



K19 ALLIED INTELLIGENCE TEAM ONE

C O D E N A M E :

MAGNET

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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CODE NAME: MAGNET

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K19 Allied Intelligence Team One Book Five

Code Name: Magnet

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CODE NAME: MAGNET

A man of attraction.

A man full of lure and connection.

Magnet is the brawn behind the brains—and impossible to resist.

I'm more than muscle and mastery. I've got more than just my head in the game. We're so close to finding our target, so close to putting an end to the reign of one of the biggest human trafficking rings in the world. This is the worst time for my commander to add a green agent to my team, especially one who lacks self-confidence. I don't have the will or the manpower to train her, but there's something about the woman that attracts me like no other ever has.

Innocent people need me for protection, sanctuary, and I'm not going to lie, they need me for retaliation and redemption too. But there's something about this particular woman that has me on high alert. A handful? Maybe. Sexy? Definitely.

If there's one thing I know, it's the power of attraction. This is one connection we'll never relinquish.

MAGNET

Pride? Where in the hell had that come from? It was inappropriate for me to have such feelings just because the woman seated next to me was the first to voice the question we were all thinking.

She was a fellow agent, and not the best one I'd ever worked with. Sure, she had promise if she could get out of her own way and think like a regular intelligence officer instead of a honey trap. As her commander, I could help guide her, but personal feelings had no place in our professional roles.

"I may have missed something..." she'd begun. "But Xavier was raised as a Vella. Francesca referred to him as her grandson, and he referred to Charlene Vella-Borg as his aunt. Wouldn't it stand to reason his and Pharaoh's mother would be related to Francesca?"

Xavier Vella, the man she referred to, had been killed in an op in Dubai after a shoot-out with several coalition agents, including my closest friend, Zeppelin, and the woman who would soon be his wife, Verity.

While it wasn't yet confirmed, we believed Vella had traveled to Dubai to murder James Godwin, the former US ambassador to Malta, who'd been found dead the day before the shoot-out.

Nemesis, the commander of the UN Coalition Against Human Trafficking, had responded to Schön's question simply, saying that, yes, it did stand to reason Xavier Vella could be related to Francesca and her daughter, Charlene.

If we were able to prove he was, it would be the biggest lead in the investigation thus far.

Despite my resolve not to make this personal, I still leaned over and whispered to Schön, “Well done,” trying my damndest not to ogle her cleavage that was on full display.

It was the middle of January, one of the coldest months in Shere, England, where the coalition’s command center was located. And yet she—Schön, which meant beautiful in Swiss German—tended to wear low-cut blouses regardless of the outside temperatures. Not that indoors was much warmer. Typically, I wore a pullover to fight off the chill of the older dwelling.

“Thanks,” she replied, also in a whisper, leaning into me like I had her and making it impossible for me to keep my eyes diverted when her breasts spilled forward and I could see where they strained against her pink lace bra.

In the two months since Prisca “Schön” Baur was assigned to the UN’s Albanian task force, for which I served as commander, I’d become familiar with her vast array of brassieres. There had been many times I wondered if her choice of attire was primarily for my benefit.

However, regardless of whether her display of cleavage was intentional or not, I was her boss, and while every other man she’d ever worked with may have been eager to take advantage of what she’d “offered,” I *couldn’t*. It didn’t matter that I waged a daily battle against kissing her bow-shaped lips, running my finger along the lace of every bra I caught sight of, or wrapping my arms around her and grinding my hardness between her legs.

It made me feel like a lecher—the equivalent of a dirty old man—but not because we were far apart in age. Instead, it was due to my rank versus hers.

Had I acted on my desire for Schön, I could very well face disciplinary actions should she ever accuse me of unwanted sexual attention. Not that I truly feared she would.

More, it was my job to help her realize she didn’t have to use her body to advance in her career. Her intelligence, her intuition, and her savvy should be what she relied on.

If only I could set aside my attraction and see her as a protégé or even as a younger sister. Then maybe I could be what she needed me to be—her mentor.

“Magnet, may I have a word with the two of you?” Nemesis asked when the briefing ended. “Schön, you brought up a point that was the metaphoric

elephant in the room. It is imperative we seek DNA samples from both Francesca and her daughter in order to prove one way or another if Xavier ‘Sheka’ Vella and Valerie ‘Pharaoh’ Olin are a genetic match to either or both women. If so, I’m sure each of you understands what this would mean for our investigation into AMPS.”

The acronym represented one of the largest human trafficking rings in the world, one whose origins traced back decades, beginning with the man we believed had founded the organization—Salvatore “Cronos” Rávdos.

Based on Pharaoh’s assertion right before she’d died, he was her father. DNA testing showed Xavier was her brother, which meant they also shared a mother. Could either Francesca or her daughter be that woman? My gut told me it wasn’t Nonna, as everyone referred to Francesca, simply due to her age. But I had an equally difficult time believing Charlene could be, given the woman we sought was a criminal mastermind, and she was the least likely person to hold such power.

“The agents already on the island of Gozo, where Francesca and Charlene are believed to be, are both familiar to our suspects. Schön, you are not. Neither is Michelangelo. I’m sending the two of you in undercover to get close enough to the women to obtain something we can use for DNA testing.”

“What about me?” I asked.

“It isn’t necessary for you to travel with them.”

“I’d prefer to do so. Michelangelo is needed in Tropea.”

Nemesis cocked her head. “Very well. Speak with Poseidon and Ares. Delfino and Atticus are the agents I mentioned. The three of you can determine whether you want them to remain.”

I nodded, thankful Nem hadn’t confronted me as to why I insisted on deploying on this op. If she had, I don’t know what I would’ve said. My request was illogical. As much as I knew I had to keep my hands off Schön, I also knew being away from her for any length of time was something I couldn’t endure.

“Magnet?” I heard her say in a voice laden with insecurity.

“Come with me.”

Her round eyes belied the fake smile she plastered on her face when I led her into the solarium, where she and I worked most often.

“Listen—”

“Did I do something wrong? Or is it that you’re afraid I will?” she asked

before I could allay her fears.

“My reason for telling Nemesis I would deploy to Gozo in Michelangelo’s place has nothing to do with you,” I lied. What I said next, though, was the truth. “This op belongs to the Albanian task force, and thus, it’s my decision who deploys. This investigation could lead to us finding the person represented by the A in the AMPS acronym. If successful, it will result in our taking the organization down once and for all.”

“I understand.”

“This is important, Schön. I cannot stress it enough. This is *our* team’s op, and I’ll be damned if I’ll let it fall apart before we get started. In fact, if I deem it necessary, I’ll call for Rogue and Ehren from our team to replace Delfino and Atticus, the agents already deployed.”

While she accepted my response, her skepticism regarding her abilities remained apparent.

What could I say to convince her otherwise? *Nothing*.

I could hardly tell her I got up every morning anxious to see her. I couldn’t admit that since she arrived in Shere, I woke at zero five hundred, telling myself to wait until at least six to get out of bed, when prior to her being on my task force, I could easily have slept until nine. For God’s sake, in just the time we both slept, I missed her. What would days apart be like? But could I confess any of it? Of course I couldn’t.

“You’re certain?” she said in the accent that drove me mad with desire. Maybe some would’ve preferred the softer tones of Italian or French. Maybe before I met Schön, I would’ve too. Now, I found no other intonation as sexy as hers.

“I thought I might start putting notes together. Nemesis wasn’t specific about when I’ll—I mean when we’ll—leave for Gozo,” said Schön.

“I would predict as soon as travel arrangements can be made.”

“Is that something I should take care of?”

I fielded such questions day in, day out. “If there is something you should be doing, as your commander, I will be the one to assign the task. Am I understood?”

She lowered her gaze. “Yes, sir.”

“Schön?”

As I’d told her many times over, I expected her to look at me when we were conversing.

When her cheeks flushed, I wanted to cup her face and tell her it was all

right, that, more than her to be subservient, I longed to stare deeply into her cinnamon-colored doe eyes.

“I’ve never been to Malta. What’s it like?” she asked, thankfully shifting our conversation in a more positive direction.

“Italy, the southern part, as far as a similar country. It’s also a lot like Greece. The water is crystal clear and, at times, looks deep sapphire blue and, at others, teal green. There are rolling hills and centuries-old rock formations.”

If we hadn’t been hunting a sex-slave trafficker each time the coalition visited the island, I would’ve said it was peaceful. Even magical. There were trails to hike, endless water for scuba-diving, temple ruins to explore, and fabulous food to taste.

Nemesis hadn’t mentioned what Schön’s and Michelangelo’s covers would be, but like Zeppelin and Verity had been assigned in St. Moritz, a newly married couple on holiday would make sense. Which meant if he went, he, rather than me, would be experiencing the Mediterranean archipelago with her, and that, I wouldn’t stand for. I couldn’t. There had to be a way for me to work it so I’d be undercover with her.

“I’ll check with Nemesis about our itinerary,” I announced, even though she was not the first person I intended to speak with.

“I’ll work on my notes,” said Schön.

I nodded once and left the solarium in search of Zeppelin and Verity. Actually, just Verity, but since the two were inseparable of late, I’d have to endure his taunts in regard to the request I was about to make.

“Verity? A moment?”

She looked up from her laptop. “Of course. What can I do for you?”

“I’m not sure how to ask this.”

She raised a brow.

“It’s about disguises.”

She smiled, perhaps in relief. “Which just so happens to be my area of expertise.”

“Do you, uh, I mean, is there a way we could make me look less like me?”

“For the Gozo op?”

“Yes, but I have no idea how long we might need to be there. Possibly for some length of time.”

“It could be as simple as cutting and dying your hair, shaving your

goatee, and putting in contacts to change your eye color.”

“Would I be unrecognizable?” I asked.

“If you mean to Francesca and Charlene Vella, you most likely would be. You weren’t in direct contact with them, were you?”

“I was not.”

“The things I mentioned would be far easier than wearing a wig, applying makeup, or using prosthetics.”

“What’s this?” asked Zeppelin, setting a cup of tea in front of Verity.

Rather than answer him, she turned to me.

“A disguise for Gozo,” I reluctantly admitted.

He nodded without the slightest sign of a smirk. I wondered if his lack of reaction was for Verity’s benefit. Or perhaps it was due to the one and only time I unleashed my anger on the man who’d been my best friend for years. Was that why he hesitated to poke fun at me? On the other hand, could it be that he recognized something had changed with me, not on the surface, but deep inside, in a place I could never let anyone see? Schön, especially.

“Michelangelo should remain on the Calabrian Syndicate investigation. In fact, I was looking to discuss that very subject with Nemesis,” I added.

Verity appeared lost in thought. “Another option is to grow your beard longer. The shape of your face is distinctive. It will mean coloring it every few days, though. That, and your hair.”

“At his age, he’ll need to learn soon, anyway,” Zep said, nudging me with his elbow.

“Yeah? Do you even know what your natural hair color is?”

He wrapped his arm around Verity and nuzzled her neck. “I don’t, but she does.”

I breathed a sigh of relief on two fronts. First, Zep was giving me shit like he always did. Second, none of it was about Schön.

“Need some backup?” he asked when I thanked Verity and looked around for Nemesis.

“I’ve got it.”

“I’ll come along anyway. There’s something I want to talk to you about.”

I nodded, wishing whatever it was could wait. We rounded a corner, and he stopped.

“I want to apologize about the things I said that day.”

That day. When I punched him harder than I had anyone in my life. Not once, but twice.

“I was out of line, and I’m sorry.”

“Apology accepted.”

He put his hand on my shoulder. “I get it, you know? Just like you did before Verity and I left for St. Moritz.”

“It isn’t the same.”

His head cocked. “I’ve called you a lot of things over the years, but never before has it been a liar.”

“Zep, come on.”

“What you’re feeling is the same, Magnet. The sooner you quit trying to convince yourself otherwise, the easier you’ll sleep at night.” He squeezed my shoulder and walked away.

My friend hadn’t needed to be specific about his reference. I’d known he was crazy about Verity long before he was ready to admit it. Unlike me, when I called him out on it, he’d responded honestly.

Why wasn’t I able to?

SCHÖN

“*A rgh,*” I groaned and put my head in my hands when Magnet left the room. Why did every brain cell I possessed seem to die off whenever he was near?

Justin “Magnet” Magnussen was my commander. I’d finally been given a chance to prove my abilities in intelligence after being appointed to the Albanian task force of a UN coalition, and instead of impressing the agent who could advance my career, I turned into a dolt whenever he was near.

Truthfully, I’d never been attracted to any man the way I was to him. Magnet wasn’t just the handsomest person I’d ever seen; he was smart and funny too. But more, he was honorable. And kind.

He *saw* me. It had been many years since anyone had. My parents had, but they’d been gone a long time. There’d been another woman, someone I considered a mentor and friend, but shortly before I left Switzerland for Shere, it seemed we’d had a falling out. It still hurt to think that perhaps she hadn’t *seen* me in the way I always thought she did.

I met Mrs. Strousberg when I was fourteen years old. Her first name was Carissa, but I’d never called her that, even as an adult.

My great-uncle, Henri “Baissier” Marchand, was named my conservator after my parents died when I was nine. He was a single, up-and-coming diplomat at the time, completely unequipped to take care of a young girl. Instead, he’d made arrangements for a couple who lived in St. Moritz—

where my parents and I had resided—to become my guardians.

The Müllers were nice enough people; however, when I reached my teens and began acting out, as many girls that age do, they'd contacted Uncle Henri, saying they could no longer be responsible for me.

His solution had been to arrange for me to attend boarding school. The best in the world was located in Leysin, approximately five hours from St. Moritz. While it was where he wanted to send me, the cost was prohibitive. Even the money I'd inherited from my parents, as well as the settlement I'd received after their deaths, wasn't enough. Rather than choose another less costly school, Uncle Henri had contacted Mrs. Strousberg.

She was the widow of a Greek billionaire, a shipping magnate, who had homes around the world, including one in St. Moritz, as well as in Paris, where my uncle resided at the time. He'd heard through diplomatic sources that Mrs. Strousberg, who had been orphaned herself, offered educational scholarships for girls like me.

From the moment we met, Mrs. Strousberg and I had seemed to hit it off. In fact, she'd occasionally visit me at the school in Leysin.

After graduating from Leysin, she'd arranged for me to attend the University of Geneva, where I majored in international relations and diplomacy. Once I'd obtained my degree, Mrs. Strousberg suggested I come work for her. I had other ideas, though. My dream was to go into intelligence.

While she'd initially appeared disappointed, she suggested I ask Uncle Henri to help me find a position. Baissier called upon his good friend Oskar "Gebierter" Schmid to give me a job with Swiss intelligence.

His error was in asking the *führer*, as most of those under his command referred to him, to give me assignments where I'd be in little danger. In other words, cared for, looked out for. Schmid had groomed me, somewhat like Mrs. Strousberg had, saying he knew the perfect field of specialization for me.

Three years later, when Uncle Henri finally discovered the kind of assignments Schmid had given me, he pulled me from the mission I was on and arranged for me to join the Swiss task force of a UN coalition.

Now, here I was, two months later, trying to figure out how to do a job I wasn't trained to do. Except for intelligence gathering, of course, but the methodologies I'd previously utilized wouldn't work in my current role.

"Change of plans," said Magnet, returning to the solarium before I'd made a single note about the upcoming op.

My first thought was I'd been removed from the assignment, but I knew better than to ask if that was the case. Questions like that irritated Magnet.

"I'm replacing Michelangelo."

My eyes widened, not sure what to make of his announcement. Hadn't Nemesis specifically said that neither Francesca Vella nor her daughter would recognize the other agent or me but might him?

"Verity has agreed to craft a disguise effective enough that neither of our suspects will be able to place me."

"Okay," I mumbled, unsure what else to say.

"I hope you're not too disappointed," he said, winking.

Relieved was more like it. Not because I didn't want to work with the other agent. I just dreaded being away from Magnet.

"Oh, good. You're both here," said Verity, walking through the door a couple of minutes after Magnet had.

"I've been thinking about your request, and while it is the easiest disguise to maintain, it might be difficult for you to do it alone," she said to him.

"Does that mean you've come up with a different idea?" he asked.

"Not necessarily. More, I was thinking Schön could help."

Both turned in my direction.

"Of course," I said. "What can I do?"

"If Magnet agrees, I can show you how to apply the hair dye."

When I glanced at Magnet, my heart sank and I felt nauseated. Horror was the best word to describe his expression, as if the idea of my assistance was the last thing he'd ever agree to.

"I, uh, don't think that will work," I said, brushing around the two of them. Once in the hallway, I found the closest lavatory and ducked inside, thankfully before anyone saw the tears that threatened to fall.

I grabbed a tissue and blotted my eyes, hoping to keep the mascara from smearing underneath them. Once I felt as though I'd gotten my emotions under control, I turned my back to the mirror and rested against the sink's counter.

Why did Magnet want to replace Michelangelo on this op if the idea of me helping with his disguise caused him so much distress? There was really only one logical explanation. He'd been forced to accept my assignment to the Albanian task force, and now that we were about to work an actual op together, he realized he couldn't abide it.

As much as I hated to do what I knew was my only option, I left the

lavatory and went in search of Nemesis.

“Schön? Is everything all right?” she asked when I approached.

“Can we speak privately?”

She stood and motioned for me to follow her. I was relieved when she stopped at the door to the library rather than suggest we speak in the solarium.

“What’s wrong?” she asked after closing the door behind us.

“As much as I’ve appreciated your willingness to honor my uncle’s request to assign me to one of the coalition’s task forces, I think we both know it isn’t a good fit.”

She motioned to a chair, and we took a seat. “I know nothing of the kind. What’s this about?”

I’d hoped she’d accept my pronouncement and wish me well, not ask me why I’d said it. “As I said, I appreciate the opportunity you so graciously offered me. However, I am not qualified to carry out the objectives of the upcoming op.”

She sat back in her chair. “I disagree. You are more than qualified, Schön.”

My eyes scrunched. “Ma’am, please. Baissier will not be upset if I look for something else to do.”

“This has nothing whatsoever to do with your uncle. Now, what’s the *real* problem?”

“I don’t believe the Albanian task force commander shares your confidence in my qualifications.”

This time, she raised a brow. “Is that right?”

“No, it is not right.” I hadn’t heard the door open or Magnet step inside, but I certainly heard him slam it closed.

“Ugh,” I groaned inwardly, wishing Nemesis had locked the door.

“Magnet, can you give us a moment, please?” Nemesis asked.

“I will not. If Schön intends to leave the task force, it is her duty to inform me, the commander.”

Nemesis turned to me. “He’s right. If your decision is to leave, you must follow the chain of command. I have no doubt you know this, Schön.”

I lowered my gaze. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Fix this,” I heard her snap at Magnet on her way out of the library. I glanced over my shoulder and saw him close the door behind her.

“Schön—”

“Wait.” I took a deep breath and squared my shoulders. Since I was leaving anyway, I had nothing to lose in being honest. “I don’t fit in here, Magnet. It was clear I wouldn’t have on the Swiss task force, and I don’t on yours, either.” I shook my head and laughed, but not because I found anything amusing about the conversation I was in the midst of. “Believe me, I’ve tried the best I know how, which is precisely the opposite as I should have done.”

“May I speak now?”

Since he couldn’t very well fire me after I’d already made my intention to leave known, I didn’t bother trying to be civil. His reaction to Verity’s suggestion didn’t just hurt; the disrespect he’d shown me infuriated me. “If you must.”

“Schön.”

I folded my arms. “What?”

“Look at me.”

“You’re no longer my commander. Please get on with whatever you have to say. I need to pack my things.” I stood and took two steps toward the door.

“*Stop!* Do not take another step. This conversation is not over.”

I don’t know who I was more disgusted with. Myself for reacting to his order or him for issuing it in the first place. “I’ve resigned. I no longer answer to you.”

“I haven’t accepted your resignation.” He shook his head. “In part, since you went around me to submit it.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m leaving.” I said with my back to him.

“Schön, please sit down.” Magnet stalked over and put his hand above my head on the door. Rarely was he this near, so close I could feel heat rolling from his broad expanse of shoulders and muscles and breathe in his scent—a heady mix of vanilla, sandalwood, and cedarwood brought alive by vetiver.

My eyes rolled back in my head as desire flooded my body. Rather than take the seat he demanded, I turned my body to face him, wishing that, instead of trying to leave the room, I could rest both hands on pecs so powerful they strained against his pullover. He towered over me, forcing me to bend my neck in order to look into his amber eyes. I willed him to kiss me. Instead, he eased away and pointed to a chair.

“I am incredulous that you, or any agent, would consider resigning an enviable position with seemingly so little cause. It is the epitome of childish

unprofessionalism,” he said as I sat in a different chair than the one he’d pointed to.

“Are you finished?” I asked.

“Quite the contrary. I’ve just begun.”

I thought about getting up and stalking out like I’d intended to a moment ago, but given Magnet stood between me and the only exit, I bided my time. The man typically paced as he spoke. It was only a matter of minutes before I’d have a clear path.

“When Nemesis came to me and requested to assign you to my task force, it was with the understanding that it would be my job to mentor you as I would any other green agent.”

I tightened my folded arms. “I’ve been an agent for three years.”

“Not at this level, as you are abundantly aware. You heard Nem when she left the room. She told me to fix this. Do not throw this chance away because you misread my reaction or anyone else’s. You’re better than that, Schön.”

“Clearly, I’m not.”

“You’re saying you’d give up a shot to bring down a human trafficking ring the coalition has been investigating for months? To be on the inside of finding the last puzzle piece we need in order to bring an end to their reign of terror? Because you raised your hand in today’s briefing and asked the question most of us were thinking, you put yourself front and center with Nemesis. When it came time to assign the op, you were at the forefront of her mind and, thus, are being given the opportunity of a lifetime. Should this op be successful, you will have proven yourself to be an agent worthy of the job you were appointed to do.”

While Magnet’s *pep talk* was insulting, I had to concede he was right about this being the chance of a lifetime, one in which I could prove I was more than a honey trap. More than someone whose sole weapon against the criminals we sought was sexpionage.

“Why did you insinuate yourself into the assignment?” I asked.

“I’ve already explained why.”

“Here’s what I don’t understand. Why did you insist on replacing Michelangelo if working with me is so distasteful to you?”

“Working with you isn’t distasteful.”

“Then, why did you appear angry when Verity suggested I help with your disguise?”

“You misread my reaction.”

“I would prefer the original plan. Neither Francesca Vella nor her daughter have seen Michelangelo or me. It will be easier.”

“Not for me, it won’t,” he said before stalking toward the library door. “We deploy in one hour. Be ready,” he added over his shoulder as he left the room.

MAGNET

I'd come within a hair's breadth of admitting to Schön why I reacted the way I had. If I hadn't bitten my tongue against the confession, I would've been forced to recuse myself from the op.

When Verity suggested she help apply the hair dye that would be part of my disguise, the first thing my mind had conjured was Schön, standing behind me, her breasts pressed against my back, her fingers woven in my hair.

No doubt, the look on my face had been one of mortification, given my body's natural response to picturing such a scene. I was immediately hard as stone with nowhere to hide the lower half of my body.

Deciphering Verity's reaction when Schön had stormed out of the solarium proved impossible. Was it pity she felt for me? Or Schön? Maybe it was for both of us. Rather than engage, I'd left the room, closed the door, and leaned up against the wall in the hallway, trying to get myself together before I apologized.

Once I reached the situation room, Schön wasn't in sight.

"Did you see where she went?" I asked Zeppelin.

"Library with Nem," he said without my needing to explain who I meant. I'd opened the door in time to hear Nemesis ask what "the problem" was.

Schön's response angered me. "I don't believe the Albanian task force commander shares your confidence in my qualifications."

Did I have the right to feel indignant? I was the one who'd reacted badly.

I had two choices. I could confess, thus ruining any chance that Schön and I could continue working together. Or I could turn things around and spin it that Schön's response was unprofessional.

I'd chosen the low road. It was a wanker move, designed to get what I wanted without having to admit that I, like many men she'd encountered thus far in her career, saw her in a purely sexual way. Except that wasn't the only way I saw her. Not even close. Could I admit any of it when we were about to deploy?

Instead, it was about damage control. *I'd* broken her down, and I would be the one to build her back up by resuming my role as her commander and mentor.

As I left the library, I told myself it was imperative I curb my physical attraction to her. It needed to end immediately. It was a mindset I had the power to muster. I'd overcome far more difficult challenges in my career.

I WAS ON MY WAY OUT OF THE MAIN RESIDENCE, INTENDING TO HEAD TO THE cottage where I stayed while in Shere, when Verity stepped in front of me.

"Yes?" I asked.

"We need to finish our discussion about your disguise."

"Right."

"Will Schön be helping?"

I shook my head. "I can handle it."

"Dying your hair is harder than you think," said Zep, joining the conversation.

"Sod off," I muttered. "Um, not you, Verity."

She smiled. "I knew you weren't speaking to me. Either way, I've put together a kit with instructions. Let me know if you have questions." She handed me a bag before walking away.

"Are you all right?" Zep asked.

"I'll be fine."

"I heard Schön quit."

"You heard wrong, not that you should've heard anything at all." It burned me up that there was chatter about my team.

"Nemesis discussed it with me privately, given I had a similar experience."

"As I said, she's not leaving the coalition."

“Magnet—”

“Let it go, Zep,” I said, remembering he’d said the same to me when I confronted him about Verity.

“If you need to talk —”

“I don’t,” I snapped, stalking across the lawn to the cottage.

After stuffing my things and the items Verity had given me into a bag, I sat on the edge of the bed, leaned forward, and put my head in my hands, wishing I could sort through how I was feeling. Perhaps being alone for a bit would give me the space I needed to pull my head out of my arse and go back to being the damned commander.

My respite was short-lived when I heard my mobile vibrate with an alert from Nem. I swiped the screen and read the brief outlining the objectives of the Gozo op as well as my role and that of Schön.

I wasn’t surprised to learn we would be going undercover as a couple on their honeymoon in Malta—specifically on the island of Gozo. While it was a repeat of Zeppelin and Verity’s op, the type of assignment was common, particularly when a mission required going to a romantic destination.

We’d be traveling via private aircraft, departing at twenty-one hundred hours. Rogue would transport us to Gatwick as soon as we were ready to leave. However, since Delfino and Atticus were already on the island, there was no need for Rogue or Ehren to go with us.

The notes continued to say we were booked in the grand suite at the island’s most exclusive resort. In addition to a spectacular view of the sea, it boasted two bedrooms, a separate living room, and a “luxurious” bathroom.

Nemesis also confirmed Francesca’s restaurant, Nonna Vella’s, had reopened since her return from Mallorca, giving us the perfect opportunity to interact with both her and Charlene Vella-Borg—who intel verified was working there with her mother. The length of our stay would depend on how quickly we could secure DNA samples for both women.

I put my laptop back in its case and was about to pick my bag up and head to the command center when I heard a knock at the door. Assuming it was Rogue checking to see when I’d be ready to leave, I was surprised to find Schön outside instead.

“I was hoping we could chat before we leave.”

“Of course.” Since we were both wearing jackets, I motioned to the two chairs on the cottage’s porch.

“I apologize for earlier,” she began.

I leaned forward, rested my elbows on my knees, and turned my head to face her.

“I know it was unprofessional. My reaction, that is.”

“Schön, there will be missteps on both our parts. When it happens, we need to find a way to communicate before it blows up like it did today.”

“I do appreciate the opportunity to be part of the Albanian task force.”

Many of the words I’d said to her earlier echoed in my head, but none more so than when I said she needed to prove herself worthy of the appointment she was given. It was a terrible thing to say. Nemesis would have stood up against Baissier if she didn’t feel comfortable assigning his niece a role in the coalition.

“I owe you an apology. What I said about you proving yourself worthy was wrong. You are already deserving. This is one of the most important and significant ops of the entire AMPS mission. If Nemesis didn’t believe you could handle it, she never would’ve assigned you in the first place.”

“Do *you* believe I can handle it, or are you going with me instead of Michelangelo because you don’t?”

“You asked me the same question earlier —”

“This time, I’d appreciate it if you would give me an honest answer.”

I turned my head and looked out at the grounds of the Trace estate, trying to come up with a response that was honest but wouldn’t require me telling her the real reason I’d demanded the change. I took a deep breath and returned my gaze to hers. “You and I are going to make a good team. We aren’t there yet, but I can see it happening.”

She nodded. “Is that all?”

Maybe the day would come when I could admit that, while every word I said was true, deep down, my reasons were entirely personal. “For now.”

“It looks like Rogue is ready to leave.”

“Right. Do you need help with your things?” I asked.

“Thanks, but they’re already in the SUV.”

“I need a minute. Please let Rogue know I’m on my way.”

After Schön stood and walked down the porch steps, I went inside. As I grabbed my bag from the bed, I caught my reflection in the mirror above the dresser. I stopped and took a good, long look.

I couldn’t remember many times when I’d studied my reflection and was as disgusted by what I saw as today. It wasn’t about being vain; it was about being proud of the decisions I’d made, the commitments I’d honored, and the

way I'd treated people. Sure, there were times when I was an immature asshole, like when I gave Zeppelin shit about whatever random thing I could come up with. We were best mates. The difference was, he knew I was joking and vice versa. It was never done to hurt his feelings.

On the days when I didn't feel great about myself or my actions, the yardstick I used to measure myself as a man wasn't my own; it was that of my grandfather. If he were the one staring back at me, would he be proud? Tonight, he wouldn't.

Papa, as I called him, would be most disappointed about the way I treated Schön. If I told him my lies were to protect her, he would've scoffed.

As I stood looking into my own eyes, I thought about what he'd say.

You can show her how you see her differently than the men who came before you. That your attraction to her is based on more than her pretty face and her desirable body. I know you, Justin. She could be the most gorgeous woman you've ever seen, yet if what was on the inside was not good and kind, you wouldn't look twice at her.

I could hear his voice inside my head as clearly as if he were standing in front of me, and I felt ashamed. What I didn't know how to do was make it right. If only Papa were here and I could ask him.

I CARRIED MY THINGS TO THE SUV, CONFUSED AS TO WHY NEITHER SCHÖN nor Rogue were there, waiting. I tossed my bag in the vehicle and was headed inside to ask when the door opened.

"Hey, Mag. There's been a change of plans," Rogue announced.

I followed him to Nemesis, who waited with Schön and Ehren.

"What's this about a different plan?" I asked, annoyed that it appeared I was the last to be informed.

"I've spoken with Cayman, and he's concerned about your undercover role, given you were at his wedding, where Francesca was in attendance," Nemesis began. "He also mentioned that, while no one saw Charlene that day, it doesn't mean she wasn't watching. Once he brought both points to my attention, I concurred."

"What is the alternate plan?" I asked, feeling my annoyance morphing into anger.

"Rather than you and Schön going in as a married couple on their honeymoon, you and the rest of your team will be two couples on holiday. Rogue and Schön are one. You and Ehren are the other." She looked up when

Verity entered the room. “You’re here. Perfect timing.”

Verity approached me specifically. “Magnet, rather than the disguise we intended, we’re going to go with something slightly more dramatic.”

“Nemesis, a word?” I snapped, my head pivoting in her direction.

“Magnet—”

“A *word*, Nem.”

Her eyes opened wide, but she nodded. “If you’ll please excuse us,” she said to the others in the room before turning to me. “I’ll cut to the chase since there is a plane on standby. Why are you making an issue of this?”

Why was I? My indignation suddenly felt overblown. “I’m unaccustomed to being the last informed about an op I own.”

Nemesis rested her chin on her hand and studied me. “This isn’t like you, Magnet. What’s really going on?”

“I am the commander of the Albanian task force. If there is an op to be crafted, I will be the one to do it,” I responded honestly.

“My apologies for the way I went about this. However, time is of the essence, and I made a decision based on what is best for the mission itself, not just the op. That is my job. Now, what is your specific issue?”

I didn’t want Schön paired with Rogue. I didn’t even want him to travel with us to Gozo. Or Ehren. I wanted Schön to myself. I wanted time alone with her like we’d had when we went to the States a few weeks ago and met first with Baissier, then with the Justice Department. Had I said any of that, I would’ve come across like a child pitching a fit of temper.

“I will accept your apology and ask that you respect the chain of command in the future,” I said instead.

She raised a brow. “I will, Magnet. Now, may we get back to it?”

“Very well.”

Rather than continuing to look like a jackass, I went in search of the others. “We’re ready,” I said, wishing I hadn’t glanced at a wide-eyed Schön.

Verity cleared her throat. “Intel suggests you may be more recognizable than we originally thought. Therefore, as I said a few minutes ago, the disguise I chose for you is a bit more dramatic.”

“What is that?” I asked, pointing to a large bag from which she pulled several items.

“As I told Zeppelin, it is often easier to add than it is to take away.”

The man she spoke of walked in behind her and flexed the muscles of both arms. “No disguising these guns,” he said before leaning in to kiss her

cheek.

“Right. Which is why I’ve prepared these prosthetics for you. And this is gray hair powder.”

After having made an arse of myself earlier, I stifled my dismay as I realized what she was suggesting. I was to be undercover as an older gentleman of, err, considerable weight.

Given Ehren was going undercover as my wife, her disguise was also as an older person. However, her slim figure, apparently, wasn’t a hindrance.

“Sorry, Mag, but your muscles are more pronounced than even Zeppelin’s,” Verity explained.

There were several taunting comments I was tempted to make. However, again, my earlier behavior was mortifying enough.

“As I said, you’ll be going undercover as two couples. You and Ehren will be disguised as Schön’s parents, traveling with her and her husband. That way, we’re able to book a family suite without drawing attention,” Nemesis explained.

Zeppelin put his hand on my shoulder. “How are you doing, mate?” he asked under his breath.

I looked at him with scrunched eyes and turned my back to the others. “Do you not recall what happened the last time you got on my bad side?” I said barely above a whisper.

“Do we need to do a dry run, or do you think you’ll be able to handle the suit?” Verity asked when I turned back around.

“I can handle it.”

My eyes met Schön’s, and I realized she was trying her damndest not to laugh. I leveled a glare at her. “Not a word out of you, *daughter*, or I’ll take you over my knee.”

When her eyes opened wider and her cheeks turned a lovely shade of pink, I wished I’d agreed to trying on the suit. At least then, my cock’s response to her reaction would’ve been less apparent.

“Shall we begin?” Verity asked, motioning for Ehren and me to take a seat. “Rather than dye, we’ll use powder for your hair and beard,” she said, handing each of us a container and a brush. “Ehren, it will be easier if you apply the powder to Magnet’s hair —”

“I’ll do it,” said Schön, stepping forward and plucking each item from Verity’s hands.

“Uh, very well. Rogue, would you like to assist Ehren?”

“It would be my pleasure,” the buff and often gruff American former special forces agent responded, seemingly unfazed by Verity’s request.

“The more difficult part will be the makeup,” she added once the gray powder had been applied to her satisfaction.

“I can handle this part,” said Ehren, reviewing Verity’s step-by-step instructions.

My brow must have shot up when I read the details listed on the piece of paper she placed in front of me.

“Don’t worry. I’ll help,” Schön leaned into me and whispered. It was my fantasy of her breasts pressed against my back playing out in real life with an audience that included my best friend. The one who easily read my every expression, then burst out laughing.

SCHÖN

I knew Zeppelin was laughing at Magnet, yet I still felt the ache of embarrassment. I'd spent my life experiencing it. I blinked away the tears that invariably came when I believed I was the butt of someone's joke. It was only looking down at the warmth in Magnet's eyes when he turned to face me that reminded me where and who I was, and that if his friend did disparage me, he'd do what he'd done a few weeks ago.

He had no idea I'd been watching and listening when he led Zeppelin out the front door of the command center and took him by the throat.

"She was a fucking honey trap agent, Mag. You can't tell me—" Zeppelin's words were cut off when Magnet threw the hardest punch I'd ever seen, hitting him square in the nose and mouth. With it, came notice that he wouldn't put up with Zep's shit any longer.

"Since you're still my friend, I'm going to give you one warning. Do not disparage Schön ever again. She's a good agent, and she's struggling enough with overcoming her reputation," he'd said.

I still remembered my mortification when Zeppelin responded with, "So you are fucking her."

Without as much as another word, Magnet had punched him again, this time so hard in the stomach that Zeppelin vomited.

While I'd wanted to throw my arms around him and thank him for defending me, I hid when Magnet came back inside. I joined him in the

kitchen a few minutes later and acted as though I was unaware of what had transpired.

“Look at your hand,” I gasped when I realized he was holding it under the faucet as blood flowed from his knuckles.

“It’s nothing,” he snapped before abruptly leaving the room.

Now, I wished I’d thanked him that day.

I realized he was still staring up at me while I held the eyeliner pencil Verity said would create the appearance of deep wrinkles beneath layers of foundation and face powder.

The simple act of putting one hand on his shoulder to steady myself sent a flood of heat through my body.

“Thank you for helping me with this even though I was a total arsehole about it earlier,” he said quietly enough only for me to hear him.

“I’ve a bit of practice with makeup,” I responded as I pressed the pencil into the natural lines of his forehead. “Sorry,” I said when he winced. “Your skin is quite dry. I reached for the container of cold cream I should’ve known to apply first.

“That feels good,” he whispered as I used my fingertips to massage the moisturizer into his face.

“Good thinking, Schön,” said Verity, walking over to me. “It will also help when it’s time to take the makeup off.”

“How often do I do that?” Magnet asked.

“Daily,” Verity and I responded at the same time.

“*Daily?*”

“Now, you see what we go through in an effort to look pretty every day.” I picked up the pencil again, and this time, the lines I drew were much smoother.

“You don’t need it,” he whispered.

I was focused on his forehead but glanced into his eyes. “Thanks, but you haven’t seen me without it.”

When I placed my hand on his shoulder again to complete the area around his nose, he took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“Sorry. I’m sure I’ll get faster at this with more practice.”

His eyes closed. “No hurry.”

“Actually, there is,” said Nemesis. “You’ll need to finish this on the plane.”

“Sure, um, of course,” I said, realizing Ehren had finished and all eyes

were on Magnet and me.

He leaned forward and looked in the mirror in front of him on the table. “Interesting,” he muttered. “Just with the gray hair and beard, I look like my grandfather.”

“*Grandfather?* I may have overdone it. I’m so sorry.”

My hand shook as I tried to put the lid back on the container of powder.

Magnet touched my wrist with his fingertips. “Let me.”

“I should wash up,” I mumbled, walking out of the room and into the lavatory after setting the container on the table. Why had I volunteered to help with Magnet’s hair and makeup? I knew it wasn’t a good idea to be so close to him, to touch him, or to lean into him like I had. The simple act of massaging the cream into his face had resulted in my heart pounding. His periodic quick intakes of breath had me fantasizing he was as affected as I was. Which was preposterous. Wasn’t it?

Remembering we had to leave, I quickly washed and dried my hands, then returned to the room where we’d all been gathered a few minutes ago. Only Zeppelin remained, and he was the last person I wanted to talk to. He’d made his opinion of me abundantly clear the day I witnessed Magnet defend me.

I put my jacket on and grabbed my bag, ignoring him.

“Schön?” he said as I was on my way out.

I wanted to pretend I hadn’t heard him, but as long as I remained either on the Albanian task force or in another role in the coalition, I would have to work with him. “Yes?” I responded, glancing over my shoulder.

“Stay alive, Schön.”

I turned to look at him, confused by his words.

“It’s what we say whenever someone is leaving on an op.”

“I see. Um, thanks.”

“I’ll walk with you,” he offered.

“That won’t be necessary.”

“Given I’m driving you and your team to Gatwick, it is.”

“Right,” I muttered. When I got outside, Magnet was holding the rear passenger door open. I peeked into the vehicle and saw Ehren in the third row and Rogue in the front seat. “Thanks,” I said, not taking the hand he offered, knowing every time I touched him would result in the same breathlessness.

“I’ll go around,” he said when I was about to scoot across to the opposite side.

I folded my hands in my lap and closed my eyes, reminding myself I was a different kind of agent than I'd been before. My job had been to get information out of men who would essentially tell me anything I wanted to know if it meant they could have sex with me.

Very few times, it had gone that far. Usually, I could collect what I needed and be gone before the mark, as they were called, realized what had happened.

It had been difficult for me to accept that a man would desire me enough to pass on classified information he'd made a commitment not to share. Yes, my breasts were overly large and the rest of me usually referred to as voluptuous, but I'd always wondered how desire could cloud a person's judgment that much.

It was something Mrs. Strousberg had taught me, though. "Like me, you are a very beautiful woman. Use it to get what you want. Other women are not as fortunate. You and I can wiggle a finger, and men will drop to their knees in front of us, willing to do anything we ask of them."

While I had no state secrets to share with Magnet, once in his arms, I'd answer any question he asked, no matter how much I knew I shouldn't. The predator would become the prey. Not that I'd ever be with him that way.

I turned my head and looked out the window, feeling my cheeks heat in embarrassment as I remembered the night I'd attempted to make a pass at Zeppelin. He'd turned me down in a way no one else ever had.

Something had changed in me that night. I realized I no longer wanted men to drop to their knees, willing to do my bidding in a way that Mrs. Strousberg had encouraged me to take advantage of. I wanted to be like Verity. Respected for how good she was at her job.

"Argh," I groaned under my breath, wishing there was a way to wipe the memory from my brain. I had many I would if only it were possible.

I tensed when I felt Magnet's hand on my arm.

"Schön, are you all right?"

"Yes, of course. I just realized I'd forgotten something."

"Do we need to return to the command center?"

"No, no. It wasn't that important." I'd answered both his questions without turning to face him. Did he realize? Most likely, he hadn't. However, I had no doubt Ehren had, especially when the agent looked right through me when we arrived at the airfield and exited the vehicle.

It was another behavior I'd experienced many times, starting long before

I joined Swiss intelligence.

“My God, those breasts. She looks like a heifer needing to be milked,” I’d heard the one person at boarding school I’d considered a friend say when I was about to enter the room we shared. The laughter of the others with her had echoed in the hallway as I hurried away, praying no one would see me and realize I’d been eavesdropping outside the door. If they’d known, they wouldn’t have apologized. No, they would have looked me up and down and sneered, like they always did.

“You need to ignore them, Schön. Hold your head high, square your shoulders, and walk away, knowing that you will go much further in life than they ever will,” Mrs. Strousberg had said when I confided in her what had happened when she visited a few weeks later.

Like then, I wished I was invisible as I made my way to the back of the plane and sat by the window.

I pulled the wrap I always wore on flights around me, folded my arms, and positioned my body with my back to the aisle. I rested my head against the seat and closed my eyes.

When I felt someone take the seat beside me, I first assumed it was Rogue. Within mere moments, I knew it wasn’t. While it was subtle, I recognized the scent Magnet wore.

“Do you want to tell me what’s going on?” he asked.

“Apologies, I find myself feeling quite fatigued. I thought I might take a quick nap.”

When he didn’t respond, I expected him to move to another seat. I peeked over my shoulder and saw his eyes were closed too. If only I could turn around and rest my head against the broad expanse of his chest and feel his powerful arm around me as he drew me into his embrace. I longed to know what that would feel like. I’d give anything to experience it. I scrunched my eyes at the thought. *Anything?* My God, what a hypocrite I was.

MAGNET

Something was up with Schön. In the past, I'd been able to get a read on her fairly quickly. In fact, one leveled gaze from me, and she'd spill the beans, as they say, without my needing to ask.

It had to be my reaction when Verity had first suggested she help with my disguise. But if that was the case, why had she stepped in to do it when Verity asked Ehren and I help one another instead?

I glanced over at her, wondering if she'd already drifted to sleep. Seeing her huddled against the window, I wanted to put my arm around her and pull her close, giving her a more comfortable place to rest her head.

Before I could shut my eyes again, I saw Rogue approaching. I put one finger in front of my mouth and motioned with my head in Schön's direction. His forehead scrunched when he put his hand on the back of the seat in front of me and looked over at her.

"I thought she and I —"

I shook my head and shushed him. "Let her sleep," I said just above a whisper.

While his expression remained perplexed, he turned around and took a seat two rows in front of us. It was closer than I would've preferred. In fact, I would've been much happier if he sat in the front of the plane, near Ehren. It wasn't as if he and Schön needed to be undercover as a couple when the four of us were the only passengers on the plane.

Since sleep eluded me, I mentally reviewed the objectives of the op in front of us. While it seemed simple—get close enough to Francesca Vella and Charlene Vella-Borg to acquire something that could be used to test their DNA, any mission element that appeared too easy usually meant it wouldn't be. No doubt, obtaining something useful from the mother would prove less of a challenge than the daughter.

However, when Rile DeLeón was asked about gathering samples from the cottage on his compound, where Francesca and Charlene had stayed, he'd responded that it was cleaned so thoroughly by the women before their departure, he and his team hadn't found as much as a single hair that could be used for testing. That was unusual enough to mean wiping any trace of themselves was intentional. Obsessively so.

Which meant Xavier Vella had to have known we were onto him, then. Or at least, that we were growing suspicious. When Zeppelin and I spoke while he was still in St. Moritz, he'd raised the question of Vella's motives in killing Mithras. I had to admit I'd wondered the same thing. My curiosity about it increased when DNA proved Mithras was Xavier's half brother. Yet the former had both kidnapped and beaten Selene Pavia, the woman the latter clearly loved. Sociopathic sibling rivalry?

Or had Xavier committed murder because he feared that, if captured, Mithras would expose him as a member of AMPS? After hearing Selene scream, "Sheka," when Xavier was shot and presumed to be dead, we'd, as a team, concluded he was mostly likely who the S in the acronym represented.

Knowing Xavier and Pharaoh were siblings explained certain things that had happened over the course of our investigation, but also resulted in more questions.

I thought back to the night I'd almost lost my life on Oleander's yacht, the *Pernicious*. Two members of the Albanian task force had died. Frick "Zig" Zigler and Drita "Qetë" Hoffman were killed when the mega yacht we were on was attacked from all sides.

Our working theory was that whoever had staged the onslaught was tipped off by Pharaoh, who was then working at the US embassy in Malta. Godwin's connection to AMPS explained how she'd come to be there.

I shook my head and pressed my index fingers against my temples. How could either Francesca Vella or her daughter be involved in all this? It just didn't add up. What I did know was that getting the DNA samples was the only way we could figure it out.

Pharaoh and Xavier were siblings. Salvatore was their father. Who in the bloody hell was their mother? It couldn't be anyone other than Charlene Vella-Borg. But why was my gut telling me she wasn't?

Not wanting to disturb Schön, I pulled out my mobile and read through my previous notes about the woman we were initially told was Xavier's aunt.

Previously, we'd believed her brother, Marco, was Xavier's father. He and his wife were killed in an automobile accident when "their" baby was two years old. At that time, Charlene had just divorced Tommaso Borg. The two hadn't had children of their own, so she and her mother, Francesca, had raised the boy.

But what had happened to Charlene's ex-husband? Was he from Gozo? Did he still live there? While we were on the island, I'd do my best to track him down. If he was still around, we needed to talk to him.

Also, what about Francesca's husband? We knew nothing about him, either. I pressed my temples with my fingers a second time.

"What are you so deep in thought about?" Schön asked.

"Xavier and the rest of the Vella family."

She turned toward the window, but within a few seconds, her eyes met mine again. "What about them?"

"Pardon?"

"What were you thinking about the Vellas?"

"My gut is telling me Charlene is not Xavier or Pharaoh's mother."

"What else?"

I told her about the woman's ex-husband and how we had never looked into him, nor did we know anything about Francesca's husband.

I watched her process what I'd said. "Francesca can't be Xavier's mother. She would've been in her mid-fifties when he was born." She tapped her finger on the armrest. "She was twenty-seven when Charlene was born and thirty when she had Marco."

I cocked my head. "How do you know that?"

"It was in one of the briefs."

"I guess what I should've asked is, why do you remember her age? Or theirs?"

She shrugged a shoulder. "I remember things like that." Her eyes opened wide. "Wait. Charlene would've only been fifteen when Pharaoh was born, unless the coroner was off in determining her age."

"My experience is the medical examiners at Vauxhall Cross don't make

mistakes, let alone ones so significant.”

“It’s possible Charlene could’ve lied about her age when she went under Rile’s protection. Then again, girls in their teens are certainly able to have children.”

“Schön, I’m...” Could I tell her I was impressed without it sounding as though I believed she wasn’t capable of recalling the details of the vast number of briefs this mission had generated?

“What were you going to say?”

“You have a very good memory.”

She shrugged her shoulders again. “I’ve spent hours studying the details of the investigation. The briefs, I mean.” She raised her head. “I just remembered something I wanted to ask you about. Can you tell me more about Manual Varilla?”

I thought back on what I remembered about the man, wishing I had the same ability as Schön when it came to details. “Sorry, I need to pull up my notes.”

“We don’t have to do it now.”

“Now’s as good a time as any.” I glanced over when I found the brief I was looking for. “Do you want to take notes?”

“I don’t need to. I’ll remember.”

I cleared my throat. “Very well. Varilla first appeared on our radar during Operation Felixstowe when our team of agents raided ten shipping containers, liberating over one hundred victims. Varilla was arrested in the port of Yavaros on Mexico’s west coast prior to the raid, and his trafficking operation was shut down. This took place several days before containers belonging to him were scheduled to leave for Shanghai, China.”

“The raid on those containers was carried out in conjunction with K19 Security Solutions, who Ares worked for.”

“That’s right,” I said.

“Sorry for the interruption. Go on.”

“There isn’t much more to it than that. His area of operation was on the Central Coast of California. He and his gang engaged in a turf war there with a guy who’d controlled the territory for decades. While that man, Harry Crosby, is now dead, it wouldn’t surprise me if we learned it was one of his men who got to Varilla in prison and killed him.”

“Or whoever was responsible for the containers on the ship that landed in Felixstowe had him murdered.”

“According to one of Crosby’s informants, some of the containers belonged to his organization and some to the one Varilla worked for.”

“AMPS?”

“It’s possible, although we haven’t found anything specifically tying him to them.”

“It seems more likely he worked for the Calabrian Syndicate.”

That was an excellent insight and something that would likely have been brought up in a future briefing in the same way as her question about Xavier Vella’s ties to Francesca Vella and her daughter.

“You’re a good agent, Schön.”

She smiled. “Thanks, but all I did was get myself up to speed.”

“The best investigators are the ones who pay attention to the details.”

“Speaking of details. I think we should start over.” She motioned to my face.

“Really?”

Schön reached up and touched my forehead with her fingertips. “It’s a little smudged.”

Remembering how good it felt to have her massage the moisturizer into my skin, I agreed with her, perhaps nodding a little too enthusiastically.

BY THE TIME WE LANDED AT THE MALTA AIRPORT, I ONCE AGAIN LOOKED almost identical to my grandfather, which made the whole idea of talking to myself in the mirror and imagining what he’d say back to me more than a little freaky.

“Everything all right?” Rogue asked when he walked into the men’s room and caught me chuckling.

“I was just thinking how much I look like my grandpa.”

“You don’t look that different to me than you usually do,” he said over his shoulder before walking into a stall.

Not knowing whether he was serious or joking, I didn’t call him out on it. However, before I left the lavatory, I silently flipped him off.

SCHÖN

By the time we arrived at the resort on Gozo, I'd had enough of the way Ehren felt the need to hang on Magnet. They weren't supposed to be newlyweds since they were undercover as my parents and I was twenty-seven. Plus, it was the middle of the night. The only people we encountered were the shuttle driver and the man in the lobby, who'd checked us in.

Making matters worse, since Nemesis had arranged for us to have a two-bedroom family suite, it meant ladies in one room and gents in the other.

Maybe I'd use the excuse that I was a light sleeper and stretch out on the sofa in the living room instead.

Given it was after zero-two-hundred Gozo time, I handed my bottle of baby oil to Magnet and suggested he use that to remove his makeup. "It'll be gentler on your skin. It will also make it feel softer."

"Laying it on a bit thick, aren't you?" Ehren commented when I entered the bedroom.

"I was trying to be helpful," I said, keeping my back to her.

"I know your type."

I thought of saying I knew her type too. While Ehren and I hadn't worked any missions together when we were both with Swiss intelligence, I knew of her and she knew of me. Going down the road of why wouldn't serve either of us well on this op.

I grabbed my toiletry bag and what I planned to sleep in before leaving

the room in search of the other lavatory rather than use the private one she and I were expected to share.

I washed my face, brushed my teeth, put on the flannels I usually slept in, and folded my clothes. If I were alone, I might consider removing my bra, but here, I wouldn't. For one, it reduced the size of my breasts; thus, if Ehren happened to come looking for me, she might take the opportunity to make a crack at my expense if they were "on display" more than usual. Two, sometimes my back hurt from not wearing it, even when I slept.

I found a blanket and two pillows in the coat closet near the suite's entrance and had just settled on the sofa when I heard a door close. I shut my eyes, feigning sleep and hoping that if it was Ehren, she'd leave me alone.

When someone approached from the opposite direction, I kept my eyes closed in case it was Rogue. I was in no mood to talk to him either. However, he hadn't been rude to me. I was just mentally and physically exhausted.

"What are you doing out here?" Magnet asked when I peeked through one eye and saw him standing over me.

"Light sleeper."

"Same for me. Except I fear I'm too wound up. I was thinking about watching a movie."

"Go ahead. It won't bother me."

He looked at me sideways, then sat on the sofa when I moved my legs out of his way. "Didn't you just say you were a light sleeper?" When I didn't respond, he reached under the blanket and tickled my foot.

"Hey!" I gasped and giggled at the same time. "Stop that."

Both Magnet and I froze when the door of the room I was supposed to share with Ehren opened a crack, then immediately closed. Magnet made a face but didn't release my foot. Not that he was still tickling me.

"Can I ask you something?"

"You can ask," he responded, winking. It was the typical comeback from most intelligence agents.

"Ehren is Swiss. Why is she on the Albanian team?"

"Zeppelin had her move over when Nemesis sent him and Verity undercover. Before you arrived, I was short two agents."

"That's right. I was sorry to hear about Zig and Qetë."

His eyes opened wider. "Did you know them?"

I nodded. "We worked a joint mission together when I first started out. They were both really nice to me."

“You say that as if not everyone is.”

“I’ve found there are fewer who are than aren’t.”

Magnet cocked his head. “Meaning fewer agents who are nice?”

When I nodded, he motioned toward my room with his head.

“Do I need to intervene between you and Ehren?”

“God, no,” I practically shouted before covering my mouth with my hand.

“If there’s an issue, I can help.”

“In your experience, does a male commander *intervening* with two female agents usually work?”

He smiled. “Never.”

“Look, if we do our jobs right, we’ll be in and out of here in a day or two. Once we’re back in the UK, I’ll keep my distance in the same way I usually do.”

He studied me. “Okay, but if I witness anything, I will step in.”

I put my hand on top of his that still rested on my foot. “I beg you not to. It won’t help. In fact, I should probably sleep in there with her just so she doesn’t spread rumors about us.”

“Unlike a typical unit, the coalition is quite small. If she does tell untruths, she’ll be shut down straightaway.”

“There will be some who believe her.”

“Like?”

I shook my head.

“You know what happened with Zeppelin, don’t you?” he asked, resting his head against the sofa and closing his eyes.

“More than know; I witnessed it.”

“I’m sorry you had to see that.”

“I’m not. I mean, I didn’t need to see you punch him, but I know what you said.”

When he nodded, I wished this conversation had never begun. “What all did you hear?”

“You said I was trying to overcome my reputation. Something like that.”

“You left out the first part. I started that sentence by saying you’re a good agent.”

“The second half was truer.”

“If nothing else, I hope that, by working with me, you realize the first part was what mattered.”

“It does, Magnet, and I appreciate it.”

“Ready for the movie?” he asked when I covered my yawn.

“Sure.”

I fell asleep almost as soon as I closed my eyes, and when I woke sometime later, Magnet was zonked out too. Sweetly, though, his hand still rested on my foot.

“UGH, I AM TOO OLD FOR THIS,” MAGNET GROANED.

I opened my eyes and saw the sunrise on the horizon. “Did you sleep here?” I said, patting the sofa’s back.

He nodded. “I must’ve been more tired than I thought.”

I checked the time. “It isn’t quite zero seven hundred. Why don’t you lie down and see if you can get more rest?”

“I should do,” he said, standing and stretching his arms above his head.

“Don’t do that when we’re out in public.”

“Put my arms over my head?”

“You do not have the torso of a man old enough to be my father.”

He chuckled and mussed my hair when he walked by. “Get some more rest yourself, *kid*do.”

Rather than doing as he suggested, I crept into the bedroom, relieved to see Ehren wasn’t yet awake. I grabbed a new outfit from my bag and took a shower. When I came out, she was still asleep, so I returned to the living room to get set up to help Magnet don his disguise. I was stunned to find him out there as well.

“No luck going back to sleep?” I asked.

“Be thankful you’re not really married to Rogue. He snores like a grizzly bear.” He motioned to two cups on the counter. “I wasn’t sure if you preferred coffee or tea, so I made both.”

“That was very sweet. However, I’m surprised you weren’t aware.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m Swiss.”

“And?”

“We are among the biggest consumers of coffee on the planet. Not to mention, almost three-quarters of the world’s coffee trade happens in Switzerland.”

“I had no idea. Truly.” He picked up the cup closest to me. “How do you take it?”

“Black, thanks.”

He made a face.

“Let me guess. You’re a tea drinker, and you use cream and sugar?”

“How do we not know this about each other? We traveled to the States together, and we’ve spent weeks at the command center.”

I shrugged. “I suppose we’ve never met up in the morning.”

“By the way, how is it, staying in the main house?” he asked, stirring what was in the other cup.

I walked over to the window, wrapping my hands around the mug, warming them. “Fine.”

“*Fine* as in miserable since you’re a light sleeper?”

“It is a bit noisy.”

“The cottages are very quiet.”

I nodded. “Except there are none available.”

“You could sleep in mine. Wait. That didn’t come out right. What I meant is you can have mine and I could move to the main house.”

“No, but thanks.”

“Why not? It won’t bother me.”

“I’ve actually been thinking of letting a place nearby.”

“Really? I hadn’t thought about that. Although, up until recently, Zep and I roomed together. It was kind of like old times.”

“Old times?” I asked.

“We roomed at Monckton.”

“Right. MI6 training ground. I envy you that.”

“What’s all the racket out here?” said Rogue, joining us. Since his hair was wet as though he’d showered, I doubted we woke him. He walked over to where Magnet had made tea. “Were you two up all night?”

“We fell asleep watching a movie.”

When Rogue raised a brow, I wished Magnet hadn’t felt the need to answer in such specifics.

I motioned to the table. “Shall we get started with your makeup, Dad?”

“You’re very funny,” he said with scrunched eyes.

“How old are you anyway?” Rogue asked.

“Old enough to kick your arse, but not so far gone I could be Schön’s father.”

“He’s thirty-two,” I blurted. “Sorry, I have an affinity for remembering ages, years born, that kind of thing.”

“How old am I?” Rogue asked.

“You’ll be thirty in June.”

“Wow. What about her?” he said, pointing at Ehren, who’d just entered the room.

“What about me?” she repeated.

“Schön was just impressing us with how she remembers everyone’s ages. Birthdays too, it seems,” Rogue told her. “So, come on. How old is she?”

“Sorry, no idea,” I lied. Since Ehren was the oldest of the four of us, I doubted she would’ve appreciated me announcing it.

Magnet sat down, and in under an hour, I’d transformed him into a man who looked old enough to be my dad. “Remember, no stretching your arms over your head,” I whispered when he stood.

“Do you mean like this?”

I almost poked the bare skin of his stomach, but thought better of it, seeing the looks on Ehren’s and Rogue’s faces.

“Wait. You were also supposed to wear the overweight suit —”

The look on Magnet’s face immediately shut Rogue up. The two men returned to the other room, leaving Ehren and me alone.

“I’m surprised you aren’t being more careful,” she said the minute they were gone.

“What do you mean?”

“It would hardly advance your standing with Nemesis should she discover you’re having sex with your commander.”

I vacillated between slapping her, denying it, or responding that, from what I understood, Ares had effectively done the same thing when he and Nemesis met and subsequently married after joining the coalition. Instead, I walked away, once again employing what I’d learned a long time ago from Mrs. Strousberg. Which was, given the options, ignoring someone’s bad behavior was usually the most effective response.

As I turned to go into the bedroom, I saw Magnet standing in the doorway, looking as though he’d heard every word. I implored him with my eyes not to say anything, then mouthed, “Don’t.”

It became apparent he either didn’t understand or didn’t care when he stalked in Ehren’s direction.

MAGNET

“Seeing red” was a phrase I hadn’t truly understood until the day Zeppelin and I went at it over his nasty comments about Schön. Then, I’d reacted with my fists. Today, as much as I wanted to wring Ehren’s neck, I wouldn’t lay a hand on her. However, she would experience my wrath.

Yes, I’d recognized Schön’s plea that I not get involved, but I had to. I’d heard what Ehren said, and she’d disparaged me as much as she had her fellow female agent.

While she may be anticipating a slap on the wrist, things were going to go far worse for her. I still hadn’t decided whether or not she’d remain on the island to complete the op. But once we returned to Shere, she’d no longer be a member of the Albanian task force.

It was up to Nemesis and the other commanders to decide whether Ehren would remain a part of the coalition. If it went up for a vote, I’d cast mine in favor of her dismissal.

Schön definitely couldn’t count on the woman to have her back, and I wasn’t too sure I could count on her either.

“Listen, Magnet,” Ehren began when I approached.

I stopped short and folded my arms. “Are you planning on telling me what’s what?”

“We both know how she got the job with the coalition,” she said under

her breath.

I leaned in. “Do we?” I asked just as quietly.

“Obviously, her relationship with Marchand. Now, she’s trying to influence you in the same way.”

I looked over at Schön with wide eyes. “I suppose that makes sense, given I’m undercover as her father.” I looked back at Ehren. “Although my understanding is that daughters typically conspire with their mothers.”

Her head cocked. “You’re not understanding me. She slept —”

“With her uncle?” I gasped. “I wonder, then, if we should address these allegations with the ambassador.”

As I’d anticipated, she had no immediate retort. Unfortunately, though, I hadn’t achieved my goal of wiping the smirk from her face. It remained.

“Why don’t you tell me what you’d like to do now, Ehren? I’m at a bit of a loss as to the most appropriate course of action.” I held up my hand when she opened her mouth to speak. “As you’re aware—or at least I *think* you’re aware—this op is crucial to our bringing down one of the largest human trafficking organizations in the world. Given you worked closely with Seshat, caring for the victims and reuniting them with their families, I would think you would possess the same sense of urgency the rest of us do.”

“Of course I do.”

My eyes scrunched. “Then, I suggest you focus solely on the task at hand rather than disparaging a fellow agent. The four of us are undercover together, and honestly, I wonder if I should call upon Delfino and Atticus to join our op and allow you to return to Shere prior to its completion. What do you think I should do, Agent Richter? What would be the *honorable* thing?” The last bit, I added in reference to her code name that was a derivative of the German word for honor.

“I’d like to remain on the op, sir.”

“Would you? What are you willing to do in order for me to agree to allow such a thing?”

Her eyes opened wide. “I’m, I mean, I —”

“If I were you, I’d start with an apology. First to Agent Baur, then to me.” I looked over my shoulder. “What about you, Rogue? Has Ehren been harassing you as well?”

“Not that I’m aware of, sir.”

“Sir, I apologize, but —”

“I suggested you apologize to Agent Baur first. However, I take exception

to your use of the word 'but.' Didn't your parents or perhaps another commanding officer teach you that once you utter the word, what you're saying is no longer an apology? It then becomes an excuse." I stroked my beard. "I fear this isn't going to work."

While my tone could have been described as sarcastic or taunting, my last statement was not. I couldn't help but wonder if there was more behind Ehren's actions than mere jealousy. "Agent Richter, did you have occasion to work with Agent Baur when you were both with Switzerland's Federal Intelligence Service?"

"Not directly, sir."

"I see." I turned to Rogue and Schön. "Will you please excuse us? Perhaps find out what the hotel offers in the way of breakfast?"

Once they left the room, I motioned for Ehren to take a seat, then did the same.

"Anouk, I'm concerned," I began. "I don't know you well, but I find it surprising an agent so well-regarded that she'd be recommended for a UN coalition would behave in the manner you have. There's got to be more to this."

She folded her arms and leaned back in the chair.

"I'm giving you one opportunity to explain. If you choose not to do so, I will ask for your immediate resignation, and rather than return to Shere, I'll suggest you report directly to FIS headquarters in Bern."

The war waging in her mind played out on her face. I was right in my assumption that this was not a simple case of "agent rivalry." Ehren's resentment of Schön ran deeper.

"Agent Baur compromised one of my sources. He was an asset I'd spent years grooming as an informant."

"In what way was he compromised?"

"He was murdered, sir."

Based on her demeanor, I sensed the relationship between her and her asset was more personal than professional. "I see. And you blame Schön."

She tightened her folded arms and stared in the direction of the windows rather than maintaining eye contact with me. "She was responsible, yes."

"Did FIS conduct an internal investigation?"

"No, sir."

"It boils down to this, Agent Richter. Are you able to continue with this op in a professional manner, or shall I make arrangements for your

replacement?”

“I am able to continue the op, sir.”

“Ehren?” I waited until she looked at me to continue. “The better question would be, do you want to?”

“If you’ll allow it, sir.”

I rested against my chair like she had. “You understand why I’m reluctant to do so. I need to feel confident you will protect and defend the other agents on this op.”

She didn’t respond right away, and I appreciated her taking the time to think about her answer. Had she replied off-the-cuff, I wouldn’t have believed her.

“I give you my assurance I will protect and defend my fellow agents. Please do not remove me from the op or from the task force, sir.”

“You owe Schön an apology, but I wonder if you’re capable of doing so in a sincere manner.”

“I am, sir.”

WHEN SCHÖN RETURNED WITH ROGUE AFTER I’D MESSAGED, ASKING THEM TO do so, it was obvious I was in the doghouse with her. However, I doubted she knew the issues with Ehren were more than surface resentment and jealousy.

“Agent Richter?” I prompted.

While I listened, she apologized without any caveat, and Schön accepted it.

I turned to Rogue. “You know what you need to do here, yes?” I asked under my breath.

He nodded. “I will cover Schön, sir,” he added in a similar low tone of voice.

“Without exception.”

“Yes, sir.”

Ehren informed us she’d work on her disguise in the bedroom while Schön helped me with mine at the table in the common space.

After several minutes of silence on her part, I asked Rogue to give us a moment.

“You’re angry with me,” I said once he left the room.

“You’re the commander of the task force and of this op. I respect that.”

“But you’re angry,” I repeated.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Schön, please take a seat.”

Her struggle to follow my directive was apparent, but after just saying she respected my command, she could hardly ignore it.

“I had to address the things Ehren said. It was not something I could pretend I didn’t hear.”

“Last night, I asked if, in your experience, a male commander intervening with two female agents usually works. Your response was ‘never.’”

“This is different. Ehren also accused me.”

Her eyes filled with tears, and while her gaze remained on mine, it was as though she looked right through me. “I’ve dealt with this my whole life,” she whispered, then shook her head and covered her face. “I cannot *believe* I’m crying.”

“It’s clearly causing you distress.” My response sounded ridiculous, but I had no idea what else to say.

She removed her hands and squared her shoulders. “When I say my entire life, I mean it, Magnet. At least as far back as I can remember. I was an ‘early bloomer,’ as they say, and subsequently, the taunting began when I was quite young. I developed the appearance of a thick skin and learned to ignore it.”

“I’m sorry, Prisca.” I’d never used her given name, but it felt right to do so now.

“You’ve nothing to be sorry for. You are one of the few who’s ever defended me.”

I leaned forward. “Ehren has a specific issue with events leading to the death of an informant.”

She nodded. “I’m aware.”

Again, I found myself unsure how to respond. I couldn’t very well ask what had happened without sounding as though I suspected Schön of wrongdoing.

“Can we please discuss this later?” she asked, her eyes darting to the closed bedroom door.

“Of course. There is one thing I need to ask now, though. What are your thoughts regarding Agent Richter remaining on the op?”

“I knew her issue, as you put it, prior to the op being assigned.”

“Right. Of course. So in your opinion, nothing’s changed.”

“Precisely.”

While the commander in me knew I shouldn’t do it, the man in me couldn’t resist reaching out and covering her hand with mine. “I’m sorry I

disregarded you and spoke with Ehren. I felt it was necessary, and honestly, I'm glad I now know there's history involved."

She withdrew her hand from under mine but leaned forward, close enough that only I could hear her. "He was a very bad guy. That Ehren turned a blind eye to the depth of his depravity would likely have gotten her killed."

"Understood."

"Now, let's finish up your hair and makeup so we can get on with the objectives of the op."

"Yes, ma'am," I said, winking.

SCHÖN

I wasn't sure whether Magnet had picked on my saying I developed the *appearance* of a thick skin. Which meant, right below the surface sat the pain of the bullying I'd endured for the last several years of my life.

While I'd welcomed the chance to attend the school in Leysin, the girls there were vicious.

Then, or now, there was little I could do about it. It wasn't just commanders intervening that never worked; anyone who tried, failed. Or made it worse.

The only thing that had helped was Mrs. Strousberg's counsel. Once in a while, I'd go against her advice and choose not to ignore my tormentors. The outcome of which was disastrous to the point I'd almost been expelled.

After that, I'd recognized my only course of action was to ignore the harassment, which, the older I got, the less effective it became. I was seen as weak, unable to "fight back," which, in turn, fueled the flames of my attackers. Sadly, that had resulted in me taking it out on other women I deemed weaker than me. Most recently, on Verity, which I felt horrible about. As soon as we returned to Shere, I needed to man up, as they say, and apologize to her.

"Ready?" asked Magnet, walking over to the window where I waited. "Beautiful, isn't it? Too bad there's no time to enjoy it," he said, gazing at the sea like I was. "That's the life of an intelligence agent, I suppose. We may

have the opportunity to travel the world but very rarely the chance to truly experience the places where we're sent. I thought about that very thing yesterday. Gozo feels magical to me, despite the horror we witnessed on the raid of Mithras' compound. I just wish I could go back and only see this place as the lovely destination it is."

I nodded, wishing more than anything that I could experience it with him.

"Isn't that what we're supposed to be doing now?" Rogue asked. "Being seen out and about as tourists?"

"Right. Are the comms ready?" Magnet asked.

"Got everything right here."

Rogue made sure our mics and earpieces worked between the four of us as well as Delfino's and Atticus'. Francesca spoke some English, more since spending time on Rile's compound in Mallorca, where it was the primary language used, but her words were sometimes difficult to understand and often dotted with Maltese.

Delfino's job was to listen and translate for us since she spoke it fluently. I spoke fluent German, French, and Italian. The latter of which would serve me best on this op. Between Delfino's translation and the words I could speak, my goal was to distract her and Charlene as much as I could with conversation. It was Rogue's job to scope out anything that could be used for DNA testing.

Magnet and Ehren would spend the same time searching for more information about Francesca's husband and Charlene's ex.

Of those on our team, I was the only one who hadn't been on the island previously or in Francesca's or Charlene's presence. Rogue's role, when he was here for the raid, had been behind the scenes. The only people he'd had direct interaction with were the victims rescued from Mithras' villa.

Still, he wore a ball cap and sunglasses everywhere we went. And, as mortifying as I often found it when men—and sometimes women—paid an inordinate amount of attention to me, in this case, it was a good thing all eyes were on the woman hanging on Rogue's arm rather than him.

Since it was early for a midday meal, he and I were the only two people in the restaurant. We sat as close to the entrance to the kitchen as we could but, so far, hadn't seen Charlene. However, Francesca had poked her head out from the double doors separating the two areas.

"Welcome!" she said in a very heavy accent several seconds later, when she brought menus to the table.

“Posso avere due bicchieri d’acqua, per favore?” I asked, pleased when she nodded then returned with two plastic cups and a large bottle of water, which meant she’d understood my request.

As we’d agreed, Rogue would ask me to order for him while he took a phone call. “Get whatever sounds good, babe,” he said, motioning to his phone and walking to the door.

“Marito?” she asked.

“Yes, that’s my husband.”

While some women may have looked at him unfavorably for leaving me on my own, Francesca’s expression was softer. “He’s very, err, handsome.”

“Yes,” I said, smiling. “But he talks too much.” I raised one hand to my ear like I was holding a phone and motioned with my fingers like a quacking duck.

She put her hand on her stomach and laughed, then pulled out the chair next to me and sat down.

“Come si dice? Err, just married?”

“A few months.” I rested my hand on my stomach like she had.

“Un bambino?” she gasped.

I smiled and nodded. “Do you have any children?”

Francesca held up three fingers, then folded two so only one remained. She rested her chin on her hand. “I have only one daughter now.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said, patting her arm that rested on the table.

“A daughter and son, lost.”

“Were they young?” I asked.

She shook her head, then looked over her shoulder in the direction of the kitchen before pulling something out of her pocket. It was a plastic sleeve. “*Marco e Marco,*” she said, showing me one side containing a black-and-white photo and the other, a more recent color image.

I pointed at the first. *“Marito?”*

She nodded.

“Tuo figlio?” I asked.

“Yes, my son.”

“You’re doing really well,” Delfino said through the comms. I managed to stop myself from appearing startled, but I had been. I’d forgotten she was listening in. And while Francesca’s accent was strong, I was able to understand everything she’d said thus far.

“Your firstborn?” I asked.

“No. The baby.”

“This is our first,” I said, again stroking my stomach.

“I was very young when my first was born.”

“How old?”

“Twenty-two.” She studied the black-and-white photo of her husband.

“Too young.”

“You speak very good English,” I commented.

Francesca’s hunched shoulders straightened, and she smiled. “I practice.” She reached over as if she was patting herself on the back.

“I’m twenty-seven,” I said, bringing the conversation back around to her children.

“I was thirty,” she said, flipping the sleeve over and pointing at the young man.

“And your other daughter? How old were you when you had her?”

“Same as you, err...”

“Twenty-seven?”

She nodded, and my eyes met Rogue’s over her head. His widened, and he looked beyond us in the direction of the kitchen. When my gaze returned to Francesca’s, I noticed she’d absentmindedly taken a sip of the water.

“*Mama!*” I heard a woman shout from behind the swinging door.

Francesca’s eyes darkened, and her cheeks flushed.

“Is that your daughter?” I leaned forward and whispered.

She nodded again. “Bitch.”

The word she said sounded more like “beach,” but I knew what she meant. I put my hand in front of my mouth to stifle a giggle. “Your oldest, then?”

The smile left Francesca’s face. “No.”

Rogue returned to the table at the same time Francesca stood. He leaned down and kissed my forehead. “Have you ordered?”

“No, we got to talking,” I answered, taking his extended hand.

I looked up at Francesca to introduce them. “What is your name?” I asked.

“*Mama!*” This time, the shout from the kitchen was louder. Francesca scurried away without answering.

Keeping his eyes on the swinging door, Rogue used the edge of a paper napkin to pick up the plastic cup, then emptied the remaining water into a pot of flowers that sat near the table. I watched as he pulled a plastic bag from

my oversized purse, which sat on the chair between us. He inserted the cup, then tucked it into my bag just as the other woman, Charlene, came out.

“We’re ready to order,” I announced, wondering if she’d respond in English.

Her eyes remained riveted on Rogue.

“The, um, Italian antipasto and a Margherita pizza, please.” I pointed at each on the menu, not that she looked. Instead, she eyed the bottle of water and single cup.

“I’ll have a Cisk lager, please,” Rogue said, following her line of sight.

When she retreated into the kitchen, we could hear the two women arguing. “I can’t understand anything they’re saying,” I murmured.

“I’m only getting bits and pieces, but it sounds like Charlene is yelling at Francesca for talking to you,” Delfino responded.

“Not very customer friendly of her,” I muttered.

“Hang on,” said Delfino. Both Rogue and I remained silent.

“Charlene said Francesca talked too much about her papa and Marco.”

“Meaning Francesca’s husband and their son?” I whispered.

“Yes.”

Since Delfino was quiet again, I remained so too, but the voices sounded farther away.

“I think they’re talking about another daughter, but I can’t make out any of what they’re saying. Except she just told Francesca to keep her mouth closed.”

“Would this be a good time for us to join you?” Magnet’s voice came through the earpiece.

Rogue leaned closer and put his arm around my shoulders as though he was whispering something in my ear rather than into the comms. “I think it would be,” he said as Charlene came out of the kitchen and practically slammed the bottle of beer on the table in front of him. “The daughter doesn’t like me much. Maybe you’ll have better luck.”

“By the way, Schön, well done. Excellent work.”

“Thanks, Magnet,” I whispered, wishing there was a way I could’ve prevented Ehren from hearing his compliment and my response.

I had to admit Rogue, who was still leaned into me as though he was nuzzling my neck, smelled really good. Just not as good as Magnet. Also, when he leaned too close and brushed my neck with his nose, my body had no reaction. None whatsoever.

“I was able to get a possible sample from Francesca. Nothing from Charlene yet, though,” he said. His breath was hot on my skin. However, the warmth didn’t feel anything but gross.

A FEW MINUTES LATER, MAGNET WALKED IN THE DOOR. “GOOD AFTERNOON, *mein Schatz*,” he said with a German accent I hadn’t heard him use before.

“Hello, Papa. How was your morning?” I asked when he leaned down to kiss my cheek.

“Fine, fine,” he said, reaching over to shake Rogue’s hand.

“Where is Mutti?” I asked.

“Migräne.”

I nodded, wondering how long he’d be able to keep up the accent. “We ordered lunch, if you’d like to join us.”

He nodded too and motioned for Rogue to give up his seat so he could take it. I knew it wasn’t so he would be closer to me. It was situated in such a way that his back was to a wall but he could clearly see the kitchen as well as the restaurant’s entrance.

“I didn’t know you spoke German, Magnet,” Delfino said through the comms.

His eyes met mine when he responded. “I possess a great number of unknown talents and abilities.”

“They’re arguing about who gets to serve you,” Delfino added. “It sounds as though Charlene is winning.”

Seconds later, the woman came through the swinging doors. She looked straight at Magnet, her cheeks flushed, and her eyelids drooped before she asked him what he’d like to drink.

When he immediately turned on the charm, I wanted to rip her eyes out, and it had nothing to do with the likelihood the woman was evil personified.

MAGNET

As this was the first time I'd been face-to-face with Charlene Vella-Borg, I was stunned by her resemblance to Xavier.

While Schön had pointed out the woman would've been fifteen when Pharaoh was born, looking at her now, I wondered again if she could be her and Xavier's mother. As Schön had said, it wasn't completely out of the question that she would've gotten pregnant so young.

When Ehren and I had separated from Rogue and Schön earlier, we went in search of information about Tommaso Borg. What we'd discovered was perplexing.

He and Charlene hadn't divorced; he'd died in a freak fishing accident. According to the woman at the public records office who remembered him, he was on a boat alone, went overboard, and drowned.

When we asked if it was after he and Charlene divorced, she responded she knew they were married but had never heard about them separating.

For now, we were waiting for someone from our team to hack into Malta's marriage and divorce records to see what else they could learn.

Also according to the woman at the public records office, Francesca's husband, Marco Vella Sr., had had a massive heart attack at the age of forty-nine. After passing on that information, she directed us to the cemetery where both men were buried.

Francesca's husband and their son, Marco Jr., were buried in what

appeared to be a family section. Marco Jr.'s wife, Yasmine, was also buried there. Tommaso Borg's headstone was in another area. If Marco Sr. and Francesca's other daughter had died, she wasn't buried with or near them.

After Ehren and I left the cemetery, I sent a message asking Rogue if it was a good time for us to join him and Schön at Nonna Vella's restaurant. He'd responded, suggesting I might have more luck interacting with Charlene, so I made the decision to go in alone.

When I wondered out loud whether Malta's lack of things like birth records might be due to their antiquated systems, Ehren offered to continue looking into Borg's family as well as the Vellas, who appeared to have lived on Gozo for generations.

While Charlene was very attentive as our waitress, her mother sneaked out of the kitchen at one point to visit our table.

"This is my father," said Schön, introducing me.

I stood, and when she put her hand in mine, I kissed the back of it. Like her daughter, her cheeks flushed, and she smiled.

"He's excited to become a grandfather," Schön added.

"Do you have grandchildren?" I asked the older woman.

"I had one, but no more." The smile left her face, and her eyes hooded as she left the table.

"I handled that badly," I murmured after she'd returned to the kitchen.

Schön leaned in closer to me. "I don't know if that's the case; however, we know Xavier and Pharaoh were siblings. Why would she say she had just one?"

It was just as well I'd put my foot in it because Charlene was very attentive throughout the rest of the meal—to me especially. Given we believed we had a viable DNA sample from Francesca, the more friendly her daughter was, the easier it would be to obtain one from her.

I had an idea and waved my hand around the empty restaurant. "Will you join us?" I asked. "Perhaps for a glass of wine."

Charlene looked over her shoulder, then nodded. Before taking the empty seat, she walked behind a small bar area and picked up two glasses and an already open bottle of wine.

"Guess we're invisible," muttered Rogue with a wink.

"Maybe we should excuse ourselves," added Schön.

I enjoyed having her near. Enough that when she suggested they leave, I wanted to protest. However, it was a good idea.

“Sorry, Papa. I need to take a nap,” she said, standing and leaning down to kiss my cheek. If I were undercover as Schön’s husband instead of her father, I would’ve turned my head and kissed her lips instead. And that was a dangerous thought.

When she straightened, our eyes met, and I could swear she’d read my mind.

After she and Rogue left, Charlene’s presence was a dash of cold water. As the two of us flirted, I couldn’t help but think of Schön and how being a honey trap felt. My role in trying to get information as well as a DNA sample from the woman who, by all accounts, appeared starved for attention, was similar, and it made me nauseated.

“So just you and your mum run this place?” I asked when she smoothed her hair. “The restaurant?”

“Yes. It is a—how do you say?—ball and chain around my neck.”

“You don’t enjoy it?”

She shook her head. “There is only me to help.”

“No siblings or grandchildren who can pitch in?”

“No.”

“I was an only child too. My parents are both gone, but the responsibility for their care felt like a ball and chain to me too.”

“We had someone who helped, but he is gone now.” Her eyes darkened, but she didn’t appear sad. It was more anger. Which made sense, given it was a stage of grief.

“Gone as in deceased?”

She nodded.

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

Rather than shrug it off, Charlene appeared to dive deeper into her anger. As much as I hoped it would lead to her talking about her brother’s death, it did the opposite. She withdrew.

“I should be off. I’m sorry if I upset you. If I could just pay the tab?”

“Yes.” When she pushed her chair away from the table and stood, I did too.

“I don’t want to be too forward, but may we embrace?”

Her head cocked, but she nodded, and when I opened my arms, she stepped into them. The hug was brief, thankfully. It was one of the most awkward of my life.

I watched her retreat into the kitchen and glanced down at my pullover.

There were two long brown hairs stuck to it. I'd been successful in procuring what we needed. I just wondered if it was worth the cost.

After she'd brought the ticket and I'd paid in cash, I lingered for a few moments, listening to the two women arguing even though I couldn't understand what they were saying.

I turned my back to the kitchen. "Delfino?"

"I've got it, sir," she said. "Transcribing now. The devices Rogue placed in other parts of the dining room are transmitting as well."

"Excellent," I said once I was out the door.

"Good job, Magnet," she added.

I wished I could thank her for the compliment, but I was too unsettled. I rounded a corner into an alley on the opposite side of the street, removed the two hair samples, and gingerly placed them in the evidence bag I'd had in my pocket. I hoped it would be enough for forensics to test since I couldn't stomach the idea of attempting to get more.

The other thing that had me in knots was the probability Schön would pick up on my discomfort. Either she'd ask about it, in which case, I'd have a hard time explaining without making her feel bad about herself. Or she'd assume she'd done something wrong while at the restaurant, resulting in the same outcome.

As far as success with her objective, she'd achieved it exceedingly well. She'd managed to get a great deal of information out of Francesca in a short amount of time.

We now knew Francesca had another daughter, older than both Charlene and Marco, who had apparently died, based on her saying she'd *lost* a son and daughter. Yet if the oldest child was deceased, she wasn't buried in the family plot.

Ehren and I could return to the records office and ask, but I wondered if Rogue and Schön wouldn't have better luck visiting the cemetery and seeking out someone responsible for its maintenance. On the other hand, Delfino might be a more appropriate choice in that she spoke the language fluently and could take the approach that she was researching her ancestry.

"HEADED BACK TO THE SUITE," I SAID INTO THE COMMS BEFORE SWITCHING to mute on my end.

"Copy that," Rogue responded.

Rather than take the most direct route, I walked by the main beach

instead. I sat on the wall, recalling the night we'd raided Mithras' compound.

We hadn't found him, but we'd liberated the women being held captive—women who were for sale on a sex-slave-auction site on the dark web.

One woman, who'd turned out to be Xavier's girlfriend, Selene Pavia, had been beaten to within an inch of her life. That thought gave me pause. Mithras had either done it himself or ordered his guards to beat his half brother's girlfriend to death, or nearly so. Had we not rescued her and the other women, I had no doubt she wouldn't have lived much longer.

It made sense that Xavier would want to kill the man for it, but what didn't make sense was why Mithras had abducted her in the first place. It was almost as if it could have been revenge for something Xavier had done to him.

Now, Selene and Xavier were both dead, and we might never know the full story of what had happened from any of their perspectives.

I closed my eyes, also remembering the horror of what had unfolded on the very sand beneath my feet. I was near Puck when he raced over to Jamie "Beak" Thomas and Tracy "Vulcan" North, and I witnessed his reaction to finding them dead. At the same time, I'd watched Cayman, agonized and frustrated, scouring the area for any sign of Bexli.

If I thought about how I'd feel if Schön was missing, fearing she was dead, the ache in my chest was worse than any other I'd ever experienced. I'd known her a matter of weeks. I could not comprehend how Cayman must've felt, searching for a woman he'd loved almost his entire life.

Also in the time when we had no idea where Verity was, other than that she was safe and recovering, I'd seen a side of Zeppelin I never had before when he went through a similar kind of agony.

"Hey," I heard Schön's distinctive voice say from behind me.

I glanced over my shoulder. "Hey."

"Are you all right?"

"I am. I just thought I'd take some quiet time to think about all we learned this morning."

"I'll let you be, then."

"Wait," I said, grabbing her wrist out of reflex since the last thing I wanted was for her to leave. Rather than let go, I pulled her down to sit beside me on the seawall.

"*Something's* bothering you."

"You're right."

“Do you want to talk about it?” she asked.

“I do, but I’m not sure where to begin.”

She studied me but didn’t speak.

“I was able to get a DNA sample from Charlene.”

“That’s good, right?” she asked.

“It is, but what I had to do in order to get it, wasn’t.”

Schön raised a brow.

“I didn’t like that I had to flirt with her. I even went as far as hugging her.”

She turned her head and looked out at the sea.

“Schön?”

“If there’s anyone who understands, Magnet, it’s me.”

I wished I could hold her hand in mine or wrap my arm around her shoulders. I truly hated being undercover as her father. “I know you do, and I don’t ever want you to feel that way again.”

She looked from the sea to me. Her eyes were scrunched.

“I know I’m overstepping in what I just said, but I’m going to go even further. As long as you are on the Albanian task force or in any role whatsoever in the coalition, I will not allow you to ever be put in the position of having to do what you’ve done in the past.”

“You don’t need to talk around it. I was a sexpionage agent. A honey trap. To say I won’t ever engage in the practice again is naive on your part, though, Magnet.” She took a deep breath. “We do what needs to be done. While I didn’t enjoy assignments such as those, is it any worse than assassinating someone? Or interrogation when we’re forced to employ methods that should be defined as torture?”

She was right. Most agents were assigned things that, given the choice, they would not have wanted to do. It wasn’t just in intelligence. There were unpleasant jobs or tasks in every walk of life. “Apologies,” I said under my breath. “I meant no disrespect.”

“I know you didn’t, and there’s no need for you to feel sorry. It’s more that I don’t want you to pity me in the same way you don’t pity Oleander for what she may have been forced to do. Anyone, really.”

I had so much respect for Schön. Far more than I did when Nemesis first announced she would be one of Zeppelin’s and Verity’s handlers on the St. Moritz op. However, I feared in telling her so, it would continue to sound as though I felt sorry for her.

“Did you mean what you said?”

“Um, I would like to say I did, but can you be more specific?”

“That we’d make a good team and that, while we weren’t there yet, you could see it happening.”

“Every word.”

“That’s what matters, Magnet. That you believe in me as an agent. That you don’t look at me and see a woman you’d like to have sex with.”

Had someone hit me in the chest with a sledgehammer, I doubted it would’ve had a greater impact than the words Schön had just uttered. I had no idea how to respond, even though I felt very much as though I should.

“Magnet?”

“I heard you.” When I swallowed, it felt like a rock was in my throat. “I can assure you, you will never have to fear that I will see you as anything but an exemplary intelligence agent, one I am proud to have on my team.”

She nodded and stood. “I’ll head back now.”

I was about to offer to come with her, but something told me we both needed time and space on our own to think.

SCHÖN

I'd set both myself and Magnet up when I said what mattered was that he believed in me as an agent and didn't see me as someone he wanted to have sex with. It wasn't exactly what I meant. What I'd hoped was that he'd see me as a woman who would be more than a hookup.

"You will never have to fear that I will see you as anything but an exemplary intelligence agent." His words were in direct response to what I'd said, but God, they hurt like hell. Why hadn't I just kept my mouth shut? Why had I envisioned a different dialogue in my head that would be completely unrealistic, and if not that, then inappropriate?

Now that we'd collected the two DNA samples as was our objective, we'd return to Shere maybe even as early as this evening. Given I wouldn't be working as closely with Magnet, I could distance myself, not hang on his every word, and not look for his constant approval and acceptance. Perhaps I could work more with Verity—if she accepted the apology I intended to issue as soon as I could. Or Nemesis, not that she'd have time to mentor me. There were several women at the command center I could request to shadow. If one of them would agree to mentor me, it would make separating myself from Magnet less difficult. No doubt, he'd appreciate being relieved of the responsibility of training me.

After returning to the resort, I gathered my things, making sure I packed the items Verity had sent with Magnet separately from my extra makeup

brushes. Then I changed into travel clothes so, once our departure was announced, I'd be ready.

"Has there been a change in the op I'm not aware of?" Ehren asked. "Or is it you alone who's leaving?"

"We completed our objectives."

"We did? Or you did?"

I looked over at where she stood, arms folded and smirking. Since my left side was to her, I reached up on my right and switched my comms on.

"I don't know exactly what you're inferring, but my understanding is that Rogue and Magnet were able to collect DNA samples."

Clearly, her comms were off since she didn't react to hearing me speak through her earpiece.

"Don't play stupid, Schön. While Magnet came to your defense in the past, he isn't here now to do so. I see your machinations, and once we return to the command center, I've no doubt Nemesis will as well. You aren't so clever as to be able to hide from other female agents. It's only the men who think with their penises as soon as you make your play for them."

It was interesting that the woman was accusing me of playing stupid when she was careless enough not to consider she was being overheard.

"I'm getting all of this." I heard Magnet's voice in my ear. "I will deal with it once we're back in the UK."

"I hear you, Ehren," I said, standing and walking past her, intending to leave the room. As I did, she grabbed my arm, digging her fingernails into my flesh.

"You took someone very important from me. Someday, I'll make sure the same thing happens to you."

I jerked away and kept walking. I held my head high and didn't respond.

Magnet didn't return for another thirty minutes, and when he did, he announced we'd be leaving Gozo via helicopter within the hour. Once on the main island of Malta, a plane would be waiting to transport us to the airfield at Gatwick. He spoke to us as a group and said nothing to me directly. Exactly as it should be.

THE THREE-HOUR FLIGHT WENT BY QUICKLY SINCE I KEPT BUSY EVERY moment I could, preparing a brief specifically detailing my interactions with Francesca Vella. No one had asked me to do it, but when either Magnet or someone else did, I'd be able to deliver it straightaway.

I *avoided* interacting with Magnet and Rogue, but Ehren was invisible to me. I didn't as much as look at her. And, given we had witnesses she was aware of, she didn't say a single word to me, either.

Upon our arrival in Gatwick, I was last to grab my bags since I sat the farthest back on the plane. When I reached the front, Magnet was waiting.

"How are you holding up?" he asked.

"Fine as always," I said, avoiding making eye contact.

"I feel like I've done something wrong. That I've upset you somehow."

"Magnet, you are the commander of this task force. I highly doubt you achieved that position by worrying that your orders or actions may have upset someone who reports to you."

When I swept past him, he put his hand on my arm. It was a gentle touch, not like when Ehren had grabbed me, but I still winced when his fingers landed in the same place her nails had dug into me. I jerked away like I had with her.

"What happened?"

"Nothing. Excuse me."

Rather than touch me again, Magnet blocked my way. "Let me see your arm."

"No!" I snapped.

"Schön, I am ordering you to show me your right upper arm."

My eyes bored into his, silently begging him not to force me to do as he asked. He didn't waver.

"It's not a big deal," I said under my breath.

"Who did it?"

"Don't you understand you're only going to make things worse?"

"Not for you, I won't be."

"Not here. Wait until we're back at the command center."

It took several seconds, but he eventually gave in, at least on seeing my arm. When I told him I was capable of carrying my own bag, he nearly snarled at me.

Like on the plane, when I got in the SUV, I avoided looking at Ehren, who was in the front passenger seat.

"I'll take the back row," I said to Rogue when he got out and lifted the seat.

"Not on your life, Schön," he said, winking. Magnet took the seat beside me, and while it made me uncomfortable, at least Ehren wasn't seated there.

“I heard you had a lot of success. Congratulations,” said Zeppelin, who was once again our driver. I raised my head and realized he was speaking to me.

“Yes, um, well, the team was successful.”

He smiled and winked. “Say thank you, Schön.”

While my first inclination was to argue and tell him I hadn’t done more than the others—except for Ehren—I knew doing so would only draw more unwanted attention. “Thank you,” I said, turning my head toward the window when I could feel Ehren’s eyes on me.

Thankfully, we traveled mainly on back roads on the drive to Shere, so other than the dim lighting inside the vehicle, there was nothing more to illuminate the shame and embarrassment I knew was evident on my face, put there by Ehren’s judgment of me.

Once alone, when I was certain no one could see or hear me, I’d allow myself to break down, to rail against being in the position I worked so hard to avoid.

What was it about me that made people notice me? Why couldn’t I blend into the background like everyone else? It didn’t matter whether I smiled or frowned, spoke up, or remained quiet; I always seemed to be a target. I was either accused of being angry or too much of a flirt. Any expression on my face at all seemed fodder for criticism.

To my dismay, I let out a groan of frustration. While he didn’t ask what was wrong, Magnet brushed my finger with his. It meant he’d heard and would add it to the list of things he’d want to talk to me about once we arrived at the command center.

After we parked near the entrance of the main residence, I waited a few seconds so Ehren would have time to get her bags and go inside before I got out. When I did, Magnet told me to wait before entering the house.

“Rogue and I have discussed it, and I’ll room in his cottage, and you can have the one where Zeppelin and I stayed previously.”

“It isn’t two bedrooms?”

“It is.”

I appreciated that Magnet thought he was arranging something nice for me. He had no idea that what he was actually doing was further isolating me from the others. “Thanks, but I’d prefer to stay where I have been.”

“Will you excuse us?” Magnet said to Rogue. “I don’t feel like I can say or do anything right,” he added after the other man walked away.

“Magnet, you—or we, rather—shouldn’t be having this conversation.” I glanced at the house. “Especially not right here.”

“Come with me. Please.”

I nodded and followed, not bothering to argue when he carried my bag in the direction of the cottage where I knew he’d stayed with Zeppelin. He unlocked the door, reached inside, and turned on a light, then motioned for me to go in front of him.

“Stop right there,” I said when he carried my bags beyond the living room. “I’m not staying here. You cannot issue an order as to where I sleep. You also cannot demand I show you my arm. Or insist upon carrying my bag just because I’m a woman, or intervene every time another agent has an issue with me. Earlier, you said I never had to fear that you’d see me as anything but an agent on your team —”

“Those were not my exact words.”

I clenched my fists at my sides and snarled at him like he’d done to me earlier. “This is ridiculous,” I spat.

When I spun on my heel to leave, Magnet did the last thing I ever would’ve predicted he’d do. His arm snaked around my waist, and he pulled my back to his front.

“I need you to listen to what I have to say.” His breath felt warm on my neck, and I wanted to melt into him. Instead, I used all my might to elbow him. Unfortunately, my aim was off, and instead of connecting with his stomach, I hit him in the groin.

“*Jesus*, why did you do that?” he shouted, dropping his arm and backing away from me.

I had my hand on the knob, about to stalk out, when I heard him say my name. Not my code name. My given name. “Prisca, please.”

I spun around and faced him. “You said you’d never see me as anything but another agent,” I repeated, hating that I sounded as hurt as I felt.

“You said you didn’t want me to look at you and see a woman I wanted to have sex with.” Magnet, who remained bent slightly at the waist, grimaced and stood up straighter. “I must say, I much prefer you this way.”

I opened my mouth, then closed it. I had no idea how to respond to such a statement.

“I’m not referring to your doing what might be permanent damage to my anatomy.”

“It was my elbow, not a baseball bat,” I said, rolling my eyes.

His expression was one of horror, but different than the one I'd seen earlier. "Consider me forewarned."

"What do you mean by you prefer me this way?"

"Standing up for yourself, fighting back, putting me in my place."

"What? How can you say that? You're my CO!"

"Is that what you want? For that to be all that's between us?"

"I don't know what you mean."

He took a step closer. "Yes, you do. You also know that I'm not saying any of this as a man who wants to have sex with you."

"What are you saying?"

"Can we please sit?" he asked, motioning to the sofa.

"No."

"Very well, stand. I, however, need to sit." He grimaced again and gingerly made his way over to the sofa.

"I'm sorry about, you know."

"I'm not quite ready to forgive you."

"I meant to elbow you in the stomach."

He raised a brow and grinned. "Yes, well, that would've been so much better." He took a deep breath. "Prisca, *please* sit down."

I acquiesced and sat beside him.

"Look, I want us to be friends. I *like* you. But if you're truly uncomfortable with my saying any of this, if you think I sound just like other arseholes you've had to deal with, I'll stop talking right now and never utter another word about it."

I shook my head.

"No, I'm not an arsehole, or, no, you don't want us to be friends?"

"We could be friends."

He nodded once. "Good. So, what happened to your arm?"

"I'd rather not say."

"Ehren?"

"She tried to stop me from walking out. I'm sure she didn't intend to grab me as hard as she did."

Magnet turned so he was facing me. "Why are you defending her?"

"I told you before; your intervention will only make things worse."

He lowered his head. "Right or wrong, I can't stop myself from wanting to look out for you."

"That's very sweet —"

His head shot up. “There’s nothing *sweet* about it. Nothing at all.” He leaned forward, but pulled himself back. “God, you have no idea.”

“What do you mean?”

“I want to wrap you in my arms and take away all the hurt you feel. I want to shield you from people like Ehren and make sure no one ever causes you pain again.”

“Why?” I whispered.

“Because you deserve to have someone in your life who looks out for you. Someone who cares about you. Not *someone*, Schön, *me*.” He cupped my cheek. “Who looks out for you, Prisca?”

“I do.”

He nodded. “I know you do. But you don’t have to go it alone.”

Could I admit how good that sounded? How long it had been since I didn’t have to?

“I see you, you know?”

My eyes opened wide. “What did you just say?”

“You heard me. I see you. It’s almost as though I can feel your thoughts. For example, right now, you’re thinking how nice it would be not to have your guard up all the time. How good it would feel to know someone had your back and not just because he’s your CO. Just because he cares about you.”

“Magnet...”

He looked up at the ceiling. “Tell me you don’t see me as some guy just trying to get in your pants.”

I reached out and touched his chest. “I don’t see you that way at all. I do believe you care about me. It’s just really hard for me to lower my walls enough to accept it.”

“How can I make it easier for you?”

My request was inappropriate. Actually, it was dangerous. The more I allowed myself to care about Magnet, the more hurt I’d suffer in the end. I spoke the words anyway. “Hold me?”

He shifted closer, took me in his arms, and pulled me against him so my head rested on his chest. Then he stroked my hair with one hand. He didn’t try to kiss me or to take it beyond a simple embrace. For the first time since I was a little girl, I truly felt cared for.

MAGNET

The self-imposed rules I was breaking seemed far less important now that I had Schön in my arms. As much as I wanted to kiss her, I wouldn't yet. What I'd hold out for before I did was her trust. The only thing I didn't know quite how to handle, though, was the matter of where she'd sleep.

I had no problem moving over to the cottage where Rogue bunked. However, that would leave Schön here alone, something I sensed would make her uncomfortable. As far as other women I could suggest move in here with her, the only other single female based here in Shere, Delfino, was still on Gozo. Well, and Ehren, but she wouldn't be here much longer. I'd seen to that.

While on the plane, I'd drafted a brief outlining the woman's behavior during our op. I had no doubt she would soon be on her way back to Switzerland, where it would be up to Oskar Schmid, director general of Swiss intelligence, where she went from there.

"What are you thinking about?" Schön asked.

"You."

She sat up. "What about me?"

"While it isn't up to me, I'd rather have you stay here in the cottage, but I'm also concerned about you being here alone."

As if the universe were listening, or the cottage was bugged, which I was

certain it wasn't, Rogue sent a text, saying he'd forgotten Kodiak was returning from the States and bunking with him. Thus, the room he'd offered me was no longer available.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Not really, anyway. The room in Rogue's cottage is no longer available. I'll, err, figure something out." I could always stay in the main house, not that it would solve the worry I felt about Schön being here alone.

"I have another idea."

"What's that?" I asked.

"This cottage has two bedrooms. How is it different than the arrangement on Gozo? I mean, besides not having to share rooms with Ehren and Rogue."

It wasn't as if anyone paid attention or cared who stayed where as long as anyone wasn't kicked out while deployed. "Are you sure about this?" I asked. "I mean, I am. Just in case you wondered."

Schön laughed. "I've made you so uncomfortable."

"You haven't. I swear."

She raised a brow and continued chuckling.

Our mobiles pinged with a message from Nemesis saying she planned to call a briefing and wanted to be sure Schön and I could attend. I responded we could.

"Ready?" I asked.

"Will you, uh, be okay walking?" She motioned to just below my midsection.

"Barely. I'll probably need to hang onto you for support."

Schön's giggle warmed my heart.

VERITY WAS THE FIRST TO GREET US WHEN WE WALKED INTO THE SITUATION room. "Well done, Schön," she said after hugging me. The two women shared an awkward half hug, and Schön whispered something to her before we took our seats.

"Everything all right?" I asked, knowing full well it was none of my business.

"I asked if we could speak at the end of the briefing."

Nemesis approached the dais and called for everyone's attention. "Before we begin with the business portion of this briefing, please join me in congratulating Team Albania for their success on Gozo. Well done, all of you. Schön, I heard great things about your conversation with Francesca

Vella.” She looked around the room. “I’m still reviewing the brief, but it will be circulated en masse tomorrow morning.”

When Nemesis leaned over to say something to Ares, Schön leaned into me. “Where’s Ehren?” she whispered.

I shrugged my shoulders.

Nemesis straightened and cleared her throat. “As I alluded to, we have some business matters to attend to in regard to task force members. First, Ehren Richter and Macht Persson are on their way back to St. Moritz, where they’ll be following up on the banking institutions to see if they can find other accounts administered by James Godwin. They’ll also look into the mystery woman seen dining with the former ambassador in November of last year.”

Zeppelin, who was seated beside me, leaned over. “Macht is coming back. Ehren is being replaced.”

I nodded.

“Magnet, my apologies for not addressing this with you previously, but I’ve received word from Zamira Prifti, Albania’s new director of state intelligence, that Rovená Basha, code name Magnolia, is once again available to join your task force. We’ll speak further at the conclusion of the briefing, but she’ll be here in the morning.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I responded.

“Zeppelin, would you like to introduce the most recent addition to your team?”

“Of course.” He stood and joined Nem at the dais. “Everyone, please join me in welcoming Mallory Felice, code name Flick, to the coalition. She comes to us highly recommended by Fatale Shaw, err, what do we call her now?”

“Merrigan Butler will suffice,” Nemesis responded, smiling and motioning to Flick. “Not to be outdone by his wife, a protégé of Doc Butler’s has been appointed to the US task force via CIA Director Money McTiernan. Parker Mills, code name Grey. Like Magnolia, she’ll be arriving by zero eight hundred tomorrow.”

“Any questions thus far?” When no one responded, Nemesis continued. “The last bit of news I want to share is, now that he’s officially been named chief of MI6, Pinch Fulton’s replacement as director general of MI5 has been appointed. I’m sure many of those in the room have had the pleasure of working with Devereaux Carlisle, code name Agatha, in the past.” Nemesis

pointed to the back of the room, where the woman I knew as Devi stood with Pinch.

“Typhon? Do you have another announcement?” Nem asked.

“Just so you don’t think we’re only adding female agents to the coalition, Hornet Zak will serve as Unit 23’s special advisor.”

I raised a brow at Typhon’s use of “we’re.” As far as I knew, there was no change in Nem’s status as coalition commander nor in Typhon’s role as advisor. When my eyes met Ares’, I saw he agreed. It was to be expected, I supposed, from the man who led SIS’ most secret and deadly units.

“Which reminds me, Kodiak has also returned from the States. Welcome back,” Nem said, waving in his direction. “And, as a reminder, Blackjack, Tank, and Michelangelo remain on the ground in Tropea, and Delfino and Atticus are still on Gozo. Questions?” She waited a few seconds. “No? Good. I don’t know about you, but after all those introductions, I need a drink.”

Like most everyone else in the room, I chuckled before turning to Schön. “What about you? Any questions, or are you also ready for a drink?”

“Err, both? But first, I wanted to talk to Verity.”

“That’s right. Hey, Zep. What do you say we hit the bar?”

He nodded but leaned down and whispered something to Verity.

“Red wine, please,” she responded, then looked at Schön. “Would you like a glass?”

“Please.”

“What’s going on?” Zeppelin asked once we were out of the situation room and headed into the kitchen where the makeshift bar was set up.

“I believe Schön wants to apologize to Verity.”

He opened his mouth as if to speak, then closed it.

“Go ahead,” I said.

Zep shook his head. “None of my business.”

“Right, then. Oh, I have a question; you said Macht is coming back but Ehren isn’t?”

He poured two glasses of wine and two glasses of bourbon, handing one of each to me. “Cheers,” he said before taking a sip of his drink.

“Cheers.”

“Magnet, do you have a moment?” I heard Nemesis ask.

“Of course.”

Zep set his bourbon on the counter, took the glass of wine I held, then muttered something about being right back.

“Can we speak privately?”

“I’d prefer it. Library or solarium?” I responded.

“I’ll let you decide.”

I led Nem to the other side of the house and into the solarium. It had always been my preferred place to work due to all of the windows, not that much was visible at this time of night.

“First, how is Schön doing?” she asked after we took a seat.

“Coming along.”

“Nasty business with Ehren.” Nem took a sip of her drink, then leaned against the sofa cushions. “God, I’m tired,” she murmured.

“We can continue this in the morning if you’d prefer,” I offered.

“No, let’s get it over with. Unbeknownst to her, Ehren is being *escorted* to Switzerland. Schmid initially scoffed when I contacted him saying we were releasing her from the coalition after her completion of this final assignment. However, I am the commander and certainly don’t owe him an explanation.”

“Glad to hear it. She’s his problem now. Or will be soon.”

“My thoughts precisely.”

“Next up is Magnolia.” She shook her head. “I can barely keep all these new names straight. Anyway, while I know very little about her as an agent, the new director of Albanian intelligence, Zamira, and I have been friends and colleagues for many years, and I trust her opinion.”

“Also glad to hear.”

“I was impressed by Schön’s success on Gozo as well as the preliminary brief I reviewed.”

“She’s a good agent, Nem.”

“What was it you just said? Glad to hear it? I am too.” She took another pull from her drink, this one much longer. “Bloody Typhon.”

I laughed out loud. “I wondered if you caught the way he worded the announcement.”

Her eyes opened wide, and she brought her hand to her forehead. “Dammit! I forgot we have someone else joining us here in Shere.”

“Who?”

“Niven St. Thomas. Do you know him?”

“It’s been a while, but I ran a couple of ops with Saint.”

“It was announced previously that he’d be joining the coalition, but now, it’s slightly more official.”

I raised a brow. “*More official?*”

“You do know Saint married a vicar, yes?”

“I believe I heard something to that effect.” I couldn’t help but shake my head. Back in the day, the man’s code name was the antithesis of his personality.

“Her name is Harper. Quite lovely. An American. Anyway, he was waiting for her to be assigned a parish closer to Shere. Well, in Shere, actually. It was mentioning Typhon that made me think of it.”

“Why?”

“Typhon cannot abide Saint and vice versa.” She smiled. “Which means...”

“We’ll see less of Typhon?”

She set her drink down and pumped her fist in the air. “Thank God, right? The arrogant arsehole.”

“I’ll admit I won’t miss his presence.”

“There are few here at the command center who will.”

“Um, Nem, since we’re talking privately, I’d like to discuss Schön a bit more.”

“Of course.”

I told Nem what I’d learned about her during our brief stay on Gozo. “Most of which I might not know if it weren’t for Ehren’s bad behavior,” I added.

“I’m worried about her, Mag. Ehren, not Schön. When I said Macht was escorting her, I’ve asked him to get close to her and see how much of a threat she really is. In the meantime, we’ll keep a close eye on Schön. She’s one of us now, and we protect our own.”

“Roger that.”

“Is there anything else I need to know?”

“Not yet.”

She smiled. “Shall we join the others? I’m feeling a little guilty for not being more welcoming to our new arrivals.”

“Yes, but there is one more thing.”

“Go on.”

“Since Zeppelin and Verity are commuting from Wargrave, I have an open room in the cottage.”

“Say no more, Mag.”

“No? I mean, I don’t want you to misunderstand —”

“I understand perfectly well. You’re a good man, Justin Magnussen. A very good man.”

SCHÖN

Now that Verity and I were alone, I felt myself on the verge of panic. I truly did have so much respect for her, and the way I'd acted in St. Moritz was shameful. I felt worse eyeing the cane that rested near her chair.

"I want to apologize for the way I treated you in St. Moritz," I said, getting the words out as quickly as I could.

"I accept. However, you're probably remembering it worse than it was."

"That's kind of you to say."

She shook her head. "You may have made missteps, but nothing that compromised the op. As far as your behavior toward me, I stand by what I said. It wasn't as bad as you're remembering."

Zeppelin returned carrying two glasses of wine. "Mag is meeting with Nemesis. Shall we circulate and meet some of the new team members?"

I stood when Verity did, seemingly not needing any help. I remained where I was, unsure if I should wait for Magnet. Truthfully, I wanted to disappear into a corner, preferably make myself invisible.

"Come on, then," said Verity, motioning for me to join them.

"I love your code name," I said to Flick. "I'm Schön, by the way."

"Wait, are you Swiss but not on that task force?"

I chuckled. "We have a lot of crossover within the coalition. I'm on the Albanian team. You're on the Swiss task force, but you're from the UK,

yes?”

She chuckled too. “That’s right.”

“I put a master list together, just so I could keep everyone straight.”

“Wait, what?” said Verity.

“I was just telling Flick I created a list of everyone in the coalition. I obviously have to add more now.”

Verity’s eyes widened. “I’d love something like that. God, why didn’t I think of making one?”

“You probably already knew everyone.”

She shook her head. “Wrong. Hey, Zep. Did you hear this?”

“What’s that?”

“Schön made a master list of everyone and which task force they’re affiliated with.”

He looked over at me. “How do you keep up? I have a hard time just with my own team.”

“What else have you done?” Verity asked.

“I made a spreadsheet of the briefs and categorized them so I could find things more easily if I had a question.”

“I bet you’ve read all of them too, haven’t you?”

My cheeks flushed at Zeppelin’s question. “I have.”

“You’re like me. I review them again and again,” said Verity. “However, unlike you, I go back and skim them when I’m looking for something. You know, you should do an introduction to the new arrivals.”

My eyes opened wide. “Me?”

Magnet and Nemesis returned to the room and, when they spotted us, walked over.

“Nem, I was just talking with Schön about things she created to help familiarize herself with the coalition members as well as categorizing the briefs. You should put her in charge of helping the new arrivals get up to speed.”

“That’s an excellent idea.” Nemesis looked at me. “Are you up for it?”

“Um, sure, ma’am.”

“While you’re at it, I think you should create another master list. One for couples and their status. Right, Oleander?” said Wren, who I hadn’t seen approach behind me. “She’s clueless.”

“True. I can’t keep up with who’s just shagging, who’s married, and who’s broken up. However, I have developed four hundred and seventy-

seven ways to assassinate a target. Bet you can't say that, Wren." Oleander held up her hand. "Wait. I've forgotten who I'm speaking to. I'm sure *you* have more."

"Does this master list include background information?" Flick asked, looking between Wren and Oleander, obviously confused by their exchange.

"Some," I admitted, although I wasn't sure how much of that I could share, given I'd added my personal opinion of those I'd interacted with.

"Everyone, sorry to interrupt, but I have one more announcement. Schön will be holding a briefing tomorrow for all new arrivals. She'll give you a rundown on where to find the information you need to get up to speed."

"Can old-timers attend?" Verity asked.

"Good idea. I should probably make it mandatory for everyone."

My eyes opened wide, but Nemesis patted my arm. "Just joking. However, I will open it up to anyone who feels they need a refresher. How's ten hundred?"

"Fine, ma'am."

"Everyone hear that? Ten hundred sharp here in the situation room." She turned to me when everyone went back to their conversations. "Magnet can help you get set up with A/V stuff. I'm horrible at it." She leaned closer. "And as long as I'm not issuing a direct order, you don't need to address me formally. Call me Nemesis or just Nem."

"Yes, ma'am, err, Nemesis."

I looked up at Magnet. His eyes were on mine, and he was smiling. Actually, he beamed.

"Argh," Nem groaned and swiped her phone's screen. "No rest for me." She looked between Magnet and me. "Not for you either. Follow me. I just received the DNA reports. We'll review them together. Oh, and Rogue should join us as well."

Nemesis led us to the solarium and instructed Rogue to close the door after he joined us.

"Can you please..." She waved her finger at the switch for the screen, which Magnet lowered. Nem plugged her laptop into the port near it.

"You know you can —"

Rogue stopped mid-sentence when Nem glared at him and motioned to the cord she used for connection. "Easier for me, all right?"

"Yes, ma'am," he muttered in response.

"First, Francesca Vella's."

A report showing the matching marks between hers, Xavier's, Pharaoh's, and Mithras' appeared on the screen. There was a twenty-five-percent match to everyone but Mithras, who had a zero match with Francesca.

"Next, we'll add Charlene Vella-Borg."

I couldn't speak for anyone else, but I was holding my breath. When the next report appeared, the results didn't surprise me.

There was a fifty percent match between Francesca and Charlene, indicating parent and child. Between her, Xavier, and Pharaoh, it was twenty-five percent, most likely indicating she was their aunt. Like with Francesca, there was no match between Charlene and Mithras.

"Finally, we'll add the DNA of the woman we believed was Seshat but turned out to be her twin. As you can see, she is half sister to Xavier, Pharaoh, and Mithras, indicating the four share one parent, who we predict is Salvatore Rávdos."

"Salvatore was a busy boy," I commented.

Nem nodded, then looked back at the screen. "While this confirms Charlene is not Xavier's or Pharaoh's mother, it doesn't rule her out as a suspect related to AMPS. She *could* be our A," said Nem.

"I don't think she is," Magnet commented.

"Neither do I," she responded.

"Thanks to Schön, we know Francesca had another daughter, older than both Charlene and Marco Jr. The questions now are, who is she and is she still alive?"

"Francesca used the word 'lost,'" I said.

Nemesis nodded. "Right."

"If the other daughter is deceased, she's not buried on Gozo with her father and brother," said Magnet. "Nor is there any record of her death, at least through public records."

"We'll get Delfino and Atticus to see what they can find. Maybe someone will remember the oldest daughter and might know what happened to her."

"She's our A," I said under my breath, wishing I hadn't said it out loud.

"I think you're right, Schön. Now, let's find the bloody woman."

When it seemed as though we were finished reviewing the reports, I excused myself, wanting to prepare for the morning's briefing. It would be my first for more than two or three people, if that many showed up.

"I'll go with you," said Magnet when the three of us returned to the hallway outside the situation room and I put on my jacket. "Hang on. I need

to talk to Zep, but I'll be right back."

There were fewer people around than when we'd left the room earlier, but those who remained were chatting and laughing. Before tonight, I'd felt like such an outsider. Now, though, I was feeling more confident, mostly in part due to how nice Nemesis and Verity were to me. And Magnet, of course.

Except it felt different with women. Men were typically nice to me, even though their ulterior motives were always evident. Other females either expressed visible disdain or ignored me entirely.

"I retrieved your cottage key," said Magnet when he returned. I held out my hand, and he set it in my palm, then closed my hand around it. I looked up at him when he didn't let go. His eyes bored into mine.

"What?" I asked.

"I'll tell you on our way back."

We were just outside the door when I heard Zeppelin call out to him.

"We're heading into the village to grab a bite at the pub. Would you like to join us?" he asked.

"What do you say?"

"I'm quite hungry, but I suppose I could get something here."

"What fun is that when we can go to the pub instead?" Zeppelin said, overhearing me.

"He won't give in, you know? Even if neither of us were hungry, he'd continue pestering until we agreed to join them."

Zeppelin shuddered. "Hurry up, you two. It's bloody cold out."

"You'll have to give us a lift back," I reminded him.

"Right. It's on the way."

"I MISS THIS PLACE," SAID ZEPPELIN ONCE WE WERE INSIDE.

Verity leaned into me. "It's no different than the one in Wargrave."

"Wargrave?"

"Where Zep's place is."

"Our place, Alena," said Zeppelin, leaning in to kiss her cheek.

Magnet took my coat and hung it on a hook. "Wine or a pint?"

"We're at a pub. A pint, definitely," I said, laughing. I watched him walk over to the bar with Zeppelin, feeling almost like we were on a date. But we weren't. We were colleagues. Working on being friends. Except when he'd held me earlier; it had felt like so much more than that.

"It's like there's an invisible string tied between the two of you," said

Verity, her chin resting on her hand.

“We’re just, um, I mean —”

She reached over and put her hand on mine. “You sound like me back when I was still trying to deny what was between Henry and me. It’s pointless, you know? He adores you. It’s written all over his face.”

“I don’t know...”

“He’s one of the good ones. Remember that.”

“He’s been so nice to me. Helped me so much.”

“Magnet wouldn’t do it if he didn’t want to.” She picked up a menu and handed it to me. “If you like curry, it’s fabulous. So are the burgers.”

“Oh my gosh. They’re huge,” I said when I saw one delivered to the table next to ours. “Maybe a salad. Except, wait. It says ‘no leaf.’” How odd. A salad with no greens?

I decided to order it, and when it came to the table, I wished I’d gotten something more substantial. On the other hand, it had been days since I’d gotten in a good workout. Verity’s curry, though, made my mouth water.

“I’ll never eat all this. Let’s share.”

I looked up from my unappetizing plate of vegetables and realized she was speaking to me. “Thanks, but I couldn’t.”

“I insist.” She dished half onto a plate and scooted it over to me. “So, I’m excited about your briefing tomorrow. Admittedly, I have a hard time remembering who is where since people move around so much. For example, what’s the deal with Macht and Ehren?” She turned to Zeppelin. “Did I hear you say he’s coming back but she isn’t? Why not?”

Magnet scooted closer to me so his arm was against mine. “I had issues with her while we were on Gozo.”

Verity moved her plate and rested her forearms against the edge of the table. “Issues?” she asked in a low tone of voice. “You weren’t there forty-eight hours. What kind of issues?” Her eyes opened wide, looking between Magnet and me. “Wait. None of my business. My apologies.”

I hated to imagine what she was thinking, but I also didn’t feel as though I could explain. Especially in the middle of a crowded pub.

Zeppelin leaned over and whispered something in her ear.

“Right,” she said, nodding first at him and then at me.

“I should probably get back so I can prepare for tomorrow,” I said when I noticed everyone else had finished eating.

NO ONE SAID MUCH ON THE RETURN DRIVE TO THE COMPOUND. ME, BECAUSE I felt sick to my stomach, worrying about what Verity must be thinking. Surely, she blamed me for whatever had happened with Ehren. Even if I explained, I knew I'd sound defensive.

God, now, I didn't even want to do the briefing in the morning. Was everyone, apart from the new arrivals, wondering what had happened on Gozo? And what about the master list I'd created? Should I remove her? It wasn't like Nemesis had announced she wasn't coming back. Zeppelin was the one who said it, and he'd only told Magnet and Verity. I'd just overheard.

Magnet thanked them for dropping us off near the cottage, and I waved when they said good night.

"I can feel you fretting," he said, opening the door and waving me inside.

"I feel like such an idiot."

He took my jacket. "Have a seat, and we'll talk."

Was I reading more into his tone of voice than I should? Was Magnet about to give me a dressing down? What a horrible idea this was—rooming with my commander.

When he joined me, he had two glasses, both with amber liquid over ice. He handed one to me, and I took a whiff. It smelled smoky, with hints of vanilla and caramel.

"I figured you could use something stronger than wine. Plus, all we have at the cottage is bourbon."

I raised the glass to drink, but he put his hand on my arm.

"Wait. There's something I want to say." He raised his glass in my direction. "Here's to you, Schön, for a great job on the op and an even better job tonight. I know I've no right to say this because what you've accomplished, you've done on your own, but I'm proud of you. Really proud." He touched his glass to mine, then raised it to his mouth and took a sip.

"Thank you," I murmured before taking a drink. "Wow. This is *really* good."

"Zep has good taste in the stuff." He took my glass and set it on the table before doing the same with his. "You have nothing to be ashamed of in what went on with Ehren. More, you owe no one an explanation. I took care of it on the task force level, and Nemesis did what she needed to do on the coalition level. It's done and over with."

"But, Verity —"

Magnet put his fingers on my lips. “Zeppelin will explain.”

“I should’ve been able to handle it on my own. I shouldn’t have needed you or anyone else to intervene on my behalf. I should’ve —”

I’d had my eyes down, so when Magnet’s lips met mine, I wasn’t expecting it and pulled away.

“I’m sorry.” We both gasped at the same time.

“No, don’t be.” Again, we said the same thing over each other.

“Can I speak?” I asked.

“Of course.”

“You just surprised me.” I put my hand on his leg. “But I liked it. I mean, I would’ve liked it.”

“Should I try again?”

I nodded. “Definitely.”

This time, Magnet put his hand on the back of my neck. I closed my eyes, wanting to focus only on how his mouth felt on mine—and it was heavenly. His lips were soft and so gentle. When I felt the wet tip of his tongue, I opened to him. And then, God, it went beyond heavenly. Was there a beyond? His mouth tasted of the bourbon, heady and masculine. I wanted to snuggle into his arms and never leave.

“Wait,” I said, pulling back but touching his lips with my fingertips. “I have to get ready for tomorrow morning, but...”

He smiled. “But?”

“Can we circle back to this, um, another time?”

Magnet pulled me into his arms and hugged me. “How about this? If I help, maybe you’ll be done sooner, and then we can do all the circling you’d like.”

“Help? How?”

He chuckled. “I don’t know what you already have prepared, so I’m not sure.”

I took a deep breath, knowing I could trust Magnet, but worrying what he’d think if I shared some of my notes with him. “There are, um, I mean I’ve included personal opinions.”

He rubbed his hands together. “I’m intrigued. What did you have to say about me?”

MAGNET

When Schön's cheeks turned a lovely shade of pink and her eyelids drooped, it made me want to know what she'd said about me even more. Just imagining what it might be had my blood thrumming.

"Was any of it good, Schön?" I said in the deepest, sexiest voice I could. "Or was it *bad*?"

Her reaction wasn't exactly what I was going for, but I had to admit I got a certain thrill when she started to giggle. I'd heard her laugh and even chuckle, but there were only a couple of other times when I remembered her making that particular sound. Once was when I'd tickled her feet the night we fell asleep on the sofa at the resort on Gozo.

Perhaps I'd ruin the moment, but I had to say something. "I love that sound."

She giggled a couple more times and then her laughter faded away, her expression darkened, and she looked off in the distance.

"What just happened?"

Her eyes scrunched. "Sorry. I was thinking about the woman with Godwin in St. Moritz. As hard as Macht and I tried, we couldn't get a good look at her. When she came out of the restaurant, her hat was pulled down, a scarf covered most of her face, and she was wearing sunglasses and a heavy coat."

"Verity got a shot of her, but it wasn't clear enough for her to be

identified. From what I understand, even Decker Ashford, who seems to be able to track down everyone, didn't have any luck."

She nodded. "I remember reading that in the brief." Her eyes darted around.

"Tell me what you're thinking."

"I know it isn't my call to make, but I want to go back. There have to be images of her in St. Moritz. Maybe even at the resort. We followed her and Godwin there, but no one reported seeing her leave."

"I'm sure we can request surveillance footage."

Her eyes met mine. "I know, but I think we'd have more luck returning to St. Moritz. I grew up there. I mean, I went to boarding school in Leysin and university in Geneva, but then I returned when I went to work for the Swiss intelligence field office there. Macht grew up there too, although we didn't know each other."

"Okay. I'm willing to make that happen."

She put her head in her hands. "But...Ehren's there. In fact, she and Macht are assigned to the op together."

"We'll talk it over with Nemesis."

"What about Zeppelin? He owns it, right?"

She made a good point. "Tomorrow, we'll send a request to meet with both of them."

Her eyes bored into mine. Her expression didn't change, and she didn't say anything.

"Or...I'll send a request tonight?"

"That would be preferable."

"Would you like to meet with them before or after your briefing?"

"If it's before, I have to get to work. Which means I can't do any circling."

I smiled. "Understood."

While she worked on her notes, I sent the promised message, outlining her request along with her concern about Ehren.

Within a few seconds, Zeppelin rang. "I'm all for Schön replacing Ehren in St. Moritz."

"Just so you know; if we make this happen, I'll go with her."

"What about Macht?" he asked.

"No reason for him to leave the op. In fact, it makes sense for him to stay on, given he and Schön were seen together there previously. First, though, we

need to figure out what can be done about Agent Richter.”

“I don’t know why we’d pussyfoot around this. We represent the UN coalition. Yes, we gave her and Macht an assignment, but we all agreed that, when it ended, she wouldn’t return to Shere. She’d stay in Switzerland, where she’d return to her job with Swiss intelligence. Who, by the way, none of us answers to.”

“That’s essentially what Nem said.” I looked down and saw I received an alert. “Hey, it’s our commander ringing now.”

“Patch her in.”

“Hello, Nemesis. I’ve got Zep on the line too.”

“Hi, Nem. I was just telling Magnet that I agree with Schön’s suggestion about returning to St. Moritz and that Ehren’s role in the op should end immediately,” he told her.

“I also agree. While you are her task force leader, Zeppelin, Magnet is the op commander. One of you must release her from duty and instruct her to report back to Bern.”

“Roger that,” Zep responded. “I’ll handle it.”

The feeling that settled in my gut was telling me it couldn’t possibly be that simple. “I’ll be deploying with Schön,” I announced to Nem like I had Zeppelin.

“A wise decision, Magnet. What about Rogue and Magnolia?” Nem asked.

“We’ll meet as a team in the morning and decide,” I responded.

“Excellent and, Mag?”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“Give Schön the positive feedback she deserves.”

“Roger that.”

I’d gone into the bedroom to answer Zep’s call, and when I returned to the living room, I found Schön sitting at the dining table, working on her laptop.

“Zeppelin is officially releasing Ehren from her coalition assignment. He’ll instruct her to return to Bern in the morning.”

She nodded.

“The op is a go and will be carried out by the Albanian task force. You and I will travel to St. Moritz, where we’ll join forces with Macht. The question is, do we want Rogue’s and Magnolia’s support as well?”

“Are you asking me?”

“In a way. I’m discussing it with you. By the way, did you and Macht stay at the resort where Zeppelin and Verity were?”

“No. I have a chalet in town, not far from Châteaux Relais.”

“Oh. I see. Well, we’ll figure out lodging and undercover roles once we determine whether Rogue or Magnolia will travel with us.”

There was a glimmer in her eyes when she looked up at me.

I sighed. “What are you thinking?”

“Will you be undercover as my father again?” she winked.

“I suppose I must, just on the off chance our mystery woman was either on Gozo or has connections who were.”

“As far as lodging is concerned, my chalet has three bedrooms. Only one with a king-sized bed. There’s a full-size bed in one of the others, and the third has bunk beds.” The glimmer in her eyes remained.

“Bunk beds, eh?”

“They’re small. More for children, really.”

“I cannot imagine Macht staying in such a place.”

“Is that your way of asking if he did?”

I walked over to where she was seated, bent at the waist, and rested my folded arms on the table, beside her computer. Our faces were close enough that if either of us leaned in, we could kiss. “Did he?”

Schön shook her head. Her brown eyes were nearly black as she gazed into mine. “He did not.”

“Good.”

“Magnet...”

“I will leave you alone and let you work, but first, there’s something I need to say.”

“Okay,” she whispered.

“I like you, Schön. Very much, in fact. I think you’re far smarter than even you give yourself credit for, and watching you transition from someone who is unsure of herself to one confident enough to boldly recommend an op thrills me to no end. You’re also extraordinarily beautiful, and yes, I am very attracted to you. However, your physical appeal is just one of the things that excites me when I’m with you. I want to be clear about that.”

“*Your* physical appeal is only one thing that excites me when I’m with you too.”

“Yeah?”

She nodded. “The other thing I really like is your ability to make yourself

scarce when I have work to do.”

I laughed out loud. “Understood. I would offer to help, but it seems my absence is what you desire most.”

“There is one thing. Although I don’t know whether it’s possible.”

Standing, I raised one arm and flexed my muscles. “I’m a task force commander, which means anything is possible.”

Her cheeks pinkened, which I adored, and she smiled. “I’m really hungry.”

I leaned down and kissed her forehead. “Of course you are. You didn’t eat anything at the pub. You’re in the right place, though. Zeppelin eats three times his weight on a daily basis, so we have lots of food. Any requests, or shall I surprise you?”

“Anything at all would be great. I can’t focus.”

“That means you need protein.” Within five minutes, I set a plate in front of her. “Madam, your chicken quesadilla in egg wrap is served.”

“My what?”

“It’s something I learned to make when I was on assignment in California. Essentially, it’s the same as a burrito or taco —”

“I know what a quesadilla is, Magnet. What’s an egg wrap?”

“Oh, the thing that looks like a tortilla, but isn’t. It’s much healthier. Instead of carbs, it’s protein.”

I waited while she took a bite of one of the slices I’d cut.

“Wow. I can’t tell the difference.”

“Right?”

“Now, all I have to feel guilty about is the cheese.”

I shook my head. “It’s plant-based.”

She took another bite. “I can’t believe it. No wonder you’re all rock-hard muscle.”

When her cheeks flushed again, I leaned down and kissed her forehead like I had a few minutes earlier. “Get back to work. If you need more sustenance, holler.” I was about to add that I’d be in the bedroom, but there was already too much sexual innuendo in our conversation.

I’D JUST DRIFTED OFF AFTER SHOWERING AND LYING ON THE BED WHEN I heard a rap on the door. I jumped up to open it, realizing when I reached for the handle that I’d only put on a pair of boxer briefs. Nothing else. “One moment.”

“I just wanted to let you know I’m calling it a night. Shall I turn the lights off?”

“No, uh, I can do it. I just need to put on some clothes. I mean, I’m not *naked*.”

She giggled. “Good night, Magnet.”

After donning a pair of jeans, I opened the bedroom door at the same time Schön opened hers.

Her wide-eyed deer-in-the-headlights expression mirrored the one on my face. “Just, err, getting the lights.”

“Right, um, showering.”

“There are fresh towels in your room. I can get them if you’d like.”

“I can manage, but thank you.”

I shuffled to the front of the cottage. “Good God, I’m a horse’s arse,” I muttered, returning to the bedroom when all the lights were out. So much for the commander who made everything possible. Now, I just looked like a blithering idiot.

What was it about this girl—woman—that had me so tied up in knots? Maybe I should suggest she return to St. Moritz without me. Not alone, of course. I’d see to it Rogue went with her. I felt sure such an arrangement would allow both of us time to focus solely on the op and quit stumbling over our shared attraction.

Just so I couldn’t talk myself out of it in the morning, I sent Nemesis a message, letting her know what I’d decided.

WHEN I WOKE AND CHECKED THE TIME, I SAW I’D OVERSLEPT. I’D PLANNED to get out of bed at zero seven hundred and make sure Schön had everything she needed for her briefing.

After putting on the same pair of jeans I’d had last night and a pullover, I glanced in the direction of her open door, then went into the kitchen.

“Schön?” I called when I didn’t find her out there. I said her name a second time, returning to the hallway. Like her room, the bathroom door was also open, so I could see she wasn’t in there. I looked around and didn’t spot her computer, bag, or jacket.

I returned to my bedroom, stunned that she’d already left, but more that I hadn’t heard her. Foregoing another shower, I brushed my teeth, changed into a different attire, and set off for the command center.

When I arrived, Schön was facing my direction but was in a conversation

with Oleander and Flick. I waved, but she must've looked away before seeing me do so.

I wondered if Magnolia had arrived at the same time Grey did, but I looked around the room and didn't see her.

"This must be some kind of record," said Zeppelin, who walked up beside me.

"For?"

"Getting yourself in the doghouse."

"I need coffee before we have this conversation."

Zeppelin followed me into the kitchen, where Verity sat studying something on her laptop. While she said good morning, it wasn't in her usual effusive way.

"What am I missing?"

"Magnet. Good, you're here. A word?"

I turned around and followed Nemesis into the library.

"I'm afraid I put my foot in it," she said after closing the door.

"In what?" I asked.

"I had no idea you hadn't informed Schön of your decision not to travel to St. Moritz."

"I planned to discuss it with her this morning, but when I woke, she'd already left. I'll do it now. By the way, what did she say?"

"Nothing. She didn't need to."

SCHÖN

Moments after I walked into the main residence to finish preparing for my briefing, Nemesis waved good morning, then tapped the screen of her cell phone.

“I’m glad you’re here. Magnolia has just arrived. I must admit I was curious about Magnet’s change of plans, but I’m sure the two of you decided that you and Rogue could handle the St. Moritz op, with Macht’s help, of course. Oh, here she is now.”

As Nem raced toward the door, I stood with my mouth open, trying to process everything she’d said.

“Rovena, come in. It’s so good to see you. Schön, come meet the newest member of the Albania task force. Rovena—or should I say Magnolia?—this is Schön.”

After taking one look at *Magnolia*, I understood why Magnet had decided not to go to St. Moritz as planned. No doubt, he saw this as the perfect opportunity to spend time with the woman who was everything I wasn’t. Poised, graceful, well-spoken, and ridiculously beautiful—all of which made her ooze self-confidence, something I possessed very little of. She was tall, much closer in height to him, with long dark hair and hazel eyes that looked green in the light.

“Good morning,” I said, holding out my hand to shake hers. I dropped it when she removed her gloves instead.

“Where is Magnet?” she said in an accent that sounded like a mixture of Polish, Portuguese, and French.

When Nemesis looked my way, I realized they were both waiting for me to respond.

“Oh! He wasn’t up yet when I left.” I knew my inference would make the women wonder if there was more to my relationship with him. I immediately regretted it, though, reminding myself I wanted to *befriend* the incoming female agents, not alienate them.

“I should finish preparing,” I said, turning to Nemesis.

“Right. Magnolia, Schön is holding a briefing for new coalition members at ten hundred hours.”

“I see. As I am not new, I will not need to attend. Where is my room?”

“Head up the stairs. Second door on the right. It’s your old room, is it not, Schön?”

“It is, ma’am.”

Magnolia was almost at the stairs when Nemesis called out to her. “Agent Basha, you’ll want to take your bag with you and freshen up. And the briefing at ten hundred is mandatory. Thanks!”

Nem walked into the situation room, and I followed.

“Good Lord. I have had my fill of prima donnas, haven’t you? I’ll sic Oleander on her. That ought to nip this in the bud.”

“Who am I taking down?”

I glanced over and saw Oleander sitting in a chair, looking at her laptop.

Nemesis sighed. “The new Albanian agent. Why can’t women behave more like men —”

Both Oleander and I burst out laughing.

“What?” Nem asked, putting her hands on her hips.

“Have you never gone to the pub with them?” Oleander chuckled. “They fall all over themselves to prove who’s the best at darts or billiards.”

“Or they puff up their chests and try to make themselves look bigger,” I added.

“That may be, but I will absolutely not tolerate the haughty behavior I just witnessed.”

“Come on, Schön. You and I can take her,” Oleander said, standing and nudging me.

“Take her? Uh, you should find another wingman; I’m afraid my previous tactics won’t work that well.”

This time, Nemesis joined Oleander when she laughed. “I like her,” O said, throwing her arm around my shoulders. “When you get back from St. Moritz, Wren, Hanadarko, and I will toughen you up.”

“Oh Lord, what are you up to now, O?” said Wren, plopping herself in a chair. “I thought we trained Bexli to do the toughening up for us.”

Nemesis stepped beside me. “Something tells me our Schön can handle herself just fine.”

While on the outside I was smiling and laughing with the other women, inside I couldn’t shake the hurt of Magnet deciding not to deploy to St. Moritz and, worse, not discussing it with me. I wouldn’t have minded if he had. Well, maybe I would’ve, but far less than now, hearing it from someone else.

A few minutes later, when he walked in and I was in the midst of a conversation with Flick and O, I pretended I didn’t see him. I had, though. I watched him turn and leave the room with Zeppelin, wishing he’d walked over to me instead.

When people started filing in, I checked the time and saw the briefing was due to begin in five minutes.

“All set?” I heard his familiar voice say from behind me.

I squared my shoulders, took a deep breath, and plastered a smile on my face before turning around to face the man whose opinion mattered more to me than anyone’s. “Good morning, and yes, I’m ready.”

“Schön, when this is over, we should talk.”

My eyes opened wide. Did he not realize he’d just cut me off at the knees? I’d set aside what I saw as his betrayal, at least for a few seconds. Now, I was rankled all over again. “Magnet...”

“I’ll just take a seat.”

“Wait. You aren’t staying.”

“Of course I am.” He cocked his head while I shook mine.

“No.”

His eyes scrunched.

“Sorry, but I would prefer it if you didn’t.”

“If that’s what you want.”

I watched him walk out, glad he was leaving, but wishing I hadn’t just put him in the direct path of Magnolia as she descended the stairs.

I’D GOTTEN NEM’S APPROVAL TO UPLOAD MY OUTLINE AND MASTER LIST

before the beginning of the briefing, which, now that I was finished with my presentation, people appeared to already be accessing.

“This is great, Schön,” said Zeppelin from several paces away. “My fellow task force commanders and I should be responsible for keeping this up to date.”

“What’s that?” asked Magnet, coming to stand beside Zep and meeting my eyes before I could look away.

“Didn’t she show you this?” Zep held out his tablet, and Magnet took it from his hands.

He glanced at it, then back at me.

“There’s more. She created synopses for briefs but in a way that makes things easy to find without divulging classified information.”

While he nodded his head as though he was listening to Zep, Magnet’s eyes remained riveted to mine. “Excuse me,” I heard him mutter as he stalked in my direction after returning the tablet to Zeppelin.

Why hadn’t I left when I had the chance? I could’ve walked out of the situation room and kept going until I reached the cottage. Once there, I could’ve hidden in my room until it was time for me to leave.

“Schön, may I have a word with you, please?” he said, using his commander voice.

“Of course, sir.”

He was walking ahead of me but glanced over his shoulder and raised a brow.

I, however, didn’t flinch. I had no reason to. Well, actually, it probably wasn’t wise that I, an agent new to my assignment, had told my commander I didn’t want him to sit in on my briefing. He had me there.

Once in the solarium, he closed the door and motioned for me to take a seat, something I really would’ve preferred not to do.

I sighed and sat in the same place on the sofa I always did when we worked in here. Magnet sat beside me, although closer than was typical for him.

“I’m sorry you heard from Nemesis that I was thinking of not deploying on the St. Moritz op. I intended to discuss it with you this morning, but when I got up, you were already gone.”

I nodded my head once so he knew I was listening.

“I’ve changed my mind.”

My eyes scrunched. “You’ve changed your mind, meaning you’re going

to St. Moritz, or you're not?"

"I'm going."

I stood and walked to the other side of the room, where I could look out on the estate's gardens. They were dormant this time of year but still lovely.

"Why?" I asked without turning to face him.

"It's an important op, one with several objectives. Thus, the majority of our team should deploy."

It was utter bullshit, and that he didn't own up to the real reason he hadn't wanted to leave Shere made me respect him less.

"Have you nothing to say?"

I glanced over my shoulder. "No, sir."

He stood like I had and stalked over to join me at the window. "Stop this and talk to me."

"Is that an order?"

"Schön, please don't do this."

"Just tell me why. And be honest."

He put his hand on the back of his neck, squeezed, then lowered it. "This isn't easy."

"It's all right. I understand. I won't force you to say it."

"Wait. Won't force me to say what? What do you understand?"

"It doesn't matter. I know why you don't want to leave Shere."

"I feel as though we're having two different conversations. If I may, I'll respond to your initial request to tell you why and to be honest about it."

I walked over to a chair and rested my hands on the back of it, wishing I hadn't asked him to tell me the truth.

"Last night was...awkward."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have agreed —"

He held up his hand. "Please allow me to finish."

I nodded once for the second time.

"I was nervous, falling all over myself, not wanting to misstep and make you uncomfortable."

"I'm sorry for interrupting, but what does this have to do with St. Moritz?"

"That's obvious, isn't it?"

My mouth gaped. "Clearly, not!"

He approached, took my hands in his, and turned me to face him. "I confessed my feelings for you last night."

“So you’ve changed your mind.” I tried to wriggle my hands free, but he held on tight.

“No, I haven’t changed my mind. Why in the name of God would you say that?” The way his shoulders jerked, he looked like a bobblehead. I almost laughed, but bit the inside of my cheek to stop myself.

He sighed. “The truth, which you asked me for, is I felt like an imbecile.”

“What? Why? I’m sorry, Magnet, but this conversation is making my head hurt. If you don’t want to leave because of Magnolia, I understand. There. *I* said it. Are we finished now?”

“While you may be getting a headache, I feel as though I’m stuck in an alternate universe. I don’t know what Magnolia has to do with anything, but I can assure you, she plays no part whatsoever in whether I remain in Shere or travel to St. Moritz. *No part whatsoever.*”

“Okay, you don’t have to shout.”

“Can we please start over?”

“I’m not sure I can survive a replay of this conversation,” I said, bringing my hand to my forehead.

“Not a replay. I’ll state my position simply. As I said, I confessed my feelings for you last night. After I had, I wondered if I’d gone too far and made you uncomfortable.”

“Did I seem uncomfortable?”

“Well, no. But I did. Actually, it was more that I felt I’d made things awkward between us.”

I cocked my head. “*That’s* the reason you decided not to deploy on an op that may very well lead us to finally finding the woman we believe is the key to taking down AMPS?”

“When you put it like that, I feel even more ridiculous.”

“Sorry, Magnet, but I agree. That’s ludicrous.”

“Right. Yes. You’re right. Lost my head.”

There was a knock at the door.

“Come in,” said Magnet.

Rogue stuck his head inside. “Nem wants to know when and how many people are deploying.”

“You, Schön, and me.” Magnet looked down at me. “When will you be ready?”

“Five minutes. I just have to put my computer in my bag.”

“Right. Good. We should go, then. Yes?”

Rogue looked at me with raised brows, and I shrugged. I certainly couldn't explain Magnet's odd behavior.

"Wait. Hold on. I need a minute." Magnet turned. "Rogue, please let Nem know what I said, and we'll join you straightaway. And please close the door." He put his hands on my upper arms and leaned down. "We didn't have time to circle back to this last night, but I feel we must now," he said right before bringing his lips to mine. "That is how I should've started this conversation. It's the most honest way I know to tell you how I feel, what I'm thinking, and most especially, who I want."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have assumed..."

"Nor should have I."

He kissed me again. It was gentle and sweet, like the first time, and not at all what I wanted from him. Soon, once we found time to be alone again, I vowed to get Magnet to let go of the constraints he was putting on himself and unleash the passion I could feel building inside him.

MAGNET

S chön said she could be ready to deploy in five minutes, but there were several things I had to take care of before we could leave.

First, I needed to check in with Delfino and Atticus and see if they were able to dig up anything on Francesca's oldest daughter or Tommaso Borg's cause of death. According to the woman in the Gozo records office, she hadn't heard anything about Charlene and her husband divorcing. It was odd that Xavier had said they did in the deposition that took place after he was taken into custody following Mithras' death.

He'd also said his parents were Marco Vella Jr. and his wife, Yasmine, who were killed in a car accident when he was two.

It occurred to me that separating what we now knew were facts versus the lies Xavier told in that deposition would be an excellent project for Magnolia to undertake. One, it needed to be clear and concise enough that, once we learned more, we could correct additional mistruths. Two, nothing I could think of would get the agent up to speed on the AMPS investigation faster. She'd literally be combing through every detail.

"You're deep in thought," said Zeppelin, pulling out the chair next to mine where I was working in the formal dining area.

"Running through loose ends on this investigation," I muttered.

"How many have you added so far? A couple of hundred?"

We both chuckled. "I've been concentrating on the Vella family first, for

which there are many.” I ran down what I’d made a note of thus far.

“Don’t you wonder about the accident that killed Xavier’s parents? Wait, they weren’t his parents, were they? Either way, I’d recommend Delfino and Atticus see if they can find a police report.”

“Good idea. I’d say we consider every death remotely related to the Vellas as suspicious.”

“Anything else on them?” he asked.

I shook my head.

“What about Manual Varilla’s death?”

“Right,” I said, creating a new list.

Zeppelin opened his laptop. “Jaicon Heart prepared a brief following a raid on a house where Varilla was living prior to his arrest in Mexico. Two men were found dead, but a third was taken into custody. In his deposition, he said some of the containers liberated in the raid in Felixstowe belonged to his boss, Harry Crosby, who by then was deceased. He also said some belonged to Manual Varilla’s boss, which is another loose end. We have no idea who he worked for.”

I nodded. “Poseidon and Oleander were on their way to California to meet with Varilla when they received word he’d been found dead in his cell. According to prison officials, it was ruled a suicide by hanging, but no one believes that’s what really happened. He was silenced.”

Zep’s forehead furrowed. “Why kill him now? He’s been in prison for over a year.”

“Whoever arranged the hit must’ve had reason to believe he was ready to talk.”

“What was the trigger, though? Mithras’ death? Pharaoh’s?” he asked.

“Let’s go back a little further. The coalition received intel that Varilla had abducted someone connected to K19 Security Solutions. The information received also suggested that person, a woman named Luisa Reeve, was among other human trafficking victims scheduled to leave the Port of Yavaros via a container ship. While she wasn’t located in that raid, others were.

“After his arrest, Varilla agreed to divulge Ms. Reeve’s whereabouts in exchange for a deal. That’s what led to the raid in the Port of Felixstowe and Ms. Reeve’s rescue—along with over one hundred other victims liberated from a total of ten shipping containers.”

Zeppelin nodded. “No arrests were made, which suggests Varilla figured

out a way to get word to his bosses, alerting them in advance of the raid.”

“The word ‘Mithras’ was scrawled in the dirt on the floor of one of the containers. Which could point to Varilla working for AMPS,” I added.

“Maybe. Or Mithras was working with another organization in addition to AMPS.”

“Given Xavier Vella killed him, it would certainly be a possibility.”

“Maybe the Calabrian Syndicate,” Zep suggested.

“Where is this guy who worked for Crosby now?” I asked. “Maybe we can lean on him to tell us who Varilla worked for.”

“He’s in witness protection.”

“We need access to him. Schön and Rogue are waiting on me to deploy to St. Moritz. Can you talk this over with Ares and see what arrangements can be made for someone from the coalition to interview him again? We also need to see what we can find out about Varilla’s death. Someone’s got to have connections inside the prison where he died.”

“Roger that,” said Zep, closing his laptop.

“Before you talk to Ares, there’s another loose end.”

“Are you referring to Seshat?” he asked.

“What is the status of the search for her? Do you know?”

“Mag, you must familiarize yourself with the brief system Schön created.”

I sighed. “Yeah. Okay. But for now, can you just give me an update?”

“Pinch Fulton put a team together and established a mission under Puck Lindstrom’s command. It includes a unit from MI6 as well as people from Decker Ashford’s firm—the Invincibles. According to the brief you haven’t yet reviewed, Ashford thought he had a lead on Seshat’s whereabouts around the time of Z’s abduction and rescue, but she was in the wind before Puck et al. arrived.”

“Who’s funding the Invincibles’ support?” I asked.

“The UN and SIS, with help from the CIA, who, by the way, have claimed part ownership of this investigation.”

My eyes scrunched. “They’ve claimed ownership outside of the coalition’s US task force? Why?”

Zeppelin shrugged. “Another question I’ll address with Ares. Anything else?”

I shook my head and closed my laptop. “I need to find Magnolia, review the assignment to reconcile Xavier Vella’s statements, then get myself on the

bloody plane.”

He leaned forward and folded his arms on the table. “May I make a suggestion?”

“Of course.”

“I’ll let Verity know what needs to be done. She and Magnolia can work on it together. That way, all you have to do is let Magnolia know she’ll be assigned to assist Verity in your absence.”

Once I’d thanked him and forwarded my notes to him and Verity, I left the main residence and walked to the cottage. When I arrived, Schön and Rogue were sitting in the living room, chatting. Actually, laughing.

“What’s funny?” I asked.

“I showed Rogue a photo of the bunk beds,” said Schön. “And then we imagined how far off the end his feet would hang.”

“And you’re taller,” said Rogue, still chuckling. “It would be worse for you.”

If I were to stay in Schön’s chalet, I wouldn’t be sleeping on a twin mattress. Nor would I be sleeping alone. Not that she and I were in that kind of relationship—yet. “I’ve made arrangements for you and me to stay in a rental,” I said to Rogue. “It has three bedrooms, all with large beds. Schön, where you stay is up to you. It can be with us or at your place.”

“Don’t forget Macht.”

Something dawned on me. “We have an issue.”

Both Schön and Rogue raised their heads.

“You were seen with Macht in St. Moritz and Rogue on Gozo.”

“That isn’t an issue,” said Schön without further explanation.

“Go on,” I prompted.

“I told you Macht and I grew up in St. Moritz. While we didn’t know each other, no one knows that, so they won’t think twice about seeing us together. Even if Rogue and I are seen with Macht, it won’t be a problem. The only person I cannot be seen with is you. People there knew my parents and also the Müllers, who were my guardians for a while.”

“Right. I’ll talk this over with Verity,” I said more to myself than to either her or Rogue.

“I’ll go with you,” she offered when I turned to leave. “You know, just in case I have to help with anything.”

Her pink cheeks and sly smile made me want to pull her into my arms and never let go. How I wished I’d pushed for me to be undercover as her

husband on Gozo. The idea that Rogue would have reason to touch her, maybe even kiss her when they were out in public, made every muscle in my body tense.

“Let’s go this way,” I said, motioning for her to follow me nearer the wooded area rather than on the open lawn. As soon as we were out of sight from everything but security cameras, I put my arm around her waist, then backed her up against a tree, covering her body from view with my own. Anyone watching the CCTV footage would know who the woman with me was, but they didn’t need to see the look on her face when I kissed her in a way I hadn’t yet.

I cupped the back of her head with my hand and used my other arm to tug her closer until our bodies aligned and I could feel her lush breasts crushed against my chest. I angled my head and took possession of her mouth. This wasn’t a simple kiss; this was me claiming her as mine. Schön’s arms wrapped around my neck, and when I let go of her hand and cupped her arse instead, she lifted her legs and wrapped them around my waist.

Knowing I couldn’t tame the rage of desire that coursed through me, I spun us so we were behind the tree, with my back up against it rather than hers.

Once in the more dominant position, Schön let loose, stroking my tongue with hers, tightening her legs around my waist, and pressing herself against me so hard that if layers of clothing didn’t prevent it from happening, my cock would be as deep in her pussy as I could get.

“Let go, dammit,” she said before thrusting her tongue in my mouth as if she was challenging me to a battle.

“Let go?”

She tore her mouth from mine and rested her face so we were cheek to cheek and I couldn’t see her eyes. “Stop holding yourself back. Give me your passion, all of it.”

“You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“Don’t I?” She ground herself against me. “Please, Magnet.”

I turned our bodies a second time so her back was against the tree again. And then I let go. I dug the fingers of one hand into her arse. With the other, I cupped the breast I longed to taste. I ground into her body with mine, using the strength of my legs until she cried out. I didn’t stop to ask if I’d hurt her. She’d demanded I give her all my passion, and that’s what I did.

“Don’t stop,” she cried as her body shook, her fingernails dug into my

shoulders, and her breath held just long enough for me to feel her pulse against me.

At that moment, when I brought her to the first of what I promised would be many orgasms, I made a decision. Rogue would stay here. Schön, Macht, and I would handle this op on our own. And whenever we were alone, she'd be in my arms, naked. If she wanted me to let go, I sure as hell would. I'd fuck her into next week, then back again. There'd be no more soft and gentle from me. There'd be no forcing the beast back into the cage.

Schön buried her head in my neck, and I felt...dampness. Her tears. I'd hurt her. Jesus, what was wrong with me? I released her, making sure her feet were on the ground and she was steady before I cupped her cheek and looked into her eyes. Or I tried. Schön looked everywhere but at me.

"I hurt you."

She tried to shake her head, but my grip wouldn't allow it. "I can't do this. I can't be this person. I told myself I never would be again." She pushed me with both her hands, so hard I stumbled backwards.

"No!" I shouted, then reined in my anger. "This is you and me. It's not the same at all. You and me, Schön. I care about you."

She shook her head. "I broke a promise to myself. I can't...we can't. You have to leave me alone now."

I felt as though I might cry too. "What the fuck just happened?"

"I became the person I never wanted to be again."

"But—"

"I don't expect you to understand," she said, walking backwards and away from me. "This has nothing to do with you."

I stalked in her direction. "It has everything to do with me. Everything. This isn't you on your own. This isn't about seduction. It's about both of us wanting each other so much that we can't deny it." I put my hand on the back of my neck and squeezed. "I won't allow you to deny this."

"You don't have a choice." She turned around so her back was to me. "Do the right thing, Magnet. Stay here."

I did as she said but not as she meant. Schön wanted me to remain in Shere because she couldn't trust that what had just happened between us was so much deeper than the experiences she was using for comparison. She'd told me to unleash my passion, and when I did, she took responsibility for it—as though if she hadn't pushed, my actions would've been different. They wouldn't have been.

Most importantly, Schön hadn't seduced me. That's where her self-recrimination was coming from. Her worry that she had. That she'd initiated what happened between us. If she could get beyond that belief, I knew she'd be able to look at the experience from my perspective.

It was intimate. We were connected. Our passions were fueled by mutual desire, building on each other's emotional intensity.

I couldn't help her see any of that if I was in Shere and she was in St. Moritz. I wouldn't avoid her, thus allowing her time to discount what was between us and to tell herself she'd become the person she never wanted to be again.

It was the opposite. Maybe for the first time ever, Schön could trust that a man—me—saw her for exactly who she was. Not a honey trap but an intelligent, amazing woman who'd already made such an impression on her fellow coalition members that they were in awe of her. Zeppelin had made his feelings abundantly clear, and of anyone she needed to hear it from, he was near the top of the list.

Right after me.

SCHÖN

What was wrong with me? Magnet kissed me, and I completely lost my sense of self. Had I really told him to stop holding himself back? To give me all his passion?

God, I wanted to rewind my life to an hour ago, before I'd made an absolute idiot of myself.

Back to before I'd shown him I hadn't changed at all. Once a honey trap, always a honey trap. Once a woman who relied solely on my body to advance my career, always that woman.

How many times had I told myself I'd never throw myself at a man again? The last time was supposed to have been when I tried to kiss Zeppelin at the resort in St. Moritz. That in itself had been mortifying enough.

Now, I'd practically begged Magnet to fuck me—out of doors, up against a tree, in broad daylight. Not only that, but all it had taken for me to have an orgasm was him grinding himself against me. I'd never felt so ashamed in my life.

I prayed he would show me the mercy I'd asked for and allow Rogue and me to deploy to St. Moritz on our own. Once there, I'd get my head back on straight. I'd focus on the mission and not allow myself to think about Magnet for even a minute.

Thankfully, when I returned to the cottage, Rogue was nowhere to be found. On the other hand, maybe he'd seen us, thus making my mortification

so much worse.

I looked out the window but didn't see him. Instead, I saw Magnet stalking toward the main residence. What would he do once inside? Would he tell Nemesis he'd changed his mind *again* about whether he should deploy to St. Moritz? She'd think he'd gone batty.

Or would he tell her he was rethinking my role not just on the Albanian task force but also as part of the UN coalition? If that was the case, I doubted Uncle Henri would lift a finger to help me get another job. I couldn't blame him, though.

Maybe I could ask Mrs. Strousberg if she'd consider hiring me to work for her. It had been three years since I turned down her offer to do so. In that time, we hadn't talked as often as we did prior to my graduation from university. I still felt bad about the way she and I had parted after I told her I wanted to pursue a career in intelligence instead. She'd done so much for me. Not only had she paid for me to attend boarding school, and university after that, but she'd mentored me, helped me learn how to navigate a world where I was regularly picked on. Honestly, I don't know what would have become of me if she hadn't been a part of my life.

I went into the lavatory when my eyes filled with tears. Leaving the coalition would devastate me. I'd just started developing relationships with the people I worked with. Women, not just men, and they admired me. I'd shared opinions in a group setting where agents with years more experience than me were present, and I'd been heard. But where had the confidence to do so come from? *Magnet*. He'd believed in me first. Now, I'd proven to him I didn't come as far as he thought.

I washed my face and reapplied mascara. My lips, swollen from Magnet's kisses, were a shade of red that no gloss could replicate. Putting any color on would only accentuate their puffiness, so I left them alone.

Just as I stepped out of the bathroom, the cottage door opened and he walked in.

"Hey." The look on his face and the tone of his voice were both so sweet that I wanted to rush over, melt into his arms, and beg his forgiveness.

"Hi," I said, wishing I could pull my gaze from his, but I couldn't.

"There's been a change of plans with the op."

He wasn't going. It was what I'd asked for. There'd be no getting upset about it now. It didn't matter that I felt like my heart was about to break. On the other hand, maybe I was the one he'd suggest remain in Shere.

“Rogue will not be traveling with us.”

My mouth gaped. I hadn't considered that scenario. “What?”

“You and I will be deploying on our own. Macht is aware of our plans, and I've been assured we will not see or hear from Ehren. Her separation from the coalition is official. Zeppelin took care of it.”

“But—”

“I told you once before that I see us as partners, Schön.”

“I'm not comfortable with this. I asked —”

“Apologies, but you have two choices. You can go to St. Moritz with me, or you can remain in Shere.”

“I'm the one with contacts.”

“Not you alone. Macht also has a vast network of sources.”

“You'd remove me from an op that was my idea, because of what happened between us earlier?”

His head cocked. “I said nothing about removing you.”

He was right. He'd been clear in saying *I* had two choices. I could either set aside what had happened between us, put on my big-girl panties, as they say, and proceed as a professional, or I could quit. Which, if I remained in Shere, would be one and the same.

“Okay.”

He raised a brow. “Okay to which option?”

“I'll go to St. Moritz.”

He smiled. “Good. We've a lot of work to do. I had a conversation with Zeppelin earlier that I'd like to run by you once we're on the plane.”

“About?”

“Loose ends in the AMPS investigation. You have a fresh perspective, which has been apparent in the questions you've asked and the suggestions you've made. By the way, what I'm saying is you're doing a great job.”

“Thank you.”

“Ready?”

I nodded and walked past him to the door, where my suitcase waited.

“Rogue will get that,” Magnet said, motioning me outside.

“I thought you said he wasn't deploying.”

“He's our transport to Gatwick.” Magnet held the front passenger door open for me and sat in the back alone. I didn't know what to make of his behavior. He was acting like nothing happened between us an hour ago. He wasn't any more or less distant; he just was.

I supposed I should take a page from his nonchalant playbook, but I wasn't as smooth of an operator as he was. I folded my arms and looked out the window at the last bit of light from the setting sun. My mind raced with questions. Would he be undercover and disguised, or since he was undercover on Gozo, was it even necessary for him to be so in St. Moritz? Was Magnet assuming I'd stay at my chalet or at the place he'd rented? What would his role be for this op? Would we ever talk about what happened between us earlier today, or would we both pretend it had never happened?

BY THE TIME WE ARRIVED AT THE AIRFIELD IN GATWICK, THERE WAS A RED spot on the back of my right hand between my thumb and index finger. Whenever I was worried, it was the place I'd rub with the fingers of my opposite hand.

The plane waiting for us outside the hangar was smaller than the one we'd taken to Malta, but once inside, I saw that, even though it was a simpler design, it was no less luxurious. There were five seats on each side of the aircraft. The first two faced the cockpit. After that, they faced each other.

"Schön, meet Angel. She's our pilot tonight."

I shook her hand.

"Who's with you?" he asked.

"Hawk Wright. Have you met him?"

"Doesn't sound familiar," Magnet responded.

"Hawk? Come on out. This is Magnet and..."

"Agent Baur," I said, shaking his outstretched hand.

While Magnet spoke with the two pilots, I dropped my bag in the first row.

"Let's go back one more," he said once Angel and Hawk had returned to the cockpit.

I didn't want to face the rear, but I figured he wouldn't either, so I put my bag in the second row. Maybe after takeoff, I could move.

"Go ahead," he said, motioning to the opposite forward-facing seat.

"It's okay," I muttered.

"I insist."

When a woman came out of a door in the rear of the aircraft, I nearly screamed.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Baur. I didn't mean to startle you."

"It's okay." I sat down, fastened my seat belt, and closed my eyes.

“May I get you something to drink?”

I opened one eye. “Water, please.”

“Mr. Magnussen?”

“Water for me too, Jane. I’ll also have coffee after takeoff.”

I opened both eyes.

“Coffee?” Magnet asked.

“Please.”

She nodded and walked toward the front.

I looked over at Magnet. “Thank you.”

He smiled. “My pleasure.”

I caught myself about to rub my right hand with the fingers of my left. “I tried not to say anything, but I must. Why are you acting this way?”

“Which way?”

My mouth pursed. “You know what I’m talking about. Don’t insult us both by playing stupid.”

He crossed his legs, resting his ankle on the opposite knee. “Schön, I assure you I’m neither playing stupid nor acting any way out of the ordinary.”

“Are you going to pretend the kiss and the, err, rest never happened?”

Magnet shook his head. “I am not.”

“Instead, you’re going to play games. Fine.”

He rested both feet on the floor and leaned forward, holding out one hand.

“What?”

“Give me your hand.”

“Why?”

“Because I asked you to.”

I folded my arms instead.

“Schön, please.”

“Just say what’s on your mind.”

He scooted forward on the seat so his legs were on either side of mine, then rested his hands on his knees. “The only thing I’m sorry for is taking things beyond what either of us was ready for.”

He tilted his head when I tried to look away, waiting until our eyes met before continuing. “It has been a struggle for me not to touch you since the night we fell asleep on the sofa at the resort on Gozo. It isn’t about sex, Schön. It’s about wanting to hold your hand, cup your cheek, tickle your feet like I did that night. I long to make you smile—no, that’s not quite right. I

want to hear you giggle. It's become one of my favorite sounds.

"And then, I want to watch how your expression changes when an idea about the investigation pops into your head and you can't wait to speak your thoughts but you're too polite to interrupt, so you tap your feet until the perfect moment to raise your hand. But still, you don't speak; you remain quiet, patiently, until someone notices. What you don't realize is someone already noticed. Me, Schön. I told you before that I see you. I notice, even when you think no one does."

"Magnet..."

"Earlier, after I pushed us too hard, too fast, I said things between you and me are different. The way I feel about you, the way I think about you, the way I see you is all different than I feel about any other woman I've ever been with. And while you may think I'm an arrogant, egotistical asshole for saying this, I am absolutely certain you feel the same way about me."

"Um...wow. I'm at a loss for how to respond."

"No response necessary. You told me to say what was on my mind, and I did. Except I left out something else that is very important."

"What?" I whispered.

"You're brilliant, Schön. Everything about you. Your mind, your heart, your beauty—all of it."

"Do you really see me that way?"

"How can you doubt it?"

I rested my head against the seat. "I've spent my entire life doubting myself."

He shook his head. "I don't believe that's true. What I think is you've spent your entire life overcoming everyone else doubting you. Look at where you are. Do you think someone like Nemesis would agree to putting you on a task force if she didn't see in you what I see? What you see in yourself? You've held your head high in the face of what some would find defeating. Instead of crumbling, you persevered."

Again, I was stunned. Magnet would not say any of the things he had if he didn't believe them to be true. He had no reason to placate me. "Thank you," I said, feeling sorry that it had taken me so long to do so.

When Angel asked us to prepare for takeoff, he sat back in his seat and fastened his seat belt. "Shall we get to work?"

"Yes, but shouldn't I wait to get my laptop out?"

"You should, but in the meantime, I'll tell you some of the things

Zeppelin and I discussed earlier.”

I nodded. “Ready.”

“First, Verity and Magnolia will be reconciling everything we learned from Xavier Vella when he was first interrogated versus what we now know the facts to be. For example, that Marco Vella Jr. was his father. Or rather that he wasn’t.”

“Good.” I’d had the same idea when I reviewed the briefs.

“Next up is Manual Varilla.”

Magnet ran down the man’s history, which I had also familiarized myself with. The big question was who he’d worked for and who’d killed him.

“I have a theory.”

“Go on,” Mag said.

“I believe he works for the Calabrian Syndicate but AMPS arranged for his murder.”

“What brought you to that conclusion?” he asked.

“Keep your friends close and your enemies closer, as they say.”

“Varilla knew enough to cast suspicion on AMPS while not implicating the Calabrians.”

“Precisely,” I responded. “If the syndicate was worried about Varilla talking, they would’ve killed him a year ago.”

“Which means AMPS knew we were on our way to interrogate him again. What’s your theory there?”

“They have people on the inside of the prison. One in administration who knew Oleander and Poseidon were on their way, and another in a position to kill Varilla. It could be one and the same, but I doubt it. Most likely, more than one guard was involved in his murder.”

“Any other thoughts on him?” he asked.

“Not at this time.”

“Shall we move on to our objectives for St. Moritz?”

“Mainly, I’d say it’s to learn the identity of the woman dining with Godwin who Zeppelin, Verity, Macht, and I all saw.”

“Agreed. I’d also like to scan the CCTV footage to see if any members of the Vella family visited St. Moritz. We can utilize facial recognition.”

I thought it over for a minute. “What about Godwin? Anything more we can find on him will help with AMPS, of course, but also with the Calabrian Syndicate and, potentially, other criminal organizations he had ties to.”

Magnet smiled. “I told you we’d make a good team.”

I smiled too. "I like working with you."

The smile left his face, and he looked toward the opposite side of the plane.

"Did I say something wrong?"

"Not at all. I feared I'd ruined things between us both personally and professionally."

I couldn't let him take the blame. "We were both there, Magnet. I kissed you as much as you kissed me. I'm the one who told you to let go, to stop holding back. How can you say *you* ruined anything?"

"I'd like to make a suggestion."

"Of course."

"How about we leave blame and shame behind? Instead, we celebrate that this afternoon was a beautiful, amazing, intimate moment between us."

"That's how you see it?"

"Absolutely, and I hope someday you can see it that way too."

"I do."

He raised a brow, and his smile returned. When he rested his head against his seat and closed his eyes, I knew he was remembering our kiss, the crush of our bodies, and the pleasure we'd both experienced, just like I was.

MAGNET

S chön and I had addressed several important topics, but there was one more we'd have to discuss eventually. Two, actually, and the first, I needed to address now.

"I'll use a disguise on this op, but it will be different than the one I wore on Gozo. I might need your assistance with it."

"I'm happy to help. What is it?"

"I'll be shaving my hair, my beard, and wearing contacts." I pulled out the photos Verity had given me. One was of Rogue; the other was of our faces superimposed.

"Verity intends for you to look like him. Maybe not identical, but close enough that only someone who knew you would see the difference."

"I'm taller. He's bulkier."

"He has a receding hairline. You don't."

I smiled. "Is this something you'd feel comfortable helping with? I can handle the beard."

"I can help with both, Magnet."

"How do you take your coffee, Ms. Baur?" Jane asked when she delivered mine.

"She takes it black," I answered for her so she knew I remembered. "And, Jane, we'll be in the back."

"Yes, sir."

“Come with me,” I said to Schön, going ahead of her. When I opened the door, she gasped at the sight before us. “I know,” I said. “It’s one of the reasons I love this plane.”

The entire aft was a bedroom, complete with a table, two chairs, and a bathroom.

“I thought it would be better to do the hair trimming in here since it would be impossible out there.”

Yes, that was obvious, but the truth was, I was nervous. Not about cutting my hair or trimming my beard. Both would grow back. Instead, I was worried about doing something to upset Schön again.

Everything I’d said to her was the God’s honest truth, and while she seemed to have accepted it, I still felt as though I was walking on eggshells.

“What’s wrong? Are you afraid I’ll mess up your hair?”

I wanted to put my arms around her and tell her that wasn’t it at all. Instead, they hung at my sides like two logs, weighing me down emotionally.

“We could always find a barber in Zurich to do it.”

“I’m not concerned about my hair.”

“What are you worried about?” That she whispered told me she was feeling as uncomfortable as I was. Yet I had no idea how to break the tension between us so we could become the two people who’d connected so easily again.

“You and me,” I whispered like she had.

“I don’t know how to make it better.”

“Neither do I. Maybe in time?”

“I have one idea.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. “I’m willing to try just about anything. I hate this awkward feeling.”

“What if we were to hug? You know, touch. Get it over with, so to speak. Then, the next time we do, either accidentally or on purpose, it will feel more natural.” Schön opened her arms.

“I have a question first.”

She raised a brow.

“Am I hugging you the same way I’d hugged Aunt Gertrude or the way I’d hug you if I didn’t have to worry about how I was doing it?”

Schön smiled. “You already know the answer, Magnet. Just hug me.”

I snaked my arm around her waist and pulled her close to me. Her outstretched arms wrapped around my neck, her cheek rested against my

chest, and I pressed mine against her hair. No hug I'd ever given or received felt as good as this one. There were so many things I wanted to say. Like, how perfectly our bodies fit together. Or how much I wished our embrace could lead to a kiss. Mostly, though, I wanted to tell her I never wanted to let her go.

It was a couple of minutes before either of us moved. Schön was first, raising her head. "Better?"

"Not yet," I said, tightening my grip around her waist. "A few more minutes."

She giggled, and my heart soared.

At that very moment, the aircraft hit a patch of turbulence, Hawk announced we should return to our seats, and Schön and I lost our footing before landing on the bed.

"I don't suppose this has seat belts," she said, holding onto me, more because the plane was jostling us than the affection we'd shared a minute ago.

"We're better off here instead of trying to get to the seats now. I'm sure we'll be beyond the rough air soon."

She lowered her head to my chest and wrapped one arm around my waist. Biting my tongue wouldn't have helped; the words I had to say would've forced their way out no matter what I tried. "I always want it to be like this between us," I said, leaning down to kiss her forehead.

"I do too."

When she raised her head, our lips met. The kiss we shared was nothing like earlier. This was soft and gentle, languid, and sweet. And while I still felt a pulse-quickenning passion, I reined it in.

When, a few minutes later, Hawk announced we should be steady for quite a while, I didn't want to move.

"I think we should wait until after we land to trim your hair and beard."

"Yeah?"

She giggled again. "Can you imagine if I'd had clippers in my hand when the plane jerked? I might've cut your ear off."

"You're right. We best not risk it."

"Should we return to our seats?" she asked.

"Too dangerous. We can't have one of us getting injured."

Her body shook with her laughter. "What if we tumble out of bed?"

"I'll break our fall."

“Thanks, Magnet.”

“Anytime.” I kissed her forehead.

“I mean for not staying in Shere.”

“It’s my pleasure, Schön.”

“Does anyone ever call you Justin?”

“Besides Aunt Gertrude?”

She giggled. “Yeah, besides her.”

“My parents do, and sometimes, my brother does.”

“I don’t have siblings.”

While I already knew she didn’t, I sensed she wanted to talk about it, so I squeezed her a little and kept quiet.

“I always wished I had an older sister.”

“Yeah?”

“Maybe things would’ve been a bit easier if I had.”

“Someone to look out for you?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Not a brother?”

Schön shook her head. “A brother would’ve beaten up boys he thought were bothering me. I needed help with the girls.”

“Ones like Ehren?”

“Yes and no. I mean, at least she had a reason for disliking me. Even though it was terribly misguided. The man—her asset—would’ve gotten her killed.”

“You said that previously. What makes you believe so?”

“He was that bad of a guy.”

“And rather than thank you for possibly saving her life, she blamed you for the loss of him. Thank goodness you’ve seen the last of her.”

Schön shuddered.

“What?” I asked.

“Something tells me I haven’t.” She was thoughtful for a minute. “There was someone else. A woman who became a mentor to me.”

“Tell me about her.”

“Her name is Carissa Strousberg, although I never referred to her by her first name.”

“Why not?”

“She provided the scholarship for me to attend school after my parents died. I won’t get into all of it now, but I was a typical teen, and the Müllers—

the family Uncle Henri arranged to act as my guardians—had no idea how to handle me. They'd never had children of their own. Anyway, my uncle had heard about Mrs. Strousberg and that she provided scholarships for orphans, which I essentially was. I mean, I had my uncle, but it wasn't like I could go live with him."

"After having met him, I can't imagine you'd want to."

Schön chuckled. "Anyway, Mrs. Strousberg would visit me from time to time, first in Leysin, then in Geneva. She's the one who taught me how to handle the girls who bullied me. She told me to hold my head high and ignore them."

"She sounds like an amazing woman."

Schön nodded. "She was."

"But?"

"She was from a different era, you know? I mean, she also encouraged me to use my 'feminine wiles,' as she called them, to get what I wanted in life. At first, I listened, but eventually, it felt wrong. Really wrong. That was when I called Uncle Henri and confessed the kind of assignments I was being given. He was livid, of course."

"That's when he recommended you for the coalition."

She nodded. "He knew about the op in St. Moritz and arranged for me to become the handler. And, as you know, he shared classified documents with me that he shouldn't have."

A lot of what she was telling me now, I'd learned when she and I traveled to the States and met with Baissier. He'd admitted he encouraged Schön to do some of the things she'd done, like question the bank managers on her own and prepare briefs about what she'd learned and send them directly to him. He'd almost ruined her chances entirely.

"As far as I'm concerned, it worked out the way it should have. You're on the Albanian task force instead of the Swiss team, and I couldn't be happier about that."

Her arm tightened around my waist. "Do you really mean it?"

I shifted so I could look into her eyes. "Schön, you know I do."

We continued holding each other, and nothing more, until Hawk announced we were approaching Zurich and to take our seats.

Since it was late, I thought it best we spend the night in the city, then travel to St. Moritz in the morning. Rather than bother anyone in Shere about it, I contacted the helicopter company and said we were pushing the trip to

tomorrow afternoon.

“Do you have a favorite place to stay in Zurich?” I asked.

“There are many lovely spots.”

I smiled. “There must be one you prefer over another.”

“There’s a boutique hotel I like. It’s nothing fancy, but the people who own it are kind and friendly. I can book it if you’d like.”

I understood enough German to know Schön had requested two rooms, both on the sixth floor, if available. She then inquired if it was possible to have dinner or if we’d be arriving too late.

“All set?” I asked, standing and offering her my hand once the plane landed and the door was open for us to exit.

“Oh, I forgot to mention there’s a barber shop not far from the hotel, in case I ruin your haircut.”

I hugged her to me. “You anticipate everything, but somehow, I think it will be perfect.”

“Travel within the coalition is much nicer than Swiss intelligence provides us with,” she commented.

“Hello,” I said to the driver when he exited to open the rear passenger door.

“Good evening. Mr. Persson arranged for your ride to the helipad.”

“Macht?” Interesting. Why would he have done so rather than Nemesis?

“There’s been a change of plans.” I listened as Schön told him the name of the hotel where we’d be staying.

“What is your name?” I asked.

“Hans Gerber, sir.”

“Who do you work for, Hans?”

“Swiss intelligence, sir.”

My eyes met Schön’s, and when Hans looked away, she shook her head.

As luck would have it, my mobile pinged with a message from Zeppelin. “Sorry, I need to take this call. You wouldn’t mind waiting for a moment, would you?”

“Of course not, sir,” the man responded. His tone of voice was friendly enough, but his jaw was tight.

“Come with me,” I whispered to Schön as I walked several paces from the vehicle. Rather than respond to Zep, I rang Macht.

“Magnet? You arrived earlier than I anticipated.”

“We’ve met the transport you arranged in Zurich.”

“I did not arrange transport in Zurich —”

“Thanks.” I ended the call, turned so I could see both the aircraft and the SUV, and put my hand on my gun.

“Everything okay, sir?” Hawk asked, walking out the plane’s door and heading down the steps. While dark, there were enough lights in the area for me to see the glint of his gun. No doubt, Hans had seen it too.

“Get back on the plane. Hawk and I will cover you. Alert Angel once you’re on board,” I said under my breath.

“Copy that,” Schön murmured.

“We forgot one of her bags,” I shouted in the man’s direction.

He waved, but his brow was furrowed. When he turned his back and raised the mobile in his hand to his ear, I glanced behind me. Hawk was at the bottom of the short flight of steps, and Angel stood just inside the aircraft. She nodded once, and I raced up the airstairs Schön had a moment ago.

“What do you want us to do?” Angel asked once I was inside and Hawk was coming up behind me.

“Hang tight.” I kept my eye on the guy, who was still talking on his mobile, and placed another call to Macht.

“Who do you know in Zurich, preferably close to the airfield?”

“I’ve got backup on the way, sir. Two units will be coming in hot. Schön sent your coordinates.”

“What’s their ETA?”

“Under a minute.”

“Copy that. Thanks, Macht.”

Twenty seconds after I ended the call, the two units Macht promised pulled up on either side of the other SUV. Also as he’d said, they came in hot, meaning we could hear them tell the man to put his hands in the air and step away from the vehicle. With guns pointed in his direction, two of the agents approached, put him in cuffs, then escorted him to the SUV they’d arrived in. At the same time, the other two agents searched the guy’s vehicle.

“What would you like me to do, sir?” Macht said when I answered his call.

“Make sure your team finds out who the fuck hired him.”

“Roger that, sir.”

“We’ll be arriving in St. Moritz as planned.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll be waiting at the heliport.”

“Please alert the chopper company that our plans have reverted. Once we

land, have backup on standby.”

“Roger that, sir,” he repeated.

I turned around and saw Schön behind me. Her eyes were wide, and she held up her mobile. On the screen was a photo of two men. One was the driver of the SUV who’d just been taken into custody.

“Who’s this one?” I asked, pointing to the other man.

“Ehren’s dead informant.”

SCHÖN

I knew the two men who transported us from the airfield to the heliport. I'd worked ops with Elias Weber and Luca Huber, including the one where Ehren's informant was killed.

"Hey, guys," I said when I got into the back passenger seat of their SUV. "This is Magnet. These two *are* with Swiss intelligence." I pointed to Elias. "That's Fuchs."

"And I'm Drachen," said Luca.

I leaned into Magnet after they'd all said hello. "I canceled the hotel reservation."

"Copy that."

My hand was on the seat, and Magnet rested his on top of it.

"We've got a problem," he muttered.

I nodded, undoubtedly less surprised than he was.

While I didn't recognize the man who called himself Hans Gerber, my gut had told me to look through the images attached to the deceased asset's case file. It hadn't taken long before one with him popped up.

Removing Ehren from the coalition had been necessary. I accepted that. However, it made matters worse between her and me. Now, she'd not only want revenge for the death of her lover, but also for losing a prestigious position. I didn't doubt she'd faced repercussions from Gebeiter Schmid, the Swiss intelligence director.

On the other hand, he could be in on it. There was no love lost between him and Baissier, especially after Uncle Henri had yanked me from the mission I was on and immediately had me assigned to be the handler on the Swiss task force's op.

Frankly, I wouldn't have been surprised to learn Gebeiter was angling for a coalition job himself.

I was one of the few who knew about Ehren's relationship with her "asset," and now, I regretted not reporting it. I'd learned a valuable lesson. By not sticking my nose into her business, I'd endangered everyone we worked with. It was something I intended to talk to Magnet about once he and I could have a private conversation. As my current commander, he deserved to know I'd withheld information I shouldn't have.

While I should probably thank the guys and make small talk on our way to the heliport, I couldn't muster the energy to do so. It could be attributed to the adrenal fatigue alone; however, the entire day had been draining. The drastic highs and lows had exhausted me. More than anything, I wanted to rest my head on Magnet's shoulder and sleep.

The ride was quick, and Fuchs pulled up as close to the copter as possible. Drachen got out and escorted Magnet and me the few steps it took to get to the waiting blade.

"Internal affairs is already on Ehren," he said. "If she isn't taken into custody, the agents on her surveillance will let their presence be known. She won't be able to make another move, Schön."

I nodded and thanked him.

"She was supposed to return to Bern," I heard Magnet say. I didn't bother saying she could've set this up from there or anywhere.

Once in my seat, I fastened the harness and put on my headset. My cell phone vibrated, and I looked down at the message. It was from Magnet.

You're staying with me.

I looked up at him and mouthed, "Okay." I was glad he'd suggested it. I would've if he hadn't. There was a good chance Ehren knew where my chalet was located. She'd obviously found out I was arriving in Zurich. She might've set something up in St. Moritz too.

I was sure Magnet had also realized we should stay somewhere other than where he had planned, and while I understood why he hadn't wanted Rogue to deploy with us, now I thought it was a mistake. In fact, we should probably consider abandoning the op.

“THE BACKUP UNIT WILL ARRIVE BEFORE DAWN,” MACHT SAID ONCE WE WERE in the transport vehicle after he met us at the heliport.

“Backup unit?” I asked.

“Zeppelin is deploying a team now. As Macht said, they’ll arrive by morning. We’re not letting Ehren fuck this up. My gut is telling me this op is crucial in finding our A.”

Admittedly, my instincts were telling me the same thing.

“Until they arrive, you will have all the coverage you need,” said Macht. “The team I have assembled is made up only of people I trust with my own life.”

“What about Gebeiter?” I asked.

“I work for the coalition, Schön. Prior to that, it was for diplomatic support. I have not and do not report to Schmid.”

“Right. Sorry, Macht.”

I recognized the compound he pulled into. The property belonged to a Swiss diplomat who was a close friend of Baissier’s and a billionaire. “Herr Benzinger is out of the country,” said Macht, glancing over his shoulder at me.

“Nemesis made the arrangements, in case you’re wondering,” added Magnet.

“Through Baissier?”

“No, through Macht.”

The man glanced at me in the rearview mirror, and I smiled. “Thank you, Herr Persson.”

“You are welcome, Frau Baur.”

He pulled up to the front door, and another man opened it. “My team and I will remain on the premises until you say otherwise,” he announced once we were inside the residence.

I’d previously visited the compound with Baissier for some of the parties the Benzinger family hosted. While it looked cold and unwelcoming on the outside, the interior was the opposite.

“There are bedrooms up each set of staircases. Herr Benzinger arranged for the staff to prepare them for you and your team’s arrival, then dismissed them for the remainder of the time you are here.”

“Thanks again, Macht.” I yawned and covered my mouth as I said it.

“Good night, Schön. Sleep well,” he said, bowing slightly before walking out and closing the door behind him.

“Come on. Let’s get you to bed.” Magnet took my hand and led me up the stairs to the left. “Macht told me the best rooms are on this side,” he said, winking.

“I’m sure every room is lovely.”

Once upstairs, he led me down the hallway as though he knew where he was going, then into a room that appeared large enough to be the master suite. The fireplace was already lit, casting a warm glow on everything.

“His and hers?” he asked, pointing to one bathroom and walk-in closet, and then the same on the opposite side of the suite.

“So it appears.”

He carried my bag into one, then returned and picked up his own luggage. “I’ll be right in there if you need me,” he said, pointing to a door on the interior of the suite. “Macht said he thinks it’s where Herr Benzinger sleeps when he’s in the doghouse.”

“Magnet?” I said when he walked in that direction.

He stopped and turned to face me. “Yes?”

“Will you stay?”

“If that’s what you’d like me to do.”

“I would.”

When I’d prepared for bed and Magnet appeared to have done the same, we met back near the bed.

Neither of us had to say that nothing sexual would happen between us tonight. We were both so exhausted we could hardly keep our eyes open.

“Good night,” I said once I got into bed. I plumped the pillow and turned my back to Magnet. Within what felt like seconds, I drifted into a deep sleep.

WHEN I WOKE, THE SUN WAS COMING UP AND I COULD FEEL MAGNET AGAINST my back. I peeked over my shoulder at the same time his eyes opened.

“Apologies,” he murmured, shifting so our bodies no longer touched.

“The magnetism between us is strong, even in our sleep,” I said, winking.

He chuckled. “It is that. Were you able to rest?”

I turned to face him and nodded. “I slept the entire night. You?”

“I woke a couple of times and made sure I wasn’t dreaming I was lying next to you, and also made sure you were okay. Otherwise, I didn’t even hear Zep and the crew arrive.”

“We needed the respite.”

“Agreed. We have a busy day ahead of us.”

“Would you like me to—wait! Has Rogue arrived?”

“He has, and given we’ll be descending on St. Moritz in full force, we’ve decided against the need for disguises.”

“Good. I mean, okay.”

Magnet smiled. “Hang on. Why’d you say good?”

I reached up and ran my fingers through his hair. “It would be a shame to cut all this off.”

He closed his eyes. “That feels amazing,” he said as I massaged his scalp.

I thought back to what he’d said on the plane about how the kiss between us earlier in the day had been intimate. I felt it now too. Magnet was right when he said what was between us was different. I’d never been in a relationship that felt as though there was more to it than sex. The boyfriends I’d had said there was, but I’d never *felt* it. Not like I did now.

“What are you thinking about?” Magnet asked.

“Intimacy,” I answered honestly. “Like this.”

His eyes drifted closed again, and he shuddered before they reopened. “You’re experiencing it too, yes?”

“Very much so.”

“It pains me to say, but I must get up. The troops are rumbling.”

“I hear them. I’ll take a quick shower.”

“I’ll go downstairs and check in, then do the same.”

There was more I wanted to say, but it could wait. It was time to transition into op mode, which meant I had to be completely focused on the objectives we’d set forth. As the warm water cascaded over me, I reviewed them.

First, we needed to determine the identity of the woman I’d seen dining with Godwin. Second, fill in the ambassador’s history of comings and goings in St. Moritz and see if we could find additional aliases as well as accounts he administered. Third, review the CCTV footage to see if any of the Vella family had traveled here and, if so, when.

I had an objective outside the AMPS investigation, and that was determining what connections Ehren currently had with criminal elements and whether or not she had Gebieter Schmid’s support in carrying out her vengeance against me. For that, I’d engage Macht directly.

“Good morning,” I said when I came downstairs and found the backup unit gathered in the great room. I was surprised to see how many agents had arrived last night. In addition to Zeppelin and Rogue, Ares, Verity, Oleander,

Poseidon, Reaper, Flick, and Grey were present. So were Macht, Fuchs, and Drachen.

“I was getting ready to lay out our objectives and form teams,” said Magnet.

“Copy that,” I responded.

He went through the same objectives I had while in the shower, including the situation with Ehren. I was stunned when he also mentioned Schmid’s possible involvement.

Magnet, Rogue, Drachen, and I were on one team. Our assignment was physical canvassing, including visits to the two banks where we already knew Godwin had made deposits on behalf of AMPS and possibly the Calabrian Syndicate—Bank Julius Bär and Union Bank of Switzerland. We’d also visit Châteaux Relais.

A second team, made up of Reaper, Macht, Ares, and Flick, would be doing the same thing but visiting other financial institutions as well as St. Moritz establishments, including the ski areas, restaurants, and shops.

Poseidon and Oleander were tasked with delving deeper into Ehren and Schmid, while Verity, Zeppelin, Grey, and Fuchs ran the CCTV footage we already had through facial recognition. As more came in, they would do the same. Depending on what that turned up, they’d have the teams who remained in Shere join them in watching the footage in detail.

“This is odd,” Verity mumbled when I walked past her. While I didn’t think she was speaking directly to me, I stopped anyway.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Take a look.” She pulled up two stills from the CCTV footage, so not very clear, particularly when enlarged.

“This is from Châteaux Relais, yes?”

“It is. What do you see?”

“Two men dressed in black suits, wearing hats, sunglasses, and black gloves.”

“Two or one?” she asked.

“They aren’t the same person.”

She sat back in her chair, then looked up at me. “That’s what I thought.”

“What’s this?” Zeppelin asked, kneeling next to Verity.

“What do you see when you look at these images side by side?” she asked him.

“Is that the bodyguard? Or should I say Xavier Vella?”

“It’s possible one is, but the other is not.” Ten more images filled the screen. They were shots captured in succession from the footage.

“Schön, what are your thoughts?”

“The one image could be a man, but the others are all of the same woman—dressed as a man.”

Zeppelin leaned in closer. “Bloody hell. That could be a woman, couldn’t it?”

Not could be. It was a woman; I was certain of it.

“Zep, I’d bet anything this is who was driving the vehicle the night we followed Godwin and his bodyguard.”

“Hey, Ares,” Zep called out. “We need more footage from your friends at the National Reconnaissance Office.”

While he and Ares chatted about the extra footage he wanted from that night, Verity and I studied the photos on the screen.

“Look at the way the jacket falls at the hips,” I said.

“It was the first thing I noticed.”

“The woman we saw with Godwin at the restaurant was considerably shorter.”

“It’s far easier to add than it is to take away,” she said under her breath. “That includes height.”

“Let’s show Macht the photo we think is of a man,” I suggested, looking around the room for him and finally finding him off in a corner, speaking to someone on his mobile. When his call ended, he walked directly over to Magnet, then turned his back to me.

“Something’s up,” Verity muttered.

Magnet raised his head, his eyes met mine, and I agreed.

When he motioned with his head in the direction of the front door, I met him in the foyer. “What is it?” I asked.

“Macht received word there was a fire.”

My eyes opened wide. “Where?”

“He said the address is of your chalet. I’m so sorry, Schön, but according to Macht, it burned to the ground.”

I felt dizzy and grabbed Magnet’s arm. “My chalet? It belonged to my parents and, before them, my grandparents.”

Anger built inside me like a storm, my hands fisted at my sides, and as much as I wanted to scream, I managed to keep my voice low. “That fucking bitch burned down the only thing I had left of my life with my mom and

dad,” I seethed. My eyes met Magnet’s. “If it’s the last thing I do, I will kill Anouk Richter with my bare hands.”

“Let’s walk.”

I followed him through the open door. Once we were outside, Magnet put his hands on my shoulders. “Let it out, Schön. Scream, cry, rage, whatever you need to do.”

When my eyes, boring into his, filled with tears, I turned my back to him and screamed. I screamed again and again until I had nothing left. Before I sank to the ground on my knees, Magnet caught me and held me as I sobbed.

MAGNET

Schön had every right to be angry. Admittedly, her comment about killing Ehren with her bare hands had thrown me a little until she said the chalet had belonged to her parents. My heart broke for her when she said it was the only thing she had left of her life with them.

While it was logical to assume Ehren was behind the blaze, until a thorough investigation was conducted, we didn't know that for sure. Which meant someone else might be targeting Schön. As much as I knew she'd hate it, my gut was telling me to get her out of Switzerland and back to Shere, where I had more control over keeping anyone from doing her further harm.

For now, I'd hold her and let her cry for as long as she needed me to. When she drooped, I picked her up and carried her over to a structure that looked like an enclosed gazebo. I kicked the door open with my foot and sat down on a bench with her in my arms. While my mobile pinged more than once, I ignored it. There were twelve other agents who could deal with whatever it was they thought they needed me for.

According to Macht, the compound where we were was as secure as the Trace estate in Shere. Which meant surveillance.

"Schön?"

She raised her head. "Could you do something for me?" she asked.

"Anything."

"My name is Prisca. Call me that."

“Of course, Prisca. It’s a beautiful name.” I’d known it, obviously.

“Schmid,” she whispered.

“What about him?”

“I want to look into him. I know he’s in on it. That’s why Ehren got away with as much as she did.”

While I could find it easily enough, it would be quicker and easier to ask her the name of the man Ehren had been involved with.

“Dolan Baumgartner,” Schön said when I inquired. “Long-time grifter. Most said he was attractive and charming, but I never thought so. The escalation of his criminal behavior coincided with when he first became an informant for Ehren.”

“You said you think Schmid was in on it.”

She nodded, shifted off my lap, and stood. “Baumgartner was part of a gang of street thugs that went by the name of Kuppe. Early on, they were small-time. Like I said, grifters. He and one other guy, Frigort, passed on information about the larger gangs. In turn, Richter and Schmid were the heroes for taking down the bigger organizations.”

She paced in the small area. At first, I thought her hands were clasped, but then I realized she was pinching her right hand between the thumb and index finger of the left. I reached out to her, and she abruptly stopped.

“There’s something I need to tell you. I planned to earlier.”

“Go ahead.”

“I knew about Richter and Baumgartner. Knew they were sleeping together. I also knew his criminal activity was increasing. I didn’t go to Schmid about it.”

“Why does Ehren blame you for this guy’s death?”

“He was in the wrong place at the wrong time, caught in the middle of a sting. There was a shoot-out, and he was one of three men killed that night.”

“Did you shoot him?”

Schön shook her head. “It wasn’t me.”

“Do you know who it was?”

“Two bullets hit him. Fuchs fired one. Drachen, the other. Either could’ve killed him.”

“I’m back to wondering why she blames you.”

“My op.” Schön sat beside me. “Look, I don’t want this to interfere with the AMPS investigation. I can leave —”

“Don’t even think about it.”

Her mouth gaped. “You don’t know what I was about to say.”

“You were going to offer to leave the coalition.”

“At the end of the mission. Not now. Not before I see it through.”

“We’ll talk about it when the time comes. However, be prepared for me to be just as intransigent about it then as I am now.”

“Yes, sir,” she responded, cheeks pink.

“Tell me more about Schmid.”

“I never trusted him. Then, Uncle Henri was so angry when I told him the types of missions I was being assigned to—honey traps—that he pulled me straight off the op I was on. I’m sure Schmid got an earful over it too.”

“You were with the agency for three years. Why didn’t Baissier pull you sooner?”

“At first, the ops were sporadic. After Baumgartner was killed, they increased to the point where they were the only types of missions I was given.”

“Did Fuchs and Drachen step forward, admitting they were the ones who shot Baumgartner?” I asked.

“They never tried to hide it. There’s always an internal affairs investigation when deaths occur, but all three were ruled to be justified.”

“She lied,” I mumbled.

“Who did?”

“Ehren. When she told me about the death of one of her informants, I asked whether IA looked into it. She said they didn’t.”

Schön shook her head. “I’m not surprised she didn’t tell the truth.”

I looked up when we heard someone approach. “It’s Macht.”

“Sorry to interrupt, but I thought you’d want to know security footage from a neighboring chalet shows the man who set the fire. He’s been arrested.”

“Is he connected to the Kuppe gang?” Schön asked.

“Yes.”

“Let’s return inside,” I suggested.

“Macht? Give us a minute?”

“Of course, Schön.”

She waited until he was several steps away before turning to me. “Thank you for bringing me out here. Thank you for not letting me make a spectacle of myself in front of everyone.”

“There isn’t a single person who wouldn’t have understood.” I put my

hand on the back of my neck and squeezed. “There’s something I need to talk to you about.”

“Okay...”

“I want you to remain on the compound today, Prisca.” I loved the way her name sounded on my lips. While there was nothing wrong with her code name, being the only person who called her by her given name felt intimate. The word continually popped into my mind whenever I thought about her.

She nodded, surprising me. “If I went out with you today, I’d be endangering everyone on our team.”

“It’s you I’m most concerned with keeping safe.”

“I want to reiterate that I do not want the AMPS investigation impacted by any inquiries into my chalet being set on fire or anything else to do with Ehren’s pursuit of vengeance against me.”

“While I appreciate what you’re saying, I’d like you to take a step back and look at it from another perspective. Ehren was an active member of a task force within the UN coalition. If she was or is engaged in criminal activity, it isn’t something we can ignore.”

“Understood.”

“At the very minimum, a team should be assigned to search for any connection either Ehren or Schmid has to Godwin.”

“You’re right.”

“Prisca...”

She smiled. “Yes, Justin?”

I chuckled. “Honestly, I prefer Magnet. Whenever someone calls me by my given name, I feel like I’m in trouble.”

When she giggled, it warmed my heart. A few minutes ago, I wouldn’t have believed I’d hear that glorious sound again for a very long time.

“Is there anything else before we go inside?” she asked.

“Just one thing. I need another hug.”

She shook her head but smiled and stepped into my open arms.

WE WALKED INTO THE MAIN RESIDENCE AND WERE MET WITH A FLURRY OF activity. When Schön approached Verity, I followed.

“Oh, good. You’re back. Macht said he thinks the male bodyguard was definitely Xavier Vella.”

“Male? As opposed to?” I asked.

“Right. You hadn’t heard.” Verity pulled up several images on her

computer screen. “This one is Vella,” she said, pointing. “The others we believe is a woman disguised as a man.”

I wouldn’t have noticed if Verity hadn’t pointed out the difference.

“Hey, Zep?” I called out to him.

“Yeah?” He walked over. “You saw?”

“I’m sure this is in a brief I overlooked rather than make use of Schön’s crib notes”—I winked at her—“but did the search of the vehicle that took Godwin to the helicopter yield any identifiable fingerprints or DNA samples?”

“Loads,” Verity answered. “The SUV they were in belonged to Châteaux Relais, and every bit of what we found traced back to their staff.”

“Nothing on Godwin either?”

She shook her head.

“I asked Ares to contact the NRO and see if he can get more footage from that night.”

“It’s in,” Ares said from the other side of the room. “I’ve just forwarded it to you.”

Verity pulled it up on the screen. The detail the NRO was able to isolate was stunning; however, the driver of the SUV knew what he or she was doing. I could see nothing identifiable. In fact, every visible part of his or her body was covered.

“She’s a formidable opponent,” Schön said under her breath. “She’s had years of practice. However, she has no idea who she’s up against now. She may underestimate us, but her circle of protection has gotten significantly smaller.”

There was an eeriness to her voice that had everyone in the room go silent. Yes, our A was formidable, but so was Schön. If anyone hadn’t noticed prior to this moment, they would now.

SCHÖN

There were a couple of adjustments to who was assigned to which objective. Fuchs joined Poseidon and Oleander so they'd have someone familiar to St. Moritz locals with them.

Zeppelin replaced Rogue, who remained behind, along with Ares, to assist with the review of the CCTV footage as well as whatever else the NRO sent over based on our additional requests.

When Magnet and the other teams left the compound, a sense of dread came over me.

“We need another St. Moritz local reviewing this footage,” I said more to myself than anyone else after I'd spent over an hour on it. While I didn't know everyone who lived here, with a population of just over five thousand, I knew the majority.

Tourists were another thing entirely. The quoted number of annual visitors was upwards of six hundred thousand. It was easy to tell them apart, though. Those traveling here from other parts of Switzerland or the world typically dripped in visible wealth.

I tried not to let my mind wander while I clicked through images, looking for anyone who stood out. If I let myself think about the chalet, three things would happen. First, I'd become nauseated. Second, my desire to exact revenge for the loss would become overwhelming to the point I wouldn't be able to focus on the task at hand—which was the third thing.

There was so little I remembered of my parents. Except when I was there. Memories of little things, like what my mother would cook for breakfast, would come flooding back to me. I shook my head when my eyes filled with tears and clicked to the next image.

Something about the previous one bothered me, though, so I went back to it. The footage was from the square where one of the world's best chocolatiers was located. They'd been in business since 1894 and were popular with locals and tourists alike. In the summer months, outdoor markets were held near the shop.

The still taken from the CCTV footage was of a day when more people were gathered than usual. Literally hundreds. Which meant it would've been easy for someone to blend into the crowd if so desired. I zoomed in and scrunched my eyes, trying to bring more of the faces into focus.

"Verity? Can you take a look at something for me?"

"Of course."

I was about to bring my computer to her when she stood. "I'll come to you. If I don't move around enough, I get stiff." She didn't use her cane very often, but she was now. The stiffness explained why. She stood beside me, leaning on it as she bent forward to get a better look at the image.

"Bloody fucking hell," she said under her breath.

Ares and Rogue stopped what they were doing and came to stand behind us.

"Who does this look like to you?" she asked both men.

"If that isn't Charlene Vella-Borg, she has a doppelganger," said Rogue.

"Let me see what the NRO can find on this. What is the date?" Ares asked.

"Ten July of this year," I said. "Taken at thirteen hundred hours."

"Nemesis mentioned Rile and Decker were reviewing the CCTV footage from the Mallorca compound. We should have them check for Charlene's whereabouts on the same date and time," said Verity, picking up her mobile. After resting her cane against the table, she placed a call and held the phone up to her ear. With her opposite hand, she grabbed my arm and squeezed.

"My God, Schön, do you know what this could mean if it is her?"

Chills spread throughout my body. "I do."

AN HOUR LATER, WE HAD THE NRO FOOTAGE SHOWING THE SQUARE FROM different profiles. The woman we believed could be Charlene Vella-Borg was

visible in about half of what they'd sent. However, after speaking with Decker, Verity reported she was on Rile's compound that particular day, as well as those preceding and following it.

"The logical explanation is that it is someone disguised to look like her," said Verity.

"Which one? Charlene on the compound in Mallorca or the one here?" I asked, somewhat rhetorically.

Her eyes opened wide. "Precisely!"

"What are you thinking?"

"There is no crime in someone visiting St. Moritz..." she began.

"But if we could come up with something serious enough to force extradition..."

"We could take Charlene Vella-Borg into custody or at least in for questioning."

"In which case, we wouldn't need to worry about extradition." I looked up and saw Ares and Rogue watching and listening to us. Both were grinning.

"What?" Verity asked, noticing the same thing I had.

"You two are such a great team," said Grey, who I'd almost forgotten was in the room. To this point, she'd been so quiet. "How long have you worked together?"

My eyes met Verity's, and we both laughed out loud. I stopped as soon as I noticed Grey's expression. "Sorry, we're not poking fun. It's just that I wasn't always Ver's favorite person."

Verity shook her head. "I was as much to blame for our rocky start, if not more so."

Grey smiled. "I don't know what went down previously, but what I see now shows that, whatever it was, you've made it work."

I couldn't speak for Verity, but Grey's words filled me with pride. Maybe that wasn't the best word for it. Maybe it was more that the way a newcomer saw it, I belonged. It was all I'd ever wanted.

When the door opened a few minutes later and the first one through it was Magnet, I couldn't wait to tell him what we'd discovered. However, since the look on his face was also triumphant, I let him go first.

"Success?" I asked.

"A good bit, yes." He walked directly over to me, put his arm around my shoulders, and leaned in to kiss my cheek. Shockingly, I didn't tense up. I didn't even care what anyone else in the room thought about it. The best part

was that no one seemed to be paying attention. Rather than not noticing, maybe they had and didn't care.

Magnet took my hand, and we moved away from the table and over to a sofa. "Come and sit with me. I want to hear your news."

"You go first," I said.

He smiled and slowly shook his head.

I swatted his arm. "You already know."

"Not all of it."

"We believe we placed Charlene Vella-Borg here in St. Moritz last summer. Or someone who looks a lot like her, perhaps intentionally. Now, the plan is to see if we can come up with something that would allow us to question her on Gozo."

Magnet leaned in and rested his forehead against mine. "So bloody brilliant," he whispered. "I'm so proud of you."

My first inclination was to argue and say it was nothing. Instead, I thanked him. "Tell me about your day," I prompted.

"James Godwin's image was recognized everywhere we visited, although the only person able to identify him by name was the bank manager at UBS. The alias he used there was Pietro Santorini."

"At BJB, he was known as Jacob Novak."

"That's correct. While most we asked remembered him accompanied by a bodyguard, no one recalled seeing him with a woman."

"What about at the restaurant?"

He shook his head.

"Not even the waiter?"

"He no longer works there, and no one seemed to know how to reach him."

"Did you have any luck at Châteaux Relais?"

"Since Zeppelin filled in for Rogue, we decided against visiting the resort. Oh, Macht has an update about the man responsible for the fire."

My stomach clenched.

"I believe Ares will soon as well."

I looked in his direction and saw him talking on his cell.

"I think we're waiting until everyone returns to the compound to debrief all at once. Do you want to take a walk?"

I nodded. "I need a break before I can view any more photos."

"Wait. Ares is motioning to me. Rest your eyes, and I'll be back as

quickly as I can.”

I must’ve dozed off, but woke when I felt Magnet’s hand on my arm.

“Come upstairs with me. I have some other news for you.”

He led me into the bedroom and over to the sitting area in front of the fireplace. He sat beside me and took my hands in his. “What I have to tell you is good news, Prisca.”

“Your expression belies it being so.”

“Ares was talking to Drachen about the fire, and he asked which house burned. Was there more than one on the property?”

My eyes opened wide. “Yes, the main chalet and a guesthouse.”

“It was the property closest to the road that burned, Prisca. The one farther down the hillside wasn’t touched. While the flames got close to it, the firefighters were able to extinguish the blaze before it got that far.”

“Are you certain?” I whispered, steeling myself from getting my hopes up.

“It will be a while before some of the others return. Would you like to see for yourself?”

“Do we have time?”

“The debrief can wait for us, and before you say something about inconveniencing the others, don’t. No one downstairs feels that way.”

“IS THIS REALLY NECESSARY?” I REPEATED WHEN WE LEFT THE COMPOUND IN a caravan of three SUVs. Reaper and Flick, who had returned without Macht, rode with Magnet and me. Fuchs and Drachen were in the SUV ahead of us, while Verity, Zeppelin, and Ares were in the one behind us.

Magnet, who was in the rear passenger row with me, squeezed my hand but, otherwise, didn’t say anything.

When I’d asked the first time about the necessity of so many people going to the chalet with us, Verity was the only one to respond, and she’d said she was riding along because she wanted to see where I grew up.

My heart sank when we got closer and I saw that the guesthouse was gone. It hadn’t been used as such for many years. In fact, there was very little in the place.

“Keep going to the next turnoff,” I said to Reaper when he was about to pull up to it.

“There it is,” I said, pointing when we were partway down the hillside and the home where I spent the first nine years of my life was visible through

the trees.

“Has Macht been here before?” Magnet asked.

“No one has. Drachen’s parents’ chalet is just up the road, though. I should’ve thought of the possibility it was the other building myself.”

He squeezed my hand, but I let go when something caught my eye.

“*Stop!*” I screamed.

“*What?*” Reaper asked after slamming on the brakes.

“Something’s wrong. Magnet, tell the others to turn around.”

“I’ll do it,” offered Flick.

“Schön? What is it?” Magnet asked.

“Look near the retaining wall on the bottom right of the chalet. There’s a flashing red light.”

“Fuck. It’s a trap.”

“Bomb?” Reaper asked.

“It’s Macht,” I said when my cell rang.

“Put the call on speaker.”

“Schön, *where are you?*” His voice was frantic.

“At the chalet —”

“*Get out! Hurry!*”

“Macht, we’re about forty meters away, still in the SUV,” Magnet reported.

“I am on my way with the bomb squad. Do not go inside the chalet.”

I jumped out of the SUV and ran toward my house before he finished his sentence. “How long have I got until it detonates, Macht?”

“*No, Schön!* Do not go near, I beg you.”

“*How long, Macht?*”

“Less than ten minutes.”

“I only need five.” I ran as fast as my feet would carry me and dropped my phone but didn’t stop. There were things I had to save, things I thought about when I believed the chalet had burned.

I heard Magnet screaming my name, but I kept going. I just hoped that, by the time he reached me, I’d already be inside and halfway to the master bedroom.

“*Prisca!* For the love of God, do not go in there!” I heard him yell as I raced in the lower-level door and up the stairs. Once there, I grabbed as many photos of my parents and me as I could hold. As I rounded the corner to enter the bedroom to get the rest, the hair on the back of my neck stood on end.

“*Hallo, Schön.*” I looked into Gebieter Schmid’s eyes and heard him cock his gun. Behind him, the precious contents of the box I’d raced inside to retrieve were scattered on the bed.

“My God, Oskar. My uncle removed me from Swiss intelligence, so now you want to kill me?”

His lip curled. “I have one last mission for you, honey trap, and you played into my hands perfectly. As soon as your team comes inside to save you from being blown to bits, we will all go up together.”

“*We?* You would give up your life? *For what?*”

“You got too close. I blame myself for letting you live as long as I did. I never dreamed you were smart enough to piece it all together. Now that you have, I am a dead man anyway.”

I heard footfalls coming up the stairs and turned to run. Another man I hadn’t seen grabbed me around the waist. “Magnet! Get out of the house! Go!” I screamed before the guy holding me covered my mouth.

“It is over. It is already too late, *mein Schätzelein,*” said Schmid.

“Do not call me that!” I tried to scream, but the hand on my face tightened.

“A few more minutes, and this will all be over. Bring her to me, Hans. Save yourself.”

The man shoved me at Schmid hard enough for me to fall to my knees. He grabbed my hair and was pulling me to my feet when I heard two shots fired. There was a hard yank right before I looked up and saw Schmid fall.

“*Get out! Get out!*” I screamed, pulling myself to my feet. “*The bomb!*” I pushed Magnet back when he raced toward me. “*Please! Get out of the house!*”

He grabbed both my arms. “Listen to me! The bomb has been defused. It’s no longer active.”

“But there’s another man!”

“He’s dead.” Magnet put his gun in its holster and pulled me into his arms. “He’s dead,” he repeated.

“There wasn’t much doubt, but so is Schmid,” said Reaper, who’d raced around us.

“Are you sure about the bomb?”

“I wouldn’t be standing here, with my arms around you, if I wasn’t. While one of Macht’s men defused the one you saw, explosive detection canines were taken around the property. There are no others.” He walked me

out of the bedroom. “Let’s return to the compound so the cleanup crew can get this taken care of. We’ll come back when they’re finished.”

“Wait. I can’t leave without this.” I wriggled from his arms and went around to the other side of the bed, gathering the things scattered on it. I thought Magnet would try to stop me, but he helped instead.

“There’s some blood splatter. Not much.” He picked up some of the framed photos and carried them out of the room while I put everything else back in the wooden box it had been stored in.

“*Schön!*” shouted Macht, coming around the corner and into the room. “Thank God you’re safe.” He looked down at the box in my hands. “Let me get that for you.”

“There’s more,” I said, picking up the other photos I’d dropped.

“What can I help with?” Flick asked.

I motioned to the throw on the back of the sofa. “My grandmother made that.” When I started to shake, she took the photos I held in my hands. “I’ll get these. You grab the afghan.”

“I need something to put these in. Anyone have evidence bags?” Magnet said from inside the kitchen where he’d gone to clean the blood from the frames.

“There are regular bags in one of the drawers,” I told him.

“Is there anything else you need to have with you tonight?” he asked, looking around.

“I don’t think so.”

“Let’s get out of here, then. We’ll come back tomorrow.”

I followed him down the steps and out to the SUV. “Schmid said I got too close. Do you think he means to what went down with Ehren and Dolan Baumgartner?” I asked once we were inside.

“I don’t think so. Poseidon and Oleander learned some things this afternoon that will shed light on what he said.”

“He told me he was a dead man. I don’t know what he meant.”

Magnet nodded. “I’m not sure I do, either. At least not entirely. However, what I do know is that it appears Schmid had ties to Godwin. Lots of them.”

I gasped. “What about Ehren?”

He shook his head. “She’s the one who saved your life, Prisca. All of our lives.”

MAGNET

That I kept my shit together at all was for Schön's sake. Without Zeppelin, I wasn't sure I would have. It was my fault that she'd been in danger at all. Not just her; I'd risked the lives of seven other people, who I considered my family. Even the ones I didn't know well yet.

When Zeppelin held me back from racing into the chalet after Schön, I wanted to fucking kill him.

"I have to save her!" I screamed at him.

"We need two more minutes," Macht shouted at us. "Then we can go in."

At the time, I had no idea Schön wasn't alone inside the house I feared would blow up any second. Had I, an armored tank couldn't have stopped me from getting to her.

"You don't understand. It's my fault, Zep. Let me go get her," I begged when he overpowered me.

"As soon as Macht gives the all clear, I'll let you go. Not a split second before that."

"I could've gotten us all killed just because I fell for the trap. Someone knew I would offer to take Schön to see it wasn't the chalet that burned. They knew I'd want to protect her and bring half the team along."

"Forget all that. None of it matters."

"All clear!" Macht shouted. Zeppelin let go, and I raced inside and up the stairs just as someone I didn't recognize came out of a room. He had a gun

but hadn't heard me. When he raised his head, I shot first, then fired again immediately after that. Both rounds hit their marks, dead center of each man's forehead.

FROM THE MOMENT WE WALKED OUT OF THE CHALET UNTIL WE PULLED INTO the compound, it wasn't enough to just see Schön; I had to touch her. Once we were in the house, everything else would have to wait. I'd carry her up the stairs if I had to, so I could spend a few precious minutes holding her in my arms. No one and nothing else. Just her and me.

"We need a minute," I said when Schön and I walked through the door and we were met by Verity, who had come back ahead of us.

"Understood," she said as I led Schön by the hand and up the stairs.

At first, I thought she might protest, but maybe the reason she hadn't was because she needed the same thing I did. To hold each other. Heart to heart. To know each other's was still beating.

After closing the bedroom door behind us, I turned and lifted Schön into my arms. She wrapped her legs around my waist and buried her head in my neck. I could feel her tears as much as I could feel my own.

I moved us to the bed and gently rested her on it. Rather than let go, Schön pulled me down with her. We scooted up toward the pillows together and lay facing each other, arms and legs entwined.

I reached up with one hand and wiped her tears with the pad of my thumb. "I've never been so scared in my life."

"Me, either. When I heard footsteps, I was so afraid it was you coming to rescue me and, instead, you were going to...going to..."

"Shh," I soothed, kissing her softly. "We're both here. We're both alive. And as much as I know we have people downstairs waiting for us and I understand the importance of what we have to talk about and what is ahead of us, I never want to let you go."

"I don't want to let go, either." She snuggled into me. "You said Ehren saved our lives?"

"It's a complicated story, and I don't know all the details, but she's the one who alerted Macht about the bomb."

"I'm sorry I brought it up. I can't think about everything that happened yet. I just need a few more minutes."

I needed a lot more than that. A lifetime wouldn't be long enough, but now wasn't the time to tell her so. First, we had work to do, a job to finish, a

human trafficking ring to take down. And because of Schön's work, along with many others', we were close. I could feel it.

Five minutes later, as hard as it was to say it, I told Schön we had to join the others who were waiting for us.

She nodded. "I need to change out of these clothes."

"Me too."

We each rolled off the bed but in separate directions. Later, when the debrief was over, I'd ask her if she'd let me be the one to undress her, to bathe her, to care for her before we got into the bed where we'd hold each other until we gave in to the exhaustion of the day and sleep.

"I THOUGHT YOU MIGHT BOTH NEED ONE OF THESE," SAID ZEPPELIN, GREETING us at the bottom of the stairs with a glass of amber-colored liquid in each hand.

"Thanks," I said, taking one and passing it to Schön. Once I'd grabbed the second, Zeppelin pointed to an empty sofa.

"We saved you both a seat."

Verity stood after we sat down. "We have a lot to cover this evening. Then ops to plan when we're finished. I apologize, everyone, but this may be a long night."

"Understood," I said at the same time many others in the room responded affirmatively. Sure, I wanted to head straight back up the staircase and spend the rest of the night alone with Schön, but after this was all over, I planned to convince her to spend much longer than that with me.

"I'm going to patch the team in from Shere, then we'll begin. Oleander? Poseidon? Which of you will brief on your findings?"

"I'll let O take this one," Poseidon responded when his wife stood and approached Verity.

"Cutting straight to the chase, we walked into the Swiss intelligence field office this afternoon, and Poseidon agreed to let me scare the shit out of all of them. It was working pretty well until I came face-to-face with Ehren."

"Was she in custody?" I asked.

"She was not. However, she was anxious to clear her name." Oleander looked at Schön. "While she was an absolute bitch to you, Ehren had nothing to do with the guy who tried to intercept you and Magnet in Zurich, nor did she have anything to do with the fire. It was all Schmid, and she had proof."

When Schön nodded, Oleander continued. "We left the field office and

went to a private residence belonging to a friend of hers, where she felt she'd be safe telling us what she knew." Oleander glanced over her shoulder. "As Verity will tell you, I suck at writing briefs, but lucky for all of you, my husband doesn't. What I'm trying to say is I'll give you the vector version. He'll bring you down in the weeds."

According to what Ehren told O and Poseidon, she'd found a connection between Schmid and Godwin almost as soon as she returned to St. Moritz after being relieved from coalition duty.

"She was still gathering evidence when Schön and Magnet arrived, but it was when the rest of us descended on St. Moritz that Schmid went into overdrive. What he didn't know was the guy he'd paid to start the fire at the chalet was still tight with Ehren from back before Baumgartner was killed. Anyway, she put some pressure on him when he was fingered, and he confessed everything to her, including how much Schmid paid him and where they met to finalize the deal."

Oleander glanced over her shoulder again, but this time, at Poseidon. "Have I forgotten anything crucial?"

"Nothing *crucial*."

"Poseidon and I were about to leave to corroborate her story at the place the alleged deal was done when she shouted after us, something about a bomb being planted at Schön's chalet. We immediately got in touch with Fuchs, who happened to be with Macht. Who, in turn, engaged the bomb squad." She looked over at him. "In record time, I might add." O rested on the arm of a chair. "What I'm going to say next may not go over well. However, for the good of the mission, I insist we bring Ehren back. I believe she can help us piece together the relationship between Schmid and Godwin. I also think she may have a lead on the mystery woman—the one I pray like fucking hell is our A."

While most tried to do it surreptitiously, all eyes in the room rested on Schön.

"It's your call, Agent Baur," said Nemesis via the videoconference.

"I trust that if Oleander believes Ehren is telling the truth, then she is."

"You're sure about this?" Oleander asked, surprising me as well as Ares and Zeppelin, based on their expressions.

"I'm sure."

SCHÖN

Oleander terrified me, which was why I'd agreed we should work with Ehren. While I appreciated being asked, I truly didn't feel it was my call. In terms of how my fear of O played into it, I knew without any doubt that if Ehren did try to hurt me, Oleander would annihilate her. Then Magnet would. Then the team sitting in this room would scrape whatever bits were left of her off the floor and burn them to ash. Not that I had strong feelings about the woman.

What I trusted was that I was safe here, with these people. I belonged with them, and nothing had ever made me feel as protected.

Despite it all, though, I believed Ehren's story. Logically, why would an agent good enough to be recommended for a United Nations coalition harbor enough resentment to want to kill me? She knew I wasn't the one who'd fired the shots that took down Baumgartner, nor did I have anything to do with him showing up in the middle of the sting. That was on him.

I recognized that being around me would serve as a reminder of her loss, but she never could've passed the necessary psyche tests to remain in intelligence if she were plotting homicide.

Schmid, on the other hand, had never had much oversight in his role as director. He reported to the Swiss Federal Council, who, historically, maintained a hands-off policy where intelligence was concerned. I thought back to how everyone I'd worked with referred to him as the *fürher*. Yes, he

had been dictatorial, but more, at times, he'd seemed truly mad, much in the same way he had in the bedroom of the chalet when he pointed the gun at me.

"Before we move on to the progress made by the other three teams, Schön, are you ready to share your experiences today?" Verity asked after Oleander sat down beside Poseidon.

Magnet squeezed my hand, then let go.

"I am," I responded, standing. "There are four key statements Schmid made in the two or three minutes he had a gun pointed at me. First, he said he had one last mission for 'the honey trap' and that I'd played into his hands perfectly by getting so many members of the deployed team to the chalet."

My eyes met Magnet's, and in them, I saw he took the blame for us being there. It wasn't his fault, and later—maybe not tonight, but in the near future—I do everything I could to convince him the fault was Schmid's. No one else's.

"When he said we'd all go up together, meaning he had no intention of trying to get out of the chalet before the bomb detonated, I asked him why he'd give his life. His response was as follows, 'You got too close. I blame myself for letting you live as long as I did. I never dreamed you were smart enough to piece it all together.' At the time, I had no idea what he meant when he said I'd gotten too close. Now, I believe he meant to uncovering his relationship with Godwin. However, my gut is telling me there's far more to it."

"I believe we'll discover Schmid had a direct connection to AMPS, or at least he was ensuring Godwin never fell under suspicion," said Oleander.

Many in the room either nodded or voiced their agreement.

"His next statement lends credence to your theory, O, that Schmid had his own relationship either with AMPS, the Calabrian Syndicate, or any number of other criminal organizations. He said, 'I am a dead man anyway.' He was referring to his previous statement about me getting too close."

I looked over at Magnet again. He nodded once, and I continued. While he had no idea what I was going to say, perhaps he sensed it would be the hardest for me to recount.

"Lastly, when I made one final attempt to get away, he said it was already too late. Then he'd called me *mein Schätzelein*. It's what my parents called me when I was young, before they died. Yes, it's a common term of endearment, but the way he said it...I don't know. It was like he knew."

I squared my shoulders, thankful I'd gotten through my part of the

briefing without becoming emotional. “Any questions?”

Verity stood beside me and put her arm around my shoulders. “I’m sure I speak for everyone here when I commend your bravery, but also, I am so happy, relieved, and thankful that you are still here with us tonight and able to tell your story.”

“And I’d just patted myself on the back for not getting emotional,” I joked when I looked into Verity’s tear-filled eyes.

I sat beside Magnet and rested my head on his shoulder when he put his arm around me. Like before, I didn’t care if anyone noticed and, if they had, what they thought. What was between Magnet and me was special. Too important to be denied. I’d walk away from anything, including the job I’d fought so hard to get, in order to be with him. That acceptance was how I knew I loved him. It was too soon for me to confess my feelings; however, I couldn’t deny them.

Listening to the reports from the other teams, I realized that many of our objectives for the day had fallen by the wayside. However, what we’d learned instead was far more valuable.

“Earlier, I mentioned planning ops,” said Verity. “Oleander, what is Ehren’s current status?”

“On standby.”

“Can we get her here tonight?”

“Affirmative,” O responded.

“Let’s do so. Once she arrives, Schön and I will brief her on the progress we made today. While we wait, many thanks to Flick and Grey for taking it upon themselves to provide the sustenance we’d all eventually need. Let’s reconvene at twenty-one hundred. Nemesis?”

“We’ll take a break here as well. Excellent work, everyone,” Nem responded before Verity cut the feed.

While several others got up and went in the direction Flick had indicated, I stayed where I was, with my head on Magnet’s shoulder.

“Hungry?” he asked.

“Surprisingly, yes. I can wait until the others are finished, though.”

He leaned over and kissed my forehead. “I’m proud of you, Prisca. You did well tonight.”

I put my arm around his waist. “Do you have any idea how much your words mean to me?”

“Everything I say, I mean sincerely. Later, when we’re alone, there are

other things that need to be said, shared. Personal things.”

“I have things to say too.”

“I’m telling you. I love Swiss food,” said Zeppelin, following Verity, who sat on a sofa that formed a right angle with ours. He was carrying two plates and handed one to her. “Can I bring you guys anything?” he asked.

“Thanks, but we’ll make our way in there once everyone else has had a chance,” Magnet responded.

Zep motioned with his head. “Come help with drinks, then.”

“How are you holding up?” Verity asked once they’d walked away.

“Better than I expected to be.”

“You did well.”

While I sought Magnet’s approval above all others, Verity’s was second. “Thank you. Please go ahead,” I said when I realized she wasn’t eating.

“I will, but first, there’s something I want to say.”

I folded my hands on my lap. “Go ahead.”

“You and Magnet are a good fit.”

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I’d say it feels awkward to be visibly affectionate toward each other, but shockingly, it isn’t.”

She smiled. “Zeppelin worried more about that than I did. Then again, like you, I came close enough to dying that I learned to appreciate every new day.” She looked around the room at those who’d returned with plates of food and taken seats. “That is especially true for Oleander. I think she’s stared death in the face more times than we’ll ever know. Conversely, it’s softened her in a way I never dreamed possible.”

“Magnet and I...it’s new.”

“I’m going to give you some unsolicited advice. When it’s right, you know it. And no matter how much energy you spend trying to talk yourself out of it, or thinking it might not be real, you eventually realize there’s no point. What’s meant to be happens anyway.”

“Thank you, Verity,” I said when I saw Zeppelin and Magnet heading our way.

“If that’s more of what Zep poured earlier, you better get some food in your stomach,” she said, looking over at the glasses of amber-colored liquid the two men held.

“Good idea.”

MAGNET AND I HAD JUST FINISHED DISHING PLATES OF FOOD WHEN I HEARD

Ehren saying hello to everyone.

“Still okay with this?” he asked.

“Oleander believes bringing Ehren back is for the good of the mission.”

“If you feel uncomfortable in any way —”

“I will handle it professionally, sir.” I winked, but I could tell my words stung.

“My apologies,” he muttered.

“For what? Looking out for me? Caring about me? Sorry, but I don’t accept.” While I was still smiling, Magnet wasn’t.

“It’s more than that, you know?”

I set my plate down and put my hands on his forearms. “It is for me too.” I picked my food up. “Come on. Let’s get this over with so we can go to bed.” I winked again, and this time, he smiled.

“Hello, Schön,” said Ehren when we came face-to-face.

“Hello.”

“I hope we’ll be able to —”

“We will. You should get something to eat.” I scooted around her and made my way back to the sofa where Magnet and I had been sitting. I wasn’t as ready to face her as I’d thought and definitely not prepared for us to say a few words and let bygones be bygones. As I’d told Magnet, I’d handle my interactions with Ehren in a professional manner. That didn’t mean I saw us as ever becoming friends.

However, I likely would’ve said the same thing about Verity, and look at where we were now. Grey had actually commented on how well she and I worked together.

“How’d your conversation go?” Magnet asked.

“You were right behind me. It wasn’t much of one.”

“I meant the one you just had with yourself.”

“It was a good pep talk,” I said, smiling again.

“I’m going back for seconds. Anyone want more?” Zeppelin asked.

Both Magnet and I thanked him, but our plates were still full.

A few minutes later, after I’d finished eating, Verity called me over to where she’d been standing earlier.

“Go on,” said Magnet when I glanced at him. “I’ll save you some dessert.”

“Ready?” Verity asked when I joined her and watched as she reestablished the connection with those in Shere.

“I am.”

Verity asked for everyone’s attention, and when the room quieted down, she began. “Earlier today, Schön and I each found something significant to this investigation. As you know, two of this op’s objectives were to identify Godwin’s bodyguard as well as the mystery woman Zeppelin and I saw him dining with when we were here in November.”

The bodyguard’s images appeared on a blank wall that served as an impromptu screen. Magnet got up and lowered the lights so we could see them better.

Verity zoomed in on the first and second images. “The photo on the left is of a male we’ve determined was Xavier Vella posing as a bodyguard. The other image, we believe is of a woman disguising herself as a man. These stills are from the CCTV footage taken in the days before James Godwin and another person left Châteaux Relais with Zeppelin and me in pursuit. We also believe it explains why the mystery woman seemingly disappeared into thin air.”

I looked over at Ehren, who was nodding.

“Schön?” prompted Verity as she brought the images from the town square recorded last summer, as well as what the NRO had supplied, to the screen. There was a collective, audible gasp in the room.

“As you can see, the person Verity has highlighted in each of the stills bears an uncanny resemblance to Charlene Vella-Borg, a woman who is a prime person of interest in our investigation of AMPS. Particularly so after we discovered Xavier Vella’s biological connection to Pharaoh and Mithras. At the time of the shoot-out during which Xavier and his girlfriend were killed, Selene was heard screaming the word ‘Sheka.’ We have surmised Sheka is represented by the S in the AMPS acronym. Subsequent DNA tests have shown Xavier and Pharaoh were full siblings and Mithras shared only one parent with them. Additionally, the same testing proved Francesca Vella is Valerie’s and Xavier’s grandmother and Charlene Vella-Borg is their aunt.”

“I thought Charlene was on Rile’s compound in Mallorca last summer,” said Reaper.

Verity replaced the photos on the screen with those Rile sent from his own CCTV footage.

“As you can see, she was. Either that, or the person on the compound was disguised to look like her.”

“It is our intention to return to Gozo to question Vella-Borg,” said Verity. “This would be a multifaceted op. Since Schön was able to establish a rapport with Francesca Vella, during which the older woman said certain things leading us to believe she gave birth to another daughter, older than both Charlene and Marco, Jr., she and Rogue will return undercover as a married couple.”

“Just to refresh your memory,” I added. “When Xavier was interrogated after the death of Mithras, he told those questioning him that Marco Jr. and his wife, Yasmine, were his parents and that they were killed in an automobile accident when he was two years old. Given Marco Jr. was twelve when Pharaoh was born and she and Xavier are full siblings, it rules him out as Xavier’s father.”

While I was speaking, I noticed Ehren approach Oleander. A few seconds later, the two women left the room.

“Any questions thus far?” I asked, waiting for the two women to return.

Less than five minutes later, the room went silent when we all heard Oleander shriek. Poseidon jumped up at the same time his wife came out of the kitchen. “We’ve got her! We’ve fucking got her!” she exclaimed, racing over to Verity with a cell phone in her hand. “Load these, please.”

We all waited while the photos transferred.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Oleander announced. “I give you A.”

MAGNET

The room fell eerily silent as those present stared at the images on the screen. The first appeared to be several years old. In it, were three men and a woman. One of the men, who resembled a previous photo we'd seen of Salvatore Rávdos, had his arm around a woman. The other men were James Godwin and Oskar Schmid.

Next to it, were the two photos we'd managed to get of Pharaoh. There was enough of a resemblance between her and the other woman to believe they were mother and daughter.

"Excuse me. I'll be right back," Schön whispered, getting up and leaving the room.

"Where did these come from?" Zeppelin asked as I watched Schön hurry off in the direction of a downstairs lavatory.

"Schmid's office. I discovered several more incriminating photos in his credenza drawer with a false bottom. It appears he either planned to or had already used them for blackmail purposes," I heard Ehren say.

More images appeared on the screen, but I couldn't focus on them.

"Is Schön okay?" Zeppelin whispered.

"I'm not sure." I got up and walked in the direction I'd seen her go, but when I reached the lavatory, I didn't find her in it. I kept walking and saw a kitchen door leading outside was open. I rushed through it and found her crouched down, losing the contents of her stomach.

“Hey,” I said, kneeling next to her and putting my hand on her back. It was then I realized she was shaking to the point of convulsing. “Prisca, talk to me. What’s going on?”

Her tear-filled eyes met mine. “It’s her.”

“Who? What are you talking about?”

“Mrs. Strousberg is A.” She turned her head away from me and vomited again.

My mind reeled. Mrs. Strousberg, the woman who’d funded Schön’s education and was like a mentor to her, and the woman who ran one of the world’s largest human trafficking rings were one and the same? I couldn’t fathom it. Or could I?

Mrs. Strousberg had provided scholarships for orphaned girls. I remembered Schön saying the woman was an orphan herself. That could be a lie, of course, as most details are when a person is living under an assumed identity.

My hand remained on Schön’s back, and when she stood, I did too.

Her eyes met mine. “I don’t know what to do.”

She was looking to me for an answer, and I didn’t have one. Did she want to leave either the compound or St. Moritz in order to have time to process the realization? Did she want to return inside and tell the team she knew A personally? Under the assumed identity, of course. Or somewhere in between the two?

“I will support whatever decision you make. If you want to leave, I’ll go with you —”

“*Leave?* My God, do you think I would try to hide this?”

I put my hands on her shoulders. “I did not say or suggest you would hide anything. What I would’ve said had I finished my sentence was that maybe you need time on your own—not entirely so since I’ll be with you—to think through the ramifications of this discovery.”

She shook her head. “No. Absolutely not. We have to do everything in our power to find her.”

“I agree, but, Schön, realizing Mrs. Strousberg was A made you physically ill. You may be in shock. I, for one, can imagine how it would feel to learn someone close to me was a criminal on par with the worst in the world.”

She stepped back and folded her arms. “It makes sense, though, doesn’t it? She had a pipeline to orphaned girls. Magnet, she asked me to work for

her! Was that a euphemism for becoming a sex slave that she intended to auction off to the highest bidder?"

"Possibly."

"Or did she think I'd help recruit other innocent and unsuspecting women?"

"Also a possibility."

Schön's eyes filled with tears. "All that time, I thought she cared about me." She brushed away her tears. "Do you think she had a hand in Schmid grooming me to be a honey trap?"

Everything she said was, again, a possibility.

Schön dropped her arms, and her hands fisted at her sides. "I'm going to take this fucking bitch down if it's the last thing I do."

"You will not be alone." I pulled her into my arms, and while at first, she stiffened, after a few seconds, she rested her cheek on my chest. I held her for as long as she let me, then held her hand as we made our way inside. There were a few puzzled expressions, but knowing Schön like I did, I was certain she would not interrupt the briefing to drop her bombshell.

"This appears to have been taken the day we saw Godwin at the restaurant," said Verity, who looked over at us.

Schön nodded.

Verity continued. "While completely unidentifiable, we can get clues from this image. The woman looks to be approximately the same height as the one in the photo with Rávdos and Godwin."

"Much shorter than the bodyguard in the photos you showed us earlier," Rogue commented.

"True, but with any kind of disguise, it is far easier to add than take away." The previous image of the woman disguised as a man appeared on the screen. "As you can see, the body seems disproportionate, which is what made Schön and I take notice initially. The hips are wider. Not significantly so, but even from the angle of these photos, you can see how long her legs appear to be in relation to her torso."

Another came on the screen next to the bodyguard's shot. It was of the woman Schön had noticed in the town square last summer.

"While we have no idea what the woman from the photo taken at least sixteen years ago might look like now, we can tell from the photo of her in the suit that she's relatively slim." Verity zoomed in on one of the images of the person masquerading as Charlene Vella-Borg taken last summer. "My

guess is, to disguise herself as her sister, she's using a combination of a mask, heavy makeup, a wig, and a suit that makes her appear at least three stone heavier." The still from Rile DeLéon's CCTV footage appeared next to the other. "My expert opinion is that Charlene Vella-Borg never left Mallorca and that her older sister is setting the stage for her to be framed for any number of crimes."

"May I interrupt?" Nemesis asked.

"Of course," Verity responded.

"Is there any additional information on the photo of Salvatore Rávdos, the woman, and Godwin?"

Ehren stood. "There was something written on the back of the photo, then erased. The only letters that are visible are C, A, and S."

"First name starts with a C? Middle initial A? Last name Salvatore?" offered Oleander.

"We need to return to Gozo," Schön whispered, but not quietly enough for Verity not to hear.

"I agree. You especially, Schön. Rogue, you too."

"I'm in if you need backup," Zeppelin leaned over and whispered.

"Appreciate it," I whispered too.

"While Schön and Rogue may be the only two with a presence on Gozo, my opinion is we take as big a team as we can assemble," said Oleander, standing.

I looked around the room at those nodding.

Schön took a deep breath, then stood. I did the same.

"Yes?" said Verity, cocking her head.

"The woman in the photo is someone I know personally." The room went silent and still. "While I'm assuming she is our A as well as Francesca Vella's oldest daughter, I know her as Mrs. Carissa Strousberg."

"Verity?" I heard Nemesis say. "I'm going to request a short break. I'd like to confer with Magnet and Schön privately."

"Yes, ma'am," Verity responded, her eyes meeting mine.

"We'll let you know when we're ready to convene," I said.

"Copy that," said Nem right before her screen went dark.

"Upstairs?" I asked.

Schön nodded.

I set up the call, and Nemesis appeared on the screen. "I've asked the others here to give us privacy as well."

“Thank you,” Schön responded.

“I mean no disrespect, but I must ask. Are you absolutely certain?”

“Excuse me for a moment?” Schön asked.

“Of course.”

I watched her walk over to where we’d put the items retrieved from the chalet. She set several items aside, then returned with a single unframed picture.

“Like Pharaoh, her mother didn’t like to be photographed. I suppose that should have raised a red flag with me, given she was a very beautiful woman. However, when I met her, I was fourteen.” She held up the image. “This was taken surreptitiously by another classmate at the boarding school. It’s from a distance and a bit out of focus, but you can still see the woman standing next to me looks very similar to the one in the photo with Rávdos and Godwin. And while it’s been three years since I was last with Mrs. Strousberg, I recall what she looks like in vivid detail.”

“Thank you, Schön, and please understand I wasn’t questioning you as much as I wanted you to be certain.”

“I am certain, ma’am.”

Nemesis took a deep breath and leaned forward slightly so she was closer to the screen. “We’ll need you to prepare a detailed brief of your interactions with this woman. Everything you can remember, down to the most minute detail.”

“Of course.”

“Next, I must ask, how are you feeling about your continued role in this investigation?”

Nem’s question would’ve raised my hackles. However, Schön responded in the way she typically did, calmly and concisely.

“I am integral to this team, ma’am. More than anyone, I can aid in finding her.”

“Agreed. Magnet? I’ll ask your opinion as well.”

“Schön’s participation in this is essential. My opinion, as you asked, is the mission should not move forward without her.”

“Very well. You have my full support. You already did, by the way. I’m just stating it to make it official.” She jotted down notes on a paper we couldn’t see. “What about Rogue? I’d like to speak with the three of you together. Would that be possible now?”

“Affirmative,” I said, sending him an urgent message. A few seconds

later, there was a knock at the door and he joined us.

“I want to impress upon you the importance of what you’re about to do. You especially, Schön.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“By returning to Gozo, the path you’ll walk will lead you straight into danger.” She paused. “This is not the same as a raid, Agent Baur. If you return to Nonna Vella’s restaurant with the intention of learning more about her eldest daughter, you will be vulnerable.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Magnet? This is your op. Are you absolutely certain about this?”

“My recommendation is we return to Shere prior to going to Gozo and craft the op as tight as possible. The entire coalition’s participation is essential in making sure we have covered every possible scenario.”

“Agreed.”

“Rogue?”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“You will be going in with Schön. The stakes are equally high for you. Not only do I expect you to get out of there unscathed, but I am ordering you to get Schön out of there the minute you or anyone else senses danger.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he repeated.

“I’ll arrange for transport in the morning. You can let the rest know you’ll be traveling to Shere first. Once here, we’ll craft the plans for Gozo.”

“Will do, Nemesis.”

“Schön, I will leave it up to you. However, I am making the offer to brief the team still in Shere on our conversation. If you’d prefer to do it yourself, I will respect your decision. Part of what I will tell them is that a brief will be forthcoming but not immediately.”

“I’d appreciate that, ma’am.”

“Magnet?”

“I agree it is the best course of action.”

She nodded. “Rogue, please alert those waiting downstairs that we’ll continue our briefing in fifteen minutes. Magnet and Schön, I do not expect either of you to be in attendance.”

“Roger that,” I responded. “Oh, one other thing. I suppose it can wait until tomorrow, but I established a rapport of sorts with Charlene Vella-Borg. I would like to be the one who interacts with her with a similar objective as Schön’s with Francesca.”

“Of course,” said Nem. “Anything else?”

I looked at Schön, who shook her head.

“Not at this time, Nem.”

“I’ll see you both tomorrow, then.”

“How are you?” I asked Schön after the call with Nemesis ended and Rogue left the room.

“I’m okay. About my reaction earlier, it was just such a shock.”

“Completely understandable,” I said, leading her over to the bed. We lay down, and she snuggled into me, my arm around her and her head on my chest.

“We had a bit of a falling out. I mean, there wasn’t much reason for us to talk after I graduated. It was when she suggested I work for her. I was polite, of course, but I told her my dream was to do intelligence work. My degree was in international relations and diplomacy, so not an exact fit, but I had completed the training necessary to become an agent.” Schön shook her head as if she’d just remembered something.

“What?”

“She was the one who suggested Uncle Henri contact Oskar Schmid.” She shuddered. “I hated him from the moment I met him.”

“Good instincts,” I commented.

“Yet I considered the leader of a human trafficking ring my mentor.”

“Think about it, though. Your gut told you not to work for her.”

“I felt so guilty. She’d done so much for me. I can’t help but think it was all manipulation.”

“I know you told Nemesis you wanted to move forward with the Gozo op, but if there comes a time you change your mind, say so. Remember, I’ll be undercover with you. If I sense any hesitation on your part, we’ll talk it through and come to a decision about proceeding together.”

Schön looked up at me and cupped my cheek with her palm. “You’re a good man, Magnet. You’re also a highly effective commander.”

“Now is not the time, but there are so many things I want us to talk about. Personal things. Between you and me.”

“I want that too. First, though, we need to find Mrs. Strousberg or whatever her name is. Maybe it’s Mrs. Rávdos.”

More than anything, I wanted to tell Schön what she meant to me, that I was in love with her. I longed for us to make love, but as I’d said, now was not the time.

Instead, I held her in my arms until we both slept.

MAGNET

Schön and I were scheduled to be on the second-to-last helicopter flight out the following morning. Some of the team had left in the predawn hours and made the three-hour drive to Zurich to cut down on the number of flights needed.

Macht, Fuchs, Drachen, and Ehren were remaining in St. Moritz and would continue investigating the ties between Schmid, Godwin, and the woman we all referred to as A.

In the brief I'd read outlining everything discussed last night after our call with Nemesis ended, Macht reported a team had gone to the chalet believed to belong to Carissa Strousberg and found it empty. Since it was isolated, none of the neighbors they questioned recalled ever seeing anyone come or go from the property.

That A didn't maintain a residence here reinforced the theory she'd left St. Moritz with Godwin on the helicopter Zeppelin and Verity saw depart.

Ares was working with the NRO to see if they could supply any footage of either Xavier Vella or Selene Pavia in St. Moritz.

After Schön's discovery of the woman disguised as Charlene Vella-Borg, facial recognition pulled up several more images of her in and around the resort town. What we didn't have were any specific crimes we could tie her to.

I still felt confident that, once the conversation between her and me

progressed far enough, I could switch modes from flirtatious to interrogatory. Showing her one or two images would be enough to make her believe her arrest was imminent.

The plan, as it stood now, was for me to visit the restaurant first and convince Charlene to leave the premises with me under the auspices of taking our conversation outdoors. Schön, then, would engage Francesca Vella in the same way she had the first time.

What we were unsure of was whether Schmid had alerted A that we were close to discovering her identity. Maybe he believed we were close to finding his connection to Godwin. Regardless, the plans for the op had to include protection detail for the three of us going in undercover, as well as for Francesca Vella and her daughter, Charlene. We couldn't risk either woman being silenced either through disappearing or being murdered. For now, they were our strongest links to identifying and locating A.

Schön was quiet when we woke, got ready for the day, then packed the small amount of items we'd each removed from our luggage and the things she'd retrieved from the chalet. My guess was she was equally deep in thought about the upcoming op. At least, that was what I hoped was happening rather than her being concerned anyone would judge her for her connection to A.

When we went downstairs, Verity, Zeppelin, Oleander, and Poseidon were waiting.

"I'll make no apology. I'm first," said O.

I had no idea what she was talking about until I saw her approach Schön and wrap her arms around her. Neither woman spoke, nor did Verity when she approached and did the same thing.

Zeppelin nudged me. "May I?" he asked with a wink.

"You may have to grovel," I said under my breath, also winking but at Schön.

"Nah, she's forgiven me for being a complete horse's arse. Plus, I'm the one who lost out here. I could've had her on the Swiss task force, but I blew it."

"I'm where I belong," she said, returning his embrace.

"I don't know what's going on, except I feel that if I don't hug you, I'll be missing out," said Poseidon, the last to approach her.

"Thank you, everyone. Like Poseidon, I'm not sure what instigated the hug-fest, but I'm very happy something did. Just so you know, I don't feel

responsible for the actions of Mrs. Strousberg—as I knew her—nor do I question whether I should’ve picked up on something sooner. Believe me, that has rolled over in my mind many times. I’ve come to accept that maybe when she and I met, a series of events began that led us to where we are now.”

“I agree,” said Verity. “And while it appears she is A, we don’t know that for certain yet.”

“Your ride has arrived,” said Macht, coming in the front door. “Ah, Schön, good morning. I hoped to see you before you left.”

I watched as she approached him. “Thank you for saving my life, Macht.”

“Stay alive, Schön.”

She cocked her head.

“It’s what they all say, isn’t it?” he responded, chuckling.

“Right. Stay alive, Macht.”

“See you in Zurich,” said Poseidon, waving.

“You are going too. I arranged for a bigger helicopter,” Macht told him.

“Please extend our thanks to Herr Benzinger,” I added before climbing into the helicopter and taking the seat next to Schön. “I’m sorry you didn’t get to spend time at your chalet,” I said when we lifted off and flew over the area where it was located.

“I’ll be back.”

My eyes met hers. “I hope I will be too.”

She smiled. “You will.”

ONCE TEAMS WERE DETERMINED AND DECISIONS WERE MADE AS TO WHERE they’d be positioned both for my conversation with Charlene Vella-Borg and Schön’s with Francesca, all that was left was to outline the objectives and then review the plan of action.

“Well, here we are,” said Nemesis when everyone had gathered in the makeshift situation room. “I think I speak for everyone when I say my gut is telling me this is it. We may not know exactly who A is yet, or where she is, but my every instinct is telling me that by the end of this op, we will know both. Not only that, but she will be in custody.” She turned to me. “Magnet, you and the Albanian task force own this op. Anything you want to say at this time?”

I nodded and stood. “The goal in every mission is to keep the suspects alive. It is imperative we do everything in our power to keep A alive. We

need to dismantle the entirety of the AMPS network, and in order to do that, we need her to talk and keep talking.”

“If that’s all, I’ll let Ares review the objectives of each team.”

Philip “Ares” Kappas was not just the commander of the US task force; he was one of the best strategic planners I’d ever worked with. Every op we’d run in this mission had been crafted with incredible precision designed to achieve the best possible outcomes.

Where we’d fallen short was in keeping the suspects alive. Mithras, Pharaoh, and Sheka were all dead, and in every case but the first, we’d had no choice. It had boiled down to kill or be killed.

I sat and listened as Ares ran down different scenarios with each team leader. “We are ready for almost everything. Barring nuclear war.”

I noticed Nem raise a brow at him.

“Okay, okay. I’ll make a plan for that too,” he said, walking over to embrace her after she ended the briefing.

“I feel like we’re the only single people here,” I overheard Flick say to Grey.

“You’re right to think a lot of couples were brought together via their work for the coalition. Myself and Ares were the first, I believe,” said Nem.

“Nope, O and I were. It just took a few years for us to be in the same place at the same time again,” said Poseidon.

“We’ve got you both beat. Cayman and I met in primary school,” Bexli chimed in.

“Don’t look at me,” said Verity when most everyone did. “Zeppelin and I couldn’t stand the sight of each other for months after we first met.” Zep cleared his throat. “Correction, neither of us had a problem ogling each other. It was every word we uttered that got in our way.”

“You’re together now, and that’s all that matters,” said Nemesis. “Thanks to Z and me, by the way.”

“Did I hear my name?” the man said, walking into the situation room with George, who was now his wife.

“God, it’s good to see you,” said Nemesis, the first to approach them.

“We’ve come to send you off on what we hope and believe will be the final op in the AMPS mission.” He looked around the room. “It seems my well wishes are premature. We’re awaiting one more arrival.” He’d no sooner finished his sentence than Baissier walked through the front door.

My arm was already around Schön, so I gave her a squeeze before she

stepped forward to greet her uncle.

“We will speak privately before your departure, yes?”

She nodded. “I’d like that.”

Baissier stepped over to Z and stood beside him. “We’ve come to send you off on what we believe will be the final op in the AMPS mission,” Marchand repeated.

Those in the room who held glasses raised them. Others expressed their agreement.

“If that felt a bit anticlimactic, I said almost those exact words right before you arrived,” Z told him.

“Almost?”

“I said we hope and believe it is the final op.”

Baissier shook his head. “You always were the, how do you say it?” He looked over at Schön, who shrugged.

“Debbie Downer?” said Oleander.

Baissier grinned and pointed at her. “That’s it!”

While the mood in the room was upbeat and positive, I could guarantee there wasn’t a person here whose underlying emotions didn’t include trepidation and even fear. We might be looking for one person, but AMPS wasn’t made up of her alone. I had no doubt it would be years before we took down the vast networks of traffickers, money launderers, and customers of the organization. More would rise in their place, and more were already out there.

“Before I spend a bit of quiet time with my niece, I will remind you all again that the mandate you have been given by the United Nations is a monumental undertaking of the direst urgency. However, there are no others I trust more to lead the fight against human trafficking than those assembled here today.”

“Uncle Henri, would you mind if Magnet joined us?”

The ambassador looked me up and down. “If that is what you want,” he said to Schön.

“I do.”

He raised a brow. “Our conversation will be of a personal nature.”

“Nothing you will say to me cannot be said in front of him.”

“Very well. Lead the way.”

“Are you sure about this?” I asked as we walked in the direction of the solarium.

“Until the op deploys, I want to be by your side every minute I can be.”

“Understood.”

“I will keep this brief since I know you will be on your way soon,” said Baissier. “I hope someday you will be able to forgive me.”

When the ambassador’s eyes filled with tears, I turned away, wanting to give him and Schön some semblance of privacy.

“Should I ask those in the coalition to forgive me for accepting the gift of my education?” she said to him.

“Of course you shouldn’t. But it is not the same.”

“It is the same, Uncle. If anything, it’s because of you that AMPS, as we know it, will finally be taken down. Had you not started the coalition, the team assembled, who I believe are the best agents in the world, would never have begun this fight collectively.”

He bowed his head. “Thank you, niece.”

An hour later, the twelve agents deploying on the op loaded into three SUVs headed to the airfield at Gatwick, bound for Gozo.

SCHÖN

A sense of calm came over me the moment I walked out the door of the command center. I knew what I had to do, and I'd deliver. It was that simple.

No one had said it, at least not in my presence, but I think we all prayed Francesca Vella was innocent in all of this. Bexli more than anyone, since she credited the woman with saving her life. I hadn't spent much time with her, but my gut told me she was a good person. Sad but not necessarily unhappy. Yes, she'd called her daughter a "beech," but I was sure most mothers and daughters referenced each other that way from time to time.

Magnet squeezed my hand, and I looked up at him. What would I have done without him through all of this?

The fire. The bomb. Mrs. Strousberg.

I'd gotten so used to internalizing so many aspects of my life, from the loss of my parents to the bullying to my job as a sexpionage agent. Yet when I'd faced each adversity in the last few days, Magnet was by my side. He didn't push. He just let me know he was there. Last night, I wanted to confess my love for him, but it didn't feel like the right time. I longed to make love to him too, knowing, as he'd said, when it came to him and me, everything was different. What was between us was unique and special—*intimate*.

When this op was over, I prayed we could go off somewhere on our own, maybe even back to St. Moritz, and get to know each other better as a man

and a woman who didn't have the threat of danger hanging over them.

I leaned against him and rested my head on his shoulder. "I'm so thankful for you."

He kissed my forehead. "I am so thankful for you."

THE FLIGHT TO MALTA WAS PLANNED SO WE'D ARRIVE AFTER DARK. THE helicopters that transported us from the main island of Malta to Gozo would land on the compound where we would stay for our time there. It was the same compound the team had used for the previous ops there.

I'd anticipated questions regarding my brief during the flight, but no one approached with any. As hard as I tried not to dwell on it, given my focus had to be on the op in front of me, I couldn't help but wonder how many other boarding schools and universities were a breeding ground for AMPS to recruit young women—orphans in particular—to the organization, only for them to eventually learn that wherever they'd thought they might be going turned out to be hell.

I HADN'T ASKED ABOUT THE ACCOMMODATIONS AT THE COMPOUND, BUT I wasn't surprised when we arrived and Magnet said we'd be sharing a bedroom. After all, I had said I wanted to be by his side every minute I could until the op deployed.

"Do you want to talk it through?" he asked.

"Sure. If you don't mind."

"You go first, then I'll run through mine."

"I thought I'd talk to her about names for the baby she thinks I'm having. I'll tell her it's a girl and then share the list I will have spent my time at the table writing, just to pique her curiosity."

"What name will be at the top?"

"I was thinking Cassie. I also plan to visit the restaurant around the same time we did before, since it was quiet."

"And if all goes as planned, I will have to convince Charlene to take a walk with me, so you and Francesca should be on your own."

"According to Delfino, who's been monitoring activity at the restaurant, no one works there other than the two women. She also said they rarely speak to each other."

"It seems to me that they have both led sad and lonely lives."

“Do you want to talk about your intent with Charlene?” I asked.

Magnet sighed. “Gain her trust. See if I can get her to talk about her family. Learn everything I can, then present her with the evidence that ‘she’ was in St. Moritz on several occasions when ‘crimes were committed,’ and take it from there.”

“Do you think she’ll flip on her sister that easily?”

“Something tells me Charlene hates her sister. I also think A’s held something over her their whole lives. Maybe that was true with everyone, including Pharaoh and Xavier. Even if she doesn’t have something to hold over Charlene, think about it—she’s in her mid-fifties and works in a restaurant with her mother. That in itself would be depressing, wouldn’t it? And she lost her husband.”

“What about Francesca? Do you think she believes her oldest daughter is dead?” I asked.

“Out of all the possibilities, that’s the most likely.”

I opened my laptop and pulled up the image of Salvatore, Godwin, Schmid, and the woman I’d known as Mrs. Strousberg. I studied her in particular.

When I first met her, I was a damaged fourteen-year-old girl who had lost her parents and rebelled against the man and woman who had agreed to be my guardians. I’d gone through puberty, starting when I was nine, and by the time I arrived at the boarding school in Leysin, I was wearing a double-D-cup bra.

Based on when Francesca said she gave birth to her oldest daughter, A would’ve been in her mid-forties. I vividly remembered how beautiful I thought she was. Like me, it was evident she had large breasts, but the way she dressed minimized their prominence. She had long blonde hair, also like me.

“Do you recall how old Salvatore Rávdos was when he died?” I asked Magnet.

“No, but if I use your crib notes, I can find it quickly.” He pulled out his phone. “Here it is. He was fifty-one. So you remember birth dates but not death dates?”

“Sometimes, I remember both. Anyway, based on that, he was still alive when I first met A.”

“What are you thinking?”

“Nothing in particular. Profiling her, I guess. I remember her being

noticeably beautiful.” I told him she would’ve been forty-six at the time. “I wonder how it all happened. Did Salvatore holiday on Gozo, meet Francesca’s oldest daughter, and whisk her away to a life of luxury and crime? According to O’s briefs, her father began investigating Rávdos when she was eleven, which means ‘Cronos’ would’ve been forty-five at the time.”

Magnet was looking at me with his mouth open.

“What?”

“How do you remember all that?”

I shrugged a shoulder. “I just do. So, back to Cronos being forty-five. Oleander’s brief also said her father had been investigating the man responsible for the largest human trafficking ring in the world at that time. He couldn’t have amassed something so big by that age.”

“Which means he was probably a second-generational trafficker. Or more.”

I shuddered. “It makes my skin crawl.”

“Mine too.”

I closed my eyes and rested my head against the seat, wishing I could drive A’s image out of my head. “The more I think about her, the more I remember how uncomfortable she made me feel. It was almost as though she was sizing me up. She probably was. Trying to figure out how many thousands of dollars she’d get for me.”

“Please don’t say that.”

I raised my brows. “It’s probably true, Magnet.”

“Whether it is or not, the image that appears in my mind when I think about it, incites enough rage for me to rip this plane apart.”

“Okay. Let’s change the subject.”

“To? More about Rávdos and the woman we think was his wife? I’d rather not talk about them right now.”

“Me either.”

“So what besides them is running through that beautiful brain of yours?”

“I think I know why Xavier killed Mithras. Is that talking about them?” I asked.

“Yes, but not really. I’m curious to hear your theory.”

“Mithras was a year older than Pharaoh, who was twelve years older than Xavier.”

“Following.”

“If Mithras was Salvatore’s son, which we believe he was, he would’ve

been the eldest. Not just son, but offspring.”

Magnet’s eyes scrunched. “Okay. Still following.”

“That must’ve made A crazy. That she hadn’t given him a son.”

“So why did Xavier kill him?”

“Because she forced him too.”

“That was ten years after Salvatore’s death. Why wait so long?” he asked.

“Xavier was twenty-five. Rite of passage?”

“Pharaoh was a lot older. Why not have her do it?”

“Didn’t she order someone else to kill Oleander?”

“I need to start taking memory supplements. Seriously, how do you remember all this?”

“Here it is. Yes, she ordered Seshat, who wasn’t really Seshat, to pull the trigger.”

“Are you saying Pharaoh wasn’t a killer?” His eyes were wide.

“She was a Libra,” I muttered.

“I was following you all the way ’til there. What does her being a Libra have to do with anything?”

“Peacekeepers. Then again, they’re also manipulative. Oh, and acquiescent.”

“I can’t even remember what we were talking about. Do you really believe in that stuff?”

“Not at all.”

Magnet wrapped his arm around my shoulders, pulled me close to him, and kissed me. “God, I love you.” He pulled back, eyes wider than before. “Um —”

“I love you too,” I blurted.

We stared at each other for what felt like several minutes, neither of us saying anything more.

Finally, Magnet reached up and cupped my cheek. “While I didn’t plan to tell you now —”

“You didn’t?”

“Not when we were talking about Rávdos and his devil spawns.”

“Good point.”

“But I am glad I told you.”

“Me too.”

He leaned forward and rested his forehead against mine. “Did you mean it?”

I brought my lips to his. “Of course I did.”

He lay on the bed and pulled me down with him after I moved my laptop out of the way. We both lay on our sides, facing each other.

“Prisca ‘Schön’ Baur, I love you.”

“Um...”

He chuckled. “What?”

“I’m not supposed to call you Justin.”

“It’s okay as long as I’m not in trouble.”

I smiled. “Justin ‘Magnet’ Magnussen, I love you too.”

MAGNET

Schön and I didn't make love before we went to sleep last night. We didn't talk about it either. Maybe, like me, she didn't feel as if the timing was right.

I prayed that, after today, we'd have confirmed A was Francesca's daughter, knew her name, and I'd gotten Charlene to talk enough to set her up for interrogation by somebody else. While I could handle some, it definitely wasn't my specialty. Poseidon, though, loved it. So did Oleander.

The other thing I prayed for was that, after today, Schön wouldn't be put in a position of danger again. At least as part of this op.

The woman was so fucking brilliant in the way she thought through things I could barely keep up with. There was no way I'd ever suggest she leave intelligence. Honestly, her doing so would be a travesty.

Getting used to the woman I loved being in danger would not be easy for me. I don't know how Ares, Cayman, Poseidon, and especially Zeppelin did it. I'd have to find out because the last thing I ever wanted to do was hold Schön back or crush her spirit. I really felt like she was finally coming into her own. It would be incredible to watch where she went from here.

I looked over to where she was being outfitted by Verity. Schön would be wearing as much protective gear as she could while still maintaining her cover. The same would be true for me and Rogue. Most everyone else would be donning tactical gear.

“Stay alive, Schön,” I heard Verity say when she was finished prepping her.

“Come here,” I said, pulling her into another room, where we could be alone. “Stay alive, Prisca. Do you hear me?”

“Stay alive, Justin. I love you.”

“I love you, Prisca.”

“ARE YOU OKAY?” ZEPPELIN ASKED WHEN IT WAS TIME FOR ME TO HEAD OUT.

“I don’t know how the fuck you do it.”

“I’m truly amazing at many things. Many, many things, but are you referencing something specific?”

“No worry about Verity? God, I’m ready to crawl out of my skin.”

The smile left Zeppelin’s face. “Do you need to abort your task?”

“No. Jesus. I can do my bloody job, Zep.”

He put his hands on my shoulders. “Are you absolutely certain?”

“Yes. Come on. You know me. When have I ever aborted a task? Never. That’s when.”

“This is the first op you’re on that you’re in love.”

“You did it.”

“And you saw me in the aftermath. In fact, you had to beat some sense into me.”

“Nothing is going to happen to Schön. She’s going to be fine. She’ll get in, talk to Francesca, and get out. Me? I’ve gotta deal with Charlene. That’s way worse, right?”

“Magnet, I need to ask you something.”

“Go ahead.”

“Is your gut telling you something is going to happen to Schön?”

“No. Yes. No. I don’t know. It’s just...God, this is who she is, and she’s so fucking good at it. I don’t want to be that guy who tries to stop her from doing what she loves.”

“That’s different than your gut telling you something’s off, mate.”

I stared into my best friend’s eyes. “I can’t separate it.”

He nodded and switched on his comms. “Ares, we need to make a change.”

“What’s that, Zep?”

“I’m on Schön’s detail.”

“You got it. I’ll take your place with Magnet.”

Zep switched off his comms. "I'll look out for her."
"Thanks, man."

I SHOWED UP THIRTY MINUTES AFTER NONNA VELLA'S OPENED, AND WAS greeted by Charlene, who, once she saw me, smiled.

Everything I'd planned went perfectly. Since it was the slow season on Gozo, she wasn't worried about the restaurant being busy and was happy to take a walk with me.

We'd decided there was better coverage at the park, so I led her over to a picnic table and asked about her life.

"I can't remember if I told you this the last time we were together, but I lost my wife."

Her eyes scrunched, and I panicked momentarily, remembering the last time we were at the restaurant, Schön had asked about her mother and I'd said she had a migraine.

"Was it recent?" she asked.

"Yes, very much so." Maybe that would be a good enough explanation.

"What about you? Ever married?"

She looked off in the direction of the beach and nodded. "A long time ago."

"What happened, if you don't mind my asking?"

"He died." More than sad, she appeared angry.

I leaned closer to her. "Were you married long?"

Charlene shook her head. "Two years only."

"I'm so sorry. Did you have children?"

"One. He died too, but before he was born."

"Oh. A miscarriage?"

She nodded. Again, her body language didn't communicate hurt or pain. She was angry.

"Have you always lived on Gozo?"

"Yes. I never get out."

"No travel?" I asked.

"A little."

"Where's your favorite place you've been?"

She shrugged.

"My favorite place is Gozo." I smiled, and she did too.

"I am happy you like it here."

“We’ve got a problem,” I heard Poseidon say through the comms.

“I’m moving in,” said Oleander.

“Is everything all right?” Charlene asked.

“No. Um, my daughter. I forgot I was supposed to meet her. She must be worried. I have to go.”

“Magnet, what the fuck are you doing?” Ares seethed.

“Move in, take her into custody,” I responded as I ran toward the restaurant.

SCHÖN

“Oh! Good morning!” Francesca said when I walked in. “Welcome back.”

“Thank you,” I said, walking toward her.

She smiled. “I am happy to see you.”

“I couldn’t stay away. I love your food so much.” I patted my stomach. “So does the baby, I think.”

Francesca cocked her head and put her hand on my arm. The warmth I felt from this woman had to be real. I was convinced more than ever that she had no idea the kind of life her oldest daughter had led.

“What would you like?”

“Hmm. Breakfast? Do you serve breakfast? By the way, your English has gotten even better since I was here a few days ago.”

She smiled and reached out to cup my cheek. “Yes, breakfast. What is your favorite?”

I tried to think of something that would be quick so she didn’t have to be in the kitchen. “A pastry? I’ve been craving sweets.”

“Yes, yes. You sit. I bring your pastry.”

I sat down at the same table I’d sat at before and took out my notepad and pen.

“Schön, abort. Abort. Do you hear me, Schön? Abort,” I heard through the comms.

I grabbed my bag and stood to run out, but I was too late. When I looked up, Mrs. Strousberg was standing a few paces away with a gun pointed directly at me in her hand.

“Schön, how nice it is to see you again. And what a coincidence, at my mother’s restaurant.”

“That is a coincidence.”

“Sit,” she ordered, taking another step toward me.

I fell as much as sat in the chair I’d just gotten up from.

She stepped closer, reached out, and ripped the comm device from my ear. “So, what brings you to Gozo? Looking for me, perhaps?”

I shook my head slowly.

“One wouldn’t think so since I left forty-five years ago and decided I’d never come back. And you know I didn’t. Not until today.” She cocked the gun. “You were always a disappointment, Schön. I had such high hopes for you. Even from the day we met.”

If she’d left forty-five years ago, that meant she would’ve been fourteen. The same age I was when she and I first met. “I’m sorry to hear I disappointed you, Mrs. Strousberg.”

She sneered. “You know that’s not my name.”

“No?”

“I am Mrs. Rávdos. Mrs. Salvatore Rávdos. Those who know me well, of which there are few, call me Ananke, the great goddess who rules over compulsion, constraint, and restraint, and presides over all forms of slavery. She is the wife of Cronos.”

She smiled, except by the time the expression left her face, it looked more like a sneer. “Do you know I was the only woman he ever married? The others, just mistresses. He tossed them aside like the trash they were. You, though, how he wanted you. However, I couldn’t allow it. You looked too much like me the day he took me away from this place.” She had a look of disgust on her face as she glanced at the floor. “He would’ve kept you and gotten rid of me. I thought about killing you then, but what was the point?”

Her gaze returned to mine, and she moved the gun closer. “I told him you weren’t ready. You needed work.” She shrugged a shoulder. “Foolish man. He believed I was grooming you for him. Of course, he’d gone mad by then. Not all the way, but enough I worried he’d cause trouble. Hurt the business, you know?”

I slowly shook my head.

“Come now, Schön. You know exactly what I’m talking about, don’t you? And so I have to kill you. It gets tiresome, all the people I’ve had to kill. So many people...” Her voice trailed off.

“Then, my Sheka took over. ‘Mama, you don’t have to kill anymore. I’ll do it for you.’ Such a sweet boy. The first person he killed was Mithras’ mother. I’d been counting the minutes until Cronos died and I could get rid of her forever. And you, even after he was gone, I wanted to kill you. Instead, I thought you’d come work for me.” Her facial expressions were hard to follow. It was as though she too was mad.

“There’s no point in killing me, *Mrs. Strousberg*. The restaurant is surrounded, as I’m sure you know.”

“Yes, but I will enjoy it. You were the last he asked for, so it’s fitting. Then they will kill me.” She shrugged as if it didn’t matter to her.

She put her other hand on the gun, leveling it. My comms was gone, but I knew they could still hear what was happening in here, unless someone had found the listening devices Rogue planted. I could try to upend the table, but I didn’t think I could do it before she got the shot off. Even if they stormed the restaurant, she’d kill me before they stopped her.

I watched her finger slowly press against the trigger and closed my eyes, picturing Magnet. Thank God I’d known love before I died. Even fleeting, I got to feel it. That would give me peace.

“Open your eyes and look at me, dammit.”

I shook my head. “No.” I stared into Magnet’s beautiful eyes and heard him tell me he loved me right as I heard the click of the gun. At the same time, another shot went off, and I heard something fly across the room. My eyes sprung open, and I saw *her* staring in horror at her bleeding hand.

Things seemed to be happening in slow motion. Oleander raced forward, and I knew she was speaking, but I couldn’t understand what she was saying. Then Rogue came through the front door. More people in tactical gear followed from both directions, but I couldn’t focus on any of them.

“*Prisca!*” My neck snapped when I heard Magnet’s voice say my name, and I turned to look at him racing toward me.

My blurred vision became clear as I looked into his eyes.

“Thank God you’re okay,” he said, touching my face and my hair. “I love you so much.”

“I love you,” I said, but it came out as a whisper.

“Mag, get her out of here,” I heard Zeppelin say, but I didn’t see him. I

didn't see anyone, not even *her*. Just Magnet.

"Francesca?" I asked.

"She's shaken up but fine. Cayman and Bexli have her," Zeppelin answered.

"Thank God Ananke didn't kill her," I said under my breath.

"Ananke," Magnet repeated.

"Your flight is leaving. Go," said Zeppelin.

I wanted to argue. I had so many questions. Instead of asking them myself, I'd have to read them in a brief. While it wouldn't be what I'd do, given the option, I understood why Magnet wouldn't want me to interrogate Ananke. No more than I would care for him spending another moment in Charlene Vella-Borg's presence.

"What about Charlene?" I asked as he led me outside and directly into the SUV that waited with Ares behind the wheel.

"She's been arrested."

I nodded, took his extended hand, and climbed into the vehicle. "Zeppelin said we are leaving. Are we returning to Shere?"

"Not right away. We'll stay in Malta for as long as is necessary." He scooted closer to me and put his arms around my shoulders. "I was so afraid I was going to lose you."

"I was sure she was going to kill me. I closed my eyes, and you were there. It was as if you were with me. You told me you loved me, and I felt peace. What happened? She had the gun pointed at me. I watched her start to pull the trigger."

"Oleander shot the gun out of her hand. I'm sure she wanted to kill her, but she needs answers more. We all do," Ares responded.

"So many questions..."

I thought about how Ananke had expressed something similar when she said she'd killed so many people, and I shuddered. "What will happen next?" I asked.

"We've arranged for you and Magnet to stay at a villa on the mainland. Ananke and Charlene will be transported to the Corradino Correctional Facility," said Ares.

The name sounded familiar to me. "Someone within the coalition has a connection there."

"Typhon. His brother is Corradino's prison boss."

"What will happen there?"

“Both women will be interrogated thoroughly. After that, I’m sure Nemesis will push for extradition, although I don’t know exactly where Ananke would be taken.”

“What about Charlene? We’ll she be extradited as well?”

Magnet shook his head. “I have no idea.”

When we arrived at the compound where we’d spent last night, a helicopter was waiting.

“Our things have been loaded,” Magnet said, taking my hand.

I thanked Ares before following Magnet into the helicopter.

“It will be a quick flight,” Magnet said when he helped me fasten the harness. “According to Oleander, the place where we’re staying has its own landing pad.”

I tried to be impressed by that news, but every word Ananke had said to me replayed in my mind. I wanted to forget all of it. “I need to debrief,” I said, sighing.

“We can do that right after we land.”

The flight took less than twenty minutes, but throughout, I felt so tired I was sure I’d sleep if I as much as closed my eyes.

Magnet grabbed our bags, then we thanked the pilot and entered the lift. “We’re just one floor down,” he said. When the doors reopened, it was directly into the foyer of what looked like a massive suite.

“I forgot to mention a crew departed Gozo before we did. We are completely secure here, Prisca.”

It was warm today, so when I saw a daybed outside the doors that led to the pool, I wanted nothing more than to stretch out on it. When I walked in that direction, Magnet followed.

“It’s beautiful,” I said, taking in the expansive view of the sea.

We snuggled on the daybed, and after several minutes of quiet, Magnet asked me if I wanted to talk about what happened in the restaurant.

“I should. I need to remember the details of what Ananke said. What about you with Charlene?”

“It doesn’t seem to matter much, but I didn’t get very far with her. She’ll be thoroughly interrogated. After which, we’ll determine what the charges against her will be.”

“Did she tell you anything of value?” I asked.

“Charlene confirmed her husband died and that they were only married two years when it happened. She also said she’d had a miscarriage, and

apparently, she was far enough along to know it was a boy.”

“Interesting. I wonder when it was.”

“I do too. The only other thing we had the chance to discuss was travel. She said she’d done a little but nothing specific about where.”

“What do you think will happen with Francesca?”

“As Zeppelin said, Cayman and Bexli are with her. We need to determine how much she knew about Ananke’s criminal activity.”

“She left Gozo when she was fourteen and hadn’t been back since.”

“Which means Francesca probably knows very little. On the other hand, my gut is telling me Charlene knows quite a lot.”

“I think Francesca is innocent.”

“I do too.”

I was happy Magnet agreed with me.

“Do you want to talk about the rest?”

I didn’t, but as I told him, I knew I had to. I picked up my cell phone that I’d brought outside with me and turned on voice recording.

“Ananke came out of the kitchen approximately five minutes after my arrival at ten hundred hours. She held a gun and ordered me to sit.

“She asked if I was looking for her, and that’s when she told me she’d left the island forty-five years ago, which would’ve made her fourteen at the time. She also said she hadn’t returned until today.”

Magnet paused the recording. “Do you need to take a break?”

I shook my head. “I just want to get through it.”

He nodded and restarted the recording.

“She told me she’d had high hopes for me when we first met, but that I’d always disappointed her.”

“Did she say in what way?”

I thought it over for a minute but couldn’t recall anything specific. “Negative.”

“Go on.”

“I apologized, insincerely, and made sure to call her Mrs. Strousberg. That annoyed her, which was my intent. She said I knew it wasn’t her name.”

“Is that when she told you A was for Ananke?”

I nodded. “She also told me the name was for a goddess who ruled over several things. The only thing I distinctly remember is her saying all forms of slavery.”

“Interesting,” Magnet muttered.

“I know, right? She started out by saying she was Mrs. Salvatore Rávdos, though, and pointed out she was the only woman he married. She added he’d had mistresses, who were eventually discarded. The words she used were, ‘He tossed them aside like the trash they were.’”

The next part would be the hardest for me to recount, but I had no choice. “She said Cronos wanted me, and that at the time, I looked much like she did when she left Gozo.”

Magnet’s eyes opened wide.

“Ananke said she wouldn’t allow it, though. She believed that if she did, Cronos would’ve kept me and gotten rid of her. She said he believed she was grooming me for him. Oh, and this is important. She said, by then, he’d gone mad and she worried he’d ‘hurt the business.’”

“My God,” Magnet said under his breath. I’d no doubt the ramifications of what Ananke said were hitting him in the same way they had me.

“The next thing she talked about was having to kill people, like she’d have to kill me. This is another thing I remember distinctly. She said, ‘So many people...’ But then Sheka took over, telling her she didn’t have to kill anymore. He’d do it. The first person he murdered was Mithras’ mother. It sounded to me like it took place shortly after Cronos died.”

“How are you doing?” Magnet asked, pausing the recording a second time.

“I’m okay. There isn’t much more.”

He nodded and hit the button to continue.

“She said she either wanted to kill me or had needed to at least a couple of times. She also added I was the last Cronos asked for, so it seemed fitting that I’d be the last she’d kill. When I warned her the restaurant was surrounded, she didn’t seem to care. She knew she’d be killed too.”

I reached over and turned the device off myself. “That was all.”

MAGNET

“All,” Schön had said, as if she hadn’t just recounted a horrific event filled with equally terrifying facts about her own life. I didn’t blame Schön for her reaction or question it. Had I been in her place, I wasn’t sure I could’ve told the story half as calmly as she had. Then again, there was no doubt she was in shock.

The part that was hardest for me to stomach, and I’m sure for her too, was knowing she’d been specifically targeted at age fourteen. Ananke had told her Cronos had “wanted her.” The thought both sickened and enraged me. No doubt, there would be additional things that would come out in either woman’s interrogation.

When Schön set her mobile aside, I held her closer, whispering how much I loved her and how thankful I was that she was in my arms.

All too soon, my phone vibrated with an incoming call I knew I’d need to accept.

“Hey, Zeppelin.”

“Magnet. How’s Schön?”

“Hanging in there. She’s right here.”

“Good, I wanted to give both of you an update.”

“Shall I put the call on speaker?”

“Please.”

Both Schön and I sat up, but our hands still touched.

“Charlene Vella-Borg and Cassandra Rávdos are being transported separately to Corradino Correctional Facility. Cassandra, which we learned was her given name, should arrive there at any time. Charlene will be transported approximately thirty minutes later. Both women will be held in solitary confinement, and Antaeus Marras understands the importance of keeping the two alive.”

“Roger that,” I responded.

“Here’s the reason for my call. Oleander and Poseidon want to be the first to interrogate Cassandra.”

“I suppose we can trust O won’t kill her since she had the chance at the restaurant and didn’t do it.”

“My opinion is that if we asked Oleander to determine Cassandra’s prison sentence, she’d give her several life terms combined with an inordinate amount of torture.”

“She deserves both,” Schön commented.

“Agreed. Anyway, what are your thoughts regarding that particular course of action?”

I looked at Schön.

“If you’re asking me, I have no problem with it. I’m not sure why anyone would think I would.”

“Oleander wondered if you’d want to be with them.”

Her eyes scrunched. “I need to think it over. When do they intend to begin?”

“At fourteen hundred.”

“Is there anything else you need to discuss with us at this time?” I asked.

“Only to alert you that Charlene’s interrogation is to take place concurrently. Rogue and Reaper will be the first to question her.”

The two men would frighten the hell out of Charlene. “Excellent choices, both.”

“Same question, Schön. Would you like to be in the interrogation room with them?” Zep asked.

“I don’t believe that’s necessary.”

After ending the call, I turned to Schön. “Whatever you decide to do, I will support.”

“I appreciate it, and as much as I wish I could avoid everything to do with Ananke or Cassandra or whatever we’re calling her, I also know the sooner we get answers, the sooner I can put the personal part of this behind me.

More importantly, I sincerely hope she gives us enough information to dismantle her network. That in itself creates a sense of urgency.”

“Why do I anticipate you saying, ‘but’?”

She smiled. “Because you see me.”

It was something I’d said to her more than once. “I do, you know.”

She nodded. “I’m not sure it’s a good idea for me to be in the interrogation room.”

“However...”

She smiled again. “I’d like to be in the observation room. I’d also like to be able to communicate with Oleander or Poseidon. Both, preferably.”

“That can be arranged.”

“What about you?” she asked.

“I’ll request a comms connection and listen in. If there’s anything I feel would be worthwhile to contribute, I can handle it that way.”

“Because you don’t want to leave me alone?”

“In part, but I also don’t want to be alone myself.” I thought about how unsettled I’d felt at the start of the op. I wouldn’t confess it to Schön now, but there would come a time I’d need to be forthcoming. I couldn’t say for certain yet if what I felt was foreboding that I should’ve paid attention to or unfounded worry due to my feelings for her.

“I’d like to shower before we go,” she said.

I nodded. “I’ll alert Zeppelin of our decisions.”

Schön approached me. “I feel like what I’m about to say isn’t necessary, but I will anyway. As soon as we can, I want to leave Malta and travel to a place where you and I can be alone. Where we can be intimate.”

“I’ve thought the same thing, my darling Prisca.”

“I want to wait until then.”

I didn’t need her to elaborate on what she wanted to wait on. Making love now didn’t feel right to me either.

While she showered, I reviewed the interrogation outline for Cassandra Rávdos. It was divided into sections, starting with Salvatore and the history of the organization she ran after he died. What we knew and what we didn’t seemed equal. However, if we were able to get her talking, we might discover we hadn’t scratched the surface.

Family dynamics were also included in the outline. We believed Mithras was Salvatore’s biological son, but by her own admission to Schön, she wasn’t his mother. The same thing was true with DeDe “Seshat”

Starkweather and her twin.

Xavier “Sheka” Vella was in a section of his own, as was Valerie “Pharoah” Rávdos. By all appearances, it seemed as though Francesca and Charlene had raised Xavier. Had the older woman believed he was Marco Jr.’s son? It was really the only thing that made sense. And what about Pharaoh? Had Salvatore and Cassandra raised her?

“I’m ready,” said Schön, coming out of the bedroom, wearing a pullover and jeans. Her hair was tied up, off her neck, and she wore no makeup. “I hope you like me this way, because I’ve decided this is my new look.”

I wrapped my arms around her waist. “I love the way you look regardless of whether your hair is up or down, whether you’re wearing makeup or not. I predict the way I’ll like you best I haven’t seen yet.”

She shuddered, but not in a bad way, and I kissed her.

“The sooner we can get this over with, the sooner we can be alone,” I said, kissing the tip of her nose before going in to shower like she had. “Oleander sent over an outline for the interrogation,” I said over my shoulder.

“I got it and am making notes now.”

“Prisca?” I waited until she looked up from her mobile. “I love you.”

Her smile was broad. “I love you too.”

SCHÖN

Even if I'd been in the interrogation room with Cassandra, I wouldn't have been intimidated. Sitting in a metal chair, dressed in prisoner garb, she looked old, almost frail, but mostly, pathetic. Perhaps someone might feel sorry for her if they weren't aware of the atrocities I was sure she'd committed throughout her life.

Before the guards brought Cassandra into the room, we'd tested the comms system, so now, Magnet and I stood by the window and listened.

"Cassandra Vella-Rávdos, have you been informed of your rights?" Poseidon asked. Rather than look at him, she stared at the mirrored glass I stood behind, almost as if she could see me.

"I'm okay," I told Magnet when he squeezed my hand.

They began the interrogation as planned, asking about Salvatore and their life together. She confirmed the two raised three children together—Pharaoh, Mithras, and Eris.

"Who is Eris?" Poseidon demanded.

"The twin," she responded.

"The one who was presumed dead at birth?"

"Cronos wanted them both, but I refused. I was already responsible for one of his bastards; I didn't want any more of them living with us. I compromised."

"You said you called her Eris. What was her given name?"

“I would not remember if it wasn’t so ridiculous. Judee spelled with two Es rather than a Y.”

“You said you raised Mithras.”

Cassandra snarled. “I hated him.”

“Then, why did he live with you?”

“He was Cronos’ firstborn son. If I’d made him choose, it would not have been me. The bastard ruined everything,” she spat.

“Between you and Cronos?” Poseidon continued to probe while Oleander rested her bottom on the table right next to Cassandra and stared down at her. Her head was angled in such a way that I could see her expression, and it was terrifying.

“Not between me and Cronos. Nothing could destroy what we had.” Cassandra’s eyes remained riveted on the mirror I stood behind. “Nothing,” she repeated.

“But you said Mithras ruined things.”

“After my beloved Cronos died.”

“She told me he was mad by the time he passed,” I said through the comms, and Oleander nodded.

“Beloved or demented,” she said, handing Cassandra’s sneer right back to her. “You know, syphilis can affect the brain. I read somewhere death can occur anywhere between ten and thirty years after diagnosis. Cassandra, have you been tested? If not, I’ll make sure the prison boss knows you need to be. I’m sure he’d rather not have a sociopathic, demented octogenarian on his hands.”

Rather than glare at Oleander, Cassandra’s gaze remained fixated on the window.

“Wait. This says you’re not yet sixty. That has to be a mistake. You look so much older.” Oleander shook her head. “Mithras ruined your life, so you forced your other son to kill him.”

“I did not force him.”

The abrupt transition was intentional, and it worked. However, we already knew Xavier was responsible for Mithras’ death.

“Was he the hit man in the family, or was that your daughter? You know what I find interesting? Your son and daughter are both dead. So are your stepson and stepdaughter. Is Ananke the mythological creature who ate her offspring? I can’t remember.”

“Mithras deserved to die,” Cassandra said, folding her arms and lowering

her gaze. It was the first time she looked away from the window.

“She’s ready to talk,” I murmured.

Oleander walked to the opposite side of the table and sat down. “Tell me why. You said he ruined your life.”

When she spoke, her tone was softer. “Not my life.”

“What, then?”

“After his mother died —”

“You mean after Xavier killed her,” said Poseidon.

“Mithras turned against the family, the people who raised him, who provided for him.”

“What did he do?”

“Many things. He made alliances outside the family. He was sloppy.”

“With the Calabrians?”

She nodded. “Mistakes that cost us millions.”

“Felixstowe,” I said.

“Like the Felixstowe delivery?”

She didn’t respond, but she didn’t need to.

Oleander shook her head. “One hundred people, some bound for slave auctions, all rescued.”

“Slave auctions,” Cassandra spat. “Cronos and I never did things like that. Mithras, he did. Another big mistake.”

“You mean the women rescued from his villa?”

She shook her head. “He did not get permission. He went against what we told him, and he was caught. Stupid fucking idiot.”

“What did you tell him to do?” Poseidon asked.

“More what we told him not to. He never should’ve brought the woman to Gozo. That was just part of his downfall.”

“Bexli?” I asked.

“Right, Bexli,” said O. “The woman your mother rescued.”

“He shouldn’t have taken her. Charlene”—she spat the name as much as said it—“had to get her out. She was supposed to get Selene out too, but she was too late.”

“Why Bexli?”

Cassandra looked up at Oleander, then at the mirror. “She had connections.”

I wondered how much Cassandra knew about our investigation and when she found out. The theory forming in my mind was that she’d somehow

figured out we'd located the sex-slave auction's IP origin, but since it was her plan to take down Mithras, she hadn't informed him. Otherwise, we probably would've found the villa abandoned the night of the raid.

"I'm curious about Selene. Mithras nearly murders Xavier's girlfriend? But didn't you say he killed Mithras' mother? I suppose if he were going for an eye for an eye, he would've killed you."

"He tried to kill both Xavier and me. He was unsuccessful."

"So he went after Selene instead. And then, when that didn't work, he tried to kill Francesca," Poseidon said rather than asked.

"Why did Francesca raise Xavier? One would've thought Cronos would want his beloved son closer. Or maybe it wasn't Sheka who was beloved. It was always Mithras."

"Nail on the head," I muttered, watching Cassandra's expression change. She'd gone from defiant to morose.

"You tried, all those years, to give Cronos a son, and then when you did, he didn't want Xavier," O said, picking up on the same thing I had.

Cassandra shook her head. "Of course he wanted him."

"Then, it was Mithras who didn't want him around."

"Nail on the head once more," said Magnet from behind me.

"What about your daughter? Mithras wanted her around?" Oleander went in for the kill. "Was he fucking her?"

Cassandra's arm jerked as if she'd slap Oleander if her hands weren't bound.

"When did it start? When she was *fourteen*? Or did Mithras like them younger than his daddy did?"

"It wasn't like that."

"What was it like, then?"

"They were close. Pharaoh protected him like she protected Eris."

"But not Xavier?" O prodded.

"Sheka too. She loved her brothers and sister."

"But when you ordered Xavier to kill Mithras, Pharaoh turned on you, didn't she?"

"You're wrong. She proved her loyalty when she allowed Eris to be killed."

"I was there, remember?" Oleander seethed. "She didn't allow anything. She ordered Eris to kill me. Instead, your loyal daughter and Cronos' mistress' kid were shot instead. Don't try to play it like anyone was heroic,

Ananke. In the end, everyone betrayed you. *Everyone.*”

“Guard!” Cassandra called out. “I am *finished.*”

“Ask about Seshat,” I said.

“What about the other daughter?” O asked. “Did Xavier kill her too, or did you?”

Cassandra’s eyes scrunched, then it dawned on her who O was talking about. “I killed her and her fucking mother,” she said, raising her chin. “*Guard!*” she shouted again, this time louder.

When a man looked through a thin window in the door, O nodded and he entered, unshackled Cassandra from the table, and removed her from the room.

Oleander and Poseidon pressed a buzzer, and another guard let them through the door connecting to the room where Magnet and I were.

“She’s pathetic,” was the first thing Oleander said.

“I agree.”

“We got a lot today, though. Tomorrow, we go for the jugular with AMPS, though.” Oleander’s eyes met mine. “You don’t have to be here. In fact, why don’t you and Magnet get off Malta and never fucking come back?”

I looked over my shoulder at Magnet, who was nodding. “I’ll stay as long as you feel is necessary. However, if you want to leave tonight, I will make the arrangements.”

“What about Seshat? Do you really think Cassandra killed her and her mother?” Poseidon asked.

“Definitely not,” Oleander responded.

“What makes you so certain?” Magnet asked.

“She said nothing about the baby. There is no way Cassandra would’ve missed the chance to rub our noses in it.”

“I agree.” I’d known she was lying too, but not because she’d neglected to mention the baby. It was the way she’d raised her chin and leveled her gaze right back at the window as if she was responding directly to me and wanted me to know exactly what she was capable of.

“Here’s our plan. Tomorrow, I’ll go after two things—the AMPS network, which will be less difficult now that Decker Ashford waved his magic wand and all their money has disappeared.”

My eyes opened wide. “Where did it go?”

“Nowhere, yet,” Magnet answered. “He hid it just long enough to get

someone's government to seize it."

"You said two things."

Oleander nodded. "The other is personal. Cassandra and I are going to have a chat about my parents."

Knowing that, made my decision to leave Malta far easier.

"How are things going with Charlene?" I asked Magnet, who'd been listening in on that interrogation while my primary focus was on Cassandra.

"She believes her sister is responsible for the death of her husband and for the miscarriage she suffered."

My eyes opened wide.

"From what she said, it sounds as if Cassandra wanted to guarantee Charlene never had a life of her own. And when she refused to do something Cassandra wanted her to do, she made threats. One was that she'd kill Tommaso Borg. Charlene thought she was bluffing. The other thing she held over her head was Francesca."

"She threatened to kill her?"

"Not that she's said. From what I could gather, Cassandra had dirt on Charlene, maybe even things she manufactured by disguising herself as the woman. Apparently, as long as she followed orders, Cassandra wouldn't tell Francesca about *Charlene's* crimes nor would she go to the authorities."

I shook my head. "And Charlene didn't have enough confidence to consider she could do the same thing. Breaking people down was definitely Cassandra's specialty. Among other things, of course."

"She's also saying the accident that killed Marco Jr. and his wife was Cassandra's doing," Magnet added.

"How much do you think she has on AMPS?" I asked.

"From what she's said, she knows everything, including where the rest of the dead bodies are buried, as they say. She wants a deal to protect her and her mother."

"Whatever we can pin on Ananke will just add more years to her sentence," muttered Poseidon.

"Are you all right?" Oleander asked me. "Sorry, stupid question."

I shook my head. "I'm okay. I was just thinking you should get everything you can out of her. Don't hesitate, and don't wait."

"You don't think she'll be alive much longer, do you?" she asked.

"I do not."

O nodded. "Me neither."

“Poseidon, do you have a minute?” Magnet asked.

When he said he did, the two men went out into the corridor.

“You know that both Cronos and Cassandra were sick fucks, right?” said O after they’d left the room.

I nodded. “I do know. I also believe it’s very likely Cronos raped Cassandra.”

“Then convinced her it was love?”

“Something like that.”

“Thank God she didn’t give you to him.”

I thought about it for a minute. “I think I had a couple of guardian angels looking out for me.”

Oleander smiled. “Your parents?”

I smiled too. “Yeah.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s why Kai and I didn’t get blown up on the *Pernicious* that night. Or Magnet.”

“Especially Magnet,” I said, winking.

Just as the guys came back in, we embraced, something I got the impression O didn’t do very often.

“We’ll touch base with Nemesis and then let you know what we decide,” Magnet said as we walked out.

“What’s going on?” I asked Magnet when we left the correctional facility and an SUV pulled up to transport us back to the place where we were staying.

“What makes you ask?”

“I’ve seen that look before. You’ve got something up your sleeve.”

“You know it’s something good, right?”

I put my arm through his and pressed myself against him. “I do know, and it’s the best feeling in the world.”

He leaned forward and kissed me. “I promise we’ve only begun sharing the best feelings in the world, Prisca.”

MAGNET

With Poseidon's help, I had more than one surprise for Schön. First, we'd travel to Tuscany, where we'd spend three days in a guesthouse on his parents' estate. From there—provided she agreed to marry me—we'd go wherever she wanted to for our honeymoon. And if she didn't say yes, we'd still go wherever she wanted to, so I could convince her she and I were meant to be together from now until the end of time.

"I'm happy for you, Magnet," Poseidon had said when I asked for his help. "I'd say I'm surprised, but it's clear to everyone that you and Schön are in love."

That was one thing I was certain of. I loved her, and she loved me. Whatever else happened in our lives, that would be a constant.

"Tell me," she said when I wrapped my arm around her shoulders after we'd gotten in the backseat of the SUV.

"I will. As soon as we're alone. I promise."

WHEN WE ARRIVED AT THE PENTHOUSE, I TOLD HER MY PLAN WAS TO TAKE her to Italy when we left Malta. She was thrilled.

"Tuscany? Really?" she shrieked, clapping her hands.

When I told her we'd be staying in a guesthouse on an estate in Val d'Orcia that belonged to Poseidon's parents, her eyes were wide and her smile was broad.

And finally, when I got down on one knee and proposed with the ring that had been my grandmother's, Prisca's eyes filled with tears she swore were the happiest of her life. And then, she said yes.

As the former Italian ambassador to the UN, Poseidon's father, Frederico Allora, had pulled *several* strings to get the paperwork for our marriage rushed through in two days. On our third day, Frederico, who was also a civil registrar, pronounced us man and wife on the terrace of the guesthouse overlooking their vineyards. Frederico's wife, Britta, and one of Poseidon's brothers served as our witnesses.

Britta wanted to prepare a big feast to celebrate, but Prisca and I insisted all we wanted was to be alone.

Now, I waited on the bed for Prisca to join me, crazy with lust for the woman who was my wife. Waiting even three days had been agony, but when she'd suggested the first time we made love should be as man and wife, I knew it was the right choice for us.

When the door opened and she came out of the bathroom wearing a simple cotton sleeping gown, I was glad I was already sitting down, or my knees would have buckled.

Backlit by the flames of the fireplace behind her, the silhouette of her body drove me mad with want. Her long blonde hair was down, cascading in soft waves over her shoulders. As she slowly padded toward me, her hardened dusty-rose nipples had me salivating for a taste. When I turned and sat on the edge of the bed and Prisca came to stand between my legs, I wrapped one arm around her waist, then leaned forward and pulled her against me. I rested my cheek against her abdomen and breathed in the scent of her arousal.

I moved her away from me and stood.

"Justin?"

"I love you, Prisca," I said as I lifted the gown over her head, placed it on the end of the bed, then stood and looked at her gorgeous naked body. Pulling her against me again, I kissed beneath her ear, burying my face in her neck. I trailed my fingers down her throat to the nipples I couldn't wait another moment to lick. She shivered when I swirled the peak with the tip of my tongue, and made the most beautiful sound when I sucked it into my mouth.

"You're wearing too many clothes," she said. I lay back on the bed, and she climbed up and knelt between my legs. I took both her heavy breasts in my hands, kneading their flesh while using my fingers to toy with her

nipples.

Knowing the small amount of restraint I possessed would soon snap, I rolled her to her back, stood by the bed, and pushed my flannels—the only thing I was wearing—to the floor.

I hissed when Prisca reached out and wrapped her hand around my hardness. When she started to stroke me, I stilled her, then settled between her legs on the bed.

Her thighs spread naturally, and I parted her slick folds with my finger, knowing what she wanted, but also knowing I would make her wait. Her body writhed, and she made more beautiful sounds of desire. I circled her wet, hot bundle of nerves with my finger and sucked the peak of her breast, nipping it with my teeth.

“Justin,” Prisca cried out, her back arching when I slid a finger inside her pussy. I released the nipple with a pop.

“I have to taste more of you, my love,” I said as I shifted down the bed.

“Please,” she begged when I pushed my finger deeper, stretching her tightness, readying her for me at the same time I caught her clit between my lips and sucked hard. My tongue danced and licked when she tightened around me. She was close, so close, but when I pushed her over the edge into the most exquisite pleasure imaginable, I had to be inside her. Our bodies had to be joined together as one.

I rubbed through her folds, coated myself in her wetness, then settled at her opening. Before I pressed myself inside, I kissed her. “Taste yourself on my lips,” I whispered against her moans, and as my tongue stroked hers, I eased into her.

“More,” she begged, but I took it slow, stretching her tightness and giving her body time to adjust to my size. I stilled, knowing if I didn’t, I’d lose control.

“Let go,” I heard her plead, just like she had the day I had her body pressed against a tree. “Stop holding yourself back. Give me your passion, all of it,” she said, repeating the very words she knew would make me lose control—and I did.

Our bodies moved together instinctively, beautifully, passionately. Our mouths met as I increased my pace, each time plunging as deep into her as I could go. Again and again, I pounded, moving faster, thrusting harder. When her pussy squeezed me like a vice, I stiffened, shouting her name, “Prisca,” as I came inside her. Neither of us moved, but our eyes met. “You are mine,

Prisca Baur-Magnussen, and I love you.”

She reached up and cupped my cheek. “You are mine, Justin Magnussen, and I love you.”

EPILOGUE

SCHÖN

Magnet and I remained in Italy only one more day. When he asked where I wanted us to spend our honeymoon, I took him to the one place that had always been my home. While I'd initially worried my memories would be clouded by what happened there with Schmid, they were not. No matter how much time passed between my visits, as soon as I walked into the chalet on the St. Moritz hillside, I felt as though it was where I belonged.

Part of me also worried Magnet might not feel the same way about the place where I'd spent the first few years of my life, but when we first walked in and he helped me replace all the photos I'd carried from here to Shere to Gozo, Malta, Italy, and finally here again, everything felt just as it should.

Each morning, he'd light a fire while I made us coffee, then we'd snuggle back under the afghan my grandmother had made and watch the snow fall outside the windows. Most days, we'd return to the bed and make love again and again, after which we'd fill our stomachs with the food I remembered my mother making.

"Are you happy?" I asked him one day when he came inside after shoveling to make a path for us to walk outside.

"Happy?" he asked as I brushed the snow from the shoulders of his coat and from his hair when he removed his hat. "No, I'm not happy. That doesn't begin to describe how I feel. I'm euphoric, joyful, living in a state of constant

bliss with you, my love, my wife, my life. What about you? Are you happy?"

I smiled and kissed the tip of his ice-cold nose. "No, I am not happy either."

We received regular reports from Nemesis regarding the progress made from the information the team had learned from Cassandra and Charlene. As Magnet reported, the younger sister had been gathering evidence against Ananke and AMPS for years, biding her time, hoping the day would come when she'd exact her revenge.

It would take years to dismantle an operation of their size. However, between what we'd learned from Charlene, investigations into the lives of Godwin and Schmid, plus Cassandra herself, we felt confident we could take them down.

Forensic accountants tracked the money that flowed in and out of the AMPS accounts. And, as Ananke had said, since Mithras had gotten increasingly sloppy, it was easier than we anticipated to find his capos and their soldiers. More arrests were made weekly, and with it came more confessions and more evidence against AMPS.

As I'd suspected, Cronos wasn't the one to build the trafficking ring; it had been his grandfather.

Between the devastation in the aftermath of World War I and by the Great Depression, men and women were desperate for work. Many were forced to give their children up to orphanages, and Rávdos' grandfather knew exactly how to exploit them for profit. Vast amounts of it. Rather than help them get the jobs he'd promised, he sold them as slaves.

It was Cronos' father who'd added sex trafficking after World War II, when money flowed more easily than it had twenty-five years previously, and even more women and children especially were displaced.

Perhaps in his madness, Cronos had believed that he and Cassandra were helping the orphans they sponsored and then sold to uberwealthy Middle Eastern customers in particular. When those same men came back for more, neither Rávdos asked what had happened to the ones previously purchased. At one point in her interrogation, Cassandra eerily said that all sales were final.

The trail of victims wasn't as easy to track, but my understanding was that we were making inroads. A fund had been set up from the money recovered from AMPS accounts to aid those who were rescued in rebuilding

their lives.

No one in the coalition was naive enough to think that other criminal organizations, like the Calabrian Syndicate, hadn't swept in and folded as many of AMPS' capos and soldiers into their enterprises as they could get to before we did.

Charlene was put in protective custody, and the supposition was, once she'd given her testimony, she'd be placed in a witness-protection program.

Francesca went to stay with Cayman and Bexli immediately following the arrest of both her daughters, and when they asked her if she wanted to remain and live with them, she tearfully and happily accepted.

From what they'd said, Francesca believed Cassandra had either run away or been abducted. When the police on Gozo weren't interested in helping her find her daughter, she assumed whoever took her, if that was what had happened, had paid them off. As the family was impoverished, she didn't have the means to hire someone to look for her daughter, so she lived with the heartbreak. It was only Cassandra's threat of killing both Francesca and Charlene that kept the latter from telling her mother her oldest child was still alive.

Each day, we received further briefs serving as a reminder that the day would soon arrive when it was time for us to return to England and resume our fight against the human traffickers of the world. Neither of us could quit. Neither of us wanted to.

"I've been thinking," said Magnet as we sat by the warmth of the fire, drinking hot cocoa with the homemade marshmallows I'd learned to make from my grandmother's recipe.

"Tell me."

"I want to help Puck find Seshat and their baby."

"Do you?" I looked into his eyes.

"It feels like the right thing for me—for us—to do."

"It's interesting you should say that."

He cocked his head when I got up from the sofa, went into the other room, and came back with my cell phone. I swiped the screen and typed the words, "We're ready," before hitting send on the message to Nemesis.

"What's going on?"

"While you were shoveling the snow, I called Nem and told her I planned to talk to you tonight about our next mission. She told me to let her know when we were ready."

“Does she know we’ve already decided what it will be?”

I nodded. “That was the other thing I planned to talk to you about. How important it was to me to find Seshat and help reunite their family. It is the right thing for us to do. To undo the wrong perpetrated by Cassandra and Cronos. And, Magnet?”

“Yes, my love?”

“You should know we won’t be traveling to America alone.”

“We won’t?”

I shook my head.

“Who else will be going?”

“Nemesis said she’s made arrangements for a plane big enough to transport every member of the coalition who wants to go.”

“And how many will that be?”

“All of them.”



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I’m excited to announce a new series —
[K19 ALLIED INTELLIGENCE - TEAM TWO](#)
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[Code Name: Puck](#)

*A tortured man. A redemptive man.
Puck is desperate and driven—a man to be watched.*

As a former MI5 agent assigned to the UK’s task force of the United Nations Coalition Against Human Trafficking, I’ve walked a fine line between right and wrong—always making sure to do what’s necessary for the greater good. Kidnapping my commander for help is no exception. I do what needs to be done.

But when I discover that the woman who captured my heart is still alive and in danger, I need all the help I can recruit to save my beloved Seshat. With the full force of the coalition and SIS searching for her, we have to be stealthy and quick. Time is of the essence. Seshat's secrets and past are riddled with enemies who will stop at nothing to destroy her and her future happiness.

And now that I know the truth about everything, I'll do whatever it takes to protect her. Can I save the only woman who matters before it's too late?

CODE NAME: PUCK

1

Puck

Kidnapping the chief of Military Intelligence, Section 6, was the stupidest thing I'd done in my life. It was only by the sheer goodness of Z's heart that he didn't kill me or allow his rescuers to do it.

Instead, he'd agreed to help me once I convinced him the woman who was not only the love of life but also the mother of the child I'd only recently learned of—my child—was missing but still alive.

Everyone who served on the United Nations Coalition Against Human Trafficking was certain she'd been killed. After all, they'd watched her die in a hail of bullets seconds before she was about to kill another of our agents, who she'd abducted.

Except it wasn't her. Instead, it was her twin, a twin neither she nor we knew existed.

"I'm sorry, Puck," said Decker Ashford, who didn't work directly for the coalition but was the adopted son of the guy I'd kidnapped and widely accepted as one of the best intelligence agents in the world. "The lead was solid. It appears we missed them by a matter of hours at most."

I nodded, looking around the empty one-bedroom apartment for any sign of DeDe "Seshat" Starkweather. If only there was a way to assure her the threat against her life had been neutralized and she no longer had to remain in

hiding.

If only there was a way to tell her how sorry I was for not protecting her, for not being there for her when she needed me, and for not telling her I loved her more than life itself.

“Hey, Puck. I found something,” said Magnet, another MI6 agent and coalition member I’d know and worked with for years.

I raised my head when he approached. “What’s that?”

“We found it taped to the bottom of a drawer in the kitchen.”

He handed me a photograph of a baby. My eyes filled with tears when I flipped it over and saw a name written on the back. Linnea, it read.

“Do you think it’s significant?” Magnet put his hand on my shoulder and asked in a soft voice.

“I know it is. Linnea was my mother’s name.”

Preorder today!

Code Name: Puck

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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I am a *USA Today* and Amazon Top 15 Bestselling Author of shamelessly sexy, edge-of-your-seat romantic suspense.

Want to know more? Check out my [website!](#)

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Thanks so much,

Heather



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Code Name: Kodiak

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