



# MORE THAN SECRETS



WATCHDOG SECURITY



# OLIVIA MICHAELS

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WATCHDOG SECURITY SERIES: BOOK 9

OLIVIA MICHAELS

FALCON IN HAND PUBLISHING

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*To Trinity, for all the lemons.*

*To my readers who have seen this story through nine books and have trusted me to tell it right. Like Lachlan tells Elissa, “Thanks for believing in Watchdog. In all of us.”*

*This book is dedicated to everyone who begged for Gina’s story. Here are her secrets revealed, finally.*

*In the end, Watchdog was always Gina’s story.*



# ONE

Gina, present day, Los Angeles

“Come on, Fleur. We have a long walk ahead of us.”

Gina strode away from the harbor and into the night alone, her only companion her beloved street dog, Fleur. The burning ship was far away and shrouded in fog, yet she swore she could feel its heat pushing at her back, telling her *go...you don't have much time*.

It wouldn't take long for Elissa St Clair to spot her on the marina's security cameras—the woman had been monitoring the marina on a twenty-four-seven feed for Watchdog Security ever since Walker Dean started guarding Kyla Lewis on her father's yacht, *Sea Prompt*.

The same ship that was now nothing but burning splinters, all by Gina's design.

The Coast Guard would be lucky to find much of anything, let alone Walker and Kyla's bodies. The best they could hope for was a trace of DNA in a streak of blood.

Also by Gina's design.

But the security camera footage of the couple boarding the sailboat and casting off after fleeing a chaotic scene at Senator Rodger Bennett's mansion would all but confirm they were aboard when the *Sea Prompt* exploded. Soon, rumors would spread about Kyla's investigations into a mysterious and deadly group of hackers calling themselves Loki. It would appear that they'd

silenced her once and for all despite her Watchdog bodyguard and security dog, both killed in the line of duty. That would be a black mark on the security company in which Gina was a silent partner.

She couldn't help but squeeze her eyes shut as she walked, trying to force back her regret. She and Lachlan had worked so hard to build it together. It meant everything to him.

*Lachlan will never forgive me for destroying Watchdog's reputation.*

That was for the best, especially after the nights they'd shared. Nights together that should have never happened.

*Maybe he won't come after me.*

Gina shook her head.

*Of course he will.*

And when he did, would it be to save her or destroy her?

She didn't know which would be worse.

She had a bit of lead time. Lachlan had known part of her plan, but not all of it.

*Just one more secret between us.*

He was expecting her to return to Watchdog or one of the safehouses tonight. When she didn't, would he think she had betrayed them all? Or that she was dead?

*Please, let him think they killed me.*

What would he tell the others?

Gina tugged on Fleur's leash when the dog hesitated. They needed to move faster if they wanted to live. The world might soon think Loki was responsible for Walker and Kyla's deaths, but other, deadlier forces were already after Gina for it.

She had just finished tipping them off herself when she called Walker's handler, Atlantis, and challenged him to find her.

*That'll bring the entirety of The Repair Shop down on my head, won't it? Anything to keep them away from Watchdog.*

That's what her 'friends' called themselves. The Repair Shop. And Gina was known among them as The Fixer. They'd once been part of the CIA, but that was years ago. Elissa and the others at Watchdog never quite knew the truth but speculated that Gina was with the CIA, or retired from it.

More secrets. More lies.

If Elissa spotted Gina and Fleur on camera, Gina's brilliant friend would track them, determine where they were going, and everything would be over

before it started. She pretended it didn't hurt to know that her best friend was about to despise her—probably already did, if Lachlan was going along with Gina's plan. But lying and taking the blame for Walker and Kyla's deaths was far better than getting Elissa and the rest of Watchdog further involved in a fight they could never win.

Though, just once, just *one time* in her life, Gina wished she could live in the light of the truth, not buried under layers of secrets.

"All right, girl," Gina told Fleur. You and I need to leave the country."

In the past, that would have been as simple as picking up a phone, opening an app designed for The Repair Shop, and scheduling a private jet. A quick ride to the nearest airport—either arranged in the app along with the flight or a quick rideshare under a false name—and she and Fleur would have had a quick escort past security with wheels up within the hour with another car waiting at their destination.

Now that was all gone. Worse—The Repair Shop still had all those resources at their disposal to find her.

She looked down at Fleur trotting next to her. "I love you, sweet girl, but you sure do complicate things." But she'd sooner chop off her right arm and mail it to Atlantis than leave Fleur behind. When they got to the nondescript white sedan Gina had bought with cash, she opened the backseat door and Fleur hopped in. She curled up in the nest of blankets Gina had left for her on the floor.

The first thing they needed to do was leave Los Angeles. The sedan didn't have plates, just a forged paper license in the back window. The other windows were tinted and treated with a thin, patterned layer that would blur a camera's image. It was new technology that in itself might be a flag that could attract Elissa's attention, but Gina had to take that chance.

Yes, Fleur complicated leaving the country. They would probably expect Gina to drive over the border into Mexico. It would be the quickest, easiest escape route and she owned a small condo in Baja. Maybe they would check that first, and waste enough time to give her a better lead. Or, they might try to second-guess her and monitor the Canadian border. Her name was on a recent lease agreement in Vancouver. Well, one of her names at least.

They wouldn't find Gina and Fleur in either place.

Gina started the car and called a woman she'd met and befriended a few years back and put the phone on speaker. Florence picked up on the third ring.

“Jenna! Hey, girl, it’s been a while.”

“Sorry, Flo. You know how it is.”

“Well, I don’t know, because you never call me,” Florence teased. “Unless you need something.”

“Yeah, well, guess what?”

Florence laughed. “I see how you are. Well, it’s good timing, because I could use *your* help too.”

“Oh, good, I was hoping you’d say that. It’s time for the spring shows, isn’t it?”

“Crufts is already past, so I know you and Jasmin aren’t competing this year, so what’s really going on?”

Gina held her breath.

“Let me guess,” Florence continued. “You need to get out of town for a while.”

Gina grinned. She had Florence well-trained. “Yeah, that I do. So, are you going over soon?”

“Of course. You know I like to get in early.”

“How early?”

“We’re leaving from Newark in three days.”

Gina breathed a sigh of relief. She’d been afraid Florence might have already left and then there was no way Gina was leaving the country.

Florence continued. “Are you in Los Angeles?”

“No,” Gina lied. “So, I’ll have no problem getting there on time. Can’t wait to see you.” That wasn’t a lie. Flo was always a riot and had the best gossip. Helpful gossip, when it came to international affairs and certain people involved in Flo’s particular hobby.

“Same.” Florence paused and her voice grew serious. “Trouble with the ex again?”

Gina let just the right amount of worry into her voice when she answered, “Something like that.”

Florence let out a long-suffering sigh on the other end. “Will you tell me about it?”

“I’m not really where I can talk. But we’ll catch up when I get there, okay?” God, she was so, so tired of the lies.

“Jenna.” Her tone was full of concern and warning. “Are you safe right now?”

“Yup! Very safe now.”

Another sigh from Flo washed over her. The woman wasn't buying it of course. "Okay. But please call if you need me before then. Promise?"

"Promise. I will call you beforehand if I need you." That was an easy promise to make. She wouldn't need Florence. If she was caught between here and Newark, Florence couldn't save her. No one could.

"Let me give you the details. You got a pen and paper?" Flo asked.

"Don't need one." Gina tapped her head even though Flo couldn't see the gesture.

"Ha! Same old Jenna. Mind like a steel trap."

"You know it."

Florence gave her the info she needed and they chatted for a few minutes about Flo's favorite subject, dogs.

"Give Jasmin a hug for me," she told Gina at the end of their conversation. "I love your dog."

Gina glanced at Fleur. "Will do. See you in three days."

Gina disconnected with a huge sigh, trying to bring her heart rate down. God, she hated possibly endangering a friend like this, but it was the only way. Flo wasn't on anyone's radar—Gina had been deep undercover at the time, posing as a woman named Jenna O'Donnell, and she recognized Flo's connections and abilities as something she might need in the future, so she told no one about her.

Gina shook her head. *Guess I've been planning this escape for a long time. Looks like I even kept it a secret from myself.* "Thanks for your foresight, Past Gina," she said out loud.

*Three days.* She made sure she wasn't being followed as she headed for I-15. She'd take the long way to Newark, stop at an out-of-the-way motel in the desert first. Gina intended to use those three days to further disguise herself and Fleur. First stop, the Waving Cactus Motel. It was in the middle of nowhere, unmonitored, and Gina had used it once before so she was familiar with the layout. She was sure no one else knew about it, and it would give her and Fleur a minute to breathe.

Gina turned on the radio and caught "Horse with No Name" at the beginning.

"Ha!" She smiled at the appropriate song, taking it for a good omen. "If Jake were here, he'd say, 'Got it in one.'" Her smile turned to a frown. God, she'd miss him. And Rachael, and Elena, and everyone else. But this was for the best. Let them hate her if that's what it took to keep them all safe.

She drove on through the cold California drizzle, headed for the bone-dry desert. Fleur snored lightly, curled up in her blankets beside the go-bag, not a care in the world. She knew her mama would take care of her.

## TWO

Lachlan, present day, Los Angeles

**L**achlan Campbell hadn't left the office since the tragedy. His dog, Sam, was worried. The old pup was currently licking Lach's forehead as the big man lay on the office floor.

"I'm not dead, boy," Lach told him when the dog sped up his licking. He reached above his head to scratch Sam behind his ears, which did not reassure or deter Sam in the least. The dog hated it when Lach was on the floor, and he couldn't blame the dog.

*Bad memories.*

"This is how she found me, remember?" Lach continued. "All those years ago. Rescued me that day. Rescued you, too."

As far as rescues went, Lach's was pretty pathetic. But it was a rescue all the same, and it wasn't the only time Gina had saved his sorry ass.

"Not dead, boy. Just feeling dead."

Because he'd failed to rescue Gina when she needed him the most.

He touched his lips, remembering Delia's restaurant and their friends' bridal shower. He should have known then, dammit. But after all this time, he'd thought Gina trusted him—trusted what they'd built together—enough to depend on it for herself.

Instead, she went and pulled this shit. Hurling herself right over a damn cliff all alone to face God knew what.

*Typical Gina. Dammit.*

Lach sat up and ground his fists into his eyes while he growled. Sam sneezed, unimpressed. Lach stood up and looked at his dog.

“Can’t fool me. I know you miss them too.”

Gina had taken Fleur with her. The two were inseparable, ever since Gina had rescued her off the streets after a mission gone bad.

*At least they have each other*, Lach thought. And it might make finding Gina easier. Elissa could check flight manifests looking for a golden-eyed, ginger-colored dog. Gina could turn herself into anyone, but disguising Fleur might be impossible.

Though if anyone could do the impossible, it was Gina Smith.

Footsteps coming down the hall warned Lach that he’d better get off his ass and on his feet or risk looking weak, which was the last thing he needed. Watchdog was in shambles and their people—Lach’s people now, he supposed—looked to him more than ever for guidance. He stood up, walked around his desk, and sat down. He picked up the cut-down plastic pen casing he used as a cigarette substitute, shoved it in his mouth, then pretended to study his computer screen.

The office door flew open without a warning knock, a new unwelcome development, and Jake Collins strode in. He looked haggard, almost haunted, so unlike the usual expression he wore that told the world not only did he have everything under control, but he looked fucking fantastic doing it.

“Anything?” Lach asked Jake before he could say a word. He switched his gaze from his computer screen to Jake as he leaned back in his chair until it squeaked.

“Nothing. She’s gone.” Jake wiped a hand over his tired face. “Hell, it’s like she never existed.”

“Except for the headlines,” Lach growled. He’d read them all this morning in the dark, somewhere south of two-thirty. He hadn’t slept since getting the news of the boat explosion a few miles off the coast of Marina Del Rey. Searchers were giving up hope of finding survivors and Lach would bet his bottom dollar that the next news report would say Kyla Lewis was presumed dead along with two of Watchdog’s bodyguards, Walker Dean and Daisy. Daisy was of the four-legged variety of bodyguard, and Lach would miss the dog very much.

“I’m not talking about Kyla. I’m talking about *her*.” Jake spit out the last word. He hadn’t spoken Gina’s name since it became obvious she’d had



everything to do with *Sea Prompt's* destruction. At the moment, no one at Watchdog would speak Gina's name or used her nickname—Spooky. She really had become a ghost.

Or maybe a poltergeist, considering how much damage she'd done.

"You don't have all the facts," Lach said quietly, shifting the pen from one side of his mouth to the other.

Jake eyed him. "Wishful thinking. I can see it in your eyes—you want her to be innocent."

"Jake—"

"No, Lach. She was there, both at the senator's house when it was attacked and later at the marina. Elissa spotted her en route."

"I heard my name." Elissa appeared in Lach's doorway. If anyone looked more exhausted than Lachlan felt it was her. Dark circles under her eyes made them look sunken in. She was pale under her usual tan. Elissa looked back and forth between the two men. "What's going on in here?"

Jake gestured at Lachlan. "I'm trying to make him see the truth."

Elissa folded her arms. "What truth is that, Jake?"

"That Gina either fucked up or outright betrayed us, and Gina doesn't fuck up."

Elissa's blue eyes narrowed. "She didn't."

Jake shook his head slowly. "Elissa."

"No, she didn't. She didn't fuck up and she damn well didn't betray us."

"Then how do you explain what happened? Walker is dead, Elissa. One of our principals is dead. One of our dogs. Is. *Dead*." He emphasized each word with a pound on the wall. "And Spooky's behind it."

Lach stood up. "That's enough, Jake."

Jake's head whipped around to stare down Lach but Elissa spoke up.

"Gina's my friend. If you'll just take two seconds, you'll remember she's your friend, too. It's true for all of us." Elissa threw her arm out to indicate Watchdog. "She's saved everyone here more times than we can count. I refuse to believe that she would suddenly betray everyone. That's not *her*." Elissa's voice rose, her usual sunny, California girl disposition completely gone. "I can't believe the number of people around here who have forgotten that. It's like you all got blasted with a ray gun set to stupid."

"Who's stupid?" Now Camden Bains was standing behind Elissa, his head swiveling from Jake to Lach to Elissa, trying to appraise the situation.

*Thank fuck*, Lachan thought. Camden could calm people down in any

situation. That's what made him such a good trainer.

"And who was banging on the damn wall?" Camden added.

"That was me, brother," Jake said. "Call me crazy, but getting betrayed by a friend pisses me off."

Camden narrowed his eyes. "Come on, brother. You can't believe Gina did this."

"Thank you," Elissa huffed. "Someone has to talk sense into this idiot."

You're the one who's not seeing the truth," Jake snapped back.

Elissa crossed her arms and actually stood on her tiptoes. "Mister, I am two seconds away from uninviting you to my wedding."

Jake pointed at Camden. "You can't because it's a double wedding and I'm his best man." He turned his attention to Camden. "Unless *you* want to uninvite me too."

"Enough!" Lach roared, stopping the fight instantly. "Camden, go get Psychic, Malcolm, Nash, and Eric—" he ordered, then swore to himself when he remembered Eric and Samantha had picked the absolute worst time to elope and weren't expected to return for another week.

"Belay Eric," Lach said as Camden looked like he was going to correct him. He stood up and kicked his office chair backward until it hit the wall. "The rest of you assholes, follow me to the conference room. I've had it with this infighting shit. One way or another, it ends *now*."

"Boss—"

"Jake. I. Said. Enough." Lach pushed past him and marched down the hall, Sam at his heels.

"He meant you when he said asshole, Jake. Girls can't be assholes," Elissa mumbled behind him.

Lach stopped and spun around. "Oh, yes they can if they keep arguing when their asshole boss tells them to *can it*."

As he stomped the rest of the way to the conference room, Lach could hear his support staff chattering then quickly cutting off their conversations like birds in a jungle sensing danger. Yup, Watchdog was fucked if he didn't get this under control.

Gina had left him her orders, but fuck it. He was about to ignore them. Hell, he was already ignoring them. Wouldn't be the first time. She'd just have to deal with it when he found her. He bit down hard on the pen case because he couldn't get his damn heart to stop hammering thinking about her. When he found her, everything would change. He'd never, ever let her out of

his sight again.

That's when all the bad had happened in the past. Whenever he let her go. Every time.

*Damn fool.*

Lachlan opened the door to the main conference room and took his usual seat at the head of the oblong table. The room looked out on a courtyard filled with obstacle course stations designed to train security dogs and keep them in shape. He remembered going over the design with Gina before they'd even found the building. He'd insisted the dogs would be the heart of the operation and Gina merely nodded in agreement, then she snapped her fingers and made it happen.

*Fuck. Where are you, lass?* His heart lurched while his skin tingled. He couldn't afford to let his emotions get in the way and distract him. Not now. He needed to be the captain of this ship and stop what was shaping up to be a mutiny.

Jake threw himself into a chair. Elissa sat as far from Jake as she could, arms crossed and glowering at him. Jake glared back.

"Fuck." Lachlan growled. "Fine. I'm going to start early just so that I can be assured you two don't kill each other."

Jake started to open his mouth.

Lach practically read his mind. "So help me God, Jake, if one smart-aleck word comes out of your mouth about Gina killing Walker, I'm grinding you into dog food."

Jake's mouth practically clapped shut.

Just then, Nashville jogged into the room with Costello just behind him. "Camden said y'all were in here for a meeting." He quickly read the room, the tension between his fiancée and one of his best friends, and took a seat beside Elissa. He dropped a protective arm around the back of her chair and gave Jake a warning look.

God, it killed Lach to see the two of them at odds. Normally, he'd have to treat them like they were kids in school, separate them for whispering jokes to each other during a meeting, but today he was more likely to stop them from fist fighting. And judging by the way Costello sat beside Jake, the fight would be two on two. Lach was surprised by that. Costello always said there was no such thing as psychics despite his nickname and uncanny ability to sense danger moments before it struck. Today though, he was right—if he was siding with Jake in thinking Gina was guilty, he really didn't have

psychic powers. And man, did his choice have repercussions. Just when Costello and Nash had patched things up after an assignment gone sideways, they were again at odds.

*Gina, it kills me to think this, but you couldn't have done us worse.*

It was up to Lachlan to fix it, even if it meant betraying Gina's wishes.

Lach looked at the conference room door, willing Camden and Malcolm to appear but it stayed empty. *Fine, so be it.*

"Jake, close the door and we'll get started. They can catch up."

Jake tipped his chair back, reached behind him, and slammed the door.

"First thing you need to know," Lach said as he chomped down on the pen, "Walker and Kyla are alive."

Jake's eyes grew round before his brows lowered in confusion. "Not dead? But the cameras, the *Sea Prompt* —"

"Gone, yeah. Blown to smithereens, just like you saw. What you didn't see was Walker rigging the ship to blow. He wanted out of Gina's little friends' group."

Everyone in the room looked at him in shocked silence.

They'd always referred to the mysterious group tasked with keeping Capitoline in check as 'Gina's friends' because they'd always come through when she needed help with resources. Ironic, considering her 'friends' now wanted her dead. Walker and Malcolm also belonged to the group until Gina had pulled them into Watchdog. At least that was the official word. The truth was, they never left it.

"The hell?" Jake shook his head in disbelief. "I don't —"

"What you've failed to grasp is that there's been a target on Gina's back ever since Hawaii."

Lach watched Elissa flinch. "That's my fault," she said. "If I hadn't destroyed Skeleton Key and just given it to her like I was supposed to on that mission, this wouldn't have happened."

"Stop right there, Elissa," Lach said, holding up his hand. "What would have happened instead is that the entire world would have been held hostage. Don't let me ever catch you blaming yourself for that. Gina wouldn't stand for it either."

Lach looked up one more time to see if Camden and Malcolm were coming. They weren't. *Fuck it.* "So Walker and Kayla are alive."

"What the hell do you mean they're alive?" Jake asked. "They couldn't have survived that. I hacked into the coroner's report. They found blood."

“They found blood, but no bodies. And they won't. I'm telling you, Walker and Kayla are alive. Gina arranged their escape.”

Elissa pumped her fist in the air. Yes, that's my girl.”

Jake looked chastened. “Boss. Lach. I am so sorry. Fuck. I am so sorry for doubting Gina.” He looked across the table at Elissa. “And I'm sorry I yelled at you. That was totally uncalled for.”

“Hell yeah it was,” Nash said as he tightened his arm around Elissa.

“No, Nash, Jake, it's okay. I get it. It's Capitoline. Those assholes mess everything up. They're splitting us right down the middle at a time when we need to be together.” She looked at Lachlan. “So where's Gina? What's the plan? I know she's got something up her sleeve. What do we do?”

Lachlan grimaced and chomped down on the pen casing. “Well, here's the hard part. The hell of it is, I don't know where she is.”

“What do you mean you don't know where she is?” Costello asked. “This wasn't planned?”

“You know Gina. She'd neither confirm nor deny the entire plan. She was supposed to rendezvous with me, but she never showed up.” Lach looked back at Elissa. “That's why I've been having you search the marina.”

“Why didn't you tell us she's alive right away? Why didn't you tell us that Walker and Kayla are alive? Dammit, Lachlan. We've been at each other's throats.”

“Gina insisted that you not know until after you were interviewed by the police. She didn't want to risk any tells that might give you away just in case Capitoline was watching, or in case they have a mole within law enforcement. Because you can almost guarantee that they do. I'm sorry. She was supposed to be back by now, and this,” he gestured in disgust at everyone in the room, “would have never happened.” He looked at the door. “Now where the hell is Camden and Malcolm? I don't want to repeat this more than once.”

Jake stood up. “You want me to go look for them, Boss?”

“Yeah, if you would —”

But before Jake could leave the room, the door opened and Camden appeared, but not with Malcolm. Someone else was with him instead.

Malcolm's fiancée Annalie Givens stood beside Camden, looking terrified.

“Malcolm is gone,” she said. “He left me a note saying I should come here, that I'm not safe. Lachlan, please tell me what's going on.” She wiped

her eyes. “I’m afraid to think the worst.”

Lachlan's heart sped up as his stomach plummeted. “I don’t know what else to think, Annalie. But we’re not letting you out of our sight.”

Especially if Lachlan's greatest fears were true. Gina had recruited Malcolm to Watchdog even before Walker. Malcolm was an ice-cold dude. Sure, he'd warmed up since meeting and falling in love with Annalie on an assignment. But Lachlan always feared that at his heart, Malcolm was still a cold-blooded killer.

The night *Sea Prompt* exploded, Walker had received orders from their group to kill Gina. And they both knew that there had been a backup if Walker refused or failed. There was a good possibility that Malcolm was that backup.

And now he was gone. And so was Gina.

“Camden, I’m issuing a call to heel for anyone who isn’t already here now, along with their families. Contact anyone who had strong connections to Gina, Walker, or Malcolm. Jake, that includes your parents and your sister. Elissa, I want you searching for Malcolm, *now*.”

Elissa looked doubly pale. She and Malcolm had bonded during their mission in Hawaii when he’d helped protect her. “You don’t think he’s gone after her, do you?”

“If he doesn’t know that she’s innocent, he might have.” *Or he may have no choice*, he thought. At least they had Annalie safe with them. In the hands of Gina’s enemies, she’d make a perfect bargaining chip for coercing Malcolm.

Elissa flew out of her chair. “Already on it, Boss. Come with me. I have some ideas, but I’ll need your help.”

She sprinted down the hall, Sam and Lachlan on her heels.

## THREE

Gina, present day

The sun was hot but the desert air cool the next day when Gina pulled up to the low, flat building and its cactus-shaped neon sign. She and Fleur would look different by the time they left, which might make the desk person look twice, but it was a risk Gina had to take. She checked in and went straight to her room. Gina was starving and the diner across the street smelled greasy and good, but the fewer people who saw her the better. She unpacked only what she needed from the go-bag—a couple of energy bars, Fleur’s food, and plant-based doggie hair dye she’d mixed up at home from sweet potatoes and blueberries.

After a quick, unsatisfying breakfast, she got to work dying Fleur’s fur. Her girl was not happy about the process. When Gina was done, Fleur had new dark markings over her ginger fur, making her look like she had plenty of German Shepherd in her. It wouldn’t last forever but would get them through the next part of their journey.

She hoped.

Gina felt her gut clench with uncertainty, an unfamiliar, unpleasant feeling. *What is wrong with me? How many times have I needed to run, to hide? Why is this any different?*

But of course it was different. This time, she was leaving the ones she loved behind.

This time, she had friends. Real ones, who cared about her.

She had Lachlan in her life, the way it should have always been.

And now she was sacrificing all of it to keep them out of harm's way. And to figure out how to survive this mess.

Gina fought the temptation to pick up her phone and contact Lach, let him know where she was and ask him to come to her. Just turn his back on everything they'd built and disappear together.

How selfish would that be?

Because she knew he would say yes.

None of them could know where she was or where she was going. It was too dangerous. Gina would rather die herself than put any of them into danger saving her sorry ass. She tried to frame it the way she always did after a mission. *Walk away, don't look back, it's over.*

But she didn't want to do that this time. She wanted to go out with Elissa, Rachael, Elena, Jordan, Annalie, and Samantha. She wanted to gossip at another Bette's Backyard Bash while eating a cheeseburger perfectly grilled by Grant.

More than anything else, she wanted to feel Lach's lips on hers. Feel his arms around her, pulling her body against his while he nuzzled in her hair and told her everything would be all right.

Because Lach saw her—really saw her. The woman inside who wasn't always calculating her next move. Who didn't always have all the answers. Who was nervous around people she considered actual friends, afraid to do or say the wrong thing, be less than poised and perfect. He knew she could be an emotional wreck underneath the cool façade, and that sometimes she was scared to death.

And he still respected her.

Still loved her.

Gina picked her phone up. Then put it back down and picked up a box of hair dye and a pair of scissors instead. An hour later, she didn't recognize herself in the mirror.

**G**ina woke early the next morning. Fleur was curled up next to her on the hotel bed. The dog raised her head and yawned loudly. Then she watched



Gina go through her usual morning ritual. Gina picked up a pen off the nightstand. She wasn't supposed to have tattoos. No identifying marks, like SEALs in the old days. So she drew them on each morning, which was almost better than having tattoos. Taking time to draw them created a practice, a chance to renew her resolve at the beginning of every single day.

She opened her right arm, exposing the softest skin hidden at her side. She drew a perfect circle with a dot in the center on the inside of her upper arm. Then she did the same to her other arm. The circles were an ancient symbol for the sun. For the highest, purest goal one could reach.

When Gina was done drawing them, she said her usual prayer.

*God grant my arms the strength to touch the sun today.*

After that, she drew a tiny lemon on the inside of her left ankle, a faint, fond smile on her lips.

To Gina's relief, a different receptionist waited behind the desk when she checked out of the motel. One less thing to explain away or worry about. Her stomach grumbled when she went outside and smelled the greasy spoon again, its chrome and faded paint beckoning from across the street. Even Fleur looked up at her and gave a little tug on her leash.

"Fine," she mumbled. The parking lot was practically empty. She'd go in, order a burger and fries for herself and Fleur to eat there and a second meal for the road, and be on her way.

"Sit anywhere, hun," the waitress behind the counter said as the bell above the door dinged when they walked in. The dining room was blessedly empty.

"Dogs okay, ma'am?" Gina asked, putting a little Texas twang into her voice.

"Long as she don't bite."

"Only really good cheeseburgers."

The waitress laughed. "She's fine then."

Gina chose a table that would let her watch her car in the motel parking lot. Old habit, and a good one. Fleur curled up at her feet.

"Coffee? Coke-cola?"

"Coffee, please," Gina answered with a smile. "Just black. And I think we'll both have a cheeseburger and I'll have fries with mine. Plain and no bun for Ginger here."

The waitress walked over with a carafe. Gina read her nametag. Doris. "Maybe she wants two patties?"

“Yeah, that would be great, thanks. Oh, and can you make a second order to go? Same thing.” She turned over the upside-down coffee mug on the table.

Doris filled the mug. “Long road trip?”

“All the way to Amarillo. Don’t really want to stop in Albuquerque. By the time I get back on the road, it’ll be rush hour.”

“I hear you. I’ll get Jeff on your food right away, hun.”

“Thanks.” She sipped her coffee and listened to the old-school country music playing over the speakers. Tom T. Hall, a favorite of hers. The man could pack an entire novel into a two-minute song.

“Here you go,” Doris said as she set two plates and a bowl of water on the table. “Jeff’ll start on your to-go order in a few minutes so it’s maybe still warm just before Albuquerque.”

“Aw, what a sweetie. Did he pick out the music?” She pointed at the ceiling.

“Sure did, hun.”

“Tell him thanks for both the food and the music.” Gina set Fleur’s plate and water bowl down and the dog dove in happily while Gina took her first bite.

“Mmm.” *Definitely worth the stop.*

She was done with her burger and halfway through her fries when the black SUV pulled into the motel’s gravel lot and parked beside her car. Gina’s hackles rose. There were plenty of spots closer to the lobby door; why choose the one next to her car?

Two men got out. The driver headed for the motel lobby. She studied his build and how he moved. The other lit a cigarette, stood next to his door, and studied the white car beside him. Gina went through a mental inventory of what she’d left in the car and what she had with her in the backpack on the seat beside her. All her paperwork, currency, phone, a couple strategic changes of clothes, Swiss Army knife, and her gun and ammo. She watched him stumble and catch himself on the car as his cigarette fell just behind her front tire. He swooped to pick it up.

She knew that maneuver well. He had just tagged her car with a tracking device and shot a specialized nail into the front tire. A slow leak or blowout that would have had her at their mercy about ten miles out of town. Except she was right across the street.

*Stupid.*

She recognized the men from their movements, too. They were two of The Repair Shop's best.

The driver walked back outside and nodded to his companion. Then, they got in the SUV. They pulled to the edge of the motel parking lot and aimed the SUV straight at the diner. The helpful receptionist must have seen her walk to the diner and told them right where to find her.

*Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

"Here's your to-go, hun." Doris set a white paper bag beside her elbow along with a receipt. The SUV waited for a pick-up to pass before it pulled into the street.

"Thanks." Gina checked the counter where the register sat. It looked thick, solid. She handed Doris a hundred-dollar bill. "I know the bill's only thirty, but can you break it? Keep a twenty for yourself and one for Jeff."

Doris' eyes widened. "You sure?"

Gina made a show of looking around the empty dining room as if to say *you need it*. "Absolutely. For the great music and for your trouble." *It won't be near enough.*

"Wow, thanks! I'll get the rest of your change."

The SUV crossed the street.

"Think I'll hit the ladies' room before I go." Gina picked up the to-go bag and her backpack and slid her hand into the front pocket. Fleur stood at attention, ready to go.

"Straight back through there." Doris pointed to a hallway at the rear of the restaurant as she got to the register, but Gina and Fleur were already halfway through the dining room.

The SUV pulled up and parked sideways, blocking the door.

"What the...?" Doris said, looking up at the SUV, then over at Gina.

"No idea." Gina was already in the hall leading to the restrooms. The restrooms were on the right, the kitchen on the left. Straight back at the end of the hallway was a door to what she hoped opened outside to the back of the diner. Without slowing, she walked straight down the hall.

"Hey, miss? You walked right past the ladies," Jeff called from the kitchen across from the restrooms.

The bell over the front door chimed as she hit the closed door at the end of the hall. She jogged into a storage room.

With no visible exit.

"Miss?"

She drew her gun from the backpack and spun around. A man in a white apron stood in the doorway.

“I said you went past the—whoa!” He put his hands up.

She dropped her arm to her side. “Jeff? I need you to be cool. I’m not going to hurt you or Doris, but those two men out there will. They won’t hesitate to shoot you to get to me. Please, how do I get out of here?”

The bell over the door rang and they both jumped.

“*Please.*”

And God bless him, Jeff looked into her eyes, nodded, and motioned for her to follow him out of the storage room. Unless of course he was leading her to her death.

“Howdy, ma’am,” Gina heard her former co-worker say to Doris. “I’m Special Agent Dale and this is my partner, Special Agent Harris. Are you here alone?”

Jeff eyed Gina and she shook her head quickly and mouthed the word *liar*. Then she prayed Doris would bluff.

“Well, no. There’s Jeff in the kitchen,” Doris said.

“That’s all? No patrons?” the second man said.

“Yeah. Yeah, it’s...just me and him.”

“We’re gonna need to ask you some questions.”

Jeff hurried Gina and Fleur into the kitchen. He pointed to a door toward the back.

“Thank you,” she said. “You’ll be all right now,” she added, hoping it was the truth.

Then she took off, looking for a car—any car—she could steal.

## FOUR

Lachlan, present day, Los Angeles

Lachlan followed Elissa to her office. The door was almost completely covered over in stickers, which Lach only allowed because very few Watchdog clients ever got this far back into the bowels of the building. There were stickers of Marvel heroes. Some were for surfboard and kayak companies. Others from video games Elissa and Nash played on their downtime. Knights and dwarves brandished impossible-looking and impractical weapons while Orcs snarled at them. Wait, that one wasn't an orc—it was Bigfoot. A Susan Stoker sticker. Right, the other half of Elissa's door was covered in romance authors' swag—Susan Stoker, Caitlyn O'Leary, Bella Stone, Elle James, Kris Michaels, Anna Blakely, Rayne Lewis. And smack dab in the middle of the door was the beat-up title page torn from a Riley Edwards paperback signed to Elissa—a souvenir from Elissa's mission in Hawaii. That book had 'literally saved the world' according to Elissa's report, and Lach believed her.

Inside her office was a temple to all things computers. As Lachlan closed the door, Elissa was already moving the guts of a computer off a chair to give him a place to sit. Sam curled up in the only corner free of gadgets, printouts, or bobble-heads, on a dog bed usually reserved for Reggie, the Lab who had been assigned to Nashville when he came to Watchdog.

Elissa plopped down into a chair in front of her main computer. "So, ever

since Kyla came on board with her research on Loki, I've been trying to suss out all the players. *All* of them, including Gina's friends."

Lachlan's eyeballs nearly clicked in their sockets. "You *what*?"

"I know, I know. Fire me later once we get our Spooky back home safe."

"Elissa, there isn't going to be a safe home for any of us if they catch you."

"Well, that's the thing, they have to catch me first." She waggled her mouse which woke up her computer, and started clacking away on her keyboard. "You think I've only been playing video games this whole time? I've been learning everything I could about, well, everything. Kyle put me in touch with a friend of his who knows way more than I do about hacking and I've quadrupled my knowledge."

"Elissa—"

She stopped typing and spun in her chair. "It's *fine*, Lach. You hired me to be the best, and this is me being my best." She blinked quickly as if she were about to cry. "You believed in me when my own family didn't *and* you gave me a chance. So did Gina. So did Nash, and Kyla, and I mean just everyone did, *including* Malcolm. This is me being grateful and giving all that back. I'm going to find Malcolm before it's too late, and Gina, and they're going to come home and we're all gonna be one big happy family again, even if it takes me a while not to think of Jake and Psychic as a couple of big dumb chuckleheads for doubting Gina's integrity, but I'll get there. Is that cool?"

"Goddammit, Elissa," Lach said quietly, fighting a lump in his throat.

Elissa turned back around, sparing them both more embarrassment. "So. I've been trying to discover who her 'friends' are, besides Malcolm and Walker. Fun fact: every organization, even a secret one, is built on paperwork, and that paperwork requires an accounting department, and that accounting department can sometimes leave a trail a mile wide if you know what to look for."

A few more keystrokes, and Elissa smiled. "For example, a private jet was rerouted from Denver into Longmont, Colorado and then flown back to Los Angeles right after that huge Christmas blizzard that pretty much shut down the entire Midwest. This was before my time here, but I believe that corresponded with your first call to heel, am I right?"

"Correct."

"And Kyle McGuire was on that flight, and a former military working

dog named Camo, and one Gina Smith.”

“Also correct.”

“Cool. Then, looking at this...I can tell you that this very same shell company posing as a travel agency just purchased a business class plane ticket for one from LAX to Newark. I just had no idea it was probably for Malcolm until like five minutes ago.”

Lachlan’s heart pounded. If Gina was in Newark, she might be trying to either disappear into New York City or, she was trying to appear that way, and instead sneak into Canada with Fleur. No way would she stick her beloved dog in cargo for a transcontinental flight.

“What’s the name on the ticket?”

“That’s gonna take some extra digging and I’m sure it’s not his, but in the meantime, you wanna catch a flight?”

“Book me. Now.”

“Got it, Boss.” A few more clicks, and Lachlan was on a flight leaving in five hours.

“I’m sorry, best I can do. Can’t exactly use her friends right now, can we?”

He chomped on the pen casing. “The Repair Shop.”

“Excuse me?”

“That’s what they’re called. The Repair Shop.”

She leveled her gaze at him. “You know, that could have been helpful to know before now, but whatever.”

“The plan was different before now.”

She nodded, then gave him a guilty smile. “Fine. You aren’t the only one holding back.”

“What do you mean?”

“So. I know who Gina really is,” she stated simply.

Lachlan started. There was supposed to be nothing—absolutely *nothing*—linking Gina Smith to her prior identity online.

“How long have you been digging up info about her? More importantly, did you wipe what you found? Why are you waving me off?”

“Because, Boss, number one, I didn’t find anything about her online, and number more important, if I *had* found something, of course I would have wiped it immediately and probably nuked whatever server I found it on for good measure. Sheesh!”

Lachlan relaxed. The less anyone knew about Gina the better her chance

of hiding from the people trying to kill her. And if Elissa knew her true identity, it saves him having to waste time disclosing it, time they were already wasting, since he wasn't out tearing down the world trying to find her.

"Of course. Shouldn't have doubted you."

Elissa rolled her eyes. "Seriously."

"So how do you know who she is?"

"Because she told me."

At that point, you could have knocked Lachlan over with a feather. Gina told no one about herself. The only reason Lach knew her identity was because...

*It doesn't matter. Not right now.* He had more important things to focus on, like determining how much Elissa knew and how it could benefit Gina.

"When did she tell you?"

"Well, we were at my place finishing off a couple bottles of wine as one does with a friend, when I got the hankering for cookies, which, sadly, I did not have in the pantry. Nash was out on a job, neither one of us was in any shape to drive anywhere, and I wasn't going to embarrass myself by having a delivery service only bring me a box of cookies. Again," she mumbled the last as she cleared her throat. "And that's when my girl Gina says she's got us covered if I have half a pound of butter and some flour and sugar lying around, which I did. So, she proceeds to whip up *the best damn shortbread I've ever tasted*. So of course I asked her where she learned to make it, thinking I'd get the standard and trademarked Gina Smith response of, 'I can neither confirm nor deny where I got the recipe.' But then she goes and blows my mind when she tells me that she learned it from the chef at, not kidding, Buckingham freaking Palace when she was a kid."

Lachlan smiled to himself. He knew that story well.

"Musta been the wine," Elissa continued, "because when I asked her how the heck she pulled that one off, she actually told me who her dad was." Elissa's eyes got big. "Mind blown again, but it sure did explain a lot for me."

"It wasn't the wine, lass," Lachlan said. "She trusted you."

"*Trusts*. Trusts, Boss. Not gonna talk about her in the past-tense." Elissa suddenly brushed at her eyes. "And she's still trusting me to help her, even if she's too stubborn to ask for it."

"So, once you knew who her parents were, you put everything else



together, didn't you?"

"I did. I know her real name, I know all the places she lived, right up until I assume she went to the Farm. After that, things get murky, at least for," she lowered her voice, "Regina Sparda. Though," And here Elissa's eyebrows drew together, "Gina lied to me. Like, outright *lied* to me back in Hawaii."

"About what?" Though the boulder forming in Lach's gut told him exactly what she'd lied about.

"About being married. She said she was never married, but Fia insisted she had an ex, and that he was alive. Once I found out Gina's real name, it was easy enough to look up marriage records. She was married to a guy named Jeremy Smith but then any mention or traces of Regina Sparda and Jeremy Smith disappear off the internet not long after. I know what happened to Gina obviously, but I've been trying to track Jeremy down and I can't find anything."

Lachlan clenched his fists. His body shook as he felt heat flush his face.

Elissa nodded. "Yup, thought so."

"What?" The word came out harsher than he'd intended.

"You're madly in love with her."

*Why lie?* But he knew why—out of old habit.

"Time to come *totally* clean, Boss."

Lachlan nodded once. Elissa's smile was full of satisfaction.

"Did you know about this ex?" she continued.

"Yeah, lass, I do."

"Why did she lie to me about him?" Elissa asked, looking hurt and anxious and scared. "No, wait, don't answer that. She did it to protect me."

Lach smiled. "Aye, she did. And if it's true that he's alive, it's up to us to find him before he finds Gina, or she has no hope of ever coming home."

"Then help me, Lach. Who *is* this guy?"

Lachlan reached for his substitute cigarette. "That's a long story."

"Well." Elissa stood up and grabbed her purse off the back of her chair. "This time of day, we've got a long drive to LAX. Grab your go-bag and tell me a story on the way."

## FIVE

Gina, age 22

**R**egina Sparda walked into her father's office carrying between her ears one of the worst hangovers she'd ever had. All the Visine in the world would not make her red eyes go away—she knew because she'd tried it about ten minutes ago—every last drop in the world poured into her blinking eyes in a dark bathroom. Light hurt. Sound hurt. Breathing too hard hurt.

Her father was not impressed.

“Good morning, Regina,” he said from behind his desk. Folders stacked in twin piles on either end of the mahogany monstrosity gave the impression he sat between two pillars. D.C. architecture. Paperwork. Secrets on top of secrets on top of secrets.

Regina dropped into a chair across from him. “Can't fool me, Dad. It's early afternoon.”

“So it is. For some of us.”

“If we're playing the ‘time is relative’ game, knowing you, it's already your dinnertime.” Regina cracked her neck. When she'd crashed sometime around four-thirty and her head hit the pillow at an odd angle, it hadn't moved until she was rudely awakened by her father's summons. She was paying for it now.

He smiled, lips stretching into a thin line, corners barely turned up. “If you're not up with the chickens, you're down with the foxes.”

“Sometimes, you just gotta party with the foxes to get what you need,” she replied.

“I heard you come in. The whole house did. I’m surprised you’re not covered in bruises, the way you stumbled down the hall. How many times did you walk into the walls?”

“You tell me. I’m sure you counted.” She glanced at one of the pillars of files.

“Five. And you left behind a broken high heel.” He folded his hands and leaned his trim body against the desk. “So *you* tell *me*. Was it worth it, Regina?”

“God, yes,” she said, reviewing the previous night in her head like watching a movie. The party at the private club, the dancing, the copious amounts of alcohol, the hand on her ass, the whispers in her ear. “Everything I do serves a purpose, Dad. You taught me that.”

Her father steepled his fingers together and studied her over them, his sharp gaze making her think of a hawk flying over a cathedral’s steeple and observing everything below from a high, cool distance. He stayed that way for close to a minute before addressing her again.

“So the prince talked?”

She nodded and tried not to wince at the sloshing pain in her head. “He did. Amazing what a man will say to impress a woman who he thinks gets turned on by stories of torture.”

Disgust flashed briefly in her father’s eyes. “And you caught it all?”

“Of course.”

“He wasn’t suspicious?”

She started to shake her head no then thought better of it. “No. I had to do a lot of evasive maneuvering to keep him from finding the wire, but he said he wants to go out with me again tonight, so obviously he suspects nothing.”

Her father blew a slow, steady breath out his nose. “Unless he’s going to lay a trap for you.”

Regina rolled her eyes. “Of course he is. A trap that leads me to his bedroom. He said he wants to marry me. I’m the same age as one of his daughters and I’d be current wife number four, but he promises I’d rule the roost.” She grinned. “Looks like I’m up with the chickens after all.”

Her father sat back in his leather chair. “Regina.”

“It’s fine. I don’t need to see him again tonight. I already downloaded the recordings onto a disk in the car on the way back home. You’ve got enough

to pass on so that maybe this time, someone will actually charge him with war crimes.” Memories of the prince’s descriptions came flooding back along with the excited gleam in his eye.

Maybe the pounding pain in her head wasn’t entirely from a hangover.

Her father shifted in his chair. “You know that’s not how it works.”

She sighed disgustedly. “So, fine, I’ll go see him again tonight. Maybe this time he’ll tell me where some of the bodies are buried if I ask if we can visit them on our honeymoon. Would that be enough to actually do something?”

“Regina—”

But she was on a roll. “So glad everything I do is in service to my country and it makes such a difference.”

Her father’s piercing eyes closed slowly. “Your mother and I worry.”

*A little late in the game to be telling me that,* she thought. She’d been daddy’s little spy since she was six—a human tape recorder with a photographic memory and completely invisible when she wanted to be. Just a diplomat’s spoiled daughter running around embassy after embassy, occasionally getting underfoot but harmless, cute even. It had always been fun actually, and she thought of herself as a real-life spy kid straight out of one the *Double-O Trouble* movies about super-spy kids.

*Yeah. What I do is not so kid-friendly though.*

“So, you worry. I’m fine, I promise.”

His eyes opened and his hands flew apart, slamming the top of his desk, making her flinch at his uncharacteristic lack of perfect control.

“You’re not fine. You want too much. You take these risks,” he gestured at her, “that go above and beyond, putting your life in too much danger. You could—no, *should*—have told him you don’t drink. He might have drugged you, thrown you on a plane, and we’d never find you again.”

“Yeah, I take these risks and nothing ever comes of it.”

“Things do come of it, Regina. It’s just that you don’t understand the long game —”

She sat straight up, ignoring the icepick pain in her head.

“What I understand, Dad, is that innocent people are suffering every day while their governments are in bed together, paid off by corporate lobbyists, and they get away with literal murder.” Her temples throbbed as she raised her voice. “That daughter of his I mentioned? She’s not off on some religious retreat, she was locked away by her own father because she’s too outspoken.

That's on the recording, too. And nobody cares. Are we going to at least *try* and help her? Of course not."

Regina's mission was to spy on the crown prince, not save her, even when she'd brought up the truth of the situation in her last report.

"The fact that he admitted he's holding her against her will, will help her." His eyes narrowed again as he got himself under control. "But she will be helped on a longer timetable, understood?"

Gina gritted her teeth. "And if she doesn't have time?"

"An international spotlight on the situation could spook her father and get the princess killed."

*All or nothing.* "Then if that won't work, I know I could sneak around the palace and find her. I could —"

Her father shut his eyes as he steepled his fingers again—closing back up like a shell.

"We can't save them all, Regina. That's a lesson I wish you'd learn and that I can't seem to teach you."

*Neither could the CIA.* Her heart closed like a fist around her anger and she squeezed her eyes shut. If she wasn't careful, she'd cry frustrated tears in front of her father and that above all else was unacceptable. He'd see her as weak and emotional.

"Sunshine." Regina's eyes popped open at the rare endearment. Her father's gaze had gone soft—also out of character. "What I'm trying to tell you is that you can't wage a one-woman war on every injustice. You're young and passionate and I can't expect you to understand that, not on an emotional level. You're seeing one battle as an entire war. Sometimes, smaller sacrifices lead to bigger victories. If you don't learn this lesson, at best you'll burn yourself out and at worst you'll get yourself killed."

"So what am I supposed to do?" she asked, though she'd softened her voice.

"Learn to never go it alone, Regina. Find yourself a strong team you can trust, and never, ever go it alone."

## SIX

Gina, age 22

**R**egina checked herself in the full-length mirror one more time. The little black dress was a perfect sheath. The stocking seams ran straight up the back of her legs and disappeared under the short skirt. The white silk bow held her hair back and sat on the top of her head. The clutch she carried was covered in sleek black-and-white feathers. The whole outfit was a wink at a French maid's uniform and the crown prince's favorite kink. He'd pick up on it immediately and forget all about the other guests—women who billed themselves as models and charged by the night—who he'd invited to the party, and focus exclusively on her.

At least that was the hope.

The party was in honor of his son, Malik, the one he'd just designated his successor. If the current crown prince liked torture, the son outshone his father. Regina hated thinking about the atrocities that had already been committed and would only increase along this line of succession. yet the world turned a blind eye—as usual—so long as the resources kept flowing. In the prince's case, it was oil, and increasingly rare earth minerals dug from foreign land owned by the ruling family. What was she even doing here, gathering intel that would probably only be used to blackmail the crown prince, not bring him to justice, while his daughter suffered? Regina swallowed down her anger.

*Fall back on your training. Be calm. Be cool. Give away nothing.*

Prince Rashid would want to see her smiling and docile, with just a hint of cruelty around her eyes. She'd practiced the expression in the mirror for hours using a picture of Rashid as a model for the eyes. She'd learned that if you mirror back someone to themselves—especially to a narcissist like Rashid—it goes a long way to gaining their trust.

She was going to need his complete trust if she had any hope of saving his captive daughter. Because someone needed to, dammit, even if she was the only one.

Princess Sana bint Rashid Al-Hadid had disappeared from public life more than a year ago.

Regina gathered what stories she could about Sana from the princess's former friends, who more often than not were afraid to speak Sana's name. When they did talk about her, they said she'd been a party girl, but now she was in prayerful seclusion. Then they would quickly change the subject to anything else.

CIA intelligence was thin on details, too. Princess Sana had written articles and posts denouncing her country's leadership and calling out its hidden cruelty, especially toward women. Regina never found pictures of a party girl, just someone enjoying life, but she did find one of Sana at a protest only a couple of days before she 'decided' to forgo her so-called party girl life.

*My kind of girl* Gina thought as she turned and grabbed the silk trenchcoat she hoped would hide her outfit until she escaped her parents' watchful eyes. She'd told them she was attending the party—everyone was, insulting not to—but she didn't want them catching on to her plan. She'd promised to step back and focus instead on her plans to return to the states and pursue a graduate degree in art history.

*As if.*

But if they saw her in this getup, they'd know she still had the prince on her hook and was playing him for more information.

Regina slipped back out of her heels and walked barefoot down the hallway toward the front door, past her parents' suites before slipping her shoes back on. She'd made it all the way to the front door, hand on the knob, when her mother's voice stopped her.

"Going out, Regina?" Such a casual tone.

*Caught.* Gina fixed a smile on her face, brightened her eyes, and turned.

Her mother was already dressed for the occasion herself, in a gold lamé floor-length dress that complimented her golden eyes—a color that Regina had inherited.

“I am. To the prince’s party, just like I told you. It’s on my calendar, same as yours.”

“Aren’t you early?” Her mother pretended to consult a clock on a nearby table. “Your father and I aren’t planning to leave for at least another hour.”

“I’m going to the pre-party,” Gina said smoothly, trying to resist pulling the trenchcoat tighter around her. “Nijah invited me, said it would be a dance party ahead of the main one.”

“Dance party?”

Gina shrugged. “You know Malik likes Western dance parties.” She bit her tongue just before adding *Rashid won’t be there*. Too much. “He wants a chance to have one before the formal party, which will be much more... formal.”

*Ugh*. She always did this under her mother’s stare. Despite her best attempts, she spilled more than she wanted to, stumbled over her words just to fill the silence.

Her mother nodded. “Nijah invited you?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“Two days ago.”

“How long has this pre-party been in the works?”

“Three.”

Another nod. Regina could practically hear the gears turning in her mother’s head, weighing how much of what her daughter told her was true, how much was embellished, and how she could turn the situation to her favor. Regina did everything she could not to touch her hair—one of the things she knew always gave her away. She kept her body still but not too still, held eye contact without staring, and studied her mother for any of her rare tells—looking off to the left, shifting her weight, sucking in her cheeks.

Nothing. Mom was playing it close to the vest tonight.

Regina broke first. “Car’s waiting. May I go now?”

Her mother smiled indulgently. “But of course. You’re twenty-two, not two.”

“Thank you.” Regina turned with relief and grabbed the door handle again.



“Just one little thing.”

*Oh no.* Regina froze without turning.

“Don’t get...comfortable here, darling.”

Regina’s spine went straight. “Comfortable?”

“Yes. You’ve made friends, obviously, you always do wherever we’ve taken you. It was sweet of Nijah to include you in her cousin’s pre-party. Just...be mindful that like everything else here, friendships are built on sand, and sand shifts according to the wind.”

Regina turned her head. Her mother’s expression was placid but her eyes held storms. She was worried for her daughter. Regina wondered what her father had told her and what he’d left out. No time to parse it now.

Instead, she did something that felt utterly foreign and completely right at the same time. She crossed the space between them and hugged her mother. And her mother surprised her by pulling her close.

“Please watch your step tonight, Regina,” her mother breathed in her ear. “We’re being watched.”

*What did Dad do now?* Regina wondered. This wouldn’t be the first time he’d earned himself a babysitter from their foreign hosts.

“The king?” Regina whispered back, hoping she wouldn’t answer with the crown prince.

“No. By our own.”

Regina stiffened. That was not good. Worse than if the king had decided one of the diplomats in his country needed closer scrutiny, or if Rashid had grown suspicious after all.

*My own country is watching my dad.* It wasn’t unheard of but it was never, ever wanted.

Her mother pulled back and ran her hands down the front of her golden dress, looking as if she were worried that Regina had wrinkled it beyond repair. Then she loudly proclaimed, “Go on then. I still have to fix my hair. Your father and I will see you later at the party.”

“Not if I see you first,” Regina joked, her usual old line from a movie series about young spies that she loved as a kid—*Double-O Trouble*. Anything to lighten the mood.

Or throw off an eavesdropping spy.

I t hadn't taken the crown prince long to find her at the pre-party as she'd make sure to stand under one of the spotlights at the edge of the crowded dance floor. She was practically deaf from the music and the multicolored lights were threatening to stir up a migraine but she kept a cool smile on her face and laughed whenever Nijah shouted something she couldn't hear into her ear. The woman wore a floor-length dress and sparkly hijab unlike the Western women in the room, many hired to dance and party with the men.

Gina's phone vibrated in her purse. She tried not to look up at the mezzanine level where she practically felt the crown prince's eyes crawling over her body. Instead, she excused herself and ducked into the marble foyer. She pulled out the phone and checked the new message.

*Such a charming dress, little queen.* His nickname for her, a play on her first name.

*I'm glad it pleases you, sir* she texted back, half-gagging as she typed *sir*. *I wish to see it close up* came the predictable reply.

*Of course, sir.*

*And we're off to the races* she thought. She knew where the cameras were in the foyer so she turned and posed to show off her legs. Just to take it over the top, she brushed the side of a pedestal with her purse, in effect dusting it. The crown prince could crow all he wanted about his modern outlook on women's rights but his proclivities and locked-up daughter spoke louder.

*Meet me at the top of the stairs, little queen.*

Then:

*Bring your purse.*

Regina smiled provocatively while dying a little inside as she turned to the staircase at the end of the foyer.

*Suck it up and think of the princess. If you're about to suffer at the hands of this asshole, think of everything she's undoubtedly been through.*

The lights were dim on the mezzanine but he was easy to spot in his gleaming white thobe and ghutra with its black bands. He looked younger than his years and his smile was nothing but warm and charming. Regina hated herself for initially finding him attractive. Older men who projected confidence were her catnip and she'd had the tiniest of crushes when she'd first met him the day her father was posted here. Now, Regina knew better. The confidence was empty swagger covering deep insecurities. Worse, the man reveled in torture and subservience. He loved breaking people just because he could. It made him feel bigger.

She knew she presented a challenge to him, a puzzle. She dressed and acted the way he wanted without him having to tell her—he never asked for anything, only commanded—but she'd held out against letting him take her to bed. She pretended to be excited about his stories of breaking spies, dissidents, and political rivals, hoping he would see her as someone who wanted to share in his 'adventures' as an equal. The forbidden idea seemed to excite him as well and kept her at the forefront of Rashid's mind.

It also kept her out of his bed as just another plaything. She had her limits.

Now, if she could just gain his trust enough to let her see Princess Sana, maybe she could take photos and get them to someone who could stir international interest. Or at the very least Regina could let Sana know that someone cared about her welfare, that she hadn't been forgotten, and Regina was doing what she could to get her free.

"Little queen," Rashid said, spreading his arms as he looked her up and down. The music was still loud but not deafening, perfect for cover while they talked.

She didn't rush into Rashid's arms, if that was what he wanted. She turned cool and ever so slightly aloof, keeping him off-balance she hoped. Instead, she sauntered to just within arm's reach. Even from there, she could smell the forbidden bourbon on his breath. That might just make things easier. He was celebrating tonight and in a good mood. Easy to manipulate.

Regina gave Rashid a big smile. "I'm glad you called me up here, sir. I was so bored down there talking to Nijah. She's so immature."

Rashid chuckled and waved off the mention of Nijah. "The women of my country are not as worldly as you."

Regina stepped closer. She watched his eyes widen and prepared to dodge out of his reach again. "But you will change that once you're on the throne. And your son after you."

His smile was close to a sneer. "Of course. I will increase their rights. But only as much as they can handle. I don't want to overwhelm them and lead them to worldly temptations."

"Of course not." She stepped closer. "They will be grateful to you for watching out for them. You will be a wonderful leader."

Rashid smiled and fixed her with a smoldering gaze. She imagined it had worked on countless women before her. He really had the alpha male thing down. At least on the outside.

“I would be even more so with you at my side,” he purred.

She fluttered her eyelashes as she looked down and thought of the most embarrassing thing she could do to bring the red to her cheeks.

Regina pitched her voice high and breathy. “I’m so young.” She briefly glanced up through those lashes then back down.

Rashid laughed and this time he did reach for her. He pulled her against his chest. *Dear God, could his cologne get any stronger or his hands grabbier?* Regina thought as Rashid squeezed her ass practically to a pulp.

“Don’t play coy, little queen. You are not nearly so innocent as you are pretending to be right now.” He bent his head and nosed into her hair. “I’m thinking of the look in your eyes the last time we spoke. There was nothing innocent there.” His head lowered until his lips rested against the bare skin behind her ear. She shivered and hoped he’d read it as desire.

“You weren’t innocent at all,” he continued, pressing his lips against her skin, “when you asked to hear more about Issam.”

Yes, Issam, one of Rashid’s brothers and his greatest rival. He had disappeared two years ago after attempting a quiet coup against his father’s choice of successors. Issam was popular among the people, seen as far less excessive in his personal spending. He had only one wife as opposed to the king’s five and Rashid’s three and the love poetry he’d written about her won fans throughout the Arabic-speaking world. Issam disappeared with the same excuse Rashid used for Sana—he was praying in quiet solitude in reflection of his past wrongdoings and fully supported Crown Prince Rashid.

No one really believed it, especially his niece, Sana, who led protests to free her uncle. She disappeared a year after he did, right after she’d supported her aunt’s escape to Europe where she petitioned daily for his release. Regina had coaxed the bit of intel about Sana out of Nijah, who was far from boring once she felt safe enough to speak.

“Issam deserves every bit of what you give him,” Gina hissed as she turned in Rashid’s arms. She let her hatred for this man disguise itself as contempt for Issam. “He betrayed you, his own brother. His selfishness knows no bounds.” She licked her lips. “He’s a sinner worthy only of punishment.”

While she spoke, she watched the cold light in Rashid’s eyes grow brighter as her words excited him. She needed to be careful, to stoke those fires just right or she’d find herself carried off to his bedchambers—or maybe just a convenient closet.

Regina tried to look away but Rashid caught her chin roughly and held it. He kissed her forcefully while his other hand found her ass and squeezed hard enough to leave bruises. Gina returned his kiss as long as she could stand then pulled her head back. This might be her only chance.

“I hate him,” she panted. “I hate anyone who opposes you. Cowards afraid of your strength. So many men are soft. They let women rule them. But not you.” She ran a finger down his cheek. “I was excited to hear about Sana as well. About how you punish her.”

“You were, weren’t you?” Rashid was panting now too.

“If I met her, I would spit in her ungrateful face.”

“Would you?” Rashid kissed Regina’s throat.

“Yes. She deserves it. She doesn’t honor her father.” Regina paused. Now it was time to twist things around to her advantage. “Or, maybe I wouldn’t spit on her or hit her,” she pretended to muse.

“No?” Rashid squeezed her other ass cheek. She’d probably have matching bruises. Again.

“No, I’d do something worse.”

Rashid pulled away from her neck and looked into her eyes. “What?” he breathed his bourbon-laced breath into her face.

“I’d give her hope.”

“Hope?” Rashid raised an eyebrow.

“Yes. I’d have her brought in front of me on her knees. Then I’d lift her up and offer her tea.” She giggled. “Tea and *cookies*.”

Regina’s mind whirled, creating a plan even as she spoke. “I’d talk to her like she was human until she thought I was her friend. Then I’d laugh in her face and tell her that I was her father’s new lover and she didn’t deserve him. Then I’d send her back to wherever she came from knowing that she had no friends, no one on her side.” Regina let a cruel smile creep over her lips. “I’d send her off with one of the cookies as a memento. But instead of sweet, it would be something sour and bitter.”

Rashid blew a breath out of his nose, his expression fierce. Had she oversold it? Would he now accuse her of trying to help the princess escape?

He clamped his hand around her arm and pulled her down the hall into a darker part of the building. Too late, Regina realized they were up here completely alone—no guests and no guards. Rashid had wanted complete privacy. Was it so they could be intimate, or did he want no witnesses when he had her kidnapped for betraying him?

He made a sharp turn down another short hall and threw open a door. He flung Regina in ahead of him and closed it behind them. At least he wasn't locking her up alone—for now.

She stumbled and struggled to regain her balance in her heels. She blinked and quickly took in the room, searching for anything that could be used as a weapon. He'd taken her to some sort of small parlor with a wide couch covered in pillows. Maybe she could use the cut glass decanter on a table beside it to conk him on the head. It looked solid enough. Now she knew where he'd stashed his bourbon. Little chance this was to be her prison. Which left the other option.

Regina turned to see Rashid staring at her with lust-filled eyes.

“You called me your lover. Is that what you want, little queen?”

*Oh, shit. I did, didn't I? Think fast.*

“Not like this,” she snapped. “Not like a common whore.” She marched up to him, shocked at how quickly the lust in his eyes turned to confusion laced with...was that fear?

*No way!* She pressed her lips together to keep from grinning.

“How could you ever call me a queen after that? *No.*” She shook her head and raised her hand as if to slap him and he flinched. She lowered it again, holding his gaze. She lowered her voice. “When you take me you will do so as your wife, as a queen beside you. And in return, I will give you everything you've ever wanted, things your other wives could never give you.” She narrowed her eyes, filling them with a look of smoky lust. “We are alike in what we want. What we *need*. If you take me now, you will destroy that and you will never find it again. So, let me show you how I can be instead.”

To her utter shock, he dropped to his knees in front of her.

“What can I give you besides my soul?”

*Whoa. Really?*

She reached under his ghutra and stroked his hair. “Let me show you that I am your match. Let me punish *her*.” She didn't think she needed to say Sana's name. “Let me punish her while you watch, and know my loyalty for you goes to my soul.”

He looked down at the garishly patterned carpet. “Little queen. I —”

A loud banging on the door behind them made him jump to his feet, his eyes wide. He looked for all the world like a teenager caught with a girl in his room.

That's when she knew. Any other woman and he wouldn't have cared to

get caught. She would have been little more than furniture. But he didn't want to be caught with Regina. She meant something more to him. Which made all of this even more dangerous.

He held up a finger that said *wait* while he went to the door. Regina backed away, out of direct view. She listened in as a man speaking Arabic told Rashid his son was requesting his presence and that the formal party was about to begin. Rashid begged him off, told him to wait in the hall, he was almost ready.

Rashid spared one look at Regina.

“My little queen, you shall have everything you want.”

Then he was gone.

Regina sprinted to the closed door and listened to two sets of footsteps moving away down the hall. No way was she staying one minute longer than she had to in this room now that she'd secured a meeting with Sana. Resisting a victory dance, Regina grabbed the doorknob.

It wouldn't turn. And there was no lock on this side.

“Son of a bitch.” Had he locked her in here on purpose or by accident? Was she stupid enough to have fallen for his act? No, she couldn't be locked in. She was just high on adrenaline and not seeing a way out. She tried again as if the door would open. She jiggled the handle in case it was stuck, throwing her weight against the door.

It didn't budge.

No use yelling. No one was up here. No one would hear her.

*I'm not going to panic. Panicking is stupid. He believes me. This was an accident.*

Regina looked around the room again. Maybe it was connected to another one like a hotel suite. Nope.

But there was a window, or at least heavy, drawn curtains promising one behind them.

She crossed the room, thinking to turn off the table lamp beside the decanter at the last second. She had no idea what or who might be below the window and she didn't want to be seen. The room plunged into darkness but light seeped back in when she threw the curtain aside.

Yes. The window looked down on a mostly dark courtyard. Light from the party played across the court but it looked deserted.

She was only one story up from the ground. Granted, it was a tall story. Maybe more like two up. But she could do this.

Regina unlocked the window and hoped it wasn't alarmed. She swung the glass outward and breathed in the fresh air she didn't realize she'd needed so badly. Freedom. The air was perfumed by night-blooming jasmine vines covering the walls on either side of the window. All she needed to do was grab one and climb down.

In a tiny, tight dress.

And heels.

Maybe not the heels.

"Bombs away," she whispered as she dropped the heels straight down to the tiles below. If a heel broke off one, oh well. She was a party girl, right? Accidents happened.

Now, to keep *herself* from breaking.

She set her purse on the ledge, reached into the dark green foliage beside the window, and found exactly what she wanted. Several rough vines had twisted together into a thick trunk of sorts. She hoped it was strong enough to hold her weight as she shimmied down.

Regina swung out the window feeling a little like Tarzan and gripped the vine. The smell of jasmine was stronger now, cloying enough to tickle the back of her throat. If she gagged or puked, well, see the previous comment about being a party girl. She grimaced at the splinters stabbing her palms but she didn't slow down. Hand over hand, she carefully felt for any footholds in the branching jasmine vines.

Just a few more feet and she'd step down onto the tiles, smooth out her dress, assess the damage, then walk casually into the party and find her parents. If Rashid saw her with them, it would send the subtle but clear reminder that she was an American after all, one with very prominent and influential parents. They weren't a perfect shield, but better than —

Big, strong hands gripped her mere feet from the ground and plucked her off the vines. As soon as they set her down on the ground one hand went around her mouth.

"Hey, *there* you are, lass," the man said casually. His accent was American with an ever-so-slight tinge of Scottish. "Didn't know quite where you went for a second there. We've been watching you and it's rude to go and disappear like that."



## SEVEN

Lachlan, age 33

**C** rushing out a cigarette under his boot, Lachlan Campbell stood in the shadows of the palace's dusty courtyard, looking up and trying not to laugh—whether out of amusement or frustration, he wasn't sure.

*What in the ever-loving hell is that lass thinking?* He folded his arms and shook his head at the ridiculous sight of the American diplomat's spoiled daughter sneaking out of a second-story window.

*She's crazy. Absolutely insane.* And it was his job to babysit her. He was not impressed.

*Stupidest mission ever.*

Lach had no idea whatsoever why his team had been called in for what amounted to 'stand around and wait, do a little babysitting, and while you're at it, we're going to treat you like a mushroom—keep you in the dark and feed you shit.'

*Damn CIA.*

Except things had just gotten interesting and amusing. Regina Sparda was shimmying her ass out a window exactly where she should not be. The upper floors were specifically off-limits during the party tonight by order of the party's host, the crown prince. Which was why Lach was stationed in the courtyard. Regina had gone missing from the party earlier and camera footage caught her on the stairs to the second floor. Jeremy Heath, who was

with the CIA and in charge of this mission, was inside waiting near the stairs when he saw the crown prince coming down without any sign of Miss Sparda. Lach was outside just in case she decided to exit in a more creative way. They'd come to expect damn near anything from her and tonight, she did not disappoint.

He had to hand it to Regina. She didn't hesitate or look down. She reached into the tangle of clinging vines, found a handhold, and swung out over the courtyard. He wondered how many windows Miss Sparda had sneaked out of as a kid and stifled another chuckle. Now he understood why the CIA had its eye on the Sparda family—it wasn't her father but Regina who had caught their attention. He wouldn't be surprised if they handed her an invite to The Farm on a silver platter.

Regina looked like she had things well in hand, so he didn't shout up to her. Last thing he wanted was to startle her into falling. As he watched he couldn't help but admire her. She was beautiful in a fresh-faced way, not overly made up unless she had to be. Athletic build, which was easier to maintain when you were in your early twenties, but he knew that she worked out religiously. And dammit, now he was focused on her pert little ass under that dangerously short black dress as she made her way down the side of the building.

*She's above your paygrade and below your dating age limit, Lach, so stop staring, you dirty old man.*

Still, it was literally his job to keep his eyes on her, right?

Lach stepped out of the shadows when she was only a couple of feet above the courtyard tiles, intent on grabbing her. God knew what she was planning to do once she hit the ground—but judging from the state of one of the shoes she dropped, she'd be hobbling off to her next adventure. Though, having observed her for a few weeks now, Lach was sure she'd make it look graceful and effortless.

He deftly wrapped his arms around her and pulled her off the vines. Her body stiffened as predicted so he quickly covered her mouth.

“Hey, *there* you are, lass,” he said as lightly as he could. “Didn't know quite where you went for a second there. We've been watching you and it's rude to go and disappear like that.”

Lachlan waited for any move she might try—going for his balls, his throat, his in-step. Lach wouldn't put it past her to have a weapon stashed somewhere on her person. It was better for him to focus on her as a possible

threat rather than dwell on how good it felt to hold a woman after so long.

“We’re friends, you and me, you just don’t know it yet,” he went on. “I’d like to keep it friendly, so how about you promise you won’t yell or go for the jewels when I let you go?”

Regina went slack and nodded, signaling that she wasn’t going to scream or attack. Or so he hoped. Lach dropped his hand from her mouth but kept his other arm around her.

“Who are you?” she asked. “Why are you watching me?”

“Fair questions.” He loosened his grip—rather reluctantly—and she turned in his arms and looked up into his eyes.

He started back. He felt like he’d been hit in the chest with a mortar and swallowed an exclamation. He’d only seen photos of her and watched her from afar. Up close, she was stunning. Gorgeous auburn hair, rosy cheeks and lips. Damn, those golden eyes were like twin suns shining straight into his soul. They softened as her gaze roved his face and her lips parted ever so slightly. She blinked slowly and exhaled before her lips curled up into a smile. Seeing that smile, Lachlan felt like the rest of his life had just clicked into place.

*No*, he told his heart. *We are absolutely not having a moment right now.*

As if she’d heard his thoughts or had her own along the same lines, the warm light that felt like home went out of Regina’s gaze, replaced by a calculating look.

“Well, you aren’t CIA.” She laid her hand on Lach’s right biceps and squeezed, sending shockwaves through his body. “Too buff.”

Lach snorted.

Regina continued. “You’re not DSS. I know all those guys and gals. Unless the Diplomatic Security Service swapped them all out or is suddenly using a private firm for us. But I would have heard about that.” She tilted her head.

“Go on,” Lach said.

Regina frowned. “Why? Because you’re amused?”

“Maybe a little.”

The corner of her mouth curved up into a hint of a smile again and those golden eyes flashed. Still holding his arm, she tapped her chin with her other hand and Lach got the distinct impression that she wanted to start pacing.

“Let’s go back to the CIA hypothesis—you aren’t CIA, but they might have called you in.”

*Damn.* She was good. Lach kept his face blank while she continued to study him.

“Mmm. Yeah.” She tapped her chin again and he wondered what he’d given away. “Yeah. You were called in. I’d say you’re part of a SEAL unit except there’s no war or civil unrest here. No need to escort us to the nearest airbase under gunfire.” Her smile widened but there was a certain amount of bitterness to it. “At least no civil unrest where anyone can see it.”

That intrigued him. He should have kept his mouth shut, stayed a mushroom in the dark little corner where Jeremy had put him and his men, but she’d just let a little sunlight in.

“Really?” he asked. “I thought things were becoming progressive here. Pick up any newspaper and you’ll read a story about constructing new infrastructure, new hospitals, new schools for girls —”

“Pfft,” Regina scoffed. “You think the royal family has *any* respect for wo—” She abruptly cut herself off as she looked around, suddenly acutely aware of their surroundings. Her eyes narrowed on him and she turned her head ever so slightly. “You...distracted me. That just doesn’t happen. Who *are* you?” she whispered.

“Lachlan Campbell. Lach to my friends.”

“And to your squad, I bet.”

“I can’t —”

She folded her arms as she said, “You can’t confirm or deny that you’re a team guy, got it.”

“Took the words right out of my mouth, lass.”

She grinned and that grin turned into a smile that lit up her eyes and Lach’s heart was lost at sea.

*Oh, lass. What am I to do with you?*

“So, is it Scottie or Soup?”

“Beg pardon?”

“Your nickname. Do they call you Scottie for your accent or Soup for your last name?”

Lach pressed his lips together and bit the inside top lip because the alternative was to burst out laughing. Finally, he managed to say, “You’re tenacious, I’ll give you that.”

“Fine, I’ll just call you Scottie.”

“Do not call me Scottie.”

Regina shrugged one shoulder. “Soup it is.”

At which point, Lach couldn't hold back his laughter. And damn if her eyes didn't dance with her own hilarity. Now all he wanted to do was whisk her away from this maddening place, from these people and their fucked-up politics and have her to himself so he could...

*Don't think about it. She's a mission. She's trouble. She's disarming and charming and ...irresistible.*

Which made her dangerous. Lachlan realized he was still holding her and dropped his hands to his sides, immediately missing the feel of her soft skin under his palms.

The mischievous light faded from her eyes as her hand slipped off his arm. "All right, Soup. You caught me fair and square. Can we please go into the party now? I'll be missed by more than the CIA. Now, where did I..." She looked around the courtyard until her gaze landed on her shoes. "Oh. Shit."

She picked up her shoes, which were now in three pieces. One had lost a heel. She looked around the courtyard again and then up to the window she'd crawled out of and she sucked her bottom lip into her mouth. Lach followed her gaze to the dark window and noticed what looked like a black bird lying on the sill, its feathers fluttering in the light breeze.

"I seem to have misplaced my purse," she said lightly. "Which I'm pretty sure had superglue in it, now that I think about it. Among other things." She shoved her shoes into Lach's hands. "Here, hold this." And just as he dropped her shoes to stop her, she took a running leap and caught the jasmine vines several feet above her head. *Is she a cat burglar too?* he wondered as she quickly scaled the building again, grabbed the purse, and tossed it for him to catch. Which he did, because what the hell else was he supposed to do? Except maybe his job, which certainly did not include letting this woman call the shots.

*Shit.* He should have marched her straight to the CIA spook in charge of this insanity and turned her over to him. Instead, he'd watched her—twice now, for sweet Jesus's sake—scale down a wall.

"Thanks, Soup," Regina said as she plucked her purse back out of his hands. She opened it and pulled out a tube of superglue. She picked up her broken shoe and quickly glued the heel back on. "It'll probably break again before the night is over, but who cares?" She smoothed her auburn hair and straightened the ridiculous white bow on her head. And all Lach could do was watch her in fascination as she frowned and removed the bow, then

shook out her hair. She slipped her heels on, gave the broken one her weight, and when it didn't break she looked at Lach expectantly.

"Can you accompany me into the party, or do you need to report me to your CIA handler first?"

"Such cheek." Of course he had to report her; that was the whole point of standing guard in the courtyard—to find Regina. But it would probably be best to get her inside. Instead, he asked, "What were you doing up there?"

"You probably have some idea, or your CIA guys does, but I'd rather keep that to myself for now. So, if you aren't going to report me, let's go in during the formal announcement. I think that'll be enough cover to keep us under the radar, don't you?"

Just as he was about to offer his arm, another voice interrupted them.

"I'll have that report first, Ms. Sparda."

They both turned at the man's voice, Lach suddenly feeling possessive. Jeremy Heath stood watching them expectantly with a smirk and a quirked eyebrow. He stood at ease, dressed in a tux that would have cost Lach half a year's salary, the Rolex on his wrist maybe two or three. Lach glanced at Regina. Her startled look quickly gave way to curiosity, then amusement.

*Sure.* The two of them looked like a matching set, like they belonged together—both classy and polished, not rough around the edges like Lach.

"So, *you're* in charge," Regina said without hesitation as she looked him up and down.

Jeremy smiled. "I won't even pretend to be as long as you're around."

*Smooth. Asshole.* Smooth enough that it appeared to win over Regina. Then Jeremy spared him a glance.

"You're dismissed, Campbell." As if Lach were the help. He turned his attention back to Regina. "I'll escort you back into the party, Miss Sparda, but we'll be taking the long way while you tell me exactly what was going on up there. And with whom."

Regina's lips twitched. "Really? I don't even know your name. At least Soup here was kind enough to introduce himself."

"Soup?" Jeremy looked smug.

"Short for Superman," Regina added, slipping her arm through his. That took a little air out of Jeremy's tires. "We were just headed into the party, seeing as I'm in charge."

"I'm Jeremy Heath," he said quickly.

"Jeremy, if you'll give me a business card, I'll be sure to add you to my

social calendar. Perhaps next month —”

“Do you want to save Princess Sana or not?”

*Princess Sana?* Lach had been briefed on the royal family at the start of the mission. She was the religious one. Or rather—the one who had discovered religion after attending a protest and had supposedly gone into seclusion. Maybe he’d had Regina all wrong.

She’d gone stiff. Her hand slipped back out from the crook of his arm, her attention fully on Jeremy.

“How do you know...you’ve got my father’s office bugged, of course.” She crossed her arms and nodded.

“Among other places. Regina, we’re on the same side.”

“How many times have I heard that line?” Regina shook her head disdainfully. “And you think after spying on me I’m just going to talk?”

“No, of course not,” Jeremy said. “Your trust and privacy have been violated and you’re rightfully pissed. I don’t blame you for being angry right now.”

“Anger isn’t half of it.”

Jeremy lifted a hand. “I get it. Look, I would have been upfront with you right away, but that young woman’s life is at risk and I had to be certain where your loyalties were. Your public acts with the crown prince are pretty convincing.”

Now Regina looked like she was about to go ballistic. Lach readied himself to grab her. Not because he didn’t want to see Jeremy Heath hurt—but because he hated to think about the blowback on Regina.

“I mean it as a compliment, Regina,” Jeremy quickly added. “If the princess’s life wasn’t at stake, I’d be whisking you off to Virginia right now and making introductions. You’d like to visit the Farm, wouldn’t you?”

All her anger suddenly evaporated as if it never existed. She looked back and forth between the men and then up went her poker face. Too little, too late. She was obviously interested in that offer.

*Too bad.* But Lachlan could hardly be surprised.

Now Jeremy had her. “So, please, for the princess’s sake, and for your future, I’d love it if you would talk to me. And from here on out, I promise to keep you looped in.”

Regina looked down, then back up at Jeremy. “Fine. Yeah, we’ll talk.” She walked over to Jeremy and spared Lachlan one last look.

“See you around, Soup.” She took Jeremy’s arm, and Lachlan figured that

was the last he'd be seeing of Miss Regina Sparda, which was for the best—  
despite the unfamiliar feeling of loss as he watched them walk away.



## EIGHT

Gina, age 22

As she walked away from Lachlan “Soup” Campbell on Jeremy Heath’s arm, Regina knew she was being manipulated. She knew Jeremy’s type—smooth, inoffensive, complimentary, a man who seemed like he could pull all the strings to get you everything you wanted, so long as he liked you, so you’d better make sure he liked you.

Regina really wasn’t into that. But, she knew how to play the game, so she leaned into him despite the swelteringly hot night and tried not to think about the incredibly handsome SEAL who did strange and wonderful things to her belly. She needed to keep her focus on doing everything she could to help Princess Sana, and if Jeremy Heath was a piece of that equation so be it.

Jeremy covered her hand with his. His skin felt soft—probably lotioned against the heat of the desert—and just a touch clammy. Completely unlike Soup’s rough, dry hands whose touch had sent shivers through her.

So, “Miss Sparda —”

“Regina.” She smiled at him, putting some sugar into her voice. “Please.”

“Regina, of course.” Her name flowed off his tongue with bourbon-warmth. She imagined that might work for some women. “Tell me, what did the crown prince have to say?” He kept his voice casual as if they were gossiping while he directed her away from the party, giving them time, privacy, and a little more quiet. Undoubtedly, he was wired.

“You assume he was upstairs.”

“We know he was upstairs, as were you, obviously. Why did you find the need to crawl out of the window? You don’t seem traumatized, as if he’d been holding you captive, which is what we’d feared when you didn’t come back downstairs. Or is it a game the two of you play?” His gaze flicked over her.

Wow. If she didn’t know any better, she would have slapped Jeremy. She laughed lightly instead, hoping it made her sound dismissive. “I don’t play games, Mr. Heath.”

“Jeremy. And that’s not true. You play games all the time, Regina.” He stopped walking when they reached the far corner of the courtyard and the concealing shadows there. “Helpful games.”

“Helpful? I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Jeremy laughed. “You don’t think we know where our intel comes from, Regina? You’d be surprised by what we’ve accomplished thanks to you and your games, ever since you were a child eavesdropping on whoever your father needed to know more about.”

She tried not to blanch at his words.

“Hey. Take it as a compliment.” He’d softened his voice, taking all the teasing out of it. “You’ve been on the Agency’s radar for a long time. If you play your cards right, you’ll be at the Farm in no time.”

“You think that’s what I want?”

“I know it’s what you want.” He gazed deep into her eyes. “It’s what you were made for. Shaped and refined by your father into the perfect spy. I admire you,” he whispered, looking over her face. “Very much.”

She buried the squirmy, uncomfortable feelings his words invoked. “What I want is to help Princess Sana. No woman should have to be treated like that by her father. Shut away, manipulated, just because she disagrees with him. She’s in danger, if she’s not already dead.” Gina couldn’t suppress a shiver. “No, I know she’s alive. He’s not lying about that.”

“You discussed the princess upstairs?”

Regina hesitated.

“Look, if you want to help her, talk to me. You have the crown prince’s ear.” The look in his eyes implied *maybe more than his ear* and she resisted the urge to slap him again.

“Stop it. He’s disgusting. I’m only tolerating him to help his daughter. He’s agreed to let me see her.” *I think*, she added silently. “But if you’re not

going to treat me with respect, then I'll work on my own. I always have."

Jeremy grinned. "You're cold and calculating." Now the teasing was back in his voice.

*What?* "No, I'm... I'm not *cold* —"

"Did I say I don't respect that? I do." He ran a finger down her bare arm. "You have a lot to offer that your parents don't see. They want to keep you safe, don't they?"

"Well, of course they do."

"What do *you* want, Regina? Do you want to stay safe? Play in the shadows, under your father's thumb your whole life? I see so much more for you, Regina. I see a future where you are in control of your destiny. Where you make the calls and they'll be good calls, I know it. I can see it. You don't sit on your ass waiting for the slow wheels of politics to turn. You're that woman's only hope right now. Do you understand that?"

Regina shook her head. This conversation was getting away from her and she didn't like it. "I'm not her only hope. There's her mother and Nijah. There's your team. Even my dad is working on the political side of things, trying to raise awareness —"

"And yet, you're the one who got the prince to agree to take her out of captivity to meet with her. Not us. Not your father. Regina," he gripped her arms and stared intently into her eyes, "I know you don't need them. You don't even need my team. Or me. You've gotten further than we have all on your own. But, I'd be honored to have you on my team anyway."

He dropped his hands and stepped back, his voice and expression cooling. "Look, it's your choice. You can go lone-wolfing it again—which I know you're capable of doing and probably prefer. Or, you can join me and that will lead to greater things for you."

This felt like the biggest turning point of Regina's life. He was cultivating her as an asset—that much was obvious—but Jeremy was offering her everything she wanted—a chance to make an actual difference, to save a woman's life, then a chance at the CIA. Did it matter that she felt like she couldn't quite trust him? She'd met spooks before, some she trusted more than others, but they were all working together for their country, right? And even if she didn't fully trust Jeremy, she'd be working with Lachlan, who she trusted on instinct.

Regina nodded. "All right. I'll tell you everything I know." She held up her hand, "But you have to keep me on the team. I want a direct hand in

rescuing her. I will not be sidelined.”

He looked relieved, almost boyish with excitement. “I knew you wouldn’t let me down.” Jeremy’s grin widened into a charming smile. “I promise, Regina, you will never regret working with me.”

Two days later, Regina received the text she’d been waiting for.

*Come meet your new daughter, my little queen. She needs correction.*

She smiled to herself even as she felt revulsion at his words. *This is it.* Jeremy had filled her in on the details of his plan to rescue Sana and how they dovetailed with Regina’s plan. She’d spent the last two days researching everything she could find about Princess Sana. She knew exactly what she would say and how she’d handle both Rashid and Sana.

Regina stepped out of the car the prince had sent to collect her from the diplomat’s mansion and was immediately flanked by guards. She grinned impishly at them, keeping up the façade that she was little more than a spoiled party girl, the prince’s current toy. One man spoke to another in the local dialect, calling her a whore who didn’t know her place. So, should she play the spoiled brat and add to the image she was building, tell them that she would have their heads once she was the new queen? Or, should she continue to play dumb so that people would tell her all their secrets without knowing it?

She opted for dumb. She had the prince around her little finger already. Why gild the lily?

“Cookie?” She pitched her voice loud the way some people did when talking to someone in a different language, as if speaking louder would somehow translate. She opened the box of lemon cookies she’d made for the princess and held it out.

The guards just sneered and one said, “The whore is offering us her sweets,” which made the other one chuckle. Regina laughed along as if she didn’t understand a word and thought they’d called her the most charming creature on earth.

Regina followed the guards into the palace and upstairs to a salon overlooking one of the gardens. The window was open and the ubiquitous smell of jasmine filled the room along with the harsh, hot-sand smell of the

winds off the desert. The astringent smell of tea wafted from a pot on a small table, set as though this were a simple social visit. The guards left her there alone and she set the box of cookies beside the teapot. There was one special cookie in the box and she placed it just so and crossed her fingers that the princess would understand.

Rashid came in first and immediately crossed the room to Regina. She stood and bowed but kept a vicious smile on her face.

“Thank you for this opportunity,” she said, looking up through her lashes the way he liked.

“Thank you, little queen, for the entertainment.” He stroked her cheek as his eyes roamed her body—she’d dressed in skintight pants today, tucked into high leather stiletto boots, and wore a stylish corset belt over her crisp white shirt. Her hair was tied back in a tight ponytail. So cliché, but he seemed to approve of the severe look.

He grabbed hold of her ponytail and arched her neck back. “You look so tough, but I’m still in charge.”

“Of course.” She let tears spring to her eyes even as she smiled, which delighted him. “But we need to talk, my love.”

They heard footsteps outside the room. He let go of her and stepped away.

“Later,” he whispered.

Three people appeared in the doorway. Regina got her first in-person look at Princess Sana bint Rashid Al-Hadid and held back a gasp.

Sana shuffled into the room, head down, her clothes looking brand new and too big for her, as if she’d just been given them by someone who hadn’t realized how much weight she’d lost. And she’d lost a lot—she barely resembled the young woman on social media with round cheeks and laughing eyes from just before she’d ‘gone into seclusion’ to pray. This woman looked aged beyond her years, pale and defeated. Regina couldn’t see her body under her robes but she imagined the bruises and cuts covering her body that Rashid enjoyed describing in great detail.

Regina almost lost her nerve. *How can I do this to her? Please, please God, make her understand what’s going on and give me the wisdom to know what I’m doing.*

One of Sana’s guards shoved her into a chair beside the table set for tea. Sana whimpered and didn’t take her eyes off Regina’s boots.

*I’m just putting on an act,* she told herself, even as Jeremy’s words

echoed in the back of her head. *Cold and calculating.* That's how she'd have to appear right now to make this work.

Hating herself for what she was about to do, Regina cleared her throat and sat down in the chair on the opposite side of the table as if this were just the dandiest social call. She smoothed her hands over her lap and glanced at Rashid who took his seat in a chair away from them as if watching a play. *I should have brought him popcorn.*

"So," she started, "You're Sana. I've wanted to meet you for quite a while." Regina smiled.

Princess Sana didn't move.

Regina felt awful. Was Sana's spirit already broken? This wasn't the same woman loudly shouting protest slogans against her father. This woman was a ghost. Did she even know where she was? If she was that far gone, the rescue was already doomed.

But then she saw it—Sana's hand clenched into a tight fist in her lap. Her middle finger was ever so slightly raised, the knuckle sticking up just above the others. Even better, Rashid couldn't see it from where he was sitting.

Regina never felt so good getting flipped off.

*Now if she'll look at my hands.*

"I want to get to know you, Sana, since I plan on becoming a bigger part of the crown prince's life." She tried to sound as chipper as she could. "We have a few things in common, you and me. For one thing, we both respect and adore your father."

She listened to the grunt of approval from Rashid and tried not to gag.

"We're about the same age, too." *Double gag.*

*Okay, here we go* Regina thought. *Please, Sana, understand what I'm telling you and believe it.*

"When we were kids, we watched the same movies."

Sana flicked her gaze up then back to Regina's boots. *Dammit. So close. Look at my hands, not my boots.*

"I heard you liked *Double-O Trouble* movies." While she spoke, Regina fluttered her hands to get Sana's attention and it worked—the princess's eyes went to her hands. Regina made a quick gesture, bending all her fingers and touching the tips of her thumbs to the tips of her pointer fingers, then pressing the backs of her fingers together until her hands formed two 'O's up against each other.

Sana blinked quickly but otherwise her expression didn't change. In the

movie, the main characters—kids who were secret, super-spies and known for getting into trouble—had come up with the gesture to show they were on the same team. Did Sana understand that Regina had just signaled that she was here to help her?

The princess looked up into Regina’s face. She nodded quickly. “I did like those movies, yes.” She looked back at Regina’s hands.

Regina smiled while Rashid shifted in his seat. She’d told him that she wanted to gain Sana’s trust only to shatter it at the end. She hoped that Sana would continue to understand.

“Would you like some tea?” Regina didn’t wait for a response before she picked up the teapot and poured some into Sana’s cup. “I always take mine with lemons for good luck.”

Sana grinned at Regina’s choice of words—or so she hoped. Lemons were another clue from the movie. During a chase scene where the kids were on their rocket-powered bikes after rescuing a princess, a load of lemons fell off a truck behind them and stopped the bad guys from catching them.

“So do I. Lemons are lucky.”

Regina laughed lightly. “See? I told you we had things in common.” Inside, she did a victory dance. ‘Lemons are lucky’ was the exact line the movie princess said when the villains’ motorcycles slid out of control when the lemons hit them. After that movie, all the kids who were into *Double-O Trouble* had a t-shirt with a lemon and the catchphrase emblazoned across it, including Sana, in an old photo she’d posted online.

She squeezed a lemon wedge into both cups of tea. Sana accepted hers with shaky hands.

“Oh, silly me, are you hungry?” Regina purred, and tried not to cringe when Rasid laughed. “Fortunately, I made you cookies.” Another plot point from *Double-O Trouble*—secret messages hidden in fortune cookies. She took one of the thick, cake-like tea cookies out of the box and waved it at her.

Sana’s eyes brightened. “Lucky and fortunate,” she said.

*Message received.*

Regina laughed as she dropped the cookie back on top of the others. “Too bad you can’t have your cookie now. I’ll send them along with you back to your cell and you can have a cookie later as you remember our meeting.” She quickly flashed the double-O sign again before folding her fingers and Sana gave her the slightest nod. “Because I want you to remember how wonderful your father was for letting you meet me.” Regina stood and loomed over

Sana, who set her cup aside as she looked from Regina to Rashid and back again.

Regina darted forward and grasped Sana's chin, turning her head upward and forcing her to stand up.

"I know the truth about you, Sana," Regina added, holding the princess's gaze, willing her to understand what Regina was really telling her. "You were willful and disobedient and you are being punished. But I will be in charge of your fate from now on. Remember that when you bite into the bitterest lemon cookie. You won't know when I'm coming for you, but trust me, I will."

She shook Sana's face and pushed her back down into the chair. Rashid laughed and clapped his hands. Regina thrust the box of cookies into Sana's lap and turned to Rashid.

"I'm bored with her. Send her away. I'd rather spend time with you."

Rashid's eyes flashed. He signaled to his guards. Right before they got to her chair, Sana made a quick circle with her fingers. The guards picked Sana up and half-carried her to the door. She clutched the box of cookies all the way out of the room.

Regina laughed once they left. "The cookies are totally inedible. She'll probably try anyway and be sick for a week."

Truth, at least for the bitterest cookie, the one that, like a fortune cookie, had a message tucked inside printed on edible paper telling Sana about the rescue in the works.

Rashid stood and crossed the room. "You are magnificent."

"Thank you. Next time, take me to her cell where I can beat her in private. I had no idea she was here in the palace or I would have begged you to let me before now."

Rashid shook his head. "It has become too risky keeping her here. I wanted you to meet her before I send her away."

Regina pretended to pout. "But why?"

Rashid grabbed Regina and pulled her close, chuckling. "You are like a spoiled baby deprived of her toy. People are talking, little queen. It is best if Sana goes to a more remote place in secret."

She grinned even if she didn't feel it. Jeremy's plan of spreading rumors of an attempted rescue had made Regina uneasy—what if Rashid saw through her attempt to meet Sana as part of the plan? But he hadn't, judging by the way the crown prince groped her now.

"When does my toy go away? Can I see her one more time before then?"



Or perhaps you can take me to her once she moves. My hand already aches to slap her insolent face.”

His eyes lit up and Rashid kissed her hard. “She leaves the day after tomorrow. And no, you can’t.” He gripped her wrist and her heart stopped. She’d misjudged him, misjudged the entire situation. He knew what she was up to, had played her when she thought she was playing him. Now she would disappear right along with Sana.

But he kissed the inside of her palm instead. “I’m too busy these next few days to watch you play. We’ll arrange another time. At my discretion.” He gave her a warning look. “Remember that even if Sana’s fate is in your hands, yours is in mine. Even as I worship you, you will learn to obey me in all things.”

She let herself shiver, passing it off as desire. “Yes, my prince. Of course.”

## NINE

Lachlan, age 33

**F**ar from the glittering heart of the city, Lachlan stubbed out his cigarette against a dirty concrete wall and waited for everything to go wrong. He wondered first how much time they had before their mission became too dangerous to accomplish, and second, how a man could despise his daughter so much that he'd condemn her to death after torturing and beating her.

Lachlan had read Sana's description in the report from Regina and it sickened him. She'd been starved and beaten. And now, her father was sending her out into the godforsaken desert ahead of an incoming sandstorm that promised to be one for the record books. All over the news, reports were coming in about the hellacious storm and advising people to seek shelter. The sky was already turning that odd color between blue and brown as the wind picked up, hurling fistfuls of loose sand across the alley between the autobody shop where Loch stood and the marketplace still under construction. The city was constantly extending its fingers into the desert around it, growing like a cancer built on slave labor. Just past the construction was a row of barracks housing Pakistani and Indian workers promised good jobs and instead finding their passports confiscated upon arrival and workdays that sometimes lasted twenty hours. But even they were hunkered down ahead of the coming onslaught of sand.

And Prince Rashid was sending his daughter straight into the heart of the storm.

Well, he thought he was. But that's where Lachlan and his team came in.

Lachlan went over the new rescue plan for the thousandth time in his head. He and his men were in place near the far edge of the city and they were ready. Regina had come through for them. She'd confirmed the princess was alive, was being held against her will, confirmed that she was about to be moved, and Regina had gotten the message to her that she was not forgotten.

Lach stepped back into the doorway facing the alley, waiting for word of the SUV carrying the princess. It was early morning in the normally bustling city, just prior to rush hour, but thanks to the weather, most businesses were closed and people were home. The city streets were bristling with surveillance cameras. Because of those cameras, the plan was for Lachlan's team to ambush Sana's SUV in the desert outside the city where there was no surveillance, overpower the guard with her, and sneak Sana out of the country.

But that was before the storm made the desert ambush impossible.

The wind picked up again and Lachlan looked out over the construction site to one of the most out-of-place things he'd seen in this impossible city—an old-time Ferris wheel surrounded by a roller coaster and colorful circus tents. He imagined that was where the families who couldn't afford to take their kids to an indoor ski slope or acre-sized aquarium in the obscenely wealthy city spent a fun Saturday afternoon. Then his gaze was drawn from the Ferris wheel to an ominous sight in the distance behind it—a towering wall of brown, billowing clouds blocking out the early morning sun and moving fast. They wouldn't have much time to execute the operation and there was no room for error. Every passing minute increased the danger he would be in after they secured the princess.

Danger he would share with Regina.

Lach grunted and shook his head. He'd been unable to think of anything else since he'd met her. She was bullheaded, spoiled, a risk-taker who didn't feel her mortality yet. But she was also smart, brave, capable. She would have made a good SEAL. The problem was, he didn't think of her as a SEAL, especially at night as he fell asleep or while he dreamed of her silky hair brushing his belly while she —

“Soup?”

He jumped. Regina had sneaked up behind him. The lass could move

without a sound and appear out of nowhere. It was spooky. She looked different with her hair dyed black and her golden eyes hidden behind brown contact lenses, but he supposed he looked different with his hair dyed and dark contacts on, too.

“Gina.”

“You’re the only one who’s ever called me that.”

“Should I stop or do you like it?”

She grinned. “I do like it.”

Lach felt heat rising up his neck. Yup, Gina was dangerous—distracting him when he should have been completely focused. But who’s fault was that? His, of course—she was just being herself.

“Do you want to go over the plan?” he asked just as she was saying, “Is everything all right?”

Lach looked behind her into the darkened body shop. Heath was nowhere in sight but he pulled her outside anyway for privacy.

“I don’t like the change in plan,” he confessed.

“What don’t you like?”

“Too many moving parts.” *And it puts you in too much danger*, he added silently. “Plus, can we really trust the driver?” Lachlan thought the weakest point of the plan was the driver, though Heath had assured him that he was one of their assets and would cooperate. He remembered the conversation he’d had with Heath about it.

“Don’t worry,” Heath had said. “We’ve been able to count on Faheem in the past. He’s well-paid, and he wants to come to the U.S. so we’ve promised him safe passage and asylum once he gets there.” Jeremy smiled and his eyes glinted. “Besides, we have dirt on him now that would send him to rot in prison. He knows better than to betray us.”

Still, it didn’t sit easy. The previous plan was a simple ambush and extraction in the desert. It didn’t rely on trusting Faheem to take the pre-arranged route to the alley and stop without alerting anyone. And it didn’t put Gina directly in danger while they bought his team time to get Sana to safety, and separate Lach from his men.

Gina nodded. “I haven’t met Faheem. I don’t know him and that bothers me, too. Jeremy vouches for him though.”

That didn’t make Lach feel any better. He didn’t trust Heath—didn’t trust anyone from the Agency, truth be told. He hated the idea of Gina wanting to join up, though she seemed perfect for the job. Actually, she was the type

who truly believed she could make a difference for good. Maybe she was exactly the type of person the CIA needed to recruit.

Heath called from somewhere in the body shop. “They’re coming. Ten minutes.”

Gina looked excited for a moment before she schooled her features into a neutral expression. Lach took one last look at the foreboding sky and the dust clouds that looked so much closer now and they went back inside.

“You’ve got your orders,” he told his men, who nodded and got into position. Lach watched Winslow and Huck get into the armored Hilux truck and drive out of the bay and into position, blocking one end of the alley. Banjo and Silas crossed the alley and hid in the construction site, weapons at the ready.

Lach and Gina waited in the dim, dusty room for the sound of the car. Brady “Bunch” Reed was stationed at one end of the alley as lookout and to discourage anyone from stumbling into their mission. The owner of the auto shop had been bribed and the mechanics were told to stay home, but there was no guarantee other civilians would stay away.

It wasn’t long before they heard a car moving slowly toward them. Faheem was doing his job so far. The SUV appeared around a corner and headed up the alleyway. Lachlan tensed. Heath’s intel said there were only three people in the vehicle—one guard who was sitting in the passenger seat, Faheem, and Princess Sana. Lach imagined the guard was already making a fuss, suspicious of the armored car with its hazard lights on, blocking their route.

Faheem’s window rolled down as he came to a stop and so did the guard’s. Faheem laid on the horn and shouted in Arabic at the armored car to move. Winslow yelled back that his partner needed to use the bathroom in the auto body shop and he was waiting for him. The guard was screaming too, luckily distracted while Huck, Banjo, and Silas crept up around the SUV. The windows were tinted so Lach had to trust Heath’s intel about only one guard. Trust but verify had always been his motto, and so Huck was ready to dispose of any other guards who might be sitting beside the princess.

Silas was the first to make his move. He stood up straight, reached into the passenger window and grabbed the guard, pointing a Sig at his head. Huck and Banjo simultaneously opened the back doors, weapons drawn and ready for a fight. All they found was a terrified princess bound and gagged.

Once Huck neutralized the guard, Lach and Gina ran to the SUV. Gina

ran to the back where Sana was sitting while Huck cut through the zip ties binding the princess's hands and feet together. As soon as the princess was free, Sana stumbled out of the SUV and into Gina's arms.

"Thank you," she sobbed. "You saved my life."

Gina held her for a moment before saying, "Team effort. I'm just relieved that you believed me. I'm so sorry that I had to scare you like that."

Sana shook her head. "It was nothing compared to what I've endured. I'm indebted to you. Thank you."

"Thank me when you're safely out of the country."

"I'm scared. What if he catches me? What if I can't get past this?"

Lach watched Gina calm Sana.

"You're going to be fine. Just keep moving forward and don't look back. Ever."

Sana nodded and smiled. "I can do this."

Gina smiled back. "You can." She motioned to Sana's robes. "Now, I need those."

Sana nodded—the instructions had been on the info Gina passed to her. She shrugged out of her robe and hijab and gave them to Gina, who'd been ready with a different robe just in case, but luckily, Sana was wearing a dress underneath. Gina put on the princess's clothes while Lachlan dressed in the guard's ghutra and iqal. He was already wearing a throbe identical to the guard's. When he was finished, he jumped into the passenger's seat while Gina got into the back.

Lachlan watched Huck, Banjo, and Silas escort Sana to the armored car. She'd be safe in there in case their ruse didn't work and there was a firefight on the way to the port where a ship waited to take Sana to safety. Heath had already disappeared once he was sure the princess was transferred. He was also responsible for making the guard disappear along with him.

Not Lach's problem. He and Gina had their own escape to think about.

The Hilux pulled out of the alley and headed back into the city, looking for all the world like any other armored car transferring money from businesses to banks. Lachlan eyed Faheem before telling him in Arabic, "All right. Get us through the checkpoint and you'll be free soon."

Faheem's face was pale; he was obviously shaken from the extraction. Lach shared a look with Gina in the rearview mirror. She looked uneasy as well. She darted her eyes toward Faheem. At least she and Lach were on the same page.

As they drove out of the alley and back to routes that were monitored by cameras, Gina made sure not to look directly out the window. So did Lachlan. The cameras didn't need to pick up their faces, They just needed to register that the Princess, her guard, and her driver were still on their way out of the city. Heath's intel said that the cameras would be monitoring them all along the route and that the crown prince would be informed if anything was amiss. By posing as Sana and the guard, they were giving the real princess time to escape. If they could make it all the way out into the desert undetected, Lachlan's team was unlikely to encounter any trouble, and that was the most important part to him. Of course, he knew the most important part to Gina was that Sana got away unharmed.

The miles ticked by slowly. The minutes seemed to turn into hours. An uneasy feeling crept up Lach's spine. So much depended on getting clear of the city. One false move and Faheem would call down hell on them. Lach realized he was worried but not for himself. All his worry focused on Gina. Gina, for her part, looked perfectly calm. Was she putting on a brave face? She was a diplomat's daughter after all, schooled in hiding her true emotions. Or, was she naïve as to the level of danger they were in? He didn't think so. In the short time he'd gotten to know Gina, she'd been nothing but clever and alert, ready to troubleshoot any and all possible scenarios, so she understood the risks. So was she truly confident that the mission would go as planned? Was she putting all her faith in Lachlan having her back if things went sideways? Heat bloomed in his belly at that thought.

*Pull it together, man. You can't be thinking like a schoolboy with his first crush right now.*

Faheem gripped the wheel until his knuckles turned white, bringing Lachlan back to reality. Lach still wasn't sure about the man and he really hated the fact that they had placed their safety into his hands. After what felt like an eternity, the checkpoint came into view up ahead. The wind had picked up and sand was blowing in the air. They were going to cut it really close if they wanted to get to the escape car and get back into town ahead of the sandstorm.

That was Lachlan's biggest fear at this point—getting caught in the storm. Sandstorms could be completely unpredictable but one thing was for sure, you didn't want to drive in one. People who have driven in heavy fog or snow storms might think they know what a sandstorm is like, but the reality was far different. It wasn't just foggy or snowy. The day could turn pitch

black, making it impossible to navigate. Flying sand could strip a car of its paint and do far worse to bare skin. Their only hope was to make like a bat out of hell once clear of the city and reach the escape vehicle before it was too late. Lachlan ran a hand over his watch. It was the latest technology—a GPS-guided beacon that would take them straight to the SUV.

Faheem slowed the vehicle down as he approached the checkpoint, just as he was supposed to. Guards dressed in desert camo, their faces covered by scarves to keep out the deadly sand, stepped out in front of the vehicle. One man came to the driver's side as Faheem rolled down the window. Lachlan wasn't sure if they were simply blocking the road or if they knew about the Princess. He had a feeling they did, as he spotted cameras above a guardhouse.

The guard greeted Faheem and looked into the SUV. Lachlan glanced in the rearview window at Gina. She hung her head low, her hijab blocking the guard's view of her face, her arms behind her back as if zip tied. Lachlan also was also careful to look away though he made sure the guards saw his weapon. Faheem began to explain that they were transferring Princess Sana to a safer location away from the city, where she could pray in peace.

*So far, so good, Lachlan thought. Keep it up, Faheem.* The guard nodded as if he knew what the plan was. He stepped back away from the driver side and began to motion for them to roll through as the other guards stopped blocking the SUV's path.

But instead of rolling forward, Fahim suddenly opened his car door and jumped out.

"They are traitors!" he shouted. This is not the princess or her guard. This is —"

Faster than the guards—faster even than Lachlan—Gina sprang into action. She jumped into the front seat, got behind the wheel, threw it into drive, and took off.

"Dear God, woman! Give a man a warning or you'll give him a heart attack."

Gina grinned fiercely. "I saw the way Faheem was gripping the wheel so I got ready." Lachlan rolled down his window as men shouted and bullets hit the back of the armor-plated SUV. He shot back more as a deterrent than anything else. He couldn't hope to aim in the wind or with Gina doing evasive maneuvers. As soon as he saw an SUV in full pursuit, he rolled the window back up and hoped the storm would stop them. No luck—a second



SUV joined the chase.

The sky grew darker and darker as they drove toward the brown clouds full of dust and debris picked up from the war-torn landscape of Jordan and fueled by hundreds of miles of desert sand.

“How far are we from our escape SUV?” Gina asked. “I need you to navigate.”

“I’m afraid we might be too far away, lass.” Lachlan looked at the GPS on his watch face and double-checked the odometer. He’d noted the mileage at the checkpoint. The second SUV was ten-point-two miles from the checkpoint and off the road, hidden under camouflage netting behind an outcropping of boulders.

The blowing sand made the road as slippery as if they were driving on a sheet of ice. The sky was growing darker by the second. They still had two miles to go—two miles that might as well be two hundred if the storm came down on them full-force. Other cars going both directions were already pulling over.

“Just tell me how far,” Gina demanded as she sped up. They started to fishtail but she quickly turned into the swerve and pulled them back out of it.

“Two-point-one miles. We’re never gonna make it.” It looked like one of the drivers was afraid to speed up while the other took the lead and gained on them.

“We don’t have a choice,” Gina said. Their truck rocked as a blast of sand-filled wind threatened to shove them off the road. The same blast hit the SUV behind them, making both SUVs swerve. The slower SUV lost control and spun out before landing in the ditch. Lach’s heart leapt for a moment when it looked like the second SUV might go off the road too, but the driver quickly corrected—he obviously had experience driving in sandstorms and was crazy enough to keep up the chase.

Gina was keeping an eye on their pursuers too. “Dammit. Can’t exactly shake him on a straight highway.” There was nowhere to turn off, and to attempt to four-wheel it across the sandy ground between them and the highway returning to the city would amount to a suicide attempt. “We have to hope that by the time we get to our new ride, it’s too dark for them to see us pull off.”

“If it’s too dark, then we’re dead. No way we can leave this one and attempt to get to it.”

The cloudbank was close enough now to make out individual churning

clouds. It looked like an explosion to Lach. And they were heading right into it.

Gina sped up.

“We’re almost there. Point-one miles. Shit.”

Darkness descended. One second, they could see a quarter mile ahead, then only a few yards, then their visibility reduced to a few feet. The SUV disappeared behind them as the storm swallowed them up.

“Brace yourself, I’m pulling over,” Gina shouted over the sand whipping around the SUV. “Otherwise, he’ll be right on top of us.” The truck swerved as she took them off road. They bumped and jolted over invisible rocks, their headlights completely useless. She’d angled the SUV about forty-five degrees from the road and the wind buffeted them, threatening to push the truck onto its side. But the dots that represented their SUV and the escape vehicle drew closer together. Lach flipped on the overhead light.

“Son of a bitch, we might make it after all.” He looked at the triumphant expression on Gina’s face. “Slow it down. Don’t want to crash into the boulders around it.”

“Got it, Soup.” Damn, she looked fierce and wild. Alive in the way Lachlan felt when under fire. She eased up on the gas. The storm tried its best to flip them and Lach felt his side of the SUV rise. The sand was thick and heavy now, slowing them down without Gina needing to use the brake. If they could just coast a little closer, they might still have a chance.

*Bam!* The SUV hit something big and hard. The airbags deployed and Lachlan heard Gina shout. Their truck died along with the cab’s light, plunging them into complete darkness, surrounded by the unholy howling of the sandstorm.

## TEN

Lachlan, age 33

**A**nother *bam!* along with the sound of cracking glass. Lachlan shook his head, not sure if he'd passed out or for how long, if he did. His first thought was of the brave and crazy woman beside him.

"Gina!" He reached out to find her and touched her arm.

"I'm all right," she said. Her voice was strong, if shaken. "You?"

"Yeah," Lach answered. "Can't say the same for our ride."

"Sorry about that. Must have cut it too close to those boulders." She coughed and he felt her entire body shake. He instinctively pulled her in closer.

"No, lass, we're still a ways out. You just hit a big rock. Miracle we didn't hit one sooner. How's your breathing?" Lachlan carefully felt her torso, hoping she hadn't punctured a lung in the collision.

Gina cleared her throat. "Just the powder..." *cough* "...from the airbag." Her hand covered his and he stopped moving. "Not injured."

"Sorry, I was checking for injuries... I wasn't —"

Gina interrupted him with a laugh. "You weren't getting fresh on the first date? I'm offended, Soup."

It was Lachlan's turn to laugh. "Wouldn't this be our second, at least?"

"Oh yeah. If you're going off the times we've been alone, I guess you could count the courtyard."

“Yeah, but we weren’t entirely alone. Heath was there in the shadows, chaperoning.”

“I thought you were the chaperone, Soup.”

“I suppose I was, up until I lost track of you and you came climbing out that window, escaping your other date.”

“Worst chaperone ever,” she laughed through her coughing. Lachlan heard her seatbelt click and suddenly Gina was right next to him, close enough that her breath tickled his cheek. “Especially considering I ended up in your arms.”

“You did, didn’t you, lass?” His hand found her cheek under the hijab. His thumb brushed away the dust there.

“How close are we?” she asked, and for a second Lachlan wasn’t sure what she meant. He shook himself out of this foolishness and dropped his hand. While she took out her colored contacts, he hit the button on his watch, hoping the sandstorm wasn’t blocking the signal. The face lit up, illuminating the cab in an eerie glow that didn’t extend past the windshield but showed a nasty crack right down the middle. God knew what the storm had tossed at them, but one thing was for sure—they weren’t safe where they were.

“We’re almost on top of it. About three hundred feet straight ahead.”

“Awesome! We did it.”

Lachlan shook his head in disbelief. “We can’t go out there. We’ll be sandblasted into nothing.”

Gina pursed her lips, her golden eyes glowing like twin suns in the light of the watch. “We can’t stay here, either. Windshield’s cracked. If anything else hits it, it’ll shatter and that’ll be it for shelter.” She looked behind them as if she could see into the storm. “And what if our friends back there are brave enough to try and find us? I don’t know if they saw us go off the road or not, but if they did, they might find us.”

“No way they’d be out in this. We can’t either.”

“We *have* to, Soup.” As if agreeing with her, the windshield made another sound as cracks spiderwebbed across it.

“We could hunker in the back,” Lachlan said. “Put up a blanket between.”

“We still risk being found when the storm lets up. Come on.”

Dammit, he knew she was right. They were just close enough that if they covered up completely and hung on to each other under a blanket, the GPS would take them straight to the second SUV.

Barring any large flying debris, choking to death, or getting so weighed

down by sand clinging to the blanket that they couldn't move.

Not to mention the remote—but not zero—possibility of armed guards searching for them.

“What’s stopping you?” she asked, as if they were looking at running across the street in a little rainstorm.

“What’s not stopping me?”

“Is it because I’m not a big tough SEAL and you think I’ll blow away like a kite?”

“It’s a strong possibility, Sunshine.” The nickname slipped out before he could stop it. Sunshine fit her from her golden eyes to her unstoppable optimism. This close, she even smelled like sunshine—something bright and citrusy and warm.

“You won’t let that happen to me.” Her breath caressed the shell of his ear and he suppressed a shiver at how good it felt. Was she flirting, or was she only this close to him so she’d be heard over the storm?

Then Gina pulled away. “So let’s go. I’m ready.” In the dim light, Lach watched her pull the hijab down and wrap a scarf around her face.

It occurred to him much later after he’d gotten to know her that being cooped up in a tiny space, unable to pace back and forth was worse for Gina than facing down a killer storm, and that’s what drove her to push for their escape.

“Hang on,” Lach said. He grabbed the bottom edge of his thobe and took out a knife. He cut a long strip of cloth into sections and tied them around her sleeves to try and keep the sand out of them. She did the same for him. He wished to God they had a blanket—something to throw over themselves that would allow him to see the GPS. The best he could do was get them going in the right direction and steal a glance at it as he kept his wrist close to his face.

“Ready?”

Gina nodded then pulled the scarf over her eyes, trusting Lachlan to lead her to safety. He put on a pair of sunglasses—the best eye protection he had—pulled her close, then forced the truck door open against the wind and driving sand. It acted as a shield from the worst of the storm. They dropped to their knees. It was either that or risk being blown over. Sand blasted over their clothes and found its way to their skin in moments as they crawled along the ground toward shelter. Gina clung to Lach with one hand. He slung his arm around her, promising himself he’d never let her go, not until she was safe.

Inch by agonizing inch, they crawled as the sand clung to them and grew heavier. Lach's face stung where the scarf and glasses didn't cover it. The glasses quickly became useless as sand etched the lenses opaque. He did his best to protect the watch face, glancing at it as little as possible. So far, so good. All they had to do was keep going straight ahead, but it was easy to get turned around in the storm. He had to make a slight course correction the first time he looked. Then a bigger one the second time. It was like swimming in an ocean full of riptides, only it was wind instead of water pushing them off course.

He gave Gina a squeeze, hoping she was all right. They kept moving forward until they reached the first little bit of the outcropping. A jagged rock poked out from the sand and Lachlan gripped it like a man reaching an island after being shipwrecked. He squeezed Gina again to let her know they were almost there, just a little farther.

He thought the wind was bad before, but it nearly doubled in an instant. They instinctively turned toward each other and huddled, faces together, backs against the world. Lachlan wrapped both arms around Gina and she clung to him, her face buried where his neck met his chest. The gust of wind eased and Lach took advantage of it to move forward again, now moving faster in desperation. Gina kept up even though she was coughing badly now. Lachlan was coughing too—the sand and dust threatened to fill his lungs, even through the scarf.

The boulders grew bigger and smoother. The SUV had to be here somewhere nestled among them. The camouflage netting would help if they could just get under it. Lachlan felt around for it. It had to be buried, and they'd have to dig under —

His hand hit a mound of sand and he dug in. He felt the rough netting and damn near cheered. They were on the leeward side of the storm and the sand had piled up; little chance of digging in before they were sandblasted. He needed to get them to the other side of the SUV and hope that the boulders and the truck itself had blocked most of the sand. He squeezed Gina and turned them to the side, doing his best to use his body to block the wind for her. Slowly, they made their way around the mounded sand and squeezed between it and a boulder. Once they did, the wind was partially blocked. Lach felt the coarse netting under his gloves and chanced a look. The driver's side was clear, with only a few inches of sand piled up around the front tire.

Lachlan lifted the netting and pushed Gina under it, shielding her while

he unlocked and opened the door. Then they were inside, covered in sand but safe.

For now.

Lachlan took off the sandblasted sunglasses and turned on the cab's overhead light. Gina was coughing hard as she removed her sand-coated hijab but her smile was unmistakable. They had survived and she was high on adrenaline. So was he. He quickly looked around and saw that only a little sand had seeped in through the other doors. The netting and boulders were doing a fine job of protecting them. They'd brought in much more sand on their own.

Gina didn't stop with her hijab. Now she was squirming out of the princess's robes, then brushing off the sand that had gotten underneath. Lachlan removed his ghutra and iqal before taking off his thobe. His skin itched and stung and all he wanted was to get naked and shower for a week straight.

Just then his eyes met Gina's and he felt his face go hot at the thought of sharing that shower with her. Her body was firm and tight, her legs went on forever, and the fire in her eyes promised pleasure all night long. He actually groaned.

Gina's cheeks flushed. *Message received.* Instead of looking away, she held his gaze as she continued to undress. Mesmerized, he watched as she slipped off her shirt and then her bra. She brushed off clinging grains of sand from her perfect breasts, her fingers lingering on her nipples as her eyes went to half-mast.

"Lass," he groaned. Was he this crazy? Making love in an SUV during a raging sandstorm? His heart pounded at the idea. He'd wanted Gina since the first moment he'd laid eyes on her. Why deny it now? His fingered ached to touch her again, only now it would be her bare skin under his hands.

Maybe it was the adrenaline, but Lachlan couldn't take it anymore. He lunged towards Gina, capturing her lips in a fierce kiss. She responded eagerly, meeting him halfway.

He broke the kiss and met her golden eyes again. Heat radiated from her body. He kissed her cheek, along her jawline, her throat, then moved to her ear.

"God damn, I want you, Gina. I've wanted you since the moment I met you."

"I want you too, Lach," she moaned. "Right now, this minute. I don't

care. I just need...I *need* —”

Lachlan cut her off with another hungry kiss. Gina pulled at his shirt and he broke their kiss only long enough to tear it off. He quickly brushed off as much sand as he could while her gaze roamed his torso. Then he kicked off his boots while she did the same.

With trembling hands, Lachlan explored her body. He ran his thumbs over her nipples, reveling in the way she hissed and tipped her head back. She obviously loved having him play with them. He trailed kisses down her neck and across her collarbone. She moaned and gripped his shoulders.

Lach was rock hard and he knew he couldn't wait any longer. His cock was already weeping in his boxer briefs. He let out a low growl of pleasure as he lifted Gina out of her seat and pressed himself against her. They moved her to the back of the SUV and he laid her down on the leather bench and knelt on the floor. As he tugged off her pants he couldn't believe how gorgeous she was. He brushed sand off her strong, smooth thighs. He pulled down her panties and chuckled. She may have dyed her hair black for the mission, but the neat triangle of hair waiting for him under her panties was still a deep, coppery red. He ran his fingers through the short curls, down between her legs, and found her hot and wet and ready for him.

“Please, Soup, don't torture me,” she moaned. “I told you I wanted you. I mean it. *Now.*” Gina arched up onto her elbows and hooked her leg around his shoulders. He shifted her until she was sitting. Gina lunged forward and undid his pants. Her fingers brushed over his cock straining in his boxer briefs and he almost lost it right then. He gripped her hand as he hissed, fighting to keep his pleasure at bay. No woman had ever excited him more.

“Touch me again and I'll fire off,” he gritted out. She pulled her hand back and attacked his throat instead, kissing and nipping until he pushed her back and pulled down his underwear. His cock sprang free and she grabbed it. Gina squeezed his shaft at the base and stroked upward, freeing more pre-come which glinted at the tip.

“Fuck,” he groaned as his balls tightened. He squeezed his eyes shut against the sight of Gina licking her lips, killing him by inches. Lachlan pushed her back against the seat and spread her legs. “You want me? Oh, fuck, you're gonna get me, lass.” He stroked her soaking wet opening, circled and pressed his thumb against her clit until she moaned.

Lachlan picked her up until she straddled him. Knees bent, shins on the bench, Gina's back pressed against the seat, he lined himself up, stroked his



tip against her once, then slid inside her. Lach's entire body shuddered as her warm core wrapped around him. He paused to savor being inside her. *This is where I belong.* The words echoed in his head and nothing ever felt truer.

They moaned together as he began to move, slowly at first. Gina massaged his shoulders and upper back. She wrapped her legs around his waist, drawing him in as deeply as she could. Her body squeezed around his cock, drawing out his pleasure. Lachlan lifted Gina's hips and pounded into her.

"So good, lass," he groaned. "So damn good, I'm losing my mind."

She let out a low moan as her body tightened around him. She thrust her hips against his, fighting to find her peak. "I can't."

"Yes you can, Sunshine."

"So close."

"That's it. That's my girl. Give it to me."

Gina's core gave his cock another tight squeeze as she arched her back and closed her eyes. Lach watched her face as she reached her pleasure, a long moan escaping her lips.

"*Fuck!*" he roared. He finally let go, his hips moving of their own volition as he came hot and hard and deep inside her. All his pent-up tension over the mission, over trying to survive, over wanting her, ebbed as his cock throbbed. Her body responded with its own tremors as she clenched and unclenched around him.

She was heaven. Pure, simple heaven.

Lachlan's breaths came fast and heavy as he shifted so that he was lying down with Gina on top of him. They were both drenched in sweat, rivulets of it streaking through the last of the sand clinging to them. His cock was still semi-hard inside her and he thought it wouldn't take much to get him up again.

Gina lay panting against his chest, tendrils of her damp hair sticking to his pecs. He ran his hand up and down her back in long strokes and felt her body relax into his. She reached up and played with the nape of his neck, sending pleasurable shivers down his spine. His cock stiffened and she ground her hips against him in response until he gripped her hips hard. He felt her heart speed up in time with his own as he lifted her and slammed her back down over his cock.

He couldn't get enough and neither could she, judging by the way her golden eyes burned into his. She sat astride his cock, grinding against him as

he played with her right nipple with one hand and her clit with the other. Sweat poured down her chest between her breasts and pooled on his abdomen, mingling with his. With one final thrust she threw her head back and screamed while he pumped into her again. She collapsed onto his chest, her breath heaving.

“That was...”

Lachlan trailed a finger down her back. “Amazing.”

She finally lifted her head and gazed into his eyes. “I’ve never done anything—*anything*—like this before.”

“What? This is the first princess you’ve ever saved?” he teased.

“Well, that, sure.” She ran her fingers through his hair. “But I think you know what I’m talking about.”

Lachlan chuckled. “I do, Sunshine. First time for me as well. I don’t make it a habit of stopping in the middle of a mission to make love to an amazing woman.”

She quirked an eyebrow as her gaze penetrated him. If she ever decided to go into the CIA she’d make one hell of an interrogator.

The thought was like a bucket of cold water dousing him. What was he doing? She was destined for the alphabets and he had his career as a SEAL. The two were like cats and dogs, not to mention she outclassed him. And worse, he hadn’t given a thought to his team or the princess. Had they gotten to safety or did they not have enough time, since he and Gina had been discovered? How was the storm affecting their escape onto the ship? And how much time did he and Gina have before the storm gave out? Would they be found?

Gina’s eyes flickered and for a moment he saw intense sadness in them. Was she thinking the same thoughts, or only reading his? God, he didn’t want to hurt her. She was so young; he had no business whatsoever making love with her, even if it felt like the best thing that had ever happened to him.

*Keep her.*

The thought accompanied an intense pain in his chest as he simultaneously claimed her for himself and gave her up.

“We need water,” he said flatly. “It’s a million degrees in here.”

He looked away like a coward at the first sign of devastation on her face. He’d killed the light in her eyes and couldn’t bear to see it. When she lifted herself off him, he didn’t stop her. She looked around for the supplies stowed in the SUV, which included a case of water. Lach sat up.

“Behind the bench. I’ve got it.” He turned and leaned over the bench. When he lifted the case and turned around, she was already back in her bra and panties and trying to brush a ton of sand out of her clothes. He’d never felt so naked.

“Gina.”

She glanced up at him, her golden eyes now wary.

## ELEVEN

*Gina, age 22*

**R**egina stared at the man who had just made love to her like no one ever had before. Who'd made her feel more alive, freer than she'd ever dreamed of feeling.

And now he'd shut her out just as quickly as he'd let her in.

When he'd first wrapped his arms around her and roughly pulled her to him, he'd read her face and didn't hesitate to give her what she wanted. His lips crashed down on hers and tasted of adrenaline and desire and she couldn't get enough of it. She'd kissed him back hungrily, wishing the moment would never end. They'd been successful, Sana was safe, and this was how she wanted to celebrate—in Lach's arms. She wanted to take him inside her body, wanted him to take her apart and put her back together again. Her blood pounded in her ears and she heard herself moan the first time she felt his erection pressing against her belly. They could burn off their adrenaline together in the best, most pleasurable of ways. God, he would taste good—salty and sweaty and masculine. Fresh from the fight.

And he had. She could smell the lust on his breath, feel it in the way his body shook when he entered her. She loved the way he didn't hesitate, the way he trusted that she wanted him. Their lovemaking was primal, a reaction to surviving she was sure. But there was more. They'd had a connection from the very beginning and it culminated the moment they came together.

Then afterward, she saw it in his eyes. The regret. Then second-guessing what they'd done. The realization of their situation. For a moment, she hoped he'd decide she was worth it, that they were worth a shot. All her life, Regina had focused on her ambitions and the will of her father which were one and the same with the needs of her country. But now, with Lachlan, she saw for the first time that there could be more in her life. There could be love with an equal partner.

She hoped he saw it too.

And then he shut her out.

"Gina," he said, and she tried not to flinch. No one else had ever shortened her name, but it sounded right coming from him. She'd already started getting dressed, not wanting to be naked and vulnerable in his presence for one more second. She glared at him, willing him to either say he still wanted her, or to look away.

Before she could react, he'd tossed aside the case of water bottles and snapped her back up in his arms. His lips found hers and she was helpless again.

He stopped kissing her. "Fuck, I..." He studied her face as if it were a pool of cool water and he was dying of thirst.

"Don't say it, Lachlan. Don't say I'm too young, or that this is wrong, or we can't do this. Don't..."

But it was too late. The spell was broken again. Taking a deep breath through his nose, he let her go and sat on the bench where they'd just made love. He scrubbed his face, then grabbed his underwear and pants and pulled them on. Her instinct was to grab him, shake him, make him understand that this was right. They both wanted it. For the first time in her life, Gina was ready to set aside all her plans and throw caution to the wind with this infuriating man. She felt like she could conquer the world with him but that wasn't what she wanted. She only wanted *him*.

"It's just the excitement from the mission you're feeling, lass. It's confusing when you're not used to it. It's exciting, and that translates to... other things."

Her desire and lust quickly shifted to anger. How dare he try and deny that what they felt for each other was only post-battle euphoria. Regina clenched her fists and looked down at the dusty floor of the SUV.

"No, don't belittle this. It's more than that." She looked up at him. "We both know it. We both felt it. This isn't either of us." She gestured around

them. “Neither of us is into casual fucking.” She watched him flinch. “This is something more, something special.”

“Sunshine,” he said sadly, shaking his head. “You’re right. God, you’re right.” His beautiful, piercing blue-green eyes held such pain and regret she could barely look into them. “But I have to say it. We can’t do this. We have separate paths, you and me. As much as I wish things were different, I’m not for you.”

*You are!* she wanted to scream as her body shook. *You are, and I want you more than I’ve ever wanted anyone or anything.* She took a step forward and he held up his hand.

Chastised, she composed herself even as her insides shook. *Never show anyone how you really feel.* Her father’s words came to her. He was right. It only complicated things, made you vulnerable.

Regina lifted her head. “You’re right. It was nothing.” She held out her hand for him to shake. He looked at it like it was unexploded ordnance before he took it. She tried not to shiver at his touch, to stay firm and dispassionate. When they finally finished shaking hands, he held her gaze just a moment too long before turning away.

**B**y the next day, their world had changed.

Regina slept fitfully. At one point, she heard Lachlan talking to his team. She roused herself and noticed the storm outside wasn’t as loud as it had been.

“What’s the word?” she asked when he was done. “Is she safe?” It was the first conversation they’d had beyond polite please-and-thank-you exchanges since shaking hands.

Lachlan nodded. “Aye. They had no resistance getting her to the ship other than the weather. They made international waters an hour ago.”

Regina breathed a sigh of relief. But Lachlan still looked tense. “What else?”

“There’s been a coup.”

“What?” She blinked rapidly. Her first thought was of her parents. Were they safe? Or, oh God, were they waiting for her before evacuating, thinking she’d been taken?

Lach showed again that he could read her mind. “Your mom and dad are fine and they’ve been told you’re safe.”

*So they’ve been lied to*, she thought. “At least they aren’t worried. So what happened?”

He looked pissed. “I need a damn cigarette.” He patted his shirt pocket and found it empty. “Fuck.”

“Those things will kill you.”

She didn’t miss his smirk, or the way he quickly covered it up.

“So what happened?” she asked again.

“Our mission was a decoy, a distraction. While Rashid was focused on his daughter, his brother Issam escaped. It’s been a bloodless coup and Rashid is in the custody of soldiers loyal to Issam.”

“He escaped with some help, I’m sure,” Regina said. “Did you know?”

“Of course not,” he practically spat. He blew out a breath. “I’m sorry. That wasn’t directed at you.”

She nodded. “I get it.” And she did. Regina felt used. It seemed some things never changed. “So what do we do now?”

“Wait for the storm to pass. Dig ourselves out. Go home. Another fine Navy day,” he muttered the last.

Regina surprised both of them with a giggle. Lachlan looked at her like she’d lost her mind.

“*Such* a fine *Navy* day that we’re in the middle of the desert.”

Lach gave her a rueful grin. “Swear I’ve spent more time these past years playing in the sand than on the water.”

“Does it still make you happy?”

“Happy?”

“Being a SEAL?”

He didn’t hesitate to nod. “Always.”

*Of course it did*, she thought. Like he’d said, they had separate paths and he was happy to follow his—away from her after this mission.

**T**he sandstorm blew itself out sometime toward morning. After he’d had a smoke—God knew where he’d found a cigarette unless one of his buddies who stocked the SUV took pity on him and left him a pack—they pulled the

heavy, sand-choked netting off the SUV and shoveled sand away from the tires. They worked in silence, guns at the ready, wary of any guards who might still be tracking them. But with the news from Lach's team, that seemed less of a possibility. Regina's body ached by the time they were done. Her skin felt raw where sand blew across it now—the worst of the storm had passed but the weather was by no means calm.

Lachlan nodded when he thought they'd moved enough sand to make it to the highway back into the city. He drove them over sand and rocks and around drifting dunes on the road that reminded her of snow after a Midwestern blizzard. They passed other vehicles that had been forced off the road—paint blasted off, their windows buffed like sea glass.

The city was quiet, on lockdown, but Regina flashed her passport and they passed every checkpoint with ease. She'd lost her cell phone somewhere, either in the princess's car or during their trek to the second SUV. She wasn't used to keeping track of one yet; no one was. She imagined it was full of frantic messages from her mother. She wished she could let her parents know she was on her way. Regina glanced over at Lachlan. Would he drive her straight to their door and drop her off like a prom date long past curfew?

Yup. That was exactly what he did.

She had about one minute before her father's security team would rush the car.

"Will I see you at the debriefing?" she asked.

"Probably not, lass." He turned to her, his sea-colored eyes dark and unreadable. "Good luck. Whatever you choose to do with your life, I'm sure you'll be astounding."

"I've decided that if given the chance, I'm headed for the Farm. So, maybe our paths will cross again."

Lachlan clenched his jaw and she wondered if it was at the thought of her joining the CIA, or of seeing her again.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the front door open and the head of security storm out. Regina undid her seatbelt and used their last few seconds together to dart across the gap between them and land a kiss on his lips. His hand came up and tangled in her hair for an instant before he pulled back, his eyes now on fire.

"Burn brightly, Sunshine," he said as the passenger door opened and Regina was whisked out of the car and back into her normal life.



Two years passed before she saw him again.

Two busy, unbelievable years.

True to her word, Regina told Jeremy that she wanted to join the Agency and true to his, he greased the rails. Regina visited the Farm for eighteen grueling months—first starting at a desk (not as boring as she thought it would be) then on to training in dead drops, detecting tails, weapons training, the stress of constant surveillance, and finally exercises on surviving capture and torture.

Six months out of the Farm, Gina's assignment took her back to the Middle East, this time to Egypt. Sipping her mint tea at a table in the dusty shade of a teashop's awning, Gina had just followed two men suspected of having ties with a terrorist group that didn't approve of Egypt's new leaders. They were sitting just inside discussing an upcoming meeting with a man from Qatar, giving her all the information she could have wanted. Tonight she would type up her report and pass it on up the line, and tomorrow, she would make contact with another agent for the first time at a different cafe and pass on any new intel and recommendations that she received back. All she knew was that this person would approach her table and ask her if she liked lemon with her tea and she would reply, *only when drinking with the royals*.

As she eavesdropped on two men, she spotted him.

He was dressed like a tourist but she'd recognize his body anywhere—the way he stood, the way he moved, the way he brought his cigarette to his lips. Lachlan Campbell stood in an alleyway across from the tea shop. He was pretending to examine spices, occasionally engaging the merchant in conversation. But every couple of minutes he glanced straight at her.

Two years. She'd spent those years trying to forget Lachlan, telling herself she was far too busy to look him up. She'd also been too busy to have a relationship with anyone else. The closest man in her life right now was Jeremy Heath. After she'd told him her intentions to join the CIA, he'd treated her with a new level of respect and gave her no reason not to trust him. Throughout her training, Jeremy had kept tabs on her. She was never sure how to feel about that. During their debriefing after Sana's rescue she'd grilled him about the coup, knowing that he must have had intelligence on it.

"I told you everything you needed to know about your mission, Regina. I

would never hold back on you. That gets people killed.”

Still, that little voice in the back of her head told her to trust but verify.

That went for everyone in her life, not just Jeremy. She'd always been distrustful by nature, thanks to her father, but working for the Agency took her wariness to an all-new level. She cut ties with her old friends and acquaintances, with one notable exception. She shed the last bit of her naivety, and locked her heart down tightly. She went into the Farm as Regina Sparda and emerged as Gina Smith—tougher and wiser.

And coldhearted if she believed what Jeremy told her about herself. Coldheartedness was a good quality to have in her new line of work—he'd told her that, too.

But seeing Lachlan watch her across the road undid every last bit of icy shielding she'd put up around her heart and set her belly on fire.

*Burn brightly, Sunshine.* His last words to her echoed in her head.

Gina was tempted to grab her phone and call in. She and Jeremy were partners on this mission, posing as friendly Canadians looking for goods to import for their shop in Toronto. Their cover allowed them to linger in the markets where they could eavesdrop, taking the temperature of the country after what was being called the Arab Spring. Jeremy had never mentioned any CIA paramilitary units, let alone Lachlan being a part of their assignment.

For one irrational moment, she let herself think that he'd sought her out on his own, unable to stay away, that he'd kept track of her just as Jeremy had. She watched Lachlan pay the merchant for a paper bag full of spices, then field strip his cigarette before crossing the street. She felt like she was in a dream—hell, she'd had dreams like this countless times where Lachlan appeared out of nowhere and walked toward her, sea-colored eyes flashing, his lips curving into a seductive smile. In her dreams he never reached her before she woke up.

*But I must be awake now because he's standing right in front of me.*

Gina shook her head to clear it. She was on assignment. She needed to keep eavesdropping on the men in the teashop. She needed to meet her contact and discuss what she'd heard about enemy movements out of Qatar. Lachlan could *not* be here right now.

Yet she watched without moving a muscle as he pulled out the chair across from her and sat down. Watched his piercing eyes soften as he smiled, before his lips parted and he said, “Do you take lemon with your tea?”

Gina swallowed hard before answering, “Only when drinking with the royals.”

“It’s been a long time, lass.” He set the bag of spices down and folded his hands on the metal table.

This had to be a set up. Why hadn’t Jeremy warned her that Lachlan was her contact? No, he would have said something—Lach had to be acting on his own. But the men talking inside the teashop were real, and dangerous judging by their conversation, and Lachlan must be the agent she was supposed to meet.

“It has been a long time. I’d love to catch up, but I have some fascinating friends inside right now.”

Lach nodded and stayed quiet. Even through her shock, it was second nature for Gina to record and remember clandestine conversations and she hadn’t missed a word. She returned her full attention to the men as they wrapped up their deal and left. The second man walked out five minutes after the first and headed in the opposite direction.

They waited another five minutes after he disappeared down the street to speak. Lachlan went first.

“You look good, lass.”

Seriously? Were they really going to do this?

“I wasn’t expecting anyone today. And I really wasn’t expecting *you*.”

“You weren’t? I thought my code made it obvious.”

“I assumed Jeremy told the agent what to say, not the other way around.” Only Jeremy and a tiny handful of people knew the ‘lemon code’ she’d used with Sana. But Lach had been in the room during the debriefing after she met Sana and so he was one of them.

Lachlan’s eyes widened momentarily. “You’re working with Heath?”

“You didn’t know?”

Lachlan’s chair creaked as he shifted and his hand went to his shirt pocket—or rather to the pack of cigarettes inside. “This was supposed to be a double-blind.” He took the pack out, glanced at it, then at her, and put it back.

“But you knew about me, obviously.”

“Never did like going into a situation blind.” Lach grinned. “I have friends, too. Imagine my surprise when they told me who I’d be meeting.”

“Are you with the Agency now?” she asked, ignoring the way her heart sped up.

Lachlan tipped his head back and laughed. “Hell no. Never. Told you, I

love my current job. I'm only loaned out. Again."

Hope she never imagined having died quickly in her chest. Of course he loved being a SEAL. He never lied to her, never even bent the truth or told it slant, when it felt like that was all she ever did anymore.

He studied her carefully, his gaze like a physical weight. She found herself staring right back. He looked good, in the prime of life, despite his tacky tourist shirt emblazoned with a picture of King Tut. The least he could have done was show mercy and gotten an oversized shirt instead of a tee with sleeves that strained around his biceps and molded to his perfect chest.

Then again, the way he was looking at her brooked no mercy.

"Should we have followed them?" he prompted when she didn't speak.

"No. I got what I needed just now. They're young and cocky and didn't think that anyone could possibly be listening in, let alone someone like me. I know where they're meeting their contact from Qatar and when. They've already told their commander he's selling them weapons for twice the price the commander agreed on. He'll bring the weapons, they'll pay, and then pocket half the money."

"They're idiots."

"Told you. Young and cocky. If this went through, they'd be found out and killed. You'll be saving their lives when you and your men raid the meeting. That's what you're here to do, right?"

"That, and a few other things."

"Which you can't talk about. I get it." She took a sip of her tea and watched his hand stray to the pack of cigarettes then back down to the table. "Can I order you some tea? It'll give you something to do with your hands that won't kill you."

"I don't smoke that much," he scoffed.

"One is too much."

"Do I look unhealthy?"

Damn that knowing twinkle in his eye. The two idiots weren't the only cocky guys around.

"Not yet." She grinned over the edge of her glass teacup. "Might want to keep it that way." Her eyes flicked up and down his body.

Red rose up his throat and spread into his cheeks.

"You know," she pushed, wanting to see if that red would spread any farther. "You didn't have to meet me directly. Like I said, I got what I needed just now. I have to make a report anyway, and it would have gone straight to

you.”

“Not straight to me. Let’s just say I wanted to know exactly what I was in for this time, unfiltered.”

“Still upset over being in the dark about the coup?”

“Aren’t you?” he pushed back. “Or, maybe not, considering who you’re partnered with.”

*Wow. That stung.* Lach never struck her as a jealous guy. Was he? Or just angry?

“I was upset, yes. But I was younger then. Naive, I guess. I didn’t know how the world worked —”

“Didn’t know how, or didn’t accept it?” Fire sparked in his eyes.

“What are you saying?”

He studied her another moment then sighed. “That maybe the CIA suits you just fine now.”

That hurt even more.

“Fine. So let me give you the details and then you can leave like you did the first time.”

*What is wrong with me?* Stupid of her to poke at him. The smart thing would be to walk away right now, let him wait for her report, and forget he existed like she had for the past two years.

God, maybe he was right. Maybe she *was* suited for this life, considering that she’d just lied to herself.

He looked taken aback. His eyes flashed as if he’d just taken a punch to the gut. Lach closed his eyes and took a deep breath. When he opened them again, they were twin pools of calmness.

“Where’s the meeting? What time?” When she hesitated, he added. “Please, Gina. I want to know if the information you give me is different from what filters down from your report.”

“What’s really going on, Lach?”

He only shook his head. “I’m taking every precaution to keep my guys safe.”

*Of course you are. You always have.*

He leaned forward. “And to keep *you* safe, Sunshine. Now, do you trust me?”

That was easy to answer. She didn’t hesitate. Gina gave Lach the details. She was sure she was breaking protocol, maybe even jeopardizing everything she’d worked for. But she knew he didn’t ask her lightly.

“Thank you,” he said when she finished. Lach looked relieved.

“You really don’t trust us, do you?” she asked.

“Us?”

“The Agency.”

His eyes narrowed. “I will always trust *you*, Gina.” His hand darted across the table and grabbed hers. His rough thumb brushed across her fingers. “Always.”

As quickly as he’d grabbed her hand, he let it go. “But only you. And I suggest you watch your back.” Lach stood up.

“Wait,” she said before she could stop herself. “Will I see you again?”

“Where are you staying?” he asked.

“The Nefertari.”

“Heath there too?”

“Yes.”

“Same room?”

She didn’t like the sour look on his face. “No, actually. What...what are you going to do?”

He didn’t answer, just turned around and walked away.

But as she made her way back to the hotel, she felt his eyes on her. Watching her back the entire way.

Three nights later, Gina was finishing up her packing and getting ready to catch her flight home in the morning, her job in Cairo finished and successful. From what she heard the raid on the warehouse went off without a hitch. No mention of anything in the papers, no injuries—at least on their side.

Jeremy had returned to the States ahead of her, leaving a note saying he’d been called back for an important meeting. Of course, he’d given her no details about it. She tried not to be annoyed. She needed to get used to being kept in the dark.

Gina tried to ignore the ache in her chest, pretending it wasn’t disappointment that Lach hadn’t come to the hotel. Of course he wouldn’t come—that would break protocol. She’d tried to find out surreptitiously if Lach was still in country, or if he’d vanished like Jeremy as soon as the job

was done last night. That's how it usually went—achieve the objective then disappear, either go on to the next mission, or go home and wait to be called up again.

Maybe someone waited for him back in the States and he'd hopped on the earliest flight he could find. She tried not to imagine what their reunion would look like—a beautiful, scantily-clad woman waiting at the door after getting his text. Or maybe she'd rush to the airport and risk security to get as close as she could to him as quickly as possible. His eyes would light up, he'd hurry to her, pick her up and twirl her around —

A soft knock on the door tore her out of her thoughts and her breath caught in her throat. She froze in place, knowing it had to be him.

He knocked again, this time louder.

There was only one reason why Lachlan would seek her out now. There was no woman waiting for him. At least not back in the States. Just like no one waited for her.

*He stayed behind. For me.*

Taking a deep breath to steady herself, she walked across the hotel room and placed her hand flat against the door. If she opened it, everything would change. She'd have to tell herself that she wasn't cold, that she did still have a heart. That she still wanted him, and he wanted her.

Gina bit her lower lip and made her choice.

She opened the door. Lach's eyes met hers as heat rose between them.

“First, I want to say I'm sorry —”

That was all he got out before Gina pulled him into the room. The door had barely closed behind him before his lips were on hers. He crushed her to his body, one hand streaking up her back to tangle in her hair, the other gripping her ass, hard. His kiss obliterated two years of loneliness and longing. They might as well have been back in the middle of the sandstorm. Her body immediately reacted to his as she ran her hands up his incredible biceps, feeling new scars underneath. She smoothed her thumbs over the stubble on his cheeks. His face would feel incredible between her legs—roughness against her thighs while his tongue brought her to ecstasy.

Gina moaned into his mouth and he echoed her desire. Lach had her undressed before they were even halfway to the bed. The world outside and all its problems ceased to exist as he laid her down and explored her body in the dimly lit room. When he finally sank into her, Gina's nails bit into his back and her cry echoed his groan.

As they lay tangled together in the aftermath, Gina's heart raced with a mixture of satisfaction and fear. He'd undone her completely, sent all of her carefully cultivated defenses crashing down. All she wanted was to stay here in his arms.

But that was a dangerous fantasy.

"How did the mission go?" she asked, trying to remind herself of who they were.

"Flawless. Thanks to you."

"My report? Or..."

He stroked the nape of her neck. "What you told me beforehand."

She started. "How different was my initial intel from the final report?"

He paused. "Different enough that there would have been complications if that's all I had to go on."

Gina propped herself up to look at Lach. "I'd like to see it."

"You don't have a copy?"

"No."

"Hmm. I'll send you one." He pulled her down again and kissed her hairline.

"I'll need to make a list of every single person who saw my initial —"

"Shhh." He stroked her hair. "That's a tomorrow problem."

But a significant change to the report that could have injured Lach—or anyone else—was a huge problem. She needed to get to the bottom of it.

"Tomorrow," he reiterated, feeling her body's tenseness.

Gina realized she was using it as an excuse to rebuild her walls. She sighed and relaxed back into his body. "Tomorrow."

Just as she was drifting off, Lachlan brushed her hair back from her cheek. "I'm sorry," he said again.

"About what?" she whispered back.

"The way I left you that day. And for staying away ever since."

"We had no choice," she said as she lifted her head to look into his face.

"We always have a choice. I was a fool to think I could give you up."

She laid her head back down and listened to his heartbeat.

"Then promise me we'll find a way to see each other again," she whispered into Lachlan's chest.

He tightened his arms around her, pressing a soft kiss to her forehead. "I promise," he murmured.

In the morning they made their plans and went their separate ways.



## TWELVE

*Gina, age 24*

**A** month after their time in Cairo, Gina received a text. She was in D.C., just a week away from leaving the country. She smiled to herself as her heart sped up. They were really doing this.

The dim lights of the hotel bar cast a seductive glow on the patrons, too absorbed in their conversations and drinks to notice her. Gina leaned against the smooth, wooden bar, her eyes scanning the room from beneath a fringe of blond bangs. She hoped her disguise, complete with glasses and a subtle makeup job, would do its work in case she was spotted by a co-worker or one of the many people her father knew.

And then she felt eyes on her. She stiffened until a man stood right behind her.

“Can I buy you a drink?”

Lachlan's voice was low and smooth. A smirk danced on his lips when she turned to face him. He'd known it was her from the second he walked in and got the jump on her, dammit.

“Sure,” Gina replied, playing along, “but you should know, I'm waiting for someone.” The twinkle in her eyes betrayed her amusement.

“Are you?” His eyebrow quirked up. “What's his name?”

She pressed her lips together, trying not to laugh. “Soup.”

“Sounds like a loser. Maybe I can persuade you to spend some time with

me instead,” Lachlan shot back, signaling the bartender for two whiskeys as Gina lost her battle with laughter. He slid into the stool next to Gina and swiveled hers to face him, trapping her legs with his. The bartender set their drinks down and moved on to the next patron.

“Mmm, I don’t think so.” She looked him up and down. “Though you are tempting.”

“This Soup guy must be someone special then.”

Gina grinned. “He is. Very special.”

They clinked glasses, laughter erupting between them as they fell into their familiar banter. It felt like a lifetime since she’d last seen him, but the spark between them hadn’t dimmed.

Lachlan downed his whiskey. “Come on, lass, let’s ditch this place.” He threw down a fifty, grabbed her hand, and led her out of the bar to the lobby. Gina’s pulse quickened with anticipation as they walked the short distance to the elevators.

Inside the hotel room, the outside world faded away once more. Lachlan's hands gently cradled Gina's face, his thumbs wiping away the remnants of her contour makeup as their lips met in a tender, passionate kiss. They shed their clothes quickly, their bodies eagerly seeking the closeness they’d both been craving, if his groans at seeing her naked and spread on the bed for him were any indication.

“Can’t get enough of you, Sunshine,” he growled as he crawled between her legs.

As they lay entwined the next morning, Gina traced circles on Lachlan's chest. They had five days together, and she imagined they’d spend most of their time in the room.

“Want me to order breakfast?” she asked. “Or do you —”

Lach’s phone rang, cutting her off. He grabbed it off the bedside table, took one look at the screen, and groaned.

Gina sighed. “Don’t tell me.”

“Wheels up in an hour.” He wrapped his hand around the back of her head and kissed her hard. “I wish to God it were different.” He pulled the sheets back and stood.

“Tell me where, at least,” Gina said before she could stop herself. She knew better than to ask, but tell that to her heart. “Maybe I can snoop.”

He looked over his shoulder at her, his expression showing the war going on inside him.

She shrugged a shoulder. “Hey, it was helpful last time.”

“I don’t want you risking your job.” Lachlan pulled on his underwear and pants.

“And I don’t want you in any more danger than necessary.” She’d planned on telling him what she’d found when she looked into who had seen her report.

“This mission isn’t tied to the Agency.”

“Doesn’t mean I can’t dig up some intel on it. I can probably narrow your destination down to three places based on what I already know is happening in the world right now.”

“What did you find out about your report last time?” He buttoned up his shirt and picked up his watch, then glanced at it and made a face when he saw the time. “It passed through Heath’s hands, didn’t it?”

“Actually no,” Gina said, feeling surprisingly defensive of her mentor. “Jeremy didn’t touch it.”

“Mmm.” Now Lach was pulling on his boots.

“He’s done a lot for me, Lach.”

“I’m sure.”

“Wow,” she said, taken aback. “What does that mean?”

The look he gave her pierced her heart before it softened. “Sorry. It means I’m insecure.”

Gina actually laughed. “About this? About us?” She gestured back and forth between them. “Lach. If you can’t tell how I feel about you —”

He swooped her up—bedsheet and all—and carried her to a chair beside the window. As the rain came down outside streaking the windowpane, he sat with her in his lap and kissed her.

“If it’s the same way I feel about you, lass, then I have nothing to worry about.” He pressed his forehead against hers and closed his eyes. “I adore you,” he whisper-growled. “I love you, Sunshine.”

“I love you, too, Soup. So, so much.”

Lach’s phone buzzed and he practically snarled at it.

“I don’t know when our paths will cross again, but I’ll find you,” he said, a fierce determination burning in his eyes. “I will always find you.”

“Promise?” she asked, her voice barely audible as he stroked her hair.

“Promise.”

After he left, she stayed curled up in the chair, watching out the rain-streaked window until she saw Lachlan jog to the parking garage across the

street. She watched him field strip the cigarette he must have lit the moment he left the room—he knew she hated the smell so he never smoked around her—before he disappeared into the garage. Then she got dressed and drove back to her empty apartment, haunting it until it was time to leave for Africa.

Wearing nothing but a pair of lace panties and a matching bra, Gina sat on the edge of a hotel bed in Iceland, her eyes red from exhaustion and disappointment. Lachlan was supposed to meet her there the night before on a quick layover, but he hadn't shown up or called and she'd tossed and turned all night. Were they cutting it too close this time with only a few hours to spend together? Or had something happened to him on his mission? Was he lying in a German hospital, injured and unconscious, with no one having the faintest clue that they were together? Would she only find out he was injured—or God forbid, dead—from a heavily redacted report?

*Stop it. You have zero to go on, so don't start making up stories.*

She laid her hand over her heart as if the pressure could make it slow down. They'd been at this for years now, meeting up whenever their schedules allowed. If they were lucky, they had a week or two together, only a couple of days if they weren't. Other times, they only had a few hours together. Sometimes, like now, they missed each other entirely, and that hurt the most.

She really needed to talk to Lachlan this time. Things were about to change that might make it even harder if not impossible to meet up. Gina checked the time on her phone again. She had an hour and a half before she needed to leave.

*Next time. If there is one.*

With a heavy heart, Gina decided to take a shower before heading to the airport. As the hot water cascaded over her, she heard the tiny hotel room's door open.

"Sorry I'm late," a beloved voice called out over the sound of rushing water. Gina's eyes widened along with her smile as Lachlan stepped into the bathroom, already peeling off his clothes. He pulled back the shower curtain, a sheepish grin on his face.

"Dammit, Soup. You scare me when you're late and you don't call," Gina

said, torn between relief and anger. "Where the hell have you been?" She looked his naked body over for any injuries. Yup—stitches ran along a new, jagged cut across his left pec. Too damn close to his heart.

"Mission ran long," he explained as he stepped into the shower and pulled her close. "But I'm here now." His lips met hers and their bodies pressed together, his erection pushing insistently against her belly.

"What's this?" she asked, running her fingers alongside the new wound.

"Nothing important." He grabbed her hand and kissed her palm. Then he backed her against the shower wall as his hand strayed between her legs. "I'm safe. I'm here with you. Where I belong."

Gina sighed as wetness that had nothing to do with the shower flooded her.

"Mmm. I can feel how much you've missed me, Sunshine," Lachlan hissed in her ear as he rubbed her.

"So can I," she replied as her hand wrapped around his straining cock.

He threw his head back and squeezed his eyes shut as she stroked him, water cascading down his chest. "Can't get enough of you, Sunshine," he groaned. "Never will."

The next half hour was pure bliss and over too soon.

Afterward, they hastily dried off and dressed. Gina still had a flight to catch.

"I can drive you to Keflavík Airport," Lach offered. "That'll give us another hour."

"No. I rented a car. It'll be safer if I leave on my own."

"No one's watching you *here*, are they?" He sounded annoyed.

"I never know." She picked up her bag, feeling irritated both at nothing in particular and at everything in general. There was no time now to talk about the coming changes and she didn't want to just drop a potential bomb in his lap and dash out the door.

"Gina."

She turned and almost snapped at him but the look in his eyes stopped her. Anger was better than the deep sadness she felt. Each time they were together it felt so good and right and it hurt so much more to leave him. But it was pain she would willingly suffer time and time again, just to feel Lachlan's arms around her. It was the only time she ever felt safe.

Lachlan's eyes were full of longing as if she were already far away. "This won't be forever."

Gina closed her eyes. She felt his arms encircle her, his warmth envelop her and she almost lost her resolve. Just when her career was about to take her away from him for who knew how long, he was sounding like he wanted to leave the Teams.

“I wish you could have gotten here sooner, Lach. There’s so much we need to talk about.”

He pulled away and looked down at her. His thumb brushed her cheek. “What is it, Sunshine?”

Her phone buzzed with an incoming text.

“That’s Jeremy checking on me. I’m already running late.”

She felt Lachlan stiffen at Jeremy’s name. “He meeting you at the airport? Is that why you don’t want me driving you?”

She nodded. This was not how she wanted to break the news. “We’re going undercover together the second I get to the airport.”

He looked stricken. “Where are you going?”

“You know I can’t tell you. Or for how long. Even I don’t know that.” She kissed him and placed both hands on his cheeks. “I love you. This doesn’t change that fact at all. It doesn’t change *us*.”

Lachlan swallowed and nodded. “I know. But, you won’t be able to get away, will you?” He already knew the answer but she confirmed it with a nod.

“Then tell them about us,” he said.

She squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head almost violently.

“Why not?” he raised his voice. “Gina, they don’t *own* you. They can’t stop you from falling in love, having friends, getting married —”

Gina’s eyes snapped open and her gaze locked onto his. “Married?”

He nodded. “I told you, this won’t go on forever. I’m only going along with the sneaking around for your sake. I don’t understand why you won’t tell them about us.”

“Because you’re mine, not theirs.” There, she’d said it. “And, you’re free. If I told the Agency we were together, they’d stick a microscope up your ass. You’d be under surveillance, your loyalty questioned constantly. If you had any debt, it would be seen as a way you could be exploited by our enemies. And that’s just *our* side, Lach. Those are the friendlies. Speaking of enemies, if I were burned, my enemies wouldn’t just go after me. You’d be in the crosshairs, too. They could kidnap you as a way to get to me. Why the hell are you smiling like that, Soup?”

“Because you’re talking about me like I’m a bashful little flower. I’m a SEAL, Gina. I think I could avoid capture. I have so far.”

She suppressed a shiver and thought *Yeah, Lach, you have so far. But maybe not against the man I’m about to face.*

But to tell him that would only worry him.

*What we have here is a standoff.*

“I don’t like the look on your face, Sunshine.”

She smiled and tried to make it look convincing. “I need to go. I love you.”

She watched him bite back his reply and it killed her. “Why can’t you believe in me?”

That hit like a sucker punch. “I do. But you need to trust me.”

“Like I’ve always said, Gina. I trust you. I just don’t trust the Agency.” He lifted her chin and stared deeply into her eyes. “And I hate what they’re doing to you.”

She shook her chin out of his grasp. “What’s that?”

“Stealing your light.”

## THIRTEEN

*Lachlan, present day*

“I only met with her one more time after Iceland,” Lachlan told Elissa as they pulled into short-term parking at LAX. “Briefly. Too briefly. And then I didn’t see her again for years.” He wiped a hand over his face, remembering the stupidity, the regret. *So much time wasted, and for what? To see her betrayed like this.*

Elissa killed the engine and sat staring straight ahead. “I seriously cannot believe it. You two hiding a relationship all those years, from both the CIA and the Navy.” She looked over at him. “And now from *us*.”

Lachlan grinned ruefully. “We weren’t hiding a relationship from all of you.”

Elissa rolled her eyes. “Puh-leese.”

“Gina did get a kick out of people speculating she and Psychic had a thing.”

“I heard about that, and I just can’t see it. Costello is head over heels for Jordan. Of course, I missed all the tells that *you* guys were a thing until recently.”

“Because there was nothing to —”

“Oh, cut the shit, Boss.” She narrowed her eyes at him. “It’s really rude to lie to someone who drives you to LAX. I should be sainted instead.”

Lach caught himself smiling. “Fine. You’re sainted. You think you hate



me now though, you're really gonna hate me when I tell you what I want you to do."

"You're changing the subject."

"This is important, Elissa." His tone change made her sit up straighter.

"What, Boss?"

"I'm putting you in charge of Watchdog."

She blinked rapidly. "Excuse me, I think I'm having a seizure. Did you just say you're putting me in charge of Watchdog?"

"I did, lass."

"What about Camden? He's way more qualified."

"Camden is the peacemaker, that's his role in this. If I put him in charge, it'll fuck that up. So, I suggest you use him to that advantage."

She shook her head slowly, looking like she was in shock. "Boss, I'm not leadership material."

"Bullshit."

"I eat Frosted Sugar Bombs cereal for breakfast. I read kids' books and play video games. Nobody's gonna take me seriously."

"First, everyone listens and respects you, Elissa. Second, you found The Repair Shop all on your own. Third, you know the full story now."

"Um, not quite," she said, glancing at the clock on the dashboard. Lach had two hours before wheels up. "We gonna finish our conversation in here, or do I have to follow you all the way through security? Either way, I think you're crazy for even considering putting me in charge."

"Well, I'm considering you *and* Nash."

"Okay, even crazier. Seriously." She sighed and leaned back in the driver's seat.

"Jake can't do it. He's too impulsive. Psychic on the other hand will ponder everything before he makes a move and time is not on our side right now."

"So it's me and Nash by default."

"It's you and Nash because you two are the best goddamn people for the goddamn job." Elissa's eyes went rounder as Lach's voice rose. "You think I would leave anything to chance when it comes to finding Gina? For all I fucking know, Malcolm's one of a dozen people who've been sent to kill her and one may have already gotten to her. So stop fighting me on this. Gina considers you her best friend. She trusts you. I'm showing you how much right now. You're gonna do right by her. Don't fight me!"

Elissa raised her hands. “Okay, okay, Boss. I’m sorry.”

Lach took a deep breath. “No, I’m sorry.”

“Cool. We’re all sorry.” She rotated her hand in a *give me the rest of the story* motion. “We’ve got an hour before you need to get your butt in there, maybe less. So keep talking.”

Lachlan nodded. “Five months passed after Iceland. I noticed a huge change in Gina the next time we got together.” He shook his head. “I guess I’d changed too.”

“Was that when she married Jeremy?” Elissa asked softly. “I mean, she did marry him, right? He’s the ex Fia was talking about?”

Lachlan only shook his head. “I shouldn’t have pushed,” he said, then continued his story.

## Lachlan, age 40

Lachlan hadn’t seen Gina for five months, not since Iceland. Now he waited in a smoky bar in Paris—smoke he was happy to contribute to, at least until Gina arrived. God bless the Parisians flaunting indoor smoking laws. He needed something to steady his nerves for the conversation he wanted to have. She was already late and that wasn’t helping. Maybe she couldn’t get away.

Maybe she didn’t want to.

*Stop thinking that way* he told himself. *She loves you. Never doubt that.*

He watched people coming in from the cold in ones and twos. Each woman made his heart stop for a second, but none of them was Gina. He always—always—knew her the second he laid eyes on her no matter what she was wearing or how she moved. To him, she had a radiance that she couldn’t hide. He’d seen it from the minute he laid eyes on her. Though, as he’d told her in Iceland, it was dimming. He wanted to put a stop to that before it was too late.

The door opened again and there she was. Gina peered into the smoky bar. Her disguise was flawless as usual but he’d still know her anywhere. God, he couldn’t believe they’d been doing this for years now, meeting when

they could, sometimes when their jobs brought them to the same city, sometimes flying halfway across the world to steal a week or two together.

She moved through the room, and to any casual observer she looked calm. But Lachlan knew she was hyper-aware of every glance that slid her way, those perceptive golden eyes scanning the room. Any moment, she'd feel his gaze on her, as surely as he always recognized his Sunshine. Then she turned her head his way and she saw him, sitting in a shadowy booth with his back to the wall. Their gazes locked, and his stern mouth curved into a smile.

Heat unfurled inside Lach as Gina walked toward him, desire and danger tangling into an intoxicating mix. This was the life they had chosen, stolen moments and secrets in the dark.

But not for much longer, if Lachlan had anything to say about it.

"You look haunted," he said when she slid into the seat across from him. He found her hand under the table, his calloused fingers entwining with her own.

"I wasn't sure if I could get away." She leaned in, lowering her voice. "There was a situation in London."

His grip tightened. "Are you okay?"

She squeezed back as she smiled. "I'm fine. I promise."

Lachlan signaled the server for two drinks, his mouth a grim line. "There've been a lot of close calls lately, Sunshine. What's going on?"

Her calm demeanor cracked almost imperceptibly.

"What is it?" he asked softly. "This isn't like you, lass. What's going on?"

"I think I just want to get out." She looked around the bar.

Lachlan grabbed his wallet to pay for his whiskey. "I have a place around the corner. We can head straight there. Do you need food? We can —"

"I mean, *out*." She looked at the table.

"Oh." Trying not to give away his joy at her words, Lachlan stood and pulled her up with him, barely giving her time to grab her bag before practically dragging her out of the bar.

It wasn't until they were outside that he realized she was laughing.

"What?" he asked, a smile already overtaking his lips.

"Tell me how you feel without saying anything."

*Hiding-joy fail.* Lach gave in and laughed. He turned his face up at the dark sky which decided just then to release cornflake-sized snowflakes. They

hurried over the slick cobblestones of Montmartre to the *pied-à-terre* Lach had borrowed from a friend. He wanted this trip to be special, even if they only had a single day together.

He opened the door and pulled Gina inside, then pinned her against the wall. He loved the gasping sound she made just before his lips covered hers. She returned his kiss just as passionately.

Lachlan pulled back and cradled her face in his hands. “When you said out...”

She nodded. “I can’t do this anymore. Not just the sneaking around you and I do. I feel like I’ve lost my way. Or maybe I sold my soul.”

“Does this have to do with whatever happened in London?”

Gina took a deep breath. “It does.” She kissed him again. “Take me to bed first. Then we’ll talk.”

He didn’t need to be told twice.

“Lach?” Gina asked as she traced one of his scars after they’d made love.  
“Yeah?”

“Do you ever feel conflicted about what you do? Or is it easy for you to compartmentalize?”

Lachlan propped himself up on his elbow. “It’s never easy. Do I feel right about it? Usually. Not always, but usually. I believe in what I’m doing for my country, even if I don’t always agree with the people in charge. But when I have a person to save, or an extraction, or when we’re backup for other guys who got in over their heads, there is no doubt in my mind that I’m doing the right thing.”

“So, you’re not ready to leave the teams.” She looked crestfallen.

God, his heart was racing. He wanted to talk her into leaving the CIA tonight. She’d looked so lost, walking into the bar. Not the young, fiery woman who’d rescued a princess. Seeing Gina so lost convinced him that the time was right. He thought he’d have a fight on his hands so he’d prepared an argument.

Lachlan stroked her cheek. “I never said that, lass. We have a guy on the teams,” he said. “Name’s Camden Bains. Joker. Always making the rest of us laugh, even when we’re in the shit. Absolutely dedicated to the job. A lifer.

At least he was up until last month.”

“Oh, Lach, I’m sorry you lost your teammate.”

“No, no. He wasn’t killed. He lost his wife and baby girl Stateside.”

Gina covered her mouth. “How awful.”

“He’s devastated. Enough that I doubt he’ll return after his leave. He told me he feels guilty, that he wasn’t there for his daughter’s milestones, that he didn’t pay enough attention to what his wife needed. He’s full of regrets. Gina,” Lach gripped her hand in both of his, “it was a wakeup call. I know the risks every time I go on a mission. I may not come back, or I may not come back whole. I love being a SEAL. I love serving my country.” He lifted her hand and kissed it. “But it’s getting harder to leave you every time. I want to stop hiding us. I want to introduce you to my brothers.”

Sudden tears sprang to her eyes. “Lach. I’m —”

“You married Jeremy, didn’t you?” The words were out of his mouth before he could stop them.

She nodded, her golden eyes shiny with wetness. “Only as cover. I have no feelings for him, I swear.”

Lach gave her a gentle smile. “The possibility of you loving someone else never even crossed my mind, Sunshine. I know you love me. I feel it even when we’re apart. And I see it when we’re together.”

He kissed her with all the tenderness he could muster while he did everything he could to hide the gut-wrenching feeling at her words. He’d spoken the truth—he wasn’t jealous that way, wasn’t threatened by the thought of Gina somehow falling in love with Jeremy. What did bother him, what stoked his jealousy was the job itself. Those bastards just kept sinking their hooks deeper into his Sunshine. And he couldn’t help but feel Jeremy was behind it. But every time he tried to discuss the man with Gina, she grew defensive. He was her one blind spot, and it was because she was grateful to him.

“So what is it?” he asked. “Why do you want out now? Is it the marriage?”

“Partly, of course. It makes it harder for me to get away if I’m a happy newlywed.” She smiled ruefully. “But it’s more than that. I’ve always known this job could be dangerous and I don’t shy away from the risk. But...it’s when I have to put someone else in danger that I question what I’m doing.”

Lachlan frowned. “One of your assets?”

“Yes.” Gina ran a hand over her face. “I recruited a woman...” she trailed

off.

“You shouldn’t be telling me this.”

“No, I shouldn’t.” Gina shivered and Lachlan wrapped his arms around her and tucked her into his chest.

“How much danger is she in?”

“If it’s what we suspect...then a lot.” He felt her trembling. “I wish I could take her place, but it’s impossible. And, they won’t let me do what I really want to do.”

“Which is?”

“Sneak in and strangle the target in his sleep.”

Lachlan chuckled. “That sounds more like you.”

“He’s awful, Lachlan.”

“Hey.” Her shaking had gotten worse. Lach held her until it subsided.

“I want out. I do. But... I can’t leave yet,” she finally said.

He closed his eyes, fighting back his disappointment. “You don’t want to abandon her.”

“Exactly. And I have to take down this monster.” She wiggled until she could look into Lach’s eyes. “He’s evil. He’s pure darkness.”

“And you’ve always fought the dark.”

She sighed as she studied his face. “Only for a little while longer, Soup. Then it’s you and me. Finally.”

He brushed back a lock of her hair. She’d dyed it black and he missed the auburn. “You know I’ll wait for you. I’d wait forever for you.”

She kissed him. “One day, we’ll be free. It won’t be long. If all goes well with this assignment. So what are you going to do on your first day of retirement?” Gina asked him.

Lachlan grinned. “That’s easy. I’m gonna get a dog.”

Gina laughed. “Why am I not surprised?” She propped herself up. “Actually, the only thing that surprises me is that you don’t already have one.”

Lach shook his head. “Can’t have one now. I’m never home. What’s the point of having a dog if you’re not the one caring for it all the time?”

“Makes sense.”

“You like dogs?”

She considered the question. “I’ve never had one. You know, kind of the same thing. We were always traveling, never sure where we’d go next. It would’ve been hard on a dog to have to go through quarantine and separation

every time we moved.”

“Your mom didn’t want one, did she?”

Gina chuckled. “Yeah, that’s probably closer to the truth.”

“But what about you, Sunshine?” He ran a finger down the side of her face, raising delicious goose bumps. “How do you feel about having a dog?”

She kissed him. “I could see that.”

“What kind?”

She laughed again. “I don’t know.”

“Not a designer dog? Maybe some purse puppy?”

“Oh, right, as if *you’d* get a purse puppy.” She poked him. “No, just a good dog. Faithful. Smart. Protective. I’m thinking like a... a watchdog.” She shrugged. “Something that has your back.”

“That sounds like a good dog,” Lachlan said, running his fingers over her bare skin. “Good person, too.”

“I suppose.”

“You’d make a great dog mom.”

She rolled her eyes and grinned. “Do *not* call me a dog mom.”

“Why not?” Humor glinted in his eyes. “Dog moms are the best.”

“If you haven’t noticed, I’m not exactly mother material.”

Lach felt Gina’s stomach tense up.

“I wouldn’t say that. You care about your team and your assets. You’re actually very protective of them.”

“Protective, yes. Motherly, no.”

That’s when he knew. She didn’t want children. They’d never quite gotten around to the topic of starting a family. She always managed to dodge it. Was he surprised? No, he decided. Would it stop him from spending the rest of his life with Gina?

*Absolutely not.*

“So. What will you do on *your* first day of freedom, Sunshine?”

She breathed a sigh of relief. “Get a tattoo.”

Lach’s eyes widened. “Really?”

“Yeah. What’s wrong with that?”

“Oh, nothing’s wrong with it. It’s just unexpected. I never pegged you as the tattoo type.”

She shrugged a shoulder.

“What tattoo would you get?”

“What else? A lemon.”

“Like you used with Sana. Of course.”

“Yeah. Just a little reminder to embrace the suck, right? But also to turn lemons into lemonade. I always thought I would get a tattoo once I left this life. Not before, of course, because, well, it's an identifying mark. But once I'm out, once my body is my own and my life is my own, I can do whatever I want. And I'm gonna get a goddamned lemon tattoo.”

He looked into her eyes for a while, not saying anything. It was a comfortable silence, which they'd gotten used to with each other. Finally, he said, “I like that.” His gaze turned wicked, sending heat straight to her belly and parts south. “Where you gonna get it?”

“Haven't decided.” She grinned back at him. “Any suggestions?”

“Hmmm. You know, I might have to think about that.”

“Oh, really?” She grinned and bit her lower lip, and he savored how doing that sparked lust in his belly.

“Yeah. Actually, I think it would require some research.”

“Research?”

“Aye,” he whisper-growled as he lifted the sheet and gazed at her body. “Very close, very thorough research. Might take a while.”

“But you'll let me know when you find the perfect spot, won't you?”

“Oh, yes, Sunshine.” He nuzzled her throat as his hand moved down her torso and nestled between her legs. “You'll know.”



## FOURTEEN

*Gina, age 29*

**G**ina shifted in Lachlan's arms, feeling like she'd gotten her first solid sleep in years. Memories of the night before returned and she smiled.

They were really going to do it. After years of sneaking around, she was going to say goodbye to the CIA. If Lachlan decided to stay with the SEALs, it was his decision and she was fine with that. She'd hate to kiss him goodbye before each mission, but it wouldn't be anything unique. So many people lived with uncertainty whenever their loved ones deployed. She could do it, too.

Not all the weight was off her shoulders, not yet. She still needed to see her last assignment through. Gina suppressed a shiver. She'd seen evil up close, danced with it to save a princess. But now, the evil she faced seemed so much worse. Maybe it was that she was so naïve back then, thought she could single handedly change the world if someone just gave her the chance, and now she knew better—though it didn't stop her from trying.

One last assignment to bring down the devil himself. She shivered again as she remembered the past week.

*arcus Porter.*

**M** Just reading that name in the report had made Gina's skin crawl. Even though she'd turned the AC in the storeroom off until the room's temperature rose to eighty degrees she still had chills running down her spine. Marcus Porter was one powerful, well-connected man. He ran a hedge fund, moved money around for billionaires, probably weapons as well to feed militias that supported causes that benefited those same billionaires.

That's not what made her skin crawl. It was the rumors about him. The whispers about kids in cages and how he used them to blackmail his biggest clients. The same innocent children he used for his own pleasure before trafficking.

He supposedly kept them on a private island in the Caribbean, Little Edward Cay. Unless invited, no one could go near it, including the CIA. Until they had proof, they couldn't move against Porter. He was too well-connected. They needed an asset Porter trusted enough to bring to the island and gather proof. And that's where Regina Sparda and her worldly connections came in.

After rescuing Princess Sana, Regina Sparda the diplomat's daughter had returned to the States, attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, received a master's degree in art history, then opened an art gallery in Santa Monica—that was all part of her official cover story. Unofficially, Gina underwent training at the Farm, just as Jeremy had promised her.

Now, she was sitting in the storeroom of her little art gallery, trying to fall back on her training. If you'd asked Gina what the biggest challenge was at the Farm, she wouldn't have answered the grueling physical training—she was in fantastic shape. Or the constant pressure of being under 24/7 surveillance—that was old hat. Or even learning how to survive capture and torture—though that was pure misery. No, the hardest part was learning patience. Meditation helped, once she got the hang of calming down her 'monkey mind' that constantly chattered at her. It gave her the calm demeanor that helped her recruit assets, including the one she would be meeting with this afternoon. Gina closed her eyes and tried to enter a state of calm.

A *bang* as the storeroom door hit the wall brought her straight out of her meditation as she jumped in her chair. Jeremy walked in, already tugging at his collar as if the temperature was getting to him, and Gina had to refrain from rolling her eyes. She and Jeremy were supposed to be newlyweds—a husband and wife team running a gallery in Santa Monica with lots of trips to

Europe and Asia scouting out new talent and old, forgotten works. Their cover allowed them to travel and mingle with the glitterati. And that's where Gina's skills paid off.

As Regina, she'd befriended a supermodel who collected art—and had caught Marcus Porter's eye. Eva Lambert was no saint herself, but she wasn't a monster. While still feeling a little guilty about it, Gina had managed to collect enough dirt on her to 'persuade' Eva to work with her and Jeremy.

*It's to bring down a monster she'd told herself. And I'll do everything in my power to keep her safe.*

After dating for a year, Eva had finally convinced Porter to bring her along to Little Edward Cay. In preparation, Eva had stopped by the gallery a week before under the guise of art shopping for her home in London. She was really there to leave behind her famous Mason Peason hairbrush so that they could make a few modifications to it ahead of her visit to the island. Some women had purse puppies or kittens as support animals—Eva had her hairbrush. She never went anywhere without it. The damn thing even had its own social media account. Gina could never understand why people would care to look at photos and videos of Eva Lambert tucking a fucking *hairbrush* into its own little bed on her nightstand every night, but at least it worked to their advantage.

There was one unexpected complication when Eva came to the gallery to ostensibly look at art but leave her hairbrush behind. She was accompanied by Marcus Porter himself, who kept his arm wrapped around her skinny frame even while he ogled Gina. It was one of the few instances when she was thankful for her cover. She'd leaned into Jeremy and planted a kiss on his cheek with the hope that Porter would back off but instead it spurred him on. Jeremy countered by flirting with Eva, which Gina considered a bold move, but it seemed to work and Porter backed off. Gina wished she could have slit the man's throat instead of putting on a simpering act.

Eva picked out two paintings on the wall and a third from a catalog, as they'd arranged. She was supposed to come back in a week to inspect the painting in person before deciding to purchase it, at which point they would give her back her hairbrush-turned-spyware, with instructions on how to use it to record conversations and take photos. But with Porter there, he'd know by bedtime at the latest that she'd forgotten the brush, and he'd probably send someone to pick it up.

Gina had thought fast. Just before Eva and Porter were ready to leave, she

started blinking quickly, pretending her contact had gone behind her eye, and asked her dear friend Eva if she would come with her to the bathroom and help her get it out. Once out of Porter's sight, Eva turned her hairbrush over to Gina, who quickly took a video of it from all angles, zooming in on every little scratch, nick, and scuff and taking their precise measurements along with collecting some of Eva's loose hair caught in the bristles. Five minutes later, the women returned to the gallery and Eva left with Porter. Gina sent the video to HQ and in five days, they had a perfect replica ready to do its job.

That replica sat on Gina's desk beside the latest intel on Porter, which wasn't much. She hoped this would finally give them the proof they needed to take the monster down, along with the evil people who visited his island.

"Hey, sorry, didn't realize you were nodding off back here, but no wonder. It's boiling." Jeremy picked up the hairbrush and twirled it in his fingers. "Want me to comb your hair?" he joked.

"You do and I'll break your arm."

"Is that any way to talk to your husband?" Jeremy slapped the back of the brush against his palm. "I should spank you with this instead."

*God, stop it.*

"Please put it down before you break it. I still need to thread Eva's hair into it." There was no guarantee that Eva would be alone today, so she wanted to have the brush ready for a quick handoff.

Jeremy dropped it onto the desk with a clattering sound. He'd been acting up lately, annoying Gina to no end. Jeremy had always joked around, but lately, his joking was ramped up to levels that worked on Gina's last nerve. Maybe it was the pressure of their assignment. Stress made people react differently and Jeremy's coping mechanism was to act inappropriately.

At least that's what she told herself during her meditations to keep herself from flipping him into the Dumpster out back some days.

"I'm sorry," Jeremy said. He grabbed a chair, turned it around, and sat down in it backwards, facing Gina. "I know this last week was hard for you."

She only nodded as she picked up the brush and took Eva's hair out of a plastic baggie.

"Hey, come on. You're doing great." He reached out and tucked a lock of hair behind her ear and she flinched. Jeremy frowned but quickly covered it up. He'd been casually touching her more lately, especially since putting his arm around her when Porter and Eva were in the gallery. Or maybe it was

just her imagination.

She didn't want to think about the possibility that Jeremy wanted to make their fake marriage real. She obviously did not. Even if she hadn't been seeing Lachlan, Jeremy never appealed to her romantically. Even though she was grateful to Jeremy for all his help and he'd been a friend to her, she could never in a million years see herself with him beyond their fake marriage. She only hoped the feeling was mutual, but the way he looked at her sometimes made her wonder.

So she countered by keeping him at arm's length, sometimes treating him coldly. She had to be a little cold to do this job. The assets she cultivated needed to be handled carefully. She had to gain their trust but she also needed to be ready to drop them if they got burned—not that she'd ever let them get burned. At the same time, no one got into her heart, and that was for the best. She was even estranged from her parents and she didn't know which hurt more—the estrangement itself or the fact that they understood and accepted it so easily. To the outside world, it looked as if Gina had no feelings, unless of course she was pretending to care about an asset.

If it wasn't for Lach, all of that might have become true. Without Lach, she wouldn't have a tether to her old life, the one where she was still idealistic, still warm and caring.

She of course never told Jeremy about Lachlan. And if he had a girlfriend he never let on, but she sometimes suspected he did. It was comical the way both she and Jeremy would sneak off for a few days here and there as if their relationship—then marriage—were real and they didn't want to get caught. But if anyone were watching them, they'd need to at least pretend they were trying to spare each other's feelings.

The only person's feelings she cared about in this situation were Lachlan's. She'd hated leaving him in Iceland and she had no idea when she'd see him next. And now this fake marriage. She thought about how Lachlan had walked away from her the first time, after Sana. God, he'd hurt her, but she understood now. Lachlan had been right—they had two very different lives, different paths to walk, both of them in service to their country. But now she wasn't so sure about the path she'd chosen. All she wanted was to talk to Lachlan about it, see where he was at.

Would it ever work out between them? Could she ever leave this life and be herself again, free to be with the man she loved?

“Thank you,” she told Jeremy as he watched her work. “I guess it is

getting to me.”

“Eva?”

She nodded as she finished threading the woman’s long brown hair through the bristles. “What if the rumors are true about Little Edward Cay? What if she finds children?” Gina shuddered. “Seeing that could scar her permanently. Or worse, Jeremy, what if she’s caught?”

He shook his head. “You can’t what-if, Gina. And what’s our alternative, letting this go on unchecked? Letting Marcus Porter continue breathing on this earth while people suffer?” He grabbed her hand and when she started to pull away he squeezed her hand tighter and wouldn’t let her. “I know it makes you feel like your heart is a frozen ball of ice sometimes. This job does that to me, too. It’s how we survive, Regina. We compartmentalize. Don’t let the right hand know what the left hand is doing. We’d go crazy otherwise, living with the contradictions.”

And wasn’t that the truth? She was living two lives. Jeremy probably was, too.

“Dammit, you’re right. I hate that.” She gave him a small smile.

“But you can always confide in me.” He rubbed his thumb over the backs of her fingers.

The offer tempted her. He’d given her no reason not to trust him. And it would be helpful—no, downright *healing*—to have an ally who knew about Lach. It might even make it easier to see him more often. She would do the same for Jeremy if and when he fell in love with someone.

*It could work.*

“I know I can confide in you, thank you,” she said.

And that was all she said. Maybe the CIA had taught her too well how to be paranoid.

The gallery’s phone rang. Jeremy dropped her hand and picked up the receiver while putting it on speakerphone. “Solaire Gallery.”

“Hi, darlings,” Eva said, sounding rushed. “You’ll never believe the week I’ve had. I’m not even in the country right now.”

Gina and Jeremy exchanged a look. Was she backing out? Discovered?

“Oh, no,” Gina singsonged her concern in case Porter was sitting right beside her. “Where are you, sweets?”

“I’m at my place in London if you can believe it. My shoot ran overtime and they’d better as hell pay me for the extra hours. Needless to say, I wasn’t able to catch a flight.”

Gina was already scribbling on a pad of paper: *Cold feet*. She raised her eyebrows and Jeremy nodded.

“Oh, no that’s so disappointing,” Gina went on. “We really are counting on you to approve and collect the piece we just got in. I’m really not supposed to play favorites, but we do have other interested parties. I don’t think I can hold them off, and I really do think the piece belongs with you.”

“Well, Marcus is in the city too, and he’s eager to fly to Little Edward Cay. We’re entertaining some guests and I just don’t see how I can get away —”

“Then we’ll come to you,” Jeremy offered smoothly. Gina quickly grabbed her cell phone and started looking up flights from LAX to Heathrow. “We’ve been meaning to get to London for ages anyway.”

“And one of the other interested parties is there,” Gina inserted for good measure. “In case you say no. It’s really advantageous for us, actually.” She found a flight they could make if they left the gallery within the hour—just enough time to crate up the artwork and grab their go-bags. If Eva agreed to it, they’d pass her the hairbrush. If she didn’t, maybe Gina could talk her back into spying for them. Gina started the booking process.

“Besides, you could see the piece right where you’re hoping to hang it. What better way to decide,” Jeremy said. “Yes, I like this idea of coming to you.”

Eva paused for what seemed like eternity. “Sure, darlings, that’d be great. You have my address, yes?”

Gina and Jeremy grinned at each other.

“We do. Can’t wait to see you! Ciao, bella!” Jeremy hung up. Gina was already up and moving, preparing the artwork and the hairbrush both for their flight.

“Still think she’s backing out?” she asked Jeremy.

“Yeah, I didn’t like that pause.” He stood up and stretched. “But I have all the faith in the world that you’ll talk her back into working for us.”

So did Gina. Too bad the thought made her sick to her stomach.

**L**ondon was cold and rainy—but wasn’t it always? It didn’t help Gina’s jetlag. Or maybe it was her conscience that made her feet and her heart

both feel like lead as they walked through Heathrow to their rental car, then on to a hotel. It was early morning and they were due at Eva's in a few hours. Jeremy laid down in bed for a quick nap but Gina was too restless to sleep. Her phone buzzed with an incoming text from an unknown sender. It looked like some sort of spam, a string of numbers and letters.

Gina smiled as she decoded the message—the coordinates for a bar in Paris and today's date through the next three days. Lachlan was less than three hundred miles away and wanted to see her. She bit her lower lip. If all went well today, she could hop on the train or fly and be there in a matter of hours. But if things didn't go well, then the message was nothing but torture.

So close. And at the same time, a world away.

"Whatcha looking at that's got you balled up?" Jeremy asked. "A message from Eva?"

*Shit.* She'd been so distracted she hadn't noticed he was awake.

"No." She put her phone away. "I haven't heard from her yet. Maybe you should check your phone."

His expression was unreadable but he pulled his phone out and looked at the screen. "Yup, she's sending a car and can see us in two hours." He looked back up at Gina. "Showtime."

On the ride over, the rain turned to sleet—Gina's least-favorite weather. Fluffy snow, spring rain, summer sun, she loved them all, but she hated this sloppy mess falling from the sky.

"Hey, smile," Jeremy said. "She's going to love it and we'll have our biggest commission yet." He glanced at the driver. Gina had surreptitiously taken a photo of the man for facial recognition later. Never could be too careful.

"I hope she loves it or else we've made a long trip for nothing."

"Eh, you'll sweet talk her into it if she's on the fence." He touched her cheek. "I have all the faith in the world in you, darling."

Gina gave him a warm smile and grabbed his hand. He leaned over and kissed her cheek, lingering longer than she would have liked, but they had to put on a show.

Eva had an apartment in Mayfair. The upscale neighborhood looked dreary in the poor weather. The inside of Eva's apartment was even drearier. The walls were painted in a blue so dark it was almost black. The furniture was stylish and uncomfortable. Her other artwork was weird and also dark, bordering on disturbing—a complete contrast to the bright and cheery



watercolor of a bowl of citrus sitting on a table in front of open French doors leading to a sunny beach she ordered from Solaire.

“Glad you could make it on such short notice,” Eva said as she kissed their cheeks. She looked over Gina’s shoulder at the driver who escorted them up the stairs and to the apartment.

“Thank you, Max. That’s all for now.” The man tipped his hat, stared at Eva for a moment longer, then left.

As soon as he was gone, her light and airy demeanor changed. Her face crumpled in on itself.

“I don’t know if I can do this,” she said. “I’m getting nervous. Marcus is good to me, but...” She shook her head. “I met some of the men we’ll be seeing on Little Edward. I don’t like them. I don’t like the way they look at me. Marcus is different, too. I don’t know.” She ran a hand through her hair, messing it up.

Gina hugged her. “It’s alright. I understand. This can be scary work. But it is so, so necessary.” She looked into Eva’s eyes. “You are saving people. Innocent little children and women who are living in hell. You’ll be gathering information that will also stop him from making deals that affect the entire world, too.”

Eva looked away, tears in her eyes.

“Eva. Look at me.” When Gina had her eyes again, she continued. “If you can’t do this, then you can walk away right now. We’ll leave the artwork here and take the brush back. We’ll find another way. It make take years, but we’ll do it. Eventually, those people will stop suffering, and the men responsible will pay. Eventually.”

Eva burst into tears. “I’ll do it,” she whispered.

Gina felt her soul shrivel up.

Jeremy stepped forward and hugged Eva.

“Thank you,” he told Eva, while his eyes never left Gina’s. “You’re doing the right thing.” He stepped back from Eva, keeping a loose grip on her upper arms and looking into her eyes. “You’ll be safe. He trusts you enough to take you there. Nothing’s going to happen to you.”

“What about after?” Eva’s voice was barely above a whisper.

“He’ll be in custody. And your fame will shield you. You’ll be a hero. Nothing can touch you.”

Gina felt sick. These weren’t guarantees. He was playing on her ego and her trust. She almost—almost—cut him off.

But Eva was nodding now and smiling through her tears. “You’re right. I’m doing the right thing. I’ll be fine.” She clenched her fist. “I have fifty-nine million followers. They’ll ask questions if something happens to me.”

Jeremy was nodding sympathetically. “Exactly. You have an army at your fingertips, Eva.”

They spent the next hour going over how to operate the hairbrush. There was even a panic alert that would send out a distress call and destroy the footage—which was automatically uploaded.

“So, you’ll be protected,” Jeremy reassured her. “If you send out that call, we can come in and get you. And we will.”

By the time they left, Eva was all smiles. Even the weather had cleared up. And the watercolor was a bright spot on an otherwise dark wall.

“I can do this! I’m going to save people.”

Gina hugged her again. “Thank you.” She squeezed her eyes shut, holding back mixed emotions, feelings she couldn’t even name.

As Max drove them back to the hotel, Jeremy hugged Gina. “Told you she’d love the piece. And it looks amazing on the wall, don’t you think?”

“Yes, yes it does.” Gina did her best to fake enthusiasm.

“We’ll celebrate with champagne back at the hotel. I’m so proud of you, darling.”

All she wanted to do was run. Open the car door and disappear into London, find her way to the train station or the airport, and fly to Paris. Tell Lach it was over for her, that she wanted out. That she didn’t care anymore, just wanted to disappear with him somewhere.

She wanted out of her own skin.

Wanted to stop being Gina Smith and go back to being...who?

She wasn’t Regina Sparda anymore.

The rest of the ride was a blur, though she was sure there was a fake smile plastered on her face. It was second nature to fake her emotions now.

It wasn’t until they got to the room that she let her face relax. Her cheeks hurt.

“I’m going to take a shower,” she mumbled as she grabbed a robe and walked to the bathroom door.

“What was that text you got this morning?” Jeremy asked, his voice flat.

“Text?” Her heart rapid-fired.

“Don’t do that.” Now he sounded disappointed. “You’re not staying in London for the next few days, are you? Or maybe you are, but you’ll find

reasons to slip away for an afternoon here or a morning there.”

*As if he doesn't do the same thing.* “Jeremy —”

“There’s someone else, isn’t there.” It wasn’t a question.

She turned. “Someone *else*?” She laughed lightly. “No. No, I just need to get away sometimes.”

“Regina, don’t lie to me. Not to *me*.” He smiled sadly as he walked slowly toward her. “Do I know him?”

She bit her lower lip regretfully. “I can neither confirm nor deny there is anyone else, let alone if you’ve ever met this person.”

Jeremy chuckled softly. “Yeah. Well. Go on then.”

“What?”

“Go see him. He’s here in London, right? That’s what that text was about. He found out you’re close by and wants to see you.”

“No, that’s —”

“Regina.” He pinned her with a sharp, though not unkind, stare.

She sighed. “Please. Don’t make me reveal to the home office that I’m in a relationship.”

He gazed into her eyes, his looking wistful. “I won’t get you into trouble, Regina.”

Relieved, she said, “I’ll do the same for you. You do have someone, don’t you? At the very least, a fuckbuddy?”

He smirked. “I can neither confirm nor deny that.”

Gina chuckled this time.

“Truth?” Jeremy said. “I always saw...*us* together.” He grinned. “I mean, for real, not just as a cover.”

“Oh.”

“How...serious are you with this guy who I only theoretically might know and who theoretically exists?” He shrugged, his wistful expression firmly in place. “Do I even have a chance with you?”

Gina grabbed his hand briefly and then let it go. “I’m sorry, Jeremy. No. Even if there weren’t someone else, I just...I don’t think of you that way.”

He nodded, a faint smile still in place. “Well. I had to take a shot or die regretting it.”

“I’m really sorry.” And she was. Jeremy deserved someone who could love him.

“Go on, go.” He made a gesture like he was sweeping her out the door. “I’ve got things covered. We aren’t even supposed to be here. This was

supposed to go smoothly back home and I probably flirted with her too hard at some point and made Porter jealous. It's my fault we're even here."

"I'm still worried about Eva. If they catch her —"

"They won't. She'll be fine. She's got the hairbrush and she's a go. You being here won't make a damn bit of difference. We're just staying and looking at art until she confirms she's on the plane and heading for Little Edward Cay. You don't need to be here for that. So go. I'll see you in a couple of days."

She nodded, her heart already out the door and with Lach.

So Gina left, grateful to Jeremy for understanding and reassuring her that everything would be all right. And now she was here with Lach until tomorrow. After that, she'd only go back long enough to make sure Eva was all right and to turn in her resignation.

Then she was free.

She noticed the room smelled like coffee. Gina rolled over to find Lach already awake.

"Heya, Sunshine. I was waiting for you to open your eyes. You were really out."

"I was?"

He nodded. "I've already been up and about. I made coffee and grabbed breakfast from the bakery next door."

"Are you serious?" She was such a light sleeper, she couldn't believe it. Gina sat up. Sure enough, a little table beside the windows was set with two plates, some pastries, and a carafe, along with a crystal cut vase holding a single red rose. She smiled at it.

"Hey," Lach said, color tinging his cheeks. "Paris is supposed to be romantic, right? Did I do good?"

Gina couldn't help but laugh. "You did good, Soup."

He handed her a robe from the other side of the bed. They got up and sat down at the table. He'd brought her chocolate-stuffed croissants, her favorite. And the coffee was hot and black and strong, just the way they both liked it. Gina savored her breakfast as she looked out over the quiet pedestrian street covered in a light blanket of snow. Somewhere, a cathedral bell rang.

Everything felt peaceful, including her soul.

“What are you thinking, lass?” Lach’s eyes sparkled as he watched her over the rim of his coffee cup.

“I thought I’d used up the last of my soul. I didn’t know I had more.”

He reached across the table and grabbed her hand. With a good-natured smirk, he said, “I thought you said you’d sold your soul.”

“I did say that because I did sell it.”

He cocked his head. “Maybe you’re wrong, Gina. Maybe your soul is bigger than you ever imagined.”

He stood up, rounded the table, and picked her up like she was a feather.

“Or maybe, it’s just connected to mine.”

He carried her to the bed where they stayed for most of the day.

When Gina finally got back to the hotel in London, she was ready to tell Jeremy her plans to resign. But Jeremy wasn’t there.

And Eva was dead.

## FIFTEEN

Gina, present day

**I**t took Gina an hour before she found a car she could steal, all while evading the men sent to kill her.

She felt horrible about stealing the car (what didn't make her feel bad these days?) as she made a square of duct tape with a long strip down the middle on the driver side window. Gina promised herself she'd find out who the owner was, let them know where she left the car, then they'd find a healthy deposit in their bank account and an amaryllis delivered to them every Christmas after.

Gina pulled on the long strip until the window came down and she crawled inside. It was an old Buick Skylark from the early Seventies, bleached a light blue by the desert sun. Gina opened the door to let Fleur in, then rummaged in her backpack for a screwdriver to insert into the ignition. Two minutes later, she and Fleur were back in business.

They took backroads all the way to Denver. The Skylark was a gas guzzler and they had to stop more often than she wanted. It put them behind schedule, which meant that Gina would have to risk a flight from Denver to Newark. No way could she drive this car all the way to New Jersey, and she didn't want to risk stealing another car. Or maybe she just didn't want it on her conscience. She took the long back way through the Navajo Nation and the Ute Reservation, through dusty mountain towns west of Colorado

Springs. She pulled off once to rest in what was probably someone's mile-long driveway and had to convince Fleur that the bighorn sheep who came to investigate was not a predator. Though it did look like it could damage the car.

She was tempted—so tempted—to give up trying to leave the country and head for Lyons, Colorado instead, where she and Lachlan had set up Kyle “Pup” McGuire with his own security agency. Acres of forest on a foothill, safehouses, bodyguards who were more than they seemed, and sympathetic local law enforcement.

The problem was, The Repair Shop knew right where Watchdog Protectors was, how it was structured, its weak points and its strengths. It was their money that financed the operation designed to keep Capitoline out of the area. For all Gina knew, they had eyes on the place, though she was sure Lach would have warned Kyle by now. *Sea-Prompt* had exploded almost two days ago. Walker and Kyla were safely aboard another ship—complements of ‘the Swiss Navy’ a moniker which made Gina laugh as much as it gave her a pang of wistfulness—probably on their way to doing the Milk Run, and Fia was back in the wind. Lachlan was undoubtedly going against her wishes and looking for her, and he’d check with Kyle just in case.

No, she couldn’t go to Lyons. She didn’t want to risk Kyle and Arden’s safety or the safety of any other Watchdog employee. Furthermore, she didn’t want to use anything attached to The Repair Shop, and that meant anything Watchdog-related, including the agency in Las Angeles.

Her eyes closed on their own as she relaxed against the headrest. Flickering images, the beginnings of dreams flitted behind her eyes, memories of how she’d found Lach again after Jeremy’s death.

*I’ll always find you, lass.*

Lach’s voice made her sit bolt upright and look around wildly. Fleur whined and she remembered that she was on a backroad headed for Denver, far away from Lachlan. Far from anyone she loved.

Fleur whined again.

“Well, not far from *you*, sweet thing.”

She let Fleur out to pee then shared a quick meal of beef jerky. The second meal from the diner was long gone. Then they were back on their way.

Sorry to say, there were no aliens living under Denver International Airport. Blucifer, the giant statue of a blue horse rearing up as if to attack drivers by shooting laser beams from its glowing red eyes might make one believe otherwise. But no, there were no lizard people, no aliens (hunky or otherwise), no ghosts, no chupacabras or jackalopes living under DIA.

There was, however, an extensive network of tunnels and abandoned rooms. Not for housing strange creatures, but for offices, storage, transporting baggage, train maintenance, and escape routes in case of fire or terrorist attacks.

Gina was familiar with the layout, especially the escape routes. One led to a field about half a mile from the airport. Under cover of darkness, she parked the Skylark on the side of a nearby road, wiped down the interior and exterior as best she could, and led Fleur through the dry, brown field to the hidden escape hatch. A nearby abandoned shopping cart made her look around for an encampment but she saw no one. Gina knelt and hoped the code was the same as it was a month ago, the last time she'd checked DIA security through the backdoor Elissa had set up.

She breathed a sigh of relief when the hatch popped open. Now to get Fleur down the metal ladder. That problem was solved by emptying most of her backpack and dropping the unbreakable bits down the hatch and putting Fleur inside. Wouldn't be the first time her pup had traveled that way, but she was a few pounds heavier this time around. Gina carefully climbed down with Fleur on her back. When she got to the bottom, she plugged her phone into a portable battery and turned on the flashlight function. She changed her clothes and re-packed her bag. She leashed Fleur and they headed for the main terminal and the underground baggage area.

Now came the hard part—relying on her luck as much as her skill.

The hallways became louder the closer they got to the terminal. Gina relied on her memory to guide them. She found one of the unused rooms, picked the lock, and stashed Fleur and her backpack inside.

“Wait,” she commanded, and Fleur curled up in a ball. She wouldn't move or make a sound until Gina returned. Gina continued down the hallway. She was dressed in dark-blue slacks and a light blue shirt with a fake name tag and ID dangling on a lanyard. She walked into the baggage area like she owned the place and started moving luggage. She nodded to her fellow coworkers who at this time of night didn't care who they worked beside as long as the job got done.



That wouldn't last forever. She was racing against the clock until someone would inevitably challenge her. She paid special attention to the odd-sized baggage and packages until she found what she needed and smiled. Then as deftly as she'd sneaked in, she sneaked back out with a collapsible kennel under her arm. Now if her luck held, she and Fleur would soon be on their way to Newark.

Wearing a travel dress that said business class, Gina walked Fleur back and forth through the main terminal, searching the airport until she saw exactly what she needed. A woman was yelling at some poor attendant just trying to do his job, which made Gina feel marginally better about what she was about to do. She was roughly Gina's size and age which was great, but the most important thing about this woman was not about her at all, but all about her dog, who just so happened to be a ginger like Fleur.

Gina pulled out her phone and opened an app that Elissa had installed a month before, a little project Gina commissioned from her. She searched until she had a cloud of cell phones on a map around her. Most were running past on their way to a gate, but one was fluttering to her left as the woman gestured wildly.

Gina tapped it, chose a command from a dropdown menu, then casually 'bumped' into the screaming woman, who immediately turned her rage on Gina. She apologized profusely then backed away toward the expedited security line, Fleur clicking along beside her. They only had to wait a few minutes before being escorted through, which gave Gina—or rather, Gertie Ellis—just enough time to switch her flight from Newark to...*Let's see where she was going.* Gina checked her new boarding pass and almost dropped her phone.

*Key West. Of all the places that woman could have been going, it had to be Key West.*

She felt like the butt of a cruel joke the universe was playing. She pushed down any and all memories related to Key West and smiled at the security guard.

Gina scanned the boarding pass on her phone at security while imagining that the real Gertie Ellis had discovered by now that her phone was bricked,

her wallet with her ID was gone, and she was wanted by security for identity fraud. She'd be delayed long enough for Gina and Fleur to reach Newark. Then when everything was straightened out, Gertie would no doubt fly free for a year.

Gina walked through the metal detector, collected her backpack and the collapsible carrier while dropping the wallet she'd lifted off Gertie Ellis, and headed to her gate. She had one more barrier to entry on the flight but hopefully the carrier would solve that.

When she got to the gate, she made sure the desk attendant saw both Fleur and the carrier.

"Ma'am, I don't think that's a regulation size pet carrier. Any pet carrier needs to fit under the seat in front of you."

"Sure it is. The lady at the check-in desk downstairs said it was fine because I'm in the first row of business class, where there is no row in front of me so it'll be fine, thank you." She put on her most brittle smile.

"Ma'am, I'll need your name to confirm that."

"Sure." She showed the desk attendant her boarding pass with Gertie's name. Gina held her breath through the phone call as the attendant described a ginger-colored dog.

The attendant hung up with a huff. "Okay, she remembers you and I guess it's fine."

"Thank you." Gina gave her another grade-A bitch smile and returned to her seat, her heart pummeling her rib cage at the thought of getting caught at any second.

Finally, they called rows one through ten to board. Gina practically jogged down the walkway. She set up the carrier but didn't close the door. Fleur curled up inside.

"Would you like a glass of champagne?" the flight attendant asked after Gina sat down on the plane. Her name tag said Terri.

"Yes, lovely. Thank you. And some water for my dog, please?"

"Of course." She smiled at Fleur. "How is Ginger today?" The attendant bent down and scratched Fleur's head.

"Ginger is happy to finally be in the air, and so am I. Here you go. This is for everyone." Gina handed Terri a big box of chocolates she picked up at a store in the terminal while looking for the perfect mark.

"Oh, thank you, Mrs. Ellis."

"Please, call me Gertie," Gina said. She sipped her champagne and

contemplated her next move. She had about four hours before she needed to put on yet another persona for Florence and whoever else would be on her next flight. She also thought about Elissa, silently thanking her for saving her life with the app. She also wondered if Elissa would be able to...

*Oh, shit.*

Her friend was not stupid. No doubt, she'd gotten an alert the minute Gina triggered it. Elissa would set things up that way, just to keep an eye on her friend.

*Maybe, maybe not. Oh, who am I kidding? Of course she did. God, I'm slipping.*

Well, then they'd think she was off to Key West.

*Fine. Good.*

If they were chasing her down, the farther away they were from Gina, the better.

It would keep them safe. But Jesus, what would Lachlan think about her 'choice' of destination? No, if anything, he was more likely to follow her there than Newark, probably thinking it was some sort of message.

*God, this is so messed up.*

All Gina really wanted to do was pace up and down the aisle the entire flight but flight attendants tended to frown on that. So she settled back in her seat as Fleur sighed contentedly, curled up into a tight ball and already softly snoring in her carrier. Gina put on the sleeping mask provided in her first-class amenities bag, dotted her wrists and forehead with lavender oil from the same kit, and tried to relax. But her mind would not let her. It took her back instead to Paris when she'd left Lachlan thinking she'd see him again soon, and that when she did, she'd be trading her fake wedding rings for the only engagement ring she ever wanted to wear.

*Why does my brain want to torture me, taking me back to those days every time I get a chance to relax?*

*Wait.*

*Wait one minute.*

It's not that her brain had wanted to torture her. No. It wasn't torturing her with memories of losing Lachlan. Her memories were going back to Jeremy's death. Why? Because that's where the trouble really started. Where she took the first wrong step that led to The Repair Shop taking out a hit on her.

She was missing something and it started the day she left Paris to turn in

her resignation.

Maybe if she let her mind remember she could figure out what it was.

“I just need to go back one more time to turn in my resignation,” she told Lachlan on their last day in Paris. “And I guess to give these rings back.” She laughed as she took the wedding rings Jeremy had given to her out of her purse. She couldn't help the laughter. She was free.

Lachlan beamed at her. “Before you put those on...” He picked her up and twirled her around.

Then he set her down and went to one knee.

“What...are you doing, Soup?” She bit her lip, knowing exactly what he was doing.

“Don't know if I should be proposing to a married woman —”

She rolled her eyes.

“But I'm not going to let that stop me. I love you. I think I've been in love with you since the moment I pulled you off those vines in the courtyard and looked into those golden eyes for the first time. And now I want to make you my wife.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a blue box. He opened the box and presented her with a beautiful ring. Instead of a white diamond, the stone in the center was a yellow topaz in the shape of an oval. Gina laughed as she realized what it represented—a lemon.

“So will you marry me?”

“Yes, Lachlan Soup Campbell, I will marry you.”

When her phone rang in the car on the way to the train station, she knew. She let it go to voicemail. And it immediately rang again. This time, she didn't just let it go to voicemail. She declined the call.

“No,” she said out loud as she put her phone into airplane mode.

She should have told the driver to stop right then and there. Gone back to the apartment where Lach still waited. He had a few more days off before he needed to return to California and turn in his own resignation. He'd stay in

the military—he'd rather die than leave it, he'd told her and she was fine with that. He thought maybe he'd become an instructor. She could continue to run the gallery she'd created as a cover, relocating it to San Diego. Or maybe she'd work as an interpreter. Or write her memoirs. Or all of it. She could do anything she wanted. Anything at all.

No matter what messages waited on her phone, she needed to face them. Tell them she was out. Finished.

When she got to the hotel room, she wasn't surprised to find it empty. The sick feeling in her stomach grew even as she imagined Jeremy was only out grabbing a drink. At a glance, all his things were still there. On closer inspection, only his raincoat, wallet, and phone were missing. Of course he'd gone out. The messages were probably Jeremy telling her that he wouldn't be there when she got back and not to worry. Gina was being paranoid. Superstitious.

But there was truth to premonitions—anyone who ever worked a dangerous job knew that. Always listen to your gut. And right now, her gut was screaming that all her dreams had just been destroyed.

Gina sat down on the edge of the bed. She turned her phone back on and it vibrated with multiple missed calls; coded messages from a 'friend' checking in on her during her stay in London. They were really from the station chief in London who had been informed of the operation. And now there were texts too. Equally coded texts telling her that Eva was dead and that she and Jeremy needed to report in immediately.

So, they were looking for Jeremy, too. He really was missing.

Gina hung her head as tears formed. Eva was dead and it was Gina's fault.

She scrolled through a news app on her phone to see what had happened and if it was public knowledge. Sure enough, the headlines blared that Eva Lambert had been found dead in her apartment, the apparent victim of a burglary turned deadly.

*Burglary, my ass.*

From the state of the body, they theorized Eva had been dead for almost two days.

*Two days. And not a single message from Jeremy since I left.* Gina tried calling Jeremy knowing in her gut he wouldn't answer. Her call went directly to voicemail. It made her sick to leave a fake message from his loving wife, saying she was back in London from visiting her friend and wondered where

he was. In five minutes, she would leave a second, panicked message asking if he knew about their latest client's death in the robbery and to please call her because she was worried about him. If anyone had his phone or if it was found by authorities, the messages would help maintain their cover.

Now the hard part—reporting in.

*I can't tell them I was with Lachlan.* She was supposed to report on any friendship she had and lovers she took so they could be vetted. Relationships were a liability, and she'd wanted Lachlan for her own, not share him with the Agency. Now with Jeremy gone and Eva dead, Gina would look negligent at best and suspicious at worst.

*Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

She didn't want to ask for a favor but she had no choice. So Gina quickly made one call to the last true friend she had in the world, explained the situation as quickly as she could, and asked for an alibi she hoped she wouldn't have to use. She hung up just as there was a knock at the door that made Gina nearly jump out of her skin.

"Jeremy?" she called out as she went to the door, hoping against hope that he'd gone to some rendezvous like she had and that she'd gotten back first.

"Regina! So good to see you," the unfamiliar woman said as she stood in the hall. "Well, come along then, time for tea. I have the perfect place in mind. Grab your purse and let's be off."

So. They had come to collect her.

"Yes, let's," Gina answered enthusiastically while feeling doubly nauseous. She stepped back into the room while her 'friend'—a stranger sent by the London station to collect her; she knew by the carnation in her jacket lapel—waited outside per protocol.

The woman peered into the room.

"And your husband? Shall we bring him along as well?"

"Oh, Jeremy seems to have given me the slip." She giggled as she grabbed her purse and coat. "He does that the second I turn my head away. Men."

"Men indeed." The woman smiled, but her eyes were steely. "Let's hope he catches up."

As soon as Gina walked into the briefing room at the station, she felt it in the air. The two men in the room—the station chief and her direct superior, Ted Davis—blamed her for Eva Lambert’s death. How could she explain that she’d been in Paris making plans with her fiancé to quit her job and run away?

The answer was, she couldn’t. No way would she let anything fall on Lach.

“Come in, please. Have a seat,” the station chief said, pulling out a chair for her at a conference table. His name was Nigel Greene and he was especially grim and unreadable.

“No thanks, I’ll stand. Update?”

Nigel paused. “You’ve undoubtedly heard the news reports?”

“That Eva Lambert was killed, yes. Do I believe that it was a burglary, no.”

Ted folded his hands on the table. “I’m just going to come out with it. Where the hell were you the past three days?”

Gina lied through her teeth about where she’d been and with whom, knowing that with one phone call, her lies would be verified as truth. Her alibi was perfect; even Gina acting secretive about meeting with her friend would make sense to the men.

She grabbed a legal pad on the table and scribbled down a phone number, then tore off the sheet and thrust it at Ted.

“Here. Go ahead and call. Right now.”

Ted glanced at the phone number and folded the paper in half.

“We will. Did Jeremy know where you were?”

“Yes. He encouraged me to go, actually.”

“And did he say what he was going to be doing in the meantime?”

“He said he’d keep an eye on Eva until she was on the plane to Little Edward Cay.” She looked back and forth between the men. “When was the last time he reported in?”

They looked at each other again.

“What? What is it?”

“We hadn’t heard from him since the two of you filed your reports after rendezvousing with Eva,” Ted said.

“And I’m afraid we’ve just had an update,” Nigel added. The calmness in his voice had Gina playing the game Brit or CIA Officer? In her head. She figured he either had his UK persona down, or maybe he was an American

raised in London.

Nigel and Ted looked at each other before Nigel picked up a large manila envelope.

“These are copies. The originals which we received an hour ago are undergoing every test we have to find fingerprints, DNA, anything. I need to warn you before I show this to you. I’m afraid it appears your husband —”

“My *partner*.”

“Excuse me, your partner was visiting Eva Lambert when the attack occurred, and was taken. Not long after Ms. Lambert’s body was discovered, we received these.”

He handed her the envelope. Inside was photo after photo of Jeremy being tortured. The final photo in the series clearly showed that he hadn’t survived.

Shaking, Gina sat down. She blinked back tears.

“I’m sorry.” Ted actually reached across the table and grabbed Gina’s hand. “It’s a loss for us all.”

“We have to find him.” She looked up at the men. “We have to find Jeremy’s body and give him a decent burial. We have to stop Marcus Porter. This—” she slammed the back of her hand against the pile of photos. “This can’t stand. We have evidence. We just need to find Jeremy.”

“We’re doing all we can,” Ted said.

“What are you doing?”

“That’s...” he trailed off.

“You think I’m involved?” She felt rage build inside. “You think I had something to do with this?”

“Gina. There is a small handful of people who knew about this mission. Nigel only knows about it now because it went sideways. We have to make sure we don’t have a mole first.”

Gina scrubbed her face. Of course, she knew that. Either way, she was screwed. What if a mole knew she’d been seeing Lach? And if there wasn’t a mole, they would blame her for shitty tradecraft. Say that she’d let something slip. It could have been Jeremy’s fault, but since he was dead and they needed a scapegoat...

*I can’t leave. Oh my God, I can’t leave until this is over. And they can’t know about Lachlan.*

What followed was months of hell. She didn’t dare contact Lach right away, and by the time she felt safe doing so, he was back out on a mission



and impossible to reach.

And by then, The Repair Shop owned her soul.

## SIXTEEN

*Lachlan, present day, Los Angeles*

Lachlan watched Elissa's face as he told her his story and realized she was the only person on earth who he'd ever opened up to about those secret days of meeting with Gina. At the time, his teammates figured he had a woman in every port—hell, some of *them* did, after all. Not a single one ever caught on to the fact that he was meeting with the same amazing woman every time. If anyone asked how it went when he returned from spending a few days with her, he'd just shrug and say it was nothing serious, when all he wanted to do was brag that the smartest, most talented, sexiest, most beautiful woman in the world was his.

But even that hadn't been true, not quite. Lach wasn't competing with another man for her love but with her vocation. She truly believed in what she was doing—protecting her country, chasing down the enemy, saving lives. He didn't want to take that away from her. Hell, he'd felt the same way about being a SEAL and he'd resent anyone trying to talk him into giving it up.

At the same time, as he watched the job eat her alive, he didn't want to lose her.

The engagement ring had jumped out at him from the jewelry store window right after their first time together after being apart for two years. Stopped him dead in his tracks. It was perfect. Before he knew what he was

doing, he'd gone into the store and bought it. Lachlan didn't know when he'd ask Gina to marry him, but he was certain it would happen. So he brought the ring every time they got together and waited for the perfect time. In Paris, when she looked so haunted walking into the bar, he almost took out the ring and dropped to one knee then and there. Proposing to her later was one of the happiest moments of his life.

"So you asked her to marry you and she said yes?" Elissa asked Lach, her eyes misty. She brought him crashing back to the present, but at least he could put off the memories of what came after the proposal.

"She said yes." He held up his hand. "Before you ask, we're not married. It never happened."

Elissa made a frustrated sound and covered her face. "Please tell me she wasn't in love with her partner," she said through her fingers.

Lach grimaced. "No. And even if she had been, he was dead before she returned to London."

Her hands flew away from her face. "What?"

Lach only nodded. "If she hadn't been with me, she might have died too." He clenched his fists. God, he didn't want to think let alone talk about the next couple of years.

"Marcus Porter," Elissa said, shaking her head. "The same son of a bitch who kidnapped Jordan years later." She shivered.

"And took her to the island where Eva Lambert would have gone if she'd lived," Lachlan said quietly.

"I remember when Eva died. It was all over the news."

Lachlan watched Elissa's face as she worked over the new data in her mind. This was exactly what Gina had seen in her from the beginning; an intelligent woman who could quickly fit the pieces together. But in this case, Lach would probably have to supply a little more info.

"She felt guilty that Marcus Porter killed Eva, didn't she?" Elissa asked. "So she didn't leave the CIA and you guys never got married." She squinted at Lachlan. "Why not? Why didn't you talk her out of staying? I would have."

Lachlan chuckled even as his heart felt heavy. "Of course you would have, lass. Too bad I didn't know you back then."

"Oh, back then I was a hot mess, seriously. Probably would have done more harm than good. But still," she practically glowered at Lach, which almost looked comical, "why didn't you just beat your chest and claim her?"

Lachlan actually laughed. “First, sitting here in this SUV waiting for a flight because Gina doesn’t want to be found, do you really—*really*—believe I could talk Gina Smith into or out of anything once her mind is made up?”

Elissa blew out a breath. “Yeah okay, you got me there, Boss.”

“And second...I had no idea what was going on. After Paris, I immediately went on a covert mission that lasted close to a year. It was remote, primitive. Very little communication in or out. And even if I did know what was going on in the world, Eva Lambert’s death wouldn’t have meant anything to me. Gina didn’t tell me her assignment then or anything about Eva.”

“But you obviously found out later, or she told you straight up what happened when you started Watchdog together. Doing a little mental math between Eva’s death and starting Watchdog, you had quite a bit of time apart. What happened in between?”

“That time in my life is...something I don’t really want to talk about.”

Elissa’s phone chimed and her face lit up. “Well, you’re off the hook anyway. This,” she held her phone up and shook it, “is good news.” She started tapping the screen.

“What is it? Don’t tell me she contacted you.”

“Not directly, but...” she trailed off, absorbed by her phone. “Ah-ha! So, she *just* used this little app I made for her that...” She clapped her mouth shut. “That might not be one hundred percent legal but we won’t talk about that part so I don’t incriminate myself, ah-*hem*. What’s important is that she’s at DIA and now she’s off to Key West.”

Lachlan felt like the whole of Los Angeles just fell out from under the SUV.

“Key West?”

Something in his voice made her head snap up from the app. “Something wrong with that, Boss?”

“Yes. No. *Shit*.” He waved her off. “Doesn’t matter right now. So she made it to Denver somehow and now she’s flying to Key West, not Newark.”

“Looks like it. You think maybe she got wind that Malcolm—if it *is* Mal and not some Repair Shop goon—is headed for Newark and now she’s doing evasive maneuvers? No, wait.” Elissa slapped her forehead. “There’s no guarantee that she’s actually going to Key West.”

But in his gut, Lachlan thought she had to be. It was a message to him. Still, he asked, “Why not?”

“Because this app just tells me what the original flight was when Gina... um, *acquired* it. No guarantee she didn’t change it after that.” Elissa sighed and went back to tapping on her phone. “She might be going anywhere.”

Lach shook his head. “No. It’s either Newark or Key West.” *But which one?* he thought. *What the hell kind of game are you playing, Gina?*

She finished tapping and looked back up at him. “I have an idea that you’re gonna hate, Boss.”

Lach look Elissa dead in the eye. “The answer is no.”

“You haven’t even heard —”

“I don’t need to hear it. You want to fly to Key West while I fly to Newark. The answer is no.”

“Actually, that wasn’t my idea at all.”

“No?”

“No. I’ll fly to Newark, and you fly to Key West.”

“Oh, well then in that case, my answer’s different.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, it’s abso-fucking-lutely no.”

“Lach—”

“No way am I sending you straight into danger like that.”

“But Mal and I are friends,” she pleaded. “If he sees you in Newark, he’ll feel threatened and might even lash out. If it’s just lil’ ol’ me, maybe I can at least surprise him into listening to me.” Her eyes watered. “I could tell him that Annalie is safe, that he doesn’t have to ki...doesn’t have to go after Gina. *If that’s what’s happening.*” She looked down at her lap as she blinked rapidly. “I still want to believe that he’s going after her to protect her. A double-agent kinda like Walker, right? He couldn’t seriously be after her. And if he is, it would only be to protect Annalie. But he knows we’ll keep Annalie safe —”

“Elissa!”

“What?” she snapped, looking back up at him. The pain in her eyes gutted him. He softened his approach and could practically hear Camden clapping and saying *hearts and minds*.

“I’m sorry. I know you and Mal are tight.”

“He saved my life.”

Lach nodded slowly. “I know, and that makes all of this harder for you. You’ve got two friends who are lost and at odds.”

Elissa snorted and then wiped her face. “Yeah, that’s one way to put it.

Look, you can't be two places at once and we don't have time to get someone else out here. Do you know anyone in Key West who could spot her at the airport? Well, as if anyone could spot Spooky when she wants to be invisible."

"No." *No way.*

"Then let me go. If you insist on Newark, then you go there and I'll take Key West. Let me re-emphasize; we do not have time. Too late to catch her in Denver, but the next plane boards here for Key West in twenty minutes and lands right before hers does. I could stand right there at the gate and throw a lei around her neck if I wanted to."

"Fuck. Okay, fine. I'll call and tell Nash he's in charge until we get back."

Elissa grinned. "Thanks, Boss." She was already half out of the SUV before Lach could stop her or even get halfway around and open her door for her. "Oh, and tell him I left the SUV in short-term parking. Someone's going to have to pick it up and at least move it to long-term. I also want to know how Annalie's doing and which safehouse they're going to so I can monitor it directly. And...why are you smiling like that?"

"Don't think you have what it takes to be in charge, eh?"

"Not now. We have planes to catch." Her glower didn't match the smile she was fighting.

When they parted ways after security—expedited thanks to another possibly illegal app—Elissa gave Lach a quick hug.

"Don't worry, Boss. I'll find her, and when I do, I'm going to ask *her* about Key West."

"Almost don't want you to find her now."

Elissa started sprinting backwards. "I won't ask on the condition that you find Mal and talk some sense into the big dum-dum for me."

"Aye-aye, captain."

"Oh, *stop!*" Then she turned and shot away toward her gate.

## SEVENTEEN

*Gina, present day*

**B**y the time the plane began to descend into Newark, Gina had it figured out. She knew why her mind had sent her back to those days just before she was recruited into The Repair Shop. It was a working theory, but it seemed pretty sound. Fia had given Elissa the first clue in Hawaii.

*Tell Gina her ex is alive.*

Now she needed to find someplace safe to hide and to think, to catch her breath, plan, and put things into motion. And time. She needed time. She'd been played for a fool for the past five years thinking she'd been doing the right thing, both for her country and in honor of Jeremy's memory.

The Repair Shop was a lie. She just needed to prove it. If she could show Atlantis and the rest that they'd all been lied to, maybe she could set them free before it was too late. Even if she died trying. So long as no one she loved died trying to save her.

Gina kept moving forward in her thoughts.

The days following Jeremy's death were a blur. Lachlan was gone on a mission and Gina didn't dare try and discover his location. She was being watched closely, supposedly to keep her safe, but she knew better. The CIA had a leak and she looked like a prime suspect. Plus, she was numb. Her mentor was dead. Her hopes of marrying Lachlan, delayed. She needed to

stay in and find where Jeremy had been taken and tortured to death, though her best guess was Little Edward Cay. Flight records showed that Marcus Porter had flown to his island the night of Eva's murder. When questioned by the press about Eva's death, he said he was saddened and that it was tragic that she was supposed to accompany him to the island that day, but changed her mind at the last minute due to a party in town. Gina had bet her soul Jeremy was on that flight, probably drugged, only to wake up in a torture chamber.

Months went by and it became clear her time with the CIA might be ending anyway. She was stonewalled, left out, and questioned at every turn. Until one day, she was approached by a man who called himself Atlantis who recruited her into The Repair Shop. The clandestine group was government-funded, though Gina dared anyone to trace the funds. As far as she could tell, it was made up of former CIA, FBI, military, and a few civvies with special talents and no family ties to speak of. Their mission was to track the movements of a mysterious group rumored to be controlling world events and stop them where and when they could—by any means necessary.

Gina saw The Repair Shop as a way to track Marcus Porter and eventually bring him down. She was shocked to find that he wasn't even on their radar. Then her shock turned to nausea when she learned just how many other people were suspected of being members of what was rumored to be called Capitoline.

"But this time," Atlantis assured her, "you'll be able to finally act against them directly."

Gina couldn't resist. Surely with new resources at her fingertips and carte blanche to pursue her enemy, she could finally clear her name, bring justice to Marcus Porter, and let Jeremy lay at rest.

Her first thought was to discover where Lachlan was and get word to him, tell him that she was only staying in a little while longer, just long enough to avenge Jeremy. She left a message on his phone explaining as much as she could and telling him to contact her when he returned.

If the CIA was intrusive, The Repair Shop was worse. Members were discouraged from any relationships at all. It was the nature of the work, Atlantis told her. And in the meantime, she trained and learned a new level of spycraft. Once she passed her tests, she was sent on missions around the world. Every new place she went, she wondered how close or how far she was from Lachlan. But she didn't have much time to wonder. She faced



danger she'd never known before, she took lives, telling herself she was saving others. And it was true. Capitoline liked to stir up political unrest, especially in Africa. The entire continent was targeted by the whole world, and Capitoline especially, for its resources.

When it came to Lachlan, she was patient. She would wait, and in the meantime, continue to fight the good fight. The Repair Shop had already stopped an attempted coup with her help. It felt good to actually do something without all the red tape, something that saved thousands of lives that would otherwise be lost to a pointless war where billionaires profited.

After months of hearing nothing from Lachlan, she sent a text but it bounced. A letter she sent to his apartment returned to her. She tried again to find him, but had no luck; whatever mission he was on was top-secret. She called the property management company and was told Lach's prepaid lease had ended three months ago and was not renewed. That's all the guy knew since his company had just taken over the building the month before.

*My God, is he dead?* Had he been killed during his mission? Frantic, she lied to Atlantis, saying she needed to know the whereabouts of a certain squad for her next mission. It was a terrible lie, and Atlantis saw right through it. But, he told her he'd look into it and let her know when she got back from Africa if not sooner.

It was there during an already frustrating mission that she discovered Lachlan was not dead. He had retired from the SEALs three months ago—the same time his lease ended.

Not a word. Not a single text or call. No letter in her secret P.O. box.

He'd given up on her after all.

That's when she found Fleur.

Fleur came into Gina's life at the moment she needed her most. Sitting in her hotel room with the dog she'd just rescued after a protest turned deadly, Gina thought about Lachlan and their last conversation.

*I'm gonna get a dog* he'd told her. *You'd be a good dog mom.*

Well, she had a dog right there, one who seemed loyal and brave and protective. And Gina was already feeling the same way toward Fleur.

*Ironic.*

Walker Dean saved her on that mission when she became trapped in the hotel. She called in reinforcements and his SEAL team answered, only to have Walker captured and tortured.

Her fault.

She went back for him, which took a lot of cajoling, but in the end, he was rescued and recruited into The Repair Shop.

No. Drafted was a better word for it. As much as they liked to say their members were dedicated to the cause, once you were in a while there was a feeling of being...trapped. So much so that when Atlantis asked if Gina wanted to know where Lachlan was currently living—a knowing grin on his face, damn him—she said no.

The Repair Shop was also where she met Malcolm McCoy—one of the coldest killers she knew, and yet she'd called him a friend. Like her, Malcolm was still part of The Repair Shop and working at Watchdog as a cover. When he'd met Annalie Givens on a security job, she brought out his warmth and humanity. Gina had arranged for Mal to keep his cover at Watchdog and was honestly surprised they let him. After Hawaii and losing Skeleton Key, Gina was no longer the organization's favorite daughter and didn't always get what she requested.

Now, Malcolm would do anything to protect his fiancée. Gina prayed he'd do the right thing and stick with Watchdog. She hoped again that if Elissa did have an alert on the app and Lachlan was after her he would head for Key West thinking she was trying to send him a signal.

Even a cruel one.

*G*ina, four years ago, Key West

*G*ina had arrived in Key West the day before and checked into her hotel. She'd treated herself to room service, a long soak in the tub, then slipped between soft sheets into a marshmallow of a bed and fell into a fitful sleep. It was too much jetlag she told herself, and not this particular mission that had her tossing and turning, second-guessing herself. Was she pathetic? Desperate? Was she doing this out of selfishness, wanting an answer, closure? Time would tell.

The Repair Shop had a new assignment for her, one that was long-term and would place her Stateside again. She agreed to it on one condition—that she could pick her partner.

She'd told them the right man for the job was retired SEAL Lachlan Campbell.

So The Repair Shop tracked Lachlan down to Key West. Gina packed her bags and she and Fleur flew in on one of The Repair Shop's private jets.

*This is madness. What was I thinking?*

But, he ticked all the boxes. Retired SEAL, trustworthy, no close family. Single. Still single. The one thing Gina couldn't check up on was his final mission. None of them could seem to request or break into the data. But Lachlan and a couple of his teammates had retired not long after. She worried about that.

Now, the anticipation of seeing Lachlan again after two years of no contact kept her tossing and turning. But every time she dozed off and her dreams started, she felt his lips on hers as the desert wind blew sand around them and she popped back into wakefulness.

Giving up on sleep, she started out bright and early the next morning with Fleur, and headed for his rented house.

Only to find he'd been evicted the month before.

*Evicted?*

And when the landlord told her where she might find Lachlan this time of day, she tried not to wince. Or to believe him. But it was her only lead, so she took it. As she approached the dive bar, she saw a terrible thing. A malnourished dog was tied up to a palm tree outside, its water bowl knocked over and empty. The dog lay with its head on its paws and stared forlornly at the bar door, waiting.

"God, you poor thing," she whispered as she leaned down to pet him, her rage barely under control. Fleur sniffed at him before licking his ear. The dog sighed but didn't even bother to lift his head.

*First thing I'm doing when I retire is getting myself a dog.*

Lachlan's words echoed in her head and she damn near turned around right then. She would take this poor dog with her and spend the rest of his life treating him right.

But no. No, she wanted to see Lach, if only to confirm her worst fears. She grabbed the dog's bowl and filled it from a spigot next to the bar's door. As the dog greedily lapped up the water, she gave him one more scratch behind the ears and whispered, "Don't worry, Fleur and I will be back."

Gina opened the door to the rundown bar that gave a nod toward tiki décor and froze.

Lachlan was laid out on the wooden floor with some sort of colorful banner draped over him. One arm covered his eyes, the other lay straight out perpendicular to his body. She couldn't tell if he was chuckling, snoring, or possibly choking.

All her anticipation and excitement on finding him turned sour in her stomach. How could she have been so wrong? Gina shook her head.

*Oh my God.* What happened to the SEAL she'd fallen in love with? The man she was going to marry? The one who'd broken her heart when he'd disappeared without a word?

The sourness in her stomach threatened to turn to bile. She swallowed hard. She had a choice—turn around and walk out now, pretend she couldn't track Lachlan down after all, and return empty-handed. Suggest that they find her a new partner to start the venture.

Or, she could work with what she had, figure out what the hell had happened, and turn Lachlan around, if only in honor of what they'd once had.

Fleur sniffed disdainfully around his exposed armpit then jerked back up.

“Fleur, don't pee on him.” *Not that he'd notice.*

Lach reached out blindly with his opposite arm and found the dog's head. “Oh, hi, doggie.” As he scratched behind her ears, Fleur visibly relaxed and looked at Gina like *Oh, hey, he's not all bad.*

“Speak for yourself, girl,” Gina murmured. Then louder, “Excuse me, are you by chance Lachlan Campbell?”

The big man raised his arm an inch off his face and peeked out at her from under it. “Who's askin'?”

“Me.”

He grinned as he studied her. “Then I am. Nice to meet you. Have you got an aspirin?”

“No.”

“Cigarette?”

“Never.”

He plopped his arm back over his eyes. He never stopped petting Fleur.

Was he so drunk he didn't recognize her? He always recognized her no matter what she did to her hair or her makeup. Her heart broke further.

“Soup.”

Lachlan's hand stopped moving. “Wha'd ya say?”

“Soup. It's what I used to call you.”

He lifted the banner again. He squinted at her. Instead of letting it drop,

he sat up, wincing as he did. He studied her face, nodding. “Well, there you are.”

Gina flinched inside, remembering that those were the first words he’d ever spoken to her.

Lach squinted at her. “It is you, lass. Or, I’m dreaming.” He shook his head. “Didn’t recognize the hair.”

Gina absently touched her dark-brown bob. “I’ve changed my hair so many times I’m not sure what the original color is anymore.”

“Auburn. Lovely shade of it, too. Perfect for your pale skin and those unforgettable golden eyes.”

Gina looked away quickly. He remembered. And his tongue was just as silver, his slight accent just as seductive, and it melted her core as easily as if she’d gone back in time, God, almost three years now. She hadn’t felt this way for so long, and yet every complimentary word was like a slap across her face.

*Why did you give up on us? she wanted to ask. Why did you walk away when we could have been together? I would have been yours, body and soul, if you would have let me.*

But he hadn’t. He’d left as if she was just another job, a task checked off, mission accomplished. It didn’t matter, none of it. Not the joking, the flirting, the camaraderie. Not the way her heart felt light whenever she was with him. Not the proposal. *And now look at him.* If this was what retiring did to him, maybe she’d dodged a bullet.

*This was a mistake. A huge, horrible mistake.* Lachan was clearly washed up, and Gina couldn’t afford to let her emotions get the best of her. She’d learned to turn them off and on a long time ago and her time with The Repair Shop had perfected the skill. It was easy when you saw the worst of humanity day in and day out.

But instead of leaving the bar, she sighed and crouched beside him.

“I’d like to talk to you but this is certainly not the venue for it.”

“Well, I might be sober for an hour tomorrow. Would that work better?”

Gina almost walked out then and there. She didn’t need this. But then a tiny voice she hadn’t heard in a long time spoke in her head. A younger version of herself, one who hadn’t seen quite so much darkness, one who still held out hope.

*Think about what he might have gone through these past couple of years. You’re right—this isn’t him, this isn’t the man you fell in love with. Soup*

*would never act this way. Something must have gone wrong at the end to make him act like this.*

Then she remembered the dog outside and her sadness turned to anger. Instead of looking into his eyes, she focused on the cheap plastic lei around his neck.

“You may not give a shit about yourself anymore, but the least you could do is take care of your dog.”

He frowned and tilted his head, then looked at Fleur. “This innit my dog. Wouldn’t mind having her though.”

“I’m not talking about Fleur, who, by the way, is *my* dog. I mean the poor animal outside.”

His brow creased further. “What poor animal outside?”

“Really? The one who’s tied up to the palm tree with an overturned water bowl. Looks half-starved, too. You can let yourself go, but if *you* don’t come with me, I’m untying him and taking *him* with me.”

Lachlan was already getting to his feet so she scrambled to hers. “I don’t have a dog. Wouldn’t do that to a dog, ever.”

That stopped her. “You said the first thing you were going to do when you retired was get a dog.”

He marched unsteadily toward the door. “I look like I can take care of a dog?” he growled over his shoulder.

The bartender looked up just then and shouted, “Hey, asshole, you ain’t leaving until you pay.”

Gina reached into her wallet and slapped a fifty-dollar bill on the bar. “Keep the change.”

“Lady, this doesn’t come close to covering his tab.”

“Fine.” A hundred-dollar bill joined the fifty. “Lovely establishment you have here.” She jogged out the door to catch up with Lachlan. When she and Fleur got outside, they found Lachlan kneeling next to the poor dog.

“There you go, buddy.” He was feeding the dog something that looked like beef jerky. The bowl was empty again so he took out a water bottle and poured it into the bowl. While the dog lapped at the water, Lachlan stroked his fur and murmured, “Good lad, good, good lad,” over and over. When he’d finished with the water, Lachlan untied the rope from the palm tree and stood.

“Okay, I’m ready,” he told Gina.

She put her hand on her hip. “I thought that wasn’t your dog.”

“Wasn’t. Is now.”

“What about the owner?”

“What *about* the owner? Don’ see ’im. Think I know who he is though, an’ if I’m right he left hours ago. Fuckin’ forgot his dog. So, let’s go.” Lach stumbled down the crushed seashell path leading from the bar to the parking lot.

“You just said you were in no shape to care for a dog.”

“Better than the owner,” he mumbled.

Just like that, he took in the dog. Exactly like she’d taken in Fleur.

Gina tried to kill whatever was beginning to flutter in her chest. The best she could do was to get it to settle back down.

*Hope is the thing with wings.* She put the old phrase out of her head.

“Wait, you don’t even know where we’re going,” she said, catching up to him.

“Sure I do. Only one nice hotel around here that’s classy enough for you.”

She fell into an easy pace beside him. “What if I’m here undercover?”

“You’re not. Lookit you.” He glanced to the side and took her in in one fell swoop. “Still can’t hide that radiance.”

“Stop it.”

Lachlan chuckled. “What? Should be used to hearing that.”

“Why?”

“Why?” He sounded incredulous. “You mean he didn’t...” Lachlan trailed off.

“Who didn’t what?”

“Never mind.”

“Look, I had been planning on talking to you at my hotel, but —”

Lachlan waved her off. “But they’re gonna wonder.” He indicated himself. “An’ they don’t let in strays. Got it. My place it is.” He did an about-face, nearly falling over as he did, and went the other direction.

“Actually, I was thinking you might be more comfortable at home,” Gina lied. Okay, a half-lie—Lachlan needed to sleep this one off and she didn’t want him doing it in her hotel room bed.

That got her a laugh and a headshake.

“What?”

“Thought you spooks were suppos’ to be good at lyin’.” Then under his breath, he added, “Actually, you were a good liar.”

That hit the center of her chest.

They walked in silence the rest of the block to Lachlan’s apartment. Gina

shook her head at the rundown building. After a couple of attempts, Lach got the door unlocked. But ever the vigilant SEAL, even when drunk, he checked the hair-thin silken thread he'd fastened across the door before leaving and found it unbroken. No unwanted guests inside—at least none who'd come through the front door. She wondered if he'd do a sweep of the apartment... and then she got a look inside.

A studio with a tiny bathroom, its door open. A mattress on a metal frame, an old recliner, a small table with two chairs, and a chest of drawers.

“Home sweet home,” Lach said, swinging his arm out. “Make yourself comfortable. I'll just be a minute.”

He walked straight to the bed, flopped down onto his back, and started snoring immediately.

A few hours later, Lachlan stirred and placed a hand over his eyes. He looked rough, even after his nap. While he'd been out cold, Gina took the opportunity to look around his place. She'd expected to find a disaster area before he opened the front door, but the apartment was spotless and neat. Even his bed had been made with hospital corners, tight enough to bounce a quarter. Either Lach was hiring a housekeeper (doubtful) or he wasn't entirely lost to the man Gina remembered.

Maybe she'd caught him on a day when he'd received terrible news and reacted by going on a bender. Her hopes rose.

And they were deflated again when she checked the kitchen cabinets and the refrigerator. In the cabinets, she found a mostly empty bottle of scotch with two more full soldiers waiting behind it. Two empty bottles of rum in the trash. And enough beer for a keggerless kegger in the fridge, with not much in the way of actual food—just some condiments, a pineapple, and a plastic container full of something that looked like meat in a dark sauce. She was afraid to open it for fear of the stench.

Lachlan rubbed his eyes, looked at Gina as she paced, and groaned.

“I was thinking I'd been dreaming, lass, but you really are here.”

“Great to see you, too.” She stopped pacing and beamed at him.

He chuckled then winced. Lach rubbed his temples. “The worst part of a hangover is lying there so miserable you don't wanna move while knowing



that if you would just get your ass up, take a piss, take an aspirin, drink a glass of water, you'd feel better faster.”

Gina sighed, then laughed ruefully. “You know, the road to meeting you all those years ago started with *my* hangover.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” And she told him about that morning in her father’s office, something she’d never brought up before. She'd had no idea that she was at the beginning of a long adventure, one whose ending she still couldn't see yet. But one thing she did know was that somehow Lachlan would be part of it again.

She just needed to sober him up first.

Gina had known women who thought it was their life's mission to fix a man. One woman she'd known in college had a real philosophy about it. She thought if she got a man to stop drinking or get a job or quit smoking that she was fixing him up for the next woman to have, and that one day she'd meet the man another woman had already fixed up for her. Gina had thought about that conversation through the years. And as she got older, it just got sadder.

*Yet, here I am.*

“I saw some aspirin in your kitchen,” she told Lachlan.

“I need a smoke first,” Loch said. He made no move to get up.

As she spoke her next words, Gina wasn't sure for once what her objective was. To fix Lach up for someone else someday? Or to fix him up for herself?

Maybe he didn't need fixing at all, just finding.

“You are no longer smoking.”

“What?”

“Not around me.”

“Fine, I’ll go outside like I always did.”

Gina crossed her arms and shook her head. “And not, *not* around me, either. I need you sober and I need you breathing and smoking too much stops people from breathing.”

“*You* need?” His eyes twinkled in a way that raised all her red flags. Dammit, she wasn’t a twenty-two-year-old with stars in her eyes over the big, brave SEAL anymore. She wasn’t even the woman who wanted to marry him anymore. The years had taught her not to trust anyone, especially herself when it came to her heart. People would use you, and God knew she’d used them.

*All for the greater good* she had learned to tell herself, first every day, then as her missions sent her deeper into the darkness, every hour of every day. But lately, she hadn't bothered saying it at all.

*And that's really why you went to find Lachlan*, that younger voice inside told her.

"Let me rephrase that. It's not for me, it's for the operation."

The twinkle in Lach's eyes dwindled, then disappeared. Gina hated herself for it, wanted to take it all back, just to see that spark again.

"Operation?" he scoffed. "Look, Gina. I'm out. I'm washed up. Can't you see?" He lifted his arm and flicked his hand, indicating and dismissing his apartment at the same time.

"No, I can't. I see a man who's down but not defeated. Not yet."

She walked to the kitchen and poured a glass of water. She took out a bottle of aspirin and shook two pills into her hand. Then she walked back to the bed and set the glass and the pills down on the bedside table.

"Take the aspirin. Drink the water. I can't take a piss for you, so you're on your own for that. And this is the last time I'm doing anything for you. The rest is up to you."

She turned and walked toward his beat-up old recliner and forced herself to sit down. "But you are *definitely* quitting smoking,"

Lach made a sound somewhere between a grunt and a groan. He sat up.

Fleur got up from the corner where she'd been napping beside the new dog and trotted over to Gina to be petted. The new dog lifted his head and sniffed the air. He looked at Lach with hope in his eyes.

"Yeah, bet you're still hungry." Lachlan stood and stretched, and despite his stated need for a cigarette, went to the kitchen instead. He opened the fridge.

*What? Does he expect food to magically appear?* Gina thought. *God, I hope he's not planning on feeding him whatever's in that container.*

To her dismay, that was exactly what it looked like when Lachlan first took the pineapple then the container out and set them on the counter.

"Patience, boy." He crouched and took the dog's face in his hands. The tender look on his face as he stared into the dog's eyes softened Gina's heart. "Life's gonna be a lot different for you now, got it? Regular food, lots of love, no more getting left out in the rain and the heat." Then he ran his hands over the dog's head down to his haunches and stood up. So did the dog, tail wagging a million miles an hour. Lachlan picked up the container.

“You’re not going to feed *that* to him, are you?”

Lachlan stared at her for a few seconds before he started laughing. “Oh hell no.”

“Good. I —”

“This is *our* dinner.”

Gina couldn't stop her eyes from widening as he grabbed the pineapple and carried both to the door.

“*And* I’m gonna grab one last smoke.”

Gina took another bite of the freshly grilled huli-huli chicken and tried not to moan. It was absolutely delicious. Lach had cooked it along with the pineapple on one of the community grills behind the apartments. He reduced the chicken’s marinade down to a rich, salty-sweet sauce and made a big pot of coconut rice to round out the meal. Despite telling her it was their dinner, he shared a couple of thighs and some plain rice with the dogs.

“You like it?” That old twinkle was back in his eyes as he studied Gina across the table.

“It’s good.”

He chuckled. “It’s better than good.”

Gina grinned in spite of herself. “Yeah, it is.” She took another bite and watched the dogs. “So, do you know his name?” She pointed with her fork at the rescued dog.

“Yeah, and I’m changing it. Asshole just calls him Bastard.”

Gina winced.

“He’s Sam now.”

“Good name. That fits.”

Lachlan swallowed a bite of rice. “So, how’d you find me?”

“Your landlord told me where you’d be. He also said you owed him rent.”

“Asshole’s lying.”

“Doesn’t matter. I paid it. Thought you might like to move back in there. More privacy and security. We’ll need both.”

Lachlan grunted. “First my tab, then my rent. Deep pockets, lass.”

“It’s easy when it’s other people’s money to spend.”

“That so?” He scratched the stubble on his chin. “CIA money? Or

someone else?”

Gina closed her eyes. *So, he knows.*

She did *not* want to have this conversation.

## EIGHTEEN

*Lachlan, four years ago, Key West*

God, he needed a smoke. He'd tried to picture this moment in his head for years. Seeing her again, being in the same room with the woman who captivated him with her bravery, intelligence, and beauty. The woman he was going to marry before it all turned to shit.

"So they weren't lying. You aren't with the CIA anymore."

Gina opened her eyes and stared at him. He'd heard she'd turned into quite the interrogator and now he believed it.

"They?"

"Yeah, lass. Whoever owns your soul now."

"My soul?" Then the corner of Gina's mouth curled up. "I left that with you the day I went back to London."

That was a gut punch. How could she tell him something like that when she'd turned her back on him? On their future? At the same time, her smile and the memories of Gina looking up into his eyes with hers full of hunger stirred him. He desperately needed another cigarette. Instead, he grabbed a stray pen and tapped it on the table as he asked, "Why are you here? It wasn't just to pick me up off the floor."

"That part was unexpected, I have to admit."

Lach dropped the pen and picked up his fork. He twirled it between his

fingers. Anything to keep his hands busy, keep them from straying to his shirt pocket. The fork wasn't cutting it but the pen was at least shaped like a cigarette so he picked it up again.

She leaned forward. "Oh, for God's sake, give me that." Gina snatched the cheap plastic pen out of his hand. She took off the lid and tossed it away. She pulled out the ink cartridge and popped off the base. Finally, she took out a pocketknife and cut the case to the size of a cigarette and handed it back to him.

"What's this?"

"It's your new cigarette. Stick it in your mouth, you'll feel better."

He frowned at the empty pen case, but did as she said. Within a minute, his nerves calmed and he stopped fidgeting. He took a piece of paper napkin, tore it, and rolled it into a makeshift filter, stuffing it into the pen. It was no cigarette, not even the ghost of one. But somehow it still made him feel better. It was the first of many cigarette-substitutes he'd have over the next few years. And it worked like a charm every time.

"So, are you going to tell me why you're here?" he asked again.

"First," she said, folding her hands. "Want to tell me why you really retired?" Her golden eyes turned cold. An inquisitor's eyes, not his Sunshine's. She was gone.

"Got tired of the BS. Figured I only had a few missions left in me anyway before they scuttled me."

"Really?" One eyebrow rose. "So, why, if you're tired of BS are you shoveling it at me right now?"

Lachlan looked away.

"Who forced you out?"

*Shit.* "Forced?"

"Yes, forced. The Soup I knew wouldn't let a simple retirement knock him down. He would have stayed in the military until he died. That's what he told me." Her voice had grown soft at the last line, soft with an edge of pain if he wasn't mistaken.

"Plans change." Lachlan chomped down on the pen casing.

She flinched like he'd slapped her.

"That they do." She pushed away from the table and for a sickening moment, Lachlan thought Gina had given up on him and was leaving.

Again.

He tensed to spring to the door to prevent her from going. It was as if no

time had passed between Paris and now, only this time instead of going on a mission thinking that when he came back, she'd be waiting for him to marry her, he knew he wouldn't see her again. He should have never let her go back to London, and now he'd do or say anything to convince her to stay here with him this time.

But instead of heading to the door, Gina paced to the peninsula dividing the kitchen from the rest of the studio apartment and back again. She made the circuit twice before saying anything.

"Your last two missions, your retirement—and the retirement of two other men on your team—were classified. Lach, what happened?" She'd stopped and fixed him with a sympathetic stare that bordered on pity. That was worse than her inquisitor's gaze.

He would have none of that.

"Fuck it. You know what, Gina? I'm tired of the secrets, of everything your people have put me through." *What you put me through* he almost added.

"My people? The CIA, you mean."

"Yeah. We were framed, all right? Accused of doping and of using coke and meth while on the mission, by a CIA informant. So they tested my team for drugs and steroids, and three of us tested positive including me. Bullshit."

"You fought it though." A statement, not a question.

"I tried. We took a second test. The other two guys were cleared, but I was told that mine came up positive again, at which point they gave me the option of quietly retiring or being turned into a bloody warning." Lachlan's fists were clenched in sullen rage. "It was a damn setup by the CIA."

Gina resumed pacing. "Why did they want you out of the way? Did it have to do with the missions?"

All Lachlan could do was stare at her until she pivoted on her heel and stopped pacing.

"What?"

"You believe me." Gina was the first person who had given him the benefit of the doubt. The first person who flat-out believed him.

"Of course I believe you. Why wouldn't I?"

*Because you wanted nothing to do with me once you decided to stay with the CIA* he thought. *No, not the CIA. With whatever black ops bullshit they have you in now.*

Instead, he simply stated, "No one else does."

She cocked her head. “Then they don’t know you like I do.”

God, she was killing him. “Why are you here, Gina?”

She returned to the table and sat down. Instead of answering him, she asked, “Did you try to discover who framed you?”

“Of course I did,” he growled. “You think I would let something like that go? Yes, I tried to dig into it. I got the names of the assholes who tested our blood, hired a PI to look into them, follow them even. Nothing.”

“You have enemies?”

Lachlan barked out a laugh. “I was an active SEAL, remember?”

She grimaced. Then she sucked in her gorgeous lower lip and Lach tried not to groan as his body reminded him of how hers had felt pressed against him and how long it had been since he’d held the woman he’d thought of as his one and only.

“I was thinking more along the lines of friendly fire. Like you said, the CIA. So, who did you piss off?”

Lach scoffed. The last CIA guy he’d disagreed with openly was Heath. Obviously, it wasn’t him. No, that bastard had already ruined Lach’s life the day he died. But, there was someone else, someone unknown to Lachlan, and he didn’t dare bring them up. So he told Gina the first lie of their relationship.

“No one in particular.”

“So, you stopped searching,” Gina said.

“I ran out of leads.” And he’d almost run out of money. He had tried to get on with security companies but it was as if he carried a stormcloud directly over his head. No one would follow up or even give him the damn time of day. He woke up one morning and came to his senses—he couldn’t win.

First, there had been one message from Gina after Paris explaining that Heath was dead and she needed to clear her name and bring justice to the bastard responsible. As wary as he was, Lach understood. That was her nature.

But when he returned from his long mission, there was nothing else from her. Not a word, text, or letter. Only a second message waiting for him that amounted to blackmail. He had no idea who had sent it, but whoever it was knew all about their affair. If Lachlan contacted Gina again, there would be repercussions for her that would send her to prison. Lach pulled every string he knew to try and find out who was threatening them, but no luck. Then after the second mission, he was falsely accused and kicked out. Were the



two linked? Undoubtedly. But by then, he was near broke and it appeared Gina had made her choice to stay with the CIA and had moved on.

He'd never be reinstated as a SEAL. He'd lost Gina and he'd lost his career—his identity. Lach had just enough scratch left to get him to Key West and so that's what he'd done—hopped on a plane and disappeared into a bottle and a carton of cigarettes.

He'd thought maybe he could at least pick up a bouncer job here and he did, hating it with every inch of his being. The place he worked was a strip club as skeezy as they get. He didn't like having anything to do with it, but at least he made sure the women working there were protected and that none had been trafficked.

"You're holding something back," Gina said. Her eyes softened. "What is it? And why...never mind."

"Why what?"

"Why did you never...why did you give up on us? On me?"

"Because you gave up on me first, lass. Not a word after that first message. Not a single —"

"That's not true." She looked devastated. "I got nothing from *you*. I tried calling, but the number was disconnected. I wrote but you'd moved. You disappeared on me without a word and I was..." She stopped talking and shook her head.

"That's not how it was," Lachlan pleaded. "I swear, I got nothing from you." He hung his head. *Damn it all to hell*. "But there was something else."

He told Gina about the message and his move to Key West, and how he'd been living—no, existing—ever since.

*Let her judge me, he thought. I've judged myself enough times already.*

They sat in silence, neither looking at the other.

"Would you still like the chance to find out who framed you?" she finally asked, her voice quiet and casual. Cold.

Was that why she'd come? Did she already know who in the CIA had burned him? Jesus, had she asked someone to tell him to leave her alone?

"What do you know?" he growled. "Is that why you're here?" He looked up at her only to find those fierce golden eyes burning with rage.

She held up her hand, palm out. Then she said, "No, that's not why I came here. But now it's the reason why I'm staying. We were played."

"Seems that's the case, lass."

"I don't know who left that fucking blackmail message. I don't know who

framed you. I didn't know the story *at all* behind your 'retirement.'" She spit out the last word with sarcasm. "What I'm offering you is a chance to start over and maybe—*maybe*—find out who fucked you over." She smiled softly and he saw the sunshine in her eyes, the light she hid away like a precious treasure. It still killed him to watch her do it. "Who fucked *us* over."

*Lass, I'd follow you anywhere. Search for that light and bring it back out for the world to see.*

"Tell me what we need to do."

Gina looked relieved as her golden eyes fluttered closed and she sighed. When she opened her eyes again, she said, "The group I'm with now—not the CIA—needs a cover. A security company. You're going to help me run it." She grinned. "I'll even let you name it."

*Not with the CIA? "Black-ops. Is that what I'll be doing?"*

"Only as needed. It'll be a legitimate company, and well-funded beyond your wildest dreams. You can hire anyone you want. Locate anywhere you want. You can get out of here. Get your life back on track. Get everything back that you lost."

"Including you?" The words were out before he could stop them. *Fuck it anyway.*

Devastation crept into her eyes, blotting out the light. "You don't want me."

"Yes, I do. *All* I want back is you."

"No. You want the girl you rescued a princess with. You want the woman you saw in secret. The woman in Paris who said yes and took your ring. That woman died that day. Neither of us knew it until later. I was hurt and confused and devastated when you didn't respond to me."

Gina held up her hand at the beginning of his protest. "I know it wasn't your fault, just like it wasn't my fault that you thought I wanted you out of my life."

She looked to the side, shaking her head. "It's never been the right time for us, Lach," she whispered. "We always just seem to miss our chance by *that* much."

He grabbed her hand. "You're here now with me. And I love you. Always have. Always will."

Tears filled her eyes as she pulled her hand out of his. "I love you too, Lachlan. Always. But I can't do this again. I can't hope anymore. Something always rips it away whenever we get close." She gave him a small, sad smile.

“Even though we were sabotaged, the repercussions are the same. I sold my soul for revenge telling myself it was for justice. I can’t change that. Not even for you.”

“Yes, you can.”

She shook her head violently. “No. I can’t. Not after everything I’ve seen.” She squeezed her eyes against her memories. “They want to control us. They already do. I can’t make much of a difference, but I can save a life here and there, like we did with Sana. I can work to bring them down, but it’ll take my life to do it.”

“Jesus, Gina. No.” He grabbed her hand.

“Then work beside me, as my business partner. *Only* as my business partner. That’s all I can give you.”

Lachlan fought with his pride for a moment.

“Yes.”

Her eyes brightened. “Yes? You’re agreeing to this?”

He nodded slowly then reached out to shake her hand. “Business partners.”

She gripped his hand tightly as he added, “For now. Because mark my words, I’ll change your mind, lass.”

**O**ver the next year, they built their company. Gina left Lachlan in charge of hiring—and one of the first people he reached out to was Camden Bains, who had joined the FBI after he left the SEALs. Camden suggested a friend, Jake Collins. From there, they built their team.

As business partners.

“So,” Gina said over dinner one night—more of Lachlan’s huli-huli chicken. “What are you going to name our little enterprise?”

He looked into her eyes. “Watchdog Security.”

The corner of her mouth curved into a smile. “I like it.” She reached down to pet Fleur and Sam. “It fits you perfectly.”

Lachlan only chuckled, amazed that she really had no idea.

## NINETEEN

*Gina, present day, Newark Airport*

When she got to the Newark airport, all Gina had to do to find Florence in Terminal B was follow the sound of howling dogs. Florence raised malamutes and they were currently singing the song of their people. Gina covered her mouth to stop from laughing. Florence was undoubtedly furious at her pups. She could almost hear the woman herself yelling over the dogs already. Fleur picked up her pace, tail wagging. She couldn't wait to join the Pack of Chaos as Flo had dubbed her four-footed critters.

Gina had made friends with Florence years ago during an undercover operation attempting to catch a rumored international diamond smuggler in the UK who also raised show dogs. She needed both a way to infiltrate the world of showing and breeding champion dogs and to get to Europe without sticking Fleur in cargo.

That's where Florence came in. She was a professional dog breeder who chartered flights with other dog owners to bring show dogs to and from Europe in the plane's cabin. Gina made quick friends with her and got herself a ride on one of the flights in exchange for handling the dogs on the way. As part of her cover, Gina entered Fleur—under the name of Jasmin—into the agility category at the Crufts show in the UK.

The competitions at Crufts weren't about breeding but instead judged dogs for their endurance and ability, so Fleur fit right in. The dogs ran

through obstacle courses proving how intelligent, quick, and obedient they were. Fleur took fifth. She probably could have taken first, but Gina didn't want to bring too much attention to herself. In the meantime, Gina managed to catch the smuggler in the act and he was arrested. She'd also gained a lifelong friend in Florence, and a way to get herself and Fleur to and from Europe under the radar. The world of dog shows had proven to be a valuable network both for information and travel.

*Ah, there they are.*

"Ugh!" Flo yelled as Gina made her way to a gate near the end of the terminal. "You guys are the worst travelers, do you hear me?" She was addressing four crates, each housing one of her dogs.

"Flo!" Gina shouted and waved.

"Jenna! Can't imagine how you found us," Florence said, laughing as she stood up to hug Gina.

"It's my superspy powers," Gina joked back. Flo had no idea what Gina did for a living. The best lies always stuck close to the truth.

Fleur was already sticking her nose into the crates one by one and checking on her friends. If they'd been free, Fleur would have attempted to roughhouse with the Malamutes. Gina imagined that if the dog hadn't grown up on the streets, she wouldn't have fared well among the bigger dogs. But Fleur was fast and scrappy, and she knew how to keep them in line. All of the dogs settled down once Fleur was in charge.

Florence shook her head as she watched Fleur do her thing. "I should hire Jasmin to watch my pack," she said.

"She does have a knack for it." And she did. Fleur tended to be in charge of the pack of Watchdogs as well.

"Here," Florence said, turning around and grabbing a big water bottle. "I got you one because you just got off a plane and I know you never hydrate enough."

Gina laughed. "Thank you." She twisted open the cap and downed about half the bottle. Florence wasn't lying; Gina was dehydrated. The water was cold and good and it helped refresh her.

Florence moved one of her bags off the chair next to her and motioned for Gina to sit.

"Now tell me what's going on with your ex. How much trouble are you in? Do I have to hide you or will I need to provide bail money in the near future?"

Gina smiled carefully, putting just enough regret into her face that she looked genuinely upset, but not enough to make Florence worry too much. Gina had carefully cultivated Jenna's persona and fed it in bits and pieces to Florence. Jenna was a bohemian who dabbled in training and showing dogs, a world-traveling trust fund baby with terrible taste in men. She was always rushing into and out of doomed relationships and sometimes just needed to get away. Like now.

"No, it's nothing like that. He never threatened me, he's just being a jerk about the breakup. I just need to get away for a while. You know how it is. Give him some space and he'll forget all about me."

Florence frowned and shook her head. "Well, I think you need to give him enough space that if he finds his way back to you, he'll also find his way into a jail cell, but that's just my opinion."

"Yeah, not that you're opinionated at all," Gina said with a grin.

"You know I'm just looking out for you, sister."

"Of course I do, and I appreciate it." Gina put her hand on Florence's. "So tell me, how are you? How are the dogs? How's your husband? Who all is flying with us today? Do I know any of them?"

Florence laughed at the usual barrage of questions. Gina had her convinced she was nothing more than a busybody who loved gossip.

"Sal is fine. He's around here somewhere. He wandered off, I think to find soft pretzels or something. Funny, whatever he wants is always just beyond the call of the Pack of Chaos. As for everyone else flying with us, we have some new faces this time."

That worried Gina. Anyone could be a plant. Even though she thought she had hidden her tracks well when she made friends with Florence years ago, who knew how long she'd been watched, and by whom?

"So tell me about the noobs. Are they just helping you out? Any new owners?"

"A new groomer and new handler. There's a new-to-me breeder of Weimaraners." As Florence went on about every passenger, Gina took mental notes. Then she excused herself, went to the bathroom, and did a quick recon on the new people, or as much of one as she could with her limited time and resources, and they all seemed to check out. She looked at their photos and didn't recognize anyone outright. But, after her escape from the diner, The Repair Shop might hire out or borrow someone from another group. Gina had started wondering too if they trained officers away from the rest of them, just

to keep in reserve for rogues like her.

*Stop it. You're only going to make yourself even more paranoid and then you'll be jumping at shadows instead of recognizing true threats.* She already felt like she was being watched at the airport, but saw no one suspicious—or anyone she knew.

Gina looked over the new groomers' social media and discovered they were Americans traveling together who'd met on the show circuit and become friends. There were two married couples, Brits and a Canadian, all with mundane, civilian backgrounds as far as she could tell. She already knew one of the other dog breeders, a pleasant woman named Vreni who raised Dachshunds and spoke Swiss-German. The man who bred Weimaraners was German and also appeared legitimate, but one never knew.

*Just look at me.* She smiled ruefully.

The rest of the flight was taken up by dogs whose owners weren't traveling with them, and that's where Gina came in.

"Hope you got a little rest on your flight here," Florence told her. "We've got our hands full between Newark and Frankfurt."

It would be Gina's job to help Florence and Sal watch over the other dogs, along with the Malamutes during the flight, though Florence continued to joke that Fleur could probably handle the Pack of Chaos all on her own.

One by one, the other passengers and their dogs arrived and Gina met them. Hans the Weimaraner breeder who sidled up to Gina and Vreni and couldn't decide which of them to flirt with more—*ugh!*—spoke German. He was just coming back from the Beverly Hills Dog Show, which checked out online earlier. To defend herself from Hans' flirting, Gina answered him in French with a shrug, feigning a barely passing understanding of German while Vreni giggled at her, knowing better.

By the time they boarded, Gina had completely settled into being Jenna again. She almost felt like a normal person.

A dangerous feeling. One that could get her killed.

She'd checked out the flight attendants as well, along with the pilot and co-pilot, who were Icelandic. As she eavesdropped before they closed the door to the cockpit, her Icelandic was good enough to understand they would be returning to Iceland the day after they landed in Frankfurt and missed home. It made her nostalgic for the time she'd met with Lachlan in Reykjavik.

The jumble of languages and accents from the other passengers washed

over Gina, soothing her. Even the dogs were quiet and well-behaved for the most part. They ranged in size from the Malamutes down to Vreni's Dachshund—who never left his mommy's lap—with Fleur somewhere in the middle. The plane's cabin was modified to hold parallel rows of kennels toward the back.

Sal was much better at tending the dogs than Florence ever gave him credit for, which made the job of feeding and watering them much easier than it sounded. Once the dogs were settled and snoozing in their kennels as they flew somewhere over the North Atlantic, Gina actually drifted off, awakened only when one of the attendants placed a covered dish on the table in front of her. Florence did not skimp on the food and had special catering brought in. Gina dipped a cracker into the Icelandic reindeer pate—which added to her nostalgia—and handed it to Fleur, who'd already eaten her own meal, judging by the empty bowl on the floor.

After she ate, Gina fell sound asleep again. She dreamed vividly, the past and the present mingling in her sleeping mind. In her dream, she was headed for Iceland instead of Germany. Greenland lay white and massive below the airplane, giant icebergs calving into the Arctic Ocean, then suddenly they were landing. Reykjavík–Keflavík Airport always reminded her of an IKEA with airplanes. In the dream, they didn't pull up to the terminal, but parked some distance away. They were let out straight onto the tarmac to stretch while a new crew cleaned the cabin and fresh pilots rode out on a shuttle from the terminal.

The Icelandic air smelled like no other place in the world—a mix of volcanic brimstone and salty ocean. Gina grinned at the fact that she could theoretically take off running with Fleur across the mossy, lava rock landscape without ever clearing customs. She could just disappear with her dog and live off stolen boiled eggs and lava bread buried in metal pots and cooked along the shores of boiling lakes. They would be two thieving trolls, slinking around at night and scaring the sheep.

The thought made her laugh out loud, waking her up just in time for breakfast—muesli with yogurt this time. Just a couple more hours to Frankfurt and everything had gone well on the flight. She even felt rested for the first time in forever. Fleur yawned loudly and looked at her, tail thumping. She took her to the doggie bathroom then visited the human one. After she helped get the other dogs fed and settled—which took a while, they were ready to be done traveling—she washed her face and brushed her hair.



On her way to her seat, Hans trotted down the aisle toward her with his gorgeous Weimaraner who Fleur had already snubbed.

“What is funny earlier?” he asked in heavily accented English. She was confused for a moment as she quickly scanned him for weapons or any threatening moves, back on her guard.

“Funny?”

She’d nearly forgotten the dream but it came rushing back to her. Oh yes—she’d awakened laughing. And he’d been watching her.

Her response in French gushed from her along with more laughter—that she was exhausted, delirious, getting high on the memory of volcanic air. Not entirely untrue.

He smiled politely and backed away, saying his doggie needed to wee-wee.

Gina returned to her seat and Florence and Vreni’s laughter and applause. With all the dogs safely fed, watered, and kenneled, she buckled into her seat and gossiped with her friends. She had less than an hour of normalcy left, then Gina and Fleur would part ways with them in Germany.

And from there? God knew. But if God didn’t know and she didn’t know, then no one else could predict her movements. If she stayed unpredictable, that might keep her from being followed, at least for a little while.

The next big challenge came at the airport. Now all she needed to do was get through customs, hop a train before she was spotted, and disappear into the EU. The U.S. let Gina and Fleur leave relatively easily, but any country that had animals coming in—especially ones who weren’t going straight into quarantine—scrutinized them pretty hard. Gina got Fleur’s papers ready—the ones that listed her as Jasmin and marked her ID chip as being in her neck. Neither was true—her real chip was in her shoulder, and a fake chip was embedded in her collar. She hoped the vet would be fooled when the scanner picked up the fake chip, and that it didn’t pick up on the real one.

Gina hugged Florence, Sal, and Vreni goodbye before they all got in line.

“Remember, don’t be a stranger, Jenna. If you need help, give me a call,” Florence said. She hugged her again as Gina’s heart broke. This wonderful woman didn’t even know her real name and never would.

Florence got her dogs through the line first, then Vreni. Gina waved to them from the end of the line behind the other passengers. If anything went wrong, she didn’t want them to see.

Finally, it was Gina’s turn. Outward she was relaxed but inside she was a

ball of tension. If they took Fleur from her here and put her into quarantine, that would be a disaster. If they ID'd Fleur correctly and it hit the system, they would be found and killed. Because there was no way Gina was leaving her dog behind.

The vet took out the scanner as Gina mentally ran through scenarios to break her out of a German doggie jail.

“It’s in her neck,” Gina said in German just to be clear. The vet side-eyed her and scanned Fleur’s neck.

The scanner beeped and the vet hesitated.

*Oh, shit. It’s over. We’re done.*

“Welcome to Germany,” he said, running his hand down Fleur’s back. “Pretty dog. Matches your eyes.”

“Danke,” Gina said quickly as she walked herself and Fleur away to freedom.

She was so distracted she never noticed the person walking up to her, and by the time she did, it was too late to escape.

## TWENTY

*Lachlan, present day, Newark Airport*

“Elissa,” Lachlan barked over the phone when he finally landed in Newark. His flight had been delayed in the air for an hour and he damn near burst out of his skin at the thought of barely missing Gina. Visions of her boarding a plane for God-knew-where as his plane was touching down tortured him. He could only hope that she was in Key West instead. “Is everything alright? Is she there? Did you find her?”

“No, boss, I didn't,” Elissa answered, her voice full of defeat. “I got to her gate before the doors opened and she never got off the plane. I didn't see her or any dog that even remotely resembled Fleur. I kept one eye out the window and watched the plane in case she decided to do what Gina does best and escape a different way. Nope. She's gotta be there in Newark.”

“Unless she's already taken off while I was circling in the damned air. Fuck!”

Elissa sounded slightly winded and Lach pictured her speed-walking if not outright running through the airport. “I'm going to keep searching just in case she did a switch-a-roo with another flight or managed to slip past me. Knowing her, she could have. I'll call the second I either find her or confirm she's not here. Then I'll book a flight back home, hopefully for both of us. There's one in the wee early hours.”

“Scuttle your search. Go ahead and book your flight now. I need you back

at headquarters ASAP.” Lach knew that Elissa would have no hope of finding Gina in Key West.

Because he had just spotted Malcolm McCoy.

“What about —”

“She’s not there, Elissa. Go home.”

“Lach—”

“That’s an order.” He watched Malcolm board a flight for Frankfurt. “But first, I need you to check the manifest for a flight.” He gave her the details. “Tell me if there are any dogs on board. Do it now!” His stomach clenched at the thought that Gina and Fleur were already on board and Malcolm was trapping them.

“Aye-aye captain!” In the background, he heard Elissa unzip her laptop tote.

“If there’s a dog on board even remotely resembling Fleur, we’re going to need to stop that plane,” he added.

“Can do.” She typed for a moment. “Okay, no dogs on board at all.” Elissa sounded as relieved as Lachlan felt. “Why did you think... Wait, is Malcolm there?” Elissa asked. “Are you with him right now?”

The sweet hope in her voice killed him.

“No, Elissa. I’m watching him get onto that plane right now.” Nothing escaped the big man’s attention so Lachlan watched Malcolm from a safe distance as he handed his phone to the attendant to scan. Malcolm didn’t seem hesitant. He strode purposefully through the gangway to the plane.

“Call him! Maybe —”

“Elissa—”

“—he’s trying to get to her before the bad guys —”

“*Elissa*—”

“—do and you guys could team up —”

“Honey. Stop.”

That got her.

He listened to her take a deep breath. “Everyone thought Fia was bad except me,” she said quietly. “But she’s not. Jake and Psychic thought Gina was bad, but she’s not and I knew it. Do you see a pattern here yet?”

Lach sighed. “I can’t risk it, lass, understand?”

“Dammit.” She sounded so disappointed. “I just want all my family back safe and not fighting anymore.”

If the hope in her voice had killed him before, the sad longing in it now

nailed his coffin shut.

“I do too, lass.”

Except he wanted more than that. He wanted to destroy whoever was responsible for dividing and scattering his house, turning the people he cared about against each other. Dammit, he had spent so long and worked so hard on Watchdog. It was the lifeline he'd needed to pull him out of despair. It brought Gina back into his life. It gave him brothers again. And sisters, like Elissa. Against the odds, they'd all found each other—saved each other—through Watchdog.

Elissa was right. Watchdog was family.

“All right, she's not on board but Malcolm looks like he knows what he's doing. So, I need to know about every flight that flew out of Newark to Frankfurt today.”

“Yeah.” Elissa sounded unsure.

“What?”

“It's just that she's never mentioned anything about Germany to me.”

“Me neither.” Lachlan was surprised at that one too. As far as he knew, Gina didn't have any contacts there. But then again, he was learning that she still had many secrets she'd kept from him.

Elissa tapped quietly on her computer for a minute, then swore.

“What?”

“Oh...nothing...just swatting a mosquito.”

“That's Florida for you.”

“Sorry, not a literal one. Someone just tried to hack me. Hazards of an airport. But I got 'em.” More tapping, then, “Okay, I'm looking over the flights... Ah-ha. Small private jet heading directly to Frankfurt left a couple hours ago. And look at that, it's chock full of dogs. Malcolm either knew about it ahead of time or saw Gina and Fleur board it is my guess.”

“Anyone in the manifest resemble Gina and Fleur?”

“Not exactly, no. But, there is one possibility. Jenna O'Donnell is traveling with a mixed-breed bitch named Jasmin who has ginger and dark-brown fur.”

Lachlan breathed a sigh of relief. “Jenna. Yeah, Gina does like her aliases to sound similar to her real name in case she slips up.”

“Gina never slips up.”

Lachlan grinned at the dead certainty in Elissa's voice. “She'd appreciate your faith in her even though she'd be the first to tell you she slips up all the

time.”

“Imposter syndrome sucks.”

He grinned. “So, what else can you tell me about this flight?”

“Already on it. It was leased by a woman named Florence Cooper. Is that someone you know?”

“Never heard of her,” Lach ground out.

“Doing a search for Florence Cooper and dogs... Yeah, she raises Malamutes. Looks like she’s really active in the dog show world. Yup, there are a bunch of shows coming up in Europe. My guess is that it’s a bunch of breeders and such, and Gina’s either posing as a breeder or support staff, maybe a photographer, who knows? Or, maybe she just bought into the lease.”

“God knows.”

“Ask her for me when you find her tomorrow.”

“You’re killing me, lass.”

“I’d rather be killing whoever’s doing this,” she murmured. “So, I’m finding you a flight to Frankfurt.”

“Before I even had to ask.”

“I’m smart like that sometimes. I’m also sending you a list of dog shows all the passengers are involved in just in case she’s gone undercover as a dog handler. It’s a start at least.”

“More than a start, thank you.”

“More good news. Malcolm’s flight has a two-hour layover where he has to change planes but I found you a direct flight leaving from B terminal, gate sixty-two in forty-five minutes. It’s totally full, which is probably why Mal took the other flight, but guess what? You are now at the top of the stand-by list and are getting aboard. Sorry, person-I-bumped.”

Lach’s phone beeped, alerting him to his new plane ticket.

“Excellent, lass. I’ll still miss Gina, but that’ll put me in Frankfurt ahead of Malcolm. I can follow him if he knows where Gina’s going.” He started walking toward his new gate.

“Wish I could do more.”

“Elissa, you’ll be the reason we get her back.”

“Nope. You’re wrong. It’s a group effort. It’s the whole fam working together that’ll bring Gina home. Even Malcolm.”

Lachlan closed his eyes and sighed. “Your lips to God’s ears.”

“Boss?”

“Yeah?”

“I still think there’s hope for all of us.”

Lachlan stopped walking and squeezed his eyes shut. “I do too, Lis.” He spoke the words he didn’t believe and hoped that just saying them would make them true.

“You will believe, Lachlan. You’ll see.”

“Just get yourself home safe, lass.”

“I will.” He heard the laptop tote zip closed again.

“And Elissa?”

“Yeah, Boss?”

“Thanks for believing in Watchdog. Believing in all of us.”

“That’s the easiest thing in the world, Boss.”

## TWENTY-ONE

*Gina, present day, Germany*

**S**hocked by a face she hadn't seen in years, Gina covered her heart. "How can you be here? It's impossible."

"Not impossible when you're lucky. Though it took a lot more than luck to find you."

Princess Sana bint Rashid Al-Hadid stood smiling at Gina. She looked incredibly chic in her stiletto-heeled boots and a pair of tight jeans, but what caught Gina's eye of course was the logo on the tee she wore under her blazer—a lemon with the slogan *Lemons are lucky* printed under it.

"What are you doing here?"

She pointed to her shirt. "Thought it was obvious. I'm here to rescue you."

Gina looked around quickly, trying to keep her panic at bay. "If anyone sees you —"

"They won't. We're fine, I promise." She subtly tilted her head toward a burly-looking man about twenty feet away reading a newspaper. "I have a second one around here somewhere keeping watch too. We're *fine*." Then Sana lunged forward and hugged Gina. "So good to see you. You look good."

"So do you. Much better than me," Gina said, giving her an extra squeeze.

Sana waved her off. "And who is this?" The princess knelt beside Gina to



get a better look at Fleur. The dog immediately nuzzled the princess's hand. "I've heard about you. It's good we finally meet." Sana straightened up. "Now, let's get the hell out of this crappy airport. I'm taking you home with me." She looped her arm with Gina's and pulled her along, the man with the newspaper following at a discreet distance. "Our plane to Zurich is this way."

"Compliments of the Swiss Air Force," Sana said as they boarded the jet. She grinned and side-eyed Gina, goading her.

*Fine, I'll bite.* "The Swiss Air Force now? Wow, really?"

"Yes. You don't think I only run the Swiss Navy, do you?"

Gina snorted. *The Swiss Navy.* That was Sana's favorite joke now. Gina took a seat at a small booth and Sana slid in next to her. The man with the newspaper nodded at them and continued to the row of seats behind them. A second, equally massive man got on board and sat in the row in front of the booth. A flight attendant set two flutes of sparkling champagne on the table.

"So, did Kayla and Walker like the boat that I...I mean, the *Swiss Navy* sent them?" Sana asked as she picked up one of the flutes. She clinked it against Gina's glass and took a sip.

"I don't know. I haven't spoken to them since I blew them up."

"Fia told me that went well."

"Good, glad to hear it since I haven't spoken to her, either."

"Well, that's what happens when you run away from home, Regina," Sana scolded her. "People can't drop you a line, let you know how your assassination went."

"So is that how you found me?" Gina toyed with her glass. "Fia tracked me somehow?"

She just smiled. Unlike Gina, Sana enjoyed keeping secrets. Maybe because she'd been stripped of any privacy for the first part of her life. Now that she was out of the media spotlight after her 'daring escape' during the coup when her uncle came into power, she lived in obscurity in Switzerland. It was a self-imposed exile that made her very happy.

Gina had long since come to terms with the idea that saving the princess all those years ago had only been a distraction so that the U.S. could put their man in place. It didn't matter to her; she got the outcome that she wanted.

Sana was safe, happy, and free. Gina never expected to see her face to face again, or even speak to her. But Sana had reached out right after Jeremy's death and they'd quietly kept in touch ever since.

And now Gina was sitting across from her friend. Her crazy, funny, wonderful friend who had funded Walker and Kayla's escape when Gina had no one else to turn to. Exile or not, the former princess still had deep pockets.

And now she was determined to help Gina, whether Gina wanted it or not.

"You are really not going to give me a say in this, are you?" Gina asked.

"I'm not," Sana answered. "You're a very intelligent woman, my friend, except when it comes to yourself. You were supposed to return to Watchdog for protection. I can't believe you simply disappeared like that."

Suddenly, her smiling, easygoing friend looked terribly upset. "I was *worried*. I don't like to be worried. I've had enough worry in my life."

Gina frowned. "Don't you dare try and make me feel guilty like that."

Sana sat back and crossed her arms. "I'll do whatever I want. My Swiss Air Force, my Swiss Navy." A pout appeared on her pretty face.

Gina couldn't help but laugh. "You're a very petulant dictator," she said.

"And you are an obstinate prisoner. I'm afraid the champagne wasn't good enough and I'll have to try and break you with some Swiss chocolate."

Curled at Gina's feet, Fleur lifted her head at the magic words.

Sana rolled her eyes. "Fine, I'll throw in some biscuits for you, puppy. Happy?"

Her tail thumped against the floor.

"So," Sana continued, glaring at Gina. "Where is Lachlan Campbell in all of this?"

*Dammit.* "Hopefully watching over everyone in a safehouse somewhere in California like I asked him to do until this blows over."

"Gina..."

"*Sana.* I don't want anyone to get hurt trying to help me. That includes you. Thanks for the lift to Zurich, but when we get there, we are parting ways." She lifted the flute. "Champagne and chocolate or no champagne and chocolate."

"We'll see." Sana picked up a remote and pointed it at a blank screen across from them. "In the meantime, we have just enough time to watch the first *Double-O Trouble* movie before we get there."

They didn't part ways in Zurich.

It had been years since Gina last visited Switzerland. The Zurich airport was as she remembered—clean, neat, easy to navigate. She tuned out the announcements overhead in German, French, and English as they headed for the trains. They took one to the city of Lucerne where Sana lived now, in Old Town where covered wooden bridges crisscrossed the turquoise-blue Reuss River. Sana's apartment was right on the Reuss and had a beautiful view of Jesuitenkirche, a seventeenth-century baroque church, right across the water.

Gina practically soaked up the beauty of the city through her skin. It was one of the few places she'd never been—she'd mostly visited Zurich or stayed in Geneva when her dad was on a diplomatic mission.

"Home sweet home," Sana said as she took Gina and Fleur upstairs and showed her to her room. "I'll let you settle in. There's an en suite bathroom with everything you need. Take a shower or a bath, eat some torture chocolate," she pointed to a fancy box of chocolates sitting on a dresser, "take a nap, and come downstairs whenever you're ready."

She closed the door behind her. Then she opened it again, stuck her head in, and said, "Oh, and I saw you studying the building outside and eying the balcony just now. Don't even think about trying to escape."

"Really? When have I ever climbed out a window to escape a royal residence?" Gina deadpanned.

"Exactly." Sana smiled and closed the door again.

Laughing, all Gina could really think about was the soft-looking robe spread lying the bed, which looked equally soft and comfortable and inviting.

"Shall we escape anyway, sweet girl?" she asked Fleur.

The dog had already curled up in a plush dog bed in the corner.

"Traitor," Gina said.

Fleur just looked at her and yawned before resting her head on her paws.

"Fine. You always were the wiser of us."

The truth was, Gina felt exhausted, even a little disoriented. Jet lag was a bitch when you were on the run. She wished she was in her twenties again, back when it never bothered her and she could stay up for days on end. Now, the bathtub called to her, and the chocolates, and the bed...

And pretty soon Gina was out like a light.

## TWENTY-TWO

*Lachlan, present day, flying to Frankfurt*

“Can I get you anything else before you turn in?” the flight attendant asked Lachlan as she handed him a bottle of water with a napkin wrapped around it.

“No, thank you.” He smiled politely at her and she smiled back with a little more than politeness.

“Just hit the call button if you change your mind.” With a wink, she turned and headed back up the aisle.

And it was just as he suspected—the napkin had a name, hotel, and phone number written on it. Lachlan smiled. She was sweet, beautiful, and not Gina. He tucked the napkin into the seat pocket in front of him. He’d throw it away later when she wasn’t looking, and so that no one else would find it and bother her. Then he drank the water, pulled up the blanket she brought ‘just for him’ and closed his eyes.

And immediately felt Gina’s lips on his.

*No. Just a dream* he thought as he startled awake. He closed his eyes again but his brain wouldn’t turn off this time. Instead, it took him back to the wedding shower at Delia’s for Elissa, Nash, Elena, and Camden.

“Love is in the air, Sam,” Lachlan told his dog as he ran his hand over his head. “It’s disgusting.”

Sam just looked adoringly up at him.

“I’d much rather spend the evening here at home with you than go to Delia’s for this thing. Don’t take that as a compliment though. Hell, I’d rather pull out my own fingernails than go.”

He swore the dog cringed.

“Got no choice though, do I?”

Sam sneezed.

“Yeah.” Lachlan stood up from where he crouched beside Sam in his doggie bed. He walked into the bathroom for the twentieth time and looked in the mirror. He ran his hand over his face, which was looking pretty craggy, but at least his body was still in shape. All thanks to Gina finding him. He’d probably have an enormous beer gut at this point otherwise. If he hadn’t drunk or smoked himself to death by now.

He wondered what she’d be wearing tonight. A little black dress that caressed every curve? Her ‘working dress’ that distracted enough that she could coax intel out of anyone—that was her go-to uniform for events like this, even when it was a party just for friends.

For years, he wasn’t sure if she even knew how to relax and have fun anymore. Lach sighed. Watchdog was his reality, his business, his life, but for Gina it was still a cover. She was first and foremost with The Repair Shop which meant she could never relax. She was always watching, always on the lookout for signs of Capitoline’s infiltration.

And yet, he’d watched her slowly open up and it did his heart good to see. He had the women to thank for that, especially Elissa—even if it meant that whenever Elissa took Gina out for girls’ night it cut into his time with her.

They’d maintained a professional relationship just as Gina had wanted, but she still came over once in a while for a drink after work. Whenever she did, he could pretend just for a night that they were together, that this was their normal, that they were just winding down before bed. He’d cut his thoughts off right there. To go any further was torture.

So they’d drink and talk—gossip, really—about their friends, about high-strung clients. They’d talk about anything except their past. The times Lachlan tried to bring up the old days, Gina would shut him down, or worse, she’d cut the night short and it would be weeks before she stopped by again.

*Except lately.* Lach smiled at his reflection in the mirror.

Gina had been stopping by more frequently and staying longer. First, she used the excuse that Fleur was sound asleep beside Sam and she didn't want to disturb either of them. So, she'd stay an extra hour. Then two. Then, she didn't bother with any excuse and nine o'clock would suddenly become midnight.

But that was as far as it went. The moment he thought she might change her mind about their arrangement, she'd give him a smile and call Fleur over to go home.

Until last night. Gina had come straight from the marina where their newest client, Kyla Lewis, lived on her sailboat. They'd been following Kyla to try and catch Fia and now she was under their protection.

When she walked in the door, Lachlan knew she was upset about something.

"What is it?" he asked her as he put a drink in her hand.

"I'm losing my edge," she said as she sat down on the couch. It was a chilly night for spring so Lach had started a fire in the fireplace, and she stared into the flames. "I tried to interrogate Kyla today and didn't get half of what I should have."

Lach tried not to grin. "Why not?" he asked, already suspecting the reason.

She sipped her whiskey. "Do I have to answer that?"

That made him laugh. "I can answer it for you."

"I know." She rolled her hand. "So, go on."

"Part of it is that she's like you."

Gina rolled her eyes. "She's not."

"She is."

"How do you know? You haven't met her."

"No, but I read Jake's profile on her and I've read her articles." He sipped his drink and set it down. "She's looking to expose the darkness to the light, but that's blinded her to the help that's all around her."

Gina reared up. "I am *not* blind. I know all the resources at my disposal."

"Resources? Really?"

She glared at him. "You know I didn't mean it like that."

"We're your friends, Gina. Your *real* friends."

"Jesus, yes! I know!" She clenched her fist, realized she'd done it, then relaxed her hand.

"What's going on, lass?" He started to reach out to stroke her hair on

instinct but pulled back. The gesture did not go unnoticed.

“Nothing.” She sighed and looked back into the fire.

“Talk to me, Sunshine.”

She flinched at his old nickname for her and he realized it had been years since he’d called her that.

After a minute, she blurted out, “Walker’s head over heels for Kyla.”

Now, that was a surprise.

And then the full weight of what Gina said—more, the reason she said it—hit Lachlan square in the chest.

*She sees who we were years ago in them.*

“So. You left Walker there with her. Alone.”

Gina nodded without looking at him.

Lachlan swallowed. “And you came straight here.”

Without a word, Gina tucked her legs under her and leaned against Lach. He put his arm around her and she gave him her weight. His heart beat hard in his chest but he didn’t dare move or speak, as if he might scare off a shy, wild animal.

“I never pace when I’m here,” she said after a few minutes, her voice low and sleepy.

“You’re right. You don’t.”

He studied her face in the firelight, which brought the red back to her dyed-brown hair. She looked peaceful, younger.

*The woman I fell in love with. The woman I still love. My Sunshine.*

She stirred and blinked quickly as if she’d just remembered where she was. She looked up at Lach and he was sure that was the end of it—she’d bolt upright and head for the door like she always did. He’d see her at Watchdog in the morning and she’d pretend like the evening had never happened. That she hadn’t let herself be vulnerable, or felt his heart pounding as he held her.

Instead she smiled. Then she kissed him.

It was a gentle, tentative kiss at first, questioning. Asking permission. She’d set the rules, and now she was breaking them.

Lach answered with a soft groan as he tasted her for the first time in years. God, how he’d wanted her, wanted *this*, for so damn long. He kissed her with a mixture of hunger and tenderness, trying with every brush of his lips, every lick, every thrust of his tongue, to tell her how much he’d missed her. Craved her. Could not live without her.

Lachlan tightened his arms around Gina, pulling her closer until their

bodies pressed together. Gina straddled his lap and ground down on his erection, eliciting another groan. He broke off their kiss and arched his head back as she kissed the most sensitive spot on his throat. He closed his eyes in pure bliss.

And then the soft, hungry touch of her lips disappeared.

“Gina,” he growled, opening his eyes. But he was too late, the moment was over. She stood up, motioned to Fleur, and they were gone.

She'd avoided him all day, living up to her Spooky reputation. And now, Lach would see her tonight with all their friends, celebrating an upcoming double wedding, knowing that he could have had the same with her.

Bitterness crept up the back of his throat. They needed to talk, and it was about more than about Walker and Kyla.

Lachlan got to Delia's restaurant early but he still hadn't beaten Gina there. And yes, she was wearing a little black dress and it was enough to drive him half out of his mind. He studied her through the plate glass window as she stood at the bar toward the back of the dining room. Delia and her wife were standing with her and they were all chatting with the bartender, who looked like too much of a flirt to Lach's eye.

*Oh stop it, old man.*

Gina was laughing at something one of them had said. And what drove him the rest of the way out of his mind was how carefree she looked in the moment. A woman enjoying the company of her friends. If only they knew the pressure she was under, the double-life she maintained. Lachlan wanted to bellow at her to stop fighting and let it all go. He almost turned around just then to let her enjoy herself in peace. He knew the moment he walked in she'd be all-business, denying what happened the night before.

Denying years of their relationship.

*Fuck it. I'm not running from the truth anymore.*

He opened the door. Gina looked up and her face went painfully neutral. He didn't take his eyes from hers as he crossed the room. He heard the door open behind him and she looked over his shoulder. From the way her expression softened, he knew it was Walker and Kyla.

It didn't matter. When he got to Gina, he grabbed her arm and directed



her through a door toward the kitchen in the back.

“Lachlan—”

“We need to talk.”

“After the party.”

“No. Now.” He walked her straight to the back door leading out into an alley. The metal door slammed shut and then Lachlan had Gina pressed up against it. He took only a moment to study her shining eyes and register that she wasn’t struggling before his lips found hers in a hard, hungry kiss. She reacted by sliding her long, bare leg up the outside of his until it was wrapped around his waist, pulling him closer. Her nails dug into his shoulder as she returned his kiss with double the hunger and passion he felt. He ran one hand down her side and clutched her leg, feeling her soft, creamy flesh under his rough fingers. The fingers of his other hand were entwined with hers, their hands pressed against the door over her head.

Jesus, he was this close to fucking her right here against the door in an alley as their friends gathered inside, just a few feet away. He didn’t care. Gina was his, right now. Nothing else mattered. He inched her skirt up higher and let go of her hand to grab her other leg and lift her until she was wrapped around his waist. She never stopped kissing him. He wondered if he could carry her unseen back to the SUV parked half a block down.

*Fuck it. Too far. This’ll do.*

He slid his hands up under her skirt and his fingertips touched lace. *Fuck.* They slipped under the scalloped edges of her panties and that’s when she pulled her head back with a soft moan.

“Can’t,” she said. “They’re all inside.”

“My SUV is just down the street.”

“They’ll wonder.”

“Let ’em wonder. Hell, they already know, we aren’t fooling anyone anymore.”

“Walker will talk. Malcolm, too. You know they’re still with —”

“Do you really think they’ll give you up?” He studied her face in the overhead light. “Gina.”

“The Repair Shop can’t know about us. They will use you against me.” Her eyes shone suddenly with unshed tears. “They’ll use anything against me now.”

Lachlan bent his head and pressed his forehead against hers. He knew how to fight on a battlefield. He had no idea how to fight the battle she waged

in her head. But the sad truth was, she was right. It did seem like her friends were turning against her. They had been since Hawaii. Maybe even before that once he thought about it.

She shook him from his thoughts as she squirmed in his arms. He loosened his grip and her legs slid back down until she was standing again.

“We do need to talk,” Gina said as she smoothed down her dress.

*Back into the cold. All business.*

She ran a hand through her mussed hair. “Kyla needs to be in a safehouse. We don’t need to risk her life to catch Fia.”

“Then we’ll put her in a fucking safehouse.”

She flinched and looked at him. “Lachlan.”

“Do it. Number three is empty.” He turned away and started walking down the alley.

“Where are you going?” she called.

“Not back inside.”

Rain pelted his face as he marched to the SUV. It did nothing to cool his temper. Dammit, he didn’t want to be mad at her, but he couldn’t do this anymore. He couldn’t be this close to her day in and day out and not touch her, not take her in his arms and kiss the hell out of her. Not carry her to his bed every night, lay her down, and wring every last orgasm out of her that he could, then hold her all night tucked up against him safe and warm.

He couldn’t leave her, either. Never. Never again.

Lach punched the SUV door. Then again as he roared. He kept roaring and pounding the dashboard all the way home.

**A**n hour later, there was a soft knock on his door.

She stood there shivering, her black dress dripping water on his porch. Fleur looked forlorn beside her.

“Get in here,” he growled.

She stepped inside with Fleur. Lach slammed the door shut. Then he scooped her up to carry her to the bedroom.

“Lach.”

“No, lass,” he said as he carried her down the hall. “Stop denying yourself.”

Lach nuzzled into the side of her neck. He felt the tension in Gina's body as he carried her, her arms wrapping tightly around his neck. Lachlan ignored the voice in his head warning him to be gentle, to tread carefully. He couldn't hold back any longer. She was here now and he was going to show her this was where she belonged.

He gently set Gina down on the edge of bed and stood in front of her. Her eyes were two golden mirrors, reflecting back his own desire. He reached around and unzipped Gina's dress swiftly. The dark fabric pooled around her waist, revealing her lacy black bra against her pale skin.

Lach pressed his lips against her exposed collarbone. He trailed kisses down to the swell of her breasts as she made soft, wanting sounds. Lachlan reveled in the sound, feeling it fueling his own hunger for her. He undid her bra and took one hardened nipple into his mouth, sucking gently before lavishing equal attention on its twin. He moved lower, leaving a trail of wet kisses along her stomach. With a devilish grin, he pulled her up and her dress fell to the floor. He hooked his fingers under the black lace fabric of her panties and slowly pulled them down until he was kneeling in front of her.

He listened to her breath hitch in anticipation as he ran his hands back up her legs. Her body smelled so good. Citrus and sunflowers and her own sweet musk. Feeling like he was in a dream, he pressed his lips against her throbbing center. His tongue traced circles around her clit, eliciting a gasp of pleasure from her lips. He continued to tease her, alternating between soft licks and gentle nips, his kisses causing her body to tremble with need.

As Lachlan explored every inch of Gina's most intimate folds, she tangled her fingers in his hair, urging him closer.

Lachlan slid two fingers inside her, curling them just right to hit that sweet spot that made Gina arch her back. Her hips rocked in time with his fingers. He held her up with one arm as he pleased her. Her moans filled the room as he set a relentless rhythm, pushing her closer and closer to the edge of ecstasy.

"Lach," she pleaded, the word torn from deep within her throat.

He removed his fingers and eased her down on the bed.

"You're overdressed," she said with a smile.

He shook his head. "We'll remedy that soon, lass. But this is for you first." He rubbed her clit again and thrust his fingers inside her until she was writhing. Gina arched into his touch, a low moan escaping from deep within her throat.

Her eyes squeezed shut, her back arched, and she cried out his name then collapsed back onto the bed.

“God, that was beautiful. Thank you,” he whispered when she finished. She looked up at him through hazy eyes, her gaze caressing his body as he undressed. His erection throbbed with anticipation, begging for release. He took hold of himself, then rubbed the head against Gina's soaking wet folds before entering her in one swift thrust. Time stood still. The past and the present melted together as they lost themselves, their bodies moving together as if they'd never been apart.

“Let me have it, Sunshine. All those pent-up years, let me have them. I'm taking them. Oh, fuck, Gina, let go and give it to me.”

Gina's core squeezed around his cock as she yelled out again, sending him over the edge with her.

As they lay in each other's arms, Lachlan whispered, “Stay the night.” And to his joy, she was still there in the morning.

Lachlan opened his eyes to find himself on the plane. He checked the screen on the back of the seat in front of him. Only a couple of hours before they landed. He prayed that wherever she was, Gina was safe and sound, and that he could keep her that way.

## TWENTY-THREE

*Gina, present day, Switzerland*

**G**ina woke up hours later completely disoriented. She'd just been having a dream about the last night she'd spent with Lachlan. It was weeks after the party at Delia's. The night before she set Walker and Kyla free.

**G**ina had been to Lachlan's house many times of course, but she'd only ever seen the front room, the kitchen, the bathroom. Never his bedroom. It was as if the room didn't even exist. No, more like she *pretended* it didn't exist. Maybe he had, too. Whenever she'd wandered down the hall in search of the bathroom after a couple of whiskeys after a long day, she'd been tempted to keep walking to the end of the hall and peek inside his bedroom. She both pretended and fought the idea that the door was ajar as an invitation, with its warm, honey light spilling out and faint wisps of Lach's scent. How much more intense would the peaty, gingery, musky smell of his skin be on his sheets? Her body would react to memories of nights spent making love with him and she'd banish all thoughts of exploring his bedroom.

Until the next time.

But now she lay in his arms, wrapped in that safe, warm smell, and she

never wanted to leave, but she also felt restless, knowing what was coming.

Lachlan was sound asleep so she carefully slipped out of his arms. He'd left a flannel shirt lying across a chair. Gina picked it up and slipped it on. Not quite as good as being wrapped in his arms, but it smelled like Lachlan's skin. She inhaled deeply and imagined the ghost of tobacco, or maybe he was sneaking cigarettes after all.

No, he wasn't, she decided. This shirt was soft and worn and old, from the years they'd been apart. Blue-and-red plaid, slightly frayed at the elbows. She didn't bother to button it, but wrapped it around her like a robe and sat down in the chair. She watched Lachlan sound asleep in the bed. They shouldn't have become lovers again. It would make leaving so much harder.

But, she'd cherish the memories of his body for whatever short time she had left in this world.

Even as she watched him, he turned over and opened his eyes the moment he realized she wasn't beside him anymore. He sat up and looked at the bedroom door first—his first instinct was that she'd left and it was a good instinct. When his gaze fell on her in the chair his expression softened. He looked relieved, like a man who was reassured his treasure hadn't been stolen while he slept.

Thunder rumbled outside and rain hit the window. Gina didn't move. She stayed where she was, studying him while he studied her. They didn't need to speak. They were far past that. She'd always been comfortable with his silences because they were still communicating. A look between them said volumes.

Come back to bed, lass," he finally entreated. "There's still a lot of night ahead. I want to enjoy all of it with you." His gaze fell on her bare legs half-tucked under her. When she still didn't move, he got out of bed. Gina watched his cock stiffen as he crossed the room to the chair. He knelt down in front of her and laid a hand on her shin.

"The queen on her throne," he whispered.

"I'm no queen."

"No, lass. Let me worship you all the same."

He pulled her leg out straight, then did the same with the other, hooking them over his broad shoulders. He bent forward and she admired the way the muscles of his upper back rippled as he slid his hands up the insides of her thighs. She was already wet by the time his tongue found her center. Gina arched her neck as Lachlan gave her what she'd wanted from him for so long.

He knew exactly how to give her pleasure. He'd never forgotten. He stroked her thighs as his tongue laved her folds. She gripped the chair's armrests and tried not to squeeze Lach too hard with her legs.

"Let me have it, lass," Lach growled against her. "Let yourself go."

She'd never felt safe or secure enough with anyone else. Never willing to be this vulnerable. But Lachlan had her back. He'd always loved her—as a friend, as a partner, and as his woman.

She felt the first waves build higher and higher and did not fight them. She could drown in pleasure and Lachlan would make sure she was safe and sound the entire time. God, the things he was doing to her, the way his lips, his tongue, his fingers caressed her body nearly drove her out of her mind.

"Let go, Sunshine," he growled against her skin, "I've got you."

And she had no choice but to obey his command. Pleasure took her and she cried out his name. He smoothed his hands up her hips and wrapped his arms around her waist as she bucked against him. She went limp and he swept her up into his arms and carried her back to bed. He tucked her in next to his side and laid his arm over her. She turned her head and kissed his throat, working her way to his sensitive throat.

Lach chuckled and pulled back. "Thought you were half-asleep."

"I was, but not now." She reached between his legs to stroke his still-hard cock and he groaned.

"You don't have to."

"I want to, Lach. We denied ourselves this for so long."

"Gina," he breathed. "I never wanted it to end."

"I know. I shouldn't have —"

"Shh." He placed his fingertips against his lips. "We can't know what would have been, only what is, right now. We're together tonight. Let's make the most of it."

"What about tomorrow?"

"There is no tomorrow."

She swung her body on top of his and kissed him before she could think too hard about what he'd said or let the truth of the words sink in. Who knew how much time she had now that she'd made up her mind?

Lachlan eased his flannel shirt down her shoulders as they kissed. She shrugged it off and grabbed his cock. She lined it up with her body and in one powerful thrust, he was deep inside her where he belonged. She rode him gently, then harder, bringing them both back to the pleasure they'd denied

themselves for years. Lachlan gripped her hard as he bucked into her.

“So good,” he cried out, “Ah, Gina, *Gina*.”

His voice sent her over the edge, into her third or fourth orgasm of the night. She laid her body down on top of his and soaked in his warmth. He stroked her back, ran his fingers through her hair.

“I love you, Gina. I always have, ever since the first moment I looked into those golden eyes.”

She nuzzled his throat and placed a kiss there. “I know. I saw it that first minute in the courtyard. Everything fell into place. It scared me, how much I felt like I’d suddenly found my home.” She kissed him again. “I didn’t want to fall in love. But I did. Immediately. I’ve loved you all this time, too, Lach. Even as just friends and partners. I fought so hard against feeling anything more. I thought it would endanger you. I’m still afraid it will.”

“Ah, Sunshine. As if I’m made of spun glass.” He chuckled again then was silent. Gina found herself drifting off in perfect contentment.

She’d drifted off again, thinking back. Why was she so exhausted? She’d slept pretty well on the plane to Germany, and now she’d had a good, long nap. But she felt like she could sleep forever.

*You’ll do that soon enough if they find you.*

The worst part was that there was a tiny voice in her head that wanted them to find her.

She hadn’t been on the run for only a few days. She’d been running all her life. And she was tired.

*No. I have an evil man to bring down first.*

Gina forced herself to sit up in bed. She looked at the clock on the nightstand. It was afternoon, but her body argued that point. She looked at her arms like she always did first thing in the morning. They were bare. The quick shower she’d taken before falling asleep had washed away the sun symbols she’d redrawn on her inner arms in Denver. She expected the same blankness on her ankle but there was the faintest outline left of a lemon.

Fleur had since left the doggie bed and was curled up next to Gina in bed. “I don’t know if Sana is going to appreciate the fur on the duvet,” she told her girl. Fleur huffed and rolled onto her back for a tummy rub.



“Yes, your highness.” As she rubbed Fleur’s tummy she looked around and thought Fleur might enjoy staying here. She liked Sana, and Sana would take good care of her and keep her safe. The thought was the first of its kind—leaving Fleur behind.

She reached for her backpack beside the bed. She unzipped a pocket and took out a vape pen. It was a tiny one, easily concealable in her hand.

*Wouldn’t Soup be pissed if he saw?*

She chuckled as she checked the pen over to make sure it made it through all the traveling intact. After that, Gina got up and picked out an outfit from a freestanding wardrobe. Sana had bought all sorts of clothes and had done a good job of guessing Gina’s size. Dressed, she went to find Sana. Her friend was sitting at a table beside a window and enjoying the view of the river. It made Gina smile to see her relaxed and happy. Serene. So different from the broken, despairing woman from years ago.

“Ah, you’re up,” Sana said as she stood. She pointed to a bowl on the floor with chopped-up chicken but Fleur was already making a beeline for her breakfast. “You’ll be happy to know that Walker and Kyla are well on their way to Fiji. They’ve had remarkable weather and are making good time.”

Gina gripped the back of a chair. She felt almost dizzy with relief. They were safe. Free, and already living out the life they’d wanted, together. She bowed her head in gratitude.

“Thanks to the Swiss Navy.”

Sana laughed. “My pleasure. But they couldn’t have done it without you.” She picked up a tablet and showed the screen to Gina. “See? Different by-line, but I’d know her writing anywhere. Kyla’s already sending articles back to her newspaper about Loki, Houston Robotics, and Bennett’s part in exposing them all. It should help his bid for the presidency. Not that he needs it with his popularity already soaring. He seems like a good man.”

Gina nodded. “He is. He’s political like all of them, but he wants to do the right thing.”

Sana touched her cheek. “You look pale. There’s a farmer’s market today. I thought we’d take a walk.”

*Is she crazy?*

“I don’t think I should be out there in the open, do you?”

Sana waved her off. “I’ll have guards following us. And you and I both know how it is.”

Gina nodded. She did. Either they knew where she was and there was no sense in hiding, or they didn't have a clue. Considering that no one had attacked Sana's home so far, she was safe. For now. And if there was any sign of trouble, Gina would do what Gina did best and disappear.

"Yeah. Might be my last chance at getting some fresh air for a while."

"Come on." Sana grabbed Fleur's leash and handed it to Gina. "She'll appreciate the walk as well."

Gina smiled. "True." Fleur was already turning excited circles by the front door. "Let me grab my bag, hat, and sunglasses." A flimsy disguise but she worked with what she had.

Lucerne was an incredibly beautiful medieval town. The way the old buildings lined the Reuss reminded Gina of Venice, only the canals were never this shade of aqua. White swans swam in the waters without a care in the world. Tourists and locals both ambled along the streets looking for shops and restaurants. The sound of church bells filled the air at the top of the hour.

"There must be comfort in hearing those bells if you're a local," Gina said. "In knowing that your ancestors heard those same bells at the same time of day every day that you do. One continuous line stretching all the way back to the first time they ever rang."

"Neither of us has that, do we?" Sana said.

"No, we don't. You're so far from where you were born, both in miles and lifestyle. And me? I grew up everywhere. No roots. Just one post after another. I'd learn the local customs just in time to leave and learn the next ones."

They listened to the bells until they finished chiming, then took the steps up to one of the covered wooden bridges—Chapel Bridge, Gina thought—dodging past tourists taking selfies. Under the roof, there were paintings from the seventeenth century decorating the triangular supports every few feet. Sana pointed to one, a scene showing Adam and Eve being chased out of the Garden of Eden.

"This is a place of deeply ingrained tradition," Sana said. "Living here, I've adapted to it and come to love everything about Switzerland, even as I complain about the little things. It's my home now. I can't imagine living anywhere else."

"So you'd never go back even if you could?"

"No. I've been invited by my uncle but I refuse him, even as he fills my bank accounts. I don't want to go back and be a part of his politics or be

some sort of a symbol of his reforms. I support my own charities.”

“Is it the memories too?”

“Yes, of course that has something to do with it. But, I was a little more than a girl when I escaped, barely nineteen. I’ve lived here almost as long as I lived as a princess in my birth country. I’m even a citizen now. *This* is my home.”

Gina sighed.

“What is wrong?”

“Hmm?” she asked, not realizing she’d just sighed.

Sana placed her hand on her friend’s arm. They’d reached the other end of the bridge and started down the steps. Gina thought it was to help Sana’s balance, but then realized it was to comfort her when she said, “That was a deep sigh and sounded full of regrets.”

Gina forced a smile. “Not regrets, just wondering what could have been.”

“That doesn’t sound like you,” Sana said as she directed them toward the white tents of the farmers’ market.

“People change.”

“They do, yes.” Sana stopped in front of a flower stall. “But, I’m going to repeat something you once told me. Don’t look back. Only move forward. It’s what got me through my escape and the years of recovery after, and it will get you through too. But more importantly, *rely on your friends*. Your family. Like me.”

Sana hugged Gina, who found sudden, unexpected tears springing to her eyes at her old friend’s affection. “And now,” Sana said, “I’m going to buy some of those Stargazer lilies that smell so lovely.”

“In the language of flowers, pink lilies mean happiness and pink carnations mean a woman’s friendship,” Gina said as she lifted some carnations out of a bucket and handed them to Sana.

“I’d never heard that.” She took them with a smile and added them to her bouquet of lilies.

“My friend Jordan told me. She’s an artist who designs the most amazing gardens.”

“Jordan Summers, yes. I’ve seen some of her work outside Bern. Marvelous.”

“I...miss her. I miss everyone.”

Sana leaned her head against Gina’s shoulder. “You’ll see her again, I know it. This is just a little rest for you before you go back out into the

world.”

Instead of answering, Gina let Sana pay for her flowers while she looked over a selection of olives and sun-dried tomatoes at the next stall. She didn't want to contradict her oldest friend. Gina would never go near Jordan or any of the others again. She didn't want to endanger them. She wondered how Jordan's pregnancy was going, if she was over her terrible morning sickness. She would miss Elena and Elissa's marriages to Camden and Nash, and deeply regretted that. Bette and Tina would put on a wonderful wedding, she knew.

Gina bit her lower lip, trying not to think about how she would miss Tina growing up into a smart, beautiful young woman. She'd never hold Jordan's baby, or Elena's, or Rachael's, or Arden's.

Maybe Lachlan would have a family one day.

*Please move on without me.*

She felt Sana's hand on her shoulder. “Let's sit there for a while.” She pointed at some tables sitting in front of a café. “I could use some tea, couldn't you?”

Gina nodded. She let Sana lead her to the table. She couldn't believe this was the same girl she'd rescued. She seemed wise beyond her years and there was a serene grace to her every movement. She'd found peace and Gina was beyond glad for her friend.

Sana ordered for the both of them while Gina couldn't help but look around. She's already spotted Sana's guards though they did an excellent job of blending in. She didn't see anyone else who looked suspicious. Gina told herself that she was looking for anyone, but really, there were three faces she dreaded seeing. But so far, she was in the clear.

The waiter brought a tray with tea, chocolates, and pastries and set it down in the center of the table.

“Danke,” Gina and Sana chorused.

Sana pretended to sneak a bite of pastry to Fleur while Gina rolled her eyes and smiled.

“She's an amazing dog,” Sana said. “I'm having fun spoiling her rotten.”

“I'm glad to hear that.”

Gina's tone made her look up from smiling down at Fleur.

“No.”

“No what?”

“She's your dog, Gina. I'm not taking her.”

“She’ll need someone.”

Sana glared at her. “Don’t you dare talk that way. I’m not going to let anything happen to you.”

“You can’t save me because I’m already a dead woman walking, Sana. You’re having tea with a ghost.”

“As you did once.” She lifted her cup and toasted Gina. “You only say that because you can’t feel the hope. But that is only temporary. I speak from experience. You brought me hope, my dearest friend, when I could not find it for myself anymore. You reminded me that there was a time when I was free and happy, and promised it would be that way again. And then you delivered on that promise.”

“Not just me,” Gina insisted, waving her off.

“Exactly. Not just you. It was you and Lachlan and his team. No one survives alone, *Regina*.”

“I’m not meant to survive.”

“So you have stubbornly decided.”

“I have people to protect. You had no one.”

Sana blinked slowly and deliberately, her entire expression saying *are you kidding me?*

“What in heaven’s name are you *afraid of*, Regina?” She leaned back in her chair and shook her head with her mouth open. “Because you are the closest thing I know to a superhero like in the movies and nothing scares you.”

“You’re wrong. Plenty of things scare me. I’m just good at hiding it.”

“So what is it this time? You’ve spit in the eye of evil over and over and this time is no different, so that’s not it. I ask again—what are you really running from?”

Gina found herself blinking back sudden tears. “They’ll kill him and I can’t lose him,” she whispered. “Not again. It’ll destroy me.”

“Then don’t lose him. Stop running away from Lachlan.”

“I never told you it was —”

“Please. It’s more obvious than the sun in the sky.”

Gina covered her face.

“Let yourself live.”

“I don’t know how.” She dropped her hands into her lap.

“You’ve only forgotten how. It will come back if you let love in. Life will follow.”

She finally nodded. "He's in my dreams. Lach is after me anyway. I can feel him."

"He is." Sana smiled and popped a macaron into her mouth. After she smiled she added, "I called him."

Gina nearly spit out her tea. "You. *What?*"

"I did. Took some doing but I found him. Poor man was wandering around Germany following a terrible lead."

"I can't believe you..." She shook her head.

"One of us had to have some common sense." She stood up and set some bills on the table. "We have a little time still. The olives at that stall across the way look good." Gina got up and followed her across the street, still in shock.

Sana pointed out the olives she wanted and the farmer grabbed a box. "Let's get some bread and cheese to go with the olives, and have them for dinner in the flat when Lachlan gets here. I'll bring up a bottle of Mont d'Or from the bomb shelter. It doubles as a perfect wine cellar. Many Swiss buildings have them."

But Sana's voice had faded into the background as Gina felt the hairs rise on the back of her neck. Someone was watching them.

She looked around for the guards, who she'd been keeping track of while they had their tea. They were nowhere in sight and Gina tried to remember when she'd last noted them. Had it been two minutes? Three at most?

*Shit.*

*A terrible lead in Germany.* Who had sent Lach on a wild goose chase instead of trying to kill him outright?

*Someone who wanted him out of the way.*

Gina didn't stop moving, only smiled at the handsome Italian trying to upsell her with a bottle of olive oil but she scanned the street behind her sunglasses. The market had drawn a huge crowd of locals and tourists both, but she felt a particular pair of eyes on her. A cold, predator's gaze. Gina handed the man some Swiss francs and took the bottle from him while Sana bought a loaf of bread.

"Now for cheese," Sana said.

"I think it's time for lemons."

To her credit, Sana's expression didn't change from her smile though her eyes darted behind her sunglasses to where one of her guards had last been standing. He was nowhere in sight.

"Ah, yes, I see," she sighed. "I wasn't expecting them to be ripe so early

in the season. My fault.”

Gina handed her the bottle of olive oil.

And then Fleur’s leash.

“You head back to your apartment. I’ll go find them on my own.”

“Regina. No.” Sana refused to take the leash. “It’s not far. We’ll go home together. Maybe Lachlan is already there. Maybe —”

“Please. Take Fleur and go. It’s already too late.”

“I’m so sorry, my friend. We shouldn’t have left the flat.”

“No. He’s known where I was this whole time. I was never safe here. He’s one of the best.”

Sana started to take out her phone. “I’ll call home and we’ll get an escort.”

“Put your phone away now. Take my Fleur to safety. Please. For me.”

“I’ll keep you both safe.”

“No. I’m done running. I’ll take care of this.”

Sana’s eyes filled with tears but finally she nodded and took Fleur’s leash. The dog whined and looked back and forth between the women.

“You are not abandoned. We’ll find you. I love you, my friend.”

“I love you, too.” She hugged Sana and dropped to her knees in front of Fleur.

“There aren’t words, puppy. My sweetest girl.”

She stood up and walked away without looking back.

## TWENTY-FOUR

*Gina, present day, Switzerland*

**A** cold, steady calm descended on Gina, as familiar as a lover.  
*Time to go back to work.*

She walked about a quarter mile in the opposite direction of Sana's apartment. She felt his eyes on her back right up until she walked into the restaurant. She went straight to the bar and sat down. She took out her vape without letting the bartender catch sight of it.

"English?" she asked him.

He shook his head. "Deutsch."

*Good. He only speaks German.*

She ordered a Hugo and took a single sip of the sweet drink. Then she stirred it, waiting.

A glance up from the bartender told her someone had entered. One look in the mirror behind the bar at his hulking shape confirmed her instincts. He settled his bulk onto the stool next to hers and gave the bartender his order before turning to her.

"Malcolm," she said.

"Gina." The Chicago accent had faded a bit. Or he was holding it in.

"Looks like the Cubs might make it to the World Series again this year," she said.

Malcolm smiled. His hometown heroes.



“You always did root for the underdog, Gina.”

“Always,” she said, thinking of a long-ago princess with no hope. Of a SEAL separated from his team and tortured. Of another SEAL washed up like wreckage on a barroom floor. Of an aimless and underestimated woman with a talent for computers.

And she thought of the man sitting next to her, who’d found someone who loved him, and had saved that woman from an even colder predator than himself. Was he here to do that again? And which woman was he going to save this time, Annalie or Gina?

That was an easy answer. She wasn’t even bitter about it.

*Please, just don’t make me hurt you, Malcolm.*

The bartender brought Malcolm his drink and looked at Gina, but she waved him away.

“So they sent you,” she said.

“They sent me. Probably thinking you’d hesitate a minute before killing me.” He clinked his beer against her Hugo. “Fan of underdogs that you are.”

They were right. The second she realized who they would send, Gina had thought of three different ways she could kill Malcolm. She’d cataloged all his weaknesses years ago like a reflex. Funny that they’d cataloged her latest weakness before she had. She’d made new friends. Real ones. Now they were going to use them all against her, starting with Watchtower.

“You think you’re an underdog compared to me?” she asked him.

Malcolm scoffed. “I know it. I’ve seen your dossier. All of it. Nothing redacted.” He took a swallow of his beer.

“The *whole* thing? It must look like *War and Peace*.”

Malcolm chuckled. “Heavy on the war.”

She considered asking him how he planned on killing her. But instead, she decided to ask for a gift.

“We’ve known each other a long time, Malcolm.”

“That we have.”

Any surprises in my dossier?”

His eyebrows rose. “Of course.”

“Then tell me what I need to know, Mal. Why? I did everything they wanted. Always a good soldier.”

He grimace-smiled at her. “You already know, Gina, so don’t pretend, not with me. For starters, you let Skeleton Key get destroyed. They wanted it.”

*Ah.* He’d confirmed something for her, just not what he thought. But she

needed more.

“That wasn't my call. You were there in Hawaii. Elissa and Fia smashed the thumb drives all on their own.”

“Well, at least Elissa did. Fia, not so much, huh?” He sipped his beer. “You were supposed to be there to ensure that didn't happen.” He looked pointedly at her. “You were also supposed to recruit Fia to Watchdog, not Elissa, but you didn't. You went for the underdog, the one who destroyed Skeleton Key. Word is, you set it up.”

“And they didn't like that.”

“No, they didn't.”

“Enough that they pulled my ex out of cold storage,” she fished. “He's alive and they've been hiding him. Isn't that correct?”

Gina swore the air around Malcolm dropped to below freezing.

He glared at her. “Yeah, I bet that was a shock for you, considering you're the one who hit Eva. And when Jeremy tried to protect her you captured and tortured him. Not quite to death though, huh?” He smiled. “Suuur-prise.”

“That's not how it happened, Malcolm.”

“Oh, so you didn't mean to kill him? Just interrogate him? You're very good at that, but I guess you've had ample opportunity to improve your skills over the years.” Malcolm took another sip. “Fixer,” he scoffed.

“It wasn't me. I didn't kill Eva and I didn't take Jeremy or torture him. I would have never hurt Jeremy. He was my mentor. My partner. My friend.”

“Not what the dossier said. You're the one who went rogue and betrayed him. It's just that no one understood it back then. Then you killed that paparazzi Ron Anderson when he got close to the truth. And now you've betrayed Walker and Kyla.”

Gina's blood turned cold. It wasn't just Mal's words but the look in his eyes. He believed what they'd told him, heart and soul. Believed that she was behind Walker and Kyla's deaths.

When she designed their escape, she didn't want a single leak. She realized too late she should have trusted Malcolm and let him in on the plan. But all it would take right now was one phone call to Walker and Kyla to convince Malcolm.

*Maybe.* Or, knowing they were alive and where they were would give him currency to trade for Annalie's safety. Annalie might be safe for now, but she couldn't stay in a safehouse forever.

She tensed, waiting for an attack. She was no match physically for Malcolm, built like a brick shithouse as he was. But she'd studied all his weaknesses and she knew she was faster.

That's what the tiny vape was for.

To airport security it looked harmless—well, as harmless as vaping could be. It would even give you a wicked-strong nicotine buzz if you used it to vape. But hit the little button on the side just right and the vape pen would turn into the equivalent of an epi pen that could deliver a fatal dose of nicotine straight into the bloodstream. All she had to do was hit Malcolm in the neck or chest and he would be too nauseated to attack and dead of a heart attack within five minutes.

“Mal,” she whispered. “I didn't betray anyone.”

*And please don't make me betray you.* She pleaded with him with her eyes. And at the same time she got ready to strike.

“Is that a lemon slice in your Hugo?” Malcolm pointed to the lime wedge in her drink.

Gina's heart skipped a beat.

*Lemon.* He knew her code for *same team*. Her meeting with Princess Sana must have been in her dossier in detail.

So, did he mean he was on her side or was he bluffing?

“Yes, actually,” she lied. “My little addition for luck.”

Malcolm smiled, but this time, it held all the warmth in the world. It was probably the same smile that made Annalie fall in love with him.

Gina lowered her hand holding the vape pen.

Malcolm laughed, low and bitter-sounding, but the warmth remained in his eyes. “You'll need luck. You betrayed all of us. You've been working for Capitoline all along, starting with Jeremy, your own partner. Funny how it all goes back to Eva and Marcus Porter. I put it together. Your little absences here and there away from Jeremy. You were on Porter's sick little island. It's all right there in your dossier for anyone with half a brain.”

Gina felt a mixture of rage and triumph. Yes, Malcolm was confirming what she'd suspected. He'd figured everything out, too—all the connections, even her relationship with Lachlan.

She gave him a smile. “Fascinating. What else is in there?”

“You're not *listening*. You betrayed everyone when you left Watchdog, Gina.”

There was something in the way he said *listening*.

“I’m *listening*,” she said. “I left so that they’d go after me and leave everyone else alone.” She put the same emphasis on listening that he did to see his reaction.

He nodded his head slowly, chuckling as if she were a child spinning a particularly unbelievable lie. That chuckle held deep, cold depths that contrasted the warmth in his eyes.

“You mean like you left Walker and Kyla alone, *in fact*?”

*Yes. There it was again.* Just the slightest emphasis on the word *in*. Subtle to anyone else, but to Gina, Malcolm was shouting a message. *Listening in.*

*He’s wearing a wire.* And thanks to Malcolm, Gina knew exactly who was listening in.

“You can’t think I’m responsible for killing *Jeremy*.” She gave his name the same slight emphasis and watched Malcolm.

He gave her back the barest of nods.

She was threading a needle, unsure of what she could say now that she knew Jeremy was listening. Thank God she hadn’t picked up the phone and given Walker and Kyla away.

“Who else could have killed him but you, Gina?” Malcolm continued. “Walker was sent to retire you. Kyla was collateral damage. Or was she? Maybe she’d been the one to discover the truth about you.”

“What truth?”

His hand whipped up to his chest, There was something metal in it. A weapon? He pressed it against his chest.

Speaking quickly, Mal tapped the metal device and said, “Elissa’s voodoo she gave me a while back. We have about two minutes tops before the wire kicks back in. They already have the back door covered.” He motioned with his chin toward the back.

Gina covered her heart. “Is Lachlan with you? Are the two of you working together?”

“No. I couldn’t risk tipping off Jeremy so I went rogue from Watchdog. I knew Lachlan was following me so I laid down a false breadcrumb trail that’s kept him busy and safe in Germany. Jeremy will kill him if Lach gets near you.”

“Shit. Sana called him. He’s on his way.”

“Fuck.”

“Walker and Kyla are alive,” Gina told him.

“I hoped so,” Mal said, looking relieved. “I knew you were innocent but I

thought Jeremy might have killed them. He's got the rest fooled, saying you tried to kill him for Capitoline and he's been deep undercover directing The Repair Shop ever since. I'm supposed to bring you in or kill you trying. So hit me with whatever you've got in your hand and run."

"I can't. It'll kill you almost instantly."

Malcolm grinned. "So make it a love tap instead, just enough to knock me out. We'll make it look good. I'll tell him you said you're planning on seeking asylum in Geneva, that you have Kyla's research and you've been leaking it to the paper, that she and Walker really are dead."

"If you don't bring me in, Jeremy said he'd kill Annalie, didn't he?" Guilt washed over Gina. Jeremy wouldn't stop at Annalie. He'd kill Elena, Rachael, Elissa—anyone he needed to kill to get to her.

Mal shook his head. "He can't. Annalie's safe. But he's got —"

The rest of Malcolm's words were lost in a horrible screeching hum that seemed to be coming from the center of her brain. Only, everyone in the room seemed to hear it too. The bartender howled and collapsed behind the bar. Other people were standing up and stumbling to the door. Then nausea overtook Gina and she doubled over.

The last thing she knew before she blacked out was Malcolm reaching out to protect her. Instead, she covered his body with hers as they fell to the floor.

## TWENTY-FIVE

*Gina, Present Day, Switzerland*

Someone was picking her up. No, she couldn't let them take her. But, God, her head, her stomach. She was in so much pain she couldn't think straight. Something was very, very wrong. Did she still have the vape? Yes, there it was on the floor under her hand. She grabbed it. If she could hit him with it —

He grabbed her hand before she could swing. She felt a pinprick in the back of her neck.

Just before she blacked out she heard a familiar voice say, "Nice try, Regina. I taught you everything you know. But not everything *I* know."

Oh, God, she was going to be sick.

*What did he drug me with?*

She was sitting in a chair, but when she tried to stand she couldn't.

*Restraints.*

Her stomach convulsed. Gina turned her head and projectile-vomited.

"Ah, you're awake. About time."

*Jeremy? No, I'm dreaming again. Jeremy is dead.*

No, that wasn't right. Jeremy was alive. He was alive and he was going to

kill her.

“Maybe. It all depends on you,” Jeremy said, proving she was dreaming if he could read her mind like that.

Unless she was talking out loud.

Gina forced her eyes open. The light hurt. Whatever drug he’d given her was still in her system. She fought to think clearly though the fog that was filling her head. Where was she? How did she get here?

*Wait, the bar. What happened? Malcolm.*

She turned her head to the other side. There he was, also bound to a chair bolted to the floor. His head was slumped forward. They’d drugged him too. But how?

*Everyone in the restaurant was sick. Did he somehow drug everyone? There was something... Something horrible.*

Black spots multiplied in her vision and she went under again.

**G**ina jolted awake. A man was kneeling next to her. He’d just injected her with something. Adrenaline, judging by the way her heart raced like a jackrabbit running for its life. At least she was coherent, even if her head pounded.

God, she was thirsty.

“That hit you hard, didn’t it?” Jeremy said as he stood up. But it couldn’t be. Now that she got a good look at his profile, he didn’t look like her old mentor.

Until she looked into his eyes.

“Plastic surgery,” she croaked. She really needed some water.

Jeremy smiled as he touched his face. “You like it? I paid a fortune for it. Well, *I* didn’t, actually.” He clasped his hands behind his back and started pacing back and forth in front of her. “The surgery was provided as payment for my services. One of many payments in many interesting currencies.”

Gina shuddered as the pieces fell into place. No; she’d already figured it out and Jeremy was only confirming what she already knew.

“Marcus Porter paid. You’ve been working for him for a long time.”

“So have you,” Jeremy said. “You’ve been one of his best generals.”

“No. Lies. Lied to.” Her voice cracked and broke. She closed her eyes

and tried to focus. It hurt to think.

“Have some water, sweetheart.” She felt the rim of a plastic bottle against her lips. She drank down the cold water like it was ambrosia even as it made her head feel worse. Too cold, probably on purpose.

But it helped her focus. And she remembered Malcolm’s last words at the bar.

*Annalie’s safe. But he’s got —*

Her pounding heart skipped. *He’s got Lachlan.*

All her running was for nothing. Jeremy had Lachlan and Malcolm and her. And he was going to kill all three to keep his secret. He’d make her watch him kill them before he ended her life.

Or did worse to her.

*He’ll give me to Porter.*

Vivid images of women and children in cages flashed through her mind. She’d seen them with her own eyes on Little Edward Key. Seen them and had been unable to save them and it killed a piece of her soul.

*Stop. Stick with what is happening right now and what you know or you’re going to freeze up.*

What she knew was that her fall from grace with The Repair Shop hadn’t started with Skeleton Key but well before that, when she finally gained access to Porter’s island while rescuing Jordan. She thought the photos she took of people in cages would finally condemn him. But The Repair Shop did nothing.

“Poor thing,” Jeremy went on. “You thought you were saving the world. You really did.” He stopped pacing and knelt in front of her. Jeremy gripped her chin and lifted it until she was staring into his stranger’s face with familiar eyes.

“That was always your flaw, Regina. For as brilliant as you are, you never understood how the world operates.”

*Jesus. He’s crazy.*

No. She knew better. She’d seen it from the beginning but was too focused on her own ambitions to recognize Jeremy Heath for the sociopathic narcissist he was.

Malcolm groaned.

Jeremy looked over at Malcolm, who was beginning to stir. “You both served us, right, traitor?”

Gina looked around while Jeremy was distracted, trying to determine



where he'd taken them. The room had the musty smell of age and dampness. She thought they must still be in Lucerne. Maybe she wasn't out as long as she'd thought. The other thing she realized was that Lachlan was not there.

Maybe Jeremy didn't have him after all. And if that were the case, Lach was looking for her. All she needed to do was keep Jeremy talking and hope that he wasn't about to move them again. She needed to give Lach time.

"How did you know where I was going? *I didn't even know,*" she told him.

Jeremy took his attention off Malcolm. "Because I know you better than you know yourself. I trained you. I made you who you are."

*Doubtful.*

"I knew you would try and leave the country and that you'd fly. LAX, Denver, and O'Hare, those are the airports I knew you could break into because I taught you how to myself. I also knew you'd never fly anywhere with Fleur in cargo. So I set up three women who looked like you in those three airports. I told them to act loud and obnoxious because it would get your attention. And I made sure the women had dogs that looked like your mutt."

*Well, shit she thought. I should have known. It was too perfect.*

Jeremy continued. "I knew if you went to the airport you'd find one of my women and steal her ticket, I just didn't know how. But my gamble paid off when Gertie called me from Denver to collect her reward and to say she needed bail money." Jeremy smiled and rocked on his feet. "I was impressed by that, Regina. You sent her to jail without any guilt."

She shrugged. "Not anymore."

Jeremy ignored her. He was on a roll. "Imagine my surprise when you didn't step off the plane in Key West."

"That must have been disappointing."

"Oh, it was. But not entirely. I had a different surprise there. A good one."

*He'll kill —*

*Oh no. Who does he have?*

Gina kept the fear out of her face and regarded Jeremy with a perfectly blank expression. He didn't have Lach. Lach would come and bring reinforcements. But until then she needed to find a way to get herself and Malcolm out of here and find whoever else Jeremy had.

"You're dying to know. I can read your poker face, Regina."

He moved in closer and bent down beside her head.

“I can read all your expressions, no matter how you try to hide them. There was a time when we slept under the same roof as man and wife. Stayed in the same hotel rooms. You think I wasn’t watching you, that I didn’t know how to hide a camera where you’d never find it? I’ve seen you in your secret moments, Regina. Moments when you thought you were alone and the fears and doubts crept in and you fought them like demons.”

He whispered in her ear, “I know every. Last. Inch. Of you.”

“You don’t,” she said through lightly clenched teeth. She barely turned her head to catch his eyes. “You know nothing about me.”

His lips formed a tight smile. Jeremy chuckled and stood up. He returned to pacing the way she would have loved to do.

“I’m going to keep you in suspense just a bit longer over Key West because I don’t think you know what happened.”

He barked out a laugh as he looked up and shook his head, acting as if he were in a spotlight. He was enjoying this—crawling out of the shadows for once to brag about all he’d accomplished. Gina realized that it must have eaten Jeremy alive, a narcissist like him starving for acknowledgement.

“So, if you knew I was on my way to Key West, why send Malcolm to Newark?”

Jeremy paced back over to Malcolm.

“I didn’t send him anywhere, did I, Watchtower?” Jeremy punched Malcolm in the gut. Gina couldn’t suppress her flinch. “I knew Malcolm was going to disobey his order to kill you, but I needed him away from Watchdog to keep them scrambling. So I let him go on his wild goose chase to Newark. I knew you were coming to me in Key West.” She caught a bit of sourness in his smile. “That’s where I fucked up. It didn’t matter though; in the end, I used him to find you.”

“Why? Why do this to me?” She shook her head trying to clear the fog that was rolling back in.

“You were supposed to be mine, Gina. You broke my heart.”

“You don’t have a heart.”

“Oh, no, you’re wrong there. I didn’t think I had one until I met you. But I wasn’t stupid enough to think I could talk you into loving me. Not once you’d made up your mind. But, I wasn’t about to watch you with Lachlan. I wanted you to see that you’d chosen a loser. I wanted to break him. So I did.”

*The doping scandal.*

Gina glared at Jeremy. "You framed him. And you were the one who sent him the message that I'd given up on him."

"I did. And he did exactly as I expected. He fell apart. He's weak, Regina. You've propped him up all this time and you still choose him over me. Stupid, stupid girl. It'll just make it all the sweeter when he has to take care of you. Or, what's left of you. That'll be a few years from now though. I'm going to keep you for a while. I'm tired of my substitute."

"Your what?" *Oh, God, please, no.* But she already knew.

"She looks like you. The same auburn hair, the same height and build, but of course she has to wear contacts. No one has eyes like yours. And no one's as smart. But she doesn't need to be smart for what I use her for."

"You're sick. You're disgusting."

"I just don't let anything get in the way of what I want. And I wanted to hurt her and pretend it was you. Right up until I could tell you how much I hurt her and see your pain. It's your fault she's suffered, Regina. So much is your fault for telling me no."

She closed her eyes, not wanting to open them again.

*Lachlan. Please. Where are you?*

*Keep stalling.*

Gina opened her eyes. "I'll never do what you want."

Jeremy bent at the waist in front of her. He reached out with both hands and pushed up on her eyelids, opening her eyes wider and staring into them like he was giving her an eye exam.

"Maybe I gave you a TBI after all, because that is a stupid fucking thing to say right now." He let go of her eyelids and her eyes watered as she blinked.

"You're right, that was a stupid thing to say. How about this? The Repair Shop is a lie. I suspected when they didn't do anything with the photos I took at Little Edward Cay. They didn't follow up because Marcus Porter is *funding* The Repair Shop."

Jeremy clapped. The sound echoed off the walls and pounded through her head like a sledgehammer. Malcolm groaned again.

*Hang in there, Watchtower. And whoever else Jeremy is holding captive. Who would Lachlan send to Key West? Costello?*

"You figured it out!"

"Would have been faster but one thing bothered me. Porter must have known we were coming for Jordan because The Repair Shop knew. Why did

he let it happen?”

He cocked his head and studied her. “For the longest time, I thought you'd arranged the whole Jordan Summers sting. I figured you had studied Marcus enough to know that he wanted a labyrinth to play in, and who better to build it for him than a helpless little mouse of a girl like Jordan? He would have kept her, you know. She was a little old for his tastes but he would have played with her anyway.”

The thought sickened Gina. “No. I would have never done that.”

Jeremy laughed again. “Such a hypocrite. Of course you would have if you thought you could get away with it. But Marcus is untouchable. Those photos weren't going to make a damn bit of difference and he knew it. It was more strategic to let you rescue her and continue believing that you're doing God's work through The Repair Shop. He needs that more than he ever needed Jordan Summers. While he uses The Repair Shop as his own branch of the CIA, Jordan was just a little plaything, an extra for doing business with her brother.”

Jeremy gave her a smile that was pure evil. “It amused me, thinking about how you must have thought you'd finally beaten him after all those years. You took those photos thinking they were the smoking gun you needed and they didn't amount to shit. It was good to see you suffer for that.” He mocked Gina's voice, “Kids in cages and I couldn't dooo anything to save them, waaaa.”

He laughed as if the whole thing were the funniest prank anyone had ever pulled. “But, that also made you a liability. It was only a matter of time before you'd figure out the whole thing. Losing Skeleton Key was the perfect excuse to turn everyone slowly against you. And, it would let me come out of hiding and take over The Repair Shop openly, the way it should have always been.”

Gina's head was killing her. “So. How long exactly has Porter been on the outs with Capitoline? As long as he's been sending us to attack them?”

“And you still don't have it right. I'm so disappointed. He's not on the outs as you put it. He's making his move to take them over. And you have been one of his best generals. You kept Capitoline out of Colorado when they wanted to build a stronghold there. You killed Walker and Kyla when she was this close to putting everything together. That's why Ron Anderson had to die. He was close too, and would have told her what she needed to know.”

“The drone attack. Was it the same...thing...that you did to us in the

restaurant?”

“No. That was just a little toxin. I used a more interesting weapon on you. The technology’s been around since the Eighties, only refined and field-tested the past few years. It was developed as a way to control pests. That’s how they see most people, you know. As pests. Vermin. It’s how I see Malcolm. And how I see Elissa St Clair. So I think I’ll let you watch me use it on them again.”

Gina blanched. *No, not Elissa. Not here.*

Jeremy cackled. “That’s right, Regina. I’ve got Elissa in the other room right now. She was my surprise in Key West. All I had to do was hack into her computer there and I knew right where you were going. To see our old friend Princess Sana. You must have gotten in touch with her after I left. If I’d known before what a good friend she was of yours, I would have —”

That’s when the lights went out.

Gina smiled into the darkness. Her next thought was one of the calmest she’d ever had.

*Lachlan is here.*

## TWENTY-SIX

*Lachlan, present day, Switzerland*

**I** 'm never working without a team again.

Maybe it was Gina's influence. Her tendency to go it alone must have rubbed off on him. Maybe it was too long away from the SEALs and he'd forgotten how to be a team guy. Or maybe he should just admit that it was his own damn blind spot that had made him fly thousands of miles alone to find Gina, only to lose both her and Elissa to Jeremy Heath.

He was standing in Sana's home while she did an amazing job of not completely losing her ever-loving shit. She'd had two bodyguards taken out of commission by what they both described as the biggest man they'd ever seen. Malcolm had done it quickly, and non-fatally and that was proof enough for Lachlan that Mal was not trying to kill Gina but to protect her.

They'd recovered consciousness just in time to find Sana racing back to her home and stopped her. She sent one off in the direction Gina had taken and the other had escorted her home while keeping in contact with his partner through a comm.

That was ten minutes ago, about the time Lachlan came rolling up to Sana's doorstep with the new knowledge that Elissa was MIA.

He'd last talked to her on the phone when she was in Key West. Then according to Nash, she'd called to update him, letting him know that she hadn't found Gina and would be heading back to LAX on an early-morning

flight. Nash was less than happy with his fiancée for hopping on plane and flying across the country without any backup but was smart enough to know he'd never win an argument with her.

Next he'd heard from her, she'd texted that she'd gotten on the plane and would see him soon.

She never arrived in Los Angeles. The flight manifest showed she'd never gotten on the plane.

*My damn fault. I should have never let her go.*

"Principal found," Sana's bodyguard said. "She's talking to the hostile in a restaurant."

Lach popped a comm into his ear.

"Do not approach," he said. "Assume they're under surveillance." He turned to Sana's other two guards. "Let's roll,"

They spread out and headed toward the restaurant with a plan to cover every exit. But like all plans, it went to shit as soon as they hit the battlefield.

The bodyguard who had eyes on Gina and Malcolm inside the restaurant suddenly screamed over the comm. Lach's first thought was that he was too late. The guard had been made and attacked. He started running toward the restaurant but came to a dead stop when he saw patrons staggering out and collapsing in the street. Some were clutching their heads, others were dry heaving. The ones who walked farther away seemed to recover from whatever had made them sick.

*Chemical agent* Lachlan thought and voiced his concern over the comm.

Gina and Malcolm did not come out the front door.

"Stay back," Lach said. "One, you're circling to the back. Two, you're staying out front. I'm going in."

Lachlan prayed One would see Gina and Malcolm stumbling out the back door on their own if not already outside and safe. Lach held his breath and pulled his shirt over his nose and mouth as he raced in. A few people inside were getting up off the floor, utterly confused by what had just happened. They seemed to be recovering, which made no damn sense at all for an airborne chemical agent.

Lachlan searched the bar, He saw only one patron, a small man on the floor heaving out his guts. The bartender pulled himself up from behind the bar looking ghostly pale.

"A huge man and a woman with golden eyes," he said through his shirt. He spotted two drinks sitting side by side on the bar. One of the bar stools

was tipped over.

The bartender only blinked at Lachlan and said, “Deutsch.”

Lachlan started to repeat himself in German when a man called out behind Lach. He’d been one of the patrons still on the floor.

“They were. Taken out. The back.” Then he dry-heaved.

One’s voice came over the comm. “Eyes on the principal. They’re being loaded into a tuk-tuk by four men.”

“Follow them but proceed with caution. We have no idea what the hell affected all those people.”

**N**ow, hours later, Lachlan waited outside an old building for the signal that the power had been cut.

It turned out that Sana, former princess and current badass, had all the military branches covered. She had what she called the Swiss Navy consisting of at least one yacht and one speedboat, a one-jet Swiss Air Force, and now her very own Swiss Army Spec-Ops unit had covertly surrounded the building where Jeremy was holding Malcolm and Gina.

*And Elissa, Lachlan prayed And please let not a hair on the lass’s head be harmed.*

He couldn’t let himself picture Gina unconscious and sick or he’d lose his focus and do something stupid that would get her killed.

This part of the city was already dark and deserted. He pulled up his night vision goggles just as he got the signal that the power was off and in they went, Lachlan in the lead. He took out one man quickly with a stab to the throat and kept moving while he heard fighting behind him.

“Found a woman bound and gagged,” Lach heard over the comm as he raced down a hall.

*Gina or Elissa?*

His question was answered moments later when he turned a corner in a hall and found a closed door. He kicked it open and counted three people, two in chairs and one standing. He pulled off the night vision glasses just before he was hit in the face with a beam of light—the standing man’s phone.

“Lach—” was all Jeremy Heath got out before Lachlan was on him. He had a gun in his hand, or so Lach assumed that’s what it was. He’d only



gotten a glimpse of it before Heath had tried to shine his cell phone in his face.

“Don’t let him shoot,” Gina said, her voice weak and shaky.

Not a problem since Lach’s knife was already buried in Jeremy’s heart.

The rest of the team rushed into the room along with one small, very pissed-off member of Watchdog.

“Tell me you killed that motherfucker,” Elissa shouted.

Lachlan’s heart unclenched just a little when he heard her voice. She sounded fine.

“Lights,” he growled as he raced to Gina. He quickly unbound her as the lights came back on. He cradled her to his chest, hating how she collapsed into his arms.

“It’s all right, Sunshine,” he crooned. “What the hell did he do to you?”

“I don’t know. My head.” God, she sounded weak.

Elissa started to rush toward Gina but stopped short like she was about to charge into a china shop once she got a look at her friend’s condition. She looked across the room at Malcolm who was in the same shape, judging by his moans as he was untied.

“All right, triage,” she said to herself, and Lach was reminded that among Elissa’s many talents, she’d been an EMT. She pressed her fingers against her wrist, taking her own pulse first. Then she pointed to one of the men.

“You. Call an ambulance or however it works here.” She pointed with two fingers at two other men. “You guys, get that garbage out of this room before anyone gets here,” she said as she eyed Jeremy’s lifeless body. “Lach, status report on Gina.”

“I’m okay,” Gina murmured. “Are you? And Mal?”

Lachlan added, “No visible wounds. Killer headache. Suspected exposure to a chemical agent. Jeremy didn’t do that to you?” he asked Elissa.

“Well, the bastard roofied me or whatever in Key West, and I woke up here with a screaming headache, but it’s totally gone.” She looked at Lachlan and Gina like she was really seeing them for the first time, and smiled. “Okay, since you’ve got her and she’s stable...”

Elissa scurried across the room and knelt down beside Malcolm. She

grabbed his wrist. “Hey, you big dummy. Don’t run off like that ever again.”

“Don’t worry,” Malcolm groaned.

“I’d wallop you myself but I’m letting Annalie have that pleasure.” She checked him over, asking him questions. Her voice became background noise while Lachlan held Gina.

“Medics are on their way, lass. You’re gonna be all right.”

She nodded and winced and he fought not to pummel her with questions. He noticed the floor beside her chair was covered in vomit.

*Please, God, don’t make me a liar. Let her be all right.*

**T**he next few weeks were hell and heaven and hell again.

Hell because of all the chaos Jeremy Heath caused. Lachlan sent Elissa back to Los Angeles—flanked by two of Sana’s best guards—as soon as they were sure Gina and Malcolm were stable. She and Nash were providing him with regular updates on the state of Watchdog. Everyone who wasn’t in on the special ops side of the business wanted to know what the hell was going on with their bosses. And those who knew were still reeling. Lachlan imagined they would be for a while.

Then there was The Repair Shop. Lachlan worried that they’d continue their attacks so he refused to leave Gina’s side at the hospital. But Sana helped with that, pulling rank and demanding heightened security for the victims of what she termed a terrorist attack. The Swiss news called it that too for the first week, then suddenly changed their tune. Then it became a gas leak that had sickened several unfortunate patrons who were expected to make a full recovery.

Lachlan had wondered what strings had been pulled and who’d done the pulling since that wasn’t Sana’s work. But he didn’t have to wonder long. He received a simple message:

*Thanks for cleaning house. Got it from here. We’ll be in touch soon.*

*Atlantis*

Lachlan scoffed. *Someone must have gotten a call from Walker Dean, whose death was greatly exaggerated.*

A second message had come the day before. This one was longer and informed Lachlan of the next steps The Repair Shop would be taking in light

of recent events as well as Watchdog's part in cleaning up the mess.

*Bastard* Lachlan thought. *Should have cleaned his own house long before now.*

He shook off his anger and checked over the bouquet of sunflowers he'd just bought for his Sunshine.

Priorities.

Cleaning house could wait. He would not make Gina wait. Never again.

The other, bigger part of hell for Lachlan was Gina's condition. She and Malcolm were both examined and found to have cerebral edema, which accounted for the headaches, nausea, short-term memory problems, and extreme fatigue. Gina had it worse than Mal, who joked it was because of his thick skull. The Swiss doctors were baffled, but that was because they weren't being told the truth about the cause. No one was—that was classified, especially not that the U.S. government was involved.

*More bastards.*

Talking to Malcolm Lach learned that whatever the hell weapon Heath had used was directed at Malcolm and Gina, and that she'd taken the full force of the blast. The other people in the restaurant were collateral damage. As for the weapon and its whereabouts? Well, that was classified of course. Lachlan guessed it was being taken apart and put together again, heavily studied and cataloged. God help them all if this was warfare now.

Lachlan paused outside Gina's door and gathered his strength. He tried to shield her as much as possible from the fallout as she recovered. Rest and no stress was what the doctors prescribed. Otherwise, they would have been Stateside by now but Lach didn't want to risk it. The changes in pressurization in the plane's cabin alone would wreak havoc and make her headaches worse. The same went for Malcolm. He was in the hospital room next door, Annalie at his side. He was getting released later today with an invitation to stay with Sana until he felt good enough to travel. The woman was a Godsend through all of this. Lachlan had tried to thank her for everything, and she just laughed him off.

"You saved my life," she simply said. "End of discussion."

Lachlan opened the door to the dimly lit room. It was evening and Gina was in bed, sound asleep. Lachlan stood in the doorway and just watched her for a minute. This was his heaven. He had Gina back, their relationship was out in the open, no more secrets. Now to get her better and back home where she belonged.

And then hell again. Her face contorted into a grimace. She was doing so much better now but the nightmares still lingered and it looked like one had her in its teeth right now. That was the worst—trying to reorient her when she woke from one.

Lachlan set the sunflowers aside and got into the hospital bed with her.

“Lach? Fleur? Where’s Fleur?” She looked around wildly.

“I’m right here. Fleur is with Sana. I’ll smuggle her in to see you again tomorrow. You’re in the hospital. It was just a dream.”

He settled Gina against his chest then brushed a lock of her sweaty hair off her forehead. She gave him all her weight, which was alarmingly less than the last time she’d lain against him in bed. Worse, she was scared. His Sunshine was shaken and that was terrifying.

Just meant he had to be brave for the both of them.

When he thought she’d finally fallen asleep again, she whispered, “Thanks for finding me.”

“Always, lass. We can’t help but find each other, can we?”

“We always do,” she said.

He’d played with her hair, worried about whatever this was. It had dimmed her golden eyes and her wits and spirit along with them. He touched her gently, carefully, as if she were a wounded bird whose bones he could break under the lightest pressure. He loved her strong and sassy, not weak. Weak worried him. Weak was a place he might not be able to follow her into and bring her back out of.

“We always do,” he echoed, remembering the jasmine-scented courtyard, the myriad places they’d sneaked off to, the bar in Key West.

Lach grabbed a washcloth and dabbed the sweat off her forehead. He wasn’t sure when he dozed off, but when he awoke again, Gina was sitting up on the edge of the bed with her back to him. Spooky had escaped his arms without him feeling it.

So she wasn’t totally gone.

“I had another nightmare,” she said. Her voice sounded flat.

“Come back here then.”

“I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“Sunshine. Come back to me.”

She wiped her eyes, or he assumed she did. She wouldn’t let him see her cry.

That had to stop.

“You’re wasting your energy,” he told her.

“What do you mean?”

“Trying not to cry. It’s a bloody waste of energy. No point to it.”

“I’m not crying.”

“You’re crying all right.” Lach sat up and reached for her but she stood and crossed the room to the window. She gripped the thin, metallic slats of the blinds like they were the bars of a prison before she pulled them aside.

“It’s too dark in here. It’s no good to open the blinds though. It’s dark outside. It’s dark everywhere.”

She hung her head.

Lach was up and across the room in the space of a heartbeat. He gently wrapped his arms around her from behind and pulled Gina’s back against his chest. She didn’t raise her head but her hands came off the slats and gripped his arms. He swayed with her until he felt teardrops pelt his forearms.

“I dream about Little Edward Cay, only we fail. We don’t get Jordan back. And then I see the women and children’s faces. Over and over.” She sobbed. “I failed them in real life.”

“No, lass. You did what you could for them. Others failed them by not doing anything.”

“Jeremy.”

It was the first time she’d brought him up. He’d wondered when she would, hoping she wasn’t hanging to anything she shouldn’t.

“He hurt them. He told me he had a woman who looked like me. We have to save her.”

“Shhh,” Lachlan soothed as she tried to pull away. “Nothing you can do for her right now.”

“Nothing I can ever do. It’s all my fault.”

Lachlan carefully turned her until she was looking at him. “It’s his fault, not yours. Jeremy hated that he couldn’t own you, that he didn’t have power over you. That you wouldn’t follow him without question. He let that hatred build into a sick obsession and controlled the lot of you through The Repair Shop.”

He nuzzled the top of her head. “And you still always did what was right. It’s an ill wind that blows nobody any good. Marcus Porter created The Repair Shop to advance his own power against Capitoline. Jeremy used it to his own ends to control you. But you brought good out of it. You used it to protect Elena and Tina. To keep Capitoline from building a stronghold. To

save Roger Bennett's political career, which led to Houston Robotics and Loki's downfalls. And you did everything you could for those people on Little Edward Cay."

"No."

Lach felt his heart grow heavy. He wanted to share the news, but there was no arguing with her now. She wasn't seeing things clearly. She was unwell, exhausted, pushed beyond her limits. Was he the only one to ever see that she had limits? The only one who cared whether or not she broke?

He led her back to bed and tucked her in, then climbed in beside her.

"There's one other thing you're not considering," he said as she snuggled into him.

"What's that?"

"Creating Watchdog with you saved me. I can't speak for anyone else, but I have a hunch it saved every single person who helped build it. Hell, I'm pretty sure Elissa would agree. And Malcolm, and Walker."

He tilted her chin up and kissed her softly.

"It's not up to you to single handedly save the world, Gina. It never was. But you saved all of us at Watchdog just by creating it. Isn't that enough?"

She finally nodded. "It is."

When Gina woke the next morning, she seemed a little better. From there, she kept improving. It wasn't steady progress and she had her setbacks, but by the end of the week, she was worlds better—enough that her doctors were ready to discharge her. She'd go to Sana's with Lachlan and maybe she'd be good enough to fly home in another week or two.

Getting out of the hospital worked more magic. Lachlan was convinced part of it was having Fleur back at her side. Gina's golden eyes were sharper, her color better. Even her appetite was back and she did more than pick at her breakfast.

When Lachlan asked if she felt better, she confirmed it.

"It's a good day," she said as she dropped a piece of bacon into Fleur's mouth. "I feel like I have my brain back. In the hospital, I still felt fuzzy, like my head was full of neurological snot."

Lachlan smirked. "Lovely turn of phrase, lass. At least you're clearer in

the head now.”

“Yeah, my grain is punctioning perfectly.”

Lachlan growled at her. “Tell me you’re joking right now.”

She actually giggled. “I am. I’m fine. Sorry for the gallows humor.”

“If it were anyone but you, I’d be laughing.” He stroked her cheek. “I don’t like the thought of losing you, Gina.”

“You’re not going to. Not this time. So.” She stared pointedly at him. “Since I’m having a good day today, maybe you won’t coddle me. Maybe you’ll tell me everything that I’ve missed. And maybe I’ll still remember it after the fog rolls back in.”

“Let’s not tempt fate.”

“I’m just being realistic. I know you’ve told me things that I’ve forgotten.”

“I have. But you’re remembering more and more.”

She nodded. Then asked, “Did I miss the wedding?”

“No, lass. They postponed the wedding.”

“Right. Right. I think I remember that now. Shit.”

Then Lach smiled. “Couldn’t postpone the baby though.”

Gina’s eyes grew wide. “Oh my God. Elena had the baby. Did I know this?” Then she waved her hand. “Doesn’t matter. Is...is Elena okay? Is the baby okay?”

“Yeah, Mama and Daddy and Big Sister and baby are all doing just great, Sunshine. He’s a healthy little boy. Ugly as his daddy though, poor kid.”

Gina laughed softly. “Oh, he is not. I bet he’s beautiful.”

“Yeeeah. He’s beautiful. All wee babies are.”

“Which name did they decide on?”

“Jonas.”

Gina laughed again, this time a little harder. “So, Tina won?”

Lachlan nodded solemnly. “Tina won. Of course.”

“The Jonas Brothers. Or, I guess Jonas *brother*, singular.”

“Right.” He couldn’t keep the twinkle out of his eye. “Because Jordan is the one having twins.”

Gina jumped in her chair then frowned like she regretted it. “She’s *what?*”

“Mm-hmm. Twins.”

She laid her hand on her belly. “I can’t even imagine.”

“It’s why she looks eighteen months pregnant,” Lach joked.

“I will smack you for her once I’m not feeling like death warmed over.”

“Hey! She’s the one who said it first.”

Gina’s expression turned wistful. “Oh, Jordan.” A sudden tear slid down her cheek. “I’ve missed so much.”

Lachlan reached across the little breakfast table and grabbed Gina’s hand. “Not everything. I just told you, they postponed the wedding.”

“I know. You did, and not for the first time. Was it because of Elissa? Is she okay?”

“She’s great, Sunshine. Running Watchdog like she’s been doing it all her life. No, they postponed the wedding for you.”

Gina tilted her head. “What?”

“Said she couldn’t get married without her maid of honor.”

Gina made a fist and pressed her knuckles against her lips as her eyes watered. She looked at the view out the window.

“I need a minute.”

Lachlan let her have it.

“When?” she finally asked.

“Closer to Christmas.”

“No, no, that’s too far away. I’ll be fine before then.”

Lachlan grinned. Now was the time to tell Gina about his online meetings.

“Yeah, you will be fine. But there’s another reason. We’ve got work to do before then. Job’s not done.”

Gina’s eyes brightened.

*There you are*, Lachlan thought.

“No, you’re right. It isn’t done,” she said.

“And we all know how you get when a job’s not done. So, you’ll be helping out.”

“Only helping?”

“It’s a team effort.”

She smiled. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”



## TWENTY-SEVEN

*Gina, present day, Los Angeles*

**T**hey flew home two days later, courtesy of The Swiss Air Force, in return for a promise that they'd visit again when Gina was up for it.

"Either way, I'll see you at the wedding," Sana told Gina as they hugged right before Gina, Lachlan, and Fleur boarded her jet.

"Elissa invited you?"

"Yes. We're old friends now."

Lachlan laughed. "Of course you are. That's Elissa. Constantly expanding the family."

**S**o back in Los Angeles, Gina began her rehab with a vengeance. She'd lost some muscle mass and her coordination was off, but Lachlan made a fantastic coach, knowing exactly when to push and when she'd had enough. She had the support of her friends who believed in her, and loved her even when she was at her weakest.

She had Lachlan, who was there at her side for every fall, every setback, every frustration. And for every little step forward, every breakthrough, every triumph. He was there every night, reassuring her when she woke up shaking and sweating out of a nightmare, holding her, and when she was strong

enough, making love with her.

“Are you sure?” he asked one night when she walked into his bedroom in her sexiest lingerie. He’d insisted she move in with him, at least while she recuperated, and she couldn’t think of a reason not to. She was done hiding, done sneaking around, done denying their relationship. They kissed openly at Watchdog and actually double-dated once with Jake and Rachael.

“Yes, I’m sure.”

A flicker of uncertainty crossed his face.

“I promise.” She crossed the room and stood directly in front of him. “You’ve seen how far I’ve come. You’ve pushed me not to give up. But when it comes to this,” she gestured from her lacy bra to her panties, “you’re still treating me like I’m made of glass. You aren’t going to break me.”

His uncertainty was quickly replaced by a look of raw hunger. Lach pulled her into his arms, and her skin came alive at his touch as he ran his hands down her back to cup her ass. Their lips met in a searing kiss as he lifted her and carried her to the bed.

As she kissed him, ran her hands over his body and felt him grow hard at her touch, Gina felt a surge of power and liberation. She had spent far too long denying herself pleasure and love, but no more. Lachlan was here, and he was hers.

He kissed his way down her neck, gently brushing his lips over her sensitive skin. He’d always known exactly how to touch her, knew where every sweet spot lay. The place just under her ear. Her collarbone. The hollow of her throat. Goosebumps prickled across her flesh as she shivered.

“Are you okay?” Lachlan asked, pausing for a moment to look into Gina’s eyes.

She nodded, unable to form any words. She had never been more turned-on before, even in their younger days.

“Lachlan, please. I want you,” she whispered.

Lachlan’s sea-blue eyes darkened with desire as he found the wetness between her legs. He caressed her over the sheer lace until she was gasping before he took off her bra and panties. She pulled off his shirt and he stopped touching her only long enough to take off his pants and boxer briefs. Gina caressed his cock until he groaned, then she guided Lachlan to her opening.

Lach stopped her even as his heart pounded and his breaths came in hungry gasps. His sea-colored eyes gazed deeply into hers.

“I love you, Gina. Always have.”

“I love you, too. So much.”

His first thrust was slow and deep and filled her completely. He closed his eyes in bliss as she squeezed around him. When he opened them again, he didn't look away. The room filled with the sounds of their pleasure as they brought each other to ecstasy.

Afterwards, as they lay tangled in each other's arms, Gina played with his hair. He was letting it grow out and she loved the way it was just starting to curl.

Lachlan's fingers traced slow circles on Gina's back, his touch soothing and comforting her. She nestled her head against his chest, listening to the steady rhythm of his heartbeat.

“Thank you for finding me,” Gina whispered, maybe for the hundredth time since Switzerland, her voice filled with a mixture of awe and gratitude.

Lachlan pressed a gentle kiss on top of her head. “Always.”

They lay in silence for a while, Gina cherishing the luxury of being together without worrying about the next day. When she slept, she slept deeply and without any nightmares.

And so their lives went. Until the day she was ready to finish the job.

They'd been back in the States for five months when she got into the passenger seat of Watchdog SUV number one. Lachlan's vehicle. She had wanted to drive everyone in hers—number eight, nicknamed The Shady Lady—but he insisted on driving. Costello got in, along with Jake, Camden, Nash, Elissa, and finally Malcolm. Now when Watchtower looked at her, all she could feel was the warmth of a concerned friend. She worried about him, too, but he insisted that he was fine. Talking to Annalie, she confirmed that the big man was doing all right, just the occasional headache.

Fleur was back in the Watchdog courtyard along with Sam and the other dogs. This was one trip she would not be taking with Gina.

“Ready?” Lachlan asked.

“Let 'er roll, Boss,” Camden said.

Lachlan pulled out of the Watchdog parking garage and turned the SUV toward one of the fancier neighborhoods. The guard at the gate took one look at the Watchdog logo on the SUV and waved them through.

Lachlan took a left onto Palm, then pulled into Senator Bennett's driveway. He parked beside two other vehicles. The other guests of the senator were already there.

Gina smiled with anticipation.

Roger Bennett met them at the door with a big, friendly smile and firm handshakes as was his custom, and they all took off their shoes and put them on a low wooden shelf as was expected. Roger's wife Cici Bennett was particular about her floors. But there was no sign of Cici or their twins as Roger led them through the foyer, past the kitchen, and into the main part of the house. Gina couldn't help but feel uneasy. The last time she'd walked through this house, she'd been trying to save Roger's life while worried about an assassination attempt on her own.

"Got some folks here who are excited to see you," Roger told Gina as he laid his hand on her arm. "And...some others."

Gina nodded and gave Roger a warm smile despite her worry about 'the others.' She felt Lachlan's hand on the small of her back, reassuring her. Yes. Everyone here was a friendly now. At least, in theory. That was about to be tested.

Roger had set up a long table lined with chairs in the great room. As soon as they were within sight, three people stood up—two women and a man—while the others remained seated. The women both ran toward her and Elissa while the man trailed behind.

Gina wasn't sure who to hug first—Kyla or Fia. The decision was made for them when Elissa announced, "Group hug!"

God, it felt good to see them again.

And while she hugged her friends, Walker shook Lachlan's hand before pulling him into one of those three-pats-on-the-back man-hugs.

"How was Fiji?" Gina asked.

"Beautiful!" Kyla answered. "Fiji was everything I'd dreamed it would be."

"Fiji?" Jake asked as he clapped Walker on the shoulder. "More like how's it feel to be back from the dead?"

Walker laughed. "Feels great."

"I wouldn't know how that feels," Fia said. "I'm still dead as a doornail."

"Do you even exist?" Gina asked.

"Ha! Speak for yourself, Spooky."

"Hate to break up the fun," Roger Bennett said. "But, we are here for

business.” He gestured toward the other people sitting in the great room.

*Right. Business.*

Fia wrapped Gina’s arm in hers as they started walking.

“You look good. I was worried when I heard the news.”

“Thank you. It was touch and go. He hit me hard.”

“Lachlan hit him back harder is what I heard.”

Gina just smiled.

They took their seats—Watchdog on one side of the table, The Repair Shop on the other.

“Not used to seeing you sitting, Gina,” Atlantis said as she took the chair directly across from him.

“A lot’s changed,” she said.

“So *these* are your friends,” Jake said as he made deliberate eye contact with each man and woman separately. They looked back impassively.

“No, my friends are all on this side of the table.”

Jake grinned.

“All right,” Roger said as he took a seat at the head of the table. “Everybody at this table is *my* friend, and since this is my house, we’re all going to stop acting like this is another remake of *West Side Story* and get along. Can I at least get a nod of acknowledgement?”

He got them, reluctant as they were.

“Great! Now that we’re *all* friends, let’s talk about your upcoming joint operation.”

“Do we at least get their names?” Jake interrupted.

“Jake,” Lachlan warned.

“No names,” Atlantis said to Gina’s surprise not at all.

Elissa glared at Atlantis. “Then how about maybe an apology for trying to kill Gina? I know I’d love to hear it.”

“It’s okay, Elissa,” Gina said, touched by the ferocity in her friend’s expression. “Water under the bridge.”

Gina smiled sweetly at Atlantis, knowing that she was burrowing deeply under his skin. He knew he owed her and owed her big and it drove him up a wall. So much more satisfying than a boring old apology and much more useful. She’d collect on the debt one day, but in the meantime, it was fun to watch him sweat over it.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Roger said, ignoring the posturing and passing a stack of folders to Camden on his right. “Your mission.”

Gina opened her folder to a photo of Marcus Porter. She spent the next five minutes committing the rest of the details to memory. It wasn't quite back to one hundred percent and the memorization took effort. But she knew that whatever she might forget, Lachlan would remember. Her entire team would.

"Any questions?" Bennett asked.

"You sure we have the authorization for this?" Atlantis asked.

"Quite sure." He cleared his throat. "Capitoline wants him gone at all costs and will not stand in your way. They are ready to provide all the necessary funding as well since all of you are, well, underfunded at the moment."

"Son of a bitch," Atlantis said. "Are you trying to say Capitoline is benevolent?"

"Oh, God no. They're terrible, like any tyrant calling the shots. But they've been at this for a long, long time. No one in this room has the power to go up against them. Luckily, they're looking around right now at the world they're living in with a critical eye. They want to live in peace, in a clean environment. They just have no qualms doing whatever it takes to stay in power and to stay hidden. This mission is doing them a solid, with your help."

"And they're going to reward you, aren't they?"

Bennett nodded.

"Such confidence, *Senator*," Atlantis said. Gina watched everyone on her side of the table sit up straighter.

Roger didn't even flinch.

"So, should we start calling you Mr. President now, or wait until the formalities?" Atlantis asked.

Bennett smiled bitterly. "Well, that's the thing. All the polls say I'll win in a landslide anyway, and there's no reason to believe they need to fix the election to get me in. Their so-called reward is simply the promise that they won't get in the way of what will happen anyway."

"The will of the people," Lachlan said, not without sarcasm.

"The will of the people," Bennett confirmed. "For now." It was the only time he looked away. "So, you're allowed to go after Marcus Porter using any means necessary with impunity." He shrugged. "And if not, I'll grant you all presidential pardons in January."

He pushed his chair back and stood up. "Now, I suggest you all go home

and get a good night's sleep. Wheels up early tomorrow."

"I hate this," Gina said later that night as she lay in Lach's arms.

"Really? You didn't sound like you hated anything just now." He nuzzled her throat.

She glared at him before kissing his nose. "You know what I mean."

"Yeah, lass, I do." He pulled her in tighter. "It's more manipulation."

"I thought I was clear of it."

"You will be after this."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

It was night but the shallow ocean water was just as warm around Little Edward Cay as she'd remembered from the night they rescued Jordan. The night she'd failed the other —

*No. Lach's right. I didn't fail them. I'm here now. I swear, we'll save everyone tonight and track down the ones who we sold in the meantime.*

She felt Lach's hand on her shoulder, reassuring her. He always did see her, no matter what disguise she wore or how well she hid herself. He saw straight into her heart and soul, every time.

She covered his hand, just a brief touch that acknowledged him.

"Ready," she heard him say, both beside her and in the comm. Lachlan was leading the mission with Atlantis as second. The two men managed to put aside anything resembling a pissing contest in order to work together. They'd all seen the photos Gina had taken and everyone had been sickened by them.

"Ready," Atlantis acknowledged.

The teams moved as one through the dark waters toward the island. This would be a very different mission from the last one. The last time, Porter had known they were coming thanks to Jeremy. This time, Porter was cut off from any intel but he knew it was a matter of time before they came for him. His island had made him feel safe—a fortress against the world. But now it

was his prison, the place he'd retreated to ever since Capitoline discovered he was behind The Repair Shop. He'd have double the security detail, all of them trusted--his personal bodyguards.

Too bad for him, one of them was a mole, and an old friend of Atlantis. He updated them on the new patrol patterns and assured them he could provide a window. So far, he'd proven true to his word.

Lachlan gave the signal and they moved forward toward the beach. They'd entered to the north and the west of the compound the first time, but that beach was now heavily boobytrapped. This time, with the help of the mole, they were able to come in closer during a gap in patrols.

They crossed the beach, found cover among the trees, and quickly geared up before moving as a group towards the compound. Thermal cameras came in handy again and allowed them to dodge a patrol, their heat signatures like red ghosts passing on the other side of the trees.

Gina's mouth was dry but her hands were steady as they reached the main house. This was where Porter kept his 'livestock' as he called his human slaves. He'd upped the security there too but there was a way to get around it. A very satisfying way that Gina was looking forward to.

As the watchdog team crept onto the wide veranda, sudden movement in the bushes caught her eyes. Son of a bitch—a guard in a ghillie suit had escaped the thermals. Gunfire erupted.

*So much for our sneak attack.*

"Elissa, we need lights out, now," Lachlan shouted into his comm.

"On it, Boss," she answered.

Gunfire blasted as The Repair Shop provided cover while they breached the front door. Gina, Lach, Walker, Jake, Camden, Nash, and Malcolm entered the house, guns blazing. True to form, Elissa's voodoo worked and the house went dark.

"Don't shoot!" A man shouted from somewhere inside. "Friendly."

Their mole? Gina wasn't sticking around to find out. She moved forward with Lach while Jake and Camden peeled off to handle the friendly. She pounded up the stairs and straight to Porter's suite. Would he actually be there, or was he cowering in his own dungeon like a coward?

One way to find out.

Lachlan pushed Gina down as gunfire erupted. He returned fire, killing two guards. Nash and Malcolm had their backs. More guards died while others put up their hands in surrender. One even killed the man next to him,



shouting that he was on their side.

Again, not Gina's problem. She and Lach moved forward to the door, hugging the walls just in case someone inside decided to shoot through the door and hope for the best.

Then Malcolm was there, taking up a good portion of the hallway. Good thing—it took both him and Lachlan to breach the bedroom door.

Empty.

But they knew right where Porter's panic room was. And, they knew the code.

Porter waited inside, preternaturally calm.

"So, you won," he said, a sick smile on his face. And no wonder. He was sitting in a chair that looked wired to explode.

"Or maybe you didn't," he said.

"He's handcuffed to it," Malcolm said.

"And if you remove me or my heart stops, it'll blow up." Porter smiled at Gina. "Is that a problem?"

They all knew it was. The doors to the dungeons were biometric, opening only to Porter's handprint.

"I've got this," Lach said, dropping to his knees and examining the wires threading around the chair. Then he hissed through his teeth. "It's on a fucking timer."

Porter chuckled. "I know why you're here, Gina. For my toys. They've been in there a while. It's sealed pretty tight and I think I forgot to turn the ventilation system back on last time I visited. Air might have gotten a bit stale in the meantime." He shrugged. "If that doesn't get them, there's a second bomb that's in communication with this one. If this goes, it goes. I figure, I'm a dead man at this point, why not take them with me, like a pharaoh?"

"I just need his hand," Gina said.

"I saw a machete downstairs," Malcolm said.

"Get it."

**T**here were some screams that would haunt Gina her entire life. Screams from innocent victims who were unlucky enough to be in the wrong place

at the wrong time. And other screams that she herself pulled from not-so-innocent criminals.

Marcus Porter's screams would not haunt her in the slightest.

As he whimpered and sniveled, she wrapped his hand up in the rest of the shirt she'd ripped up to use as a tourniquet so he wouldn't bleed out. She hoped the lock didn't require a pulse, but she had some thoughts on how to get around that.

"Come on, Mal, I'm heading down to the cages," Gina said.

"Not until I get this problem solved," Lach said, pointing to the bomb. "I want everyone out of this house now and I don't want you anywhere near the other bomb."

"Too bad. How much time do I have?"

"Gina." Lachlan looked at her and saw it in her eyes. And bless him, he was smart enough not to fight.

"Ten minutes."

She set the timer on her watch.

"Take Walker with you too. He's good at dismantling these things."

**T**hey ran back down the hall. The gunfire had stopped, and Gina hoped that was a good sign.

A moment later, Atlantis confirmed it was.

"All tangoes neutralized," he said. "And we have prisoners."

For a moment, Gina thought he meant the slaves, but then she realized he was talking about some of the guards. She wondered how many decided Little Edward Cay had gone from an island to a sinking ship and were giving themselves up like rats.

"Then get everyone out of the buildings. God knows if they're all wired to blow."

"It would make sense," Atlantis returned. "Destroy all the evidence."

"Good point. This way," she told Malcolm. They went down a servants' staircase to a back door and back out into the night.

Walker joined them as soon as they got outside.

"You don't have to," she started but he waved her off.

Gina, Malcolm, and Walker sprinted across a courtyard.

*Don't waste your time. They're all dead.*

Porter's screams didn't haunt her, but his calm, quiet voice in her head did.

Gina ignored his hateful voice. She wouldn't believe a word that came out of his filthy mouth. She'd see for herself.

She led them to a small, concrete building tucked away among some tall palms. This was it, the entrance to the torture chamber.

Gina unwrapped Porter's bloody hand from the shirt. She slapped the palm against the panel and prayed for the best.

The red light over the panel turned yellow, then green. The door opened with an evil hiss. The smell that came out with it was indescribable and eye-watering.

Gagging, they entered and descended down a staircase into hell.

Walker spotted the second bomb in a corner of the room and went straight to it.

Cages lined the walls of the underground room. Twenty in all, with at least five people in each cage, just like she remembered. But impossibly, these people looked even worse.

*Please don't let any of them be dead.*

"We're going to need more help down here," she said over the comms.

"Copy," Atlantis said.

Each cage locked separately, requiring Porter's handprint to open it. Gina went to the first cage and held up Porter's hand. Someone inside the cage cried out and Gina jumped back.

*Oh my God. It's her. The woman Jeremy told me about. The one who looks like me.*

"It's okay, We're setting you free." She lifted the hand again to press it against the screen.

"No!" Gina's lookalike shouted. "You don't understand. If you open it, it'll blow up. We'll all die. He told us."

"Oh sweet Jesus." Gina looked at Walker for confirmation.

"Not sure," he said, sounding totally focused. "Don't risk it."

"Fuck."

Footsteps pounded down the stairs.

"All of you leave," Walker said calmly. "Three minutes."

"No. No," Gina whispered.

"I'm calling my people back," Atlantis said. The footsteps retreated. She

couldn't blame him. Gina was about to make the same call.

The people in the cages were all waking up and grabbing the bars, staring between them without a shred of hope.

"Get out," Walker said again.

*He can do it. Lachlan will fix this.*

"Gina," Malcolm said.

"Carry her out, Mal, that's an order." Walker continued to fiddle with wires.

Gina whipped her head around and gave Malcolm her best interrogator's stare, stopping him in his tracks. "Go, Mal. Get the hell out. Don't break Annalie's heart."

"One minute."

"Not without you, Gina."

"No. Not while Lachlan's at the other end. Now go. Annalie."

"Not playing fair," he growled as he ran for the stairs.

Her calm came back, but it felt different. Not cold, but warm.

"We'll meet you up there. Lach's got this."

*Lach's got this.*

And with five seconds left, he and Walker defused the bombs.

"So," Atlantis said back in the main house. "We have a decision to make."

They had just helped the last of the prisoners into rescue helicopters. One helicopter remained to take them back to civilization. Kyla had flown in on that one to report on the story for the paper.

Now, they just needed to decide if Marcus Porter was coming with them. The man sat in a chair—a normal one not wired to anything—half-slumped onto the table in front of him, looking very pale and very interested in this conversation.

"We know he'll just slip through the courts. Again," Costello said. And he knew better than the rest of them. Jordan with all her money and influence had tried and still failed to bring him to justice.

Fia folded her arms. "I vote sharks."

All eyes turned to her.

"I like that," Atlantis said, looking her over.

She smiled at him. “Do you now?” She looked around the room. “Shall we have a vote about it? Helicopter or shark?”

“Are you serious?” Gina asked.

“Hang on.” Fia looked around. “Do I need a pencil and paper to keep track, or do you trust me to be honest? Wait, don’t answer that.”

Jake raised his hand. “I vote shark.”

Camden raised his. “Make that three votes for Jaws.”

Fia pulled out a Sharpie. “You know, I think I’ll just write the tally on the table next to Marcus’ head, shall I? Okay, Helo or Jaws.” She scribbled the words.

Porter made a gurgling sound.

“Another vote for Jaws,” Fia said. She made four tally marks on the table in front of his face. “Let’s make this go faster. All in favor of sharks, raise your hand.”

Hands flew into the air while Elissa’s voice came from Gina’s phone on speaker. “Put me down for sharks.”

Fia clapped. “Oh, it appears to be unanimous.”

“No,” Malcolm said from the back of the room. “I vote helo.”

Gina was surprised people didn’t give themselves whiplash the way their heads turned.

“Really?” Fia put a hand on her hip. “Helicopter? Do you recall what we just spent the last three hours doing?”

“Clearly. Their faces have been chiseled onto my brain for eternity. So I vote helicopter. I vote we take him up in the helicopter with a chum bucket first, then drop them both from a great height into a hungry school of sharks.”

“Oh! Can I change my vote?” Elissa asked over the phone.

**T**hey didn’t have to fly high and they didn’t have to fly far to find the sharks.

The chum went into the water first and helped to draw some of the biggest bull sharks they’d ever seen. But Gina liked to think what really attracted them was the stink from the very special chum she dropped in.

Porter’s right hand. The hand that caused so much pain when it slapped a face. The same hand that locked cages and condemned innocent people into

darkness and slavery. The one that wrote checks and moved blood money and built fortunes for monsters. It fell glistening and red into the clean blue waters below and the sharks loved it.

Almost as much as they loved the rest of Porter, judging by all the blood.

It took a while, but even the blood disappeared, and the sharks dispersed, and the waters were clear and blue and clean again.

## TWENTY-EIGHT

*Gina, early December, Los Angeles*

“I think you’d rather be the one out there handling the dogs than in here running the place,” Gina said. They were standing at one of the windows watching Kyle McGuire examine each dog carefully. He and Arden were in town for the upcoming wedding and as the former kennel master, Kyle couldn’t resist the dogs.

“It’s the best job here,” Lachlan said. “Kyle agrees. Told me he has the same problem I do now running his agency. He just wants to escape from behind his desk and get back out there with them.”

“I believe it. I don’t know which one of you loves dogs more.”

“Well me, obviously.”

Gina laughed.

“I chose well when I put Kyle in charge of them. I couldn’t have just anyone doing it,” Lachlan went on. “Dogs deserve the very best, even though they end up betraying you.”

Gina stared at Lach. “What do you mean?”

“The only dog who doesn’t break your heart in the end is the one who outlives you.”

Gina smiled softly. “Then I guess our dogs will simply have to outlive us.”

Lachlan chuckled. “Aye.” He turned his attention back to Kyle. “He’s

happy in Colorado.” His words sounded pointed.

“I know. He found his home with Arden.”

“You’ve been there. What did you think?”

*He’s definitely fishing* Gina thought. She nodded. “It’s nice.”

“Nice?”

“Mm-hmm. Nice.” She grinned, turned, and walked toward the door.

“Nice,” she heard him say behind her.

“I have never seen two more beautiful brides,” Gina told Arden as they left the ‘bridal suite’—an extra-large bedroom and ensuite bathroom in Bette Collins’ home. They were giving Elena and Elissa a moment alone before everything started with the excuse of grabbing them a couple of waters.

“How are they?” Bette asked as she rolled up to Gina and Arden in the kitchen. “What do they need? Oh my gosh, I didn’t stock the room with enough water, did I? And I should know better. A wedding dress can make you so hot and thirsty —”

“They’re *fine*, Bette,” Gina reassured her. “You’re doing a great job. Everything is perfect.”

“They just needed a little less hovering from us,” Arden added. “We’re giving them some space.” She looked around. “The house is beautiful, and so is the back yard. Really, perfect.”

“Oh, thank you, dear. We had to change the wedding colors for the season of course, even though it’s not Christmas yet, because pink just wasn’t going to cut it. And I have to say, the green velvet bridesmaid dresses are gorgeous on the two of you.”

She looked around at the green, white, and red garlands decorating the house. Holly wreaths with red ribbons decorated the back of each white chair in the backyard where the ceremony would take place. “Tina assured me that it wasn’t *too* traditional and still looked modern.”

“Speaking of, where is your co-hostess?” Arden asked, looking around. “Oh, there she is.”

Elena’s daughter Tina was standing beside Rachael and looking uncharacteristically shy. Then Gina noted one of the newcomers to their extended family—Rachael and Jake’s foster son, Brian. He was a skosh older



than Tina and was looking at her just as shyly. Rachael and Jake had planned on adopting a baby. But they'd had a chance to foster Brian and couldn't turn it down. Gina wouldn't be surprised if they ended up adopting him.

It looked like Tina might be in favor of that decision as well.

"I'm so happy for them," Bette said, looking a little misty-eyed. "He's a sweet boy and needs a good home."

"Bette, I need to ask you a quick question." Grant Collins, Bette's husband, looked handsome in his tux. He winked and headed down a hallway.

"Excuse me," she told Gina and Arden as she turned her wheelchair. Then she motioned for them to come closer and she lowered her voice. "I think he just wants to make out for a minute. Weddings turn him on." She grinned. "Lucky me."

Then she was zooming off down the hall after her husband while Gina and Arden laughed.

"She's the best," Arden said.

"She is," Gina agreed. "Wait. Do you think that's why she offered to host the wedding?" She raised her eyebrows and pointed her chin in the direction of the hallway.

That sent Arden back into hysterics.

"I've missed you, Gina," she said when she caught her breath again.

"I've missed you, too."

"So," Arden said as they walked back to the bridal suite. "Rumor has it, you're looking at taking some time off?"

Gina grinned. "Something like that." The word 'retirement' scared her. What would she do with all that time? "Maybe I'm just between things."

"Well. Colorado might not be as warm this time of year as California, but it's beautiful, as you know."

"It is."

"And...you're coming out for our wedding, right?"

"I wouldn't miss it for the world."

They stopped right outside the door. "Well, we would love it if you stayed there."

"Stayed?"

"I mean, maybe a move to Colorado would be a good thing. For you. And, um, Lach."

Gina smiled. "It's okay. You don't have to dance around us being

together. We're not hiding it anymore."

"Thank goodness." Arden leaned forward and kissed Gina on the cheek. "So, think about it?"

"I'll take your offer under advisement."

Arden grinned. "Shall we?" She tipped her head toward the door.

"Back into the fray," Gina said as she turned the doorknob.

"Wait for us," Rachael said behind them. Next to her was Jordan, who looked so much more comfortable now that she was no longer pregnant with twins. They were beautiful and perfect even though they'd arrived a little early.

"How are the brides-to-be?" Jordan asked.

"We're fiiiine," Elissa called from just on the other side of the door. "But we got lonely!" The door opened. "So get your cutie patooties back in here, bridesmaids."

By the time they'd all gathered in the room just ahead of the ceremony there was hardly any space to turn around, let alone pace, which is what Gina wanted to do. Fleur was with the other dogs corralled outside at the moment and Gina wasn't used to not having her at her side.

She was surprisingly nervous. She'd been to many weddings, some even for heads of state and a couple of royals, but she'd never been in one before, let alone as a maid of honor. Gina looked around the room. Elissa and Elena looked like angels in their white dresses. Then there were Rachael, Delia, Arden, Jordan, Annalie, Samantha, Kyla, Tina, and Bette.

All women she loved and admired.

Elissa caught her eye and somehow managed to wade across the room through the sea of green bridesmaid dresses.

"This is so great," she gushed. "Elena's getting married on one side of me, you're my maid of honor on the other. I'm flanked by besties."

"Besties, plural?" Gina asked.

Elissa shrugged like *no big*. "Yeah, of course."

"But, can't there only be one bestie? That's the definition of best—one outshining the rest."

Elissa looked at her funny, then she cracked up. "I can have an infinite number of besties, sisters from other misters, and gal-pals and they're all *the* best. It's not a chain of command, Gina. It's friendship."

She blew out a breath as she studied Gina. "I'm not saying I feel sorry for you that you're still learning how friendship works, but... I feel sorry for you

that you're still learning how friendship works."

Gina shrugged. "Better late than never?"

Elissa swept her up into a hug.

"All right, ladies," Bette said. "As we say in the biz, it's showtime. Where's my co-hostess? Ah, there you are; lost you in all the greenery."

Tina darted between the women and hopped onto Bette's lap.

"What's the other thing we always say, Mermaid?" Bette asked the little girl as she pointed her wheelchair at the door.

"*Allons-y!*" Tina said with a flourish. "Let's get this show on the road."

The bridesmaids filed out behind Bette and Tina, the brides hanging back until the end of the parade. The groomsmen were already lined up and waiting. They all looked handsome but Gina only had eyes for Lachlan—who looked ridiculously sexy in his green-and-blue tartan kilt.

And he only had eyes for her as he offered his arm.

"Hello, Sunshine. You're taking my breath away today." He brushed his lips across her cheek.

"Do me a favor?" she asked.

"Anything."

"Tonight at home. No shirt, just kilt."

Lachlan stifled a laugh. "Aye, lass." He poured on his accent.

The music started and they all lined up and faced forward. Just as they started walking, Gina added, "And wear it for our wedding, too." She flashed him her engagement ring, which she had put on after they'd gotten to Bette's house to surprise him. The yellow oval-shaped stone was still as beautiful as the day Lachlan had given it to her. And it matched her new lemon tattoos just above her ankles.

Lachlan stopped dead in his tracks and Psychic bumped into him from behind.

"Wow, for once I did not see that coming," he said.

"Me neither," Lach added, never taking his eyes off Gina.

She practically glided the rest of the way to the altar.

And she tried not to cry at the sight of Elissa and Elena coming down the aisle looking absolutely blissful. Nashville and Camden were both struck speechless and the officiant had to call their names twice.

She couldn't blame them.

The wedding was beautiful, but the reception was better in Gina's opinion. The bar was of course Tiki-themed and Elissa insisted that all the girls get matching mai-tais for their first round.

"To all of us," she toasted. They drank and she winked at Gina.

"Told you it would happen, Spooky. All of us, Tiki bar. Here it is."

"Yes you did. Thank you."

The men eventually made their way over when it was time for the wedding party dance. Lachlan took her in his arms and they circled the dance floor. Gina pointed at Elena and Camden, who were joined by Tina. They held their new son between them. It was absolutely beautiful to watch.

"So," Lachlan said. "I guess it's time for us to make our plans."

"I guess it is."

"Are you really ready to step down?"

She nodded. "I am."

"Think you'll get bored?"

"Eh. Bored might be underrated."

"We could travel," Lach said.

"We could. But I've been everywhere. I've seen the world. Now I think I want to see what having a home looks like."

"Sounds good to me. I like how it looks so far." He winked at her, grabbed her hand, and kissed it.

"Me too, Soup."

Lachlan chuckled. He lifted his arm and twirled her. "So, you want to stay here?"

"You mean at your place or are you talking about California in general?"

He shrugged. "I like my house, but it's mine. I figured you'd want to start fresh. something we could both build together."

"We're kind of good at building things, huh?"

Lachlan nodded. "I'm pleased."

"We have a good team."

"That we do, Sunshine."

"Elissa and Nash have done an amazing job putting it all back together."

And they had. Between Elissa's constant cheerleading and Nash's practicality with the day-to-day operations, Watchdog was stronger than ever."

Then she couldn't help but laugh as she remembered the conversation the four of them had had the other day concerning turning over Watchdog.

“So, I was thinking. What if we renamed it?” Elissa had asked Lachlan. Nash covered his face and shook his head. “Shug,” he warned. “We talked about this.”

“Renamed what?” Lachlan asked.

“The agency! New management, new name.” Elissa beamed.

“No.”

Her lips twitched in thought. “I was thinking maybe something like Watchlizard.”

Lachlan looked at Gina. “Is she serious?”

“Of course she's not serious.”

“I am totally serious.”

Lach sighed. “I'm not doing this.”

Elissa shrugged. “Fine. But Watchlizard is way better than something like, I don't know, Watchrabbit.”

Remembering the look on Lach's face, she almost doubled over laughing and was glad when Lachlan held her up.

“I know what you're remembering, lass,” he said, trying to hide his smile and look serious.

“Watchrabbit.”

Lachlan snorted, still trying to look serious. “Naming's important business. Crucial to both boats and businesses.”

“Boats? Spoken like a true sailor.” She paused. “Do you want a boat?”

“Maybe. Depends on where we go.”

“So, if we stayed in California and got a boat, do I get to name it, or do you?” she asked, pulling his chain. She swore that one of his favorite things about Watchdog was that he got to name the company.

“Her, not it. We'd need to think long and hard about what to name her.”

“Whatever. Call it *Boaty*.”

Lach laughed. “I just told you, a ship is a her, not an it. She needs to be named after a lady. Like...” His eyes filled with mischief. “The *Sassy Lassie*.”

Gina rolled her eyes. “Are you serious? You're naming our hypothetical boat after a TV dog?”

“No, of course not. I said a lady.” He winked at her.

Gina gave him an incredulous look. “You calling me sassy?”

He pretended to look around. “I don't see anyone else here fitting that description.”

“Dear Lord,” she murmured. “Every woman here fits that description.”

“In any case, I can’t name something so important after a dog.”

She reared back in shock. “Really? You named Watchdog after Sam.”

Lach fixed her with a confused look. “Say what now?”

She stopped dancing and put her hands on her hips. “Watchdog. You named it after Sam.” She tilted her head. “Right?”

But he was looking at her bemusedly, a half-smile curling his lips. “No. I tried to tell you once but you’d fallen asleep.”

“Tried to tell me what?”

He took her back into his arms. “You were always one to protect others. Always on guard. So that’s how I named our company.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Watchdog, lass. I named Watchdog for *you*. And I’ll be damned if Elissa goes and changes it.”

Gina didn’t know what to say. So she just kissed him instead.

“You know, it doesn’t matter where we end up,” she said. “If we stay here, if we buy a boat and sail the world, if we move to Colorado, or Switzerland, or Timbuktu. It doesn’t matter.”

“And why’s that?”

“Because I’m already home,” she answered as she laid her hand over his heart.

The End

**R**ead on for the first chapter of *Bear on the Mountain, Book One in the Watchdog Mountain Division Series*.

## BEAR ON THE MOUNTAIN

Ellie Jameson slipped off the Greyhound Bus in the early morning mist and shivered. The bus terminal in Denver smelled of exhaust and grease from a nearby fast-food restaurant and Ellie's stomach rumbled. She hadn't eaten since Kansas, which was...the day before, she thought, or maybe the day before the day before.

The bus driver climbed down the steps behind her and opened the luggage compartment.

"Which is yours, miss?" he asked, tired but not unkindly.

"The big bag right behind that hard case. I've got a bike in there." She hiked her backpack higher on her shoulders. She didn't tell him about the sleeping bag stuffed in the bike bag.

He nodded. "Planning on doing some mountain biking?"

Technically, she was, but probably not in the way he thought, so she nodded and smiled. "I'm headed for a place outside of Lyons."

"Pretty country," she heard him say from inside the bus's compartment as he pushed the hard-sided suitcase aside and grabbed the black bag. "Here you go." He set the bag on the pavement and arched his back, stretching before he got back on the bus.

"Thank you. Drive safely." Ellie dug into her pocket and took out some crumpled bills to give him a tip. She was down to her last fourteen dollars—a lucky number and a good sign, she liked to think. She took the five, then decided to add two dollars more. Seven was lucky too.

He watched her count out the money, then waved her off. "Don't need a tip from you, miss. Take care." He turned and climbed back up the steps. A couple other people had gotten off but only had carry-ons. Ellie watched

them head into the terminal. Each person had someone waiting, who greeted them with hugs and took their bags.

Ellie had no one.

No, worse than no one. She had her family behind her. She prayed they'd stay there.

Ellie wheeled the bag away from the bus to a metal bench and sat down. Water dripped from a corner of the roof into a puddle where a couple of sparrows darted around the bigger pigeons for a drink. One ran straight in and threw water over its feathers, reminding Ellie that she was also in desperate need of a shower.

As the bus pulled away, she unzipped the bag and pulled it down from around the folded-up bike and the sleeping bag. Both belonged to her oldest brother. She didn't want to imagine his face when he found his stuff gone. He was bad enough on a good day, let alone on a day when he woke to find her gone with his things. Nope, she couldn't even begin to imagine how red his face must have been, or how loudly he'd yelled, not caring if he woke up everyone else, or how he must have stomped through the house to see what else she'd made off with—a bag of chips, a box of power bars, her own clothing, and a few sundry items, and of course the letter, though none of them knew about that.

And here she was, imagining exactly what she didn't want to imagine. Funny how her brain worked that way.

Ellie reached into another jacket pocket and took out a crumpled plastic wrapper. She shook out the few cake crumbs left and watched the birds run for them. It brought a smile to her face.

“Whatcha doin’?”

Ellie turned her head and looked up at a man in a nice suit. He was fairly tall, thin, and he had a ton of gel in his hair. His tie had the tiniest spot of grease on it.

“Just feeding the pigeons,” Ellie said. She quickly looked back down and went back to pulling the sleeping bag out of the bike bag.

“You need a place to stay?” he asked.

“No-I'm-good-thanks.” Her answer came out as one word. She stood and held up one short end of the sleeping bag to roll it up. He stood about a foot taller than her.

“Let me help you.” Before she could protest, the man bent down and took the other end.



“I’ve got it. Please let go.”

He straightened and held his hands up, palms out, and took a step back. He was still smiling at her. Her gaze flicked up, then back to her hands as she folded the bag in half to roll it.

“I just don’t want to see the end of that nice sleeping bag get all wet and dirty,” the man said.

Ellie said nothing. The sleeping bag wasn’t new or even particularly nice.

He chuckled. “Of course, if you’re sleeping rough, it’s going to get dirty, isn’t it?”

She already had, and it did. “I’m visiting my cousin,” Ellie said.

“Oh,” the man said, folding his arms. “Does she make you sleep in the yard?”

Ellie flicked her gaze up to him then back down. She had the bag almost rolled up into a tight cylinder that she could attach to her backpack. The bike was still folded up in the bag. Lightweight and fancy and nicer than anything she’d ever owned.

“I don’t think you have an aunt or a place to stay, little girl.”

She cringed at those two words. Ellie was in her twenties, not a little girl, though her small size often made people look twice.

“Why don’t you come with me?” he coaxed in a cooing voice that put the pigeons to shame. “I have a nice place, a closet full of nice clothes. Hot food.” He lowered his voice. “You came out here for the,” he pressed his thumb and index finger together and put them up to his pursed lips, then inhaled loudly, “am I right? I have plenty of that too, and other things.”

She barely shook her head.

“Don’t deny it, sweet face. A lot of kids like you come out here for that. And you know what? They end up sleeping on the street where not so nice things happen to them. That doesn’t have to be you.”

Ellie bent and reached into the bottom of the bag.

“You’re a sweet little thing, so let me help you.” The man took a step forward and reached for her, then stumbled as he danced backward.

Oh yeah, she’d taken one more thing from her brother that was sure to really get him mad. Ellie pointed the .38 special as steadily as she could at the tiny grease spot on the man’s fancy tie.

“I don’t do drugs and I’m not interested in becoming a prostitute.” She held his gaze as she added, “Now go away.”

He left her alone to unfold the bike and pop the wheels on. She folded up

the bag, stuffed it into the top of her backpack as best she could, and mounted the bike. As she pedaled away, she told herself that the sweat trickling down her back was only from exertion.

*I was aiming at a grease spot, not at a man. A grease spot...*

*Read about Ellie and Bear's romance in [Bear on the Mountain, Watchdog Mountain Division Book 1](#)*

## AFTERWORD

Nine books. One series. Done. I can't believe we made it, but here we are. You'll have to forgive me if I'm rambling a bit here. I'm winded after running this marathon.

Fun fact: I, the writer, the one who is supposed to be in charge, had no idea these two crazy kids named Gina and Lachlan would end up together when I started writing *Watchdog Security*. I didn't even know they'd carried on a steamy love affair for years *until I was about a third of the way into this book*.

Wow. Blew my mind. Also made me go back and rewrite a crap ton of stuff. But from that point on, the book felt...right. The story was coming together in a way that felt true. Inasmuch as fiction is true (it kinda is, or at least it reveals truths even as it's lying to your face about the facts. Maybe I missed my calling as a spy.)

There are times when I have no idea what my characters are going to say or do until it happens on the page. They are so much smarter than I am. Then again, if I knew everything about a book before I wrote it, then I don't think this job would be nearly as much fun.

Thank you so much for having as much faith in me as I do in my characters. Thanks for coming with me on this long journey.

We are not done yet though, not by a long shot. I've got some ideas for extras and spinoffs, Lovelies. Let me know too what you'd like to see again. Would you like to know more about any of the side characters? Or maybe the fate of *The Repair Shop*? There are so many possibilities and I want to write the stories that you want to read! So help me out; get on my newsletter at [oliviamichaelsromance.com](http://oliviamichaelsromance.com) and drop me a line sometime.

If you've also read Watchdog Protectors and Watchdog Mountain Division, you know that they are all tied together and that the characters are liable to pop up anywhere. Gina and Lach didn't tell me about their relationship so you'd better believe they haven't let me know yet where exactly they're going to end up, though there's a good chance they'll be moving to Colorado. Like Arden and Kyle, I'm rooting for it. All I know is that we haven't heard the last from them, and that makes me happy.

So, now it's time for me to start on the next book. I can tell you that it's in the Mountain Division Series, it's in Colorado, and it's going to be fun.

I hope you'll join me again.

With Love,

Olivia Michaels, December, 2023

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As always, Trinity, this writing gig would not be the best job in the world without you. Lemons!

Same goes for you, Tiki-Riley, Chaos-Bella, Caitlyn, Susan, Kris, Elle, Anna, Rayne, Em, Ophelia, Carrie, Ninette, Becca, Gary, Oliver, and Mike. And to you, Jeff the Short Order Cook, aka my big brother from another mother, and the lovely Cori. Also, forever and always to my sisters from other misters, Michelle and Sara. Last but not least, my husband and my boyos.

Finally, for my readers—my family in Watchdog. I do it all for you, Lovelies.

Love and gratitude to you all.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

International bestselling author Olivia Michaels is a life-long reader, dog-lover, gardener, and a certified beachaholic. When she's not throwing a Frisbee for her fur-baby, harvesting tomatoes, or writing, you can find her playing in the surf, kayaking, or kicking back on the sand and cracking open a romantic beach read.