms. It was smeared across the other man’s T-shirt, hands, arms, and face. She couldn’t tell which one of them was bleeding, but it didn’t seem to affect either of them. The unknown man wore boots, and a backpack lay nearby. He looked like an average hiker.

Ty and Teague scrambled down opposite sides of the steep ravine. Two of the military men guarding the property immediately followed. Cash and Mitch came at Quaid from behind, Cash leading the way at a dead run. Keira and Luke followed.

Jessica dropped to her knees on the rocky soil, hands clenched. “Oh my God.” She barely breathed the words, hardly able to speak through the shock.

“Stop. Stop.”

She wanted everyone, everything to just *stop*. Reality had exploded completely out of control.

Cash jumped on Quaid from one side, grabbing his arm and prying it from the man’s throat. Mitch attacked from the other, yanking Quaid back by the waistband of his jeans.

Within thirty seconds, everyone was smeared with blood.

When the others reached them, Teague helped Cash and Mitch restrain Quaid, while Keira held her weapon on the hiker, and the military guys scanned the lip of the ravine for other enemies.

Jessica dropped her face into her shaking hands. “Oh my God.”

A flood of fear hit. Was this who Quaid was now? Would she ever be able to trust him? Feel safe with him? Maybe Quaid had gone insane in that place. Maybe he hadn’t just lost his memory, but his *mind*. And maybe she was going to follow right behind him.

What would they do if he’d killed that man? Even if he hadn’t, how would they hide this attack? And why did she immediately consider lying as a remedy?

Her year of commitment to truth quickly succumbed to fear, showing Jessica just how easily her recovery could be threatened.

She peered down into the ravine again. Ty had lifted the victim, now apparently unconscious, over his shoulder in a familiar fireman’s carry. Cash led Quaid toward the long path up the ravine. Mitch followed, carrying what looked like the man’s pack, and Keira wandered behind, her attention focused on a...rifle?

Jessica scanned Keira’s body and found a rifle strapped over her back. Jessica’s gaze moved to Luke, and she found his rifle in the same place. She quickly took inventory of Brody’s two guys, who held their own rifles.

“Oh, shit.” The victim was looking less like a victim.

She sank back on her heels with the realization of just how quickly and completely she’d expected the worst of this man. And a truckload of guilt weighed her down.

As Jessica headed toward the others to meet them at the top of the ravine, her mind went numb. Nothing made sense. Nothing.

When she caught up with them, she found Teague bringing up the rear of the line on their way back toward the bunker.

When he caught sight of her, he stopped and waited until the others

moved ahead before asking, “You okay?”

“No. I’m not okay. I’m confused and terrified. What was that? What in the hell is going on?”

His eyes were sharp, his expression intense. Blood smeared one side of his chin. “We’re not sure, but he looks like an asset.”

She sucked in a breath, fighting to get her mind around everything happening. “Wait, what is an asset?”

“A black ops assassin.”

Jessica stared at Teague. His words seemed to bounce off her brain.

“We’ll know more when we get him back to the bunker and check his gear,” Teague said.

She glanced at the pack moving ahead, the limp man bumping against Ty’s back as he walked. “Is he alive?”

“He’s alive.” Teague tossed his arm over Jessica’s shoulders and pulled her into step beside him. “I know that may have looked rough, but if that fucker is part of this bullshit, Quaid was far more restrained than I would have been.”

That confession surprised her.

She trailed the team, dividing her attention between the colorful leaf-strewn ground and Quaid’s muscled back. Her brain scattered—from the past to the present back to the past.

Teague looked down at her. “What’s going on in that head of yours?”

“I can’t remember any circumstance where Quaid showed even a hint of violence. The man I knew never had the capacity. He never got into a physical fight, not even when provoked. Hell, he never raised his voice unless he was giving an order or laughing.”

A sharp, clear vision of Quaid—*her* Quaid—laughing, as he often did, filled her mind. Her Quaid had been lighthearted, fun, easygoing, mischievous, and loving. So loving.

The joy that followed was so clean and crisp and pure, it struck her like the stab of a knife. Her breath caught on a sudden and vivid twist of loss. Her body weighed her down and she stumbled. She caught herself with a hand against a tree, but Teague kept her from landing on her ass.

He faced her as she found her feet, inspecting her face with concern.

“Do you think Quaid is gone?” Voicing the question cut through her chest. “The Quaid we knew?”

His gaze wandered through the treetops before meeting hers again.

“You may see parts of the old Quaid, and with time, who knows, maybe he’ll be able to recover parts of his personality as you knew it. But even if he got his memory back tomorrow, he wouldn’t be the guy you married. He’ll never be the man he was before the warehouse. But we’ve all changed since then.

“When I went to prison, I had to become a different man to survive. I stayed out of trouble as often as possible, but it was a violent setting with violent men. And if I wanted to stay alive, I had to take on some violent tendencies too. We still don’t know all of what Quaid went through, but there’s no doubt he had to do the same. Considering everything he’s been through, the rough truth of it is the Quaid we knew is gone.”

Tears broke through the haze and spilled down her cheeks, dripping off her chin.

“Hey.” Teague turned into her and wrapped her in his arms where she cried against his shoulder. “Just because you’re both different doesn’t mean you can’t still love each other. It doesn’t mean you can’t be together. Life changes people, but humans are resilient. If you want to continue to grow, if you want to stay in love, you adjust and grow together.”

“You’re not violent,” Jess said, voice muffled against his shirt. “You’ve never been violent.”

“I have the capacity to be very violent. Not something I would have ever guessed possible before prison. If someone threatened Alyssa or the kids, I would kill them with my bare hands and never miss a wink of sleep. But my capacity for violence is funneled. I would never hurt you or any other member of this team. I wouldn’t hurt an innocent stranger.”

He released her and met her gaze, and Jessica saw so much turmoil there. “I think it’s like that for Quaid too. He attacked that man because he knew we were all in danger. He may not remember us in his mind, but I think he remembers us in his heart. He’s already accepted us as his family. He risked his own life to protect ours.”

Jess wiped at the tears wetting her face. The ones that wouldn’t stop coming. “I don’t know... I don’t know if I can do this.”

He hugged her again. “One step at a time, Jess.”

23

Owen sat back in his leather desk chair, one ankle crossed over the other knee, his gaze unwavering on Abrute's face. He rested his elbows on the arms of the chair, steepled his fingers, and pressed his index fingers against his lips.

"So, that's all that's missing?" Owen enjoyed Abrute's jittery, restless movements, his darting eyes, his sweat-beaded forehead.

He'd only been questioning Abrute for twenty minutes and the man was ready to split at the seams. All the questions had been asked and answered. Owen had the bigger picture in his mind. Now, he just had to confirm the information by asking a few key questions again and making sure he got the same answers the second and third time around. Then he had to figure out how to move forward.

"Yes, sir," Abrute said, his dark head bobbing in affirmation. "Just the Method pages."

A soft knock on his office door sounded before it opened and Stephanie, Owen's secretary, came in with two bottles of water. She set one on Owen's desk and handed the other to Abrute.

"If you won't be needing me, sir?"

"No, Stephanie, thank you." Christ, where had the day gone? "You can go home."

"Thank you, sir. Also, I put that information you requested in your top drawer. Good night."

Through the open door, he saw the two military guards still flanking the entrance to his office. Owen returned his gaze to Abrute and remained silent

until the door clicked closed.

“And you have copies of all the previous Methods pages O’Shay had developed up to the point that the experiment was successful, correct?”

“Yes, sir.” Abrute leaned forward and put a shaking hand on the papers on the desk. “They’re all right here. As I told Deputy Director Dargan, I knew how important this project was to our military, and I felt compelled to secure a second set of documents. I know it is against procedure, and I understand why. I take full responsibility and I—”

“Explain again what this formula is for, Mr. Abrute.”

“We call it a second skin in that it’s flexible and breathable, but impenetrable. Safer than body armor, but weighs almost nothing.”

Amazing. “Deputy Dargan doesn’t run any research branches of DARPA. Who is this project for?”

Abrute’s eyes widened. “I can’t say, sir.”

Owen stood, pushed his shoulders back, and stared down at the man. He knew how to use his size to intimidate, and it was easy with Abrute’s meager never-dragged-my-nose-from-a-book body.

Abrute followed Owen’s movement with even wider eyes, sitting back in his chair and clenching his hands.

Owen pressed his fingertips to the desktop and leaned toward Abrute. He didn’t need to try to look frustrated or angry or impatient or at the end of his rope: he was already there.

“Mr. Abrute,” he said, his voice low, “you don’t have the luxury of choosing whether or not to answer me. You *will* answer me. And you will answer me *now* because this is about national security. Or are you a traitor as O’Shay was?”

The insinuation that Abrute could end up imprisoned like O’Shay made the man sit forward in earnest. “I am no traitor, sir. I’ve spent my career in service to this country.”

Owen slapped the desk with one hand. Abrute jumped. “So did O’Shay, and look where that got him. You’d better keep talking. *Now.*”

Abrute’s gaze flicked away. He licked his lips. “I’ve only heard rumors.” He looked up at Owen with sincerity in his eyes. “Normally, when I’m working on a project, I have direct access to a member of the group I’m developing for, you know, to better meet their needs, to touch base along the way to check if we’re on target. But this wasn’t my project. I only oversaw O’Shay and reported back to Deputy Dargan. She never told me who this

skin was being developed for other than the military—”

“You’re testing my patience.”

Abrute licked his lips again and glanced around the room as if he thought he’d see someone materialize. “I could be in danger if I say—”

“You’re in danger *now*,” Owen said. “And you’ll be in more danger if you *don’t* say.”

Abrute’s gaze lowered to Owen’s desktop, and he thought for a second before plucking a pen from the holder. Then he pulled a blank pad of notepaper toward him and wrote while still talking. “It was only rumor, sir. There is no validity in the rumor and I could be damaging someone else’s career if I spread that information, not to mention my own.”

He put the pen down and pushed the notepad across the desk and looked Owen in the eye, steadier now. “I’m sorry, sir, do to me what you will, but I don’t know anything for sure.”

When Abrute didn’t go on, Owen cast his narrowed eyes from the man’s face to the notepad and read.

Fire exploded in his gut.

24

Q kept his gaze off the prisoner, because the need to choke off the fucker's air still thrummed through Q's veins. The only reason he wasn't fighting every other person here to get to the guy was because of the way Jessica had looked at him back in the forest.

Like he was an animal.

An animal that terrified her.

The supply room was huge, with the same unfinished concrete as the main bunker. Food, supplies, weapons, and ammunition covered shelves on every wall. There were two cots set up, more stored in a corner. A small table and several chairs sat off to the side. In the ceiling, bare bulbs were screwed directly into outlets.

He paced in front of the door, unable to hold still. Exhaustion dragged at his mind. Starvation gnawed at his stomach. But those were nothing compared to the self-disgust hammering his heart.

Who the fuck am I? He rubbed both hands over his head and down his face, trying to understand why his mind splintered and different personalities came out. What did it mean? And how the hell could he make it stop?

When his eyes opened again, his gaze landed on the fucker, now cuffed to a chair where he was bleeding from his head, face, arms, hands...everywhere. Q didn't remember beating him to that extreme, but he had to claim everything except the bullet Keira had put through his palm.

Teague held the guy still as Alyssa checked his wounds. Keira and Luke were back on the road to Washington. Ty scavenged through the man's pack, and Cash checked his weapons, now laid out on the floor: three guns and four

knives. Jessica sat in the corner, arms crossed tightly over her middle, eyes closed.

Q dropped his head back and focused on one of the bare bulbs in the ceiling, where moths appeared, one by one, fluttering around the light. Something shifted inside his mind like sand under his feet. The moths' shadows danced as black dots along the gray walls. He darted a look that way, then back to the bulb, where the moths had multiplied fifty times and fanned out along the ceiling.

“About fucking time you showed up.”

Q jerked his head toward the voice. The same man from his previous vision stood with the same rifle strapped over his shoulder, but now his fatigues were caked with dirt, his face scratched.

“What the fuck?” Q stumbled backward. He darted looks right and left.

He wasn't in the supply room anymore, though he was still in some type of building. This one had similar concrete block walls, but it was smaller, the floor made up of packed dirt.

And these walls were stacked floor to ceiling with weapons. Sleek, high-tech weapons, neatly stored in rows. And crates labeled OX6 with the words STABILIZED OCTANITROCUBANE were piled alongside the weapons. A new explosive, Q could only guess by the name, and he damn well hoped that substance was indeed stabilized, or one poorly placed boot and he and Trent—*that* was his name, Trent—would blend right in with all the grainy dirt on the floor.

Another entire wall was obscured by wooden boxes of ammo two-deep. Magazine casings spilled out of one and bullet bandoliers draped over another.

He looked down at himself and found he was still wearing bloody jeans and nothing else. But the smells were completely different. The air was dry and dusty and gritty. The rank scent of body odor and urine filled Q's head, wiping out the scent of blood on his skin.

Panic surged. He had to go back. He wanted Vermont. He wanted his team.

He wanted Jessica.

“‘What the fuck?’ is right, dude. Where the hell you been this time, a gladiator ring?” Trent swung the rifle off his shoulder and set it on the floor, leaning it against the wall. “You okay, man? You hurt?”

“No.”

He met Trent's eyes again. Steel gray. Flat. Serious.

Then Trent grinned, and those eyes sparked. Q knew this man. He *liked* this man. And that's when Q knew he should be here with Trent. Every time Q left, he was abandoning his partner.

He suddenly found himself trapped between two places he belonged after a lifetime of belonging nowhere.

"Good," Trent said. "'Cause now I can kick your ass for leaving me in this hell hole with those fucks."

Trent gestured behind Q, and tension crawled over his shoulders.

Oh God. He didn't want to look. Shit, he didn't want to look.

"Almost makes me mad enough to tell you to stop insisting that Gorin pair us on these missions," Trent went on. "But then I'd never get out of my fucking cell. And since I don't have a *snuggle buddy* like Cash, I'd have to talk to the walls. You're so much more fun to annoy."

"Trent." Q tried to fill his lungs, but it felt like a rock crushed his chest. "I'm not right."

"Man, you scared the shit out of me." Trent ignored Q's distress and turned toward a box in the corner, then crouched and rummaged through it. "I was starting to think you weren't coming back. Damn, I'm starving. Now we can set up the meeting, dump these guys, and get out of this place. I'm not looking forward to seeing Abernathy, though. We're behind schedule, and fuck, man, he's going to rip us both new assholes.

"Hey, maybe you could throw some of your new mind control his way. You know, that shit you used to make me give you the last of my beef jerky?"

Mind control?

Trent snorted a laugh and shook his head, turning his attention back to the box. "You still suck at it, but it couldn't hurt, right?" He pulled something out and broke it in half, holding out one side toward Q. "I'm still pissed about my beef jerky, but I'll share my last power bar with you anyway. You're looking a little scrawny. When's the last time you ate?"

"Trent, Jesus, shut up a second..." Panic swamped Q's chest. "Something's wrong. God. don't know what's happening to me."

"Shit." Fear flashed in Trent's eyes. He dropped the power bar and rushed to Q, grasping his arms. "Stay with me, Q."

"I can't control it." He turned his hand over and grabbed Trent's arm. "Can I...can I take you? Come with me. Get out of this hellhole."

“I can’t travel like you do. You can’t leave.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No! Dammit. Don’t give me that sorry shit. I need you. I can’t set up the rendezvous on my own, and I’m running out of food and water.” Trent’s grip tightened. The *clink, clink, clink* of the moths hitting the bare bulb grew loud. “Come on. You’re fine. Everything’s fine. Just sit down.”

Trent’s voice was drowned out by the moths’ wild fluttering. Q looked over his shoulder, his last sight as the scene faded that of six young males, gagged and bound and lined up along the wall, their dark eyes fixed on Q and filled with the terror of having just seen a ghost.

When he looked back at the light, the moths were gone. The clinking sound had been replaced by a loud buzz still filling his head. Trent’s hands were still on his arms, shaking him.

“Quaid. Quaid, look at me.”

Quaid.

Couldn’t be Trent. A female voice. Small hands.

He looked down into deep brown eyes. Beautiful eyes filled with fear and confusion.

“Talk to me,” Jessica said. “What’s going on?”

He was going insane, that’s what was going on.

“Where did you go?”

“Go?” He focused on her. “What do you mean?”

“I mean you left the room while my eyes were closed. I went out to find you, and by the time I got back, you were here. Where did you go?”

“I...don’t know.” He put his hands to her shoulders and pushed back. “Holy fuck, I’m so messed up.”

He moved to the farthest corner of the room and paced in the shadows, trying to differentiate between reality and mind games. There could be a man out there who needed him to get food and water. A man who needed him to gain his freedom. Q couldn’t just leave the guy there. How long could he survive without water? How in the fuck did he get back to Trent? How did he get Trent to move with him?

Then a familiar question filled his head: was Trent real?

He scraped his hands over the pain in his scalp, dropped his arms as he reached the wall, and pivoted one-hundred-and-eighty degrees. A hand grabbed his arm. He swiveled, grabbed the person’s forearm with his free hand, and met Jessica’s gaze.

“Let me get some of this blood off you,” she said.

He didn’t understand until she held up rags in her free hand. Water dripped down her arm. He released her and stepped back, casting a glance around the room again. The others were absorbed in their tasks—Alyssa doctoring, Teague guarding, Ty and Cash inspecting.

“No, don’t touch me,” he said. “I don’t know what the hell is happening. I think I’m going crazy, and I don’t want to hurt you. Just stay away from me, Jess.”

“What do you mean?” She came closer despite his warning. “Talk to me. Maybe I can help.”

“You can’t.” He started pacing again, but kept his voice low. “For five years, all they’ve done is fuck with my mind day and night. I don’t understand my actions or my feelings. I don’t know who I am or who I’m not. I don’t trust myself, and I can’t have you near me when I can’t control this...whatever this is inside me.”

She caught his arm again, meeting his gaze with a steadfast warmth that settled him deep down. “I’m not leaving you alone, no matter what you say. You may as well just accept that.”

Q shook his head, wondering if she had a screw or two loose. “Have you always been this stubborn?”

“No. It’s developed over the last few years,” she said, serious. “I’ve changed too, Quaid. We’ve all changed, and we’re all fucked up in one way or another. Join the club already, for God’s sake.”

Q let her lead him to a chair away from the others. When she lowered to her knees at his feet, an uncomfortable tightness wrapped around his chest. He sat forward, pressing his hands to the arms of the chair to rise, but she put a firm hand on his knee and looked up at him with those damned eyes. They begged for everything he couldn’t give and offered everything he’d ever wanted.

“Please, Quaid. I can’t stand seeing you like this another minute.”

With him leaning forward and her looking up, their faces were only a few inches apart. Her gaze lowered to his mouth. His throat tightened. Her breath touched his lips, and she licked her own.

He reached for her at the same time she leaned back. Instead of catching her head so he could pull her in to taste her again, his hand was grasped by both of hers. She didn’t meet his eyes, just started scrubbing at his fingers, his nails, his palms. The sight of the blood coming off his hands took his mind

off kissing her.

There was something incredibly humbling about the way she willingly sat at his feet, like a servant, caring for him.

“How did this happen?” he asked. “How did I end up at the Castle?”

Her gaze darted up and her hands stilled. “I thought Cash told you...”

“Cash told me we were all firefighters together on some special team. That’s all.”

Jessica pressed her lips together, rose up on her knees, and scooted forward, forcing him to open his thighs to her. She smelled amazing, a pretty sweetness and an edgy spice wrapped around her own sensual scent. He wanted to press his face to her neck and inhale.

She rubbed the cloth along his collarbone and worked her way down his chest. “That’s because it’s better for you to remember—”

“On my own. I know. How long are we going to wait for that to happen? I want to know now. After all I’ve been through, I would have shut down a long time ago if it was going to happen. I’m either crazy as fuck or strong as hell. I think it’s about time we all knew the answer.”

Her gaze flicked to his, then over her shoulder toward Alyssa. Q put his hand under her chin and guided her gaze back to him. “Jess, I need to know. If it’s too much, I’ll tell you.”

She held his gaze for a moment, then resumed work. “Do you remember anything about the warehouse fire?”

“No. Tell me.”

Pain flashed in her eyes. “Our team was called to a warehouse in the mountains, one owned by the government. There were chemicals there that shouldn’t have been stored there.”

She glanced up, searching his face. When he shook his head, she said, “The chemicals exploded in the heat, and everyone was critically injured and exposed. We were taken to a military hospital nearby, the only location with quarantine facilities large enough to house us all—or so we were told.”

She paused to refold the rag. Her hands shook. Q found himself leaning forward. “And then what?”

She pulled in a breath and wet her lips, but couldn’t seem to form words. After she started on his other arm, tears slid down her cheek, and she rubbed them away with her shoulder.

“And then,” she said with a helpless little shrug, “you...died.”

“You mean I coded? My heart stopped? And they brought me back?”

“No.” She looked up at him with a sudden and unexpected rage burning in her eyes. “I mean someone decided that you would be a perfect science experiment and told the team that you didn’t make it. That you’d died. They *took you—*”

She choked on her emotions. Struggled for air.

Q gathered her in his arms and held her close.

“They *stole* you from us,” she finished against his shoulder, fingers digging into the skin of his back.

Her pain brought tears to his own eyes, but as the view of his life widened, all the happiness, all the possibilities that had been taken from him surfaced, and his anger boiled.

He could see how close this team had once been. How important he’d been to these people. How drastically and painfully their lives had been changed by his death.

He was humbled to have meant so much to such good people and enraged that those bastards had taken such a rich, rewarding life away from him.

Jessica pulled out of his arms and sat back on her heels. She wiped at her wet face with her forearm.

“Why me?” he asked. “If we were all in the explosion, if we were all hurt, why did they take me and not anyone else?”

Her hand paused midstroke along the top of one foot. She didn’t look up, but her lashes lay against her cheek for a long moment as she closed her eyes. “That’s my fault.”

“What? How?”

“You were trying to protect me.” She lifted her head and met his eyes with so much regret, so much guilt filling her own. “There were two containers of chemicals. You took first in that night, and when the first tank exploded, you were hit with the strongest force. When the rest of us came in to help, you knew the second would explode too, but your headset wasn’t working, so you couldn’t warn us... *Fuck.*” She pressed her forearm to her eyes, and air stuttered into her chest. “You knocked me down and covered me with your body before the second one exploded.”

Q imagined the scenario. A truly heroic act, though Q couldn’t see it as something he’d done. He saw it as something *Quaid* had done. Something Quaid had done out of a deep love for Jessica.

Were we happy?

Very. We were very happy.

Dammit, there had to be some of Quaid inside him if he still had these strong emotions. And he *wanted to remember*.

“How did that make me worth taking above the others?” he asked.

“You had double the chemical exposure. We think they believed your abilities would be the strongest.”

Q sat back. “Abilities?”

“Your powers.” She raised a cautious gaze to his. “Cash told you—”

“No.”

Jessica’s shoulders sagged.

“I mean, I know I have hypersensitive senses,” he said, “but I thought those had been created by the experiments.”

A new sense of anger lodged between his ribs. He gripped Jessica’s biceps and pulled her toward him while dropping his head to look directly into her eyes. “You need to be honest with me. I’ve spent all the life I can remember being lied to, having secrets kept from me. I won’t live like that again.”

Jessica swallowed and nodded, and when his fury receded, he saw the scared look in her eyes and realized how tight he was holding her arms. He released her.

“The first thing we all noticed,” she said, “was how fast we were healing from the burns and breaks. Then how little scarring we had. But later, after we were released, we each noticed different abilities we didn’t have before.”

“Like?”

“Keira is clairaudient, which means under the right conditions, she can hear people’s thoughts as if they’re speaking. That’s how she knew to come back today to help with this guy.” She tilted her head toward the prisoner. “She heard our thoughts. And Teague has thermokinetic abilities, so he can heal with the heat in his body.”

Q leaned back, his jaw loose.

“I know it sounds crazy,” she said.

“What can you do?”

She shrugged. “I thought I could scry, which is seeing into different places and times, but then that thing happened with your coin, and instead of just seeing another location, I *traveled* to that location. Only I wasn’t really there. You were the only person who could see me. So I don’t know what my power is exactly.”

He lowered his head into his hands and rubbed his forehead. The fact that

she hadn't been a dream at the cabin actually made more sense now. She'd never interacted with him in his dreams. What he couldn't get his mind to take hold of yet was whether those other times he'd seen her had been dreams or...something else. Something more like whatever was happening with Trent.

He lifted his head. "And the others?"

"Seth, who you haven't met yet, has telekinetic abilities. He can move objects with the power of his mind. And Ty is an empath, which means he senses other people's feelings. When you went after that guy, Ty knew because he felt the spike of emotion you gave off, not because I told him."

"And Alyssa, Mitch, and Cash?"

"They don't have powers. Only those exposed to the chemical have them, which is why Mateo has abilities. Mateo was tested much the way you were. He has the phoenix marking and is a remote viewer, which is kind of like my scrying in that he can see things in real time in other locations. The difference is *how* a person accesses the visions. With scrying, visions arise from a shiny surface or mirror. With remote viewing, there are more possibilities—touching something related to a person or place, extreme focus, meditation, training...."

Q braced his elbows on his knees and rested his head in his hands. "Okay, that might be enough."

Her cool hands slid over his head, caressing. Then she kissed the top and rested her head against his. "Things that might seem crazy to you right now could simply be your powers at work."

"Or it might be insanity."

"There is that," she said with a smile in her voice, making him laugh.

She lifted her head and met his eyes. "What's happening that seems so crazy?"

"I'm seeing things. Or...I don't know what it is. I think I'm seeing things, but then it feels like I'm really there, then the next minute, I'm not. Like just now, I was here, then I was in a desert somewhere in the Middle East, then I was back here. Kind of like my dreams of you when I was at the Castle. I have no control over where I go or when I come and go or even how it happens."

She went quiet. Her hands stilled. A shift of some kind appeared in her eyes, and a sense of fear tingled over his skin.

He was about to ask her about it, when Ty said, "Hold his head straight."

Ty stood in front of the prisoner and snapped a picture with his phone.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“I’m sending the pic to my boss to see if he can get anything more on this guy than Keira was able to pull from his brain, which was very little. He’s locked down.”

“Who is this boss of yours?” Jessica stood and stepped back from Q, and he instantly felt their connection break. “A private jet. Weapons. Now this?”

“What about a private jet and weapons?” Q scanned Ty again. He was military—Q had noticed that right away. The way he stood. The way he talked. The way he looked at someone or something.

Ty didn’t take his eyes off his phone. “He’s retired Air Force Intelligence, working a contract for the government.”

The prisoner’s eyes flicked open.

Ty’s mouth kicked up in a lopsided smile. “Sleeping Beauty awakes. Did you want to start talking now, *amigo*? Better for us to hear it from you than from someone else. Either way, we’ll find out who you are and why you’re here shortly.”

The man said nothing.

“Come on,” Ty cajoled as if ribbing an old friend. “Not even your name, rank, and serial number?”

Nothing.

“Wow, definitely no sense of humor.” Ty shrugged one shoulder and turned his attention back to the phone. “Keira said his name is Reggie Alsadani, former-Marine, reporting to Colonel Owen Young. He’s on a seek-find-and-destroy mission.”

“She got all that from his thoughts?” Q asked, still finding the idea unbelievable.

“She probably got more and left the colorful stuff out,” Ty said. “My boss has face recognition software and I’ve already scanned in the guy’s fingerprints and sent them.”

He finished what he was doing and looked up while sliding the phone into his pocket. “Within eight to twelve hours, we’ll be able to confirm Keira’s information plus know when this guy eats and sleeps.”

A strange sensation nudged the back of Q’s mind. “Is your boss’s name…” Ty looked up, expectant. “Abernathy?”

“No, it’s Waterbury.” Ty waited. “Why?”

Relief loosened Q’s shoulders. He shook his head. “How are you sending

his fingerprints?”

“On the glass. Look here, Boy Wonder.” Ty pulled out the phone, tapped the front glass, and the face lit up bright blue. Little boxes dotted the display.

“What’s ‘boy wonder’?” Q asked, watching the colors and information change as Ty touched the glass.

Ty laughed, the sound soft and not particularly joyful. “That’s one of the things I used to call you. When I was in a good mood.”

“Why?”

“Because you could do anything you set that stubborn mind of yours to do. Look,” Ty said, pressing his thumb against the face of his phone and drawing it away. A crisp fingerprint remained, the ridges glowing red. Two buttons beneath the image read SCAN and CLEAR.

“If I hit SCAN, the program will record the image and send it wherever I want. If I hit CLEAR, we can start over with another fingerprint.”

Even though Q didn’t know how to use any high-tech equipment, what Ty had told him this little box was capable of didn’t surprise him. “And in the meantime?”

“We research and strategize so we’re ready to move when we find out who this guy is.”

Alyssa snipped the thread. “Done. Brody and his guys are going to have to monitor his blood pressure and heart rate throughout the night to make sure there’s no internal bleeding.”

“Good luck with that,” Ty muttered. “They’re more apt to waterboard him.”

“He’ll survive.” Q’s quip surprised everyone. Even him.

The room went silent a long moment before Ty broke the silence with a raspy, furious “You were waterboarded?”

He searched his memory, but like always, it was blank, so he changed the subject. His gaze skimmed over the black stitches in the man’s face. “Was I like this before? Violent? Did I hurt people like I did him?”

His gaze pulled from the prisoner and searched out Jessica, fearing the answer to the question. “Did I hurt you?”

“No, never.”

He cast a look at the others in the room. “I wasn’t like this before?”

Ty’s chuckle sounded deep and tired. “You couldn’t even kill a damn spider, dude. You had to get a container, coax it inside”— he accentuated the statements as if each task was a big ordeal—“then set it free like some

freaking pansy. It was goddamned episodic.”

“All through school,” Teague said, “you were always one of the biggest kids in our class, but I had to step in and save your ass on the schoolyard when someone picked a fight. You could have whipped anyone who challenged you, but you refused.”

Teague saved his ass? Nobody else saved his ass. Q carried his own weight. Q sometimes carried other people’s weight too.

Trent’s face filled his mind. Guilt flowed in its wake. Q wasn’t carrying his weight now.

Things that might seem crazy to you could simply be your powers at work.

God, he suddenly wanted, needed to know everything, yet wanted to run in the other direction as fast as he could.

He clenched his hands, drew a deep breath, and said, “I want to know who I am. I mean, who I was. I want to know what I was like. What did I love? What did I hate? Did I make a difference? Was I good at my job? Did I have family?”

He pulled in a breath and checked in with his mind, heart, and body after that sudden demand. Found it felt right. Found it was what he needed. “I want to know everything.”

Jessica stared out the sliding glass doors, her fingers fisting and releasing as she waited for Cash to finish the book he was reading to Mateo so they could talk.

Quaid was in the shower, Ty in the kitchen washing and cutting fruit for his famed power smoothies, and Mitch watched the security video in the nook across from the dining room. Alyssa, Teague, and Cash were in the living room reading to the kids.

The house buzzed with activity and burst with the aromas of fresh fruit and spices.

“Anything out there?” Ty asked Mitch, slicing into a mango.

“Not that they can find.” Mitch turned away from the CCTV screens and sat down at the dining room table, where he had three different laptops set up, each searching different information databases on the web. “But there are three dogs working the property now, so if we missed anyone on the surveillance tapes, we’ll get them with the dogs.”

“They won’t find anyone else.” Ty popped a piece of mango into his mouth. “Assets work alone. And if he doesn’t check in soon, they’ll send another.”

When Cash finished the book, he stood from the sofa and his son crawled into Teague’s lap to listen to Kat’s attempt to read to Alyssa.

Jessica refocused out the sliders, letting her gaze soak in the beauty of the fall foliage as she tried to tune out the various conversations. She searched for a place of peace inside herself, but she only found stress. And fear. Her hands ached with it. She rubbed them together and massaged her fingers, then

took hold of her locket, sliding it along the chain as Cash came up beside her.

“Can’t you make a deal with them?” she asked. “You said they want your formula. Can’t you just trade the formula for your freedom? Quaid’s freedom?”

“I might be able to do that if I *had* the formula. Unfortunately, I destroyed the method pages so they wouldn’t find them on me. I was going to recreate those pages after I was free and do exactly what you’re suggesting.

“What I didn’t count on was the way the explosions during the escape shook up my head. I can’t remember the details. I’d need access to a lab to recreate those few final steps. I could do it in just about any high school or college chemistry lab, but I’m SOL at the moment.”

She sighed and shifted gears. “How do you think Quaid’s doing?”

Cash turned his gaze out the window. “There’s a lot going on beneath the surface. He’s struggling.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t try to reintroduce him to his past right now. I don’t want it to put too much pressure on him.”

“I think not telling him what he wants to know will put even more pressure on him.”

“I think he has powers similar to mine. He told me he’s confused with what he thinks are hallucinations, but he describes them as visitations, where he’s somewhere one minute, somewhere else the next. He thinks he’s going crazy, but I think he’s traveling and doesn’t understand. He’s talking about doing some kind of mission with a man in the Middle East.”

With his jaw muscles flinching, Cash returned his gaze to the forest beyond the glass and crossed his arms. “We knew he had heightened senses, but not that they were paranormal. We just thought that ability came from the way they fucked with his brain. If he has other powers, he doesn’t know what they are or even how to use them. They put him under when they did whatever they did to him—tested him, trained him, whatever. I think they did that so, one, he wouldn’t resist them, and two, he wouldn’t learn how to use the powers they brought out in him, because they probably knew they wouldn’t be able to control him otherwise.

“Only, now, they can’t suppress his thoughts or memories, so things are slipping through the cracks into his conscious mind, which I have no doubt makes him feel like he’s going insane.”

All up and down her back, her muscles knotted.

“But if you think he’s traveling,” Cash went on, “they could have also

been using the drugs to create a state of consciousness where that type of travel could take place. Because what you're describing is linked to the theory of quantum physics, which takes a certain state of mind, or state of being, to accomplish."

"You're talking way over my head," she said. "Can you tell me what his dreams of me were about?"

He was avoiding her gaze again. "You know dreams. They never make any sense."

"You said he's dreamed about me ever since you've known him."

"Up until about a year ago. Then they stopped. That was really hard for him. You kept him hanging on."

A year ago? He'd left that part out. "Yet none ever made sense?"

"I wouldn't put too much emphasis on the dreams. Who knows what any of that means?"

She had a feeling he knew exactly what they'd meant. "Cash, I'm going to find out, either from you or from Quaid. Which do you think would be better?"

He searched her eyes for a long moment, the silence twisting in his unreadable, darkening expression. Then he glanced over his shoulder at the others, who were all occupied in their own activities.

"His dreams of you were...sexual...in nature."

A zing of surprise and awareness traveled through her torso and lodged in her belly. But it was Cash's demeanor that set Jessica on guard.

"As in he and I having sex?" she asked cautiously.

"No." Cash scratched his temple. "As in you having sex with other men."

Jessica sucked in a shocked breath and took a step back. Panic edged in. "He's seen me with other men?"

He met her gaze again. "He just thinks they were dreams."

"But now we know about his powers." She covered her face with both hands. "God, did he travel? Was he *there*?" She lifted her head and the blood drained from her face and neck, leaving her cold and dizzy. "This is bad. Really bad."

Cash turned toward her and gently gripped her biceps. "He wasn't traveling. At least not in body. He was under watch twenty-four-seven. If he left the facility, I would have heard about it. And he didn't even know he had these powers or how to use them. Worst case scenario is that he was traveling by astral projection."

“But he still saw me. You just said he saw me with other men.”

Cash dropped his head, exhaled and regrouped. “He was crazy about you. *Is* crazy about you. The other men never bothered him. You were the one thing that kept him going, day after day. His dreams of you brought him joy and relief from all the stress and suffering.”

She bit the inside of her lip to keep the tears back. “But that was before he thought I was real. Before he knew we were together.” She covered her eyes. “God, he’s going to eventually realize we’re married, and I was...” Her fingers slid to her mouth as she mumbled, “How will he *ever* forgive me?”

“You thought he was dead, Jess. There’s nothing wrong in attempting to move on.”

“You know he won’t understand that. He’s...” She shook her head. “He’s so...naïve isn’t exactly the right way to describe it.”

“Clueless,” Cash said with understanding. “But that might be a good thing. Right now, he doesn’t harbor the social norms we live by. He doesn’t understand relationships the way we do. He’s been surrounded by scientists and guards. I’ve been his only friend. He has no reference for love or romance or marriage.”

She shook her head. “He asked me if I was his. Asked me who I belong to now. He understands enough for my behavior to be hurtful, especially when he realizes we were *married*. *Are* married.”

“I don’t think there’s anything wrong with letting him believe they were dreams. I don’t believe one-hundred-percent truth is the best answer to every situation. If telling him sets him back instead of moving him forward, then I think it would be better to let him believe what he already believes.”

Jessica wrapped one arm tightly around herself and rubbed the growing ache in her temple. She couldn’t lie to Quaid. As tempting as it was, she knew how one lie led to another. The same way lying about her drug habit created the need to lie about where she’d gone, which then created the need to lie about what she’d been doing, which then created the need to lie about whom she’d been with... And so on.

She’d carved out a life of truth over the last year, and it kept her accountable. Kept her sober. If she lied and he figured it out later, how would he be able to trust her moving forward? But if she told him the truth, that could be just as damaging.

“Shit,” she whispered, squeezing her forehead between her fingers.

A grinding noise made Jessica jump and turn toward the kitchen to Ty

and his smoothies.

“Do you even know what’s in those powders you’re throwing in there?” Mitch’s voice rose over the loud whir. “You could be poisoning yourself and not even know it.”

“This one’s for you, shark.” Ty flashed Mitch a devious grin. “Super B complex, selenium, phosphatidylserine, tyrosine, phenylalanine They’re all-natural mood-enhancing supplements.”

Mitch, who stood at the stove stirring a big pot with a wooden spoon, shot a you’re-so-not-funny look and an obscene hand gesture toward Ty.

“God,” she muttered, turning back to Cash. “I can’t take this anymore.”

“Jess?” Concern filled Cash’s voice as she moved past him.

She hesitated, but didn’t turn. She couldn’t stand to see the pity on his face a second longer. “I just need to think.”

She wandered down the hallway leading to the bedrooms as she chewed her thumbnail and turned over damage control scenarios in her mind. Lying was not an option. But telling Quaid about those other men didn’t sound any better. Trying to explain how they’d been her attempt at diversion from the gut-wrenching pain of losing him, a human Band-Aid for her broken heart, to a man who’d been imprisoned and tortured. She didn’t exactly make a sympathetic picture.

At the bathroom door, Jessica stopped, leaned her back against the opposite wall, and focused on the white noise of the shower. If she could show Quaid how deeply she loved him, show him how differently she felt about him than she had the others, maybe that would help melt the other memories when they came to full realization. And maybe that could even bring back some of *their* memories.

The shower shut off. She pulled her nail from her punishing teeth and clenched her hands. Her stomach fluttered with indecision. The muffled click of the shower door opening met her ear, and she envisioned Quaid naked—all that lean, sculpted muscle and tight skin.

Remembering the feel of his mouth on hers, hot and demanding, shot liquid fire to the center of her body, and the insatiable need propelled her toward the door, where she stared at the white wood. She couldn’t think about what would happen if this backfired. She needed to connect with him. Needed to reach him on that intimate level only they shared. She needed to help him find his way back from the dark place he’d been for the last five years. And she was running out of options.

Her nerves kicked up, but she raised her hand to knock anyway, determined to set at least one part of this mess right.

Before her knuckles met the wood, Quaid's voice drifted through the door. "It's open."

Her stomach jumped, then her mind darted back to Cash's explanation of Quaid's heightened senses, and she blew out a breath.

Swallowing her doubts, Jessica turned the knob and cracked the door enough to put her head through and glance around. Steam filled the small room. Quaid stood in front of the sink, hands braced on either side, staring at the mirror where he'd wiped away the steam. A white towel was hooked around his waist, and the sight of his phoenix and all that gorgeous muscle added a heady, tingly sensation to her tension.

"Hey," she said softly. "Are you okay?"

He didn't answer.

She slipped into the bathroom and closed the door, but Quaid just kept looking in the mirror. "Do I look like I used to?"

"What do you mean?"

"I've never seen my face. Do I look the way you remember?"

Every time he exposed another level of his tormented life, her heart sank and twisted.

"Your body has changed from heavy muscle to a sleeker version." She closed her eyes for a split second and sighed. "But to be honest, I haven't looked at a photo of you for years, so it's a little hard to remember."

His gaze cut to hers in the mirror, instantly guarded. "Why?"

"Because it hurt too much."

His gaze dropped to the porcelain sink, and a look of pain crossed his face. "Five years. I can't even imagine how hard that had to be for you. My only reference is how tortured Cash had been for those years without his wife and son."

Jessica had a feeling he understood more than Cash was giving him credit for.

He went quiet a long moment before saying, "You must have moved on."

Oh, yeah, the pain in those words told Jessica this was as fine a razor's edge as she'd ever walked.

She wanted him to know everything they'd meant to each other. How much they'd loved each other. That they'd been planning a family. But that was all too much, too fast. They needed to start slow and build. If she hit him

with everything at once, it could overwhelm him and cause more damage. He didn't deserve any more hurt.

She took a deep breath and pushed back the self-hate. "I tried. But failed. So, no, I never moved on."

His shoulders sank, and he closed his eyes with a look of pain. "I'm sorry."

She stepped up behind him, cautiously settled her hands at his hips, and pressed a kiss to his back. "It wasn't your fault. You would have never left me by choice."

She tasted his skin before sliding her tongue along the indentation of his spine and paused and kissed him again.

His muscles contracted beneath her lips, and a sound rolled in his chest, then a heavy exhale rocked his shoulders.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" she asked.

"You can never stop doing that."

A smile turned her lips and some nerves melted. "That can be arranged."

She slid her hands around his abdomen, pressed against him, laid her cheek on his back, and let her hands roam over his hard, warm body.

"God..." He breathed the word, long and slow as if he'd never felt anything so good.

She ached to share a million heavenly pleasures with him. "I can't even begin to tell you how much I've missed you. "

"Jessie" he rasped, as if he were in pain. "I don't know how to do this."

"Do what?"

"All of this. I don't know how to be free. I don't know how to love or be loved. I don't know how to trust."

A surge of sadness washed in, stinging her eyes with tears. She tightened her arms and met his gaze in the reflection.

"That changes now, because I'm here to show you how to do all of it. And you might as well embrace it, because as long as I'm alive, you will *always* be free, and you will *always* be loved. And those people out there will also *always* love you, and they will go to the ends of the earth to make sure you *always* remain free. No one will be walking away from you just because you're not the guy you used to be."

He closed his eyes and lowered his head with a huff and a shake. "How could I have *possibly* earned that kind of loyalty?"

"We need to take what we have and move forward." As soon as the words

were out of her mouth, she cringed at the way they sounded. “I don’t mean to say that what you’ve been through doesn’t matter. I don’t expect you to just forget. I only mean we’ve been given a fresh start. A second chance. And I’m not letting you go unless you force me to. Same goes for them. You’re stuck with us. No one’s walking away.”

He straightened from the sink and turned to face her. She slid her arms around him again and pressed her body to his. They stared at each other for a long time, Jessica cataloging every inch of his face, Quaid sliding his fingers through her hair.

“I love you.” His murmur was barely more than a whisper, and Jessica was sure she’d imagined the words, but then he said, “I don’t know how I know. I don’t fully understand what it means. I don’t even know if I can live up to what it involves or give you what you need or if I’m what you want anymore.”

She saw the truth of it in his eyes—both the love and the doubts. And while she wanted so badly to wrap those words around her, the qualifications he’d attached made that hard.

“But I feel it, Jess.” He pulled her close and lowered his head, pressing his forehead to hers. “And I know I’ve loved you a long time.”

Tears flowed down her cheeks. Her heart seemed to be mending in some ways and breaking in others, none of which she understood.

“I sure do make you cry a lot,” he murmured, frowning. “That can’t be good.”

She laughed and used the hem of her tee to soak up the tears, then took his face in her hands. “I love you too. More than I could ever explain, more than you can understand, especially right now. I have never stopped loving you. Not ever. Not for one minute. And I never will. I will always love you. Always.”

The look in his eyes reflected a lot of the love and pain in her own. “I keep waiting for someone to drag me from this fantasy.”

“This isn’t a fantasy. This is reality. This is your world. This is where you belong.”

She pushed up and pressed her lips to his. A long, warm kiss that transitioned, little by little, into more. Before long, he possessed her in his arms and made her forget every other taste but his. Made her body pulse and ache.

Jessica broke the kiss for air, and Quaid’s mouth traveled to her jaw, her

neck, her ear. His hands slid beneath her T-shirt, found skin, and touched her everywhere.

“I want you,” she murmured at his ear. “I want you so badly.”

When he lifted his head, his pupils were huge, his lids heavy, his expression tight. “I’m right here.”

A smile flickered across her mouth. “That’s not what I meant.”

He tilted his head, his gaze hazed with confusion.

“I mean I want to feel you, taste you, love you.”

He lowered his gaze. “I...don’t remember...”

When he didn’t finish, she slid both hands into his hair and brought his head up. “Don’t remember what?”

His gaze touched hers again before darting away.

I don’t know how to be loved.

When his meaning hit her, Jessica’s heart caught in her throat. He didn’t remember how to have sex. It was such a foreign idea to her, but without a memory, without any opportunity to have relationships, it made sense.

A wave of sadness flooded her body. Sadness for all he’d gone without over the years, gratitude for having the opportunity to give it all back to him. And loss. A deep, wrenching loss for the sweet intimacy they’d once shared. Of the people they’d once been.

Her hands roamed down his back, her thumbs hooked in the towel at his waist. “Can I show you?” She kissed him. “Can I show you all the things you used to love?” She kissed him again. “Show you how good it was?”

He lowered his head, his gaze following the movement of her hands, his muscles so taut, his entire body quivered.

He scraped in a shallow breath and pushed out a barely audible “Yes.”

Anticipation fluttered in her belly. Jessica held her breath, then pushed at the towel until the knot released and dropped to the floor.

His erection sprang free and stood proud between them, making her catch her breath. The atmosphere in the room flipped from anxious and confused to full-tilt intense. Awareness set her nerves on fire. She laid her hands low on his pelvis, her fingertips brushing the fine hair leading lower.

Quaid’s hands gripped her biceps and his breathing quickened, but he didn’t pull her in, and he looked unsure. His nerves were endearing in a way, disappointing in another. This man didn’t have the confident sexual moves Quaid once had. This man didn’t have the lighthearted personality she’d missed so much. This man would not be laughing and teasing her during sex.

Another thread of loss wove through her heart.

Then she met his gaze and found a fierce, lusty, intense fire burning there. Whatever lurked inside him sent a hot thrill buzzing down her spine and spreading over her skin.

He released her and gripped the sink behind him.

Her heart squeezed painfully, terrified that every move he made signaled imminent rejection. “If you’re not ready—”

“You’re scared.” Those hot brown eyes lowered to her mouth, yearning. “I don’t want you to be afraid of me. But I understand why you are.”

Jessica closed her eyes and exhaled. *Holy. Shit.* This was so fucking complicated and risky. This could go bad in so many ways. And if this went bad, she wouldn’t survive.

But he needed her. He needed to know she was strong enough to support him, to handle all this shit. It was one thing to tell him she would always love him, but another for him to see it. To feel it.

She slid her hands up his chest, around his neck, and let her body rest against his. “I’m not afraid of you. I’m afraid of *losing* you again.”

Quaid’s breath released, and a low, rough growl rolled in his throat. Jessica’s body immediately responded, need throbbing low in her pelvis. Quaid leaned forward, closed his arms around her, and turned his face into her neck. Then his mouth opened, and his lips pressed against her skin. His arms brought their bodies into full, tight contact, and his erection pressed long and hot against her. He moaned again and bit her neck. The sting of pain shot lust straight between her legs.

“Yes,” she whispered, holding his head to her neck, gripping his shoulder to try to get even closer. Her need exploded, and she pushed up on her toes, rubbing her hips against his erection. This felt so rich and real and right.

She took his head with both hands and pulled it back, found his mouth and kissed him. He opened to her immediately, hesitation replaced by frantic need. Walking her backward, he circled her tongue with his until she hit the wall, where he turned his head and kissed her harder, deeper, then turned it back, licking and sucking and kissing. She skimmed her hands down his chest, his belly, and slid her hand between them to palm his erection.

Quaid’s body jerked. He swore as a full-body shiver rocked him, shoulders to toes. His intense reactions and raspy breaths thrilled Jessica, increasing her own desire.

“Jesus Christ...” he breathed.

“If you like that, you’ll love this.”

She slid down his body, and Quaid released her and planted his hands flat against the wall. On her knees, she darted one quick smile up at him before taking the wide head of his cock between her lips. The confusion on his face turned to instant ecstasy. His body stiffened and his eyes closed as his head fell forward.

“*Holy. Fuck.*” The words came from deep in his throat.

His taste flooded Jessica’s memory, filling her with joy. She took him deeply with greedy strokes of her lips and tongue, filling her mouth. Before long, he had one hand fisted in her hair. The force of it stung her scalp, and she laid her hand over his.

His fingers instantly released. “Sorry, sorry. That just feels so fucking incredible.”

The rock of his hips, the sounds from his throat, the shivers across his body made her own sex heavy and wet.

Quaid’s hand moved to her chin and tilted her face up to his. “I need more.” His breathing came in shaky pants, his eyes barely open. “I need *you.*”

He leaned down, gripped her waist, and pulled her to her feet. He panted as he pushed at the waistband of her shorts, his urgency renewed.

“Buttons, baby,” she said, reaching to unfasten them. “Hold on.”

“Fucking buttons.”

She laughed. Maybe she’d been wrong. Maybe they would find ways to laugh again.

He slid his hands under her shirt, up her back, and pulled it off over her head. His mouth immediately found hers, hard and hungry, making her fingers fumble.

As soon as her zipper rasped down, everything clicked into frantic, passionate flashes, stealing Jessica’s air.

Quaid’s hands were everywhere. His mouth was hungry and searching. He pushed her shorts and panties down her legs, gripped her ass, pulled her naked pelvis against his erection, and groaned, the sound animalistic and impatient.

Jessica hadn’t had sober sex since Quaid died, and the pure raw sensations burned through her body and shattered her ability to think clearly.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, stretched, and pressed her body close and held tight. “God, you feel incredible.”

He covered her mouth again, his tongue plunging with a stunning force.

He broke the kiss to pull off her T-shirt and cup her breasts.

Then his fingers found their way under the bottom band of her bra, and he tried to pull it off over her head like he'd done with her T-shirt.

Jessica laughed and pushed him back. "Clasps."

"Why the fuck are there so many obstacles?"

She laughed again, harder, and it brought true joy to her heart.

As soon as she flipped the front closure, her bra fell open, and his hands instantly covered her again.

He was so clearly inexperienced. Unable to regulate his passion. Not a trace of the finesse he'd once had. But he also wielded a primal element he'd never had before either, and it was electrifying.

Without warning, he gripped her ass and lifted her off her feet. She broke the kiss to breathe, wrap her thighs around his waist, and get her bearings.

"Quaid—"

She barely got his name out before her back hit the wall. Before his mouth covered hers again. She turned her head to draw air, and Quaid's mouth went straight to her neck.

"Quaid, baby..." she rasped, breathing hard, dizzy.

"What now?" He lifted his head and the look on his face was focused and fierce. "What do we do now?"

A sudden wave of emotion hit her. The combination of passion and innocence was so adorable, it hurt.

She slid her hand between their bodies and moved the head of his cock over her heat. He was bigger than she remembered, and the realization created both excitement and concern. Quaid clearly didn't possess the control he'd once had, and Jessica hadn't had sex in over a year.

"Good God," he growled from behind clenched teeth. "This is insane."

Insanely good. And Jessica wanted to slow down. Wanted to savor him. "Quaid, let's—"

His hips rocked, and he pushed into her. Not fully, but her body stretched and burned, and she gasped. Quaid's teeth closed on her shoulder, and he growled low in his throat, a very male sound of guttural pleasure that shot lust into her blood. His hands moved back to her ass, and he used those powerful arms to pull her into him as he thrust forward.

Pain burned through her pelvis, along her walls, and a sound ebbed from her throat. She closed her eyes and dropped her head back against the wall. Her nails dug into Quaid's shoulders, and she tightened her legs around his

hips.

“Quaid...can you....”

He didn't hear her. He'd felt sex for the first time—at least in his memory—and he was gone. Jessica gritted her teeth, circled her arms around his neck, and held on. The pain was offset by the thrill of his passion and the joy of having her husband back, even if he wasn't the man she remembered.

His powerful thrusts drove him balls-deep on every plunge and slammed her back against the wall. “God, Jessie...”

He didn't choke out anything else, but she didn't need more. He knew he was with her. He knew she was giving him this pleasure. These memories would stay with him. Memories of the two of them.

His thrusts came faster, harder. Jessica turned her face into his neck to smother the sounds she couldn't hold back. She slid one hand up and over his head to hold tight. She tried to stay focused—this was her husband, he wanted her, it was a start. But the leak of tears from her eyes gave away all those underlying emotions she didn't want to acknowledge.

His climax rocked him hard, and he continued to shiver for long moments after while he stayed there, inside her, holding her, pressing kisses to her shoulder, her neck, her cheek and finally, her lips.

She tried every trick she knew to stop the tears, because he wouldn't understand. She didn't even fully understand.

“Holy fuck.”

The awe in his voice created a combination of love and loss, and she turned her head and lay her cheek on his shoulder, trying to hide the tears.

“Jess?”

She slid her hand over his head and held him close. “I'm fine.”

He exhaled and rocked his hips, moving inside her and making her catch her breath. He was still hard, or hard again, she didn't know which.

He turned his head and kissed that sensitive spot beneath her ear. “If you tell me what to do, I can do something for you. I want to make you feel as good as you make me feel.”

She smiled at the sweetness of the offer, even while experiencing the pinch of disappointment. “Thank you, babe.” She pressed a kiss to his shoulder. “But, not right now.”

He pulled back to look into her eyes. “Are you okay?”

She smiled and nodded. “Just a little sore.”

His breath hissed out through his teeth. “I'm sorry.”

The fire in his eyes was banked to a glowing ember now, and guilt had taken up space in the foreground. She spread her hands on either side of his head and kissed him. “Don’t be. I’ll be eating up all that passion and power soon. It’s just been a while. My body’s adjusting.”

It took about two full seconds for Jessica to realize what she’d said, “*It’s just been a while.*”

He stared at her as if he was thinking hard, and she was terrified what doors that might have opened in Quaid’s mind. So she kissed him again, relieved to find that just like every other red-blooded man, his mind could be sidetracked with a slow, tongue-sliding kiss.

When he pulled from her body, Jessica experienced a wicked sense of loss. A hollow feeling hovered at the edges of her heart, the same vacancy she felt every time she had sex with anyone else. And she hated how it was threatening to tarnish the first time making love to Quaid again.

They dressed in silence. Not as much awkward silence as distracted silence. While her mind acted like the cheerleader, tossing out positive, optimistic messages, her body was the leather-clad rebel still looking for relief, her heart the wallflower still aching for connection.

When she turned for the door, she didn’t understand how the emptiness inside her could have expanded, or how she could be even more confused.

She pulled the door open, but Quaid put his hand flat above her head and closed it again. His other arm slipped around her waist, and he gently pulled her back against him. He nudged her hair out of the way with his chin and pressed his mouth to her neck.

Jessica closed her eyes. Tears burned and leaked over her lashes.

“I love you, so much,” he whispered against her skin. “I just want you to remember that.”

Chest swelling with emotion, she turned and wrapped her arms around him. She pressed her face to his neck. “I love you more.”

When she pulled away, he lifted her face with one hand and used his T-shirt to wipe her tears with the other. “Ty will probably take a hammer to my knuckles if he thinks I made you cry.”

She burst out laughing and pressed her forehead to his chest.

“I’m serious,” Quaid said. “I’m just glad Keira’s not here. Cash is going to have to get moving on that protective skin. I might need it.”

Jessica’s mind made a hairpin turn as she was recalled to their dangerous situation. When she lifted her head and looked into his eyes again, this brief

—very brief—interlude seemed so minor in the grand scheme of all they still had to accomplish to be free to have a relationship.

She laid her hands against the soft cotton over his chest. “I know it might be hard to see right now with all the stress they’re under, but Ty and Keira would both die before they’d let anything happen to you again. They’re just —”

“Protective. I know. I’ve already gotten that lecture from Cash.” He brushed his thumb over her cheek, his dark gaze following the motion. “Sometimes your freckles look like they’re shimmering when you dream.”

Surprise parted her lips, while fear stung her heart.

But Quaid kissed her softly before opening the door, and Jessica stepped out into the hallway, her body tingling, her heart yearning, her mind twisting.

Mitch and Ty’s argument met Jessica’s ears halfway down the hall.

“What now?” Quaid asked.

“Who knows?”

They rounded the corner into the living room and Jessica glanced toward the kitchen, where Ty had been before Jessica had wandered and ended up in the bathroom up against the wall having sex with her husband.

And, *how* had that happened exactly?

“You would *ruin* chili with Heinz 57?” Ty asked.

“Hardly ruining it.” Mitch still sat at the dining room table, shirtsleeves rolled up on his forearms. He was sitting in a tired sideways slump, one hand holding a pencil over a legal pad, the other propping his head up with his hand dug deep into his hair. His gaze ran over the screen in front of him, its blue-white light reflecting softly off his reading glasses. “It’s an award-winning recipe.”

“Award-winning where? The internet?”

Mitch turned and hooked one arm over the back of his chair and looked into the kitchen. He acknowledged Jessica and Quaid with a lift of his chin, but kept scowling at Ty. “The woman who made that recipe for me studied at Le Cordon Bleu.”

Ty leaned into the counter, arms stretched out and gripping the edges, his expression confident and superior, like he owned the kitchen. “And did you eat the chili before or after you had sex?”

Mitch opened his mouth, poised his pencil for retort, and froze. Then he deflated. He turned back to the table, tossed his pencil on the paper, and scrolled through the webpage on screen with a muttered “You prick.”

Ty laughed, the sound deep and rich and familiar, bringing back all the fun memories from Jessica's days as a firefighter.

"I don't care what you say," Mitch said, "that recipe I gave Brody is good shit. Have one of the guys make yours and one make mine and we'll let Quaid decide."

"Decide what?" Quaid asked.

"Which one you like better," she told him.

"What difference does eating before or after sex make?" Quaid asked, his frown creating that positively adorable little V between his eyes.

Jessica shook her head, prepared to tell Quaid that Ty and Mitch were full of shit, but Ty spoke first. "Everything tastes good after great sex, brother."

"Good, because I'm starving." Quaid's hungry eyes scanned the counter in front of them, which was covered in freshly cut fruit, and stopped on the mixture Ty had sitting in the blender. "Can I have some of whatever that is?"

Oh, fuck. Jessica's stomach squeezed in mortification. She froze and prayed the comment would go right over Ty and Mitch's head. But no, she couldn't be that lucky. They both went silent. In fact, everyone went silent, including Teague, Alyssa, and Cash on the sofa. The only voices filling the space were Kat's and Mateo's.

Ty's gaze snapped to Jessica's. Mitch twisted toward the kitchen and hooked his arm over the back of the chair again, this time pulling off his glasses. Quaid, totally oblivious, picked up a piece of mango on the cutting board in front of Ty, studied it, and popped it in his mouth.

And even before he said it, Jessica knew what was coming.

"Mmm, that *is* amazing. I never had it before, but it's great now." He picked up another piece and held it out to Jessica. "Jessie, try it. Tell me if it's better after."

Ty snorted a laugh he'd been trying to hold. And Jessica caved.

"Jesus Christ." Jessica covered her eyes and dropped her head.

Ty and Mitch burst out laughing, and Jessica's face burned red hot.

Ty picked up a half-cut mango and threw it at Mitch, who caught it at the last second. "You idiot. I didn't even feel what was happening with them because you were pissing me off."

"You're sick, dude." Mitch pitched the mango back at Ty, narrowly missing his head. It bounced off the stainless-steel refrigerator and hit the floor. "Stay out of their business."

She dropped her hand and found Quaid frowning in confusion, his gaze

alternating between the two men, who were laughing so hard, they were crying. Quaid stuffed mango into his mouth three slices at a time.

Jessica pushed the cutting board out of reach, laughing, and Quaid eyed the mango longingly and licked his fingers.

She couldn't help it. The combination of Quaid's innocence and Mitch and Ty's antics was hilarious. She just wished it hadn't been over her sex life. Especially now, when her and Quaid's relationship was far from settled.

"What did I do?" Quaid asked.

"You put us back in the firehouse fishbowl." She sighed, knowing he didn't understand. "Nothing. It's fine."

She pounded Ty's arm with a fist before wandering over to the sofa and sinking into one end sideways, curling her feet under her. She had to hold her breath to keep from groaning. Her body hurt in a few very strategic locations, which brought back the flash of erotic memories. And that nagging sense of discontent.

When she looked up, everyone was staring at her, part curiosity, part amusement. "I didn't plan it." She shrugged. "Just kinda...happened."

Quaid came in sucking a giant smoothie through a straw and handed another to her.

"Made one for you too, Jess," Ty said, subdued laughter in his voice. "Both have energy boosts."

She shot a look over her shoulder toward Ty cleaning up in the kitchen, then looked at Quaid, sucking down the smoothie like water. "Slow down on that, babe, or you're going to be sick tonight."

He pulled the straw from his mouth and smiled. Jessica's stomach went light, like she'd swallowed air. That was his first real smile.

And, oh, he was so handsome, so purely Quaid, her heart ached.

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When she looked at him like that, Q's chest filled until it felt like it would crack open. Only, it wasn't a happy look. She was sad. She looked at him like she *wanted* to love him, if only...

If only he could be Quaid. The Quaid she remembered. The Quaid he'd once been.

And he wanted her to love him badly enough to do what he could to find that man inside him.

Q sat on the sofa next to Jessica, slid his hand down her thigh, rested it over her knee, and looked at Teague. "So how do we do this memory stuff?"

"We were thinking of using pictures instead of just stories."

"I made a Facebook page for our team," Ty said, "a long time ago, before the warehouse fire. Training, goofing around, incidents."

"Facebook?" Q asked.

Ty waved that topic away. "They're pictures."

"Pictures," Q echoed. That felt...comfortable? Hell, no. He glanced at Jessica, but couldn't read her expression. "Sure. Pictures will work."

"Q or Quaid...?" Alyssa said from her position beneath Teague's arm.

Neither really felt right anymore, like he didn't fit into either mold. "Either is fine."

"You need to speak up if you feel overwhelmed or you experience any pain in your head."

He nodded. "Fine."

"And if you have any flash of memory," Alyssa said, "we should also stop and explore that before moving on. Otherwise, it could get lost in more

images.”

“Okay.”

Teague looked at his wife, who nodded, and he picked up his closed laptop from the side table. When he opened it and tapped buttons, apprehension crawled beneath Q’s skin, and he reached for Jessica, but she was gone. He’d been so interested in the computer, he hadn’t noticed her slip away.

Ty came up behind the sofa and took Q’s empty glass. “Showtime?”

“Jessica?” Quaid said looking around.

“I’m right here,” she said from behind Ty.

He reached for her, and she came to the back of the sofa and took his hand, her other hand holding a glass of water. Ty rounded the sofa and sat on the floor, and Teague set the computer on the coffee table in front of everyone.

“Come sit,” Q told Jessica.

She shook her head, her expression tight, guarded. “I’m okay.”

“Here we are.” Teague drew Q’s attention. “Do we want to start with recent and move backward or oldest and move forward?”

Q leaned forward, elbows on knees, hands clasped. A beehive had been planted in his stomach, among a turbulent, rushing river with moss-covered rocks wedged beneath his ribs and mosquitoes sucking his blood. He glanced at Jessica over his shoulder.

Her glassy stare cleared long enough for her to say, “Oldest to newest makes most sense.”

Teague shrugged. “Oldest to newest it is.”

He clicked into something called a “photo album” and there were several separate albums labeled by year. Teague clicked onto the earliest year and pulled up the first image—a group picture, taken in front of the grill of a fire engine. Six people posed there, three crouching low, three standing behind.

Q recognized the faces—the faces of some of those in this room, only younger. And happier. So much happier. A sudden, dark weight made his chest heavy.

“Seth is the one you haven’t met,” Ty said. “The blond, top right.”

Q glanced over Seth’s face without any hint of recognition. Then his eyes focused in on the face right next to Seth’s—*his* face. Quaid’s face. No mistake, Q was staring at *his own* face. His throat dried up as he looked closer.

His head was tipped back and to the side, his mouth open and wide in a smile, as if someone had just made a joke, he'd found very funny. Arms crossed over his chest, butt leaning against the fire engine's shiny chrome grill, legs relaxed and crossed at the ankles, he looked completely at ease and carefree.

A chill settled inside Q, and something layered alongside. Something ugly and dark. Something beyond anger. Beyond fury.

Rage.

The first hints of the rage he knew would eventually try to devour him. Rage toward whoever had taken from him all he was about to see. Rage toward whoever had substituted a full, meaningful life as a firefighter for life as a test subject. He'd had life with friends who'd loved him. A woman—a beautiful, compassionate, intelligent woman—who'd loved him.

Q tore his eyes from the photo and looked behind him. Jessica was gone, but the photos distracted him from searching her out.

He stared at a photo with a burned structure in the background, fire engines with bright red lights in the foreground, water spouting from hoses pointed at flames dancing from doors and windows. He swore he could feel those flames licking his gut with excitement, the same way the thought of being with Jessica again turned his blood to fire.

"You fucking fell down that ladder, dude, remember?" Ty laughed out the words.

When Alyssa realized there was no way she would be able to contain their language, she put the kids and their toys into a bedroom.

"Don't even start," Teague growled, "or I'll start telling stories about you tripping over hose line."

Teague clicked to the next picture, an image of two firefighters, their backs to the camera, but looking at each other so their profiles were visible. A fire of some kind blazed in front of them, which created a dynamic, blurred background for the image. The firefighters were dressed in typical yellow gear, both with red helmets. The taller one wore the helmet, the shorter one held it under an arm.

His gaze paused on the shorter firefighter's hands. She was holding her helmet under her arm while she twirled her hair into a bun. Long, thick, copper hair. His heart thumped hard. Jessica. That was Jessica's profile. God, she looked so young. So happy.

"How old was Jessica there?" Quaid asked.

“Would say...” Teague tilted his head. “Twenty-four-ish.”

Really basic questions Q didn’t know the answers to popped into his mind. “How old is she now?”

“Thirty-one,” Ty said.

Q looked over at Ty. “How old am I?”

A stark look crossed through Ty’s eyes before he forced a smile. “You’ll be thirty-three in a little over a week.”

Thirty-three. Was that old? Was that young?

He turned back around and studied the picture. It spoke of comfort and camaraderie. Intimacy.

Teague continued clicking through pictures. Photo after photo after photo—in the fire station working, in the fire station messing around, outside training, at actual fires, working on the engines, playing basketball, sitting in lounge chairs with beers. In every damn one, Quaid was smiling. Even when soot or dirt covered his face, maybe even more so, Quaid smiled at the camera.

Q quickly lost track of anything the others were saying. He didn’t need their commentary to know all he needed to know. The photos said everything that mattered to Q, at least everything that mattered right now.

He could see the relationships he’d had with the men around him, and with Keira and Jessica. They’d handed each other tools, let each other climb on their shoulders to reach something, teamed up together to accomplish a task, risked their own safety to save another in danger, taught each other, teased each other. They high-fived, punched arms, slapped shoulders. And they hugged. Guys to guys. Girls to girls. Guys to girls. They all hugged a lot. In nearly every photo, someone had an arm around someone else.

And, God, they smiled and laughed.

Their happiness, no, their joy—pure, vivid, passionate joy—was palpable.

Then there were the photos of Jessica. Q watched the progression of the relationship between Quaid and Jessica shift from interest to flirtation, flirtation to relationship, relationship to love. Yes, Quaid had definitely loved her, and he’d reveled in the way she’d clung to him. He’d leaned into her, held her tight, kissed her head, her temple.

By the time they reached the last image, Q could see the man Jessica had fallen in love with. He could see why she’d fallen in love with him. And he knew that man was not inside him, anywhere.

While Q might have Quaid’s feelings of love for Jessica, he didn’t have

the memories that supported those feelings, and he knew, without a doubt, what he felt for her now was *nothing* in comparison to what Quaid had felt for her then.

The next image had an arrow over it. “What’s this?”

Teague and Ty shared a look. Teague said, “It’s a video.”

“Of what?”

“Your birthday one year. But I don’t think it will add anything to the pictures.”

Q thought about seeing this Quaid in living, breathing color. Hearing his voice. Seeing his mannerisms. He was desperate to pick up *something*, some indication that he’d once been this man. “Play it. I’ve seen everything else.”

The video began in an industrial kitchen, obviously in a firehouse, judging by the men in navy-blue uniforms, familiar to Q now after that barrage of photographs. He recognized the youthful faces of Ty, Teague, Luke, and Seth. A few other men were there too, people Q didn’t know.

On the screen, Ty pulled small white bowls out of the refrigerator and piled them in his arms, while Teague and Luke held something that looked like a plastic pipe and Seth dug in a kitchen drawer. The other men stood around laughing and joking.

“Who’s holding the camera?” Q asked.

“Keira,” Teague said.

“Where’s—”

Q didn’t get Jessica’s name out of his mouth before the door to the kitchen on screen opened and she flew in, her hair down and flowing over her shoulders with her forward movement. She held a brightly wrapped box under her arm and she wasn’t in uniform. She wore faded jeans that fit nice tight hips and hung low on her waist. She dropped the package and her purse on a nearby counter, slid off her coat, and unwrapped a knit scarf from her neck.

When Jessica looked toward the camera, her grin was so vivid, Q swore he could see all the way to her soul. Her eyes sparkled with joy and excitement. And, God, so much love.

The stark difference between the woman on the screen and the woman crying after they’d had sex earlier made Q want to kill someone. Made him want to find the bastards who’d started this whole fucking nightmare and rip their throats out.

Then her gaze darted to the guys, and her mouth opened into a surprised

“O.” Her hand flew there. She shook her head and, despite her obvious horror, started laughing. “Oh my God. You know I’m going to get blamed for this. He’ll *kill* me. Sending him flowers at work was already pushing his limits. Did they get here? Has he seen them?”

“They just came,” Keira said. “He hasn’t seen them yet.”

Ty had the bowls on the counter. Teague and Luke had brought the PVC pipe over, and Seth, his grin wide, spooned a thick frothy white substance into it.

Hands on both cheeks, she groaned, then looked up and around. “Where is he?”

“Your sister has him on the phone upstairs,” Keira said. “We asked her to call and wish him happy birthday and keep him talking.”

Q sent a look toward Ty. “What is that thing?”

“We affectionately refer to *that thing* as the Master Blaster Two Thousand,” Ty said. “A handmade, state-of-the-art, whipped-cream-shooting weapon of lethal proportions. Observe the highly aerodynamic chamber of compressed air duct-taped onto the carefully salvaged PVC pipe.”

The thump of footsteps sounded from the computer, and Ty said, “This is the good part.”

Q found the people on screen suddenly serious. “Here he comes,” Ty said, his voice filled with urgency. “Seth, finish up.”

They all went into another room, where recliners sat in a semicircle around a big screen of some kind. Behind those, the dining room table sprawled beneath a row of windows, and balloons and flowers sat in the center of the table.

Ty, Teague, and Luke whispered to each other as they took up their positions inside a doorway through which Q could see the stairwell beyond.

Ty glanced at Teague and Luke. “On three.”

Q could see Quaid’s lower legs as he came down the steps toward the living room. This was surreal. Bizarre. Watching himself, a man he couldn’t remember being, relive an event he couldn’t remember living.

“One...two...”

The real Quaid turned the corner into the room, his head down. When he looked up, he slowed, eyes narrowed.

“Three!” Ty said.

Quaid stopped short, put his hands up, and turned his face away. “Oh, shit!”

Teague let the Master Blaster spray while Luke steadied the aim. Whipped cream spewed from the crude device, coating Quaid's perfect navy uniform. He cursed again and took a few stumbling steps back, laughing. In less than five seconds, the man was coated, head to toe, in snow-white foam.

How on earth could Q *not* remember that?

On the screen, everyone broke into boisterous laughter, catcalls, and whistles. Laughter from the others around him joined those on the screen. The camera shook with Keira's laughter. Quaid stood frozen, arms held wide, mouth sputtering whipped cream. He slowly brought both hands to his face, wiping his eyes clear.

Q couldn't help it. He laughed too. But, he also ached with the absence of this memory.

Keira panned out with the camera and Q's gaze locked on Jessica. She was standing to the side, both hands covering her mouth and laughing so hard, tears streamed down her cheeks. The sight made Q's mouth curve and his eyes grow damp.

In the video, Quaid grinned and licked his lips. Shaking his head, he stared down at himself. When he looked up, he raised one white arm, dripping with froth, and pointed at Jessica. "You."

She gasped around laughter while shaking her head, barely able to speak. "N-no. It was-wasn't me."

He sauntered toward her, that dangerous grin in place beneath so much whipped cream, it was ridiculously comical. Yet, Q was mesmerized by the cocky confidence of this Quaid. The swagger and humor and good nature. Q didn't possess any of those things.

Jessica backed away, hands out, choking on the laughter still trying to bubble out of her. "I swear. It was Seth."

Keira panned the camera to Seth, who was doubled over with laughter. Everyone around Q laughed too.

"I'm so nice," Quaid said, "I'm going to share." He laughed low in his throat, grabbed her arms, circled her waist, and pulled her fully against him.

"No!" She screeched and squirmed and laughed, gasping for air. "Quaid, you—"

Whatever she was going to say got cut off by Quaid's mouth—as he kissed her.

Q straightened. Eyes wide, lips parted, he watched his alter ego kiss Jessica. He heard her murmur, some mixture of surprise and pleasure that

spear heat between his shoulder blades. He watched as both of them slowly closed their eyes in pleasure.

Their expressions were lost in what Q could only describe as...bliss. Quaid slid his hand behind her neck, tilted his head, and opened his mouth over hers. Another murmur sounded in her throat. This one softer, longer. And the way she kissed him back, with so much passion, want, need... Q's throat tightened, making it hard to breathe. Q had definitely not kissed her like that in the bathroom. In comparison, Q had been rough and crude. He thought of how he'd taken her, equally as rough and crude.

The terrible weight of disappointment and self-disgust made Q sink deeper into the sofa.

In the room around the lovers on screen, their coworkers hooted and howled and whistled. Quaid pulled back, and the way he and Jessica looked at each other hollowed out Q's heart. Without even an inkling of doubt, he knew he didn't have the capacity to love like that. He was too damaged. Too scarred. Too jaded. And what he saw in their eyes had to have been only a fraction of what they'd felt in their hearts.

Seth yelled, "Showers!" from the laptop, and Q focused to see the man's huge grin in place, triumphant fist in the air. Followed by the rest of the group chanting, "Show-ers! Show-ers! Show-ers!"

Quaid grinned, leaned down, and swept Jessica into his arms, then he turned and started for the stairs. When he broke the kiss to see where he was going, Jessica's mouth slid to his neck, her hand clawing at his hair.

Quaid cut a quick glance over his shoulder. "Get the hell out of here, O'Shay."

"Not a chance, Legend," she said from behind the camera. "You do realize fraternizing on state property, and while on duty, is grounds for—"

"Then you should be fired a few times over, sugar." He barked a laugh. "You don't think I know what you and Luke are doing in that engine bay? You may be working, but it ain't on fire apparatus."

Quaid lengthened his strides, got a head start up the stairs, turned into the bathroom, and shut the door in Keira's face. The sound of a lock clicked, and Jessica's laughter penetrated the door, drifting out of the screen, traversing all those empty years and shivering over Q.

Whoever was behind this hadn't just taken five years from Q. They'd taken his whole goddamned past. And his whole goddamned future.

Gil Schaeffer held his pipe by the bowl and sucked a deep lungful of his newest tobacco, its rich, smooth blend resulting from the blend of three different tobaccos.

He leaned back in the ancient leather chair and appreciated the sexual splendor of the dancer atop the bar in front of him. He'd chosen the back parlor of the Alibi Club tonight, hardly in the mood to mingle. Truthfully, he needed a place to relax so he could think. He couldn't say watching Courtney flatten her bare belly and double D's on the glossy mahogany less than a foot away *relaxed* him, exactly. But here he could shake off that uptight, senatorial layer he was finding more and more restrictive. Sometimes damn suffocating.

"Mmm," Courtney hummed, red-thong-clad ass in the air, knees bent, thighs spread wide, bare breasts rubbing the bar.

What did they coat the thing with to make the women's skin slide across it that way? Why was this the first time he'd ever wondered?

"I love that smell," she said, drawing Gil's gaze from the push and pull of her pale breasts against the dark wood to her black-rimmed green eyes. "The tobacco. Dark and edgy. It turns me on."

Gil's groin tightened, but his mind was distracted. He offered his inane politician smile and nodded in acknowledgment. Let his gaze slide up the curve of her back, watched her smooth ass gyrate, and felt the tension evaporate from his shoulders.

"What can I do for you tonight, Senator?" Courtney crawled along the bar. Stretching out, she pressed up on her palms, threw her head back, and

bent her knees until the tips of her glittering scarlet boots touched her blond head. “My throat is achy. Could use a good rubdown.”

Oh, this girl had his number and played it expertly, giving him control and hinting at dominance. “You’re lively tonight.”

“I’m lively every night, Senator.” She swung her legs around and pulled herself up by the pole at her back, then bent forward, her ass writhing along the big round brass shaft.

This one could offer him extreme stress relief. God knew he deserved it. He was pulling in a breath to accept her invitation, when someone dropped onto the stool beside him.

Courtney’s gaze swung in that direction. Her eyes sparked. “Well, hello, general.”

Gil didn’t have to look to know the man’s identity. The club had only two hundred members, twenty of those generals, only three of whom had reason to sit down beside him now.

“Good evening, Courtney,” the newcomer returned in a smooth, confident tone.

Every ounce of Gil’s tension returned, cramping his neck, clenching his teeth, and fisting his hands. “Can’t I get an hour of peace?”

“You could have if you’d returned my phone calls.” General Bruce Abernathy leaned forward, resting his forearms on the bar, his gaze appreciating the deep undulations of Courtney’s hips. “But since you didn’t, I have to interrupt your...peace. Courtney, beautiful, can you give us a minute?”

She bent to run a finger down the side of Abernathy’s face, whispering, “I’ll give you as long as you want.” Her lips touched his. “You know where to find me.”

The girl slithered farther down the bar, joining another woman and treating Admiral Peck and Ambassador Manash to an erotic rubbing, touching, tongue-sucking act. Gil was almost as furious with Courtney for forgetting he existed as soon as Abernathy plopped his womanizing ass in the next chair as he was for these damn problems at the Castle that had arisen only months before his Senate campaign kickoff.

“You sure choose the strangest times to chase pussy, Gil.” Without taking his eyes off the women, Abernathy drank deeply from the amber beer in his hand.

“I’m relaxing,” Gil said. “Or I was until you showed up, and I have

everything under control.”

“Then you must have located O’Shay.” He paused, still watching the girls. Courtney was rubbing something shiny over the other woman’s breast while licking and sucking the opposite. “Must have the completed formula in your possession. Must have been just about to call me and let me know when Courtney distracted you.”

Gil’s blood pressure spurted into the two hundreds. He could feel the heat of tiny blood vessels bursting across the surface of his skin. “I’ve put Owen Young on O’Shay’s trail. We’ll have him within twenty-four hours. Probably less.”

“Good start.” Abernathy nodded absently, his attention honed now on Courtney’s finger deep inside the other woman’s mouth as she sucked until her cheeks caved in, pulling it out slowly, licking it up and down, then starting all over again. He took a drink of his beer, then rolled the chilled bottle against his forehead. “It’s getting hot in here.”

After another greedy swallow, nearly downing the rest of the bottle, Abernathy said, “Q was due in Punjab two days ago. My troops can’t just slum it in Pakistan, Gil. If Q isn’t the über-soldier of the future you’ve been mouthing off about for fucking years, it’s time for my men to move on.” Abernathy pried his gaze away from the soft porn show atop the bar and used his glacial blue gaze to pin Gil in place. “And our budget goes where we go.”

A pop from the other end of the bar drew Abernathy’s gaze again. One of the girls had pulled a can of instant whipped cream from behind the bar and was shaking it. Abernathy grinned and shoved his beer away. “Hold on there, ladies. I’ll help you with that.”

He stood and started in their direction, tossing Gil a dark look. “You’ve got two days to get Q to Punjab.”

Abernathy snagged the can from Courtney’s hand with the confidence of a man used to getting his way. He tipped his head back, squirted the cream into his mouth until it overflowed, then trailed the stream down his neck. With squeals of delight, one girl attacked Abernathy’s mouth, and the other latched on to his neck. While feasting on and being feasted upon, Abernathy wrapped one arm around each girl’s waist and headed for the back stairway.

Jessica couldn't get comfortable. Couldn't find sleep. She kicked the covers off, but found her legs already bare and remembered she'd torn off the silk pajama pants Mitch's assistant had supplied early on in her attempts to sleep. Now she only wore panties and a tank top, but she was still hot, restless, and dying for some fresh air, but Mitch had told everyone not to sleep with their windows open.

She groaned in frustration and twisted onto her back, pulled the pillow from under her head, and tossed it to the other side of the bed. She scraped both hands through her hair, then flung her arms out to the sides.

Quaid filled her mind. Quaid then. Quaid now. Where the hell was he? She'd thought he'd be sleeping with her tonight. She'd expected him to come to her after he'd looked at the pictures.

And the pain that went away only when she slept blossomed like a flower in her chest. She remembered him telling her he loved her and closed her eyes on the bittersweet memory. Sweet because, of course, he had strong feelings for her. Bitter because he didn't know why, didn't understand either the feelings or what they stood for. How much could words, or even feelings, mean when the real moments in life that created those feelings were gone, absent from his memories? Then he'd admitted he wasn't even sure he could live up to the commitment.

She really hadn't gotten her husband back.

She'd gotten the *possibility* of her husband back. The very low possibility.

What the fuck did she do with that?

Still, there were parts of this new Quaid she really enjoyed. His vulnerability. His openness. His almost-innocence, which was a strange way to see him after he'd nearly beaten that spy or assassin or whatever he was to death. But that was another thing she loved about this Quaid: his fierce protectiveness.

And if she'd been prepared for that intense sexual version of Quaid, their sex earlier in the day might not have been so shocking and she might not have been too emotionally messed up to enjoy it, because the passion ebbing from the man was toe-curling extreme.

Okay, this was not helping. She was going to fry in here. Rolling off the bed toward the window, she unlocked it and slid it open. She inhaled deeply, letting the clean air cool her body, cleanse her mind, soothe her heart.

She could do this. She would rework her life to make it right for Quaid too. They'd find a way.

Fear crawled out of a dark corner of her chest. He had no memory of having chosen her after dating many other women. Without any comparison, how would he know she was the right woman? What if he wanted to date? What if wanting his freedom meant him wanting freedom from her too?

God, these were never things she'd even imagined, let alone considered.

Her anxiety amped her body heat again. She pulled at the fabric of her tank, fanning the air against her belly. Wasn't cement supposed to keep buildings cool, for God's sake? Oh, screw it. She crossed her arms, grabbed the hem of her shirt, and pulled the fabric toward her head.

"Don't."

A male voice—Quaid's voice—rippled through the darkness.

Jessica froze in place, her heart speeding from the kick of fear-laden adrenaline.

"Please." He softened his voice, the tone edged with a painful plea. "Please don't. I'm barely keeping my hands off you as it is."

Jessica lowered her arms, swallowed, and turned slowly. It took a moment to find him, sitting on the floor near the door in the deepest shadows, knees up, back pressed against the wall.

"What...?" She felt stupid asking such a basic question, but it needed answering. "What are you doing?"

He didn't answer right away. The darkness felt heavy and charged with emotion. "I just...needed to be near you."

With no other stimuli distracting her, his voice registered so clearly as

Quaid's, it reached into her chest and squeezed her heart like a fist.

"I didn't want to wake you," he said. "Why didn't you stay?"

She knew he meant for the pictures, but she didn't know how to put all the pain, failed hopes and dreams, misery, agony, and loss into words. "I...it just..."

"Hurt too much," he said, his voice a pained whisper, telling Jessica he felt the same pain.

Her heart cracked a little more. She twirled her fingers in the bottom of her tank. "Yeah. I'm sorry. I should have been there for you. I didn't realize... I didn't think..." She gasped with a sudden realization, and that damn spark of hope that just wouldn't die flared again. "Did you remember —"

"No." He pulled an audible breath. "I'm—" His voice broke, and with it, Jessica's heart fell to pieces. "I'm sorry, Jessie."

She pressed her eyes shut and nodded, because she didn't trust herself to speak.

"I want to. I want to remember so badly." The desire in his voice rasped low and needy, and both Jessica's heart and body churned in response.

"It's not your fault."

He made a noise, and Jessica lifted her gaze to him. All she could see was that he'd straightened his arms, braced them on his knees, and hung his head between his biceps. His shoulders shook. And, oh, shit...

"Quaid?" Her voice trembled.

She crossed the room and knelt beside him. The industrial-grade carpet bit into her knees. She could hear him now, suppressing his sobs, and her heart shattered.

"Oh my God, Quaid. Baby, don't."

She put her hand around his ankle, slid it up bare skin to his shin, and realized he'd changed into shorts at some point. Scooting close, she put both hands on the leg closest to her and gave a comforting squeeze. The heat of his hip burned through the cotton of his shorts and into her thigh where she pressed against him.

The feel of his skin, the light brush of crisp hair against her hand, all that warmth, made her want to keep touching, caressing, exploring. She longed to move close, to feel him against her.

"Shh, baby," she whispered, pressing her cheek against his arm. "I'm sorry I wasn't there. I didn't realize..."

“Seeing everyone, seeing how happy we all were, especially y-you”— his voice caught— “only to see what my death has done to you, how much pain you’ve been through....”

He heaved a breath and rested his head on his arm. She scratched her fingers gently along his scalp, something that always used to soothe him. He let out a shaky sigh. He fisted his hands and then released them.

“When I thought you were a dream, a fantasy, it kept me going, gave me something to look forward to. You kept me alive all those years. I’ve spent an hour looking at those pictures of us, then another three replaying them in my head, and I know I *had* you. You and me. We were, we were *us*.” He shook his head, a sharp, angry movement. “And I don’t remember a goddamned minute. It’s killing me. Because, goddammit, Jess, I want you. I want *that*. I want shit, I don’t even know. Because I don’t know what we had, because I can’t fucking remember, but it’s inside me and it’s... God, it’s so intense, so insane, I feel like I’m going to explode with it.”

His ferocity seemed to roil inside her, kicking up a storm of hope and loss and love and anger.

“I’m sorry, Jess, but I’m not that man.”

“Quaid—”

“I’m not. And I never will be.” His voice was cold and final. Bitter. “I know I look like him and sound like him, but inside, *I’m not him*. You just have to accept that. I have to accept it.” He gestured toward the door. “They have to accept it.”

“Baby, you’ve been through so much. Give yourself some time. Give *us* some time. You can’t expect—”

“There is no part of him inside me.”

His finality chilled her, but it also angered her. “You told me just hours ago that you love me.”

“I do, Jess. I *do* love you.”

“Then at least some of the man in those pictures *has* to be inside you somewhere, because there’s no other possible way for you to love me. *None*.”

He breathed heavily and laid his forehead against his arms. “You’ve already gone through so much pain. I don’t want to put you through any more when you realize I can’t become him.”

“I can accept that, if you can keep yourself open to memories that come, if they come.” She spread her fingers over his head and pulled him toward her until their foreheads touched.

His eyes closed. “You are so stubborn.”

“Persistent.” She pushed his knees until his legs lay flat, then lifted one leg across his lap and sat on his thighs. “This is a one in a zillion opportunity. How often do people get a second chance to find love with their once-in-a-lifetime? I believe in you as a person. I believe in your essence. No one can change that.”

God, she hated using euphemisms for their marriage, but considering he was ready to bolt even after they’d had sex that he’d enjoyed, now would not be the time to tell him he was stuck with her.

She tilted her head and kissed him. Firmly, purposefully.

He met her kiss for the briefest moment before pushing her back. “This didn’t go so well last time.”

“If you’re referring to the bathroom, I think it went plenty fine for you. I wasn’t expecting quite so much passion and had a few of my own head trips going on. You’re not the only one with issues to get past, Quaid. We all have our demons. Besides, practice makes—”

“Perfect,” he finished.

A small smile lifted her mouth as she thought of the baby they could have a second chance at making. “We’re different people now. We’ll have to learn how to make love to each other again. It’s a tough job, but someone’s got to do it.”

She leaned back and pulled her tank off over her head before he could protest. Then she tossed it across the room to make a statement—she wasn’t changing her mind and she wasn’t letting him try to change it for her.

“And I think we should start now. *Right* now.”

Air shuddered into Q's lungs as he dragged his gaze over Jessica's full breasts and flat belly. All his focus seemed to collect, then center on her as if nothing else mattered.

And that was one of his biggest problems. He didn't just want her. He *craved* her. Had coveted her for years. Every cell in his body strained for the freedom she offered. And she was the one and only place he could find everything he needed.

Yet, just like with the food, the more he wanted something, the more he resisted, and he wanted her a hundred times more now than he'd wanted her earlier when she'd come to him. Because now, he'd tasted her. Now, he knew exactly what she could offer him, and he was ready and willing to beg. If he would only let himself.

"Jessie—"

A flash of impatience lit her dark eyes before she grabbed his wrists and drew his hands to her breasts. With her hands covering his, she cupped the mounds, caressing them.

Q's goal of staying in control evaporated. His mind funneled to the utterly unique feel of her feminine body—her skin so soft, he had nothing in his experience for comparison, her breasts pillowy, yet resilient. And her scent. God, her scent. Now she smelled like a combination of herbs and spice, flowers and sunshine. She smelled like pleasure, seduction, secrets, and trouble. She smelled like sex. Like raw, wild, passionate sex—like their sex earlier.

She shimmied forward on his thighs and pressed the heat between her

legs against his erection. Sensation so powerful, it bordered on painful surged through his entire pelvis. Jessica rubbed against him, and her nipples tightened in his palms. All of Q's banked lust broke loose.

He leaned in and kissed her, instantly penetrating her lips with his tongue, seeking hers. Then circled in demanding, needy strokes, which made him think about tasting different parts of her. All of her. He wrapped her in his arms, suddenly ravenous, his mouth hungry to travel, his tongue restless to taste.

With her arms clutching his shoulders and head, thighs grabbing his hips, bare belly sliding along his, and those damn full, round, jiggly breasts rolling against his chest, it was a fucking feat he wasn't a comatose, drooling mess from the pleasure.

Her very essence rubbed the length of his cock with every rock of her hips, and each tilt began a slow, luscious wave that traveled up her body, sliding through them as if they were one, stomach to stomach, chest to breasts, and right into their kiss, only to start all over again. With each move, everything in his body coiled tighter, grew larger, demanded more, until that *more* made him grip a handful of her hair and pull back to break the kiss.

"More," was all he got out.

"Yes," she answered.

His body took action without a direct order from his brain. He pulled his legs under him, slid his arms around her waist, and pushed to his feet. With her smooth, luscious thighs clutched around his hips, he held Jessica just as he had earlier in the day, but tonight, it wouldn't end there. At least not the way it had earlier.

All Q could think about was getting Jessica horizontal, bringing his body in complete contact with hers and sinking his hands into her hair.

When his legs hit the side of the bed, he leaned over, laid Jessica back with plans to follow her, press his body into hers, and soak in the feeling of all that perfect flesh beneath him. But he took one sweeping gaze down that body and paused on the shape of a wing emerging from high on her inner thigh.

He slid his hands down her body, over her belly, pelvis, thighs, where he rolled her leg out. Her scent traveled on the heat of her body and wrapped around Q, making him dizzy with lust. He focused on the scar, just below the junction of her thigh and pelvis. Traced it with his fingers, while his mind struggled with flashes of memory. Dreams or...

“Quaid?”

Jessica’s voice pulled him back. “I’ve seen this. In my dreams.”

He closed his eyes and pressed his lips to the purple flourish. Jessica sighed. He sucked at the tender flesh. She moaned and lifted her hips. Something about the sound made him open his eyes. He looked down at her phoenix. Alongside the bird, his hand spanned her thigh, big and rough and very male in comparison to her smooth flesh.

The sight, her sound, the combination, lit off memories he couldn’t quite grab, but a cold trickle of discomfort traveled through his chest.

“Quaid?” Jessica said. “Are you okay?”

His hand tightened on her thigh. “Were those dreams?”

Fear, clear and sharp, passed through her eyes when he glanced up at her. She propped herself up on an elbow and ran her hand over his head and across his shoulder, but she didn’t speak. Didn’t meet his eyes.

That cold river in his chest turned hot and spread through his body, but no one memory emerged fully.

“Jessica.” He waited until she lifted her gaze, her beautiful eyes a mix of regret, fear, plea, and an edge of rebellion. “I have a strange feeling those weren’t dreams. Did I dream of you with...”

God, why was it so hard to say? It had never bothered him before. He’d never felt this tightness in his chest. This need to grab her and shake her. This need to brand her as his. This need to choke any other man who ever touched her.

“Fuck.” He ran a hand down his face. The intensity of his emotions made him push away.

Jessica grabbed his arm. “Quaid, wait.”

“I don’t understand. Nothing makes sense.” The combination of panic, fear, and anger made a volatile emotion grow inside him, one he didn’t like, one that felt too much like the desperation he’d felt at the Castle. “I thought... You said... Were they all *real*?”

“It wasn’t...” Her hand tightened on his arm, her voice strong, insistent. “Quaid—”

His gaze sharpened. “Were they real?”

She hesitated, then said, “Quaid, I’ve never—”

“Don’t you dare lie to me.”

“—loved anyone but you. Ever.”

The deepest place in his heart believed, but other dark places inside him

needed security. He combed his fingers into her hair and pulled it back from her face. The motion tipped her head back so she looked directly into his eyes.

“You’re. Mine.” His voice shook, and he took a breath. “That may not be right, but it’s how I feel. It just *is*.”

Her eyes closed and then opened, glistening with tears. “Yes.”

“Say it, Jessie.”

“I’m yours. I’ve always been yours. I’ll always be yours.”

His restraint snapped. His arms opened, took her in, wrapped around her, closed, and locked.

He looked back at the phoenix and lowered his mouth to her skin. Pushing all other thoughts out of his mind, he kissed and licked and sucked at her flesh, determined to make new memories.

Her quick breaths and little moans indicated she liked what he was doing, which was good, because he wanted to taste every part of her. But one part of her was pulling him more strongly than the rest. He slid his mouth toward her center, her heat. The silk of her panties caressed his lips. Jessica moaned and lifted toward his mouth. He licked the fabric, sucked it and her flesh beneath into his mouth, then rubbed it with his tongue.

“Yes,” she murmured. “God, yes.”

Her pleasure was so intoxicating, he suddenly couldn’t get enough.

Starved. Starved. Starved.

He didn’t think the word as much as felt it at his core as he took her. His mouth was too hard, hands too rough. Somewhere, distantly, he feared losing control again, hurting her again, but he couldn’t control the frenzy. His fingers wrapped into the fabric at the hip of her silky underwear and jerked.

The fabric ripped. Jessica gasped, and the combination of those sounds threw gasoline on a fire. He was insane with the need to feel her on his tongue. To hear her call his name. To own her.

He didn’t understand and pushed the thought away. Frustration joined need and lust and urgency and so many other turbulent emotions eddying to the surface.

When he covered her with his mouth, Jessica arched. She electrified him. Her taste fueled his passion. He explored every delicate fold, suckled the soft center flesh that made her writhe and repeat his name over and over. Then slid his arms underneath her and held her to his mouth until her pleasure peaked, stroking her with his tongue until her lunging ceased and her body

went limp.

He kissed her stomach, her ribs, explored her breasts with his mouth, finally reached her lips, and drowned in her kiss. She was liquid and wet and smooth and loose, and the way she moved her tongue in his mouth made his need to drive inside her too great to ignore.

He pushed up on his hands and looked down at the beauty beneath him. Her flushed face, heavy-lidded eyes, the smile curving her mouth, they all made his heart constrict, and his need to be inside her intensified.

He pressed his body between her legs and pushed the head of his heavy cock into her wetness, glistening in the dim light.

Blood surged through his veins, rushing into his cock, through his pelvis, his thighs, and his body took over. The muscles of his ass contracted, and he thrust forward, his cock deep, deep, deep until his entire length was buried in the most amazing encompassing sensation.

Jessica gasped. Arched. Dug her nails into his arms. And Q froze.

His body throbbed with excitement and lust, life and vitality. His heartbeat rushed in his ears.

“Jessie . . .?”

Jessica let out a breath, the sound a little shaky, and slowly bent her knees and flattened her feet on the bed. The shift tilted her pelvis and rubbed his cock. His breath hissed through his teeth.

“Christ.”

She loosened her grip on his arms and lifted her hips, pushing him deeper. His mind went complete whiteout.

“Oh, yeah...” she breathed.

He slid in easily, felt every ridge and indentation of her body wrapped around his cock. She lifted into him, pulled back. Repeated the motion. The forward thrust of his hips was as natural, as automatic as breathing. And when his hips synced with Jessica’s, a sound started in his chest, grew, coiled, and rumbled toward his throat.

His hands gripped the comforter on either side of her head. His eyes rolled back before the lids closed in pleasure so extreme, it racked a shudder through him.

Sensation washed over his body and emotion bloomed in its wake like a freshly watered field. He didn’t understand, couldn’t process, only knew that in this moment, he had never felt such perfection—of time, of space, of purpose, of existence. Without a doubt, he was right where he was meant to

be. He was home.

For the first time in his memory, something felt completely, utterly, pristinely *right*.

“This is...” *unbelievable* he was going to say, but didn’t have the lung capacity as he labored for air. He finally ended up choking out, “God, Jessie.”

Then he opened his eyes, and something he thought couldn’t get better became infinitely more erotic. Those fascinating breasts bounced with each powerful thrust. The muscles of Jessica’s tight abdomen played in the shadows when her hips rose and undulated to take him deep, and that sight of him entering her again and again and again...

“Jessie...”

His pathetic rasp must have said everything, because she said, “Let go, Quaid. I’m here. Let go.”

Q couldn’t believe how damn good it felt to hear those words—*I’m here*. How blessed it felt to have permission to let go and know he was safe.

And to let go, he needed more room, more leverage, more...just more.

He gripped her waist, slid toward the edge of the bed, and found his feet, then drew her to him, the sight of her shapely, smooth thighs parting to wrap his hips a delicious pleasure. This time when he entered her, he was careful. This time when she cried out, it was definitely in pleasure, not pain. And this time when he looked down on her as he let his body drive home, the electricity arcing through him sure as hell wasn’t guilt.

His climax came swift and sharp and lightning intense, cracking through his body so hard, his muscles jerked him into a rigid line. Only it didn’t recede just as fast. Jessica kept thrusting and rocking and his ecstasy continued to float. Instead of the climax draining his, Jessica pushed him back toward that peak of pleasure.

When she came, her body arched, stretching long muscles, curving already gorgeous lines, and her face, God, her face—even hidden among the shadows—it was the single most beautiful thing Q had ever seen. The only thing that had ever given him hope. As her body squeezed his, he realized she still did that for him. She gave him hope.

When she relaxed and her moans had turned to sighs, Q eased her to the bed. He lay down beside her, wrapped an arm over her waist, and dragged her toward the top until he could slide a pillow under her head.

She was slow to move. Slow to open her eyes. Limp and breathing hard. It made a foreign and frightening emotion expand in Q’s chest.

Jessica rolled onto her side, away from him. His chest pinched for a millisecond. Then she reached back, curved her arm around his head, and pulled him down for a kiss. A slow, hot, sensual, tongue-tangling kiss. Already on his side, now as hard as he'd been five minutes before, he pushed against the curve of her back, riding the shallow vertical indentation rising from her buttocks and fading into her spine. She pulled in a little gasp, sucking air from his mouth.

"Why are you still hard?" she asked, lashes lifting enough for Q to see the confusion in her warm eyes.

The seriousness of her question made him curious about all those little nuances of sex he didn't remember, didn't understand. Things he didn't want to talk about now, because his hips were nagging at him to move, and his rigid cock was rubbing against her silky soft, sweat-dampened skin.

"Because..." He drew out the word. "You're a sexual goddess?"

She smiled. "Quaid."

"Because..." He kissed her cheek, her jaw and whispered in her ear. "You're like nothing I've ever known. Or even imagined. I'm ready to do it again. And hopefully again. And hopefully again after that. I mean, you know, if you want to."

She did that little breath-catching thing that threatened to pull a smile out of him. "How is that possible?"

"Whatever they did to my head at the Castle messed with me," he said softly at her ear. "Because for about the first year I was there, I couldn't get hard at all. Then I started dreaming about you, and I was hard all the time, dreaming or not. After more experiments, I stopped getting erections. All the normal times a guy gets hard—thinking about sex, fantasizing, in the morning—I got nothing. Except when I dreamt of you. Whenever I dreamt of you. But about a year ago, I stopped dreaming of you, and the erections went away again."

"Jesus," she breathed.

"So, I know that I stay like this for, I don't know, three or four...you know."

"Orgasms?" she supplied.

He flattened his hand on her belly and smoothed it in a circle over her perfect skin, then let it glide lower and straight between her legs. With another scrape of inward air, Jessica's fingers wrapped around his wrist, but didn't pull him back. Her lids went heavy, and her top teeth came down on

her bottom lip.

Q explored the crisp but silky tiny strip of hair over the swollen, secret folds that looked so much like flower petals in real life. Glistening petals. The thought threw fire on his smoldering excitement.

“I think so. Let me bring you another one and you can let me know.” He closed his teeth over the skin between her neck and shoulder. With his fingers sliding warm and slick along her opening, he pushed them inside just as he rocked his hips into her.

“Oh, God,” she moaned.

“Jessie.” He sighed against her neck. “How long does this last? How does anyone get anything done?”

A soft bubble of laughter shook her chest. She reached behind her, gripped his butt, and rolled to her stomach, pulling him with her. “They just fulfill the need until it’s sated.” On her stomach, she wiggled until her thighs were outside Q’s. “Then they get back to work.”

She reached up, grabbed the top metal bar of the plain steel headboard, and pulled herself toward the head of the bed. Her body was sleek and strong, and just looking at her rolled Q’s temperature up the scale. Q’s hips dropped between her legs, his cock rubbing her ass. Pleasure, sharp and sudden, stole his breath and broke his thoughts.

“And when the urge strikes again,” she said softly, “they generally make time, you know, to take a break from whatever they’re doing and fill the need.”

She looked over her shoulder and into his eyes as she lifted her hips until the warm, wet place he wanted rubbed along his cock.

Then she gave him that smile, the naughty one that promised delicious things, and said, “I’m feeling needy.”

30

Trent to Q. Come in, Q.”

Q tuned in to Trent’s communication. “Here.”

Trent’s heavy whoosh of breath filled Q’s head. “Shit, man, when you coming back?”

The uncharacteristic emotion in Trent’s voice put Q on alert. “What do you mean?”

“You’re scaring the shit out of me. If you jump ship, you’d better not leave me stranded, dude. You wouldn’t do that to me, right? We’ve been through too much together, right?”

A growing unease made Q feel physically restricted, like when Gorin restrained him.

“If I can’t meet Abernathy with these guys and these weapons,” Trent said, “I’m SOL. Schaeffer will abandon me here.”

“Schaeffer?” Q’s skin prickled. His muscles tensed. Electrical shocks ripped over his skin. His head exploded in pain as if Gorin were stabbing him with thousands of ice picks.

Q lunged upright, eyes wide, arms out in defense. And found himself alone.

In a room. A cement room. Dawn hinted outside the single window. This was not his cell.

He looked down. Naked. Sheets half torn from the bed. He scanned the room. Pillows scattered on the floor. Comforter bunched at the foot of the bed. Not only was this not his cell, this was not like any cell they kept him in at any outside testing facility.

He rolled off the bed and landed on his feet, then immediately reached for a wall to steady himself. His muscles ached. His ass and thighs felt as if he'd done a thousand squats. His arms, shoulders, abs...shit, what the fuck had they done to him this time?

With his hand on the cold cement, he looked down at his body, searching for injuries. He ran his other hand over a few red marks on the side of his lower abdomen. A deep, voracious sexual hunger erupted from nowhere, its force making him suck in a sharp breath.

His mind flashed to thick copper hair threaded through his fingers. Her mouth moving over him. Lips and teeth closing over bite-sized areas of his flesh. The same thrill that had speared through him then, cut through him again. His cock jerked and hardened. The sight brought a rush of thoughts so vivid, his breath caught. He looked back at the bed. Swallowed.

Stupid. Just another dream.

Only, she'd never touched him in those dreams.

He looked at the door—solid metal. Looked at the knob—simple. At the dead bolt—absent.

No barred window. No keypad. No locks...at all.

Still looking at the doorknob, he touched his erection, throbbing with an unfamiliar discomfort. He winced. He was raw, and in that instant, he knew—he was raw from being rubbed and ridden and then revived to succumb to some new sweet, sensual, erotic pleasure Jessica had to show him. Which always resulted in the rubbing and riding and reviving. Again. And again. And again.

He pushed off the wall, twisting toward the bed.

Gone. She was gone. *Why* was she gone?

He tried to keep the panic down. Tried to remember something that would ease the pain-laden fear squeezing his chest. Instead, his mind filled with Gorin. With all the times he'd discovered something Q loved—a favorite author, a new hobby, a developing interest—let him get hooked and then yanked it away, held it out there as incentive to do what Gorin wanted.

“Fuck, no.” *Not Jessie. Please, not Jessie.* His head spun. He reached for the door and yanked at the knob. It opened so unexpectedly, Q fell back a few steps, then bolted out of the room.

Two steps into the hall, he came up against a hard body.

“Hey, hey, relax.” Cash. He recognized the voice immediately. Knew where he was, why, remembered everything from the past five years of his

life, but—again—no more.

“Jessica.” Q fisted Cash’s T-shirt with both hands. “Jessica’s—”

“Fine. Jessica is fine.” Cash’s smooth, serious tone stopped Q’s mind from tilting. He looked down at Q, pushed him backward, and shoved a handful of fabric into Q’s arms. “Get some clothes on, man. You’re not alone in your cell anymore. Then come out. I’ve got breakfast ready.”

Cash left and closed the door behind him. Q turned toward the bed and picked up a T-shirt from the pile. He ran his hand over the fabric and breathed in relief at the soft brushed texture.

Q finished dressing and went to the kitchen, where he was hit with a barrage of delicious scents that made his stomach rumble. Cash looked up from washing dishes and lifted his chin toward the covered pans on the stove.

“There’s eggs, bacon, potatoes, pancakes, hell, just about anything you could want,” Cash said. “But go heavy on the eggs. You need protein for cell repair and brain function.”

Q didn’t answer right away. He’d spotted Jessica through the sliding glass doors, where she sat in a chair outside, feet curled up under her, pen to her lips, gaze distant toward the forest as if her mind were far away. She had her long hair in a loose braid that she’d pulled forward and over her shoulder. She was bundled in a hooded sweatshirt, sweatpants, and socks.

God, she looked sweet and warm and so young, the way she had on the video the night before, which made his memories of last night seem that much more like nothing but another of Q’s fantasies. Only the sting of the scratches on his skin told him this particular fantasy had become a reality.

“Leave her be for a minute, Q,” Cash said. “Your body needs food.”

“My body needs her.”

31

A piece of plastic broke off in Jessica's mouth. She turned away from the colorful view of trees and pulled the pen from between her teeth. Sputtering, she spit out the casing chip. She was going to break her teeth if she didn't stop.

She turned her attention to the computer in her lap again. The internet service on the property was painfully slow.

She waited for another video file from the stash of evidence she'd collected on Schaeffer over the years to download, but instead of watching the hourglass rotate on the screen, her eyes darted to the time in the bottom corner. Every minute that passed was one minute closer to facing Quaid, and the thought made her stomach do that nervous fold and flop.

She'd tried to do her yoga when she couldn't sleep, but her body was so sore, it had been more an exercise in torture than relaxation. Sure, Quaid was bound to have urgent needs after going so long without, and she hadn't experienced true pleasure since he'd died. So it stood to reason their lovemaking would be intense, when they finally reunited.

But the raw, lusty, blood-boiling sex that had resulted? That she hadn't expected. Excitement and need speared her body without warning, and Jessica closed her eyes to savor it.

She had to admit, after last night, she was beginning to believe he was right about his past self. Jessica had called him Quaid, and he'd looked like Quaid, but last night, she hadn't shared her bed with the husband she'd known as Quaid.

Sex with Quaid had always been great. Fun, satisfying, fulfilling. He'd

been creative, adventurous, loving, considerate, passionate—everything every woman wanted from a lover. Jessica couldn't have imagined wanting anything more or anything different. He'd been perfect, which was only one reason she'd had such a hard time moving on. Sex with other men had been so unappealing, she'd had to do it high, and even then, she'd endured more than she'd enjoyed. But the sex had become part of her drug pattern, and the drug pattern revolved around the goal of forgetting, blocking the pain and filling the void.

All those extracurricular activities ended the day she entered rehab, over a year ago, which also happened to be when Quaid's dreams of her stopped. But Jessica knew they hadn't been dreams. Quaid hadn't said as much, but she guessed he knew as well. Yet, he'd still wanted her.

But that brought up a lot of fears. She wondered if he also knew about her drug abuse. If he even understood what that was and whether he'd want to be with someone with that baggage. She worried that while he was willing to accept his memories of the other men now, how long would that last? Would there come a time when her behavior created insecurity in their relationship?

This new Quaid was unpredictable, in good ways as well as not so good. The man in her bed last night... Jessica blew out a breath. She still felt a little overwhelmed. Q was deep. He was raw and open like a wound. His anger and fear and regret were part of his character, buried deep beneath his skin as if they were part of his genetic makeup. All that emotion came out in his sexual expression and, holy hell, had he expressed himself.

The sex had been passionate, bordering on obsessive. Hard, edgy, dark, serious. Hot. God, just thinking about it made her wet. She squeezed her thighs together against the need that had been growing since the moment he'd last pulled out of her.

But he'd been right about who he was. Even if he regained his memory, or part of his memory, as Teague had suggested, he'd never be the Quaid Jessica lost. One part of her was painfully hollow with the realization, but another zinged with the wild electricity this new Quaid brought to her life.

“Jessie?”

Her breath caught at the sound of his voice. Apprehension tightened her muscles. She turned toward him. He stood in the doorway, wearing a chocolate acid-washed tee and tan cargo shorts, and she went liquid. His body looked as delicious in clothes as it looked naked. His frame filled out the style. His muscle stretched the fabric so it flowed and pulled just right. He

was unshaven, his eyes dark and worried and vulnerable.

“Hey.” She smiled, genuinely glad to see him, while still not quite over her loss. “I was hoping you could get some sleep.”

He stepped outside and closed the door behind him. He was barefoot again, his steps soft against the sandstone patio. He stopped next to her chair, and she found herself anticipating his touch, but he dropped into a crouch, arms crossed over his knees and those deep, warm eyes burrowing into her with the kind of intimate intensity that made Jessica feel completely—dangerously—exposed.

“What’s wrong? Why weren’t you in bed with me when I woke up?” he asked, his voice the rough murmur she knew so well from the night before, the one that had shivered through her as he’d driven her to orgasm after orgasm, wringing more pleasure from her body than she’d known existed.

“I was restless. Couldn’t sleep.” She lifted her fingers to his lips, a deep craving to taste them again rushing through her.

His eyes closed, long black lashes lying decadently against unshaven cheeks. His hand covered hers, guided her fingertips between his full, soft lips where he ran his tongue over them. A noise sounded in her throat. He pulled her fingers back, took her hand in both of his, holding her fingers gently, splaying them as if to inspect each tip.

“Well, damn.” His voice, low and soft and still a little sleepy, rumbled over her, teasing her nipples tight. “I’m going to have to work on tiring you out a little better.”

With those warm eyes locked on hers, he slowly licked the pad of each finger. The sight of his tongue against her flesh made her want so much more. She squeezed her thighs together, clenching the muscles between her legs to quell the building want.

“Because,” he lowered his voice and leaned close, “I slept better than I can ever remember.”

He tilted his head, took Jessica’s mouth with his, and licked into it, catching her tongue in a sexy, slow sweep. She immediately curled her hand around his and leaned into his strength, kissing him back as if she was starved for it, as if they hadn’t just spent the last several hours having blistering, mind-altering sex. And, God help her, she wanted to spend the next several hours doing it again.

“Now that is what I like to see.”

Jessica startled at the male voice and broke their kiss. Ty and Alyssa

walked toward them from the direction of the supply room. They were both grinning—Ty’s smile a mixture of relief and excitement. Alyssa’s a gentler blend of happiness and hope.

“Did Alsadani talk?” Jessica asked.

Quaid released Jessica’s hand and stood, crossing his arms.

“Nope,” Ty said. “Didn’t think he would, but it was worth a try. I took a video of him so we can e-mail whoever he belongs to. Alyssa, the humanitarian that she is, checked his wounds.”

“How is he?” Jessica asked.

She shrugged, and her gentle smile transitioned into a matter-of-fact doctor mask. “Rough. Really rough. But I think he’ll be able to heal. Mostly.”

The reminder of Quaid’s volatility sent a chill through Jessica’s belly. She looked at Ty. “Any word from General Waterbury?”

“He just texted me, asked me to call. I was coming to round up the posse for a conference call. Come inside?”

She nodded and reached up to close her laptop.

“What the...?” Quaid said. “Who is that?”

Jessica followed Quaid’s gaze to her laptop screen and stared at the still image of the video with the arrow in the center ready to be played. The hair on her neck prickled. “Senator Gil Schaeffer. Do you recognize him?”

“Schaeffer.” Quaid’s gaze went distant for a moment, then he blinked. “Yeah. He came to the off-site testing facilities to talk to Gorin once in a while.”

Jessica’s heart thumped hard and picked up speed.

“Max Gorin?” Ty asked.

Quaid’s gaze jumped to Ty’s. “I only knew him as Gorin. Never knew if that was his first or last name, but that Schaeffer guy never acted like anyone important. I mean, he never had security with him, not like that bitch from DoD, always had to have a fucking armed detail around her.”

For Jessica, hearing Quaid say their names, knowing they knew he was alive all this time, yet had hidden him, shot a strike of fury through her. If she’d gotten him back sooner, maybe...

She shook the thought from her head. Too late for maybes, but the rage still burned.

“Dargan?” Ty asked.

“That’s what Cash said. I got all my information through Cash. No one

was ever introduced to me. I wasn't a person, I was a thing. An instrument. A test rat."

"So, you saw this man"—Jessica pointed to Schaeffer in the video's still frame—"and this man"—she pointed to Gorin—"together in the last five years at one of the sites where they took you to, um, test—"

"Experiment." His gaze came back to hers with a hard, almost glassy quality. "They experimented on me. I've been living with it for years. There's no point in softening the words. And the answer is yes. I've seen them together in the last three months. Why? Is that significant?"

Jessica stared at the image of Schaeffer and Gorin shaking hands. They were both much younger, both wearing suits, only Gorin wore a white lab coat as well.

She darted a look at Ty to find him already looking at her, his green eyes alight with excitement.

"Very." She redirected her attention to Quaid. "Schaeffer and Gorin own a company together called Millennium Manufacturing. Millennium is a contractor for the Department of Defense. They bid on manufacturing projects for the military. Because Schaeffer has a seat in the Senate as well as on the Armed Forces Committee, his ownership of a company that handles military contracts is seen as a potential conflict of interest. As a condition of his positions, Schaeffer has to keep his assets with Millennium in trust for the term of his candidacy. Part of that agreement states that he can't have any dealings with the company—at all. Which means meetings with his business partner while a senator and a member of the Armed Forces Committee—"

"Can get him canned from both," Ty said, vengeful glee in his voice. "Without the power of his positions and contacts within the government agencies, Gil Schaeffer is nothing. He becomes a nonissue."

"It may be difficult to prove he visited the sites," Quaid said. "I don't know how you'd get access to their security tapes or logs."

"Play the video." Ty lifted his chin toward the screen. "Maybe there's more on it."

Jessica hit the arrow, and they watched the video play. Within the first ten seconds, she remembered what it was from—an attempt to raise public opinion of the senator during an election year. She instantly recognized the significance for Quaid and the team—different from what she'd first thought. Her hope for the future shot skyward.

She stopped the video and grabbed Quaid's hand. Clutching the computer

to her chest, she looked at Ty and pulled Quaid toward the door. “We have to show this to the others.”

Jessica's mind twisted with all the implications of the video of Schaeffer as she stepped into the main bunker. "I have something."

They all looked up from their work where Mitch, Cash and Teague sat at one of the dining tables. Even Kat and Mateo stopped coloring to peer up at her.

Mitch took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." She smiled, her hope rallying for the first time since all this had started. "And it's really good."

They all came into the living area, where Cash sat next to Jessica, Teague wound his arms around Alyssa, and Mitch stood behind the sofa, sipping his orange juice. Kat and Mateo resumed their chatter and their coloring.

"This video is from before the warehouse explosion," Jessica explained.

She pointed out Schaeffer on the video and then Gorin.

"We can't use that," Mitch started. "Schaeffer wasn't—"

"I'm not finished, Mr. Mouthy." She gave him a warning look. "This video isn't about Schaeffer and Gorin associating *before* his term in Senate, it's about something else. But Quaid does recognize both of them from meetings they've had *recently* at off-site test facilities where he's been."

Mitch's eyes sharpened with interest and darted to Quaid, who was standing nearby, arms crossed. "Is there any way to prove that? Video surveillance we can steal? Witnesses we can blackmail? Log books? Anything?"

"Every site has tight security," Quaid said. "Good luck getting into it."

"Luck has nothing to do with it," Mitch said. "I'll talk to you about that in

a minute. Tell us about the video, Jess.”

“This is from Schaeffer’s campaign during his bid for Senate just before the warehouse explosion. He participated in a short-lived campaign while he was still with the DoD designed to increase his ratings by dolling up the use of taxes in defense-related research. This was one of the news interview spots. Just watch.”

Jessica started the clip and knelt on the floor to give everyone a good view. A pristine lab filled the screen, complete with test tubes bubbling in the background and workers in white jackets scurrying past in the distance, intent on their work.

Schaeffer began the casual spot by introducing Gorin and discussed some totally bogus but politically acceptable and publicly supported form of research to keep their nation safe from enemy forces.

“That’s bullshit,” Mitch said. “They never even planned on putting that project into action.”

“They don’t plan on putting two-thirds of their projects into action,” Jessica said. “Most are just covers for black projects.”

Schaeffer called to someone off-camera, and another man stepped into view. Mid-fifties, gray hair, flat, dark eyes, placid smile.

Alyssa gasped. “Rostov.”

“Who’s Rostov?” Quaid asked.

“The scientist Keira shot at the raid in Nevada.” She looked at Quaid and added, “Her special response unit was dispatched after she’d discovered Mateo was being held at this place that looked like a religious compound, but which turned out to be a big testing center run by Rostov. It’s complicated. I’ll explain it all later.”

“You’re right, Jess,” Mitch said. “This is interesting.”

Schaeffer introduced Rostov and spoke of more false projects. Then he called another person into the camera’s view. A woman—young, wearing a white coat, and so stunningly beautiful, she dominated the screen.

“And this is our youngest new addition to the scientific team—”

Crash.

Jessica jumped at the sound of breaking glass. Kat and Mateo startled and ran to Alyssa. Teague and Cash were off the sofa, and Ty at the door with his weapon drawn, all before Jessica had gotten to her feet.

Mitch was the only one who hadn’t moved. His hands still curved in front of him as if he held the glass, but it had long since shattered on the cement

floor and he'd lost eighty percent of his color. His eyes were wide, mouth slack. He tilted forward and gripped the sofa with both hands.

"Mitch?" Alyssa extricated herself from the sofa and stood beside her brother, a hand on his arm. "Mitch."

When he didn't respond, she followed his gaze to the computer. Jessica did the same. Cash picked up a broom from the kitchen and worked on the glass shards.

"Dr. Dubrovsky," Schaefer was saying, "is a brilliant rising star in information systems security and will be creating an impenetrable barrier to our most valuable data."

"Oh my God," Alyssa said. "Is that...? I mean, she looks just like..." She turned wide, confused eyes back to her brother. "But Halina's last name wasn't Dubrovsky, was it?"

Mitch's shock twisted into confusion and anger. "No, and she didn't work for DoD. I would have known. I've had the name of every employee since before I met her. And she was a biological scientist, not a computer wizard. What the fuck?"

"Kids in the room," Ty said out of the side of his mouth.

"Sorry." Mitch rubbed his face with both hands. When he looked back at the now-frozen image of the three scientists where the video had ended, his brow was pulled into a tight V and his bright eyes had darkened to a complex hazel. "You're right, Jess, that is good. I'm going to take a shower, and then we can make our call to Schaeffer."

Mitch walked out and Ty immediately turned to Alyssa. "What in the hell was that about?"

Alyssa's gaze returned to the last frame in the video, brow furrowed in distress. "The woman. She's Mitch's ex-girlfriend."

"That's no coincidence," Ty said, voice dark. "And his reaction to seeing her had to be the realization that she might be tied into this, because he beds three new women every week."

"She's the reason he seeks out all the others." Alyssa's gaze met Ty's, her normally bright expression troubled. "She was *The One*. I never understood why he couldn't get past their breakup, then I met Teague."

"Oh." Jessica's soft sound of pain echoed in the silence. She hadn't meant to verbalize her empathy, but she felt for Mitch. Knew exactly how that lifestyle could look so fun and carefree on the outside, yet could be the loneliest, emptiest existence on the planet.

Quaid's big, warm arm slid around her shoulders and drew her to his side. A burst of confusing, complex tears sprang to her eyes. She burrowed close and looked up into his worried gaze. She'd lost her One. Now she had a second chance. She pulled his hand to her mouth and kissed his palm, soaking in the feel of his skin against her lips.

She refocused on the screen. "What I wanted to show everyone with the video was how Schaeffer linked himself to Rostov. It proves that Schaeffer and Gorin are linked directly to Rostov and that bullshit of a psychotic religious leader they tried to use to cover the incident in Nevada will be blown to hell. If this gets out, his campaign is dust. Not to mention those government contracts Millennium is after."

Ty nodded. "That's powerful, Jess."

"I'm just going to check on Mitch," Alyssa said. "I'll meet you in the supply room."

Quaid wrapped his other arm around Jessica and turned her into his chest, pulling her close. She was just about to close her eyes and sink into his support when Alyssa came to an abrupt stop, one hand on her belly, the other on the wall leading to the hallway toward the bathroom.

"Alyssa?" Jessica stiffened and pushed back from Quaid. "Teague... Alyssa—"

Teague turned and rushed toward his wife.

"I'm fine," she told everyone. "His son is just trying to give me kidney failure."

In the supply room, Ty called his boss. Q leaned against the wall, his arms around Jessica, creating a warm spot in the middle of his chest.

“Hey, kid,” his boss answered. “How do you find so much trouble?”

“I think it has a lot to do with my present company,” he chided. “We’re on speaker.”

“Your boy is Reginald Baker Alsadani, an American-born Libyan. Semper Fi for twelve years, MARSOC for eight of those.”

Ty turned his gaze on Alsadani, who was peering at the group through a swollen left eye.

“What’s MARSOC?” Jessica murmured to no one in particular.

“Marine Corps Special Operations Command,” Quaid answered. “Military special forces like Delta Force or SEALs.”

When she looked up at him in question, he gave a one-shouldered shrug. “I don’t know how I know half the shit in my brain.”

“He’s been out of the military for three years,” Waterbury said. “Dishonorable discharge, but I can’t see deep enough into the file to know why. The security clearance is too high.”

“So he’s an asset like we thought.”

“Nope, he washed out of that too.”

Ty frowned at Alsadani. “Dude, how did you wash out of black ops after eight years in MARSOC?”

He just got that angry stare.

“He’s got to be working rogue,” Waterbury said. “Unless, that is, one of you knows him personally and this is all moot.”

Ty's head came up. His gaze darted around the group, paused on Cash, on Q, then on Jessica. Cash and Jessica shook their heads. Ty's gaze darted back to Q.

All the strange visions Q had had of the mysterious Trent and the Middle Eastern desert flooded his mind. The idea that he'd brought Alsadani to the team had him releasing Jessica. He stepped over to Alsadani, bent, and gripped the man's face in one hand. Q studied his bruised features and thought back to what the man had looked like when Q had first spotted him scaling the ravine, but his memory was as blank as always.

Frustrated, angry with himself, with Gorin, with so many unnamed assholes he didn't even know, Q pushed Alsadani's face aside as he let go. He turned to Ty and shook his head. "He looks as familiar as all of you did yesterday."

"No one here knows him," Ty told Waterbury.

Q crossed his arms and paced, head down. A bad feeling stewed inside him.

"It sounds like he was hired by an individual," Waterbury said, "not a government institution. Even the CIA would veer away from this guy. Anyone who sanctioned a burned asset as a contractor on a legitimate op is looking to end up in the unemployment line. That's serious business to eighty percent of us who are going for pensions."

"Why would someone hire a burned asset when they could hire a legit one?" Jessica asked.

"Usually, for one of two reasons," Waterbury answered. "One, the job is too dirty for a legit contractor to take on, which would have to be pretty damn dark, something along the lines of shooting up a kindergarten class, or two, the job has to be kept absolutely confidential. Burned assets are at the end of their rope. If they talk, they'll end up on the wrong side of the dirt, so a burned asset offers a higher likelihood of them staying quiet."

"So, sir," Ty said, "if I told you that Reggie was hired by the DoD—"

"The *DoD*?" Waterbury said before Ty had even finished his sentence. "I'd tell you not to fly my damn plane again until you'd had a full psych eval. My insurance doesn't cover stupidity."

This information got under Q's skin. Had he been used as one of these burned assets? Had he killed people like Alsadani had been prepared to do?

Q needed air. He turned out the supply room door and walked and walked and walked. He found himself on the edge of a sharp drop-off and stopped to

look out over the hills, rolling in gorgeous shades of reds, golds, oranges—something he couldn't appreciate in the midst of this turmoil.

He knew Jessica was behind him. He'd heard her footsteps shortly after he'd left the bunker.

"Hey." Her soft voice floated over him, and he closed his eyes to absorb the sound. "I'll leave you alone if you need time. I just want to make sure you're okay."

"If it turns out I brought this on, that all of you have suffered because of me, that all of you are in danger because of me..." He shook his head. "No, I wouldn't be okay."

"We're all in this together, Quaid. The rest of the team is in just as much trouble for breaking into that lab and rescuing Cash. Whoever's after us is after us all because of who we are and what we know.

"This isn't because of you. At least not *just* you. Dargan has wanted us dead for years. The fact that we now have you, that we stole you from them, is just Schaeffer terrified of us learning even more than we know now. If Schaeffer was gunning for one of us in this team, it would be me. I've been making waves for Schaeffer for years, collecting dirt on him."

Q turned. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that getting dirt on him has been my life's mission." A bitter anger crept into her voice. "Not only did he cover up what happened to us at the warehouse while he was still with DoD, but he dismissed your death as an accident to push the heat in another direction, while also insinuating your actions added to the safety hazards. It was a chickenshit move—blaming the dead, but he never bargained for who or what I became."

Q's chest coiled tighter with every word. "What you became?"

"A stalker," Jessica said, her gaze distant over the hills, her voice an angry rasp. "I've stalked him from the day I came to Washington. If we're at a function together, I take photos or videos of him, tracking who he talks to, and I make sure he knows I'm doing it. If I know he's going to be at another event, and I'm not working, I show up to mingle so I can get pictures. I may have been known to use associations with others to get me in where I wasn't invited or set up accidental meetings just to get a photograph. I've placed trackers on his cars. I've dropped bugs in his pockets or pinned them to his blazer lapels when he's left his jacket on a chair."

She grew more animated, more forceful, more passionate, and Q's stomach joined in the tension.

“He’s coming up for reelection in a few months, and I’m going to do my damnedest to make sure he rates so poorly in the polls, even the garbage collectors’ union won’t hire him.”

Q took a moment to find his voice. “Was it my fault? The fire?”

“The fire? No. Absolutely not. You did everything right. Which is another reason why it was so wrong for Schaeffer to cast doubt on your reputation. And, goddammit, no one—*no one*—disgraces someone I love that way. *Ever.*”

His lungs had grown tight. She had sacrificed so much, and all after she’d believed he was dead. Even after he’d been gone, she continued to fight for his name, for his reputation, for justice. She’d fought for his honor, which meant she really did love him the way she claimed.

He stepped forward and pulled her close. “How did I get so damn lucky with you?”

“I was always the lucky one.” She curled into him, her head fitting just under his chin. “They e-mailed the video of Reggie to Schaeffer. He’s probably wiggled out by now, which is why Mitch wants to call him. We should get back.”

He released her, but instead of stepping away, she wrapped both arms around his neck, pushed up and kissed him. God, she had a beautiful mouth. One that could ease his worries and make him forget all the immediate problems.

Which meant he should have been happy as they headed back to the bunker for the all-important phone call to Schaeffer, but when she took his hand and they walked through the trees, he held on tighter than he had to, tighter than he should. And instead of relaxing into the life-affirming buzz radiating through his body or relishing more happiness than he’d ever hoped to find, Q scanned the terrain for danger, more fearful now that he had so much more to lose.

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Q opened the supply room door for Jessica, but before he followed, he made another sweep of the area, scanning as far as the trees allowed. No movement, no odd colors, no unusual landscape. He'd been listening closely during their walk and hadn't heard any indication of human movement. The guards at the edges of the property were out of range. Still...

"Quaid?" Jessica's voice brought his attention back, and he closed and locked the door behind him.

Mitch was back, in fresh clothes, hair still wet from the shower, but it didn't look like his frame of mind had improved. His eyes and cheeks now appeared hollowed, his coloring still too pale, giving him an overall drawn quality. His jaw jumped with stress, his mouth pulled tight as he stared down at his phone and paced in a short line.

"Sure you don't want to talk?" Ty asked Alsadani. "This is your last chance. Then it'll be all about what we say you told us. You'll be toast, man."

The prisoner just stared from beneath that horrid bulbous purple eye.

Alyssa bent beside him, her fingers at his wrist. "He should be cuffed in a different way. He's losing a pulse in this wrist and his hand is swelling."

"So what?" The words were out of Q's mouth even while another part of him knew he should have held them back. "He was going to kill us. Every one of us. He would have killed Kat and Mateo too. Wouldn't have given it a second thought."

Everyone looked at each other. Except Mitch. He just scrolled on his phone and said, "I'm with you, Q."

Strange to have someone here call him Q. While he still thought of

himself as Q, he wasn't sure he liked anyone else thinking of him that way now.

When he looked deep inside himself, Q wondered if he knew how this Alsadani thought because he'd once been that kind of man. God, he hoped not. If he had been, Q hoped he never remembered.

"Quaid's right," Ty said.

"And Alyssa's right," Teague said, and then looked at Quaid. "You and I both know how much it hurts to have our hands cuffed behind us that long."

He ground his teeth. "Fine. But I'll move him."

Across the room, Mitch pulled a Glock 19 from a holster on his hip, dug the keys from his pocket, and tossed them to Teague. "If he breaks and I shoot one of you taking him out—not my fault. Just sayin'. I'm really in the mood to shoot someone. Creek, why don't you stand real close to him?"

Teague jingled the keys in his palm and crossed to Alyssa. "You're so lucky I was head over heels for you before I met that fucker."

A grin edged up her mouth. "Teague."

A heated smile lit Teague's blue eyes. "I'll pay up tonight—personally."

"TMI, Creek," Mitch muttered.

Teague handed the keys to Q, wrapped an arm around Alyssa's shoulders, and walked her back across the room.

Q moved behind the prisoner and bent to insert the key into the lock. At the guy's ear, he said, "I'm doing you a favor, here. If you cause any trouble, if you hurt anyone in this room..."—he lowered his voice to a scraping whisper—"I'll break your neck with my bare hands."

And, son of a bitch, he meant it. Deep down, he knew he'd do it. Couldn't imagine how, but was one hundred and ten percent positive he'd know how when it came time.

"Are we clear?"

Alsadani nodded once.

Q held the man's arm and clicked the lock open. He felt the guy start to push out of the cuff before the key had made a full turn. The next three seconds shifted into slow motion—the guy pushing out of the chair, twisting toward Q with his now-free arm arching up. Mitch lifted his weapon, but Q swiveled behind the man, swung a forearm around his neck, slapped his other hand to the opposite side of his head, slammed him back into the chair—

"No! Quaid, *stop!*"

Quaid froze an instant before pulling the man's head around and snapping

his vertebra, Jessica's voice echoing in his head. Mitch held the barrel of his Glock an inch from Alsadani's brain. Q could let go now. The guy wasn't going to do anything with a gun in his face. But he couldn't. Something inside urged him to kill.

To *kill*.

His breath came fast. Sweat ran down his face. His entire body shook with unshed adrenaline.

"Quaid," Jessica pleaded at his back, terror and tears in her voice. "Please, don't. Quaid, pl—please don't. This isn't you. *This isn't you*. This is who they created in a *lab*."

The torment in her voice made him weak. There was no room for weakness here. No room for error. No room for miscalculations. No room for...*others*....

"Quaid." Jessica's voice was closer now. She was an *other*. An other he wanted to make room for. "To make *us* work, you have to stop. If you want *me*, you have to let go of *him*."

Q dropped the man. Just let go and watched Alsadani drop to the floor. If Jessica hadn't come up behind him and wrapped him in her arms, he might have—no, he *would have*—kicked the man to death.

Mitch kept the gun trained on Alsadani's chest while Ty dragged the prisoner along the floor until he reached a metal bedframe, cemented into the wall, where he secured the man's hands to one post. "That's the second time we've pulled him off you, fucking moron. Next time, nobody's going to get in his way."

Q turned out of Jessica's hold and stalked to the opposite end of the supply room, unable to get rid of his violent thoughts, unable to stem the fear of what he might have done to others already.

Then Jessica was there, holding him, running her hands over his shoulders, calling him back.

"It's over. Everything's okay. I'm here." She pulled at a hand covering his face. "Quaid, look at me. You made the right choice. You proved you're stronger than their programming. You can beat this. We can beat this together."

"Why?" He rubbed his face one last time and dropped his hands. "Haven't I caused you enough pain? Why would you even want to try?"

He looked away, ashamed he couldn't be something more, something better. But she took his face in both hands and turned it until he was looking

into her eyes.

“Because I believe in you.” She said it with such sincerity, such conviction. “I believe in you the way you’ve always believed in me.”

Q shook his head in disbelief, humbled by her inner strength, and pulled her into a fierce hug.

“Making the call,” Mitch said from across the space.

“We’re listening,” Jessica said, still holding Q close.

Mitch dialed and put the phone on speaker. He cleared his throat, took a deep breath, and straightened his spine.

Q braced himself for the worst. Jessica slipped her hand into his and squeezed. How foreign and fabulous it was to have someone stand by him in a stressful moment. A group of someones standing by him. Cash was right—everything he’d ever wanted, ever dreamed of having in his life was right here.

“Schaeffer,” the man snarled into the receiver on the other end of the line.

His voice was deep and gravelly, sounding far older than his reported sixty-two years. Q picked up the unmistakable wheeze of air battling in and out of damaged lungs even across the phone line. Q instantly connected the voice and the wheeze to his face. When that clicked, he could also recall every time he’d seen Schaeffer and at which facilities. He leaned down and whispered to Jessica, “I need paper and pen.”

She read the urgency in his eyes and immediately set out on a search, returning to him with heavy packaging torn from a bag of rice and a pencil Ty had been using to sketch surveillance routes for the guards.

“Senator,” Mitch said, tone even, matter-of-fact, void of emotion. “Mitch Foster. I hope this is a good time to resolve our mutual issue. With the election only a few months away, I’d like to get this straightened out as soon as possible. I know how distractions during a campaign can damage a candidate.”

Q jotted down the nicknames and general locations of the facilities where he’d seen Schaeffer, adding the type of security available at each. He wrote “*Schaeffer met with Gorin at these locations*” at the top of the paper and handed it to Mitch.

“And I know how problems with the bar,” Schaeffer said, voice now cool but clearly threatening, “can damage a lawyer’s career.”

“Better men—and women—have tried. Let’s just skip the threats and get right to the deal. We propose a live-and-let-live scenario.” Mitch sounded

easy, cool, and unaffected, like he was ready for an afternoon stroll through the gorgeous woods outside, despite the haunted look on his face. “We’ll leave your assassin’s confession off the airwaves, and you leave us the hell alone.”

“I don’t have time for games. We have nothing to talk about.”

“Reggie would disagree.” Mitch waited a beat. Silence filled the line and his mouth lifted at one corner. “Reginald Baker Alsadani is quite talkative with the right incentive. He’s already told us all about his time with MARSOC. How you’ve got Owen Young running this little side black op now that Jocelyn is out of the picture. Strange to consider there are legit and non-legit sides of black ops. Your world fascinates me.”

“You can say anything you want, Foster, but no one’s going to believe a terrorist.”

“Is that how you’re going to spin this, Gil? Really?” Mitch asked with condescending humor in his voice. “You can see how this is going to go, can’t you? You slander us, but with no evidence, the issue falls away, and I file a few more lawsuits against the government and you personally. You did hear how successful those were for Creek and my sister, didn’t you?”

“Then,” he continued without pausing, “we slander you, and with the shitload of evidence we’ve collected, you’ve got big problems. As a gesture of early discovery, let me give you just a sample of the type of evidence we’ve collected against you.

“Campaign funding fraud, misuse of federal funds for personal uses including recreational drugs, political bribes, vacations, and prostitutes. These photos will be sensational in the press, don’t you think? We also have documents exposing kickbacks you’ve received from weapons, drug, and chemical manufacturers for votes in the Senate. Videos reminding the public of your very close link to Rostov—boy, wouldn’t that look bad just weeks after the inferno that killed women and children?”

Mitch tsked as he studied the notes Q had scribbled.

“Well”—Schaeffer let out a heavy sigh—“that would all be problematic—if I was dead set on running for Senate again, but as much as I’d like to serve another term, it’s not my grandest goal in life, Foster. Unlike you, I have more than one reason for living. Besides, I could argue that exposing a homegrown terrorist cell will win me a lot of votes. Having to fight for my reputation when said terrorists create fraudulent accusations against me will only make me a more sympathetic victim. You know how the American

people love to root for an underdog.”

Every muscle in Q’s body coiled and twisted. He couldn’t see that they had more leverage than Schaeffer. Couldn’t see how they would pull this off.

“Hmm.” Mitch’s hum sounded completely unconcerned. He was frowning at Q’s notes. “What about Millennium Manufacturing?”

A beat of silence extended. Then Schaeffer’s low, angry, “What about it?”

“Do you care about your business? Your multibillion-dollar business raking in the green from government military contracts? Because Quaid can put you at several testing sites meeting with Gorin over the past few years. Years while you were in the Senate. Years while you served on the Armed Forces Committee. Sites located all over the US—California, Nevada, Idaho, Arizona, Utah, Texas, Tennessee, Florida—”

“By the time we get through discrediting Q as a lunatic, no one’s going to believe—”

“It’s Quaid, Gil, not Q. *Quaid Legend*. He’s a person. A man. Who had a w—” For the first time, Mitch faltered. His gaze flicked up and held on Q with unmistakable apprehension.

Something tightened uncomfortably in Q’s stomach. Whatever his misstep, it was obvious Mitch didn’t make them often, because he sucked at covering. His gaze shifted to Jessica, the message in them clear apology before he started pacing again. “Who had friends and dreams and purpose. Remember his name, Gil. *Quaid Legend*. I promise it will haunt you to your grave.”

Q pulled on Jessica’s arm and whispered, ““Who had a...what? What was he going to say?”

Jessica shrugged without looking at him.

Anger and fear burned in his throat. He gripped her arm harder. “Jessica, I told you no more secrets.”

She covered his hand with hers and looked into his eyes. “We have years of memories to revisit. It takes time. We’re not keeping anything from you.”

“And you didn’t let me finish, Gil.” Mitch’s even, overly patient tone had to be killing Schaeffer, because it was irritating the hell out of Q. “We can corroborate Quaid’s statements with security camera footage we’ve already collected from the sites.”

Ty held his arms out to the sides, palms up, with his face crunched in a what-the-fuck expression. Mitch returned a shrug, then made the motion of

wings with his hands.

“What does that mean?” Q whispered to Jessica.

“He’s winging it,” she whispered back. “Making it up.”

“Talking to the partner of your military manufacturing company when you’re consulting to the country’s highest military committee and having said company come out with just the right solution to the military’s latest problem, putting millions in that company’s pocket?” Mitch said. “Biiiiig no-no, Gil. You won’t just get your hand slapped. You won’t just lose your Senate position or your seat on the AFC. Millennium will be torn apart by a government investigation so deep and so long, neither you nor your business will ever recover.

“Let me just take the next step here—for the sake of time—and assume your next statement will be that your business doesn’t mean as much to you as taking down a homegrown terrorist cell, the amazing patriot that you are—hoo...yah...”

Mitch voiced the military sentiment in a bored, flat, mocking tone. “Let me ask you about your freedom, Gil. Because when those investigators uncover the connection between your seat on the AFC and the developments of Millennium followed by the multi-million-dollar military contracts? Well, Gil, even the government can add one plus one. Even senators go to jail. But you know that, don’t you? A few of your friends are currently behind bars.

“If you need reminders of just how many politicians have been imprisoned, I could recite names, offenses, and jail terms. I can even give you a where-are-they-now update of how far they’ve fallen since, just for a little added color. But, no ...”

Mitch paused, shook his head, and lowered his voice. “That wouldn’t even begin to compare to your punishment given the scope of your crimes. We haven’t even touched on the whole illegal imprisonment of two upstanding, law-abiding American citizens. Or the heinous experimental testing on one said prisoner.

“When I get done with you, Schaeffer, you will look like a rabid hyena. I will have the American people lighting your mansion up with Molotov cocktails and dragging you out to a hangman’s noose.”

Mitch paused and took a breath. “Now, back to my original reason for calling—our live-and-let-live offer. Bet it sounds more appealing now. I’ll even do you one better. I’ll return your assassin, safe and, well, relatively sound. Where can we drop Reggie off for you?”

Silence. Mitch crossed his arms. Stared at the phone. Waited.

“Well,” Schaeffer drew out the word, heavy with resignation.

A spark of hope ignited in Q’s chest. He squeezed Jessica’s hand. Imagined lots of time, no deadlines, no pressure. Just time to get to know Jessica. To learn everything he’d forgotten all over again. Nothing had ever sounded so amazingly blissful.

“Don’t you worry about doing anything with Reggie, Foster.” The icy edge in Schaeffer’s voice cut into Q’s fantasies. “I can take care of him from here.”

Mitch frowned at the phone and opened his mouth to speak, but Reggie jerked upright, the cuffs clanging against the metal bed frame.

All attention turned to the prisoner, whose eyes were unnaturally wide and filled with panic. His mouth hung open, but no sound emerged.

Alsadani tried to pull his hands to his throat, but the cuffs jerked against the restraint.

Alyssa immediately stood and started toward him. Teague grabbed her back, and they argued.

“What in the fuck?” Ty said.

Ty and Cash rushed toward him, but Alsadani went into jagged convulsions, and they stopped short. The man’s body arched into a bow, dropped back on the floor, and thrashed.

Cash grabbed Alsadani’s arms. “Get me something to hold his tongue down. It’s blocking his air.”

Ty searched the storage shelves. Teague approached the foot of the bed and tried to grab the man’s legs.

Q watched the activity in confusion. “What are they doing?”

“He’s seizing,” Jessica said, her hand so tight on his, it stung. “They’re going to clear his airway.”

Alsadani jerked loose of Cash’s grip and kicked, barely missing Ty’s head.

“Fuck.” Cash pressed the man’s head against the cement floor. “He’s strong.”

Teague sat on Alsadani’s legs and Ty came back with a wooden mixing spoon. “It’s all I could find.”

Cash grabbed the spoon and Ty gripped the man’s jaw and pried it open from the outside with pressure at the hinges.

“Why are they helping him?” Q asked, angry and confused.

“What?” Jessica’s gaze jumped to his. “He’ll hurt himself if we just let him seize. He could die.”

“Let him die.” Q stalked toward the bed. “Don’t save the bastard. He’d kill us all given the chance. Get off him. *Just let him die.*”

“Take it easy,” Cash said.

“Move back.” Jessica took his arm, her voice stern. “Let them work.”

Ty finally pried Reggie’s mouth open wide enough to insert the spoon’s handle, but Cash pulled back with a soft “Holy shit. *Ty, Teague, let go. Get back.*”

Cash had barely finished the order when Alsadani coughed. Ty turned his face and raised his arm just before blood sprayed from the man’s mouth.

“Fuck.” Teague rolled off the man’s legs and yanked at Cash’s arm, pulling him back.

Alsadani continued to buck and jerk and cough blood. It splattered his clothes, the floor the wall. With one last spasm, he went limp, eyes open and blank, blood still spilling from his mouth.

Jessica turned her back and put her hand over her mouth. Q didn’t console her. This was exactly what the fucker deserved. Q had seen the carnage this kind of killer left behind.

He dragged his mind back from that fork in the road. It would lead him nowhere. He’d followed too many detours to expect this one to lead him to any information. They always dead-ended in frustration.

By the time Ty laid his fingers on Alsadani’s neck, blood was leaking from the man’s nose and ears. Ty pulled his hand away and shook his head at Mitch.

Jessica made a sound in her throat, and Q found she’d glanced over her shoulder. Now, she turned into Q, wrapped her arms around his waist, and pressed her face to his chest.

Q’s entire focus changed. He enclosed her in his arms, held her tight, and stroked her hair. The anger inside him ebbed, and he found it difficult to hold on to his hate when he was filled with so much love.

“Quiet down,” Mitch said. “I have Schaeffer on mute. He doesn’t need to know how rattled we are.” Mitch took a few deep breaths, clawed a hand through his hair, then cleared his throat and pressed a button on his phone. “I knew you were a sick fuck, Schaeffer. The prison psychologists will enjoy picking your brain apart.”

“All our subjects are injected with a high-tech material when they come

to us,” Schaeffer said. “It allows for remote control of those we send into the field. Reggie had obviously become a liability.”

An ice-cold fist slammed into the center of Q’s chest. His gaze darted to Cash’s at the same time Cash’s met his. Cash wore the same look of shock Q felt on his own face. Q’s breath wheezed out of his lungs. Terror tightened every muscle.

“I was really hoping to avoid this since we have so much invested in Q and Cash,” Schaeffer said, “but I can see you’ll make it a fight to the bitter end.”

“Now hold on, Schaeffer—” Mitch started.

Something popped inside Q. Multiple snaps of pain burst all along his ribs and deep in his belly, knives stabbing his guts. He grunted and doubled over. Jessica reached for him.

“Quaid?” Her voice rose in panic. “Quaid!”

He couldn’t breathe. Something hot leaked through his insides and seared like acid. Her face swam in his vision. His legs weakened, and he stumbled backward and hit the cement wall.

“Shit, Cash!”

Q heard Ty’s voice, but his vision had gone dark.

“Teague,” Jessica called, and the man was there in an instant, his hands patting Q down like a cop.

“Where do you hurt most?” he asked.

“St—st—” He couldn’t draw air. His throat was on fire.

“Stomach?” Teague asked.

Q managed a nod, and Teague’s hands moved there. Q’s legs went out, and he slumped to the cement. Heat swallowed him. He couldn’t tell if it was coming from Teague or if it was the burn in his stomach, but within seconds, the sear eased, and Q drew a deep breath into his lungs.

As his vision returned, his first sight was Cash curled into a ball on the floor.

Q pushed Teague’s hands away. “Cash. Help Cash.”

Teague swiveled and moved to Cash.

“I’ve set these at a slower release rate,” Schaeffer said. “That will give you time to consider a change of heart. If you do, I can administer a neutralizer for the compound now slowly killing them.”

“You motherfucking —” Q started.

“Q,” Schaeffer said, “if you bring me the formula Cash created at the

Castle within twenty-four hours, I'll give both you and Cash the neutralizer. If not, well, American troops will be the ones who suffer, and I'll have two less witnesses to worry about, won't I?"

"Schaeffer—" Mitch started.

"Oh, and Foster," Schaeffer said, "don't think about holding back on that information, because if I discover you did, I'll simply reactivate the compound and let the men die—just like Reggie. Only slower. Much slower."

35

Jessica sat on the edge of a chair in a bedroom in the main bunker, hands between her knees, heart in her throat. Quaid paced as they waited for Alyssa.

“Baby,” Jessica tried again. “You should sit down. You need to conserve your energy.” She also hated the thought of him aiding the spread of whatever Schaeffer had released into his body, but she didn’t think he needed to hear those stark words right now.

Quaid stopped and put a hand against the wall, the other against his forehead, wiping at the sweat. He was running a fever. He was pale. He occasionally suffered tremors. But he was faring far better than Cash, which the team attributed to Quaid’s advanced healing abilities.

He seemed to be in another world. She couldn’t blame him. Hell, she swore she’d been caught in some bizarre low-budget sci-fi film, and she wasn’t the one injected with a lethal material who had an unknown amount of time left to live.

“Sorry.” Alyssa swept into the room and closed the door behind her. “I had to fight Mitch for a legal pad.” She took a chair beside Jessica. “Why does everyone think he’s charming? On what planet?”

Jessica huffed a laugh at the unexpected humor.

Alyssa looked at Quaid, who stood with his hand against the wall, his back toward them. “Are you sure you’re feeling up to this?”

He didn’t answer right away. He swiped at his forehead again and wiped his palm on his jeans, then pushed off the wall and turned. His eyes clouded over. He thrust one hand out in front of him and swayed. Jessica jumped up and crossed the room before he fell off balance.

He leaned on her without arguing. “Let’s do this before I can’t.”

She eased him onto the bed and sat on the edge. Because Quaid had his forearm flung over his eyes, Alyssa divided her attention between him and Jessica as she outlined the hypnosis process.

“You’ll be in control of yourself at all times. I will never be able to direct you or force you to do anything.”

He peeked out from beneath his arm with a look that said: *And elephants fly.*

Alyssa sighed. “This is a very sensitive process. Many clients prefer not to have anyone in the room with—”

“No.” Quaid grabbed Jessica’s forearm, and she startled. Their eyes met, and she knew he saw it—her fear. Hurt flashed, then sadness. “I want her with me,” he said softly. “Stay? Please?”

Her heart twisted with warmth. Damn it, this roller coaster was making her nauseous. She looked at Alyssa, who shrugged. Jessica covered Quaid’s hand with hers and squeezed. “Of course, I’ll stay.”

Alyssa led Quaid through a relaxation process first, then deeper into a hypnotic state. The grip of his hand had become so light, his breathing so even and deep, Jessica was sure he’d fallen asleep.

“Q.” Alyssa’s voice was smooth and soft. Utterly tranquil. Her switch to calling Quaid “Q” threw Jessica for a second, but it made sense to use the only name he’d known at the time he was remembering. “Go back to the last time you saw Gorin. Take your time. Nod when you’re there.”

A moment passed while Jessica just studied Quaid’s handsome face. How could she have ever thought this man wasn’t her husband? Amazing what the mind could do to block pain. Maybe, in time, after all this was over and the threat was gone, his mind would shift as hers had. Maybe, in time, he’d remember.

Something hitched in her chest. A sense of loss, which was stupid. Of course she wanted him to remember all they’d had. All they’d been. How deeply they’d loved each other. But she didn’t want to lose what they’d newly discovered—a deeper, truer connection. A unique bond transcending time and memory.

His head bobbed slowly, almost imperceptibly.

“Okay, good,” Alyssa said in that smooth tone. “Can you tell me where you are?”

“Lab.” His voice was languid, as if he were sleep-talking. “At the Castle.”

“And what does he have you do there?”

Quaid licked his lips. “Mmm, guard straps me into the chair. Gorin shoots me up. I...Then I don’t know.”

“Gorin shoots you up with what?” Alyssa asked.

“Don’t know. Makes me pass out.”

Jessica closed her eyes on deep pain, trying like hell not to imagine Quaid’s life like that day in and day out for five long years.

“Can you rest in that place for a moment, Q,” Alyssa asked, “where you pass out? Then let yourself wake there. Remember, you’re safe. You can come out at any time. You are not strapped to that chair now.”

Jessica raised her head and opened wet eyes.

Quaid nodded.

“When you’re ready, tell me what you see.”

Quaid’s hand immediately tightened on Jessica’s. His breathing quickened. Jessica frowned at Alyssa, who put up a hand and mouthed *he’s okay*.

“Q.” Alyssa’s voice slid into the space like an easy ocean wave. “Where are you? What do you see?”

“Shh.” Quaid tensed and pushed the sound through his teeth in a sharp, demanding rasp. He held up the hand not holding Jessica’s. His face tightened in disapproval. “If you blow our cover, I’ll blow your head off.”

His continued expression of violence set Jessica on edge and clouded her hopes for his recovery.

“No one can hear me but you, Q,” Alyssa insisted. “You’re in no danger. I need to know where you are and what you’re doing.”

“This is a classified mission. No one—”

“I have clearance.” Alyssa’s voice strengthened while remaining nonthreatening. “From the highest level of the Pentagon and General George Ascott. He wants details on the op’s progress and he wants them now.”

Jessica looked at Alyssa and mouthed *who?* Alyssa shrugged. Jessica covered her eyes.

Quaid’s grip eased, and he muttered, “Fucking brass.” Then in a raspy rush, he said, “We’ve located the weapons factory and detained the Pakistanis running it. They have information on the raw material suppliers and technical designers, but they’re not talking. We’re waiting to rendezvous with General Abernathy to turn over the weapons and prisoners.”

Alyssa and Jessica stared at Quaid, absorbing the implications.

“Copy?” Quaid almost barked in a whisper.

“Yes,” Alyssa said, startled. “I mean, copy.” She stared down at her legal pad, which had nothing on it, then asked, still in a whisper, “Q, are you performing this operation remotely?”

“How in the hell would we do that?” The bite behind his words said that was the stupidest question he’d heard in months.

“So, you’re at the site. You’re in Pakistan. On the ground. Physically.”

A hesitation. “With all due respect, ma’am, you don’t sound smart enough to be reporting to the Pentagon.”

“Forgive me,” she said dryly. “I’m new to this assignment. How did you get to Pakistan, Q?”

“The troops were already here. My partner and I teleported.”

Alyssa’s mouth opened and her eyes went wide at the same moment as Jessica’s did. When Alyssa looked at Jessica, Jessica mouthed *oh my God*. She pulled the pad from Alyssa, grabbed the pencil, and started writing, all without ever letting go of Quaid’s hand. She handed the pad back to Alyssa with her chest so tight, it was hard to breathe.

“Who’s your partner?” Alyssa asked.

“Trent Dare.”

Alyssa shot another look at Jessica. She shook her head and shrugged.

“Who is Trent Dare, Q?”

“I just told you, *my partner*. I’ve got shit to do. Are we done here?”

Alyssa’s head tilted and a funny little smile turned her mouth. “No. Check the attitude. I’ll tell you when we’re done.”

Quaid sighed and wiped his hand down his face.

Alyssa read Jessica’s note, then asked Quaid, “I just want to clarify, Q, are you sure you’re physically there? Not just there in mind?”

“I’m here in both.”

“But remote viewing is done from a distance.”

“I only view remotely while collecting intel.” His tone indicated he was losing patience. “I have to travel to the site to execute the op. Why isn’t Gorin answering these questions?”

Alyssa made an oh-shit face. “Gorin has...developed the flu. He’s been puking for two days and isn’t well enough to talk to us.”

“Stupid motherfucker,” Quaid muttered. “So obsessed, he never sleeps. Knew it would catch up with him someday.”

Jessica’s stomach was so tight, the muscles ached. This horrible intimate

glimpse into Quaid's life as Q turned her inside out.

"This information is very important to your superiors, Q," Alyssa said. "What you do is very special, very unusual. They won't understand unless it's all explained and there is a, um, Covert Affairs Committee meeting later today where they're discussing your operations. Can you explain how you travel?"

"I swear to God," he rasped, voice still low as if he were hiding, "if you people stopped holding *committee meetings* and got off your asses, important things could happen. Explain to them that consciousness is the basis of all being. Matter is all possibility, allowing us to choose our own reality. I choose—in my reality—to travel as electrons do, by moving to parallel orbits without passing through interpreting space. Everything in the universe is simply a matter of choice."

"What in the fuck?" Jessica whispered.

Alyssa's head turned sharply toward her, a finger to shushing lips. She grabbed the pad from Jessica and scribbled: *quantum physics*.

Jessica remembered the same headache-inducing phrase coming from Cash and rubbed her temple.

"Where else have you traveled for these ops, Q?" Alyssa asked.

He hesitated. "The Pentagon should have all this information."

"Q," Alyssa said, growing stern again, "this is information you will remember when you wake up. This is information you need to bring back with you. To do that, you must recall it all now and have it fresh in your mind. Do you understand?"

Another hesitation. Then, "I understand."

"Think back. Start with the operation you're on now. Tell me all the information you have, then move backward in time, to the operation before that and so on."

36

Quaid had never been so exhausted. His muscles felt like jelly, his bones like rubber as he leaned on Jessica on his way to their room. He felt like he was melting in the desert sun.

Jessica eased him to the edge of the bed, then down the rest of the way to rest his head on the pillow. He sank into the softness beneath him with more gratitude, more relief than he could ever remember. His eyelids felt as if they were made of concrete, and as much as he wanted to look at Jessica every moment he had left, he couldn't keep them open any longer.

He couldn't die. Not because he was afraid of death, not because he didn't want to die, but because he couldn't leave Jessica again. He knew if he died now, it would break her.

Jessica sat beside him, stroking his head over and over. Her touch brought him heaven, and he relaxed into the mattress and absorbed the tingling comfort.

"You've been through so much," she whispered, her voice tight with emotion. "I'm so sorry I wasn't there for you. I'm so sorry I didn't know."

She started to get to her feet. Quaid caught her hand in his grasp, but she didn't startle. Maybe because now she knew he'd been trained to move fast. Now they both knew. Knew why he spoke so many languages—so he could manipulate people in many different countries. Knew why he hadn't known about his gift—because they'd drugged him while utilizing it.

"Don't leave me," he murmured.

She leaned down and pressed her forehead to his. "Didn't I already tell you I wouldn't?"

Yes, she had. Why didn't he believe her? Because there were still secrets between them. Between him and the group. There were things they weren't telling him. The same way Gorin kept secrets.

Maybe the secrets Jessica and the group held weren't harmful to Q, but that wasn't the point. He needed honesty, and he couldn't get it. If he couldn't trust the people who said they loved him most, whom could he trust? Himself. Alone.

But he didn't want to be alone anymore. He wanted Jessica with him every moment of every day. He wanted to be part of this bigger team. He wanted to uncover his past, develop a purpose, move forward.

And he couldn't imagine that future without complete honesty in it. "Jessie—"

"I'm going to check on Cash," she said. "I'll be right back."

He was too exhausted to argue. He closed his eyes. "Tell him to stop screwing around." His words slurred. "Not going to get any more attention this way. I'll kick his ass if he doesn't get better."

Jessica laughed, a soft, sweet sound.

Before he released her hand, Quaid brought it to his mouth, uncurled her fingers, and kissed her palm, drifting into sleep even as he did. "Thank you."

"For what?"

For loving me. But the words didn't pass his lips before he floated into that place between consciousness and sleep.

Scenes from the forgotten half of the last five years stirred his mind—dark nights in sweltering jungles raiding guerilla paramilitary camps for intel and equipment. Long, filthy days scouting the streets of Vietnam for informants. Dark Greek nights lit up by flash fire and filled with tear gas during riots.

So many scenes played out in little clips pieced together to create a movie of shadows, deceit, espionage. Secrets, lies, and mysteries all leading toward violence, injury, and death. Had he directly caused death? The twist in the pit of his stomach hinted that he had.

He saw blood. Heard gunshots. Screams. Pain clawed at him from the inside, like an animal trying to get out.

Q lunged upright and gasped for air. His gaze darted around the room, assessing, preparing, but it was empty. The room was quiet. Voices drifted in from the living area. A surge of nausea caught him by surprise, and he clenched his teeth and closed his eyes, willing it away. When it passed, he

fell back on his elbows, turned, and reached for the orange juice Jessica had left beside the bed and took a few slow sips.

Then he sank back into the bed, breathing hard, sweating, utterly depleted. He tuned in to the conversation in the living room through the partially open door.

“Teague’s healing powers get sucked dry after only a minute or two working on Cash,” Alyssa said. “He’s not doing well at all.”

Worry speared Q’s chest, but he didn’t have the strength to move, to speak.

“Has someone called Keira?” Jessica asked.

“He asked us not to,” Alyssa said. “He asked us to wait.”

“Quaid’s healing abilities are obviously fighting whatever this is,” Jessica said, “but not well.”

“If Quaid could repair himself after shattering every bone in his body, he can beat this.” Ty was obviously wound tight again. The man definitely had anger control issues, though Q wasn’t one to talk.

The room remained silent a moment, and Q fought the drag of sleep.

“Look, it’s clear we can’t wait to go after the neutralizer,” Jessica said, pulling Quaid back. “We’re not giving up Quaid or Cash, and Cash doesn’t have the formula finished. So Schaeffer’s not going to give the neutralizer to us.

“I know everything about that fucker, right down to when he brushes his teeth. I have an in with his hairstylist, his new chauffeur, one of his housekeepers. We socialize in all the same circles. I can get close to him. No one else here can.”

“What are you saying?” Ty demanded more than asked.

“Thank you, Ty,” Q muttered, resting his forearm over his eyes.

“I’m saying that I’m our best bet to get to Schaeffer and get that neutralizer.” Jessica’s voice had that determined tone that said they were in for a fight if they disagreed. “Ty, you need to fly me to Washington. I’ll be ready to go in fifteen minutes.”

Q’s eyes opened and stared up at the gray ceiling. She couldn’t be serious.

“I’m not flying you to Washington just to get your butt arrested. Or killed,” Ty said.

“I owe you, brother,” Q murmured.

“Contrary to popular belief,” Jessica said, “you guys aren’t the only ones

who can handle a gun. Schaeffer won't be calling the police with a couple of his fingers shot off. If I have to spend a few years in jail to save Quaid and Cash, I'll do it."

"No, no, no..." Q tried to roll off the bed. He put his arm into it and managed to get to a sitting position. He picked up the orange juice and took another big swallow. He needed the sugar rush.

"There's got to be a better way, Jess," Mitch said. "You know a lot of powerful people in Washington. Don't you have an ally you can pull into your corner given all this evidence? Someone Schaeffer can't manipulate? His involvement is incredibly clear. Every op Quaid cited corresponds to a technical development within Millennium Manufacturing in the following six months, which then led to a military contract for Millennium within the six months after that."

"Write it up. Line it out with all the details," she said. "If Schaeffer won't give up the neutralizer, I'll... Dammit, I'll take all the information to the secretary of defense."

Q's brain froze, shocked at the bold sureness in her statement—as if there would be no problem getting in front of such a powerful man. Which made a trickle of unease slide through his chest, one he instinctively didn't want to look into.

"Will Dutch?" Mitch asked, surprise clear in his tone. "You know Will Dutch?"

"Yes. He'll listen to what I have to say. He'll look over the documents if I ask him to. He's smart. He'll see the connections, and he's not one of Schaeffer's biggest fans."

Q let his mind drift. He barely had the energy to remain sitting upright. He definitely didn't have the energy to make it go where it didn't want to go.

Jessica came in, nothing but a whisper of movement. Her simple presence eased his stress and lifted his energy.

She knelt in front of him, hands on his knees, worried eyes searching his. Good God, she was beautiful. She took his breath. Made him ache.

"Jessie..."

She scanned his body. "Is your fever up again? You took your shirt off."

He didn't remember taking it off, and he couldn't seem to formulate an answer, so he just shook his head.

"Why are you sitting up?" Frown lines crinkled her smooth brow. "Are you okay? Do you need something?"

“You.” His eyes slid closed. “All I need is you.”

“Well, you’re in luck. I’m all yours. Lie down.”

Grateful for the permission, he dropped back on the bed. Jessica wrung a cloth in the cold water by his bed and wiped down his face, his neck, chest, and arms. It helped. Gave him a zing of energy.

“Don’t go to Washington,” he said, forcing his eyes to hers. “Wait until I get better. I’ll go with you.”

Her gaze dropped away. “We don’t have time for that. Cash isn’t doing as well as you are. He may not even have twenty-four hours.”

Quaid slid his hands up her arms and pulled her toward him. She came easily, willingly, and a rush of sweet gratitude filled him. He rolled to his side, taking her with him. He kissed her lips, gently, sweetly, and combed his fingers through her hair.

She kissed him back, and that already-familiar deep bond they’d developed so quickly wrapped them in intimacy. And relief. And comfort. And joy.

His hand slipped under her top to caress the soft skin of her back, and he slid his thigh between hers.

Jessica hummed in pleasure, wrapped her arms around him, and held him tight. “You have to get better, Quaid. I can’t live without you. Not again.”

“Shh.” His mouth drifted to her cheek, her jaw, her neck. “We’ll be okay.”

He rolled her to her back, slid down her body, lifted her shirt, and pressed his mouth to her belly.

She caressed his head and shoulders as he kissed his way up her belly, pushed her cami over her breasts, and groaned when he found them bare beneath.

He pushed up on his elbows and looked down on her, staring at her breasts. This was the first time he’d gotten a good look at her body, and his hands caressed and shaped as his eyes watched. “So beautiful.”

He lowered his mouth to hers, losing himself in the feel of her body, the softness and warmth of her skin, the sounds she made, the way she moved beneath him.

“Quaid,” she murmured. “We’ll have to finish this later. I have to go.”

What if she left and he never saw her again? He couldn’t wait. Couldn’t put off making love to her one more time. He pulled his mouth from her breast, pushed to his knees, and brought his hands to the button of her shorts.

His eyes wandered up her body as he flipped the button open and eased down the zipper.

He froze.

“Quaid?”

He didn’t answer. His gaze was caught on a scar. A linear scar beneath her left breast. He sat back on his heels and reached up, letting his fingers slide over the light flesh. Images flickered in his head. Extremely unpleasant images—Jessica and a man on a sofa in some big house. The images and sounds at this stage of his dreams or visions or whatever they’d been had always started out hazy, blurry, watery, distorted, sometimes so much so, he couldn’t actually see or hear in detail what was happening. He hadn’t seen—or experienced—her with another man in a long time. The memory slammed into him like a truck.

She touched his face. “Quaid.”

Quaid took her hand, but didn’t look away from the scar. “What’s...” He swallowed, the memory coming back to him even as he asked the question. “Where’d you get this?”

She didn’t even look at the scar, but pulled his hand away from it. “I don’t remember. Where were we?”

Secrets, lies and mysteries.

And memories. They came pouring in.

Q pulled his hands from Jessica's as he remembered the night she'd gotten that scar, the last night he'd seen her in his dreams.

Jessica had already been high when her flirtatious "*What's a good-looking secretary of defense like you doing at a party like this?*" had started a conversation with Will Dutch, one that had continued throughout the night.

She'd looked utterly mouthwatering in an elegant deep-emerald dress. He'd visualized the night fairly clearly up until the last hour. Until after Jessica had made her last trip into the room of the house designated for drug use. After that, everything had gone blurry.

The home where the party had been held was luxurious beyond Q's imagination. All the men dressed in tuxedos, the women in full-length gowns that sparkled and shimmered. But no one had been as beautiful as Jessica.

Q had watched the attraction grow between Dutch and Jessica, the building flirtation and Jessica's increasing but clandestine ingestion of cocaine and alcohol. Dutch hadn't taken part in the drugs, but he'd made his share of trips to the open bar and simply looked the other way when Jessica used.

When they'd escaped to a private room in the house to have sex—something Q had anticipated with pleasure at the time, something that made him want to kill the man now—Q had to admit, the man had been good to Jessica, at least in comparison to the others.

But the drugs had taken their toll, and afterward, when Jessica stood, she passed out and hit a table on the way to the floor. The sight of her torn dress and the vivid red blood on the carpet was bright and fresh in Q's mind, as if

he'd dreamt it last night, not over a year ago.

"Quaid?"

Her voice pulled him out of the memory. Pain lingered in his chest, but he leaned down and kissed her belly button. "I heard you talking about the secretary of defense," he said, rubbing his lips across her soft, soft skin. "How do you know him?"

"Just work," she whispered, sitting up and kissing him.

Pain stabbed his heart. He pushed away, turned, and sat on the edge of the bed, head in his hands. He couldn't think. His brain was so full. So confused.

She laid a hand on his back, and he stood, needing distance.

He paced to the wall, then turned. She sat in the middle of the bed, tank top pulled back into place. "I told you, in the very beginning, I needed honesty. I *told* you."

Her face paled, and those brown eyes seemed to grow huge in the absence of color. She swallowed and nodded. "I... I got it... I fell and hit a table. Needed stitches."

He took one big step forward, hands clenched. "God *dammit*, Jessica."

She flinched and shrank from him. The gesture added insult to injury, and he turned away again, rubbing his face with both hands. God, he was so tired. His legs felt like they would collapse under him.

"I was there that night," he said, disillusioned by her continued need to keep secrets from him. "I know how you got the scar. I know how you know Will Dutch."

"Quaid." Her voice vibrated with tears and panic. He turned back and found her holding her locket, rubbing it like she expected a genie to pop out, though he didn't know what the hell a genie was. "Quaid, listen to me. If I could go back and live my life over, I'd do it all differently. If I'd known you were alive, if there had been even a remote chance that you were alive... I've never wanted anyone but you. I was crushed. I was trying to find a way to survive. It was the wrong way, and I've suffered for it, but I thought you were *dead*."

He knew that. He understood all that. He could see that she'd obviously suffered. She didn't have to explain to him about pain and hopelessness, about doing what you had to do to find a way to survive. Yes, the memory of seeing her with other men hurt, but her lies, her secrets, hurt far more. And by the way she clung to that locket, he sensed there was another lurking nearby.

He closed the distance, and when she dropped the locket, Q grabbed it.

One solid pull and the chain snapped.

“Oh my God, no.” She lunged for the necklace. Quaid turned his back to her and opened it. She pulled at his arms, stood on the bed and grabbed for it over his shoulders. “Quaid, let me explain....”

He fumbled with the small piece in his big fingers. Fending Jessica off didn’t help. Finally, he caught the latch with his fingernail and pulled the locket open.

A gold band lay inside.

Quaid blinked and stared. He flashed hot, then cold. His hands started to shake, then his body. Jessica pleaded with him, but it dimmed in the rush of blood in his head. He took the ring and dropped the necklace. It bounced against the cement, but the sound never reached Q’s ears.

He held it up to the light, and the gold band gleamed. It was simple, elegant, and polished, but marred with a heavy diagonal nick across one side. Inside the band, lettering caught his eye. QUAID, ALL MY LOVE, FOREVER. Jessica. And a date. Six years earlier.

Jessica clung to him, face pressed to his spine, crying. Quaid held the ring at the end of his left ring finger—he didn’t know why that finger, but that’s where his hand drifted.

Breathing fast and shallow, chest tight, he slid the ring on. The gold band passed over his knuckle in a tight fit, then lay loose around his finger above. He stared at it on his hand.

Absolutely surreal. He was stunned at the way a simple gold band transformed his whole identity from a separate, lone man to the important half of something beautiful. Something vital. Something he should have been told. *Immediately.*

“We’re *married?*” He turned on her. “We were *married*, and you didn’t tell me?”

The door to the bedroom pushed open and Ty, Teague, and Alyssa came in, eyes wide with worry.

“What’s going on?” Ty asked.

“We were *married* and none of you bothered to tell me?”

All eyes darted to Jessica, who held her face in her hands, then back to Q without a word.

“I told everyone not to tell you.” Alyssa pushed to the front, her expression worried, but stern. “What you want and what you need are sometimes very different things, Quaid. As I told Jessica, pushing that

information on you before you were ready could have sent you into shutdown. Your brain could have completely turned off and you could have been in a catatonic state for an indeterminable amount of time.”

Fury and betrayal lit him on fire. He thought of Schaeffer, of Gorin, of all they’d taken from him for their own greedy purposes.

“Goddamned fucking scientists,” Q growled, visualizing Gorin. “You all think you have the right to control other people’s reality.”

“Just stop there, Quaid.” Teague stepped up next to his wife. “That’s—”

Alyssa put a hand on his arm. “It’s okay.”

Now that Q had a choice—he chose his own reality.

And he teleported straight to Gorin.

“Quaid, don’t do that...” The nervous tone in Alyssa’s voice brought Jessica’s head up. “Quaid...”

Jessica focused through blurry eyes, sure her traumatized mind had failed. Quaid held his arm out in front of him, looking down at his open palm. The sight of his hand faded and reappeared.

He dropped his arm, closed his eyes, and, with a look of concentration, entirely faded from sight.

Jessica gasped. Alyssa swore. Everyone looked around as if Quaid would reappear somewhere in the room.

“Holy shit,” Ty breathed, raking a hand through his hair.

Jessica jumped off the bed. “Quaid!” Fury struck through her like lightning. Outside, the sky responded with a flash of light. A roll of thunder echoed right behind it. “Quaid, goddamn it, get back here. Don’t you dare fucking leave me again.”

Shaking with fear, with fury, with more emotions than she could name, Jessica clenched her hands and punched the air. “*Goddamn* you, Quaid. *Goddamn* you!” she screamed at nothing. “You fucking coward.”

Her insides caved. She curled in on herself and fell to the bed. No, she wasn’t perfect. Yes, she’d made mistakes. But that didn’t make her worthless. That didn’t make her expendable. He hadn’t been perfect either, and she’d stood by him. She’d mourned him for years. Now, she continued to stand by him even though he didn’t even *remember* her.

“That...fucker...” she stammered through sobs.

“Has he always been able to do that?” Mitch’s mildly annoyed voice

entered the fray. “‘Cause if he has, when I get my hands on that bastard, he’s gonna wish he’d done it a hell of a lot sooner.”

Jessica’s breath caught. Her mind spun. She stared at nothing.

“What happened?” Cash’s soft, rusty voice sounded in the doorway. “Where’s Q?”

Jessica scrambled to the corner of the room and rummaged in the pocket of the jeans she’d been wearing the day before. She pulled out Quaid’s coin and sat back on her heels, holding the coin out, searching for light to reflect off the surface, but it was dull and flat.

Everyone was talking, but she ignored them, rushing to the single window and tilting the coin toward the sunlight until it sparkled in her eyes. She took a shaky breath and blurred her vision. *Come on. Come on.* Shadows began to swish and sway inside the reflection, then take shape. A figure, a man, moved through monochromatic institutional hallways, throwing doors open.

“Need a doorway,” she whispered, turning the coin to catch the light. “Come on, give me a—”

The sun hit, bounced, and speared right into Jessica’s eyes. White light blinded her. She squeezed her eyes and lifted her hand. The light grew brighter, bigger, and showered her entire body with heat. *Fizzle-pop*, the sound of a bubbling soda grew in her ears. Jessica’s body grew light, her head dizzy. Then she was moving, falling. A rush of air and pressure prickled over her skin. Adrenaline sizzled so hard, her blood felt like froth in her veins.

Even knowing the process, panic rode high in her chest, choking her. The pressure made it hard to breathe. Then, as suddenly as it had grown turbulent, the air slowed. The pressure eased. The fizzing in her skin calmed.

She focused on the cool cement beneath her hand. She shaded her eyes and squinted into the light. The intensity faded to reveal that monochromatic institutional hallway where she’d seen Quaid, the cool surface beneath her hand linoleum, not cement.

She tuned in to her senses and found the space eerily quiet. Down the length of the hallway, doors stood open, some still swaying. Which meant she’d just missed Quaid.

Using the wall for support, Jessica pushed to her feet, tested her surroundings for stability and started down the hall, following the path of open doorways. She peered into rooms only to find nondescript offices and empty laboratories, as if the place had been deserted. There was no sign of

what institution this was or in what city, or state, or even what country. Hell, she could be in Bangladesh for all she knew.

A muffled *bang* sounded far off to her left. Then another—*bang*. Jessica started down that hallway at a jog.

Bang.

“Gorin!” Quaid’s distant, furious bellow knifed through her. “Where the fuck are you?”

Bang.

Then she heard another voice, and an immediate argument.

Jessica pushed into a run. Her bare feet had good traction on the smooth linoleum, and she sprinted down halls and around corners, moving toward the voices. Every hallway, every room, looked absolutely identical. If she ever had to find her way back to where she’d started, she’d be screwed. This was like a house of mirrors, minus the mirrors.

She turned another corner and found Quaid—a splash of color inside an otherwise white rectangle. He had one hand wrapped around a doorknob, yanking at it, the other flat and pounding against the door as he peered through the one-foot-square window at eye level.

“Open this door, asshole,” Quaid yelled. “If I have to teleport in there, I’ll be ten times as livid as I am now.”

Jessica stopped twenty feet from him, breathing hard. “Quaid.”

He jerked toward her, eyes wide. When he recognized her, his expression clouded with exhaustion. Sweat drenched his face, the neck and chest of his T-shirt. “Get out of here.” He peered through the window again and slapped the door hard. “Open. This. Door. Gorin.”

She dug her fingers into his arm and jerked him around to face her. “Newsflash, asshole, you’re not the Lone Ranger anymore.”

“The what?”

“You have an entire team of people wrapped up in this with you. More than a dozen who have risked their lives and futures to see you safe. So, guess what? You can be as pissed at me as you want. You can hate me. You can fucking divorce me if that’ll give you the vengeance you need.” She drove a finger into his chest. “But you don’t get to screw them too.”

“A team of people who lied to me.”

“For fuck’s sake, get the hell over it. You act like we tried to steal your DNA to create a serial killer. We wanted to keep you *safe*. We didn’t want you to jump off a psychotic cliff. Excuse us for *fucking caring*.”

In a sudden show of exhaustion, Quaid slumped against the door, holding himself up by the handle. “Have you always had a mouth like that?”

“Shut the hell up. You’re not one to talk.”

“Newsflash, girl,” he said. “You’re not persistent. You’re just fucking bossy.”

She crossed her arms and lifted her brows. “What are you going to do about it?”

Quaid’s eyes slid closed, and he let out a tired laugh. He actually *laughed*. His mouth turned in a real smile. A smile from the days when he used to be happy. Some of Jessica’s anger evaporated.

She went to him and put her arms around his waist. “You’re not in any condition to be doing this. You need to go back to the bunker.”

Quaid ran a hand down her arm. “No, Jessie. *You* need to go back to the bunker.”

He covered her hand, pried the coin away, and gave her one good push.

Jessica stumbled backward, fell on her ass, and slid on the linoleum. Light flashed in her eyes and her vision blurred. *Fizz-pop-sizzle* sounded in her ears. “Damn you, Quaid!”

Jessica kept a hand over her eyes as Teague's heat poured through her head, easing the pressure in her brain and soothing her stomach. She'd been back in Vermont at least twenty minutes, and precious time ticked away.

"Cash," she called without opening her eyes.

"I'm here." Cash's voice was weak and raspy.

"What Quaid does is different from what I do. He's really there, I'm not. He called it remote travel. What's the difference?"

"Hell if I know." Cash coughed, then pulled in a breath that made it sound like he was drowning.

Once Cash and Quaid had been poisoned, Alyssa had kept Mateo and Kat down at the end of the long hall of bedrooms with one of Brody's guys. Jessica was glad Mateo didn't have to see his dad so sick.

She opened her eyes and found Cash's face pale and covered with sweat. She pushed Teague's hands off her head. "Use your energy on him."

"It's wasted on him." Teague sat back and wrapped his arms around upturned knees. "Whatever is happening in his body is too strong for my power."

"What Quaid was talking about," Alyssa said, "was the theory of quantum physics. Or at least that's the theory he was giving for how he traveled."

Jessica wiped both her hands down her face and shook her head. "I don't care what it's called. I don't care how it works. I just want to know if one of you ridiculously intelligent people can teach me how to do it."

"I can..." Cash wheezed "...explain the concept...of quantum physics.

...”

Alyssa put a hand on Cash’s arm, and he stopped speaking.

“If I can get to Utah from DC without even trying,” Jessica said, “I must be able to do what Quaid does with a little training. He talked about traveling like an electron. What does that mean?”

“Like an—” Cash frowned. “What the hell?”

They all fell quiet, but Jessica’s mind was working, trying to fight the lingering pressure from her travels while forcing her brain to wind around this bizarre concept.

“Quantum physics,” Cash said, then dragged in a rough breath, “is about how we see our world. The theory says...we can view our world through materialism, where...everything we know is a solid object. Or through consciousness...where everything we know is a possibility.”

He paused, breathing as if he’d hiked an incline and had to catch his breath. “In quantum physics, it is believed we...can find a state of consciousness where we take the possibilities...from each of our bodies—spirit, emotion, and intuition—and convert them into actual events.”

When Cash didn’t go on, Jessica frowned. “I’m more confused than I was before.”

“Quantum physics would say”—he wheezed in air—“that’s because you’re conditioned to...see the world from a materialist view. But, according to quantum physics, the reality is...everything is simply a matter of choice, and we choose our own reality.”

Jessica was trying to keep her brain from sliding sideways. Quaid was a human being. If he could use this altered way of thinking to move his body through space, and she could move her spirit through space, she had to be able to make that leap in her thought process. She had to at least try.

“Ty,” Teague said, “how long to get the plane ready?”

“An hour drive to the plane. Twenty minutes to get her in the air. Another two and a half hours’ flight time. Another thirty minutes to deplane—”

“We don’t have that kind of time,” she said. “So, how does quantum physics say one gets to this place where one can choose one’s own reality?”

Mitch turned to Ty with one of those “can you believe this shit?” looks. “I’m thinking this would be a good time to rev up the plane.”

Ty, looking equally dumbstruck, nodded. “Best idea you’ve had since I met you. I’ll volunteer to take care of that.”

“On an altered level of consciousness,” Cash rasped, his eyes falling

closed, “we can’t reach consciousness from a regular state of being...which is where we are now.”

It clicked like a starburst in her brain. “Meditation.”

“That’s a staple of people who...practice quantum physics. They believe the ego holds such a tight rein on a person...the only way they can get past it...is through an altered state of consciousness—meditation, drugs, sleep, coma.”

The excitement in Jessica’s stomach turned to fire and burned. Quaid had dreamed of her with other men, but he hadn’t been dreaming. He’d traveled and— “Oh, *God*. That’s how Quaid reached me. Sleep.”

Cash opened his eyes. Their blue depths were exhausted and regretful. “I’m sorry, Jess.”

Loss overwhelmed her. It pushed emotions up her chest and created tears in her eyes, but she squeezed his hand and shook her head. “It just is. He’ll either accept it or he won’t, but he won’t have a choice if he’s dead. So how do I do this?”

“I’d only be guessing,” Cash said.

She heaved a breath and offered her own best guess. “Get into an altered state and then create my own reality?”

Cash coughed, then nodded. “That’s what I’d do.”

Jessica thought about where Quaid would go. If he’d gotten the neutralizer from the facility she’d just visited, he’d have been back already. So after Gorin, he’d have gone in search of Schaeffer.

“Where would Schaeffer be?” She looked at the clock, thought of the day, the date. “Oh!”

“What?” Alyssa asked.

“Schaeffer’s probably headed to the Speaker’s dinner.”

“The Speaker *of the House*?” Mitch asked.

“Yes. Marc Jester. He throws a huge fall bash every year. Only the *who*’s *who* are invited. Schaeffer was planning to attend, and I was planning to stalk him.”

“There’s going to be a shitload of security.” Mitch walked into the kitchen and pulled a beer from the refrigerator. “I swear, if that sonofabitch goes and gets himself taken again because he tries to walk right into that place—”

“He’s smarter than that,” Cash rasped.

“Good, because I’m not particularly in the mood to go pulling his ass out

of the next hellhole they throw him into.”

“Alyssa,” Jessica said. “Can you help me? I’m going to try meditation first, but if I can’t get deep enough with that, I might need you to try hypnotherapy. You’re going to have to teach me how to do it to myself because I have to make a stop before I go to the party.”

40

Q stared through the small glass square at Max Gorin. The man was crowded into a corner of a room barren but for a single metal bench, looking at Q as if he expected him to crash through the door and beat him to death.

“You *should* be scared, Gorin.”

Q slammed the door with his open palm again. Sweat plastered his shirt to his shoulders. His heart beat fast and hard. His head felt light.

“You created me, and if you don’t tell me where that neutralizer is, I swear I’ll find a way to get this door open or I’ll gather enough energy to transport in there, and I’ll show you just as much mercy as you’ve shown me over the years.”

“I told Schaeffer to leave you alone.” Gorin’s voice came through the door high and tight. “I’ve been fighting to keep him from hurting you. That’s why I’m in here. You should be grateful—”

Q hauled back and slammed the door with both hands. The metal rattled in its frame. “Grateful? I should be *grateful* that you stole my life? That you hurt the people I love? That you took everything that mattered away from me?”

Q looked up and down the hall. He needed something substantial to break the glass on this door, or something to work the hinges off.

“If you get me out—” Gorin’s thin voice turned his gaze back. “If you get me out, Q, I’ll help you find the neutralizer. I don’t want you to die. We’ve come so far. We’ve done so much work together.”

“It’s Quaid,” he said from behind clenched teeth, accepting Quaid’s identity, even though he didn’t have any idea what he was taking on. “My

name is *Quaid*. I'm a person, Gorin, not a letter or a number or a fucking science project. And you'll tell me where the neutralizer is or you'll die a slow, lonely death in this room. If you think Schaeffer's coming back for you, you're wrong."

"If I tell you where it is, you'll leave me here to die anyway."

"Oh, no. We have things to talk about. Lots of things to talk about. You're staying alive until you've told me everything you've done to me over the last five years, you sick motherfucker."

Quaid's anger grew to an explosive level. He almost swore he could tear off the door with his hands, but he slammed the metal again, and Gorin startled and cowered. "*Where. Is. It?*"

"Schaeffer has it."

"Where?"

"On him." Gorin slid his shoulder down the wall until he crouched in the corner. "It's on a key fob."

"A *what?*"

"A little gadget attached to his key ring." He turned his face to the door, eyes wide with fear. "You have to come back for me."

"Tell me what you released inside us, and your chances go way up."

"It wasn't me. I didn't know about it. I would never have let them put that in you." He grew belligerent. "Who knows how that altered my tests—"

"*What is it?*"

"A bioengineered protein. I didn't create it, so I don't know the properties, but they can make it work almost any way they want. All I know is that you need to get the neutralizer to stop the chemical reaction that's been started in your body before it's done too much damage."

"Can he rerelease it inside us, or is it a one-shot deal?"

Gorin went still. His brows fell and his head tipped. "Re—? Is that what he told you?" He shook his head. "No. I hate it when he misrepresents—"

"*Gorin,*" Quaid shouted and pounded on the door.

The man flinched and started babbling. "Once it's activated, it's activated. You either neutralize it or the subject dies. The neutralizer is simply another element that bonds with the protein to form a different substance normally found in your body. When that happens, the effects of the engineered protein stop. It will take a few days for your body to recover, that's all."

"When I get this fob, how do I release the neutralizer? Is there enough for

both me and Cash?”

“There are two buttons—red for releasing the protein, blue for releasing the neutralizer. There are two fobs, one for you and one for Cash.”

Quaid’s fingers curled into his palms. “You do realize that Schaeffer’s going to leave you in here to rot, right? That if you’re lying to me, I’ll die, and no one will come back here for you. You’ll starve to death. Ugly way to go.”

“I’m not lying.”

“You’d better not be, or you’d better hope I die if you are.” Quaid’s anger made him shaky as he thought of Cash. “I swear to God, Gorin, if Cash dies...”

No. He couldn’t think about that.

“Where is Schaeffer? Where is he? *Right. Now.*”

41

The sound of water in Quaid's ears grew louder and the adrenaline fizzed through his bloodstream faster.

He was light. Powerful. Free. Invincible.

He materialized, the scene coming into view as he took shape on the plane he'd held in his mind as his purpose. Even before he'd fully transferred into reality, before he could move, he'd scanned the surroundings—a quiet country road, rolling hills on either side, large estates dotting the tranquil terrain. He was alone, which was lucky, because as soon as he was one hundred percent there, Quaid dropped to his knees.

“Invincible, my ass.” He added counterpressure to the pain in his abdomen.

This transporting thing was hell, and clearly imperfect, though that could be because of the poison in his blood. He'd geared his mind to go to the Speaker's house, but landed at least half a mile away, on a two-lane country road.

In the distance, Quaid picked up the sound of an engine. A car. Luxury vehicle. No doubt headed to join the crowd already gathered at the house on the hill, where cars lined the drive and people milled about on the porches and in the gardens.

He moved back and crouched in the shadows. By the time the vehicle passed, Q had regained his breath and the pain in his stomach had mostly ebbed. But, shit, he was wasted, completely wiped out, and the trek to the house might as well have been miles.

He thought of Cash and wondered how bad his friend had gotten. He

pressed his hands to his thighs, preparing to stand, and his gaze held on his ring. His chest tightened with myriad conflicting emotions. His brain throbbed with even more clashing thoughts. But as angry, as hurt, as betrayed as he felt that she'd lied to him, knowing honesty was the one thing he'd needed most, the one thing he'd asked for—he still didn't want to take the ring off. Couldn't imagine ever taking it off again.

He'd held on to that coin because it had been the only thing he'd had that was linked to his past, but it had never meant anything to him. But this. He spun the band, the sensation familiar and comforting. This meant everything.

Which meant he had to do what he'd come to do and get back to her, to Cash, to his team, his family.

Q rose and inspected the estate on the hill. He focused on each face, searching for Schaeffer, then he peered through the windows, every detail as sharp from half a mile away as if he were right there. Still, no sight of—

A man came into view at the edge of a window toward the front of the house. His height, his heavy build, and the gray and black of his hair caught Q's eye. A woman in a sparkling red dress approached from the opposite direction to shake his hand, and he turned, his face coming into view—Schaeffer.

A slow smile came over Quaid's mouth. "Got you, sucker."

But then he eyed the terrain again, checked in with his body, and decided that he was far too exhausted to make the hike—or would be by the time he got there. He also needed to save his strength for the confrontation. He scouted out security and chose a location midway between two guards along the fence line among treelike shrubs.

He closed his eyes, and his practiced mind went straight into a deep state of stillness. The rushing sound returned. The zing of adrenaline grew stronger until a sudden weightlessness, a tingling sense of power, came over him—that was when he knew he'd moved locations. The easing of those sensations indicated he'd landed at the site.

His breathing was labored as he gained his bearings. Teleporting drained what little energy he still had, and he dropped to his knees amongst the shrubs. His belly cramped, and a sweat broke out over his chest, back, and face.

"Shit," he bit out as his body turned inside out. "I'm going to...kill that fucker when I get ahold of him."

By the time the pain subsided, Quaid was exhausted. The crowd at the

party thickened, the sky had grown dusky with twilight, and white string lights twinkled throughout the estate. He was momentarily mesmerized by the beauty of it. Women wore sparkling gowns and the men wore tuxedos. Couples held hands and strolled through the gardens, kissing beneath the lights.

He rolled to his back and stared at the night sky. If he died here, his last words to Jessica would have been angry words. A hollow sensation opened beneath his ribs, followed by a dark streak of fear.

He couldn't leave her. He couldn't lose her.

Motion five yards to his right startled him. Quaid scrambled back into the shrubs and stared as a vision of Jessica faded in and out of sight.

"God dammit." He closed his eyes and rested his face in his hands. He was sweating, shaking, panting. He didn't have the energy or the time to fight with her again.

"Quaid." Her voice met his ears the same time something touched his shoulder.

He jerked his head up and glared at her. "Jessie, I don't need you—"

"You made that plenty clear when you vanished." She straightened and met his gaze with heat and anger. "I don't need you either. I used to think I did, but I was confusing want and need. Regardless, if you don't trust me, we don't belong together."

"That's not—"

Something was different about her. He narrowed his eyes, tipped his head, and his mouth dropped open.

"You...you're...*here*?"

"Yeah. I'm here. Teleporting is better than whatever that was I did in spirit, but they both still suck, and I may throw up all over you. But you can't get to Schaeffer alone. I need this to be settled so I can figure out what I'm going to do with my life. Once I know you're healthy and safe, I can let you go to find the life you really want."

"That's *not* what I want."

"Could have fooled me." She watched the house before returning her gaze to him. "You can't get in there looking like that, unless you have some power of invisibility that I don't know about. It's by invitation only, so unless you also have the power to create something out of nothing or control minds —"

"As a matter of fact, I did use mind control to get my partner to turn over

his beef jerky.”

Her brows went up. “Oh. Well. I’ll guard my jerky closely. Think you can bend minds to ignore duty? To put their own careers and lives at risk?”

He sighed heavily.

“I’ll take that as a no. What’s your plan?”

“I’m still working on that. What’s *your* plan?”

“Same.”

“Gorin told me Schaeffer has the neutralizer on him. A key...something.”

“Fob?”

“Yeah.”

She huffed, more of a scoff than laughter. “It’s still so weird to hear what you do and don’t remember. How do you know Gorin’s not leading you into a trap?”

“Because he won’t get out of that cell until I have the neutralizer, so if I don’t get it, he dies along with me.”

She looked over at the house again. Quaid’s gaze wandered over her beautiful profile, down the tantalizing slope of her neck. Want grew heavy in the pit of his stomach and through his chest.

“We can wait for him to come out,” she said, “but we’d be wasting valuable time, and I don’t think Cash can afford it.”

“Why? He’s that bad?”

She met his gaze. “You want honesty? Yes, Quaid. He’s bad. I don’t know if he’ll live long enough to receive the neutralizer.”

“Fuck.”

“Or, we can go in, find Schaeffer, hope your instincts on Gorin are correct and get the neutralizer.”

“You just said I can’t go in.”

“I said you can’t go in the way you’re dressed.”

He wiped sweat off his forehead, longing for the peace he’d experienced lying in her arms. Such ultimate peace. “That presents a problem, ’cause, yeah, I just haven’t caught on to that invisibility thing yet.”

“I know where we can get clothes.” She considered him again. “I just don’t know that you’re up to it. You don’t look so good, and I’m not interested in getting nailed because you’re off your game.”

“Harsh.”

“Get used to it. Honesty is often harsh. People who care about someone sometimes spare them a truth that has the potential to cause problems or pain

but won't immediately change their life. I'll be back as soon as I can. I'm not great at this, so I need complete concentration, and it takes me a while."

She walked away from him, shook out her arms, and turned her face up to the sky.

Regret welled up and hovered like an impending wave waiting to crash. "Where are you going?"

"To a brownstone one of my client's organizations keeps for political parties and fundraisers. We keep a few extra changes of clothes there for unfortunate incidents of spills, tears, puking, etc. Wish me luck."

"Jessie..."

"Quaid. Please. Cash has very little time. You don't have much more. I need quiet."

Owen parked at the curb down the street from the bank. They would close in about half an hour. The fall night was already growing dark. He reached across to the passenger's seat and pulled out the court order for access to Jason Vasser's safe-deposit box.

Owen couldn't help but wonder if Jason had known Jocelyn was dirty. It stood to reason. Jason hadn't only been sleeping with her off and on for years, but had worked with her on many assignments.

He folded the paper, slid it into the pocket of his suit jacket, and prayed this box contained something big he could hold over Schaeffer, because Owen wanted out.

He pushed the door open and stood. The air felt thick with the fall humidity. A couple crossed the street a hundred yards away, catching his attention. Tall, blond male. Small, brunette female. Even with their baseball hats, Owen knew it was Ransom and O'Shay.

Schaeffer hadn't offered any information on his "homegrown terrorists" to the news. That would have opened Pandora's box. Journalists would start digging, and Schaeffer had so many skeletons in his closet, they were bound to find something, if not everything.

He drew his weapon and rounded the back of his car while judging their trajectory toward the bank's front door. He'd go for O'Shay. Ransom was bulletproof. Literally. Owen took one step with the intent to sprint, then froze.

He was still on autopilot. He wouldn't get away from the Schaeffers of the world that way. So he stayed put and watched the pair walk straight into

the bank holding hands.

He holstered his weapon and crossed his arms on the roof of his car. The team had to be close, and he wondered just how close. He had two analysts searching for them, but every possibility had been a bust.

It took thirty minutes for them to come out of the bank. Owen pulled his weapon and balanced on the balls of his feet, muscles coiled, but he kept his body still, his mind quiet, as he waited behind a fence separating the bank's property from the alley behind a strip mall where he'd parked. He wasn't one hundred percent sure how O'Shay's powers worked, and he didn't want her hearing his thoughts.

He remained cool and calm, so tranquil inside he'd forgotten how amazingly good it felt as O'Shay and Ransom came toward him. He needed to return to his Tae Kwon Do training. He needed this inner tranquility in his life.

Ransom carried a small cardboard box under his arm, his other hand holding O'Shay's. Both of them scanned the area, their steps brisk, their expressions tight.

They had something. They were nervous.

Owen didn't get excited. Didn't let any emotion stir his insides. Only tracked the couple with his eyes as they neared him on their way to the car they'd exited. He heard the murmur of their voices as they came upon him, but not the words. He held his breath as they passed, waited half a second until O'Shay was in the perfect position, and lunged.

He hadn't made a sound, but before his hand reached her arm, she looked over her shoulder. She had sensed him, but he'd expected it and pushed his hand that extra distance to grab her jacket collar. He jerked her back and pushed the gun against her neck at the same time. A sound of shock came from her throat, but she went completely still. Ransom whipped around and grabbed her arm.

"Don't," he told Ransom. "Just come back here where we can talk."

With his hand fisted in O'Shay's jacket, the gun against her neck, he dragged her backward. Ransom followed with murder in his eyes.

"It's okay," she told Ransom. "He just wants information."

A shiver twitched beneath Owen's skin. Her knowing what was in his head was just creepy as hell.

"Think about it from my perspective," she said. "It's pretty creepy for me as well. Can you ease up? I'd rather not have a tattoo of a nine-millimeter

muzzle on my neck.”

He stopped behind the fence and pulled back on the weapon.

“Thank you.” O’Shay winced and raised a hand to rub at her neck.

“What the fuck do you want?” Ransom demanded. “In case Schaeffer didn’t tell you, he killed the asset you sent.”

“I didn’t send an asset. He’d already done that by the time I got the case. How did he kill him?”

Ransom’s stance shifted into one of a hotshot cocky know-it-all. “Your just as full of shit as the others involved in this. Someone should put you bastards in one of these testing centers. Let these fuckers mess with you for a change.”

“How did he kill the asset?” he demanded.

“Some sick poison already in his body that he released remotely. The same poison is in Quaid and Cash. He released it on a timer, and they’re both slowly dying.”

A chill slid down Owen’s spine. “I have no idea what you’re talking about, and as far as the testing centers go, none use humans as test subjects. I didn’t know about the castle and who was in it until just a day ago.”

“You’d better get your facts straight,” Ransom said, “because Quaid can name dates and locations where he was used as a fucking Guinea pig, and which locations Schaeffer visited while he was there.”

“He’s being honest,” O’Shay told Ransom. “He’s clueless.”

Owen wanted to take issue with the clueless comment, but it was true. “What’s in the box?”

Ransom sent O’Shay a questioning look, and she nodded. He opened the box, revealing reports or documents of some kind.

“What’s in there?” he asked.

Ransom pulled a document bound in a black plastic report cover from the top of the box and held it out to him. “Hope you haven’t eaten recently.”

Owen hesitated. He wasn’t ready to let go of O’Shay. He scanned the title on the cover, which read ESOPREVIR TRIALS, AFGHANISTAN with a bright red CLASSIFIED stamped on the front. “What is it?”

“Drug trials,” Ransom said, his disgusted tone confirming Owen’s fears. “A drug tested on a group of marines stationed in Afghanistan.”

Ransom opened the report a third of the way, displaying images of men with horrendous open wounds on various areas of their bodies.

“Drugs tested outside the US so the manufacturer wouldn’t have to deal

with the expense or time restraints involved in an American volunteer's safety."

Ransom turned to another batch of images showing men with crew cuts, some in fatigues, displaying portions of a limb eaten off by disease.

Ransom hit the report pages, making the paper snap. "Look at the end result for this platoon."

He glanced down to images of a war zone—burned-out tanks, missile craters, dead bodies. "What's this?"

"The result. They were disposed of," Ransom said, "because they may have been infectious. Because the failure of this drug could not be known. A raid was staged, and the families of these men were told they died in battle."

Ransom turned to a report later in the bound volume and pointed at a signature. Owen focused on the familiar script, which made the muscles all along his spine tighten. Schaeffer's signature with his position as Director of Defense Sciences at DARPA.

Everything inside Owen collapsed. He released O'Shay and holstered his gun. "What else is in there?"

"More of these," Ransom said. "But you didn't let me tell you the best part."

Owen raised his gaze to Ransom, dread circling his belly like a vortex.

"The drugs these guys were taking?" Ransom tossed the report back into the box. "They were supposedly going to amp their *psychic abilities*. *Psychic abilities*. Schaeffer is a fucking lunatic. Why hasn't anyone seen it before now? Why doesn't anyone see it *now*?"

"I see it." Owen glanced between them. "Go. Take that shit and get the hell out of here so you can do something useful with it."

Ransom reached for O'Shay, but she kept her shocked gaze on Owen.

"I said get the fuck out of here before I change my mind."

Still, O'Shay waited a beat. "You help us put him out of commission and we'll help you get out from under him with your pension. Deal?"

"Jesus Christ." He cut a look at Luke. "How do you live with her in your head?"

He glanced at Keira. "We're still figuring it all out."

Before O'Shay turned away, she said, "You should definitely go back to Tae Kwon Do."

43

Jessica's fingers curled into the fine fabric of the tuxedo as the sound of a crashing waterfall filled her ears. Her head went light, and she had to force herself to concentrate on the spot where she'd left Quaid. No telling where she'd end up if she let her mind slip for even a millisecond, and she wasn't in the mood for a side trip to Tangier or some equally remote corner of the earth just now.

Finally, the sound dimmed, and that sensation she'd often gotten at the first hit of any drug started to wane. Thank God. It wasn't all that exciting now. Not when she knew what came along with it. Not when it brought back so many horrible memories.

She blinked as the rushing sound faded to nothing. The night had darkened, and she squinted, unable to pick Quaid out in the brush.

"Qua—" A strong hand came over her mouth, a hard body behind hers. She stiffened, one hand reaching toward his.

"Shh." He murmured at her ear, "It's me."

Relief and annoyance twined inside her. She grabbed his wrist and pushed it away. "Dammit—"

"Security on both sides of us," he whispered.

The hand over her mouth lowered. His other arm circled her waist, and his body fit against her backside. A mixture of sexual need and emotional craving to bond with him again on that primitive level brought tears to her eyes.

"You look beautiful," he murmured, his lips touching her ear, her neck, her shoulder.

Tortured, she pulled away, turned, and held out the suit to him. “Just wait until you see the gorgeous women inside that house. I’ll look like a field mouse in comparison. And I guarantee you will not go unnoticed.” She forced a bright smile. “You’ll have your pick. And as good as you are in bed, you won’t be able to get rid of—”

His fingers dug into her bare biceps, and she gasped at the streak of pain. He instantly relaxed his hold, but his eyes were fiery dark, face taut. “I don’t want anyone else. I overreacted when I learned we were married. I’m sorry. I —”

He winced and bent forward, arm across his abdomen. “Fuck.”

She grabbed his arms to support his weight and agony twisted in her heart. She wanted to believe he truly wanted only her. She couldn’t be angry with him. None of this was his fault. None of it was her fault either. She could only do what she could to make it right.

She pushed him deeper behind the bushes. “Sit down.”

He collapsed, and Jessica crouched in front of him, a hand on his face. He was breathing fast, sweating, eyes closed. “There’s no way you can do this. You stay here, I can handle Schaeffer.”

He grabbed her hand. “You can’t go by yourself.”

“I’ve done everything by myself for the last five years, and if you’re this bad, imagine Cash. We’ve all suffered enough. I’m ready to put an end to this. Rest. When I come out, you have to be ready to move again.”

Quaid met her gaze with a clear look of exhaustion and pain. “I love you so much, it scares the shit out of me.” His eyes slid closed. He took a deep breath, opened his eyes, and started again. “But I never want to take this ring off. I never want another woman, and I never want to be without you. Ever.”

Her heart ached at the words she’d been waiting for, but she feared there was just too much water under the bridge. “There’s a lot about...before that you still don’t know. I’ve made a lot of mistakes—”

“Those other men don’t mean anything to me. I know what we have is different. I’ve known from the first time you kissed me. Some part of me has always known. I think that’s why it never bothered me to wait. Because I knew you’d never find what we had with them.”

Her chest squeezed with both love and pain. She crouched in front of him. “It’s not just that. . .”

He laid his head back on the grass and closed his eyes in exhaustion, then forced them open again. He slid his hand down her arm to her hand and

twined their fingers. “You mean the drugs?”

She bit the inside of her lip and looked away.

“You forget, Jessie,” he murmured, “I’ve been with you. I know about the drugs. I know about the men, and now I know why. I’ve never stopped loving you. You gave me the will to get through every day in that hell. I was even with you in the hospital that night you overdosed.”

“Oh, God...” She covered her face with her hands for a long moment to control the mortification. No one knew about that. No one. She’d collapsed when she’d been alone, on her way back to her car after scoring some crack, and a good Samaritan called the ambulance.

She forced herself to look at him. “I searched for you. When my heart stopped, I was so relieved. I was finally going to find you, be with you. But then you weren’t there. I thought you’d be waiting for me, but you weren’t there.”

The memory of the complete sense of loneliness hit her hard.

“I was there,” he said softly. “I just wasn’t on the other side. I was standing by your hospital bed while they tried to restart your heart, calling you back. I knew if you died, I’d have lost you, and I couldn’t lose you. I willed you back to me.”

He squeezed her hand hard. “Some part of me was smart enough to marry you. You can bet I’m not letting you go now. You can fight it if you want, but it would be easier to keep me than get rid of me.”

A fierce joy gripped her heart. She leaned down, took his face in both hands, and kissed him. He drank her in with all the passion and love and hunger she’d come to expect from this new version of her husband.

He pushed her back by the shoulders, his eyes serious. “I want kids, Jessie. I want us to start trying for a baby. Life is too short.”

She laughed through her tears and pressed her forehead to his. “We’ve already started.”

Owen left the door of his Jeep Laredo open for the valet and jogged up the front steps of Speaker Jester's palatial mansion. A thick arm blocked him at the open double-door entrance.

"Sir, your invitation?"

Owen stepped back with a quick glance at the guy who could barely be twenty-five, and pulled his credentials from the inside of his blazer pocket while searching the milling crowd inside for his boss, Carter Cox. "I'm here to see DARPA Director—"

"I'm sorry, sir, but this is a private party. If you don't have an invitation —"

"*Look* at my credentials, son. I have the authority to dispatch a covert SEAL team to nail your ass and never be questioned. Now, I'll say it one more time, and only one more time. Director Carter Cox. *Now.*"

The man swallowed, nodded, and glanced at his partner, then back at Owen. "Yes, sir. I'll go find him, sir."

This time when Owen stepped through the doorway, no one stopped him. He pocketed his creds and forced the tension from his shoulders. This was an elite group, one he knew included both Schaeffer and Cox, which was good. He could just get this all over with now.

He took a glass of champagne offered by a passing waiter and drank it in one swallow. When he searched the crowd again, Cox was treading toward him with a frown on his face.

"Is something wrong?" Cox asked.

Owen put the glass on a passing tray. "I'm sorry to bother you off the

clock, sir—”

“Ridiculous. You know there’s no such thing around here. What is it?”

“It’s Senator Schaeffer, sir.”

Cox glanced behind him. “I was just talking to him.”

“I refuse to work for him. I’ll give you more details during office hours, sir, but I just needed you to know immediately that he’s asking me to conduct unethical, illegal, and highly immoral acts, and I refuse.”

Cox’s mouth opened, his brow furrowing in confusion and disbelief. “I can’t believe... I don’t understand...” He collected himself. “This must be serious.”

“It is, sir. I’ll contact your secretary first thing tomorrow and make an appointment to meet with you.”

Cox held out his hand and Owen shook it. “I can’t wait to hear this.”

“Where did you see the senator, sir? I’m going to talk to him right now.”

“You’re possessed when you get a bee up your ass, aren’t you?” Cox took an offered glass of champagne. “He was headed toward the gardens, but was waylaid in the parlor. I doubt he made it outside yet.”

Owen thanked Cox and turned toward the back of the house.

45

Jessica took a deep lungful of the country air and blew it out slowly. Standing at the edge of the patio in the shadows of the garden, she shook out her arms.

“I can do this.” She whispered the reassurance to herself. “I can do this.” She had to do it. Quaid needed her, and she wouldn’t let him down.

She smoothed the bodice of her dress over her abdomen and checked the skirt one more time for dirt, grass, or leaves. With the clutch holding the .22 she’d brought held tight to her belly, she brought up that effervescent smile she’d used to hide the hole inside her for the last five years and approached the front door.

“I’m so sorry,” she told the man, “I left my invitation at home. I grabbed the wrong purse, and everything is in the other one.”

She saw a congressman wander into sight behind the security guard, chatting with other guests. “Oh, wait.” She called past the man, “Congressman Gordon.”

When the older man turned toward her, his smile grew. He reminded Jessica of her grandfather. He came into the foyer, where he pressed a kiss to her cheek. “Don’t you look beautiful, sweetheart.”

“Thank you. Would you mind vouching for me? I picked up the wrong purse.”

“Oh, of course.” To the man he said, “This is Jessica Fury, the fiercest lobbyist on the Hill.”

The man checked his list, nodded, and let her pass.

Someone immediately approached the congressman, and Jessica thanked

him before moving through the crowd.

Lights twinkled in the garden. Jewels sparkled from every woman's ear. Dresses shimmered and glimmered. Smiles shone. She played the greeting game, so many familiar faces—some attached to good memories, some attached to ones she wished she could forget forever, but none of that mattered now, and she ignored her past, focused on her future and the one man standing in the way of that future.

After ten minutes of searching, Jessica's face was cramped from smiling. She ducked into a restroom simply to give her facial muscles a break. She leaned on the sink and closed her eyes. Good God, she was exhausted. The stress, the fear, the lack of sleep, the crying, they all combined and seemed to hit her when she needed stamina and strength and concentration the most.

She took a few deep breaths and started toward the living area, crossing another hallway, where someone collided with her.

"Oh, hey, sorry." The man took her arms, and their momentum turned them in a circle. "Jessica, hey. Wow, you look amazing."

"Sean. Hi, how are you?"

"Not nearly as good as you." His easy grin lit his face as he gave her a once-over. "Girl, that is quite a dress. Definitely your color."

"Thank you. How's Joel?" she asked of Sean's partner.

"He's fabulous. We were just talking about you the other day. Come say hello." Sean took her arm and started down the hallway.

"Oh, maybe later, I can't right now—"

"It's okay. He's right here. Just pop your head in and say hello. It will make him so happy."

Sean reached for a door, pushed it open and pulled Jessica inside. The room was stuffed with people. Music played in the background. What seemed like fifty conversations filled the air.

Jessica's shoulders tensed. This setting was too familiar. Her body recognized it too. Her mouth went dry. Her nerves kicked up with anticipation.

Sweat broke out on Jessica's neck and chest and she backed toward the door. "I can't stay. I'm sorry."

He held up a tiny bag of white powder, and Jessica's face froze. "I'll share. How 'bout a line for the road?"

Holy. Shit. Her fingers gripped her purse until they went numb. Her cotton mouth threatened to permanently meld her mouth shut.

“Uh, no, thanks. I...I...I...have to...to...meet—”

Sean put his arm around her shoulders and nudged her forward again, to where someone had already started lining out coke along a small mirror on a side table. No one around them paused to look. No one cared. They were all high.

Jessica stared at the pristine white powder. She couldn't tear her gaze away, and she licked her lips.

It would feel so good to have energy. Energy would help her stay positive. Help her help Quaid. Help her stay strong for the days, weeks, months to come with all they still had to face. God, she was so tired.

“You look like you could use a little boost, girl.” Sean pushed a rolled twenty into her hand.

Jessica found herself frozen. She couldn't use, but she couldn't walk away. She was stuck. Her feet were glued to the floor. Her gaze was pinned to that perfect white line.

She didn't want this. She was stronger than this. Wasn't she?

Nearby, a young woman broke from a small group, bent at the waist, and vomited into a drink cup. Jessica's stomach clenched. Anxiety tightened her skin.

Sean sidestepped and blocked the sight of the retching woman. “Kids,” he said with a roll of his eyes. “Show her how a pro handles it, Jess.”

She clenched her teeth, turned to Sean, and returned the twenty. Looking into his eyes, she smiled. “I'm not a pro anymore, Sean. Take care of yourself.”

She turned and walked toward the door, one foot in front of the other. She expected the trek to be torturous. Instead, a sense of relief and victory rose inside her. When she reached the door and turned around for one last look, she had no desire to return to the drugs or that life. She had something far better waiting for her just beyond this house.

Back in the thick of the party, Jessica resumed her search for Schaeffer, but another ten minutes passed with no sign of him. The first tendrils of panic snaked up her chest with inevitable questions. Had he spotted her and slipped out? Was he coordinating security right now, strategizing an ambush that would render her useless to Quaid?

She finally found Schaeffer near the doors leading to the gardens. Relief and renewed purpose fueled Jessica's struggle through the crowd.

Then she caught sight of Owen Young. Statuesque tall, Tonka built,

model handsome, the man was impossible to miss, even in a room as crowded as this. He stood half a head taller than most, his bright eyes intent on Schaeffer.

Jessica halted. Her fingers clutched her purse as her mind spun for alternative plans. Young's name hadn't been on the attendees' list. "Shit."

She started forward again, her mind circling for the information she'd learned of Young over the years. So much buzz and flutter surrounded the man. He was the object of many a fantasy among the women of Washington. Though, only a fantasy. He had been married for nearly a decade and, Jessica was pretty damn sure, faithful. If he hadn't been, she'd have heard about it. That kind of news spread through the female population of Washington like wildfire.

Young worked his way through the thick crowd. He was in the midst of a divorce, she'd heard. Yet, still no scandal. He was either stealthily discreet or... She'd been thinking "honorable," but no honorable man would dispatch an assassin to end their team.

Young was farther away from Schaeffer than she was, but while she could probably reach Schaeffer first, he would be right behind her. He was stronger and far more skilled. Even holding a gun to Schaeffer's gut, she'd never escape. She'd be arrested. She'd go to jail. Neither of those events worried her. She just needed them to happen *after* she'd gotten that neutralizer to Quaid and Cash.

She slid her hand into her purse, her finger beside the trigger of her gun and continued pushing through the crowd.

Halfway to Schaeffer, who stood laughing with Congressman Scott O'Reilly, Jessica glanced at Young again. He swept the crowd, and his gaze collided with hers. She felt the physical *snick* in her chest like a chambered round.

He stopped and stared, then shot a look toward Schaeffer. Desperation pumped adrenaline into her body. She could beat him there. She was smaller. She had more incentive.

Jessica turned sideways and shouldered through the crowd. "Excuse me. I'm sorry. Excuse me."

With her heart ready to explode, every breath labored and quick, she stepped right into the middle of Schaeffer's conversation and positioned her purse against his rotund belly.

"Hello, Congressman," she said to the other man. "How's your family?"

Jessica didn't hear the man's answer. Shock rounded Schaeffer's muddy brown eyes, followed by what she swore was a spark of fear. It gave her a cocaine-worthy thrill. Screw the drugs, this was just as good. She put on her best smile, and this time, she didn't have to work for it. This was a smile of vengeance.

Jessica sent the other man a sidelong glance, "Congressman O'Reilly, if you don't mind, the senator and I have an important matter to discuss."

"Of course." The older man patted her shoulder. "You look beautiful. Dora is here tonight. She'd love to see you."

"And I'd love to see her. I'll find her as soon as I'm finished here."

Schaeffer's eyes seemed to plead with O'Reilly not to go, but the congressman moved on, leaving Jessica and Schaeffer in a cocoon surrounded by people. She didn't waste any time, sure Young's hand would land on her shoulder any second.

She jammed the gun into his belly and received a satisfying grunt. The anger that shot through his eyes thrilled her. "It may feel small, Gil, but I promise fifteen hollow points into your belly will not leave you pretty."

The anger on his face edged toward fear again. That gave her the confidence to reach out with her other hand and feel for his pants pockets. Nothing there but mounds of fat. She grabbed the right pocket of his blazer. Through the fine fabric, something small and hard met her fingers. She felt farther down the length and felt keys.

"You may have just saved your life, Gil." Yanking the keyring from his pocket, she held the fobs up so she wouldn't have to take her eyes off him.

"If you choose the wrong button"—Schaeffer's voice had that smooth-as-glass, cold-as-ice chill that made him famous on the Hill—"you'll give your long-lost husband an extra dose of bioengineered proteins that will kill him instantly."

A steel band squeezed Jessica's chest. Her hand shook when she raised the weapon mid-abdomen and murmured, "Then you'd better tell me which button is the right one, Gil, because if Quaid dies—*again*—I have nothing left to live for, nothing left to lose, and no reason not to pump these fifteen bullets into your belly and watch your stomach acid fry your guts."

His condescending smile shivered, then fell. His muddy eyes searched frantically over Jessica's shoulder.

She pushed the weapon against Schaeffer's gut to get his attention. "Which one is it, Gil?"

He licked his lips, his eyes studying hers. “Red. *Red*, goddammit. Now take that gun off me.”

Gorin told me the blue button was the neutralizer, Quaid had said. I’m nothing but a witness to Schaeffer.

Jessica put her thumb over the blue button and turned it toward the senator. His eyes went wide with panic. Even as his mouth formed the word *no*, Jessica had all the confirmation she needed, and jammed the blue button on both fobs.

With the neutralizer working as remotely as the poison had, relief and hope pulsed through Jessica’s body.

“You’ll be sorry.” His words made the hair on the back of her neck rise, but she didn’t let him see her fear.

She shoved at his belly. “Outside.”

“Why?” Gil’s eyes burned with rage. “You got what you wanted.”

“Oh, no, Senator. This is only the beginning of me getting what I want. And you’re not leaving my sight until I know the neutralizer worked.”

With the weapon pointed at his side, her other hand wrapped around his arm as if she were accompanying him out to the gardens, Jessica smiled at guests and acquaintances as she made her way through the room.

A light rain brought everyone inside while she and Gil exited. Lightning threatened in the distance, a warning of her unstable emotional state.

Her tension rose as they moved closer to that gray area between the house and Quaid. She wasn’t a warrior like the other members of the team had become over the years. She was just Jessica. As soon as she knew Quaid was feeling the effects of the neutralizer, she could call the others to find out how close they were. Mitch and Ty would show up first. Hopefully soon.

She led him right, toward the side of the house, and as the rain came down harder, even the security and valets collected in the house.

“Where are we going?” Schaeffer demanded.

“As soon as I see that Quaid’s all right, we can go our separate ways,” she lied. “Remember, Gil, Keira taught me to shoot. Don’t test me if you want to keep your balls.”

“Your career is over, Fury. I will bury you.”

“You should be worried about your own career right now.” Now they were alone, the night seemed even darker and more terrifying. The rain intensified, soaking her hair and running down her face. The lightning neared and thunder cracked and rolled through the night.

“I can’t see anything out there,” Gil said, incensed as if this was all one big inconvenience. “This is just stupid.”

“Put one Ferragamo in front of the other, Gil. *Now.*”

A hand darted out of the dark, grabbed her ankle, and jerked. Jessica’s heels slipped on the wet dirt, and she went down hard. She rolled to her side, scrambled to her hands and knees, and kicked off the man’s grasp along with her shoe. One lunge and she clutched the purse still holding her gun.

But a man’s dress shoe crushed her wrist and Jessica cried out. A hand gripped her chin and jerked her head up, cutting off her scream. She expected to open her eyes to see Young, but found a face she didn’t recognize. At least not at first. Then her mind flashed back to the safe house, and she recognized him as the man who’d beaten Quaid. And, yeah, she still wanted to kill him.

“Hello, *Ms. Fury.*” His voice, cold and pleased, raised the hair on the back of her neck. “You don’t know me, but I’m a friend of your husband’s. The name’s Green. Your husband likes to call me Ice Man.”

46

Quaid didn't know how long he'd been unconscious, but a light rain tapped his face.

The first thing he noticed was that he didn't hurt anymore. A cool wash of relief spread through his body, loosening all his muscles. The reprieve was so unexpected, so sudden, and so absolute, Quaid thought he'd died, that his body had given up and let go, but his mind just hadn't figured it out yet.

He opened his eyes. Clouds floated overhead, covering the sparkling stars, and in the distance, a storm brewed, far more ferocious than the one currently overhead.

"Sir." The authoritative voice cut into Quaid's thoughts, assuring him he wasn't dead.

"Sir, this is a restricted area. You need to return to the house."

Quaid sat up and used his semicoherent state to his advantage. "Oh, hey, dude."

He wiped rain from his face as the guests made their way inside. He scanned for Jessica, but didn't see her.

"Sorry. I just, you know, drank too much and it was so hot in there. I came out to get some air and... Where am I again?"

"The Speaker's dinner." The guard glanced at the sky with the same annoyance as he'd given Quaid.

"Jester." Quaid snorted a drunken laugh. "Now I remember."

The rain intensified, and the man came closer. "Come on. You can't be out here."

"I hear you, but I don't think I can get where I'm supposed to be by

myself.” He was only half faking. “Can you help me up?”

The guard held out his hand, and Quaid let the other man pull him to his feet.

“Ice Man.”

The words reached Quaid from a short distance, and they came in Green’s voice. All Quaid’s senses kicked into high gear.

In the process of getting to his feet, Quaid let the momentum bring the guard close enough to deliver a sloppy chop to the side of his neck.

But it was enough to make man’s eyes roll back in his head, and his body went limp. When he hit the dirt, Quaid pulled the weapon from beneath his jacket and forced his feet into a jog toward Green’s voice.

“If you tell us where he is,” Green said, “we’ll skip the punishment when he gets back into a cage. If not, I’ll let Gorin have him. I’m sure that sick fuck is frothing at the mouth to get Q back to see how being in the outside world has changed him.”

Green had Jessica, and the fear that cut straight down the middle of Quaid’s body was a kind of fear he’d never known before.

He approached the back corner of the house and peered around the side toward the street. Despite the rain, he didn’t need his sharp vision to assess the entire situation in a millisecond—four men, all armed. Jessica, unarmed, and held hostage with a gun at her head—by Green. Ice Man Green. That’s where Quaid’s mind slid off the rails.

Green must have heard Quaid, because he moved behind Jessica, using her as a shield. “I’ve met your lovely wife, Q. Come join us.”

Quaid stepped around the corner, weapon aimed at Green, ready for the instant he gave Quaid the slightest window to shoot. “Jess, transport.”

“I tried.” Her voice exposed her fear, and Quaid wanted nothing more than to put all these men in the ground and take Jessica far away from here.

Green had a solid hold around Jessica’s waist, her body pulled up against his. His big hand opened wide over her abdomen and slowly slid lower. “No wonder you were so juiced to escape. I’d want to get back to a hot little thing like her too.”

“You fucking coward,” Quaid said. “Using a woman as a shield.”

A feral mewl came from Jessica’s throat, and she clawed at Green’s arm.

“Quiet now,” he told Jessica, his gentle tone so twisted in opposition to his violence. “Or I’ll just shoot him in the head so he matches his death certificate.”

Almost before he finished the sentence, Green struck Jessica's temple with the weapon, and she cried out.

"*Stop.*" Quaid wasn't sure how he managed to make that an order and not a plea. "You're just as sick as Gorin."

Quaid rushed Green in what felt like the speed of light. One second he was yards away, the next he had the gun against Green's forehead.

It must have surprised Green just as much, because his icy blue eyes rounded in shock. The first real expression Quaid has seen in the man in five years.

"*Let. Her. Go.*" Quaid sounded feral.

"Or what?" Green said, amused. "If you shoot me, I shoot her. Lose-lose, Q."

It took everything he had not to shove the muzzle of his gun down Green's throat. "It's *Quaid*. And if you shoot her, I have no reason to live. Given my skills, we both know I could take out every one of you before a bullet ever found me."

That drained the amusement from Green's face.

A car stopped at the curb.

"Enough," Schaeffer barked. "In the car."

No one but Schaeffer moved, opening the passenger's side door. "If you want your wife safe, Q, hand Green the gun and get in the car."

"Don't," Jessica told him. "Please don't. I can't live with you trapped with them. I'd rather be dead."

Green tightened his arm around Jessica's waist and dragged her back a step so Quaid's weapon wasn't against his head, then made a point of dragging her up against him in a way that made Quaid want to skin the man alive.

"I can't lie, man," Green said. "I'm kinda hoping you make the wrong choice here. I'd much rather have her than you."

"Let her go." Quaid took a shaky breath. "And I'll...go with you."

"No—" Jessica didn't get the scream out before Green slapped a hand over her mouth.

"You've got a hard head, don't you?" he asked Jess. "Don't make me hit you again."

His warning didn't keep Jess from pleading with Quaid from behind his hand. He lifted his weapon to hit her again.

"*Stop,*" Quaid yelled, making the others look toward the house.

“Making trouble here will only lead to a whole lot of trouble for every member of your team,” Green said. “A reason to kill you all.”

“And lose all your science experiments?” Quaid said. “I don’t think so.”

“Green will let Jessica go,” Schaeffer said. “Then you get in the car. That’s fair.”

Fair. Quaid caught a bitter retort in his throat. He couldn’t stand to see Jessica tortured or threatened another minute. He gritted his teeth, turned the gun sideways, and crouched to lay it on the ground.

With Jessica’s pleas filling his head, thoughts of the past five years floating in the background, it took everything Quaid had to let go of that gun. As Q, he would have taken death, but as Quaid, he couldn’t let his wife watch him die. Again.

As soon as the gun left Quaid’s hand, Green shoved Jessica aside so hard, she hit the ground. Quaid didn’t get a chance to go to her before Green planted a fist into his gut so hard, Quaid’s spine rippled with the shock. He was still coughing and gasping for air when Green pushed him into the car.

“No!”

When Jessica finally had the ability to scream, she couldn't draw in enough air to make it worthwhile. All the car doors closed, the engine revved, and the same fiery panic that had terrorized her in the warehouse looking into Quaid's eyes as he lay broken on the cement floor blazed through her body now.

“No, no, no, no, *no!*” Her head exploded with the effort to scream. She rooted around on the ground for her purse, sank her fingers into the beaded fabric, and ripped the gun out to aim at the retreating taillights, but she didn't fire. Couldn't fire. She risked hitting Quaid.

She dropped her head back, prepared to yell for help, but a hand covered hers, and she looked up at Mitch.

“Quaid,” she panted. “They took him. Mitch, *they took him!*”

Mitch took the gun from her hand and looked to his right, to someone Jessica hadn't noticed—Owen Young. “Are you going to take care of this, or am I?”

“I've got it.” Owen walked away.

He turned his back on her like her pain meant nothing. Rage ignited inside her, propelled her to her feet, and she lunged toward Young. “You fucking bastard—”

Mitch grabbed her around the waist with one arm and used the other hand to toss keys to Ty, who was already running toward the road. He caught them like a pro receiver and disappeared into a car Jessica didn't recognize, and gunned the engine, racing after Schaeffer.

“We’ll get him back, Jess.” Mitch took her by the arms and bent to look directly into her eyes. “Ty will catch up with them and Young’s on our side, at least for the moment. Hold tight.”

He released her as if he had the utmost confidence she was going to do just that, but she couldn’t even breathe. Rain pelted her face, hard and cold, and her lungs felt like they were going to burst.

She turned and sought out the car’s taillights. Futility and confusion and despair instantly turned to white-hot rage.

“That goddamned sonofabitch,” she yelled. “That fucker is not taking Quaid from me again.”

Lightning streaked across the sky, lighting up the rain clouds, and thunder rolled in its wake.

“Why doesn’t he transport?” she yelled at Mitch.

“They’ve drugged him by now.” Water poured down his face. “He’s too powerful for them to control otherwise.”

Owen stepped up next to Mitch, his light eyes bright in the darkness. “I’ve dispatched Black Hawks from Bolling Air Force Base. They’ll be on them in ten minutes.”

Mitch cut Owen an angry you’re-useless glare. “Quaid will be dead in eleven.”

“I’ve also clued in the cops, the sheriff, and the highway patrol,” he drawled. “They’re on their way, and when Schaeffer is stopped, they’ll be arresting him, not Quaid.”

“You’re the last person I’d trust,” Jessica bit out. To Mitch, she said, “What can I do that will stop them but won’t hurt Quaid?”

Mitch looked up just as lightning cut through the sky and hit the ground. Thunder clapped immediately, so loud her ears nearly exploded. The ground shook. The air quivered. Her body quaked. And that was when she knew—she didn’t need stillness and inner quiet to harness the weather the way she did to transport. Just the opposite.

“If you can hit the hood of the car with that lightning,” Owen said, “it will disable the electronics system and stop them in their tracks.”

“Too bad you can’t turn Green and Schaeffer into French fries,” Mitch said.

She focused on the heat of the storm and the electric currents flashing bright in the dark clouds. She directed all the energy downward, then added all her fear, all her pain, all her anger.

The image of Quaid attacking that man Schaeffer had sent to kill them flashed in her head. She remembered the sight of him slamming Alsadani up against that ravine wall over and over, like a rabid animal in an attempt to keep them safe. Now she was living that rabid sensation, and she needed to protect Quaid.

She stiffened, fisted her hands, and focused.

Quaid floated in that familiar place, the one somewhere between waking and sleep, but it was different this time. Here, he didn't drift on serene waves, but was tossed in dark, angry seas. Anxiety surrounded him like a bubble, filling him with fear and desperation. As if he was needed somewhere and couldn't get there. As if his very sanity depended on getting out of this chaos, but he was trapped.

Light burst behind his closed eyelids—one blinding flash, followed by a waterfall of smaller sparks. A hard clack of thunder roared around him like an invisible dragon.

The car swerved. Quaid flew one way, then jerked another, tossed around the backseat like a beachball on the ocean. Pain crushed his shoulders, stabbed his ribs, rammed his skull, but the ache that threatened to kill him was the one ripping at him from deep inside.

Another crack filled Quaid's ears, followed by screams and smoke. Then he was spinning. *Smash*. Bounce. *Smash*. Spin. *Smash*.

The car came to a rocking halt, and everything went still.

Quaid struggled in the sea of fear. He wanted out. He wanted to go back to where he'd been, but he couldn't remember where that was.

He put all his focus into opening his eyes, but nothing happened. He worked to move his hand. No go.

Fumes filled the car. Gasses from whatever was burning. Something toxic that made Quaid's stomach roll.

He groaned. Fresh, wet air whisked in from somewhere nearby, and the sweet, soothing sound of rain pinging against metal.

A revving car engine drifted into his head. He tried his eyes again. Concentrated all his energy to force his lids open. They fluttered, but didn't rise. He started to drift off, but was brought back by the distant sound of choppers. Apaches. No, Black Hawks. Three of them.

White light floated in from somewhere nearby, mixed with a strobe of red and blue. Voices drifted in and out. Several cars came to skidding stops, followed by the thud of footsteps. Yells came from several different people, then someone giving orders.

The crush of glass sounded, tiny pieces showering him. The door opened and the wind swept in. Heavy breathing filled the space, along with pressure on Quaid's neck.

"Fucking A, Legend." A man's voice—a familiar voice. "You are the biggest pain in the ass."

Quaid didn't know why that struck him as funny, but he wanted to laugh. He couldn't remember the last time he'd wanted to laugh. Yes, he could. It had been with Cash. Or no, maybe Jessica.

Cash. Jessica.

A fist gripped his heart. He gasped so hard, his throat hurt. His lids flickered, then closed.

"Hold on, buddy. You're okay."

Ty. It was Ty.

"Let me check you out." Ty's hands touched his legs, his abdomen, his head. "EMS just got here. Don't move until I can get you on a backboard. The last thing I need is you tweaking your neck, freaking paralyzing yourself and having to listen to Jess bitch at me for the rest of her life about all the amazing sex I cheated her out of. I'll be right back. Don't move."

Jessica. The image of Green with his hands on her filled his head, followed by that dark, superior chuckle.

His eyes opened and his muscles flexed. He managed to pull himself into a half sit-up before his head tried to float off his shoulders, and he gripped a seat back to steady himself.

Ty was back with the board, and the minute he ducked into the car again, he muttered, "Fuck me. Legend, what in the hell did I just tell you? What part of *don't fucking move* didn't you understand?"

"Sorry, Cap." The words scraped out of Quaid's throat. They felt awkward, but somehow right.

Ty must have found them odd too, because his expression filled with a

haunted look.

“Jessie,” he said. “Where’s Jessie?”

“I’m right here.”

Her voice sounded behind Ty, and he spiked to his feet, swearing in combinations Quaid had never heard.

“Where the *fuck* did you come from?” Ty asked, moving out of the doorway. “Jesus, Jess, don’t do that.”

“I transported,” she said, tucking her dripping hair behind her ears as she stepped into Ty’s spot.

“We’ve got to have some rules about this shit, so I don’t have a heart attack.”

Silhouetted against the lights of other cars, Jess crouched near his head. She was soaked to the bone and smeared with mud.

He rested back on the seat and took her hand. “Are you okay?”

Her big brown eyes transitioned from worry to relief. “I’m supposed to be asking you that.”

She lowered her head, pressing her forehead to his. “You’ve got to promise to stop doing all this crazy shit, or Ty won’t be the only one having a heart attack.”

“Promise.” He lifted his hand to her face. Mud smudged her skin, and her hair hung in wet waves. She’d never looked more beautiful.

The *whap* of the Black Hawks’ blades came close. It was a nice sound. The sound of safety. The sound of brotherhood. The same kind of brotherhood he’d found here with his team.

With Trent.

The thought of Trent lit off a cluster of sparks in his chest.

Mitch crossed his arms on the roof of the car and peered in at Quaid. “Ty wants off my shit list. After this stunt, I might just let you take his place.”

“Yes,” Ty hissed behind Mitch, fist in the air.

Another man appeared, a man Quaid didn’t know, which made him instantly tense.

Quaid’s gaze found Jessica’s. “Gorin. You have to get to Gorin. I have to find Trent. I have to know about all those years—”

“Gorin’s dead.” The stranger delivered the information with a stern expression, but curious eyes.

Quaid’s stomach sank. “No.”

“I’m afraid so. I’m Owen Young.”

Quaid's hand tightened on Jessie's.

"It's okay," she said. "He's on our side."

"The asset—"

"Was Schaeffer's," he said. "Gorin died the same way Alsadani died. Who's Trent?"

"Partner. Need to bring him back."

"From where?"

"Punjab."

Owen looked at Jessica who said, "That will take some explanation."

"Can't wait. Let me know when we can sit down and hash this shit out. The sooner, the better." To Quaid, he said, "We'll find this Trent of yours." He straightened and addressed Mitch. "I'll clean this up. You all clear out and stay low profile, and when I say low, Foster—"

"I hear you. I hear you."

Owen put a finger to Mitch's chest. "Stay available."

"Yes, sir. You'll let me know about Dubrovsky and Schaeffer?"

"Yes, sir."

When Mitch stuck his head into the car again, he said, "Are you good to go or do you need medical? 'Cause if you need to go to the hospital, I'm going to have to pull all kinds of tricks out of my ass. Given your stellar healing powers, you should be able to handle it, right?"

"I'll be fine." He propped an elbow underneath himself. "What happened to Green and Schaeffer?"

"Green's dead. If you ask me, he got off too easy for an evil fuck. Schaeffer's headed to the hospital. I'm hoping he makes it so I can clip electrodes to his balls and get some questions answered. I'll be there if he survives. Me and all the legal action I can dream up between now and then."

His gaze rested on Jessica, and he tilted his head toward Quaid. "Is there anything really wrong with him?"

Her eyes danced to his as she sputtered, "That's a loaded question."

Quaid used the last bit of his strength to yank on the arm he still held, pulling her close enough to press his mouth to hers.

"I guess that answers my question," Mitch muttered. "Get your filthy, soaked asses in my car before the cops get extra nosey."

When Mitch disappeared, Jessica helped Quaid sit up.

"Gorin's dead." He met Jessica's gaze. "There's still so much I don't know."

She took his face in her hands. “We’ll find your answers. Gorin isn’t the only person who knows what happened to you. And there’s Trent. Owen will find him if Mitch doesn’t. Personally, I think they’re in a silent competition to see who can find him first.”

That eased Quaid’s mind a little, and hope and love rushed in. He kissed her. “I want to know about my past, and I want to find Trent, but what really matters from this day forward is making memories with you. New memories. *Our* memories.”

Her smile grew, her eyes filled with joy, and she nodded, pressing her forehead to his.

“One more question.” His warm breath brushed her cheek. “Why is your last name Fury and not Legend?”

She pulled back to look in his eyes. “Because we wanted to stay on the hazmat team together, and the department had a policy that spouses couldn’t be stationed at the same firehouse or placed on the same team. We had a small, quiet wedding and were keeping it secret for as long as it lasted.”

His mouth twisted up at one corner, and he cupped her face in his hand. “I love your name. Maybe we can use it to name our first baby girl. But, I want you to have my last name. Marry me, Jessie. Again,” he murmured, his heart beating in his throat. “I want to carry that day with me. Forever.”

She pulled back, smiling. “I will absolutely marry you—again. And we’ll make all new memories.”

Quaid kissed her, and when she looked at him again, her eyes glistening a warm, rich cinnamon brown, Quaid knew exactly where he would always belong.

SNEAK PEEK

WICKED WRATH

Heather Raiden sat on the floor of her darkened home on Lake Washington in Seattle staring out at the midnight blackness through her night-vision goggles. The man remained huddled in the compact speedboat he'd rented from a local outfitter under the name Dane Zimerelli. The same name he'd used for the rental car parked in the marina's lot.

Two nights. He'd been watching her house two nights in a row. Had dropped anchor in the perfect location to view Heather's living room, kitchen, and bedroom, all on the lake side of the property.

"I hope he's freezing his balls off out there."

At her elbow, Dexter picked up on the bitterness in her voice and whined. She ran her hand along the shepherd's silky-soft fur and looked into his golden-brown eyes with a heavy sigh. His brows moved with his darting gaze, making him look truly worried. He was an incredibly sensitive animal and frighteningly intelligent.

And her very best friend.

"Don't look at me like that. I can't just sit here and do nothing."

She reconsidered her options. The cops would brush her off. A private investigator would take time. Ignoring Zimerelli had potentially lethal consequences. And she'd spent seven long years preventing those lethal consequences.

Heather hurried through the darkness to her bedroom with Dex's nails clicking behind her on the hardwood. When she stepped through the door, he

pushed past her, jumped on the bed, and lay in an alert pose, head up and watching her every move. “Everything I’ve done will be wasted if I don’t act now. All my sacrifices...”

She closed her eyes, absorbing the weight of loss that always came with the thought. So many sacrifices. But only one she regretted.

Only one that haunted her.

Already dressed in black, Heather slipped on dark lightweight running shoes and tightened the laces. In the bathroom, she wrapped her long hair into a bun, her mind and body immediately slipping into training mode. Training she had, admittedly, hoped never to use. Training that was still just training because she’d never utilized it in real life. But she’d also known deep down she’d need it someday.

Because she’d known they would come after her.

Resigned, focused, she headed for the door leading to the garage and pulled her slim black jacket from the peg. She slipped it on, crouched in front of Dex standing faithfully at her feet, and hugged him tight.

“*Ya tebya lyublyu,*” she whispered, her throat closing around each Russian word and the reminder of the past she’d fought so hard to leave behind. “I love you so much, sweet boy,” she repeated in English with more emphasis, because once just didn’t feel like enough.

With a kiss to his muzzle, she stood and firmed her voice when she commanded him to protect the property. “*Zashchishchat.*”

In the garage, Heather located her black canvas duffel at the base of the stairs. Adrenaline fizzed through her blood. The duffel’s zipper ripped the silence, and tension pulled at Heather’s skin. She clenched a penlight between her teeth, pulled the SIG Sauer .45 semiauto from the bottom of the bag and checked the remaining contents—lock hacker, silencer, extra ammo, rags, bleach-laden wipes, latex gloves.

As she pressed the ignition of her BMW, Heather experienced a tangle of deep, complex emotions—fear, resignation, the dark thrill of the personal power she’d cultivated over the years, and anger over having to use such drastic and brutal measures to take back control over her life.

“Maybe there’s more of my family in me than I thought.”

Heather backed from the garage with the sick realization sticking to her like tar.

She left her sleepy Laurelhurst neighborhood for the streets bordering the University of Washington, still dotted with cars and pedestrians.

Fear drummed its fingers on the back of her neck. What-ifs teased her mind into tangles. If her worst fears came to fruition, Dex would go to her neighbor and her assets would be distributed among charitable organizations.

Heather located the stalker's rental and parked a block down, but as she turned off the car to wait, she realized that having her death in order didn't help her face the possibility.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Skye Jordan is the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of more than thirty novels.

When she's not writing, Skye loves to learn new things and enjoys staying active, so when she's not writing you're just as likely to find her in the ceramics studio as out rowing on the nearest lake or river.

She and her husband have two beautiful daughters and live in Oregon.

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