



RYDER'S WATCH



TEAM WATCHDOG

KRIS NORRIS

RYDER'S WATCH
BROTHERHOOD
PROTECTORS WORLD

TEAM WATCHDOG

BOOK FIVE



KRIS NORRIS



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To Jen... for all the pep talks and brainstorming. I'm so thankful I jumped in without looking. You're the best.

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Guarding Leah - Regan Black

Team Eagle

Booker's Mission - Kris Norris

Hunter's Mission - Kendall Talbot

Gunn's Mission - Delilah Devlin

Xavier's Mission - Lori Matthews

Wyatt's Mission - Jen Talty

CHAPTER 1



“RYDER. This is a fundraiser, not a funeral. Would it kill you to smile?”

Ryder Callahan paused on the patio just outside the ballroom doors, smoothing out his jacket as he glanced at the balcony a floor above him. Not that he needed to look to know Mason Quinn was staring down at him. Ryder sensed it. Knew it in the soldier part of his brain that had spent the past twenty years fighting alongside his buddy. Advanced recon missions that had relied on Ryder knowing exactly where each of his teammates were situated without having to check — constantly radioing in. What had often been the difference between success and failure — hell, life and death. The fact they’d been best friends since they’d started playing competitive hockey together as kids, hadn’t hurt any, either. A connection that went deeper than blood.

It was also the reason Ryder was stuck at the high-class charity event instead of kicking back in a cabin for some much-needed down time. What he’d planned on doing with Mason and their other buddy, Cruz, until Mason’s wife, Isabella, had charmed the man into doing her a favor. A last-minute security detail for the Sinclair Foundation. Which meant Ryder had reluctantly traded in his hiking boots and cargo pants for a tux and shoes that reflected the overhead lights.

His earpiece clicked before Cruz chuckled. “He’s just pissed because I told him an incoming frontal system was going to ruin his hopes of getting in any quality hiking.”

Ryder glanced over his shoulder, shaking his head as he eyed Cruz standing off to his right across the patio. “And yet, not a cloud in the sky, buddy.”

“Just wait. It’s coming.”

“Why are you actually here, anyway? I doubt we’ll need a Spec Op weatherman’s expertise inside a museum, unless you think that storm cell is going to rain all over the guests, tonight. And since when does a guy of your *prestigious* rank stoop to field work?”

Mason laughed, joining them beneath a string of lights on the patio. “He’s got you there, Cruz. You kinda did give up the grunt work to ride a desk and boss everyone around.”

Cruz simply crossed his arms over his chest. “Only so I could spend more time at home — work on my marriage.”

“Which explains why it took you and Ayla nearly dying in a tornado a few months back to finally fix everything, which was long overdue, by the way.” Mason shook his head. “But now I know why you two were always the perfect fit. You’re both nuts.”

“She’s nuts. I just happen to love her brand of crazy. And at least she’s not my polar opposite.”

“Ayla’s impulsive. You’re anything, but. And Isabella isn’t my polar opposite. She’s just more refined than me.”

“Right. And what color tuxedos are we all wearing? Because the guy I knew would have called them gray, but Isabella would probably say something like gunmetal.”

Mason laughed. “That’s exactly what color they are. I’m glad you’re finally learning some fashion sense.”

Cruz gave Mason a nudge. “I guess we both married our opposites. Probably why we’re so happy.”

Ryder groaned, eyeing Mason and Cruz before making exaggerated gagging sounds. “God, you guys really need to stop with the over-the-top love shit. Some of us don’t have the stomach for it.”

Mason arched a brow. “You’re the one who insists on remaining single. I’ve already offered to set you up with one of Isabella’s friends.”

“And I’ve already declined.” Ryder held up his hand, cutting off his best friend before Mason started listing all the reasons Ryder was being stubborn. “I appreciate the offer. You know, I do. And it’s not as if the ladies I’ve seen with Isabella aren’t beautiful or talented. It’s just...”

“They aren’t your type.” Mason crossed his arms over his chest. “I didn’t think Isabella was my *type* either. Look how wrong I was.”

“And I couldn’t be happier for you. Truly. But I’m really not a cover girl kind of guy.”

“Winners of a beauty pageant are usually referred to as beauty queens, not cover girls.”

“And the fact you know that says it all.”

“Hey, you were the one who told me you liked a lady who didn’t mind getting dressed up.”

“For special occasions, sure. Like tonight. I’m wearing a tux.” Ryder smirked. “Gunmetal and all. But we both know I’m not suited for a woman who shows up to fish wearing three-inch heels.”

“You know Isabella wears more appropriate footwear for those kinds of outings, now.”

“Right. Designer combat boots.” Ryder gave Mason a light shove. “Not that you’d care if she didn’t. Which is kind of the point of being in love. Besides, I’m fine. Happier than ever, unless you two insist on making goo-goo eyes all night. Blowing kisses to your wives.”

Cruz sighed. “It’s gonna rain. I promise you. In fact, I bet you fifty bucks it’ll be pouring with thunder and lightning by the time we leave.”

Hand it to Cruz to see through Ryder’s bullshit. That his annoyance had little to do with his buddies being happily in love and everything to do with him being out of his element.

Not that he hadn't participated in these kinds of events before or wasn't suited for urban assignments. He just excelled at the dirty, dangerous, dragging-assets-out-from-behind-enemy-lines type work. And after twenty years of being a Combat Rescue Officer for the Air Force Special Warfare division, trading in his boots for dress shoes was taking some adjusting.

Mason's hand landed on Ryder's shoulder. "Cheer up. Maybe a bunch of armed thugs will try to raid the place, and you can go all *Rambo* on their asses."

Ryder snorted. "*Rambo*? Seriously? You couldn't go with *John Wick* or *Ethan Hunt*? Something from this decade? Not that it matters. The chances of anything ugly happening are about as good as Cruz's prediction that it's going to rain." He motioned to Cruz. "You're on, by the way."

"Easy money." Cruz moved out in front of them, waving at the starlit sky. "Because it's moving in faster than I thought. Within the hour. Guaranteed."

"You two are so full of shit. And don't even bother denying it. I'm here. I'll do my job. But you both owe me."

Ryder headed inside, ignoring how Mason and Cruz kept hounding him before stopping near the bottom of a sweeping staircase. Ryder had to admit, the museum's architecture was breathtaking, with vaulted ceilings and inlaid wood details in the floors. The kind of old-world charm that instantly put him at ease. And knowing the event was for a good cause definitely tugged at the heart he thought he'd buried in some distant hellhole overseas.

Not that it eased all the tension bunching his muscles. A distant nagging feeling that perhaps Mason wasn't completely off the mark, and there was a real possibility the night could end bloody. Not for the guests — they'd see to that. But between the items the foundation had acquired for the silent auction, and the sheer amount of priceless paintings and antiques on display, it definitely put a giant bullseye on the event for any organized group that thought they'd only be facing minimal security forces.

Which was probably why Isabella had volunteered their services in the first place. While they weren't SEALs or Delta Force, they'd spent their careers operating behind enemy lines, and were more than capable of dealing with any kind of outside threat.

Mason nudged Ryder's arm. "You've got that look."

Ryder arched a brow. "The one that says it'll take more than a case of *Corona* to make it up to me?"

"The one that says you're feeling twitchy."

"We're ex-Special Forces. I don't know about you — if keeping all the colors straight from your new fashion wardrobe has turned your brain to mush — but *I* don't get twitchy. Though, before you roll your eyes, I'll admit I've got a heavy feeling between my shoulder blades that won't go away."

Mason nodded, giving the main open area a thorough once-over. "Me, too. I can't believe the Sinclairs were going to make due with just the usual museum security."

"Let's face it. Most people don't see the world the way we do. They don't look at possible *infil* points or map out route strategies. The regular staff have the entranceways and perimeter manned. And since nothing bad has happened at previous functions, it's not unrealistic the Sinclairs wouldn't consider their event a viable target. Though, to be honest, even with the five of us as added help, there are still a dozen ways this could go south, and we'd have to intervene with extreme prejudice."

"God, I hope it doesn't come down to that. Can you imagine the bill if someone opened fire in here? They just added a brand new wing."

"Causing damage beats allowing everyone to die."

"Still..." Mason nodded when Cruz motioned toward Ayla walking in from the main auction room, before the other man headed her way. "At least Kent and Asher have the auction covered. That leaves the three of us to recon the remaining areas — do the occasional perimeter check, just to be safe."

“If our team can’t handle any possible threat, then it’s time to retire from everything.”

“I love how you always see the positive side of things, Ryder. Though, something tells me you might not be all that upset if you have to react to a dynamic situation.”

Ryder elbowed the man. Hard. “It’d be a shame if I had to punch my best friend because he’s being an ass.”

“Please, I’m too quick.”

“Never seemed to have trouble catching you all those years on the ice.”

Mason snorted. “You? Catch me? Not a chance in hell. You’re a goalie. The only thing you can catch is the puck.” He waited a beat then added, “On occasion.”

“How about I rent out an arena next week, and we put that claim to the test?”

“You’re on. Bring all your gear. My prize for beating your ass will be hitting you in the mask.”

“Like you could hit my face. You’re too rusty.”

Mason sighed. “You’re not wrong. Though, you do realize assimilating into civilian life would be easier if you found a few pastimes that didn’t involve waivers and adrenaline rushes.”

“You make me sound like I’m a junkie.”

Mason merely crossed his arms and stared at Ryder. Not that the guy was wrong, but after living in that zone for most of his life, Ryder found it hard to simply kick back. Step down off the ledge without wanting to jump headfirst. Not that Mason or Cruz were any different, but with their relationships taking priority these past few months, they didn’t have as much free time to indulge in their wild sides.

Which was why Ryder preferred spending any other time off at a fellow Brotherhood Protector’s training cabin. Logan Bishop, part of Team Raptor, shared Ryder’s affinity for riding that razor’s edge, and was always happy to fly him out to the team’s shack. Even with Logan’s wife, Harlow, along, it was

rarely civilized. Though, that was probably due to the fact Harlow was ex-CIA and a current ATF agent. Or because she was just as likely to fire a few rounds at Ryder's ass to, "Keep him sharp," than sit around.

It was also how he and Mason had scored their two-bedroom cabin. Logan had just finished building the extra space when Team Watchdog had come online, and the other man had been more than happy to have a couple of fellow ex-soldiers renting it. And, if it meant Harlow had more protection whenever Logan was away, that was a bonus. Not that any of them would say that to her. Even several months pregnant, the lady was pure grit, and one hell of a shot. But Ryder knew it eased some of Logan's protective instincts, just the same.

Of course, Mason had moved out when he'd bought a place with Isabella a few weeks back — after their shotgun wedding. Though Ryder knew Mason would have asked Isabella to marry him, pregnant or not. He'd been hooked after the first date, even if he hadn't admitted it. Which left Ryder manning the cabin by himself. Not that he was lonely. In fact, he was starting to appreciate the special kind of calm that came with living on his own. A nice change after all those years in barracks or sharing a tent overseas.

Footsteps sounded above them, and Ryder glanced up the stairs. Isabella stopped at the top, leaning over to talk to an older couple admiring some of the paintings before looking their way. He focused on Mason, and damn if the man wasn't beaming. Not just smiling — this went beyond that. All school-boy giddiness Ryder wouldn't have thought still existed, but there it was. Shining up at Isabella as if she'd infused Mason with a supply of neon.

Ryder groaned, elbowing Mason in the ribs. "Dude. You're practically drooling."

Mason laughed. "Jealousy does *not* suit you, bro."

"I'm not jealous."

Mason arched his brow.

Ryder elbowed him, again. Harder. “Shut up.”

“I didn’t say, anything.”

“We both know you did. You just didn’t say it out loud. And for the record, it’s not as if you’ve adapted by taking up any non-lethal pastimes, either.”

Mason nodded toward Isabella. “I’m sorry, have you not met my wife?”

“You’re claiming *she’s* your suitable pastime?”

“She’s my everything.”

Ryder covered his mouth. “And now, I’m gonna be sick.”

“Talk about being full of shit. Offer’s still open to set you up with her friends.” Mason gave him a firm look. “Or maybe just *one* friend in particular.”

Ryder groaned, resisting the urge to punch that sloppy grin off Mason’s face. “Like I’ve told you the other dozen times you’ve brought it up, I don’t have a thing for Kennedy.”

It wasn’t a total lie. He didn’t know Isabella’s best friend, Kennedy Sinclair, well enough to have any concrete feelings. Sure, she was stunning and smart, and he was definitely attracted to her sharp wit and sarcastic sense of humor, but... There was no mistaking she rivaled Isabella’s desire for fashion, and he doubted she’d be happy dating a guy who felt more at home in a manmade lean-to on the side of a mountain, than in a luxury suite in a five-star hotel. And at this stage in his life, he wasn’t looking to change.

Compromise, sure. But he liked the man he’d matured into, and if he was ever going to find the kind of connection Mason and Cruz had found, he needed someone who loved him for him. Not for who he could pretend to be.

And a lady that fine deserved a partner who fit into her world without making her feel as if she needed to change, either.

Mason shook his head, still focusing on Isabella. “You know you have a tell, right?”

“You’re just saying that because you think I’ll suddenly admit I’ve been lying, all this time.”

“I don’t need you to admit what I already know.” Mason held up one hand. “I won’t push it. I just think you two would be a great match if you simply gave her a chance.”

“She’s beautiful. No question.”

“She’s also tough and down to earth.”

Ryder simply raised a brow. “I’m sorry, but we’re talking about Kennedy Sinclair, right? Socialite. Heir to the Sinclair fortune, and the *face* of their private operating foundation? Who looks as if she fits in at Isabella’s pageants? That Kennedy?”

“Technically, her mother, Dr. Jacklyn Sinclair, is still the figurehead of the Sinclair Foundation, along with her father, John.” Mason sighed. “And you, of all people, should know that life is all about wearing different masks. You might be surprised what you’ll find if you see her without one of hers on.”

“Are you sure they’re not just variations of the same one?”

“Guess you’ll have to figure that out for yourself.”

“Jackass.” Ryder straightened, nodding at Isabella as she descended the stairs then walked over to them. “Isabella. You look beautiful, as usual. Guess that old saying is true. You’re glowing.”

She blushed, and Ryder had to admit, she really was breath-taking. “And you’re still pissed you didn’t get to go camping, or hiking, or whatever it was you three *amigos* were going to do out in the wild.”

“Amigos?”

“Isn’t that what you, Mason, and Cruz call yourselves? The *Trés Amigos*?”

Ryder shook his head, glaring at Mason. “You really need to stop watching those old movies, buddy. It shows.”

Mason grinned. “At least, I’m not watching them all by myself.”

“You shouldn’t be watching anything when you’re still in the honeymoon phase. Don’t you two have better ways to kill the time? Or is your unborn child already cockblocking you?”

Isabella laughed. “Don’t you two *ever* stop?”

Mason knocked her shoulder, wrapping one arm around her waist. “Nope. So, I thought you were helping Kennedy with the auction? Shouldn’t it be in full swing, by now?”

“Do *not* get me started.” Isabella brushed at a few stray hairs that had slipped free from her up-do. “The whole audio system practically blew up. There’s some magician her mom hired stalling while Kennedy’s retrieving a spare system from the archives. I offered to go with her, but she insisted I stay here.”

Ryder smiled when Isabella rubbed her hand across her belly, not that she seemed aware she was even doing it. But it definitely made him realize that maybe Mason wasn’t completely wrong about him being jealous, either.

Fingers snapped in front of his face, and he blinked as Isabella frowned. “Ryder? Are you okay?”

“Fine.”

“Then, why are you grinning at me like that? It’s creepy.”

He shrugged, tugging on the bottom of his jacket. “No reason. Just thinking. Do you know if Kennedy took one of the security guards with her?”

“I don’t think so. But it’s a secure area.” She held up an ID card, similar to the ones their crew had. “You need a pass card to access the elevator and codes to get into any of the rooms.” Isabella looked at Mason. “Is something wrong? Should I go after her?”

Mason gave her a squeeze. “Of course not. Everything’s fine. Ryder’s just being cautious.”

Isabella gave Ryder an odd raise of one brow before removing her cell from the ridiculously small clutch purse in

her other hand. “I’ll call her. See if she’s found...”

Ryder glanced at Mason when she frowned, tapping her phone a second time. “Isabella? Something wrong?”

She met his gaze as she touched her phone, again. “I just realized Kennedy probably left her phone in her purse, which is with her mom — nowhere for her to carry it — but it doesn’t matter. I can’t seem to get a signal.”

That heavy feeling between Ryder’s shoulder blades increased as the voice inside his head started yelling at him. He removed his cell, looking over at Mason when nothing worked. “Mason.”

But his buddy was already on the radio to Kent and Asher, telling them to keep everyone seated inside the auction room, just to be safe. Then, he was waving Cruz over. “Pretty damn sure I already know the answer, but since you’re the weather expert... Any chance that inbound storm is screwing up our cell service?”

Cruz glanced out the window at the growing darkness. “It’s not nearly intense enough for that, yet, unless it somehow knocked out a few cell towers. But I’ll review some charts just to be sure it hasn’t changed...”

Mason clenched his jaw at Cruz’s hushed curse. “Cruz?”

“Internet just went offline.”

“Well, shit.”

That was all Ryder needed to get everyone moving toward the auction room, Isabella and Ayla positioned between them, in case a few tangos burst through the doors and opened fire. Not that Ryder thought that was the next move any organized group would make. More likely the bastards would kill the power, first, then strike when they thought they had the upper hand.

Mason had his radio out, again, trying to raise the museum’s security staff. “Damn it, nothing but static. This is really starting to piss me off.”

Isabella snagged his arm. “Mason? Ryder? What’s going on?”

Ryder faked a decent smile. “Not sure, yet, but we need to check out a few things.”

“Oh, god. You think this is the start of something bad, don’t you.”

It wasn’t a question, and Ryder didn’t try to lie. “Let’s just say this is the progression I’d take if I wanted to launch a surprise attack.”

“Attack?”

Mason groaned. “Way to keep it all on the down low, buddy, before we know for sure.”

Ryder shrugged. “Knowledge is power. Hope for the best ___”

“But plan for the worst. Yeah, I’m familiar with the concept. Which means we need to get everyone into a central location. Set up sentries, while someone checks out the mechanical room to rule out a simple electrical issue with the wi-fi. What might have sparked the audio system to go haywire.”

“Oh my god. Kennedy is down in the basement.” Isabella paled as she squeezed Mason’s arm. “Alone.”

“Breathe, babe. It’s going to be okay. We can handle whatever this is, we just need everyone to remain calm. I’ll go ___”

“Sorry, buddy, but this one’s mine.” Ryder merely stared at Mason when his friend glared at him.

“I’m team leader. If there’s a risk to be had…”

“We all can take that risk.” He cut Mason off with a wave of his hand. “There’s no way I’m allowing you to leave your pregnant wife’s safety up to anyone else.”

Mason punched his arm. “Isabella being pregnant doesn’t change, anything. I—”

“You know I love it when you go all team leader on me, but not this time. So, save your breath. This is one decision I’m making for everyone.”

Mason’s face paled slightly, the reference to his sister, Mary Lou, weighing down the space. How the man still blamed himself for her death, despite knowing it wasn’t anything he could have changed. Isabella had been helping lift that burden, but it was still there — still raw. Which meant, Ryder needed to shoulder Kennedy’s safety in case she got hurt.

Or worse.

Ryder shut Isabella down when it was obvious she was going to insist he take Mason with him. “I know Kennedy’s your best friend, but there’s a room full of people who also need Mason and Cruz’s expertise. I’ll bring Kennedy back.”

The fact he cared a bit more for Kennedy than he wanted to admit hadn’t factored into his decision. Was simply another reason he needed to be the guy to go hunting.

Mason snagged his arm when he went to move past him. “If this is an attack, we both know they’ll take the power out, next.”

“Then, I guess it’s a good thing I’m checking out the mechanical room. I’ll radio in when I have an update. Might be best if you don’t try calling me until I do.”

“Do *not* get yourself shot.”

“I didn’t make it through all those years in the service just to let some gangbanger cap my ass. Channel two.”

Ryder took off, heading for the service stairs at the far end of the museum. Normally, his team would have done numerous dry runs of any possible threat — had the layout memorized. Scrutinized every inch of the building. But getting the call only hours before the event...

It didn’t matter. He’d scanned the floor plan enough to know where the main sections were. How to access the various stairwells and exit points. What might be the difference between getting to Kennedy or getting ambushed. All he

needed was for his luck to hold a bit longer. Once he had her safely at his side, he could deal with any other threat.

Until the lights cut out, blanketing the entire building in eerie shadows. Not even the backup generator kicking in.

Looked as if he'd have to do things the hard way. He grabbed his mag light and started down the stairs.

CHAPTER 2



THIS WAS BAD. And if her hunch was correct, the situation was about to get worse.

Kennedy Sinclair pressed her back against the wall behind the door, hands fisted at her sides, her breath stalled in her chest. She didn't move — didn't breathe — all in the hopes of staying quiet. That the men stalking down the hallway might walk right past.

She'd been on her way to the door, after coming up empty, again, while searching for spare audio equipment, when the lights had winked out. No flickering or buzzing, just that bright white glow one second, numbing darkness the next.

She'd tripped a few steps until she'd found the wall — gotten her bearings. But she hadn't been worried. Had taken it all in stride. With an inbound frontal system, it wasn't a surprise the power might go out.

Crappy timing, with her fundraiser in full swing, but that's what happened in mountain towns. Winds wreaked havoc with weak or dead branches, and after a dry summer, it was bound to happen.

Until she'd reached for her phone and realized she'd left it in her purse in the auction room. That, in all the chaos of clearing the building, she could get left behind because all the storage doors locked as a security measure when the power went out. And if they couldn't get the electricity back on for a while...

That thought had gotten her blood pumping. Her heart rate kicking up. She wasn't claustrophobic, but the idea of being stuck in the insanely dark room for hours — alone — definitely hit a nerve. Brought back some ugly memories from a few less-than-stellar experiences overseas. Ones she'd been happy to bury, until they all came rushing back. The smell of smoke and blood and charred remains. How the darkness took on a life of its own — made the room feel as if it was breathing. Waiting for her to drift off before consuming her.

That this was what death felt like.

She'd made her way to the door, cursing that the high-tech lock was still in place, when it had clicked over, allowing the door to shift slightly. The exact opposite of what was supposed to happen. The entire reason the museum had pass code readers on all the locks. What would prevent any half-cocked idiot from simply waltzing in, turning off the power, then stealing everything. While it meant she wasn't trapped — could breathe, again, without it wheezing in her chest — it also meant someone had managed to override the system.

On purpose.

Since one of the maintenance guys hadn't opened the door and walked through as if it was normal — just a routine test — she knew it was anything but ordinary. And she didn't need to be some ex-special forces soldier like her best friend's husband and his team to realize something very bad was going down.

Just like they'd claimed could happen.

That's when she'd heard the footsteps. Hushed at first, as if someone was trying not to make any noise. Then, they'd increased, stopping and starting, as if they were trying each door. Checking if they'd bypassed the security.

She didn't even know how they'd managed it. Not that it mattered. One twist of the handle, and they'd be inside.

With her.

She'd listened at the door until the steps had stopped, again, before chancing a quick glance down the hallway.

That's when her heart rate had really soared. Five shadows gathered in front of the door a few rooms over, the faint glow from the battery-powered exit lighting illuminating their silhouettes. Big. Menacing. What she assumed were men roughly twice her size. And they all looked more than primed for a fight.

She'd closed the door, then hidden behind it, hoping they'd only take a peek inside, then move on once they realized there wasn't anything worth stealing. Just her luck, she was in the one room that didn't have anything remotely lethal stored inside. Just packing boxes and blankets — nothing hard enough to knock anyone out.

Tapping. Coming down the hallway. Steady. Strong. No hesitation, this time. No stopping, just the click of heels on linoleum — each step drawing closer. She readied herself, mapping out all the moves she should make in order to have any chance of getting out of the room alive if they noticed her. A few jabs and hooks — to throats and groins — maybe a kick if her damn dress would allow it, and she'd be out the door. Racing for the stairs.

At least, that's what she imagined. What might happen if she was only facing one threat. Two decade's worth of kickboxing lessons gave her the confidence to walk around in foreign countries without cowering when someone glanced at her. Allowed her to knock some drunk creep on his ass if he tried to cop a feel at a bar. Facing five men of unknown ability...

This was way outside anything she'd ever faced. And knowing how she'd faired against only two armed men when that asshole had wanted to abduct Isabella, didn't instill much confidence.

She'd try. Go down fighting. Sinclairs never gave up, and they rarely gave in. With any luck, her heels might skewer one of the bastards in the balls. Or catch one on the inside of their knee — that weak spot that dropped any creep, regardless of size.

Having the handle rattle as she was working through the next several moves chucked all her strategies out the window. Technicolor one moment. Nothing but emptiness the next. The cold slide of fear down her spine overshadowing everything else. How she'd lived through all that violence overseas only to die in a damn storage room inside a museum.

In her own hometown.

Voices. Muttering words she couldn't make out. Not English. Something else. Familiar, but too fast for her to place with her mind now racing through every possible outcome — most of which resulted with her dead on the floor. Could they hear her heart pounding? What sounded like a jackhammer inside her head? What was probably setting off seismometers across the state. Making those concentric rings inside everyone's drink, just like in the movies. Did they already know she was there?

The door swung open, stopping an inch from her chest. What had her sucking everything in, hoping they wouldn't realize someone was behind it.

A few beams of light danced around the room, pausing at any place big enough to hide before they disappeared. That door closing a moment later.

Kennedy stayed still, hating the fact she wasn't even sure she *could* move. That somewhere between her psyching herself up to fight, and the stark reality that she might die, her muscles had frozen. Locked in place like the damn door should have been.

Not that she could make a run for it until she was convinced they were focused on searching one of the remaining rooms. She was fast — even with heels on, she could run like the wind. If she took them off... She'd be down the hall and up the stairs in record time.

But she couldn't outrun a bullet, and she'd bet the limited-edition Gucci dress she was wearing, the bastards were armed.

It took her a few moments to push the fear aside — creep to the other side of the door. Another few of her ear pressed

against the slab to feel at all confident the men had continued down the hall... Just like she'd hoped. That this might be her only chance to make a run for it.

But not in her heels.

Not only were they loud, they'd definitely slow her down. And that split second might be the difference between life and death — a graze or a lethal hit.

She wouldn't leave them behind. Not because she cared, but on the off-chance she might be able to use them as a weapon, like she'd been imagining. Unlikely, but anything was better than nothing if she ended up facing more than one guy. Catching one in the neck with a stiletto might buy her enough time to punch another. And there was always the chance she might need to protect her feet from glass or some unforeseen hazard.

The cold press of the floor had her inhaling. Fisting those shoes until she was sure her knuckles had blanched white as she took one last breath, then reached for the handle.

Having it turn in her grasp caught her off-guard — had her reeling back. She hadn't heard any footsteps. Any voices. Nothing to suggest any of the men had backtracked — decided to perform a more thorough search of the room. Having the door swing open a second later had her reacting on instinct. Shifting her weight onto the balls of her feet then striking as soon as the guy took a step inside. Two jabs and a hook, and he was off to the right, the door closing behind him. A firm left cross, and he'd toppled against the wall, some insanely small flashlight beam bouncing off the roof. A hushed curse sounding through the space.

Then, he was on her. No fighting her off, or pushing her back. Just a shift, and he'd dodged her next strike. No effort. No conscious deflection, just a breath, and he was in her space — had her hand holding the shoes grasped in his. A twist and a step, and her back was plastered against the door. He didn't even seem to use any force, any fancy attacks. She simply blinked, and their positions were reversed. His body an inch from hers.

Dead. No other outcome when the guy was obviously skilled to the point, she hadn't even felt him move.

Another curse, then his face looming in close. "Christ, Kennedy, it's Ryder. Feel free to stop trying to kill me."

Was she already dead? Unconscious on the floor with a head injury? Maybe slowly suffocating from a choke hold? Because she could have sworn he'd just said it was Ryder — as in Ryder Callahan. Mason Quinn's best friend, and the guy who'd been haunting her dreams a bit too much, lately.

She blinked, inhaling when he used that stupidly small light to illuminate his face — showcase the perfectly manicured stubble on his jaw. How his caramel-colored hair spiked up from his forehead, the ends messier than usual from their round of sparring. But mostly, it highlighted the gorgeous blue of his eyes. Somewhere between sapphire and steel, they sparkled, even in the dim glow of the beam.

She must have said his name because he nodded, then gently eased his hold, only to grab her, again, when she started sliding down the wall as her legs buckled, all that strength from before, gone.

He sighed, pulling her close as he used his weight to keep her pressed against the wall. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you, but I couldn't risk calling out with those assholes just down the hall." He smoothed some loose strands of hair out of her eyes. "Are you okay? Can you breathe? Talk?"

She groaned inwardly. Great, now he thought she was the proverbial damsel in distress.

It took her a couple of breaths to regain her composure — give him a slight shove. Just enough he released his hold — took a step back.

Kennedy rolled her shoulders, raising her chin. "I'm fine, you just surprised me. I thought..."

She'd thought she was going to die. Not that she'd admit that to him. Not when she'd already embarrassed herself by nearly toppling to the floor.

He gave her a small half-smile. “You aren’t the only one who was caught off-guard. Where the hell did you learn to box like that, because... Damn. I think my jaw’s going to be sore for a week.”

He’d kept his voice low, like her. But simply standing there, chatting, had her stomach rolling in protest. How the hell was he so calm when they should be racing down the hallway? Maybe shimmying out a window?

“We can talk about my *Rocky Balboa* skills, later. After we get out of here.”

He reached for her shoulders, keeping her still when all she wanted was to dart out the door. “I know you’re scared but—”

“I’m not scared. I just don’t want to die, here.”

“It’s natural to be scared. I’d be worried if you weren’t. And no one’s dying. I’ve been shadowing the group for several minutes. Managed to take out a couple of sentries they left in the mechanical room.” He shook his head. “Unfortunately, they knocked out the entire electrical grid with a bastardized version of an EMP.”

“They have an electromagnetic pulse device? To rob a museum?” Though, she had to admit, it made sense. Explained how they’d taken all the high-tech security measures offline. It also eased her conscience, just a bit because who would have planned for that contingency?

Ryder and Mason would have, if they’d been given the assignment more than a few hours before the event. Something his narrowed gaze told her without him having to say the words out loud.

Instead, he merely nodded. “They’ve probably been casing the place for a while. Maybe they didn’t realize there’d be a fundraiser going on tonight. Or they thought it would be a great distraction. Get everyone focused on the power outage and getting the guests to safety while they pillage the storage rooms. Or maybe they plan on stealing everything upstairs, too. Rob the guests while they take whatever was up for

auction. Regardless, we need to proceed carefully. They've got AKs and some G3s."

Kennedy wasn't sure what a G3 was, but she didn't need to know what the weapon looked like, only that they had impressive firepower, which probably outweighed whatever gun Ryder was carrying. But it got her thinking... wondering who would bring those kinds of weapons to a simple burglary.

She glanced at the door, praying she hadn't just ruined whatever chance they had of escaping by waylaying the guy. "So, what's the plan?"

"First, we take a breath. Make sure you can run properly in that getup. Then, we wait until they move to the next room around the corner before we head for the stairs."

"This isn't a getup, it's a gown. And what if they decide to come back here?"

"It's a death trap, if we're being honest. No way you could ever run in that thing. Just throwing a few punches ripped the seam. And if they were going to ransack this room, you would have punched one of them in the face, instead of me. And things would have turned out much different."

The part where she'd be dead. Or shot. Maybe that unconscious scenario she'd been thinking about. Which also meant, she owed Ryder her life.

All of which she could deal with once this was over. When she was more worried about living down her mistakes — that Ryder had rescued her — than whether they'd make it out alive.

Ryder didn't seem worried. He wasn't sweating or breathing hard as he stepped back and drew that beam up and down her torso, frowning as he took in the snug mermaid styling and ankle-length hem. Then, he removed some kind of massive knife. At least, it looked massive to her, with a steel blade that gleamed in the focused light.

"Do me a favor and hold still."

"What—"

A quick flick of his hand, and he had slit down one side, the skin on her thigh showing through the opening. A scrunch of the fabric and a few passes of that blade, and he'd cut off the bottom half — just above her knees. What now looked more like a hooker outfit than an evening gown.

Kennedy stared at him as he bunched up the silky remnants and tossed them in a box on one of the shelves, obviously hiding the scraps from view.

He arched a brow when he met her gaze. “What?”

“I...”

Speechless. That's what she was. Not that she cared more about the dress than escaping in one piece but... He could have at least cut along the seam. Maybe taken off less so she could have savaged... something.

Instead, he merely shrugged. “Sorry, but—”

“Don't. Just, get us out of here.”

“I haven't heard those assholes move on, yet, so we still have a couple of minutes.” He stepped in front of her when she tried to push past him. “I can get you another dress.”

“It's not about the dress, Ryder, though you could have at least taken a few extra seconds to do a decent job, instead of going all *Edward Scissor Hands* on it. It's more that you didn't even bother to ask if I thought I could move effectively in it, which I could have. Not the first time I've run in clothes like this. But I would have let you cut it, regardless, if you were concerned it would be the reason we died.” Kennedy held out her shoes. “Do you want to chop up my Louboutins, next? Or can I carry them in case I want to spike you in the head, later?”

Those brows furrowed, creating lines above his infuriatingly handsome face. “You were the one who wanted to get out of here, fast.”

“And yet, we're still talking.” She waved off any further reply. “Am I suitably dressed to escape, now?”

“Barely. That material could still bind, but asking you to run in a bra and what's likely a thong probably won't win me

any favors.” He nodded at her feet. “I don’t suppose you’re hiding socks someplace.”

“Stuffed my bra before I left.” She resisted the urge to stab him, now, instead of waiting. “Of course, I don’t have socks. I didn’t plan on needing them. And before you start, I know... You guys were right. I was wrong. I never should have thought the museum security could handle everything, and I owe Isabella for pulling a save out of her ass by arranging you all to work tonight, last minute. And I can run just fine in bare feet.”

“This isn’t your fault, and barefoot is fine until you step on something sharp and slice your foot open. But, it’s better than breaking both your ankles.”

“Do you even have any female friends? Because most girls learn to run in heels by the time they’re twelve. But I agree. They’re a bit high for sprinting, and they’ll make too much noise. Which is why I’d taken them off, to begin with.”

“And here, I thought Isabella was stubborn.”

Kennedy simply smiled sweetly at him, aware it would irk him, then waved toward the door. Ryder didn’t seem fazed by her silence, focusing on the task. He held up his hand, cocking his head side to side for a few moments before slowly easing open the door. He didn’t speak, just poked his head out, keeping his other hand raised until she wondered if he’d fallen asleep. Maybe gotten killed without falling to the floor, before he finally opened the door wider — looked back at her across his shoulder.

He gave her a hardened stare, then flicked off his light, exchanging it for a massive gun before grabbing her hand a moment later. “Stick to my ass like glue. And if anyone starts shooting, drop.”

CHAPTER 3



RYDER WAS GOING to kill Mason. Stab him through the heart he'd given to Isabella because if his friend hadn't fallen for her, Ryder wouldn't be standing here feeling oddly guilty for slicing up Kennedy's dress when he knew it was the right move. What might save her from getting hurt once they made a run for it.

Of course, if Mason wasn't madly in love with Kennedy's best friend, she'd likely be trying to slink down the damn hallway — alone — in a dress that wouldn't allow her to take more than small, jerking steps.

And she might not make it out of the museum alive.

She would. Ryder would see to that. Whatever it took, whatever the personal cost, he'd ensure she lived to curse his name. But that didn't ease the bunching between his shoulder blades. Or stop the riotous clench of his stomach at the thought that he might have just blown any chance he had of actually asking her out on a date.

Not that he knew where that thought had come from. He hadn't been lying to his buddy, earlier. Everything Ryder had learned about Kennedy Sinclair suggested they weren't a match. That any kind of relationship would require too much compromise, to the point neither of them would be happy.

But, he'd really only been around her at events or gatherings — occasions that required her to wear the same mask, as Mason had phrased it. Until now...

Whether it was how strong she was in the face of imminent danger or the fact his jaw still ached from where she'd punched him, he wasn't sure. But somewhere between the lights going out and him shining his flashlight on her face inside that storage room, something had changed.

Not that he liked it. He had a job to do, and getting even incrementally distracted was a death sentence. Just like her dress had been. Though, he couldn't deny she had a point. He *could* have taken a few extra moments to slice the seam. And he *could* have cut it slightly longer and still enabled her to run. Maybe allowed her to hem the damn thing later, but...

That's not how he functioned. Clothing only mattered if it hindered the job, and hers had.

He pushed away the annoying thoughts. Nothing had changed. Sure, she hit like her *Rocky* comment, southpaw and all, but part of that was likely the adrenaline spike. Flight or fight, and damn, she'd fought.

He smiled, then schooled his features as he scanned the hallway one more time before darting out and up the corridor. Kennedy's hand in his right. His Sig in his left. Despite what he'd said, he didn't immediately break into a sprint. More of a fast walk — what allowed him to fully gauge the situation. Once he was confident there weren't more men hiding in any of the doorways, he upped the speed until they were quickly closing in on the stairwell.

Kennedy maintained his pace. Not that he'd expected to have to drag her or slow down, but she didn't even seem to be working. Nice steady breathing. Confident strides. Almost as if this wasn't the first time she'd been in a dangerous situation and lived to tell about it.

He'd have to ask her, later. See if he could bridge the gap, just a bit. Even if they weren't couple material, they were destined to spend a lot of time together. Better he make it as civil as possible. Which wasn't what he should be thinking about while running down a dark corridor with armed men in the area.

Reaching the stairs without having to shove her to the floor to avoid getting shot was encouraging. Opening the door and not having a group of men jump out at him, even more so. He ushered her in, keeping her pressed against the wall as he scanned the staircase. Not that he could see much with only another small exit sign providing any glow. But enough he was confident he'd notice any silhouettes hiding amidst the shadows. Maybe hear a rough breath or hushed curse when the men realized they weren't alone.

Hearing nothing but the whisper of air feathering across his neck as Kennedy waited behind him, eased a bit of the tension. That he might be able to get her to safety without having to engage more forces. Put her at risk.

Ryder motioned to the stairs. "We'll take them slowly. If anyone tries to follow us..."

She nodded. "I let you do the heavy lifting. I know the drill."

"Stay close."

Then, he was off. Climbing the steps, keeping his body between hers and the inner railing. Blocking any possible shot, not that he thought he'd missed any tangos. But he'd plan for it, just the same.

Kennedy moved quickly and quietly, her bare feet silent against the vinyl flooring. If the cold surface bothered her, she wasn't letting it show. In fact, she was strangely detached.

She'd definitely faced danger before. It was evident in the line of her back. How she was scanning the area as much as he was — as if her head was on a swivel. Not to mention the way she kept herself tight to the wall — reduced the portion of her body that could be used as a target. Not something people often considered when their adrenaline was pumping — their focus narrowed to escaping the situation as fast as possible — unless they'd trained for it.

Or survived it.

Ryder mulled over the thought as they neared the first floor, an eerie silence blanketing the space. The kind that often

preceded a coordinated attack. And with the EMP frying his radio, he had no way of contacting Mason — uncovering if there were more forces swarming the auction room or if they were only focused on the basement level.

His team could handle it. But the last thing he needed was to pop out in the midst of a firefight. Bullets were unpredictable, and all it took was one crazy ricochet, and Kennedy could get hit.

Until the door below them bounced open, shouts and shots filling the stairwell.

No other choice but to make a run for it. Do his best to keep her body hidden behind his. Having a vest would have been nice, but his crew had needed to blend in, and wearing Kevlar would have made that impossible.

A mistake he wouldn't make next time.

Ryder fired several rounds down the stairs, then grabbed the door. Kennedy must have read his mind because she was already shifting over — positioning herself so he could dart out, first. Cover her. Either an excellent guess, or she'd picked up on some of their practices when Mason had been shadowing Isabella. How the bodyguard always went out ahead. Not that he was her bodyguard, but he was the guy with the gun. The one who'd make the ugly choices — hell the sacrifices — if needed.

He reeled on the door, then popped out, clearing the space before booking it over to the far side of the room. They'd made it halfway across when three assholes dressed in that same black garb came charging around the corner, guns drawn. What looked like night vision goggles and body armor. Ryder didn't slow down, simply raised his left hand and fired.

Two shots, two hits, before the third guy was firing back. Barely missing them as bullets pinged off the floor, then the pillar Ryder ducked behind, keeping Kennedy off to the side. Out of the bastard's sight line. Not that the column provided much cover, but Ryder would take what he could get.

He shuffled her over, readying his next shot when the group from the basement barreled out of the stairwell and into the room. Fanning out in each direction. What looked like a strategic formation, and not what he'd expect from a bunch of thieves.

This was more than a routine burglary.

That was all he needed to get them moving, again. One or two he could handle — would have stood his ground until he'd eliminated them. Six was a bit zealous when they had rifles, and he was already nearing the end of his first magazine for his Sig.

A couple trigger pulls to scatter their ranks, and Ryder was running — Kennedy keeping stride beside him. They reached the far side and went straight out through a set of patio doors. No worrying if there were other forces. If he might get hit covering her. He'd take the chance when staying inside was riskier.

She stumbled a step, but regained her balance on her next stride, following him across the patio. They made it to the edge of the open area before any of the men had reached the doors — were pouring out onto the concrete. Seeing Mason pop up from behind some bushes had Ryder altering his plan, again — heading for his buddy as Cruz peeked out from the other side. Both flanked perfectly to take out any resistance while giving Ryder maximum coverage.

Two more steps and a dive, and he had Kennedy safely behind a fountain at the end of the patio, her body trapped between the marble and him — no way for her to sustain a lethal hit. He whistled to indicate he was clear, then grinned when his buddies went to work, shouting out warnings, then what sounded like a few strategic shots. The entire ordeal lasted about thirty seconds before everything went silent, the lingering echo of gunfire fading into nothing.

Kennedy gave him a light shove, but Ryder shook his head, motioning for her to stay hidden while he chanced a quick look over the ledge. Three of the men were down, what he assumed was blood splattered across the door and patio. He

didn't know if the men were dead or injured, but Mason and Cruz were already securing them. Disposing of their weapons.

Ryder waited until he was certain there weren't any other tangos hiding in the bushes, then eased away, helping Kennedy to her feet. Her knees were scraped, and her hair had fallen loose from the messy bun she'd been wearing, but she seemed unharmed. No gunshot wounds or gaping lacerations. Nothing a shower and some antiseptic wipes wouldn't fix.

He smiled, wondering how she somehow looked sexier with her hair poking out in every direction, and her makeup smudged. "Well, that was interesting."

She snorted. "Just another routine Sinclair charity event. I'm sure the extra dose of fear was well-received."

"Look at it this way... their hearts got a workout." He gave her a once-over. "You okay? You look fine..."

"Fine? You think just anyone could pull off this outfit?"

"Again, I'm sorry about the dress, but I was referring to your actual well-being. Any injuries I don't see?"

"Other than the fatal hit to my pride, I'm good. Though, I'll be wearing flats for a while, just in case. Barefoot wasn't quite as fun as I imagined."

He frowned, glancing at her feet before muttering a hushed curse. "Shit, you're bleeding."

Kennedy held up one hand. "Just a cut. I clipped the metal lip when we ran onto the patio. A bit of skin adhesive, and it'll be—"

"Fine? Is that what you were going to say, because with how it's bleeding, I'm thinking you'll need stitches."

"Trust me... Adhesive will do the trick. And I know, for a fact, my mom has her to-go bag stashed in the office. I'll take care of it."

"Oh, so you're a doctor, now, too? Sit." He removed the decorative pocket square from his jacket, impressed it hadn't gotten lost along the way, then held it out to her. "Use this and put some pressure on it. I'll go get your mother and her bag."

Kennedy scoffed, lifting her foot against the fountain just enough to tie the material around it. “I don’t need a doctor to treat a cut. This isn’t the first time I’ve hurt myself, Ryder, and it won’t be the last. Let my mom make her way through the patrons. I know her... she’ll be in prime triage mode, whether anyone got hurt, or not. It’s best to just let her do her thing.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but you bleeding would be part of this ‘triage’ mode.”

“Ryder...”

She inched closer, and god, how did she still smell so good? Like roses, with a hint of ocean. And why hadn’t he picked up on it before? Like when he’d pinned her to the door in the storage room.

Her hand landed on his chest, and he swore it struck him like an electric shock. Sent his heart racing when it had been steady just moments before. “I appreciate your concern. Really, but—”

“No buts. It’s still my show until we’re convinced it’s over, and there aren’t any more assholes hiding in the shadows waiting to jump you the moment you walk away.”

Had he emphasized the words, “jump you”? Because he swore they’d taken on a different meaning than he’d intended as soon as they’d slipped free.

She laughed, and damn the sound... like music drifting through the air. “Isabella’s right. You guys really do take paranoia to a whole new level.”

“Which is the reason you’re up here and not unconscious in that storage room.” He leaned in closer. “Or worse.”

Some of the color drained from her face as she glanced over her shoulder at the patio doors. Which only made that guilt from earlier resurface.

He gently cupped her elbow, shaking his head when she snapped hers back toward him, those gorgeous hazel eyes wide. “And that came out all wrong. Just... humor me, okay? I’d hate to have to tell Isabella you got hurt because I was stupid.”

Kennedy snorted, that deer-look slowly fading. “How about a compromise? You can walk with me while I go get a bandage. And if any creep jumps out of the shadows, you can go all *Frank Farmer* on them.”

Ryder sighed. “First a *Rocky* reference, and now a *Bodyguard* one? Sweetheart, you need to embrace the new millennium.”

“The last *Rocky* movie came out in ‘06, not counting the *Creed* ones.”

“Always a comeback.”

“Only when I have something to prove. And since when do you call me ‘sweetheart’?”

“Since you called me *Frank Farmer*. You’re as bad as Mason. You could have at least gone with *Bryan Mills*.”

“You lack the accent, and I don’t really know what your particular set of skills are, now, do I?”

Had she intended that comment to sound sexual? Because it had sounded sexual to him, especially with her breath all raspy. Her finger drawing a line down his chest as she stood there, staring up at him.

Kennedy smiled, allowing her hand to linger against his abdomen as she cocked her head to the side. “So, Ryder, do we have a deal?”

CHAPTER 4



KENNEDY STARED up at Ryder and thought her heart might stop. That, or it would break her ribs with how hard it was pounding. Not from the chase, or even the gunfire. It was Ryder. Ex-soldier, and the guy who'd saved her life.

God, how had the night taken such an unexpected twist? One minute, she'd been happily living her life, the next, she was thinking about all the ways she wanted to taste that sarcastic mouth of his.

The adrenaline. That's what this was from. Coupled with the endorphins from surviving a traumatic event. The high of living. At least, she hoped that's what this was because the other option was terrifying.

That she was genuinely attracted to her Ryder Callahan. Something she feared she'd been lying to herself about for far too long.

Not that the man wasn't gorgeous. He was. Especially, now, with his hair all messed up, a healthy flush on his skin from the chase. His eyes were darker, leaning more toward that steel shade, and there was the part where she'd seen him in action. It was definitely an aphrodisiac she hadn't expected.

But the last thing Kennedy needed was to fall for a guy who seemed so emotionally distant. Sure, he was always civil and pleasant — with a quick wit and a great smile — but he never got too personal. Never asked the kind of questions that led to any kind of a deeper connection. And after spending thirty-six years avoiding any serious relationships — focusing

on her job and her parents' foundation — she wasn't scared to admit, she was finally ready.

Maybe not today, but sometime in the near future. Something tonight had put into perspective. Or, maybe it was how she'd reconnected with Isabella all those months ago. Finally having someone she could call a best friend. And, with Isabella married and pregnant, Kennedy had taken a cold, hard look at her own life.

And she'd realized she'd been running. She just wasn't sure what she'd been running from.

Love, she supposed. And all the strings that came with it. But that stopped. Now.

Ryder smiled. "Mostly... Just one minor change in the arrangement." He bent over and scooped her up, tugging her close. "You're not walking on that foot and leaving a bloody trail. Not on my watch."

Kennedy inhaled. How had she not considered he'd carry her? That he'd be fine with her limping her way across the entire museum when he'd balked at her insisting she could tend to the wound by herself. That he wasn't finished playing the role of her protector. "Ryder..."

"Seriously. It's bad enough it's going to keep bleeding. God knows what's on the floor. If it were life and death, sure. But it's not."

He made his way over to Mason, giving his buddy what looked like a death glare when Mason grinned way too smugly at how Ryder was holding her. As if there was some kind of inside joke only they shared. "Kennedy cut her foot but doesn't want to wait for her mom to fix it. Is the building clear?"

Mason simply stood there, still smiling. "Thankfully, all the action was contained to the rear section of the museum, away from where we'd corralled the other guests. The reason Cruz and I were able to dart outside when we saw you charge out of the stairwell. Looks like you owe us, buddy."

“Cruz can join us on the ice, next week, and try to land a shot to my face, as compensation, too. So, no one else got hurt?”

“A few cases of stress-induced hyperventilation, and a couple of folks fainted when they heard gunshots — might have bumped their heads — but we’ve got two doctors in attendance. Some guy named Paxton was helping Dr. Sinclair work through the crowd. They seem to have everything under control.” Mason nodded at Kennedy. “Your mom’s pretty impressive. Ice cold under pressure.”

Kennedy grinned. “She has a lot of experience dealing with stress. She was a trauma surgeon for a few years before deciding one specialty wasn’t enough and underwent another one in obstetrics. You should see her deal with fetal emergencies in a canvass tent in the middle of Kenya.”

Mason winced. “I think I’ll wait until *after* Isabella has the baby before asking your mom to share any war stories.” He focused on Ryder. “And before you think I got distracted and didn’t answer your question, Kent and Asher have cleared the remaining exhibits and offices, but we’re not allowing anyone to leave until after the police have gotten names — confirmed everyone’s who they say they are.”

“You’re thinking inside job.”

“No way this was a random burglary. They were way too coordinated. My guess is, they’ve been planning it ever since the charity event was booked, and they realized they’d have a group of wealthy socialites all in the same room. They would have made a killing...” Mason looked at her. “No pun intended.”

She grunted, squirming just enough Ryder gave her a hard stare, before she blew out an exasperated breath, begrudgingly relaxing against him. “The pun was absolutely intended, and I already apologized to Ryder for my oversight.”

“Technically, you just said we were right, and you were wrong.” Ryder chuckled at her irritated huff. “But you’re forgiven. Now, we need to get that foot bandaged before you bleed out.”

“I won’t bleed out from a cut on my foot. It’s not like I nicked my femoral artery. Sheesh, you’d think I’ve never been hurt before. But, carry on.” She flashed him that same sweet smile she’d given him in the storage room. The one she knew clearly conveyed she thought he was being an ass. “Pun definitely intended.”

“You are something else.”

Ryder struck off, giving her a quick side eye when she wrapped one arm around his neck, her head next to his. She didn’t speak, afraid her voice would sound lower. Raspier. It was bad enough her traitorous heart was messing with her brain. She didn’t need Ryder to notice that the flush on her skin had nothing to do with the near-death experience and everything to do with having him carry her.

Was he tired? Did he regret offering when the office was clear across the other side of the museum? Because he didn’t seem winded. Wasn’t constantly jostling her as if his arms were cramping or his back hurting. In fact, he walked as if he was carrying a kid or some groceries, not a grown-ass woman who’d punched him in the face twenty minutes, ago.

Had it really only been twenty minutes? Because it felt like hours had passed. Hell, a year, since she’d been hiding behind that door, praying the monsters in the hallway kept moving.

Maybe she’d hit her head? Sustained a concussion. Something logical to explain how she’d gone from thinking the guy was an ass to admiring how nice his was.

Ryder stopped at the office door, juggling her just enough to open it without putting her down, then walked inside. He placed her on one of the chairs, then grabbed the big black bag off the floor. “I assume this is your mother’s medical bag?”

“Yes. And the fact it’s still here means Mason was right, and she didn’t think anyone needed any advanced kind of treatment. Or maybe that jackass, Paxton, had his medical bag handy. Most of the people who’ve volunteered with the foundation get used to carrying one.”

“Jackass, huh? Sounds like you don’t particularly like this Paxton, guy.”

She shrugged, rummaging through the medical bag. “He shows his face in Kenya a few times a year for the foundation, and he’s a decent ER doc, but he’s definitely got a bit of a god complex. Looks down on people, which isn’t the best trait when you’re dealing with folks who often travel for days just to see a doctor.”

“Maybe he simply needs time to get comfortable around people.” Ryder closed the short distance between them, watching her as she removed some supplies then started treating the wound. “Call me crazy, but it looks as if you’ve done that before.”

She laughed at the thought. He’d obviously never spent any time with her mother, or he’d know she’d insisted Kennedy was more than equipped to handle any medical emergency. What her mother called “preparedness training” but equated to nothing short of paramedic status in Kennedy’s books. But Jacklyn Sinclair meant well, and Kennedy couldn’t argue with her mother’s rigorous training, now. “You could say that.”

She tilted her head to the side, trying to read his expression. He’d never come out and asked her what she did for a living. She’d assume Isabella had filled in any details, since her friend hung out with him and Mason, but maybe Ryder hadn’t been interested. Had jumped to conclusions that fit with what he’d observed. “Surely, you don’t think all I do is prance around in designer clothes and use my cleavage to garner donations?”

He froze. Just like that. Smiling down at her one moment, then everything tensing the next. The exact opposite to how he’d been during their escape. What was clearly his area of expertise.

Shit. She knew that look, and it dropped the bottom out of her stomach. “Guess you do.”

“I never thought you pranced.” He groaned as soon as the words slipped free. “Kennedy—”

“Don’t. If there’s one trait I appreciate, it’s honesty.” She finished bandaging the cut, then stood, wincing when her right foot touched the floor. “And that’s about all you’ve got going for you, right now.”

Ryder pressed his lips together until the rosy color blanched white. “I deserve that remark.”

He did, but he was also the reason she was still breathing. Still able to feel as if someone had sucker punched her in the stomach. “Except for the part where you saved my life.”

“Just doing my job.”

And there it was. The ugly truth she hadn’t wanted to hear, just yet. Where she was just a job to him. Which, of course, she was. It had been foolish of her to think it was anything else. The start of something... special.

That maybe she was special.

She nodded, testing out her foot, again, as she took a step. “Right, your job.”

She drew herself up, pushing her shoulders back as she held her head high, giving him a fake smile. “Regardless, thank you. You didn’t have to come after me, and you didn’t have to play the role of bodyguard. And yes, I noticed how you kept yourself between me and any threat. If your crew requires any kind of recommendation, just let me know. I’d be happy to pass it around the socialite circle. And I’ll be sure to employ more security for future events. Avoid any repeats of tonight.”

She headed for the door, stumbling to a stop when he stepped in front of her. “Is there something else I can do for you?”

A deep flush crept along his cheeks, and for one shining moment, she thought she might have been wrong.

Then, he pulled back, the same way he’d done every other time they’d been alone. “You need to go over what you saw and heard with the team before any memories slip away. Give a statement to the cops.”

Her shoulders drooped, all the energy she'd had a minute ago, fading. As if someone had flicked a switch. What she assumed was the result of the adrenaline dump. While she knew he was right, all she wanted to do was crawl into her bed — pretend tonight never happened. Or, at least, the part where she'd gone temporarily insane and admitted her feelings for the big jerk standing in front of her. Even if it was only to herself.

She pushed away the jolt of disappointment. The icy cold sluice of rejection as it slithered along her skin. “Of course. I’ll do that, now.”

“I’ll walk you over.”

He’d walk her over? Was he the one who’d gone insane or was he just a masochist? Because she was certain things couldn’t get more awkward between them if they tried. “Pretty sure you already checked for more bad guys when you insisted on carrying me here. Unless you think you missed something.”

Ryder chuckled. “Clever... you got to question my competence without actually saying the words. I’m impressed. But I’m still on the clock, which means you’re stuck with me until they let you go home.”

“Lucky me. Can I walk, this time, or...”

“Thinking it’ll be more limping than walking, but...”

He waved at the door, still grinning when she glared at him before heading out. She did her best not to limp, but the damn slice had been much deeper than she’d initially thought, and it was obvious that she’d bruised the area by running across the concrete without any cushioning.

He tsked, stopping her before scooping her up. He shook his head when she gasped, the firm press of his mouth daring her to challenge him. “You’re limping. Really limping, which means it was worse than you let on. You can curse me all you want, but the less pressure you put on that wound, the faster it might heal.”

Kennedy wasn’t sure what irked her more. That he was carrying her — again — or that he was right? Both, she

supposed, though having him pressed against her definitely took precedence. And how did the guy still smell like pine trees and spicy musk after racing through the museum, eliminating a bunch of armed men?

Just her luck, she probably smelled like a mixture of fear and bad decisions.

Isabella inhaled when they came around the corner, tapping Mason's arm, then darting over. She waited until Ryder had placed Kennedy on her feet before tugging her into a firm embrace. "Christ, what happened? Are you okay? Why was Ryder carrying you? Should I get your mom?"

Kennedy laughed, gently easing back. "Is pelting me with questions a nervous thing or a pregnancy thing?"

Isabella hitched one hip out to the side. "You scared me half to death. This is as calm as it gets."

"And your restraint is noted. To answer your questions... nothing serious, fine, because he's an ass, and no."

"I agree Ryder can be an ass, but that bandage on your foot suggests that wasn't why he was carrying you. Honestly? Should I get your mom?"

"So she can undo all my hard work, nod and say, good job, then wrap it back up? I'm fine. Just a cut, and before you ask another dozen questions... it only hurts because I bruised it after I sliced it open. It'll be better by morning."

"Or it'll be all swollen and infected, and your mother will be extra snarky that you didn't ask her to look at it, tonight." Isabella waved her hand. "Fine. You took care of your booboo, all by yourself. Now, the bigger question is... what the hell happened to your dress? It looks..."

"Like I'm off to meet my *pimp* and give him his share of my nightly earnings?" Kennedy thumbed at Ryder. "My knight was concerned I couldn't run."

"So he butchered it?" Isabella glared at Ryder. "You couldn't have cut it along the seam? Chopped it off below her knees so she could salvage it?"

Ryder sighed, glancing at Mason when the man moved in beside Isabella. “Time was a luxury we didn’t have. And I already told Kennedy, I’d buy her a new one.”

Isabella scoffed. “You’re going to buy her a limited-edition Gucci dress? Do you have any idea how much they cost?”

He frowned. “It’s a dress. How expensive can it be?”

Kennedy stopped Isabella from answering by stepping between her and Ryder. The last thing she needed was having Isabella create future excuses as to why Kennedy and Ryder had to be in the same room together. “It’s fine. As I recall, you mentioned something about how it didn’t really go with my eyes.”

“I didn’t...” Isabella let her voice fade when Kennedy turned toward her, eyes wide as she alternated her gaze between Isabella and Ryder. “Right. That pewter shade really doesn’t bring out the rich amber tones.”

Kennedy turned back toward him. “See? No replacement needed. Thanks, again. Now, I believe I’m supposed to talk to you, Mason? Or the cops?”

Mason waved it off. “You look exhausted. And we’ve already told the police you’re not a suspect. They said you could give them your statement tomorrow. The only pressing question I need to ask you before you head home is whether you heard or saw anything vital.”

“Nothing. They didn’t say or do anything other than quickly look in the room. Thankfully, it only had packing supplies in it, which was pretty obvious, so they didn’t waste any time searching it. Then, Ryder showed up, and he knows the rest.”

Mason nodded, then held out his phone, slowly flicking through a bunch of images of the men she assumed were behind the burglary attempt. “So, do you recognize any of them?”

She inhaled. “Are they all... dead?”

“Mostly just injured, but the couple that were still conscious aren’t talking. So, none of them look familiar?”

She scrutinized each photo. “Not really. Should they?”

“Probably not, but it doesn’t hurt to double check. Sometimes the brain picks up on cues we don’t think about immediately.”

She nodded, when the voices from the hallway echoed inside her head. “Wait. I remember thinking it was odd that they weren’t speaking English.”

“So, they did talk to you?”

“No. I only heard garbled murmurs through the door, but enough to recognize it was a different language.” She sighed. “I can’t really place it, right now. Maybe once I mull it over, I might know what dialect I thought it was. It all just happened so fast, and while I don’t want to admit it, I was a bit freaked out.”

Isabella grabbed her hand. “Of course, you were freaked out. Everyone was freaked out. I’m just glad you’re okay...” She looked at Kennedy’s foot. “Well, mostly.”

“You’re as bad as Ryder. I’m fine. But, I am tired. Still jet lagged from the trip back, so... if that’s all you need, I’d like to go home. Shower. Maybe down a dozen Jell-O shots as I reconsider my life choices.”

Isabella gave her a swat. “You just mentioned the Jell-O to make me jealous.”

“Guilty. So...”

Mason shook his head. “Women. And Ryder can drive you home.”

Kennedy wasn’t sure which of their jaws dropped open faster, hers or Ryder’s. He gave his buddy a hard glare just as Kennedy regained her composure — cleared her throat.

“I’m sorry, but did you say *Ryder* was going to drive me home?”

Mason crossed his arms over his chest, looking every inch the team’s stoic leader. “Your charity event was just targeted by a group of disturbingly organized assailants. We need to err on the side of caution, in case this was a personal attack on the

Sinclair Foundation, and not some bungled burglary. And since you're the face of said foundation..."

"Actually, my mother's the official spokesperson. Most people don't even know who I am."

"And I've got Kent and Asher seeing your parents home, too. Any other excuses you want to throw at me?"

"I don't need a babysitter."

"Good, because Ryder is shit with babies." Mason avoided the swing Ryder aimed at his head. "But he's exceptional at his job. It's just for tonight. Besides, your ride already left."

Kennedy clenched her jaw, praying her teeth didn't crack from the strain. "This is punishment because I didn't hire you last week."

"You should have hired a crew months ago, when you first organized the event. You're just lucky our boss, Jake Cogburn, doesn't mind me making some executive calls, last minute. And Ryder's not that annoying that I'd call him punishment." Mason turned to Ryder. "Check out her place, first, before you leave. Just to be safe."

Ryder gave Mason a shove. "Didn't you just say I was exceptional at my job? I know what to do, jackass. And she's right. This *is* punishment."

He turned to Kennedy, but she crossed her arms, remembering all the reasons she'd wanted to spike him in the head with one of her stilettos, earlier. "I assume you'd prefer to limp to the car."

It wasn't a question, and he merely waved toward the door when she glared at him. Kennedy focused on the exit — on the rain now falling in sheets beyond the glass. How a distant rumble of thunder echoed the roiling sensation in her stomach. On anything but how this was going to be the longest twenty minutes of her life.

CHAPTER 5



RYDER PRIDED himself on his ability to read people. Know if they were lying by the shift in their eyes. How they held his gaze. Which tactic would garner him the best outcome. And he knew how to be charming, when needed. When to say what was expected instead of the first thing that popped into his head.

Why all those traits had vanished while he'd been inside the office, watching Kennedy bandage her foot, was a fucking mystery. One worthy of *Sherlock Holmes* because in the space of five minutes, he'd not only alienated her, he'd insulted her.

Hurt her, if he was being honest.

Not physically. But he'd definitely lashed out at her emotional well-being.

I never thought you pranced?

Had he actually said those words out loud? To her face? Because he couldn't believe it. Was still hoping it had been some kind of weird waking dream, and he was, just now, coming out of it.

The fact she'd completely distanced herself inside his truck while being only a foot away was proof that he'd said every asinine word.

He hadn't meant to let that slip. Had meant to say something witty and charming — have her laughing and smiling. Something that might open an opportunity to suggest they grab some coffee. Or maybe a late-night snack. Instead,

he'd been exactly what Isabella and Kennedy had claimed — an ass.

The fact Mason had gotten his assumption wrong was just Ryder's dumb luck because he was absolutely annoying enough to be classified as punishment.

Having Cruz meet them at Ryder's vehicle had only heightened the already tense atmosphere when the guy had smiled at the steady downpour of rain. How lightning forked across the sky as thunder rumbled in the distance. Cruz hadn't actually said the words, "I told you so," but Ryder had heard them echo inside his head, just the same.

Which translated into the night being a complete bust, other than where he'd prevented Kennedy from getting seriously hurt. He'd handed Cruz the fifty bucks he'd lost in their bet, then helped Kennedy into the passenger side, where she was currently fuming. Probably plotting his murder, and he deserved it.

Some corny slow song cut through the silence on the radio, the sappy lyrics highlighting every mistake he'd made since walking into the museum. How the situation wouldn't fix itself if he didn't do something to bridge the giant chasm he'd forged between them.

Ryder reached over and turned down the music, glancing at Kennedy when she snapped her head toward him. Lips pursed tight. Color high on her cheekbones.

He'd been right about her fuming.

He took a breath, focusing on the road as it appeared and disappeared amidst the swipe of the wipers. "I'm sorry."

Not exactly the full apology she deserved — how he hadn't meant to insult her, and that he thought she was talented and smart and so fucking sexy he couldn't think straight — but at least it was a start. The first plank in that bridge he needed to rebuild.

Kennedy arched a brow, meeting his gaze for a moment before staring out her window. "For the seventies music? It's

okay, I suppose someone has to embrace that era. Though, the least you could do is play some *Eagles* or *James Taylor*.”

“Not about the music, though I happen to enjoy the classics.”

“*Carry on Wayward Son* is a classic. *Hotel California* is a classic.” She gave him a pointed glare. “*You Light Up My Life* is something else.”

“Agreed, and it’s not like I made a mixed tape for us to listen to. It’s a radio station.” He sighed when she rolled her eyes. “None of which is the point of this conversation. I meant, back in the office. I didn’t mean to insult you. That wasn’t my intention.”

She shrugged, but not before he saw a slight quiver in her chin. How she pursed her lips even harder together as if holding herself back. “Forget it.”

“That’s a bit hard to do when you’re obviously pissed.”

She clenched her jaw, then twisted to face him. “Just because you seem to think my job essentially matches my new fashion statement, doesn’t imply I’m pissed.”

“I never said you were a hooker.”

“No, you just think I prance around in sparkly outfits and use my body to make money.” She inhaled. “Oops, my bad. You don’t think I *prance*.”

He’d been wrong. She wasn’t pissed. She was whatever was beyond that. Beyond hurt.

Ryder took a deep breath, reminding himself not to make the situation worse. “I meant that there’s nothing wrong with using your attributes for the greater good.”

Fucked. That’s what he was, and it wasn’t the good kind. Of all the things to say...

Kennedy laughed. “You might want to stop talking, now, Ryder. I’m a big girl. I can fake being civil when we’re around each other. Which I’m sure we can minimize if we try, really hard.”

“I don’t want you to fake...” Nope, he wasn’t going there. Not tonight when his brain had somehow disconnected from his mouth. “Your question just caught me off-guard. Isabella hasn’t really mentioned what you do, and I don’t have a clue what a charity organizer does.”

“You think I’m an event coordinator? Not that there’s anything wrong with that, other than it’s a thankless job. Nothing ever goes according to plan, and it’s exhausting having to smile when you’d really rather just punch someone in the face. But after you commented on how I’d bandaged my foot, and with my mom being a doctor, I thought you’d go with paramedic or something. All of which beats you thinking I basically sell my body for charity money.”

“Again, I didn’t say—”

“Save it.” She looked at him as if he’d grown another head. “Yes, I organize events for the Sinclair Foundation. I also research project proposals and vote on how funds are distributed. That’s what having a private operating foundation is all about. But I don’t get paid for any of that.”

Her words hit him like a physical blow. God, he really *was* an ass.

“You volunteer all the time it takes to help your family run the foundation?”

“Sorry if that doesn’t fit with all the assumptions about me you’ve concocted in your head.”

“I haven’t—”

“You had me pegged from the moment you first saw me. I know Isabella told you we met doing beauty pageants together when we were young, not that pageants were a choice or something I enjoyed. But knowing that, coupled with my family’s social status, is all you needed to conclude that I’m just another rich girl who skims money off her parents’ charitable organization so I can live life like a princess.” She arched her brow, again. “Am I close?”

Kennedy looked away. “You don’t have to answer. I know I’m right. Which is why I’ll say it, again. Forget it.”

“I don’t want to forget it, and that’s not what I thought. Though, I’ll admit, I assumed you worked for the Sinclair Foundation.”

“I do. Just not doing any of those jobs.”

“Okay, I’ll bite. What, exactly, do you do for them?”

“I design all the infrastructure we build and maintain overseas, as well as a few projects locally.”

Was his mouth hanging open? Was he drooling? Because of all the vocations he’d thought she’d state, architect hadn’t made the list.

Kennedy knocked his arm. “You’re freaking me out. Close your mouth, and stop looking at me like I just told you where I’ve hidden all the bodies.”

Ryder snapped his mouth shut, resisting the urge to wipe it — check for that drool he’d been worried about. Then, he sighed, staring out at the road for a moment until he stopped at a red light.

He gazed over at her, only this time, he looked beneath the makeup and flashy clothes. Beyond the wealthy family stereotype and saw her — Kennedy Sinclair. And damn, she was stunning. Not because of her symmetrical features. The way her eyes gleamed in the glow from the streetlights. It was something deeper. Something pure.

He really needed to find a way to apologize. And not some token words to smooth things over enough they could be together in the same room without it exploding into an argument.

He needed her to believe him.

To give him another chance.

He got the truck moving once the light changed, checked his mirrors for the fortieth time since he’d left the museum, noting what cars were tagging along behind them, then gave her a quick side eye. “So, you’ve got bodies buried somewhere.”

She smiled, and his chest closed in tight — made it hard to breathe. To focus on anything other than the way her eyes crinkled, or the hint of white showing between her lips. “Don’t worry. I only kill the men who are worth dirtying my shovel.”

“I see.” He turned at the next intersection, then gathered his courage. “Maybe, we can start over. Hi, I’m Ryder. The guy who promises not to be an ass if you give him another chance.”

Kennedy stared at his outstretched hand before cautiously shaking it. “Kennedy, and that sounds like a pretty tall order.”

He laughed, and damn it felt good. “Glad you think so highly of me.”

“At least, I never implied you were a hooker.”

“Touché. So, you’re an architect, huh? I honestly didn’t see that coming.” He groaned at how her brows furrowed. “Not that you couldn’t be an architect, I simply meant—”

“This ‘not being an ass’ thing doesn’t come naturally to you, does it?”

“Apparently, not tonight. Maybe that left hook damaged the part of my brain that kicks in my filter.”

“Oh, so, this is all my fault.”

“It *was* one hell of a hook. Which reminds me, where *did* you learn to fight?”

“You’re changing the topic, so I’ll forget that last comment.”

“And hopefully, it’s working. Is it just boxing, or do you dabble in martial arts, too?”

“Don’t think you’ve fooled me. I have an excellent memory. And I practice kickboxing. I would have landed a round house to your temple, but the dress was too tight.” She leaned in close. “This is the part where you *don’t* remind me I wasn’t dressed for fighting.”

“Thanks for the tip. And I really am sorry about the dress. It was nice before I...”

“Made me look like *Debbie* about to do the museum? And Gucci should be far more than nice, so maybe you did do me a favor.”

“Hardly. Besides, I know Isabella was lying for you. That color goes perfectly with your eyes. Makes the hint of green shine through.”

Kennedy shifted back, giving him a thorough once-over. “Maybe there’s a glimmer of hope for you, yet.”

“Don’t set the bar too low, sweetheart. I’m liable to hang myself.”

Shit. He’d let the endearment slip out before he’d been able to stop it. As if it was natural.

Kennedy cocked her head to the side, still sizing him up before she shrugged. “And that would be a bad thing?”

He laughed, again. “Maybe not as much hope as you first thought.”

“The jury’s still out.”

“Then, I’ll have to find a way to sway them.” He stopped at the next light, checking his mirrors, again, when the same blue sedan darted in behind a white panel van.

Granted, they were traveling on the main thoroughfare through town, but there was something about how the car kept changing position that seemed off.

Kennedy tapped his arm. “Is everything okay? You’ve got that same look as when you shoved me behind that pillar in the museum. Like there’s another threat we should be running from.”

She’d noticed his expressions? While they’d been on the run? In the dark?

He glanced in the mirror, again, then started moving, changing lanes as he drove. “Everything’s fine.”

“Maybe you’re less of an ass and more of a terrible liar. You think we’re being followed, don’t you?” She motioned toward the rear of his truck. “That white panel van’s been with

us since we turned onto North Cascade. Is that the one you're worried about?"

Ryder stared at her, wondering if he really was suffering from brain trauma. "I'm sorry, who are you, and how do you know that van's been with us since the start?"

She simply shrugged. "Let's just say my work has made me very situationally aware. So, the van?"

"The van's not a threat. It's not maintaining any particular vantage point, and the woman driving it has barely looked our way. But that blue sedan behind it... It's staying exactly three cars back, jockeying for position if another vehicle cuts in front."

She nodded, waiting a few moments before scanning the mirrors. "It doesn't have a front license plate."

"Which means they're either driving illegally or they're from out of state. Maybe Kansas or New Mexico."

"Wouldn't they bring more attention to themselves if they had out-of-state plates?"

"If they're a threat, the car's stolen, so the plates don't matter. Hold tight. Let's see how interested they really are. We're going to take the scenic route, for a bit."

Ryder waited at the next light, ignoring the horns blaring behind him until the damn thing turned yellow before peeling off, leaving a spray of water behind him. Two other cars followed before the light changed to red, that blue sedan nearly causing a collision when it barreled through the intersection as the other vehicles started to move.

Kennedy grabbed the handle beside her head, constantly looking in the mirror as Ryder hit the gas, taking the next right. He followed the road as it curved around, taking another right at the last second.

His truck skidded around the corner, fishtailing a few times before he straightened out. More horns blared around him, a few drivers pulling over to the curb as he bared down on them.

He chanced a glance at Kennedy, noting how calm she seemed. Sure, her hand was fisted around the grab bar, and she was focused on the mirror as if it held the secret to life, but she wasn't hunched into a ball. Wasn't rocking in her seat or mumbling incoherently. In fact, she looked as if she was keeping track of whatever passed behind them. Cataloging it, in case he tested her, later.

He was definitely memorizing every plate that popped up — how that damn sedan had caught up. Not directly behind them, but only one car back, now. And there was no mistaking that it was matching his increased speed. Was taking the turns as tight as his truck — slipping on the slick pavement when the driver must have hit the gas a bit early.

Ryder took a moment to toggle through the map on his GPS. While he'd been living in Fool's Gold for a few months, he'd been assigned to a number of operations up in Colorado Springs. The fact he wasn't as familiar with the streets in this section as he should have been, irked the hell out of him. Another oversight he'd correct, once he'd gotten them clear.

He advanced the map, planning out the best route before hitting the accelerator. The truck lurched ahead, shooting out another spray of water as he plowed through a deep puddle, allowing the truck to slide for a moment. The chassis shimmied, taking them close to the curb before the tires caught on the asphalt, surging them forward.

Ryder focused on the road, weaving his way down a series of streets. Wanting concrete proof they were being followed. That the sedan wasn't a by-product of the previous attack — that paranoia Kennedy had mentioned.

Seeing several cars parked on the opposite side of the road up ahead on his left had him changing tactics. Checking both directions, then reefing up on the parking brake as he turned the wheel, spinning them a full one-eighty. The tires locked as the truck rocked to a halt, more water shooting across the road. A quick switch into reverse, a kick at the gas, and he had the truck wedged between two others — had killed the lights. A wave of his hand, and Kennedy had ducked beneath the dash

as he slid back in his seat, sinking enough any oncoming cars wouldn't light up his silhouette. Out him.

He grabbed his phone, then started filming. With any luck, he'd catch an image of the vehicle as it drove by. Maybe got a shot of the rear license plate. Something he could use to identify who was behind the wheel.

Having every other type of car drive past *but* that blue sedan had Ryder questioning his sanity. If he'd truly lost his mind along with his ability to be charming. That he'd been too close to the truth, and Kennedy's punch really had knocked a screw loose.

He kept filming for a few more minutes, then shut it down as he closed his eyes, waiting for Kennedy to say something sarcastic. Which he deserved, especially with all the idiotic shit he'd allowed to slip free tonight.

"Well, I guess whoever was driving wasn't really that into me, after all."

Ryder whipped his head around, chuckling at the easy smile on her face. How she leaned against the door as if being stuck in the wheel well was just another Friday night for her.

He reached over — helped her up. "I swear that car was following us."

She simply nodded. "Maybe you lost it, or they decided it was too risky to keep chasing us. Either way, it looks like they're gone."

"Which is your subtle way of saying, you'd like to go home."

"I am tired, but..." She snagged her bottom lip, glancing up and down the street. "Only if you think it's safe."

Ryder arched a brow. "You're deferring to my judgement? Isabella was right. We should have had your mom give you the once-over. You've obviously sustained a concussion."

"Or, maybe I've seen your team in action, and I'm not too proud to admit, Mason was right. You are exceptional at your

job. And if that means we sit here for another ten minutes, then so be it.”

Ryder shook his head. “Are you actually being... nice?”

She flashed him a sweet smile. “See? It’s really not that hard.”

“And... You’re back.” He nodded at the road. “I think we’re good to go. I’m still taking the long way, but it’s unlikely anyone’s out there waiting. Maybe it was all just a coincidence.”

He didn’t think so, but it was hard to argue his case when the vehicle had seemingly vanished. Disappeared in the space of a heartbeat. Which seemed impossible, especially after working to keep up with them. Not that it mattered because even after taking another thirty minutes to reach her house, he hadn’t gotten so much as a hint of that sedan, let alone any other vehicle that seemed intent of tailing them.

Kennedy didn’t seem bothered by the event, punching in her code to get them through the gate, then directing him up the driveway. He stopped in front of a modest carriage house, the silhouette of the main residence looming in the background.

Ryder shoved the truck in park, motioned her to wait, then walked around to her side, once again scooping her into his arms. She rolled her eyes but didn’t swat him in the head or demand to walk, electing to wrap her arms around his neck like she had that first time — before he’d made a complete ass of himself.

Another code to open the front door and one to stop the alarm from chirping, and he was standing in her foyer, the single lamp burning in the adjoining kitchen the only light illuminating the small space.

He eased her to her feet, doing a quick scan of the place. It was elegantly decorated, with cool tones on the walls and splashes of color scattered throughout the room. But not nearly as much furniture as he’d been expecting. “Don’t punch me, but I’m surprised you don’t live in the mansion on the hill.”

“I love my parents, and it’s not like I couldn’t have my own wing, but no.” She shrugged. “And I actually prefer less. Having a bunch of things stuffed into a room puts me on edge. I find the simplicity of clean lines, calming.”

He couldn’t argue with that. “It’s nice.”

“Again, with the nice. You need to learn more descriptive words. But, thanks.”

Ryder snagged her arm when she started toward the kitchen. “Just let me have a quick look around, first. I don’t want Mason to think I’m slipping.”

“Right. Wouldn’t want some *tango* to be hiding in my shower.”

“Mock me all you want. And he’d probably hide in the closet.” He leaned in. “Or under the bed.”

“You’re trying to freak me out, aren’t you?”

“That would make me an ass. Stay here.”

He headed for the hallway, systematically clearing each room before making his way back to the main living area. Kennedy was still standing by the door, her gaze intently following his every move. She didn’t speak, just waited until he made his way back over to her before arching her brow.

“Well? Any surprises I should know about?”

“Just that I found your stash of chocolate in your nightstand. Peanut butter cups?”

“Every girl needs a vice. So, does this mean I can start in on those Jell-O shots I mentioned? Because I have more than a few life choices to question, tonight.”

“The kitchen’s all yours. “He stepped aside as she hobbled past him, still favoring that right foot. “Do you live alone, or...”

God, why hadn’t he stopped to consider she might be involved with someone? While he was fairly certain Mason wouldn’t keep hinting that they’d be a good match if she was, maybe his buddy didn’t know. Or Kennedy’s status had

changed while she'd been overseeing one of the foundation's projects the past few weeks.

Kennedy glanced at him over her shoulder as she flipped on the kettle. "I've thought about getting a cat, but I didn't want to be labeled too soon."

"So, you're content with just the crazy part."

She laughed. "Definitely a small glimmer of hope for you. And I'm fairly certain Isabella would have told Mason if I was dating anyone. But kudos for making it appear security related."

"You really don't cut anyone any slack, do you?"

"Rarely. Tea? Coffee?"

Ryder waved his hand. "I'm fine, thanks."

"Are you sure? It's a bit of a drive back to Fool's Gold, and it's already late."

"About that..." Ryder nodded at the couch. "Don't take this the wrong way, but after everything that's happened, it doesn't feel right leaving you alone. That sedan still isn't sitting right with me."

Kennedy stopped pouring the water into a mug, staring at him for a full minute before she finally swallowed. "Is that your way of saying, you want to stay?"

"Just for a few hours. I'll camp out on the sofa, do a few perimeter checks. Test your security system — see if it needs any upgrades. And I'll be out of your hair before you wake up. Promise."

Kennedy frowned, glancing at the couch. "You're going to keep watch, while I sleep? That doesn't sound creepy, at all."

"I'm not going to *watch* you sleep. And it'll only be for a few hours, until I'm sure that whoever was driving that car didn't find another way to track you here and is just waiting for me to leave."

"I'm not completely sure why anyone would follow me, but I can tell by how you're all tensed up, this isn't an

argument I'm going to win, so make yourself at home."

"Like I said. I won't overstay my welcome."

She opened her mouth, probably to spurt out some witty comeback about how he'd surpassed his welcome back in that office, only to close it and nod, again. Then, she scribbled something on a notepad, grabbed her mug, and headed for the hallway.

She stopped at the threshold, pointing to a narrow door off to her right. "There're pillows and blankets in that closet if you decide to stay the night. Some spare towels in the bathroom if you'd like to have a shower. And the code for the alarm is on that pad. Assuming you didn't memorize it when you saw me punch it in."

"It's Isabella's due date. Which is very sweet, and comforting as it proves you change it on a regular basis."

"I really don't like playing the part of the victim." She stared for a few seconds, then nodded. "Thanks, again, for the rescue."

"My pleasure. Sleep well."

She snorted, then turned and left, just the faint hint of roses and sea spray lingering in the air. Ryder waited until her door closed in the distance before removing his cell and hitting Mason's number.

His buddy answered on the second ring. "Either you got waylaid and are calling me from then hospital, or you two finally acted on all that sexual tension that was making the rest of us squirm. It better be the latter, buddy."

"And Kennedy says *I'm* an ass."

"You are."

"Sorry to burst your bubble, but we had to take the scenic route. I'm pretty sure we had a tail."

Mason inhaled, and Ryder knew any hint of sarcasm would be gone. "Please tell me you got a license plate or a good look at the driver."

“No front plates, and the windows were heavily tinted. Then, it disappeared.”

“Shit. I assume her place is clear?”

“Not a trace that anyone’s been here. I’ll do some perimeter checks — test her security system, but I need you to call Jake. Get him to clear it so I can have Darius from Team Raptor do some discreet digging for me. Just to be sure. Hopefully, I’m overreacting, and there’s nothing for him to find.”

“Consider it done. We’ll meet at the office tomorrow. With any luck, Darius might have some intel by Monday. Do you think she needs protection?”

“I think there’s as much chance of her accepting a bodyguard, right now, as there is of me getting lucky, tonight.” Ryder speared his fingers through his hair, hating how his damn heart leaped at the thought of spending more time with her. “Let’s see how the evening plays out. Despite what I told her, I’ll stay until I hear her get up in the morning. And if I’m at all unsure, I’ll figure out a way to provide some protection, again, tomorrow night without her realizing I’m doing it. Hopefully Darius will have more intel if it needs to go beyond that.”

“Good luck with that because the lady’s shrewd. Call me if you have to cap anyone.”

“You know you’re my number one.” He made some smooching sounds over the phone when Mason sighed. “I’ll call you in the morning.”

Ryder ended the call, glancing at the hallway. He really hoped he was wrong because he hadn’t been lying. Kennedy Sinclair didn’t strike him as the kind of woman who accepted help unless it was warranted. And right now, all he had was a questionable track record and one hell of a gut feeling.

CHAPTER 6



“YOU’RE LATE.”

Kennedy leaned back in her chair as Isabella rolled her eyes, removed the purse hook from her bag, then hung both on the edge of the table.

Her friend took a sip of water, thanking the server after he placed the menu in front of her before he hurried off to another table. “Just wait until you have some alien growing inside of you. Between the puking and the peeing, I spend more time in the bathroom than all my pageant girls, combined.”

“I thought the puking was supposed to stop by the end of the first trimester?”

“So did I.”

“Well, even nauseated, you look like you just walked off the pages of *Pageantry* magazine. You’re glowing, and that dress is stunning.”

Isabella waved off Kennedy’s compliment, then smoothed her hands down the pretty fabric. “Finding clothes that fit at this stage is exhausting. My regular outfits are too tight, but maternity clothes are too big. Not to mention unattractive. I’m seriously considering creating my own line of pregnancy wear.”

“It’s only for another five months. Then, you’ll have a newborn to keep your mind off all your fashion issues.”

“Please, as long as I’m running my pageants, I have an image to uphold. Not that I haven’t learned how to kick back

at home. But out here in the real world...”

Kennedy smiled. Isabella had definitely come a long way from when they’d first rekindled their friendship. Though, Mason had been a driving force behind her friend’s transformation. Knowing the man loved her regardless of how she looked or what she wore, had allowed Isabella to be more comfortable in her own skin. A feat that made her true beauty shine through, even more.

Though, ever since some eager paparazzi had photographed her wearing a less-than-flattering outfit, Isabella had been vigilant about not going out in public in anything less than a photo-worthy ensemble.

“Is that your way of telling me you won’t get caught dead in those rubber fishing pants, again?”

“You promised you’d never mention that photo.” Isabella shuddered. “It still haunts me.”

“You looked adorable. And it helped show Mason you have a fun side. Sounds like it was a win to me.”

“That’s because he was too focused on getting them off me to care how I looked in them.”

“I doubt that’s going to change, anytime soon. The man’s completely smitten with you.”

Isabella titled her head, and Kennedy instantly regretted the tone that had slipped its way into her words. “You said that with a hint of longing. Anything you’d like to share? Did something happen the other night to change your mind on getting involved in an actual relationship?”

“I never said I didn’t want a relationship. I just haven’t met anyone who fascinated me enough to make that leap.”

“That hint of pink creeping up your neck suggests otherwise.” Isabella leaned forward, placing her chin on steepled fingers. “So, I hear Ryder stayed over.”

“Did you?”

“I want *all* the details.”

Kennedy laughed. “Let’s see, he saved my life, proceeded to be an ass, drove me home, then stared out the window while I went to bed.”

Isabella sighed, relaxing back in her chair as one hand fell to the tiny bump just showing through her clothes. “You’re no fun, at all.”

“There’s nothing to tell. He thought we were being followed so he stayed to make sure no one impaled themselves scaling the wrought iron fence or got electrocuted bypassing my security system.”

“And did they?”

“No. He did mention that my system needed newer sensors, and that the night vision wasn’t clear enough. Hell if I know. I arm the thing and forget it.”

Isabella nodded. “Mason’s obsessed with security, too. Not that I blame him, but I just wish it wasn’t necessary.”

“You nearly died because of some madman. It’s only natural Mason wants you to be safe.”

Isabella grinned, and Kennedy realized the giant hole she’d left for her friend to take advantage of. “Which has me wondering why Ryder showed up at your place, again, last night, to install those upgrades.” That grin widened. “And yeah, I know all about that.”

Kennedy groaned inwardly. She hadn’t planned on mentioning that to anyone, especially when she was wondering, too. Because she’d nearly had a damn heart attack when she’d turned around, and he’d been standing there. Arms full of boxes. A smug smile lifting his irritatingly kissable lips.

Ryder had brushed it off as his way of proving that her system was outdated, and that anyone could override it without even trying. She’d just been happy she hadn’t peed herself.

Or booted him in the head. Which she would have done if her right foot hadn’t still been bothering her, and he hadn’t been on the other side of the kitchen island.

He'd spent the rest of the night wiring a bunch of sensors and repositioning cameras. She'd finally gone to bed and told him to lock up when he was done. He'd promised, but she knew he'd stayed.

All night. Again.

She just wished it was because he secretly wanted to spend more time with her, and not because he was worried some asshole carrying an Uzi might sneak in and *cap her*, as he phrased it.

Kennedy shrugged. "Nothing happened."

"But you wanted something to happen, didn't you?"

Kennedy closed her menu before looking her friend in the eyes. "Even if I did, I can assure you... Ryder isn't interested."

"Are you sure you didn't hurt more than your foot the other night? You'd have to be blind not to see he's definitely interested. He just hasn't figured out how to ask you on a date after being an ass." Isabella laughed. "Did he really say he didn't think you *pranced* around to get donations?"

"Every word." Kennedy blew out a raspy breath. "Not that it matters, because I'm just an obligation to him. His best friend's, wife's best friend."

Isabella reached over and took one of Kennedy's hands in hers. "Do you really think Ryder drove up from Fool's Gold with all that equipment, then stayed the night, because you're my friend?"

"We've known each other for months. He wasn't interested before."

"But, neither were you, unless..."

Kennedy pursed her lips, knowing if she opened her mouth, she'd admit that she'd been lying all the times she'd claimed they weren't a match. That she really had been interested in the guy but had known her feelings weren't reciprocated. And she hadn't wanted to deal with his awkward rejection when they were destined to spend time together.

All of which had changed the other night, when he'd pinned her to the door in that claustrophobic storage room and looked at her as if he'd been afraid he wouldn't get to her in time. That he'd find her lying in a pool of her own blood.

That maybe he'd been lying to himself, too.

Isabella inhaled, squeezing Kennedy's hands until she had to pull free. "Oh. My. God. You've liked him all along!"

Shit. Her inability to effectively hide her emotions had obviously shone through. "I didn't—"

"Don't you dare lie to me. Your face is red, and your eyes are darting the wrong way because you're trying to think up another lie." Isabella leaned in closer, again. "And if that's not enough, you're sweating."

"It's warm in here."

"Tell that to your nipples."

Kennedy scrubbed a hand down her face, checking her shirt, but her friend had obviously been lying for effect. Not that it mattered. She was still busted.

"I always said he was attractive." She waved off Isabella's stern gaze. "How I've felt is irrelevant because Ryder clearly didn't return my feelings. Which brings me back around to why you think anything's changed."

"Maybe because you damn near dropped him on his ass, and he finally realized you're not the person he'd created in his mind."

"I only punched him because I thought he was one of the bad guys."

"Which, for Ryder, was a complete turn-on. Too bad you weren't able to kick him. He probably would have jumped you instead of being an ass."

Kennedy groaned, smiling at the waiter when he popped over to take their orders. She waited until he'd ambled off before shaking her head. "Can we please talk about something other than how I've lost my mind? Like the baby? Have you and Mason picked out any names?"

Isabella shook her head. “We’re still making a list, both secretly hoping we won’t get surprised with the opposite sex. Can you imagine how insane I’ll be if we have a boy? One man in the house is more than enough. Besides, we’ve got months to talk about the creature determined to use my bladder as a punching bag. Speaking of which, I need to pee.”

“I’ll come with you.”

Isabella arched a brow. “You don’t have to be my bodyguard, again.”

“Considering how that turned out the last time, that’s probably a good thing. Though, I’m definitely dressed to fight, today.”

And she was. Instead of wearing anything too fancy, like she normally did when she was meeting Isabella, Kennedy had opted for designer jeans with a flowing peasant blouse and a cute pair of white leather sneakers. Not exactly high fashion, but with her foot still sore and her mind racing from Ryder’s presence the past two days, she’d wanted to feel comfortable. If that meant she could also kick a guy in the throat, it was a bonus.

Isabella stopped, gripping Kennedy’s arm. “You stood between me and an armed man. That’s more than I could have asked for.”

Kennedy waved it off, knowing she’d start crying if Isabella got too sentimental, then motioned toward the hallway when a hint of movement flickered in her peripheral vision. She turned toward the bar area, but it was empty, just like it had been the previous two times she’d checked when she’d thought someone was there.

She frowned, rolling her shoulders before following after Isabella. A shiver wove down her spine, and she scanned the hallway, again, before finally heading into the bathroom. She’d had the weird sensation she was being watched since she’d arrived at the restaurant, and she was worried she’d somehow been infected with Ryder’s extreme paranoia. Next, she’d be searching for footprints in the mud outside the

entrance or tackling innocent men to the ground if they walked behind her for more than a few feet.

Maybe she really was losing her mind. A thought that plagued her as she waited by the sink, alternating between splashing water on her face and double checking the hallway. Bad memories aside, she still couldn't shake that tingling sensation. And after everything that had happened lately, she didn't want to get waylaid because she'd been stupid.

Which seemed unlikely when the next twenty minutes passed by without anything remotely unusual happening. Just the two of them chatting and laughing as they ate their food.

Isabella picked at her other half of her sandwich, sighing before pushing it away. "Apparently, turkey is a no-go, right now. I'll take the rest home for Mason."

"Do you want to order something else?"

"I'll grab something later. Besides, we still haven't finished talking about Ryder."

Kennedy coughed as a spoon full of soup went down the wrong way. "*You're* not finished. I'm completely done."

"Why is it so hard to admit you like the guy?"

"Besides the fact he's Mason's best friend, and it would ruin everything if things ended poorly? There's the part where he doesn't want a relationship."

"Kennedy—"

"Have you ever tried to have a real conversation with Ryder? The guy pulls back whenever you ask him anything remotely personal. Either, it's me, or he's not looking for any sort of commitment."

Isabella sighed, glancing around the restaurant as if to ensure they were out of earshot of anyone else, before reclaiming Kennedy's hand. "Do you remember me telling you about Mary Lou?"

"Mason's sister? Of course. God, her dying in that accident, and how Mason blamed himself because he was

driving, was so tragic. I'm happy you've been able to help him let go of a lot of that guilt."

"He's a work in progress. But what I didn't tell you was... Ryder had a serious crush on Mary Lou since he was twelve. Mason hasn't said too much, just that his sister and Ryder had a special bond. Not romantically, at least, not since Mason and Ryder joined the Air Force. But Mason said Ryder changed after she died. Kept to himself more. Not that I'm saying that's the reason he seems so emotional distant, but maybe he's rusty at communicating."

"He communicates with Mason and Cruz just fine."

"They're his buddies. He's not trying to charm them into his bed."

"Pretty sure whoever's sharing his bed isn't there because he was charming."

"According to Mason, it's been ages since Ryder brought anyone home."

Which still beat her record. It had been well over a year since Kennedy had let her guard down enough to have some fun. Though, experiencing reoccurring nightmares from the PTSD she actively denied having due to all those situations overseas had more to do with her lack of a sex life than her desire. And somehow having to explain why she'd woken up screaming or slept with a machete tucked in the nightstand hadn't sounded like fun pillow talk.

Isabella sighed, relaxing in her seat, again. "All I'm saying is... give the guy a chance. He might surprise you."

"It's just unfortunate his idea of surprising me is by scaring me half to death. I swear, if I turn around and find him standing in the middle of my kitchen, again, I'm going to toss my kettle at his head."

Isabella grinned. "Sounds like the perfect form of foreplay."

"You're incorrigible." She pushed back her chair, then stood. "You ready? I know you've got work to do, and I have to find a way to convince all the patrons from the other night

that donating to the foundation is still a worthy cause, despite the fact my event could have gotten them all killed.”

“It wasn’t that bad for everyone else.” Isabella rose, huffing out a breath when Kennedy insisted on paying for lunch. Kennedy just smiled, left the cash on the table, then walked with her friend to the door.

Isabella stopped on the small porch, frowning at the sudden downpour of rain. “So, when are you heading back to Africa?”

Kennedy released a weary breath. “Too soon.”

“Are you safe when you’re there?”

Kennedy schooled her features, focusing on keeping her emotions in check. Otherwise, Isabella would see right through her. “As safe as I can be.”

“That’s a non-answer.” Isabella sighed, leaning a bit closer. “I know how dedicated you are to your parents’ foundation, but maybe it’s time you focused on you, for a change. You’ve got plenty of work offers, here, and I know your mom would understand if you wanted to dial it back. Keep doing the design part but ease off on the going over and putting yourself in harm’s way part. Which no one even knows about because it’s too risky and you might get kidnapped or whatever you told me. In fact, I bet your mother would be ecstatic. Probably love for you to give her a grandchild.”

“Whoa, slow down. I’m not even dating, anyone, let alone thinking about kids. And I’ll ease off on the traveling and the risky grunt work once I find something or someone worth staying home for. But right now, I’d end up going stir crazy.”

“Hmm, that sounds like a challenge. And you know who *loves* challenges?”

Kennedy laughed. Damn, she loved having a best friend. “You know, the first step is admitting you have a problem. Like this rain. It’ll ruin your outfit.”

“I’m not so pregnant I can’t run to my car...” Isabella groaned. “Which I parked at the bank across the street when I hit the ATM. I thought the walk back would be nice.” She

gave Kennedy a playful shove when Kennedy snickered. “It wasn’t monsoon season when I arrived.”

“You sure that pregnancy brain hasn’t already kicked in?” Kennedy avoided the swat Isabella aimed at her shoulder. “Unlike you, my lazy ass parked as close as I could get. And I can unlock my Jeep from here. See?” She pressed the button, smiling when the vehicle chirped. “I’ll drive you over. Save that dress, and those shoes. God knows, there’s been enough dress mutilation for one week.”

“Poor Ryder will never live that down.”

“Screw Ryder. He killed my Gucci.”

Isabella laughed as they darted toward the vehicle, rain splashing up their legs. Kennedy got within a few feet, when something flickered beneath her vehicle. Nothing obvious, just a pulse of light, a pause, then another pulse. What looked like numbers reflected on the slick surface. A nine, or was it a six?

She didn’t know — didn’t care. Not when the obvious answer screamed inside her head. The next flash dispelling any doubts. She had just enough time to hook Isabella’s arm — give her a shove. Get them both moving back toward the restaurant.

Isabella took a few stumbling steps, catching her balance when Kennedy darted in beside her — pushed her in front, again.

Was that a click? An audible indication that they’d run out of time? Had that stupid clock reached zero or was it all in her mind?

She didn’t have time to think — to puzzle it out. She just wrapped her arms around Isabella, toppled them forward, and braced for impact.

CHAPTER 7



“THAT’S IT?”

Ryder speared his fingers through his hair, resisting the urge to yank a few out, as he stared at the papers Darius Ford had handed him. The results of the first round of digging the other man had performed on the Sinclair Foundation.

Nothing.

At least, nothing juicy — worthy of sending a group of armed mercenaries to a museum to discreetly kill the Sinclair family. In fact, if anything, the lack of tangible dirt only highlighted how it was more likely Ryder was nuts, than the burglary was anything other than just that — a routine heist.

Darius shoved his hands in his pockets, leaning against the wall. “You’ve heard the phrase ‘squeaky clean’? The Sinclairs make that saying seem dirty. Their foundation is completely legit. They’ve never had any grumblings of embezzlement or had anyone so much as give them a bad review. Every clinic, hospital, and freaking outhouse they’ve ever claimed they’ve built is physically there. They educate locals to staff the facilities, pay them actual living wages, and they all go over for months at a time to help keep the projects running and on schedule — without collecting a dime from the organization.”

Darius released a raspy breath. “Face it. These people are saints. Or, at least, as close as it comes. And they don’t even try to make sketchy deductions on their taxes. I checked. They’re damn near perfect.”

Ryder nodded, tossing the papers off to one side. “Any chance they’re too perfect?”

“In this case? No. They’re good people, Ryder.”

“I never thought they weren’t good people. In fact, I think they’re exceptional people. I just really hoped there was some deep dark secret hiding in their past that put all the pieces together. This...” He snorted, as he motioned to the intel. “This just proves that no one should be targeting them.”

Mason ambled over to the side of Ryder’s desk. “I know you thought that sedan was following you, but maybe it was just the hype from the takedown coupled with the bad weather.” His buddy leaned in, palming the desk. “I think it’s time to consider the museum was simply crappy timing. Or a planned burglary we managed to thwart.”

“I know, except...”

Except where he was certain that damn car had been following them. And that whatever was going on was much more than poor timing and good luck on their part, even if he had absolutely nothing to back up his hunch. The fact he was also fixated on Kennedy had nothing to do with the way his skin prickled. Or the heavy feeling between his shoulder blades.

Sure, he’d finally admitted to himself he was definitely attracted to Kennedy Sinclair. That she’d been right when she’d claimed he’d created his own version of her. And once he’d managed to clear all the fog from inside his mind...

He’d seen her in a completely new light.

One that was determined to drive him to the brink because the real Kennedy was breathtaking.

Not just on the outside. She was smart, and funny, with a wounded edge to her soul he was dying to uncover. To heal. And all because she’d knocked him senseless in that storage room. Then dared him to resurrect that heart he’d been so sure he’d lost.

Buried in the damn desert.

It didn't help that the only other woman he'd ever been crazy about had died. The fact she'd been Mason's sister had made it difficult to talk about — not when Ryder had wanted to be strong for his buddy. Allow Mason to grieve the loss without worrying Ryder might lose it, too. But he was starting to realize he might have subconsciously used Mary Lou's death as a reason for keeping every other relationship at arm's length.

To justify being alone.

Maybe he hadn't wanted Mason to be the only one shouldering the guilt of her death. To be perpetually treading water. That in some weird kind of way, Ryder needed to share the blame.

Seeing Mason finally move past that night when he'd allowed himself to fall for Isabella had gotten Ryder to take a long hard look at his own life. And he hadn't been impressed with what he saw.

No denying, he'd had a great career he was proud of. Had a new job that promised to be just as rewarding. And he had his teammates working beside him — men he trusted. Would die for.

He had everything — everything, but that special someone to make it all worthwhile. Who could fill that hole inside of him.

Which was why he couldn't let this issue go. Not when he feared Kennedy might pay the price. And he couldn't keep showing up at her house, unannounced, without her demanding answers. He'd managed it once. Twice was pushing it.

Mason narrowed his gaze, looking as if he was following every disjointed thought racing through Ryder's head, before straightening. "Except you think there's more to this than a simple explanation."

Ryder groaned, then pushed to his feet. "I know, there's no proof. And before you say it, again, I can't be sure that car was following us. And after two days of hanging at Kennedy's

home, I haven't seen a single image on her security cameras of any intruder casing the place. No broken latches, or unusual footprints. Which means I'm either going completely crazy..."

Ryder chuckled when Mason simply stood there, staring at him. "This is where you're supposed to say or it's because whoever's watching her is waiting for her to be alone."

Mason grinned. "Why? You had me at crazy."

"Shut up."

"It's either that, or you're trying to find a work-related excuse to spend more time with her, so you don't have to admit you really do have a thing for her." Mason gave him a hardened stare. "Like I've been saying, all along."

Ryder wouldn't slug his best friend. He wouldn't, even if the smug smile on Mason's face was begging for it. "For a moment, can we all assume I'm capable of thinking with my head and not my—"

The door burst open, cutting Ryder off cold, as Logan Bishop stepped inside, hands fisted at his side, his mouth pursed tight. He glanced at Darius, nodding toward the door before focusing on Ryder and Mason.

Darius grunted, then walked out. No chatting, no asking what Logan had to say. He just grumbled something about grabbing Nash as he left.

And Ryder knew it was bad news. Whether it was the lines creasing Logan's forehead or that air of doom hanging over the man like a freaking shroud, whatever had brought him to Ryder's office would change everything.

Mason had obviously picked up on the same vibe because he was already moving toward the door. "Whatever crap news you have to tell us, say it on the way because I know that look. We're heading for your hanger, aren't we?"

He hadn't really asked, and Ryder was right behind the men as Logan turned and marched down the hallway. The guy waited until they were at the exterior doors before stopping — barring the way.

He swung his gaze to Ryder, and Ryder's heart fucking stopped. Strong and steady one second, like a dead weight in his chest the next, because that was the look on Logan's face. A damn death mask. "I was outside when Captain Oakley drove up. She just heard a call come in over the radio. There's been a suspected car bombing in Colorado Springs. No real intel, just that two women were taken to the hospital."

Logan swallowed, and Ryder grabbed Mason before his buddy stepped forward and fistfisted Logan's shirt — choked the man in an effort to change the truth about to slip free. "It was Kennedy Sinclair's vehicle."

Silence. Not a breath, a hiss, just Ryder and Mason standing there, staring at Logan as if the man had sucked out all the available oxygen. Maybe put up some kind of forcefield that made it impossible to breathe. To speak. To do anything other than wait for the earth to start spinning, again. Jumpstart their hearts.

Then, it all came rushing back. Mason practically wheezing out a series of breaths as Ryder kept them both from slumping over.

He managed to swallow — not puke — before he pushed down his fear. Locked it away until he knew the outcome. If he'd failed — all those thoughts of finally moving forward shattering to the ground — or if he had one more chance to get things right. "Are they okay?"

"They were both breathing on their own, but that's all I know. There's a blanket hush order out to prevent this from becoming a full-fledged panic until they know if this is terrorist related. But I've got ROXY waiting. I'll fly you two there, and Darius and Nash will drive up. Cruz and the rest of your team, too. Jake's already in town on a supply run, and he's heading straight for the scene. He'll update us along the way if he can, though, we'll likely arrive before he gets any news."

Logan grabbed each of their arms before they could dart past him. "I know this must be hell, but we need to go in there with clear heads."

Mason raised his chin, eyes narrowed. “One hundred percent focused, brother.”

Logan winced, glancing at Ryder, but Ryder wasn't sure if his expression conveyed a better outlook. That he was any less affected by the news than Mason, or if the slashes of red slowly working across his buddy's face were mirrored in his. Regardless, Ryder would be there for Mason, whatever the outcome. And if anyone had harmed Isabella or Kennedy, Ryder would hunt them down. He just wasn't sure if it was justice he'd be seeking.

Which made sense in terms of Isabella. She was the love of Mason's life. The mother of his unborn child. What Ryder aspired to have one day.

Kennedy...

She was a wild card. A dark horse. And she wasn't close to being his.

He'd worry about that later. Once they'd gotten to the hospital. When he knew where they stood. If he was hunkering down — going into protector mode — or if he was on the offensive. His enemy's last nightmare.

Whether Logan believed Mason or not, Ryder wasn't sure. But the man nodded, then took off, jogging his way to the hanger. ROXY was already on the helipad, and Logan had her revved up and airborne in record time — in what seemed like a blink of an eye — that eerie time slip that happened in a crisis. Pockets of emptiness that bled into snippets of action. Climbing in the chopper, then nothing until they were skimming the trees. So freaking close, Ryder was sure there'd be pine needles and leaves on the skid gear.

Logan didn't seem fazed. Wasn't grabbing onto his seatbelt or silently praying. Even when a thick bank of fog rolled in on them, he didn't seem worried. Merely moved them parallel to the highway. Pushed it so low, Ryder swore they were level with a semi. That, if he'd raised his hand and yanked it down, the driver would have pulled on the horn.

Ten minutes of nothing but numbing silence, and they were closing in on the town, barely missing streetlights and wires. Rain pelted the bubble, the streaks distorting the misty scenery until Ryder wasn't sure how Logan could distinguish between the ground and the sky. Both of them blurred into a washed-out gray.

But the man never faltered, talking on the radio, then angling them toward the north end of the city. Ryder didn't know if Logan had permission to land at the hospital, or if he was going rogue, only that he'd land there, regardless. In fact, Ryder was certain the guy would happily go to jail before he wasted an extra second by finding an alternative. Something that would require cars or taxis — time they didn't have.

Not having a S.W.A.T. team waiting for them on the helipad was a nice surprise. Meant Logan hadn't done anything horribly illegal, not counting how low he'd flown, which Ryder was sure had broken every rule, but that's what the brotherhood was all about. And Logan Bishop was one of the best.

A hospital rep met them as they disembarked, weaving them through the corridors. The guy didn't seem to have any answers, only commenting that Dr. Sinclair would talk to them.

Shit. Kennedy's mother. Hadn't Kennedy said her mom had been a trauma surgeon but had done a second residency in obstetrics? Something about dealing with emergencies in the middle of the desert?

Ryder couldn't quite remember. But it didn't matter. It all ended the same — with three lives in the balance.

They stopped outside a series of rooms, their guide rushing off to fetch someone else. Ryder hooked Mason's arm when the man headed for the first set of doors, keeping him from busting inside.

“Easy, buddy. There're a dozen rooms in here. We can't blindly barge into each one looking for Isabella and Kennedy. I'll go find out where they are. You stay here in case someone comes out looking for you.”

Ryder hadn't phrased it as a request, and Mason merely nodded his reply. Not that Ryder blamed him. The fact Mason hadn't broken down three doors and was working on his fourth, was proof the man was still holding onto that razor's edge of control.

But it wouldn't last much longer.

Ryder struck off toward the nursing station when he nearly ran into a woman darting out of one of the doors. He cupped her elbows, juggling both their weight before easing her to the side — somehow avoiding taking them both to the floor.

She gasped, spinning to face him as she placed a hand on her chest. "I'm so sorry... Ryder?"

"Dr. Sinclair?"

"How did you get..." She waved off the rest of what she'd been going to say. "Never mind. I know how resourceful your company is. Is Mason with you?"

"He's about to *Hulk* out a few doors down. Not that I'm much better. How's..."

His throat closed. Just like that. Isabella and Kennedy's names poised on his tongue, then everything clamping shut. Which had never happened to him. After twenty years in the service, he'd gotten accustomed to death. Numbed to it, actually. Not that he liked that side of himself, but it was necessary. Emotions didn't belong on a mission, and that's what his life had been. One endless mission.

Jacklyn took his hand — gave his fingers a squeeze. "They're both going to be fine. I just popped in to check on Kennedy. Not that the doctor treating her isn't topnotch — he is. Volunteers with the foundation. And he deals with these kinds of injuries every day, but..."

"But he's not you."

She blushed a bit. "I don't mean to sound vain. Not that it matters because Kennedy insisted I stay with Isabella. Ensure the baby is okay. Still..."

Ryder nodded, finally getting his damn throat to work. He managed to swallow without spitting half of his saliva at Kennedy's mom before smiling at her. "It's not vain. You're her mother. You're allowed to be worried. To want to treat her, yourself. I expect you've been doing that all her life. It's hard to turn that off."

"Feel free to tell that to my daughter." Jacklyn looked over her shoulder when a harsh grunt sounded from behind the curtain. "Actually, would you mind sitting with her? Make sure she doesn't punch Greg in the face, because she's hands down the worst patient I've ever known. Always thinks she can fix everything, herself, with some glue and a bit of tape."

"That sounds like her. So, Isabella?"

"Other than a mild concussion, some ringing in her ears, and a few cuts along her legs, she came out of the incident fairly unscathed. I'm just about to do an ultrasound. I'll go grab Mason. Give them both some reassurance that the baby's fine."

"Thank god. And thank you..."

"You might want to wait until *after* Kennedy's done in there before you thank me. I'm giving you the dirty job."

"Nothing new, there. Mason's quite the task master."

"I bet."

Ryder snagged Jacklyn's arm. "We're going to have Kent and Asher hang around you and John until we figure out what's going on. Just to be safe. Kent's gone to your husband's work, and Asher will be waiting for you at the nurse's station once you're done with Isabella. I know it's an inconvenience, but we'd appreciate it if you'd humor us. Just for a few days."

Jacklyn frowned but nodded, glancing over her shoulder into the room. "Kennedy? I'm sending Ryder in to make sure you behave. Play nice."

She waited until Kennedy had grunted a reply before hurrying off, hugging Mason once she'd made her way over. The two talked for a few moments, then disappeared into one

of the other rooms. Ryder looked at the curtain, took a deep breath, then ventured inside.

And stopped cold.

Again.

Blood. Smearred across her back. Soaked through a mountain of gauze heaped on the floor. What looked like more than just a pint or two. Closer to the point where she would have passed out from the loss. What he'd teased her about the other night in the museum but seemed to be a viable possibility, now.

But it wasn't just the blood. Dirt covered her arms and legs. What he could only deduce as soot from the flames. Maybe grease from the pavement or her vehicle. There were chunks of glass and god knew what else poking out of her skin, some large enough he wondered why she hadn't been knocked out and taken into surgery.

She snapped her head toward him when he inched around the curtain, eyes wide. Her face an eerie ashen color. Ryder glanced at the doctor leaning over her back just as the guy straightened, placing a needle on the tray beside him. He didn't speak, just motioned toward a chair next to her head, then went back to tweezing debris out of her flesh.

Tears pooled in her eyes, and she squeezed them shut as he walked over, then knelt so his head was level with hers. He took her hand in his, smiling when she looked at him, eyes still glassy. The hazel color gleaming in the harsh light.

He brushed his other hand along her jaw. "Hey."

She pursed her lips when her chin quivered, a couple of those tears slipping free. "Isabella?"

"Better than you."

Kennedy nodded, but Ryder knew it was for show. "If anything happens to her or the baby..."

"Everything's going to be fine. You just focus on not punching anyone, because your mom told me you're a terrible patient."

That got him a snort and a small smile as she glanced at the doctor treating her. “Like she should talk. And I was being perfectly civil until Paxton, here, decided I didn’t need any freezing. You do know the difference between glass and skin, right?”

Ryder frowned. This was that Paxton guy she’d called a jackass? And hadn’t he just finished doing that when Ryder had walked in? What was in the needle?

Paxton didn’t even stop working. “Dr. Sinclair’s assessment’s correct. And I froze the three largest cuts, but jabbing you a dozen times in already compromised tissue for the others would hurt just as much.”

“I beg to differ.” Kennedy stuck out her tongue, hissing when the guy yanked out one of the larger pieces. “Damn...”

Ryder tightened his hold, hoping to distract her because she wasn’t the only one hurting. Seeing her wince every time the doctor removed a shard as more color drained from her face had him wanting to punch the guy, too. Not that it was Paxton’s fault. The last thing Kennedy needed was to get an infection because the man had missed a piece. But Ryder didn’t do helpless, and right now, that seemed to be his only option.

“I know it’s been one hell of a day, but do you think you can tell me what happened?”

She squinted at him as if trying to bring him into focus, rubbing her fingers along the bridge of her nose. What Ryder was sure was much more than a mild concussion like Isabella had gotten. “Someone blew up my Jeep.”

He chuckled, knowing she’d said that on purpose. To get a rise out of him. He played along. “Thanks, *Captain Obvious*. Care to give me a few more details?”

She blinked her eyes a few more times, rubbing her forehead, again, before pushing out a rough breath. “We were standing at the entrance to the restaurant, when Isabella realized she’d parked across the road. It was pouring, so I

offered to drive her over.” She snorted. “I figured enough designer clothes had been butchered this week.”

“You’re not going to let me live that down, are you?”

Her smile belayed the small shake of her head. As if she was afraid to move it too much without risking some disastrous consequences. “I unlocked the doors while we were still standing under the awning. What I assume armed that bomb. Then, we made a dash for the car, but just before I reached the door, I saw something flash beneath it.”

She paused, wetting her lips as she closed her eyes, hissing out another breath. “When it flashed, again, a second later, I guess my brain knew what it was because I grabbed Isabella and tried to get us clear. But then I heard this click...”

Kennedy met his gaze. “I know I didn’t really hear anything. That I *couldn’t* have heard the timer that far away, but that’s how my brain processed it. Or maybe I had subconsciously counted down from that last number I saw. Either way, I knew it was going to blow. So, I wrapped my arms around Isabella and toppled us over.”

Another pause, and another round of her pushing on her head as she scrunched up her face. “It seemed to take forever to fall. I remember seeing everything hanging in the air. The rain. Isabella’s purse. Then the car exploded, and it was like a train crashed into us from behind. Everything sped up as we skidded across the parking lot. The rain came down in sheets as the roar of the explosion echoed through the air. There were people screaming and horns blaring. My head was pounding, and my ears were ringing. I think Isabella was telling me to roll off, but I couldn’t move. Couldn’t breathe. There was smoke and flames and glass everywhere. A tire smoldering next to my head.”

She swallowed, and he nearly reached for a garbage can because she looked as if she might puke. “After that, it gets blurry. More like snapshots. Some fireman talking to me. Paramedics asking if I knew what freaking day it was. Those stupidly bright lights in the hallway that made me want to throw up. I kept asking if Isabella was okay, but no one was

answering me. I finally got one of the nurses to page my mom because she's the best with fetal emergencies, and I thought..."

She'd thought her best friend was going to lose her baby. Kennedy didn't say that, but Ryder saw the fear in her eyes. The way she choked back a sob, only allowing a hint of it to escape.

Ryder nodded, bending a bit lower until she looked him directly in the eyes. "She really is going to be fine. Your mom told me, herself. Just a minor concussion and some scrapes." He motioned toward her back. "You're the one who looks like they rolled around in a pile of glass."

She shrugged without really moving anything. "I couldn't let her lose the baby. Not after..."

Her voice drifted off, but not before Ryder heard the haunted edge to it. And he couldn't help but wonder if she knew about Mary Lou? That she'd been pregnant when she'd died, and Kennedy had wanted to spare Isabella repeating that. Save Mason from another round of crippling guilt. Because Kennedy had definitely taken the brunt of the impact. What would be a patchwork of black and blue skin by tomorrow, not to mention some nasty scars.

Paxton straightened, giving Kennedy's arm a tap. "All done. I taped and glued those larger lacerations. They shouldn't scar too badly, but you can always have a plastic surgeon look at them once they've had a chance to thoroughly heal."

"I don't care about a couple scars." She grinned at Ryder. "It's not like I'm out to win any beauty pageants."

He laughed. He'd definitely been wrong about her. "I don't know. Isabella said something about acquiring a Ms pageant."

"I'd rather get blown up, again, than *prance* around on stage."

"Looks like I'm never living down that prance comment, either."

“Never.” She allowed him to help her up, grabbing his hand as she tumbled against him.

He held her steady, looking at the doctor. “Should she be moving?”

Paxton didn’t even make eye contact with Ryder as he cleaned up the instruments, pocketing that needle, then placing the tray on the counter across the room. “Ms. Sinclair needs to take it easy for a while. Keep the wounds dry. Try not to get blown up, again. But she’s free to go home, as long as there’s someone around to make sure her condition doesn’t worsen.”

He scribbled something on a pad as he moved back over to them. “Trust me, Kennedy knows the drill. She has a penchant for getting hurt.” He gave Kennedy a piece of paper. “That’s for some stronger pain meds, and the antibiotics you’re going to take. Don’t be a hero — fill them. And finish the damn script so you don’t start oozing puss. I’ll tell Dr. Sinclair you’re good to go. Try to stay out of trouble.”

Ryder frowned as the guy left, steadying Kennedy when she eased away. “You were right. That guy’s an ass. Was I really that bad that first night?”

“You two could be twins.” She laughed when he pouted. “Just kidding. You would have insisted on carrying me out and driving me home.” She cursed when he arched a brow at her. “I don’t need you to carry me, now, but I would appreciate some help getting dressed. If you think you can do that and not be an ass about it.”

“I’ll give it the old college try.”

Which was harder than he’d thought when all she was wearing beneath the hospital gown was a thong — just like he’d teased about in the museum, only seeing it in person...

He’d definitely been an ass not to realize how incredible she was. From her shapely curves to her smooth skin across taut muscles, Kennedy Sinclair was sin with a side of sarcasm.

It took a few minutes to get her dressed into the scrubs the hospital had provided. Then several more to walk to Isabella’s room. Though, walk was a bit enthusiastic. More like Kennedy

stumbled between shuffling steps. It wasn't until they reached the door that she seemed to find her stride. Wasn't relying on him to keep her upright and off the floor. But it cost her, the smudges beneath her eyes already darkening.

Ryder stayed close enough to catch her in case her legs suddenly buckled, as she talked with Mason and Isabella before grilling her mom for all of Isabella's vitals. It took a while before the air in the room relaxed. Made it possible to breathe without wondering if there was enough oxygen for everyone.

Once Jacklyn had cleared Isabella to leave, Mason made the executive decision to discuss the situation back at Kennedy's carriage house — allow the ladies to get more comfortable. His buddy tsked when Isabella tried to walk out, insisting on pushing her in a wheelchair. Ryder arched his brow at Kennedy, but she stubbornly shook her head.

“I'll land a round house kick to your temple if you even suggest it, consequences be damned. I can walk.”

“The way you staggered here as if you'd had a few too many ciders at lunch suggests differently.”

“My muscles were stiff. I'm fine, now.” She stuck out that adorable chin, and he had to admit — he loved her unyielding resolve. What was likely the reason she hadn't died in the explosion. Why Isabella barely had a scratch. Though, a bit of compromising wouldn't hurt, either.

He waved at the door, directing her toward the side parking lot, where Darius had texted that he'd left Ryder's truck. They'd need to figure out their next move and whether or not they'd require Team Raptor's help for more than just a lift and some intel gathering.

Mason veered toward the front doors. Jake had somehow arranged to have Isabella's vehicle driven over, and Mason didn't want to leave it at the hospital, in case he and Ryder decided to separate, later. Keep each possible target in their own secure location.

Kennedy managed to walk down the hall without tripping. Not completely steady but better than before. Ryder wasn't sure if it was luck or more of that steel determination he'd admired. If maybe she'd been telling the truth, and she'd simply needed her muscles to loosen up. Either way, she smiled when he opened the door for her, checking both directions, then ushering her through.

She took his hand when he held his out, walking beside him down the pathway, then toward the car park. He kept her close, enjoying the easy feel of her skin against his — how she matched his stride — seemingly without trying. As if they'd been walking together for years. He scanned the area, pausing to smile over at her, when the hairs on his neck prickled, that uneasy weight settling between his shoulder blades, just like it had been since the museum. That sensation of being watched.

He gave her hand a squeeze, then upped his pace, silently praising her when she quickened hers without asking him any questions. Just a slight widening of her eyes, a raise of her brow, then her moving faster. They hit the lot at a slow jog, his hold on her ensuring she didn't fall, didn't add to her injuries, when a dot appeared on the windshield of the truck in front of him.

His training kicked in before he could voice his intentions, and he took them both to the ground just as the window in the car beside them exploded. Shards of glass rained down across the pavement, another shot hitting the rear panel above their heads.

Ryder rolled them over, pulling Kennedy in behind the next vehicle before pointing at the building down the street. "I'm going to count to three, lay down some cover fire, then we're going to book it to that construction site. We'll use the cars as a shield until we reach that row of bins. I need you to stay low and on my left. Don't go ahead, don't look back, and whatever you do, don't get shot."

CHAPTER 8



THEY WERE GOING TO DIE.

That was the only thought that looped through Kennedy's head as Ryder counted to three, then popped up from behind the car, emptying several rounds toward wherever he thought the gunman was hiding.

A sniper.

While she wasn't an expert ex-special operations soldier like Ryder, she'd seen enough movies — had lived through enough bad experiences — to know what that red dot meant. Just like with the bomb beneath her car. Where an image really was worth a few thousand words. All of them mapping out what would likely be the last moments of their lives.

Ryder obviously didn't share her fears. A heartbeat after he'd fired the last shot, he had her on her feet and running — one hand keeping her from face planting on the ground. The other holding that massive gun.

She didn't know what make it was. What caliber, other than something large because it made the damn earth shake when he fired it. Probably produced a concussive wave in its wake.

Or maybe it was just her actual concussion playing tricks on her. They were only several seconds into his escape plan, and her head was already pounding. What had dimmed to a minor irritation while talking in Isabella's room had blossomed into a full-blown throbbing headache. The kind that

blurred the scenery and increased that ringing in her ears she'd thought had finally dissipated.

Not that she could stop. Even with a steady supply of cars between them and the bins, and Ryder keeping her body hidden behind his, she knew there was a good chance one of them would get hit if they wasted even a single second. One slight hesitation on her part — a missed step or a trip — and the asshole behind the scope would capitalize on it.

And Ryder would get shot.

She knew it. Sensed it. That he'd find a way to cover her, regardless of whether she followed his directions or not. That he'd sacrifice his life, even if her actions were the cause.

That realization had her focusing on planting each step. On how Ryder telegraphed every small change in their direction with a shift of his hand. A twist to the right and that's where they headed. One to the left, and he was coming toward her. Even their speed was mirrored in his touch. A squeeze sped her up. Him loosening his grip slowed her down. Mostly so she wouldn't fall, but it worked.

He stopped her just shy of reaching the last car, guiding them behind the bumper. He nodded at the closest bin, changing the magazine in his gun. "I'm going to fire off more rounds. As soon as you hear the first shot, run. I'll cover you, then dart in behind you. And no, Kennedy, this isn't a democracy. You go, first. Period."

Kennedy bit back the retort on her tongue. Not because she thought he was being bossy. But because she didn't want to be the reason he died. What if she fell on the short jaunt across the open space? Or didn't move fast enough, and he had to dive out and save her?

What if she never got to tell him she'd had a crush on him for the past five months?

Ryder didn't give her a chance to voice anything, he just pointed at the dumpster, counted, again, then jumped up. Kennedy took a breath, then booked it, lifting her feet higher than normal in the hopes of not tripping over them. She was

already over the curb and within reach of the dumpster by the time he stopped firing.

Another two seconds, and he was rolling in behind her, bullets ricocheting off the concrete, then the metal. The loud thuds vibrating through her chest as they impacted the opposite side of the bin.

How had he covered the distance so fast? She'd been a dozen steps ahead of him, but he'd rolled in a second behind her.

That's when she realized he wasn't moving faster. She was moving slower. That somewhere between the exit and the dumpster, her body had stopped listening to her commands, each step now requiring some heroic effort. What would be a death sentence if she didn't find a way to push through.

Another throb across her temple had her palming her head. Squinting at Ryder to bring him into focus.

He glanced at her, looked away, then snapped his head back. "You okay? You look like a ghost."

"My head hurts."

No sense lying when it took every ounce of strength just to speak. Get those three words out without having to pause between them. Take a few breaths.

Ryder's frown intensified. "The last thing your body needs is us running like madmen. But I can't protect you out here, and there's way too much open ground between us and the hospital. Mason's sure to have heard the gunfire. All we need is to get inside that building that's under construction. I'm positive I can find a suitable spot I can defend until the cavalry arrives. I just need you to hold on a bit longer, then, I'll see you spend the next few days in bed."

Had that come out sexually? Or was that the concussion talking, because her body had taken it completely different. Had immediately conjured images of Ryder on top of her, nothing but moonlight between them.

Kennedy pushed away the thoughts before she did something she'd regret, then nodded. Well, she tried. It wasn't

much more than a slight tilt of her head, but he understood. Took ahold of her hand, again.

Another quick countdown, and they were back to racing across the pavement. Ryder followed the line of dumpsters, firing off a few rounds whenever there was some open space. Not that she knew where the gunman was. If he was still in the same place.

Didn't snipers build nests? Find the best vantage point then stay there until their targets emerged? And how the hell could the asshole have known they'd come out the side exit?

Her head protested the questions, and she let them fade. It hurt too much to think. To do anything other than try not to pass out as she ran with Ryder along the walkway. They'd nearly reached the entrance facing the street when that blue sedan from the other night fishtailed around the corner. Tires slipping on the slick surface. The entire car shimmying when the driver overcorrected.

The rear window opened as it bared down on them, some guy dressed in black with a bandana covering his face leaning out — a massive gun cradled in his arms.

Kennedy wasn't sure if Ryder had spotted the car before her or if he'd heard it coming, because he was already moving. Taking her in his arms as he spun, firing two shots toward the speeding vehicle. The first hit the guy in the shoulder, knocking him back inside the car. The second punctured the front wheel, the resulting pop echoing through the air. The sedan lurched, then spun, flipping over on itself a couple times before bouncing to a stop. The top crushed in. Steam pouring out of the hood.

Kennedy didn't know how Ryder had made each shot count. Hit his targets while simultaneously shoving her behind him and covering her from the sniper still hiding in the shadows. But he'd made it look easy. Just another Monday afternoon.

Ryder didn't stop — didn't wait to see if anyone got out of the car — he just turned, then took off. Through the makeshift door then up the temporary stairs. Three flights in before he

finally veered off. Found a place that obviously met his criteria for standing his ground, then crowded her against the wall. Another change of his magazine, before he had his phone out — was trying to reach Mason.

“Shit. Damn signal’s being jammed.”

“You and Mason worked together all those years in the service, right? I’m sure he’ll anticipate your tactics.”

“He will. But we could really use an entire team for backup.”

Kennedy snorted. “I don’t know. You seem to be a one-man wet squad.”

Ryder glanced toward her for a moment. “How the hell do you know what a wet squad is?”

“Please. I read.” She smiled at him, instantly regretting even that small movement. “Fine, I might have looked up what you did in the military. Got intrigued then spent the better part of the day lost down some rabbit hole. It’s amazing what you can learn.”

“Don’t believe everything, sweetheart. But, thanks for the vote of confidence. I just hope whoever’s behind the scope has cleared out. Which would make sense. I’m betting the S.W.A.T. team is on its way. And snipers hate getting boxed in.”

“As long as he’s not making his way, here.” She coughed, biting back a scream when her head felt as if it was going to explode. “Oh, god.”

Ryder’s face was next her hers a moment later, those gorgeous blue eyes fixed on her. “Kennedy? Are you okay, because you look like you’re about to—”

She managed to turn before her stomach heaved, and she emptied her lunch on the floor, hurling a few more times before the pain ebbed — allowed her to collapse back against the wall.

Ryder moved in closer, bridging part of her weight as she slumped forward. He didn’t talk, just alternated his attention

between her and the door until she was able to look at him without wincing. “Breathe, sweetheart. I need you to stay with me, okay?”

She didn't nod. Couldn't without fearing she'd puke, again. “I'm fine.”

“Pretty sure puking is a sign that head injury's getting worse.”

“Only if I keep on puking. Once or twice is pretty normal.” She nudged him. “Especially when you're stupid enough to run around immediately after your doctor tells you not to.”

He snorted. “Well, this one's on me. Still... Any other symptoms I should be aware of? Vision blurry? Limbs tingling? Finding it hard to breathe?”

Was the man a medic, too? Because he seemed ridiculously knowledgeable about how a more serious brain injury might present if she'd really worsened her condition. “Just the vision, but that's also common with head trauma. I'm not bleeding into my brain, Ryder. A few hours of sleep, and I'll be good to go.”

“No sleeping. At least, not here. Understand?” He looked at her when she didn't answer — was too tired to form the words. “Kennedy? I need you to stay awake. Talk to me.”

Why was he yelling? Spiking the pain through her head with every syllable?

She batted at his hand when he cupped her chin — tried to tilt it toward him. “Too, tired. Just... give me a few minutes to...”

Had she finished her thought? Gotten all the words out because she couldn't be sure. Couldn't think beyond the increased pounding in her skull. “God, my head really hurts.”

“Shit. Okay, new plan. We get you back to the hospital. Now.”

She grunted, then managed to grab his hand. “No. It's not safe. I can wait, I...”

Another wave of nausea had her twisting — relying on Ryder to keep her from falling to the floor as she heaved, again, nothing but some spit to show for several strong attempts. By the time he'd eased her against the wall, again, even she had to acknowledge she might have aggravated her head injury — that she really did need another trip inside.

Ryder leaned in close. “That’s twice, and you look like shit.”

She managed a smile without puking, again. “Thanks. My fragile ego appreciates the boost.”

“I’m serious.”

“And so are those guys with guns.”

“I can deal with the men.”

“Not if you’re carrying me, and as much as I hate to admit it, that’s the only way I’m leaving. I...”

That’s all she got out before more pain had her closing her eyes — pressing her hand against her temples. She wasn’t sure how long this round lasted, just that Ryder was still snuggled against her when she was finally able to look at him without wanting to scream.

He pursed his lips. “You’re scaring me. I...”

His head jerked to the side, the muscles in his neck, cording. He gave her shoulder a squeeze, mouthing for her to stay before he rolled onto his feet, silently disappearing around the far wall.

Had he heard something? Caught a glimpse of movement? Were people closing in on them? Obviously not the cavalry he was waiting for. They wouldn’t be silent. Wouldn’t sneak in like wraiths. Because even straining to hear anything above her own pulse, all she got was numbing silence. No traffic noise sounding through the walls. No birds chirping in nearby trees. Just her heart pounding in her chest, and that eeriness of utter nothingness.

A footstep somewhere in the distance. Not too far. Maybe just beyond that wall. Then, another. Not loud. More of a

hushed step. The scuff of rubber soles on the plywood floors. Like back in the museum. What had gotten this entire shitstorm rolling.

There was definitely more than one guy, the footfalls fanning out in different directions. Some fading away. Another drawing closer. No more than ten feet, now. Maybe less. Probably about to dart around the wall.

Had someone grunted? Tried to call out? She wasn't sure, but the footsteps paused for a moment when something clattered to the floor, the tiny echo reverberating through the room. A few moments passed of that all-encompassing nothingness, again, before an odd whistling noise sounded close by.

The creep was trying to signal the other men. Kennedy wasn't sure how she knew. If it was a memory from some movie she'd watched, or if she'd read about it the other day — that rabbit hole she'd gone down where she'd learned about wet squads and combat strategies. Either way, it gave her one chance to escape. Or, at least, hide.

Frozen. Just like when she'd been lying on top of Isabella in the parking lot. None of the signals getting through. Every time she tried to shift — crawl to the corner and hope the shadows hid her — the thought would get as far as her hand, then short circuit. Nothing but a small wiggle of her fingers proof she'd planned on moving.

Then, he was there. Some guy dressed in black. Like the one who'd been hanging out of the window. That same type of scary gun tucked into his shoulder. Only his eyes visible above an identical bandana. He turned, aimed that muzzle her way, then inhaled.

Was he gasping? Clawing at his throat? Had that weapon clattered to the floor? The same metallic ting she'd heard moments earlier?

Kennedy blinked, then Ryder was there. Stepping out behind the man as the creep crumpled to the floor. No struggling, no screaming, just his body dropping. A loud thud as he hit the ground.

Ryder didn't give the guy another glance as he moved over to her. "Shit, sweetheart, are you okay? I didn't mean to scare you, but I couldn't risk opening fire in here. Not when you could have gotten hit. Taking them out one at a time was safer... Kennedy?" He frowned, placing the back of his hand against her forehead. "Shit, you're burning up."

Had he always been this handsome? His eyes this bright? Or was she seeing him differently?

She managed to snag his hand — hold it against her chest — when something red caught her eyes. She squinted, not that it did much, but after a few tries she managed to focus on a small raw patch on his shoulder. "Jesus, are you hit?"

Because it looked like he'd been cut. Or shot. Maybe burned. She couldn't tell — couldn't focus enough to see any details. Just a splash of red where she knew it shouldn't be.

Ryder shook his head. "I get one tiny injury, and you're worried about me. I'm fine. But you're out of time. Let's—"

He cut off, again. Like before with that same head jerk. Only this time, he didn't vanish. Didn't move other than to crowd over her — check his weapon.

Not that it mattered. Everything was fading.

The wall. The room.

His face.

Solid one moment, then bits of black eating it all away until only his blurred silhouette remained. A dark smear amidst even darker shadows.

Had he glanced her way? Given her shoulder a firm shake? All she knew for sure is that she was sinking, and she wasn't sure if he'd catch her.

CHAPTER 9



THIS IS what Ryder had been worried about. Why he'd questioned if she was well enough to leave. If that damn doctor had brushed off more serious injuries because she was good at hiding what she didn't want discovered. Another one of those masks she wore.

Kennedy slumped against him, eyes closed. Her head off to one side. She hadn't made a sound. No whimpering. No crying. She'd simply stared at him as if she wasn't sure she'd ever see him, again, then passed out.

He checked her vitals. Pulse strong. Steady. No discharge from her ears. No obvious additional injuries. Not that she needed any. Her concussion was enough to account for all her symptoms. What could be swelling — bleeding into her brain. And all because he'd made her run.

Admittedly, getting shot would have been instant death. But if he didn't get her back inside the hospital — have them check her, again, only more thoroughly — she might die, anyway.

Just his shit luck he'd heard movement in the distance. What he knew were more men. Like the fucker who'd pointed his gun at her. Would have killed her if Ryder hadn't stuck his knife in the bastard's throat. Not the cleanest of takedowns, but without a silencer for his Sig, Ryder couldn't chance shooting anyone unless it was his only option. Not without risking more encounters.

He'd do it if necessary. But he'd had choices before.

He didn't, now. Not if he was going to get Kennedy back inside.

“Kennedy? Sweetheart can you hear me?”

He kept his voice low. More like a murmur than actually talking, but it got him a slight tilt of her head. A hushed moan. Not the response he'd hoped for, but at least she was still with him. Still within his power to save.

He'd have to carry her. And not in the romantic way he wanted to carry her — like he'd done in the museum, with her head against his shoulder. Her body cradled against his. This time, it would have to be fireman style. It was the only option while still having one hand available to fight or shoot. Maybe toss a knife, not that he was an expert of chucking knives, especially if it meant losing it. But desperate times...

Kennedy groaned as he slipped in front of her, then eased her across his shoulders — her head off one side. His arm through her legs, then gripping her wrists. Not pretty, but efficient. Thankfully, she wasn't that heavy. Or maybe his adrenaline was simply pumping so much he didn't notice the added weight. Which was unlike him.

This was his wheelhouse. What he'd spent his entire career doing in the Air Force — bringing men back from behind enemy lines. And he'd never had his heart rate spike. Allowed worry or fear to send a shiver down his spine. He was either all in, or declining the op.

He either succeeded, or he died.

And he'd made peace with that. Had gone into every mission aware he might not make it back alive. That he'd have to sacrifice his life so a brother might live. And he'd been fine with that — had embraced it.

But this was different.

Sure, he'd felt kinship to the men he'd rescued. But he hadn't been dreaming about a life with them. Trying to puzzle out how to move beyond friends — ask them on a date.

He hadn't been hoping they were the forever he'd been missing.

Kennedy was. He acknowledged that, now. In fact, he didn't simply like Kennedy Sinclair. He was smitten. Halfway in love. A fact her nearly dying had brought to the forefront. What had been weighing in the back of his mind the entire flight over, then while watching the doctor pick chunks of her damn Jeep out of her back.

That's when he'd realized that somewhere between meeting her all those months ago and that rickety chair in the trauma room, he'd fallen for her. Hard.

Ryder held back a chuckle. Kennedy would likely kick his ass if she could read his thoughts. She was much more of a wild cat than he'd imagined, and she wasn't going to be easy to sway — to convince they were worth a shot. That he really wasn't an ass and had simply been trying to find sure footing when she'd challenged his reality.

Changed it.

Concerns for later. If they had one, because she really hadn't looked well. Her skin a ghostly white. Obvious pain creasing her brow. If her concussion had worsened...

Her mother would fix it. Or would know a brilliant doctor who could. All Ryder needed to do was get her back to that trauma ward.

A scuff.

Not loud, but distinct, this time. Closer than that movement he'd heard before Kennedy had passed out. And the creep was headed their way.

Ryder took a few steps, readjusted, then headed for the corner. He'd chosen the darkest section of the room with enough cover he could dart in and out without being completely in the open. But it meant his view was limited.

He stopped at the end of the wall, carefully peeking around the edge. No men. No silhouettes backlight by a window on the far side. Just more shadows.

That was his cue to move.

He crossed the room, then followed the far wall around another series of partitions. None fully finished, but enough he was able to hide his movements. Some footsteps off to his left had him hunkering down. Crouching behind a stack of materials. Not completely bent over, but enough they were hidden without it being hard for him to pop up, if necessary.

There. Across the room. Three shadows moving in sync. One point man with the other two guarding the first guy's six. A proper formation.

Which meant, these guys were trained. Whether professionally or more guerrilla style, he wasn't sure. But Ryder was certain this wasn't the first time they'd hunted people.

It also meant he was gravely outnumbered. If he'd been alone, he would have countered their tactics. Used their strategies against them. But with Kennedy slung over his shoulders, he wasn't in the position to fight. And leaving her, even with the hopes of eliminating the threat, wasn't an option.

What if there were more men? What if one of them got to her before he'd dealt with all of them? He couldn't put himself between her and a bullet if she wasn't beside him. Couldn't trade his life for hers. And that's what it would take for them to get to her.

Him dead.

Luckily, he had twenty years' worth of S.E.R.E training. Excelled at every aspect of it. Only, he'd be focusing on the surviving, evading, and escaping aspects. Resisting wasn't part of the equation. It meant they'd been caught, and Ryder knew these assholes weren't taking prisoners.

But then, neither was he.

He didn't want to engage them, but he'd use whatever force was necessary if they challenged him. Because he was getting a second chance with Kennedy.

The men slunk forward, heading toward the area he and Kennedy had been hiding in. He waited until they were

rounding the wall before quick-stepping across the floor. Not quite a run, but as fast as he thought he could go without exacerbating Kennedy's condition. Shaking her head too much or having it connect with his shoulder.

He hit the other side still moving fast, when one of those assholes popped back out. The bastard must have gotten a glimpse of them because the damn air was filled with bullets a second later. Pinging off the studs and floor — coming way too close for Ryder's liking.

No other choice but to make a run for it down the stairs. Pray he could get to some cover before they came sprinting after him. That the winding, narrow stairway would slow them down enough, he'd be ready to pick them off one-by-one once they attempted to follow him out.

What he wouldn't give to have one of his buddies backing him up, right now. Mason or Cruz. Maybe Nash perched in a sniper's nest, ready to do some serious damage. Instead, he had one hand, a Ka-Bar, and a single mag left for his Sig.

Not a problem. It only meant he had to make every shot count. Chose his actions carefully. Running into some jackass dressed in black tactical gear at the bottom of the stairs didn't do Ryder any favors. Had him twisting to protect Kennedy while kicking the bastard's gun out of his hand. A step in and another kick, and the guy was reeling backwards, trying to catch his balance. A pivot, a cross and a hook, and he was down. Blood dripping out of his nose. Eyes rolled back in his head.

Ryder didn't have time to pry the gun out of his hand, then unhook it from around the creep's neck. Not with those three guys from upstairs pounding their way down the steps. Each echoed footfall likely to be Ryder's last.

Which meant spinning and making a dash for the door. Turning his body sideways to avoid hitting Kennedy's head then sprinting out — complications be damned, because he was pretty sure a forty-five to any part of her would make her head injury unimportant. And if they clipped Ryder instead...

She'd still be dead. She wasn't in any condition to fight them off. Hell, he was praying she was still breathing. That her brain hadn't swelled in the two minutes it had taken him to run down the stairs, kick that gunman's ass, then dart outside. Because it was a definite possibility.

Having Cruz round that line of dumpsters was the lucky break Ryder needed. The reason they might make it out of this alive. He didn't even have to call out to the man because his buddy was already aiming at the entrance behind him — his gun cocked.

Two seconds later, and Cruz had capped the forerunner. No hesitation, no doubt. A pull of the trigger, and the bastard dropped, a red mist fanning out behind him.

The next guy fell a moment later, obviously too close to pull back — retreat. But Ryder wasn't even looking, any longer. Focusing on what he hoped wouldn't be another gauntlet run to the hospital. Praying the fact Cruz was standing out in the open meant the sniper was gone.

God, Ryder hoped the sniper was gone. Or that, at least, the bastard hit him and not Kennedy.

Ryder considered pausing at the edge of the dumpsters — judging if it was safe. Maybe sticking his hand out to see if anyone tried to shoot it off, when Kennedy moaned.

That was all it took to sway him. Knowing it wasn't too late. That if he picked it up and got her inside, she still had a chance. Might not have her damn head explode.

Seeing Logan and Darius round the bins a few steps ahead of him brought everything into focus. Ryder didn't stop to talk — to ask what the hell had happened. If they'd caught anyone. He just darted past them, rounded the corner, then hoofed it back to the side entrance, doing his best not to jostle her but aware speed was more important. That he'd lost any spare time she had.

He barely slowed enough to wedge them through the doors, before he was running, again. Dodging a cop in the hallway as he retraced the path he'd taken with Kennedy less

than thirty minutes prior. Jacklyn Sinclair was standing at the nurse's station, going through a chart, when Ryder rounded the corner to that trauma ward. What looked like a full lockdown, with all the doors closed and the hallways practically empty. He called her name, his voice slightly higher than usual. She looked up, her mouth gaping open for one agonizing heartbeat, before she was all business. Had Kennedy on a gurney and heading toward the elevators inside of a minute. A volley of staff racing after her.

Jacklyn yelled for him to stay — that they'd be back as soon as they'd ran some tests — but the words weren't getting through. Or maybe he wasn't really listening because he started to follow after them when Mason came out of the same room he'd been in, earlier.

His buddy snagged his arm, and Ryder nearly pushed it off, his entire focus on Kennedy's pale face disappearing into the elevator. "She'll be back. You need to wait here."

Why the hell would Ryder wait there when she might still be at risk? Was the hospital safe? Had they vetted ever damn person in it?

Mason held firm. "I know what you're thinking, but it's okay. Jake rallied every available Brotherhood Protector within the city limits. The hospital has been dispatched a few officers to man the exits, and the Dean of Medicine has the whole place on lockdown until we're confident it's clear. Hell, we even have two dogs searching the floors. No one's getting to her. Besides, I know you saw that cop and Asher tagging along. They'll keep everyone safe until you're done getting patched up. Jacklyn said she'd have someone here to treat you in a couple minutes."

What was Mason talking about him needing to get patched up? He was fine. And had Mason said Asher was tagging along? As well as a cop? And Ryder had missed it? Or had he simply been too focused on Kennedy to notice anything else? Tunnel vision, which was a sure sign he needed to get his head out of his ass and start acting like a professional. The only thing tunnel vision would do was get him and Kennedy killed.

Mason leaned in closer, tugging on his arm. “You can be her watchdog once she’s back. And in case you haven’t noticed, you’re bleeding.”

Ryder snapped his head toward his friend, frowning. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Mason gently led him back inside that room. Isabella was still sitting in the wheelchair. Eyes wide. Her skin far paler than it had been when they’d left.

Mason pointed to the gurney. “Plant your ass on that exam table, and I swear to god, I’ll cap it if you even think about jumping down before someone stitches whatever’s hiding beneath all that bloody clothing.”

Ryder waved it off. “It’s nothing. Kennedy...”

He couldn’t say it. Couldn’t get the words, “she might be dead,” out of his mouth. Couldn’t admit that he might have failed the one time she’d needed him to succeed. To beat the odds.

Mason nodded. “She’ll be okay. I heard her mom say her pupils were responsive. Something about normal pressure. It won’t take long to run a CT — figure out how to treat her symptoms.” He moved in closer. “It might be nice if you weren’t dead from blood loss when she got back.”

Ryder gave Mason a shove, hating how the scenery dipped for a moment, before steadying. “I’m not going to bleed out.”

He hissed when Mason grabbed some gauze off the counter behind him and put pressure on the wound. Maybe it was a bit deeper than Ryder had thought. “Any other casualties?”

“Other than some of the bastards wearing the bandanas? No. They did their best to block you two off. It took a while to flank them — head your way.”

“Shit. So, they were gunning for Kennedy. At the museum, the car, and now, here. She’s their target.”

“It sure looks that way.”

“You know what this means?”

“Other than you were right and probably won’t let us ever forget it? Yeah, it means you’re officially on the docket. Jake’s already talked to Hank, and he’ll be briefing her parents as soon as possible. Looks like Kennedy Sinclair has a bodyguard until we uncover who the hell is out to kill her. So, let them stitch you up, buddy, because the fun’s just beginning.”

CHAPTER 10



“HEY.”

Kennedy scrunched her eyes closed, then slowly opened them, staring up into Ryder’s sapphire-blue gaze. Lighter than she’d seen his eyes previously. Though, maybe it was just the harsh illumination bringing out the stunning hue. Whatever the reason, they were mesmerizing, and it took her a few moments to realize he was waiting for an answer.

She went to shift her head when he tsked, palming her chin with his left hand. The warmth stealing what little breath she’d managed to suck in.

“I wouldn’t move your head too much, sweetheart, or you’ll be back to puking your guts out.”

Sweetheart.

He’d been calling her that since he’d sat down in the chair when that jackass, Paxton, had been removing bits of her Jeep from her back. And it seemed as if he wasn’t reconsidering using the endearment any time soon. Which shouldn’t make her heart race or her lips twitch into a smile.

Kennedy blinked a few times, hoping the scenery wouldn’t start sliding left and right like it had in that building. “Where are we?”

“The hospital.” He leaned in closer, his perfect mouth a mere inch from hers. “I’m not going to lie. You scared me down to my damn soul. When you passed out...”

The muscle in his temple jumped, and she had to resist reaching out — smoothing the area with her fingers. Because she wanted to. Wanted to feel his skin move beneath her touch. Share in his warmth like when he'd palmed her chin.

He was so close, she could kiss him. All it would take was a lift of her head, a slight shift, and his mouth would be pressed against hers. Not that she would risk lifting her head, but it didn't stop her mind from picturing it. "I don't remember passing out."

"That kind of comes with the territory. But trust me, it wasn't a fun time."

"You got us out?" She frowned. "But how..."

A thrum of pain stole the rest of what she'd wanted to say, the light suddenly ten times brighter. All the ambient noises that much louder. Which only emphasized how tired she was. That, after only two minutes of staring into his eyes and managing those few words, she was ready to go back to sleep.

Ryder must have noticed her eyelids drooping or maybe she'd blinked for a really long time because he chuckled, dropping a kiss on her forehead. "I'll recount the adventure you slept through once you're better. I just wanted you to know that your solo days are over, for a while. At least, until we figure out who wants you dead. So, make peace with the fact that I'll be shadowing your every move."

"You're my bodyguard?"

"Has a nice ring, don't you think?"

She snorted, groaning when it sent another jolt of pain through her eyelids. "It's something." She hummed as everything started fading. "You'll stay, right? Be here when I wake up?"

"That's the entire definition of being a bodyguard. You're stuck with me."

She smiled. "Remind me to hide my Guccis."

"Brat. Sleep. I'll be waking you every hour until the doctor gives the go-ahead to move you somewhere more secure." He

grinned. “And then, I’ll be waking you every hour until your mother tells me to stop.”

“Look at you, following the rules.” She closed her eyes, then fluttered them open. “You really will stay, right?”

He slipped her hand into his. “Promise.”

She did her best to swallow past the lump in her throat, which had caught her by surprise when she’d imagined him leaving. How, in the space of a few days, she’d come to rely on him being there, watching over her. Even if she hadn’t said it out loud. “Thank you.”

“Don’t get too sentimental on me. I’m sure I’ll be pissing you off, again, in record time.”

“I like the sound of that.”

Had he answered with another witty remark? She couldn’t remember, not fully waking, again, until the next day. Even then, it wasn’t for longer than ten or fifteen minutes at a time. Just enough to answer a few questions. Prove her condition wasn’t worsening.

Her mom finally allowed Ryder to move her. Kennedy didn’t remember that trip, either. Just more flashes like after the bombing. Ryder carrying her out. Her cradled in his arms. Had they flown in a helicopter?

She swore she’d heard the whop-whop-whop echoing around her, but it had gotten lost beneath the steady beat of Ryder’s heart. The feel of his hands holding her close to his chest. The ever-present scent of pine trees and musk. Like from the museum only it was infused into her senses, now. Like some Pavlovian response that instantly had her smiling. Seeking him out.

It wasn’t until she was well into day five that the world really stopped spinning, and she could finally look at a light without wincing and setting off a chain reaction of pain. Another two before Ryder seemed confident she wouldn’t face plant if she walked to the bathroom on her own. Or drank a cup of coffee without him hovering over her, in case she dropped it.

Sweet, but she was beginning to climb the walls. No doubt, those first few days had been hell. The pain. The dizziness. Not to mention feeling as if she might puke if she turned her head the wrong way. But once the symptoms had eased, doing nothing but sitting in the bed had been torture. Especially with him keeping watch in the chair beside her. Close enough she could reach out — grab his hand — but miles away from how she wanted to touch him.

She must have had a few nightmares during his vigil, too, because she'd woken twice with him propped against the headboard, her head cradled in his lap. His arms loosely wrapped around her. He hadn't asked her to explain, but she'd recognized the shadowed look in his eyes. How he'd studied her more closely for a while, and she knew he wanted to know what demons were hiding inside her head.

She wanted to know, too, because she never remembered the dreams. Didn't know which bad memories plagued her the most. Only the part where she woke up screaming and drenched in sweat. Her heart racing. Her muscles cramping. She'd never been able to go back to sleep after, too afraid the images would return. That, maybe remembering them would be worse than simply wondering.

Until Ryder.

While she didn't recall every detail, she remembered him holding her. Lulling her back into a dreamless haze. And she couldn't help but wonder if she'd be able to sleep alone once they'd caught the men hunting her.

If her old life was worth returning to.

Not that returning to anything seemed likely when, after a week and a half, they still didn't have any leads. Not one concrete suspect who might want her dead. Not that they'd asked her too many questions, yet. Most likely afraid they'd send her backwards in her recovery because of some horror scenarios her mom had probably spun. How anything more strenuous than looking out the window or chatting about the weather — what projects she had lined up for work — would cause her to relapse. Future events, not past. The kind that

required deeper thought. What would somehow make her brain swell.

Her mother must have finally given them the go-ahead to delve into more pertinent information because Ryder had asked her if she wanted to have some tea with the rest of the team — so they could talk. Ex-solider speak for them finally getting some intel on what deep dark secrets she was hiding that might be the reason some crazed lunatic was hunting her.

She'd agreed, and there she was, sitting at a table with Mason, Cruz, and Jake Cogburn gathered around her. Some guy named Hank Patterson via video conference on a large monitor on the wall.

Kennedy took a sip of her drink, glancing at Ryder. He'd elected to sit beside her instead of with the other men. Whether he was still worried she'd have a sudden relapse, or some madman would burst into the room and he'd have to protect her, she wasn't sure, but his presence eased some of the tension in her shoulders. As if he was on her side.

An illusion. But she chose to believe it. Not that the other men were against her. It was simply intimidating being the center of their attention. All that alpha-dog testosterone focused on her. While she acknowledged they were definitely looking out for her, she couldn't help but feel as if she was the one on trial. Defending some wrong she couldn't remember.

Ryder chuckled, then slipped her hand in his, giving her a brilliant smile. God, had he always been that suave? “Relax. They tend to forget how grave they all appear, sitting there, staring at someone. But it's just resting soldier face. Everyone here only wants to help you. Promise.”

She laughed, relieved when the action didn't result in any pain pulsing through her temples. Or shift the room left and right. What was a sure sign she really was better.

Mason tossed some wadded paper at Ryder's head, but he merely deflected it, the goalie in him shining through. “You're such an ass. She knows we're on her side, Einstein.”

“Then, stop looking at her as if you just found the shovel she used to bury all the men who were worthy of her getting it dirty.”

Ryder winked at her, the casual reference to their conversation in his truck that first night dissipating any remaining unease. Vanquishing it with a squeeze of his hand on hers. The easy way his smile flourished when he looked over at her. As if she pleased him simply sitting there.

Mason rolled his eyes, glancing at her. “If you want to punch him, no one will stop you.”

Kennedy shrugged. “Why, when he’s right? It’s like you’re all waiting for me to admit there’s an even grislier location you should be digging up.”

Mason shook his head. “Point noted. And we’re serious because we hate not having any answers to give you. We should have cracked this case wide open, by now, but, instead, we’re just treading water. Anyone who’s been apprehended and is still breathing, isn’t talking. And shockingly, they aren’t in any data base. No fingerprint matches. No DNA. No way of knowing if they’re local or international. That sedan they were driving was stolen from a casino in New Mexico, but the fact you heard them speaking a foreign language, and how they’ve been using G3s, hints at a connection back to Africa. We just don’t know what, yet.”

“Which is why I assume I’m having my tea in here and not in that secure room.”

Ryder gave her a nudge. “The entire facility is secure. And you’ve been sequestered to that room because we didn’t want you to drop dead when your head exploded. And yeah, that’s the actual medical term your mom used.”

“Pretty sure she would have used bigger words, like intracranial pressure or spinal cortex compression, but we’ll go with my head exploding.”

Ryder leaned in close, and god, she really wanted to taste his mouth. “Still not cutting anyone any slack after nearly dying on us. That’s cold, sweetheart.”

Was she blushing? Panting? Drooling on herself because those seemed like viable possibilities with how aroused he'd gotten her from nothing more than calling her sweetheart. Again. And with his buddies in the room.

Mason cleared his throat, and Ryder gave the man a slight side eye. As if he wasn't ready to shift his focus off of her, yet. "I'd say, get a room, but we've only just gotten you two out of it, so try to focus, buddy."

"One hundred percent *engaged*... buddy."

Had the word "engaged" sounded off to the men, too, because it had sounded weird to her. Like Ryder was telling her something without actually spelling it out. Which was ridiculous. Other than her waking in his arms after she'd had those nightmares, and how he was always holding her hand, he hadn't made any indications he wanted to move beyond their current arrangement. The one where he was at arm's length, and she was slowly drowning in her own desire.

Then, he smiled at her, rubbing his thumb across the back of her hand before he turned and faced his crew. But she swore him tearing his gaze from hers had cost him. Had his mouth tightening and creases forming above his brow.

Mason had some smug grin on his face when she looked at him, and she had the weird urge to smack it off. "So, back to your situation. We've spent the past ten days talking to your parents, investigating the foundation, your work contacts, here, but nothing they've told us hints to why someone would want you dead. We're hoping maybe they missed something. Or you were involved in an incident they aren't privy to."

She snorted. "You think I've got some secret agenda on the side? Like I'm really this giant drug dealer, and my competition wants me out of the way?"

"That would certainly make our lives easier."

She laughed. "Sorry to disappoint you, but I'm not hiding anything. I design buildings. That's it."

Ryder nudged her, again. "Your mom said you spend a month or two at a time in Africa when she's there volunteering

in the clinics and hospitals. That you do a lot of grunt work — lend a hand building or whatever else needs doing. Why isn't that common knowledge? And while we're at it... Why aren't there photos of you on the foundation website?"

Kennedy sighed, relaxing back in the chair. "It's for my own safety. So no one can take advantage of the fact the Sinclair Foundation's heir is digging a ditch in some dirt-poor town roving with mercenary bands who'd like nothing more than to make some easy ransom money. It's happened before, where family members of international aid workers have been taken hostage, then traded back for large amounts of cash. If no one over there knows who I really am, I'm better off."

Had Ryder's left eye just twitched? "People have been kidnapped, and yet you go over there and walk around like you're one of the locals? Without backup? Are you nuts?"

"Not crazy, just practical. Having an armed escort would announce I'm someone important. Dressing in khaki shorts, tanks, and boots — having my hair in a pony without wearing any makeup... That keeps me safer than a couple of watchdogs waving pistols."

"God, you're going to be the death of me, aren't you? And no, don't answer that." He raked a hand through his hair. "I understand where you're coming from, but damn, you're taking a huge risk."

"Nothing changes for the better in this world by playing it safe. Do you know how much my parents risk? My mom delivered a baby last month in a canvass tent in the middle of a skirmish, five hundred miles outside of Nairobi. Did triage on a bunch of car bombing victims with the vehicles still engulfed in flames no more than twenty feet away on a dirt road in the freaking Congo. Most likely with guerrilla forces still patrolling the region. And my dad regularly oversees the entire construction process, regardless of whether there are armed factions in the area or some rival gangs looking to steal anything they can get their hands on. Trust me, I play it pretty safe compared to them."

“Except where you’re probably right there, fetching your mom the instruments, right? Or digging that footing for your dad with bombs going off in the distance.”

Damn. Busted.

He groaned. “Fuck... don’t answer. I need to actually sleep later, and picturing you hunkered down handing your mom some alcohol wipes and a damn scalpel or pouring concrete for your dad while armed assholes are shooting each other all around you, isn’t going to allow that to happen.”

Kennedy reached over and brushed her fingers along his jaw, loving the contrast of soft skin and rough stubble. “If it helps, any, those are rare occurrences. The bad memories that are the price of the good. Most of the time, she’s in a hospital, and I’m on site with my dad and a group of people. The biggest risk I take is scouting out new locations for future developments. But those are usually in very rural areas. Not exactly the kind of spots murderers and thieves hang out.”

Had his face paled? Was his mouth hanging slightly open? Because he looked more freaked out than a moment ago when he’d twitched. “You wander? *Alone?*”

“It’s not wandering. It’s investigating. And I’m extremely cautious. I’m not completely reckless.”

“Oh, sweetheart, you passed reckless when you were twelve, and learned to run in those death traps you call shoes.”

Mason cleared his throat, drawing their attention. “Seriously... do you two need some alone time?”

Ryder flipped him off.

Mason looked over at her. “When you say, investigating, what does that involve, exactly?”

“A number of things, like extensive photographs. Soil samples. Geological information.” She shrugged. “Anything to save my dad time so he can weed out all the unlikely areas. I can design a building to suit any terrain, but he’s the structural engineer. He needs to make sure it won’t sink or collapse.”

Mason nodded. “Is that it?”

Kennedy paused, wondering if she should be honest about everything she did, before sighing. If they were going to be effective in their job, she needed to come clean — she just wasn't sure how well they'd take it.

Mason leaned forward at her silence. “Kennedy?”

Ryder cursed under his breath, getting impossibly closer. “Shit, there's definitely more, so just spit it out.”

“It's nothing.”

“Sweetheart...”

“Nothing bad. I just...” She paused to swallow, hoping she didn't choke on it. “I take a *lot* of photos.”

Ryder frowned, glancing at Mason and Cruz before inhaling as he ran his fingers through his hair. What she assumed was his way of not reaching out and shaking some sense into her. “You're talking about people. You take pictures of anyone you think might want to harm your family if they build a hospital or school in that location.”

He hadn't asked, and she could only nod.

“I'm discrete. But, we've had a few instances where the intel we got wasn't quite complete, and the area turned out to be far more volatile than we'd been led to believe. Granted, those are the kinds of places that need clinics the most, but I don't want my parents to get killed because they're too compassionate to think anyone might actually do them harm.”

“So, instead, you just go around idly snapping photos of who? Drug cartel and weapons' dealers?”

“Like it or not, those kinds of people pose the most threat. I have a good friend who works in Interpol. If someone shows up multiple times and seems more than curious about my presence, or if I notice something sketchy going on, I send their photo along. My friend checks it against known threats and warns me if a certain region is too hot to consider, right now.” She paused to look at the others for a moment. “I'm not trying to get anyone arrested, or have the authorities start some kind of official investigation. I'm just doing my due diligence before I put people I love at risk.”

Had Mason's face paled, this time? And Jake's? Or was she relapsing? Experiencing visual issues from the concussion because she swore every man in the room — including that Hank guy on the screen — had just gone ten shades lighter.

She crossed her arms, distancing herself as much as possible. "I won't apologize for wanting to protect my family and our foundation."

Mason cleared his throat, rolling his shoulders before glancing at Ryder. Something unspoken passed between the two men before Mason focused on her. "It's not your honor we're questioning, Kennedy. It's — and I think I speak for all of us when I say this — we're a bit *alarmed* you just confirmed Ryder's suspicions that you've been actively trying to identify local drug and weapons' dealers. That you've apparently got an Interpol agent talking to you like *Jiminy freaking Cricket* on your shoulder, and that your parents somehow neglected to tell us you have a death wish."

"I don't—"

"I swear to god, if you say you don't have a death wish, I'm going to tell Isabella what you just told us, and let her rip you a new one. Because I'm pretty damn sure she would have told me if she knew you were over in Kenya and the fucking Congo — which happens to be one of the most dangerous places in all of Africa, by the way — sniffing out cartel members and mercenary squads."

Mason stared at her, arms crossed, eyes narrowed — his voice still lingering in the air. Hanging there like the rain had the day of the explosion. As if time had stopped, or at least, slowed. Then, she swore there was a boom, like some kind of sound barrier being breached, before everything faded into an unnatural silence. No breathing. No whisper of fabric across a chair. Just them looking at her with that steel resolve she was certain had gotten new recruits squirming in their pants.

It took a few breaths before she was able to disengage — focus on Ryder. "Would you like to yell, now? Emphasize how foolish I've been, even if it was in an attempt to keep my

parents — hell, to keep everyone — safe? Or do I get the silent treatment, instead?”

Ryder slid his gaze to Mason and Cruz, studying them for a few minutes before looking at her. “How about we concentrate on moving forward? Which starts with all those photos. Do you still have access to them?”

Had she passed out, again? Was this some kind of dream? Had her head really exploded, this time, because she could have sworn he’d just given her a pass, of sorts.

Kennedy stuck her finger in her ear, giving her head a small shake. “Wait. You’re not going to yell? Or list all the ways I’ve been reckless? Maybe draw some kind of pie chart or Venn diagram for emphasis? Because I find *that* extremely alarming.”

A twitch of his lips was the only indication he was holding back. That he definitely wanted to yell and count off the reasons using his fingers. Maybe his toes, too. But that’s when she realized, he was giving her his trust. That, while he didn’t agree with what she’d done, he wasn’t going to judge her for it. That, on some level, he really did understand.

Ryder released a slow breath, leveling his gaze at her. “I can’t change the past, and it’s wasted energy to argue about risks you’ve already taken and survived.” He narrowed that gaze. “Not that we won’t have a very thorough chat about any future risks you’re considering.” He eased back. “But, for now, let’s put our energy into finding the asshole who’s out to kill you. Deal?”

It took her a moment to process the words — get them all to make sense — then she was cautiously nodding. “I was wrong... There’s more than just a glimmer of hope for you. And you’ve got yourself a deal.”

God, the smile he flashed her. It was hot and sexy, and it did something to her stomach. Like before when she’d hit her head only without the puking. “Good, so back to those photos. Do you still have them?”

She blinked to get her mind refocused. “About a year’s worth. They’re on my secure cloud server, except for any I took on the last two trips. The ones just before and after Mason and Isabella’s wedding. Those are still with my camera at my place.”

“If you’re okay with it, I’d like you to give Darius your server information. He’ll download everything and start looking for patterns. Something that might not have been evident unless studied as a whole.”

“Sure.” She shrugged. “As long as he promises to ignore any *personal* ones. I think I might have been wearing a bikini at some point.”

Ryder’s left eye had definitely twitched, only she didn’t think it was frustration, this time. “I’ll tell him to send those my way. Just to be sure there isn’t anyone hiding in the background.”

“And just like that, the glimmer’s gone.”

“And I was so close. Where’s your camera?”

“In my room, somewhere. Everything was delayed coming back, and I barely had time to get home, change, then go to the event. But it won’t take me long to find it.”

Another twitch, only she knew what this one was.

She firmed her chin, looking each man in the eyes. “You’re not going to let me leave, are you.”

Mason winced a bit at the cold tone. “It’s safer if you stay here.”

“So, I’m a prisoner?”

“Of course not, but—”

“I seem to recall Isabella going a number of places when someone was after her.”

“And we nearly lost her.”

“I promise not to pee without Ryder standing guard. Okay?” She groaned when they merely stared at her. “I’d really like to get some more personal items, if you know what

I mean. And I swear, I'll be a model client and follow instructions."

Mason grunted, glancing at Ryder. "Well, buddy? It's your assignment, so, it's your call."

Ryder leaned over, his mouth dangerously close. "You'll follow every instruction?"

"Every. Single. One."

His lips lifted into a grin. "Okay. But Cruz is coming with us. And if you try to ditch me..."

"Why would I ditch you when I could just get out that shovel?"

"Right. Let's go, and sweetheart, don't make me regret this."

CHAPTER 11



RYDER HAD OBVIOUSLY LOST his mind. Or maybe suffered a head trauma without realizing it because that was the only explanation as to why he'd agreed to bring Kennedy along. Sure, she had a point. Her mom had barely grabbed enough clothes and supplies for a couple of days, let alone the nearly two weeks she'd been staying at The Centre. And he was pretty confident he and Cruz could handle any threat that might pop up.

But it was still a risk, and a smart man would have ignored her feelings and chosen the safest route.

Except where Ryder didn't want to ignore Kennedy's feelings. Didn't want her mad at him, if he was being honest. To go back to her thinking he was an ass. There was also the fact that she wasn't a prisoner, and if they didn't get a lead on a possible suspect, soon, they'd have to allow her to reintegrate into her life. Find a way to protect her without simply locking her away for the foreseeable future.

Not that any form of reasoning eased the pressure between his shoulder blades or stopped the tingling along his spine. He was good at his job. Exceptional, really. As was Cruz. They were more than skilled enough to keep her safe. But there was always that unlikely ricochet. An unforeseen force that changed the rules in an instant. And Ryder wasn't sure he'd be able to look himself in the mirror if anything happened to her.

Like when he'd thought he wouldn't get her to the hospital before her brain swelled. Only, this time, if shit went

sideways, he'd have to live knowing he'd brought her here on purpose.

Cruz nudged him when they stopped at his truck, and raised his brow. He didn't come out and tell Ryder to stop overthinking things or, more pointedly, to get his mind off Kennedy and back on the mission, but Ryder heard it.

He flipped off Cruz, helping Kennedy into a Kevlar vest before donning his, then thumbing for Cruz to climb in the back. Once his buddy was settled, Ryder opened Kennedy's door, offering her his hand. She laughed, muttering something about chivalry, before allowing him to give her a boost as she hopped in and buckled up. He closed the door, then jumped in on his side, giving her another quick glance. And he had to admit, it felt right having her next to him. He just hoped she'd want to make it a more permanent arrangement once she was safe. That spending every moment with him since the bombing had made her see him in a new light — just like he'd seen her.

Ryder smiled when Kennedy picked that same seventies station as he started the truck and drove off. He spent the entire drive checking his mirrors and looking for tails. Anything to suggest the asshole targeting Kennedy had discovered where Ryder had hidden her. That he was playing into a trap. Which was part of the reason they'd waited until evening. Not actually dark, but enough dusk they wouldn't be easy targets if they did end up running from a threat. But even after parking in front of her house, he hadn't gotten a hint of unwanted attention. No sketchy vehicles. No strange shadows. Nothing.

Ryder motioned her to wait as Cruz stepped out, scanning the area before taking up his position behind the passenger door. What would effectively block a shot if they'd missed a sniper hiding in a tree someplace. Unlikely considering the landscape, but they planned for it, anyway.

That was Ryder's cue to clear the home before finally motioning her in. Constantly changing his position to complement Cruz's, which would give Kennedy the most coverage without wrapping her in his arms. Which he would have done if Cruz hadn't looked at Ryder as if he was

questioning his judgment. Again, Cruz didn't come right out and suggest that Ryder was focusing too much on Kennedy, and not enough on his job. But Ryder knew that's what Cruz's furrowed brow meant.

Which was a bit of an oxymoron since focusing on Kennedy *was* Ryder's job. But he made a point of continually checking the area, not just her face. Looking for anything that could indicate someone had bypassed the security and left them another surprise. Like with her Jeep.

Ryder didn't think that was likely, either. Not when he'd been monitoring her security system since the bombing. Other than her mother stopping by to pick up those few supplies, the place had been quiet.

Kennedy followed him in, grumbling something about how her mom hadn't left any lights on, then walked over to one of the lamps. He looked outside when a gust of wind sent a flurry of leaves rushing past the window, the sudden movement triggering that instinctual response he'd honed in the service. The one that had saved him from being ambushed on more than one occasion.

Cruz chuckled from the doorway, alternating his gaze between Ryder and the driveway, but Ryder knew the guy thought he was nuts. And hell, maybe he was.

He was certainly a bit crazy where Kennedy was concerned.

Another gust of swirling leaves had him frowning, — glancing at his phone. Wondering why he hadn't gotten a motion alarm notification for outside of Kennedy's house. He knew he'd only disabled the interior alarms, in case some tango suddenly barreled out of the bushes at them. And Ryder had personally set the sensors to their highest setting — the one that would trip if a mosquito landed on the damn wall.

He checked his phone, then scrolled back over the past week — not a single notification since Kennedy's mother had stopped by that second day.

Shit.

Ryder snagged Kennedy's arm as she went to walk down the hallway. "Change of plans. We're out of here."

She frowned, glancing at Cruz when Ryder headed toward him. "But, I thought we needed the camera and SD cards?"

"No time to explain, but this place has been compromised. I can send a team to grab them, later. Let's—"

A ping, then a crack, then a damn canister crashing through the window before clicking across the floor. A freaking nightmare in the confined space. What could kill them, outright, if he didn't pull a save out of his ass.

Two bounces, and Ryder had Kennedy wrapped in his arms as he yelled for Cruz to get down. Two more, and they were hitting the ground — rolling behind the sofa. Ryder had just enough time to cover his ears and close his eyes before the grenade exploded, erupting into a fury of sight and sound. Smoke poured out of the opening, quickly filling the room as sparks started the curtains smoldering in the kitchen — all overpowered by the deafening roar blasting through the air.

Too close.

Despite having the sofa block some of the force, the size of the room had amplified the effects — had every damn nerve twitching. His damn head feeling as if it might split apart. Were those footsteps? Someone yelling his name or was it just the ringing in his ears? The echo of the blast?

A hand landed on his shoulder, and he managed to grab the guy's wrist — twist it, before Cruz's face loomed in close. Snapped him back a bit.

Cruz shook his head, scooping Kennedy out of Ryder's arms, then helping Ryder to his feet. It wasn't pretty, but with some luck, he managed to lean against the wall. Not keel over.

Cruz was talking. Shouting, really, but all Ryder heard was the odd word. "Backdoor." Then, "Run." Or had he said, "Gun"?

Both made sense, not that Ryder had the coordination to do both. He started by moving. A step, a trip, then a bounce off the wall. What nearly took him to his knees before he got his

feet working. Not a hundred percent, but enough he managed to stumble down the hallway — not crash to the floor.

Cruz wasn't stumbling. The guy was steady. Strong. Ryder didn't know if Cruz had somehow gotten ear plugs in and donned some shades, or if he'd managed to dive out the front door — avoid getting slammed by the flash bang. Either way, his buddy was the only reason Ryder and Kennedy weren't still lying on the floor, waiting for the fuckers who'd tossed the grenade to barge in.

Which happened seconds later. The clear thud of the door bouncing off the wall. The pounding of feet on the hardwood floors. What might still end with them all bleeding out if Ryder didn't push through — regain enough of his senses to help Cruz defend their position.

Cruz placed Kennedy on her feet before opening the backdoor — scanning the area. He leaned into her, asking her something, not that Ryder could make it out past the ringing in his ears. But the guy's lips were definitely moving.

She must have told him whatever he'd needed to hear because he had her by the hand and was heading out a second later. No discussion with Ryder on his plans. No apparent consideration for additional forces that might be hiding in the yard. Just Cruz clearing the area one more time with his Glock, then him and Kennedy disappearing through the door.

Ryder followed suit. Not that he had much choice. Even if he disagreed with Cruz's plan, he wasn't in the position to voice his complaint. Especially when simply running after them took all his concentration. Remembering to watch his six was an afterthought. More instinct than anything. But he managed to send some guy in black gear diving back into the house when Ryder got off a couple of trigger pulls.

When had he pulled his Sig? All he remembered was focusing on planting each step, then he'd been firing his weapon — wondering why the recoil hadn't knocked him off balance.

Training, he supposed. Those twenty plus years in the service. The endless missions behind enemy lines. All the ops

where he'd been forced to exceed his limits — adapt or die.

And they were definitely saving his ass, tonight.

Cruz followed a line of bushes, staying slightly hunched over so he and Kennedy remained in the mix of shadows blanketing the foliage. Kennedy was barely keeping stride, tripping every other step. Using Cruz's hand to somehow stumble her way along, the numbing effects of the flash bang still messing with her neurons. Though, the fact she was conscious and moving, at all, was a miracle. Especially after the concussion. God, had the grenade made her relapse? Was she at risk of having her brain swell, again? Would they reach safety only to have her pass out?

She didn't seem unwell. Wasn't grabbing her head or squinting like she had before. But, he also knew she'd go the distance until they either got clear or she passed out. Because if he'd learned one thing about Kennedy Sinclair, it's that she cared to the point she'd put her own life at risk if it meant keeping her friends safe.

Not that he would have labeled her his friend, really. Which was fine, because he wanted to be so much more than that.

Cruz stopped when they reached a fishpond surrounded by dense pine trees, with a decorative cement bench off to one side. Thick shadows stretched across a stamped concrete walkway, like long fingers reaching toward them.

Cruz darted behind the largest trunk, nodding at Ryder when he stopped behind the one beside them. "You back with me, or are you still seeing double?"

"It's more of an occasional shifting, now, but your concern is touching, buddy." He looked at Kennedy, trying to assess her condition. "Sweetheart? You okay? Is your head pounding? Feeling sick, again?"

She met his gaze, a hint of a smile showing through the obvious pain as she palmed her head. "Yes, to all, but it's not because I'm relapsing. What the hell was that?"

“It’s called a flash bang. It’s designed to immobilize you with light and sound, and you can see how effective it is. Are you sure any side effects are just from the grenade?”

“Positive. So, where, now? We’re out of cover.”

“This is where you stay with Cruz, and I go take care of our friends.”

Cruz snorted. “I saw three guys racing up the driveway while I was picking myself up after diving out the door. That’s a tall order, when they’ve got the advantage.”

“Who says they’ve got the advantage?” Ryder checked his gear as he readied himself to dart out. “I’m the one with everything to lose. That makes me extremely motivated. You good?”

He didn’t wait for Cruz to answer, simply turned and followed the trees around the far side of the pond. He didn’t look back. Couldn’t. Not and be the man he needed to be because if he thought, for one second, Kennedy might get hurt...

He had to put his faith in Cruz. As much as they teased him for riding a desk — being a freaking black ops weatherman — the guy was hardcore. Had been right there in the field with him and Mason, and their team. Was every inch the warrior they were. And Ryder knew Cruz would guard Kennedy with his life.

Ryder hoped it wouldn’t come down to that. Not after his buddy had finally made things right between him and Ayla. And Ryder definitely didn’t want to have to tell Ayla he’d allowed her husband to die because he’d been stupid — had walked into a trap.

He should have realized the damn cameras had been tampered with. That they’d be waiting for Kennedy to return. But, he’d been more focused on not having her die on him from her head injury. In digging through intel to uncover who was targeting her. *Not* seeing threats on her security feed hadn’t even fazed him as being off.

Mistakes he could worry about later. After he'd redeemed himself.

A chance that cropped up a minute later while he was following the opposite line of bushes back toward her house. One of those men in tactical gear slinking down the walkway. The guy wasn't even trying to hide, just strolling along out in the open, begging to be capped.

A decoy. Which explained the slight rustling of leaves off to the creep's right. One of his partners following along in the brush, ready to shoot anyone who took the bait.

No sign of that third guy. Maybe he'd stayed in the house in case Ryder had doubled back. Or he could be flanking Cruz's position — boxing them in. Either way, Ryder needed to act quickly.

He took off, staying low and tight against the fence. No moving the branches or stepping on twigs. Nothing that would announce his position. He only went far enough he could dart across to their side without being seen. Making himself a target. While it would be a good distraction, he couldn't afford to get hit before he'd eliminated at least two of them.

Halfway across, and those bastards were still heading toward Kennedy and Cruz. Weren't even checking their six. Probably thought their buddy was watching it. Which left them wide open.

Ryder circled in behind the second guy, slowly closing the distance between them. He didn't have much time with them nearly at the damn pond, but if he rushed it, he might not get them both.

He unsheathed his Ka-Bar from his ankle holder, thankful he'd had the forethought to strap it on before leaving, then moved in close. He didn't want to fire, just yet. Not when he suspected they had body armor beneath the clothing. What could end in a risky gunfight with Cruz or Kennedy getting caught in a crossfire. While they were both wearing vests, that didn't make them invincible. And that wasn't a chance Ryder was willing to take.

Instead, he crept up behind the guy, staying in his blind spot until the creep must have sensed Ryder's presence. He turned when Ryder was still a couple feet back, but close enough he didn't think twice about throwing the knife.

The guy clutched at his throat, nothing but a gurgled breath escaping before he dropped. Hard.

His buddy turned, but Ryder was already stepping out. Asshole's head in the crosshairs. While he would have liked to have wounded the man — given them someone else to interrogate — he couldn't take the chance things would go sideways.

One shot, one hit, and the bastard was down. His foot still twitching. Blood pooling across the pressed concrete patio on this side of the pond. Not that Ryder stood there and stared. He was already running for the trees — darting back in behind that pine in case the third guy popped up and started firing.

An engine revved in the distance, followed by squealing tires, the hum of the vehicle slowly fading. They waited until they were confident the other tango really was gone before doing a full sweep, Kennedy wedged between them.

Coming up empty didn't hold the satisfaction Ryder thought it would. Not when it meant there were still threats out there. A seemingly endless supply of goons for whoever was in charge. And Ryder knew this was far from over.

CHAPTER 12



KENNEDY WAS GOING TO DIE.

Not from the men chasing her, or the headache that had resurfaced from the flash bang. It was Ryder. *He* was going to kill her if he didn't finally make a move and kiss her.

She'd been waiting. Wishing. Aware that she hadn't been in any condition to get physical with him before now. That it probably wasn't the best time to make those kinds of decisions, with her adrenaline spiking. Her emotions riding a non-stop rollercoaster. One that might mistake the thrill of surviving with something more romantic.

Except she'd been secretly harboring feelings for him for months. Long before anyone had targeted her.

But just her luck, he seemed perfectly happy riding along in the friend zone. Sure, he'd held her hand even when he hadn't needed to, and he'd been glued to her side when she knew one of his buddies could have spelled him off. But he hadn't given her a single clear sign that he was interested in more than simply keeping her safe.

That he was slowly dying, too.

Kennedy glanced at the clock on the wall. Midnight. And he was still in the communications room with Darius, Logan, Mason, and Cruz. The five of them poring over the images Darius had downloaded from her server. And the one SD card she'd managed to recover once Ryder had allowed her back inside her house.

What was left of it. Between the sparks and the smoke from the flash bang, and the broken items from one of those bastards trashing it, not much had remained unscathed. Realizing they'd taken her camera and two of the memory cards had been the last proverbial straw. Made the trip a shining failure. Had they been after the photos, all along? Was that really what it was all about? And why hadn't they simply ransacked her place earlier?

Or had they been waiting for her, and the rest was just a coincidence? Maybe they'd heard her talking about the camera with the bug Ryder had found, and used that opportunity to steal it, hoping they'd get her in the process.

Whatever the reason, Ryder had been brooding ever since they'd returned. As if it was his fault the men had stolen possible intel. Not that she blamed him. If it hadn't been for him and Cruz, she'd be dead.

Again.

She'd nearly had a mini stroke when Ryder had darted off, alone. That massive gun in his hand. Nothing but steel cold resolve mirrored in his stride. She wasn't sure what he'd meant by having everything to lose — if he was talking about failing his mission or her — but *thinking* he might have meant her had done something to her head beyond the shifting scenery and buzzing noises.

It had made her hope. Dream, really. Both of which were slowly fading with every moment he stayed distant.

The handle rattled, then Ryder was standing in the doorway, his muscular form taking up most of the space. He wasn't quite as large as some of his teammates, but he was quick and agile. More like tightly wound strength than brute force, with a quiet confidence that was sexy as hell.

He did a scan of the room, not that she was sure why. This was the one place he'd allowed her to stay on her own when he'd needed to run down a lead without her. Which he'd limited to no more than an hour or two at a time, but he'd obviously felt completely confident that nothing could target her while she was inside.

Kennedy glanced around the room, too, wondering if she'd missed some hidden threat. If there were snakes or spiders suddenly crawling across the floor. Maybe a tango crashing through the window after having scaled the wall. Something to account for Ryder's furrowed brow and narrowed eyes. The odd way he drew himself up before closing and locking the door.

That had her inhaling. He'd never locked the door, before, always muttering about how his buddies might need to race in if the facility was under attack. That he was more worried about not getting her out quick enough in an emergency than whether a rogue band of mercenaries would get past not only their security, but his crew. Team Raptor, too.

Was this that sign she'd been waiting for? Did he want to do more than sleep, and that's why he'd locked the door? So they wouldn't get interrupted? Was she reading it all wrong? Projecting her desire onto an otherwise innocent act?

Maybe the attack today had changed his mind about how safe they were once everyone else left. When his guard was down a bit. Or, maybe he wasn't even aware he'd locked the door. Just an old habit he'd been overriding all those other nights. Maybe he didn't want to pounce on her, at all.

Then, he turned, and all those thoughts about him *not* wanting to go beyond friends, disappeared. Gone in a heartbeat, because the way he was looking at her, right now... Lethal was putting it mildly.

Had she gasped? Mouthed his name? Already begged him to kiss her, because he was standing in front of the door one second, then shoving her against the wall, the next. His fingers sliding through her hair, all that muscular form pressed against hers.

He paused, tilting his head to one side, then his mouth was crushing over hers, his tongue dipping inside.

Had any man ever tasted that good? A mix of coffee and promise that had her humming in response. Wrapping her arms around his neck in an effort to pull him closer. Either he'd gotten the message, or they were simply on the same page

because he shifted her just enough she could wrap one of her legs around his. Not quite riding his thigh, but enough his heat warmed her skin through the thin fabric of her yoga pants. The ones he'd been staring at since she'd slipped them on after they'd returned. As if he'd never seen a woman wear a pair, before.

Ryder brushed his lips across hers, either unable or unwilling to completely break contact as he stood there, their breath mixing. Her chest heaving against his. She wasn't sure if the dots starting to cloud her vision were because she couldn't fully expand her lungs — take a deep breath — or because he'd stolen it. Absorbed all the oxygen in the room simply by being there.

Not that she cared. Passing out while pinned to the wall seemed like a reasonable risk. One she'd willingly take if it meant he'd keep kissing her. Keep pressing all those firm muscles against her.

Did he still have his gun? Or was the ridge digging into her hip her reward for living? Enduring the past two weeks of pain and stress. Of having her life put under a microscope. She rubbed against him, and his fingers fisted in her hair, his next breath releasing on a harsh moan.

Definitely *not* his gun.

Ryder eased back, sliding one hand down to rest on her hip. “Do you know how long I’ve been waiting to do that?”

She smiled up at him. “Too long.”

He sighed, dragging his mouth along her neck. “It took me a while to get past being an ass.”

“You did that when you saved my life. Everything since then has been me slowly falling under your spell. So, in case you’re still confused on whether I’m all in or not...”

She eased one arm from around his neck, trailing her fingers down his chest, over his hip before squeezing his length through his cargo pants.

He groaned, and she swore she nearly climaxed, right there, because the sound... Part anguish, part desire. As if

she'd caused him pain, but the good kind, that burned red hot and would make the final release turn supernova.

Ryder lowered his mouth next to her ear, nipping at her lobe before exhaling. "Dangerous, sweetheart. After nearly losing you, again..."

Had he growled, that time? Some sort of low purr that vibrated through his chest and into hers. A primal warning that things were about to get very messy.

"I'm on the edge. Between the flash bang, the men, and you looking like fucking sin in those yoga pants..."

She shook her head. "I wasn't the one who took on three heavily armed men... Alone. I damn near had a heart attack. And this is how I prefer to dress when I don't have to keep up appearances. All that *prancing*."

"Still a hardass about that comment. Makes me wonder what it'll take to get you to forget about it."

"Unsure, but I'd say you're on the right track, soldier. Because this is just the start, right? You *are* planning on making love me all night, aren't you?"

He smiled. "If that hadn't already been the plan, then it would be, now. So, take a deep breath. You won't be coming up for air, any time soon."

"As long as I'm coming, I don't need to breathe."

Ryder's breath hitched for a moment, then his lips kicked up. "Challenge accepted."

He claimed her mouth, licking and tasting until she really was seeing dots. The bedroom spinning just a bit. Not that it stopped once he'd eased back enough, and she managed a lungful of air. Which meant it was him — Ryder Callahan. And she doubted she'd find sure footing in the foreseeable future.

She must have moaned or tugged on his shirt because he stepped back a moment later, placing his weapons on the nightstand. He ripped his tee over his head before unzipping his pants and shoving them down his legs. A shimmy and a

kick, and they were gone. Pooled on the floor somewhere off to their right. Not that she cared because, damn, the man was beyond gorgeous. Long, lean muscles that corded with every movement. Slightly tanned skin with a dusting of hair on his chest. Just enough to take the edge off the pretty model vibe and turn it into rugged warrior. The man who eliminated threats. Was willing to sacrifice himself for honor. For his teammates.

For her.

She relaxed against the wall, openly running her gaze the length of him before reluctantly dragging it up to his. She tilted her head to the side, loving the weight of anticipation hanging in the air. “What if I’d wanted to undress you?”

He arched a brow, waving at his boxers. “Left the most important piece for you.”

“Your socks?”

“You wouldn’t want my toes to get cold prematurely, would you?”

“I doubt I have to worry about any part of you reacting *prematurely*.”

He closed the short distance between them, drawing his fingers along her collar bone at the edge of her shirt. “You doubt? Are you questioning my stamina, already? That hurts, sweetheart.”

“You’re a big boy. You can handle it.” She hummed when he kissed the path his hand had taken. “God, Ryder.”

She’d been right. He was definitely going to kill her. Especially when she’d been close to finishing five minutes ago. From nothing more than touching him through his pants.

With them gone...

He was longer — harder — and just thinking of finally feeling all the strength move inside her had the room spinning, again. Or, maybe it hadn’t really stopped. Maybe Ryder had simply been spinning at the same speed as her while they’d

locked gazes. Now that he'd broken the link, was kissing and nipping the skin on her neck, the speed had increased.

She blinked in an effort to ground herself, and her shirt was gone. Vanished. As if he'd simply wished it off. A tug at her waist, one arm lifting her up, and her pants were gone, too. Fluttering to the floor near his. A splash of black amidst his beige.

Ryder paused, her body flush with his, her feet dangling in the air, before he closed his eyes. Groaned. "Another thong. Christ..."

She inhaled as he placed her on the floor, one hand cupping her ass. "Another? When..."

"The hospital. When you asked me to help you get dressed. It took a year's worth of self-control to inch those scrubs over your hips without running my fingers all over your skin." He bent down until his head was level with hers. "My tongue, too."

She forced herself to swallow, thankful she when she didn't choke or spit on Ryder's face, then brushed her mouth over his. "Nothing's stopping you, now."

He moved. Striped off his briefs and socks, lifted her in his arms, again, then turned and took the five steps over to the bed. She bounced as they landed on the mattress, before he was flipping her to her stomach — pinning her beneath him.

He kissed her neck, pressing onto his hands and knees, moving his palms to her back. He started up a gentle circular motion, kneading her shoulders, then working his way lower. He unhooked her bra as he went, somehow managing to slip it down her arms and slide it out from beneath her without losing contact. By the time he'd reached the top of her ass...

She was panting. Practically vibrating with need as a deep, gnawing ache built in her groin. At this rate, her thong would be soaked once he finally reached it. Maybe the sheets, too, because she'd never been this aroused. Never been so close to begging him to touch her.

Really touch her. Not the infuriating massage he seemed focused on giving her.

He must have picked up on her increased tension and levered back, dropping a lingering kiss on one ass cheek.

“Ryder. God, are you determined to kill me?”

He chuckled against her flesh, kissing the other side as he teased the vee of her legs. “Can’t rush this. I wouldn’t want you to think I’m still an ass. Besides, you did issue me a challenge.”

“And yet, I’m still perched on the edge. Slowly going insane.”

“Oh, sweetheart. We’re nowhere close to the prize. There’s still so much I need to learn. Like this...”

He shifted, then his lips landed on the soft spot behind her knee, making her giggle. “Are you ticklish?”

He used his tongue, and she squirmed beneath him, glancing at him over her shoulder. “Very.”

“Good to know. What about here?” He nudged her legs apart, kissing her inner thigh.

“Everywhere. Please, for the love of god, Ryder, consider me impressed. I need—”

“To be patient.”

She groaned, letting her head fall back to the bed. She recognized that tone. Like when he’d told her to make a run for the dumpsters while he covered her. Nothing was going to change his mind.

Ryder prowled over her, threading his fingers through her hair and twisting her face toward him. He claimed her mouth, eating at it until more than just the room was spinning when he finally let her grab some air. “I promise the wait will be worth it.”

She beckoned him to her for another kiss, smiling when he stayed close. “You’ve already exceeded expectations. Just enjoy your turn because I plan to get my revenge.”

“I love the sound of that.”

“Remember that when you’re begging me, later.”

Ryder closed his eyes, another one of those growl-like purrs rumbling free.

Kennedy waited until she had all his attention focused on her, again. His blue gaze definitely all steel, now. “Are you imagining me on my knees in front of you? Giving you the best damn blowjob of your life? Because I am.”

Whether it was what she’d said, how she’d said it, or her admitting she wanted more than just this one go-round, she wasn’t sure, but it flicked some kind of switch. Took Ryder from teasing to determined in a heartbeat.

He leaned forward, capturing her lips in a kiss that made the others seem trivial. As if he’d been practicing, all along, in order to get this one perfect. Then, he was flipping her over — dragging his mouth down her skin. Licking and sucking. Taking her to the brink only to ease off — wait until she’d recovered before starting up, again. By the time he was wedged between her legs, she was panting, and gasping, and ready to explode at the lightest of touches. That stupid triangle of cloth still separating her from feeling his skin on hers.

Ryder tsked, tugging on the edge of her thong. “You’ve soaked through this.”

He slipped his hand inside, a swirl of his finger had arching her off the bed. “Fuck, Kennedy. So soft and wet. I bet you taste just a bit wild.”

“Ryder, I’m close. You lick me... Damn.”

Her thong was gone. Ripped off or he’d shucked it without moving her. Not that she cared when he licked a path along her flesh, sending colored dots across her vision. The next pass had her clenching her teeth, thinking about anything but the smooth glide of his tongue. The firm pressure when he sucked at her skin. By the time he slipped his finger inside her, she was straining not to come. Lifting her hips into the gentle rhythm of in, pause, then out.

“God, you’re beautiful strung tight. Fight it, sweetheart. I need more time.”

She cried out his name, managing to lift her head a bit to look at him. “Seconds. You have seconds, and that’s only if you stop and simply stare at me. Maybe not, even then.”

His smile. It was sin and promise, and the most gorgeous thing she’d ever seen. “Then, let’s make every one count. Deep breath, because I want you to scream my name.”

Five seconds in, and she was chanting some mix of. “Yes,” and, “please.” Another five, and she had her fingers locked in his hair, fisting the soft strands as she tried to hang on. Last more than one more second.

She got maybe ten, before that coil inside her core snapped, and she broke. Heat billowing out in every direction, those colored dots exploding behind her eyes. Time stopped or slid sideways, numbing her into a soothing haze with nothing but her body and his even registering.

Had she screamed his name? Whispered it? Only thought it in her head? She didn’t know, but once she was finally able to open her eyes, Ryder was grinning like a victorious warrior.

He reached for something on the ground, then held up a packet as he sighed. “This thing’s at least a year old. But I’ve only got a couple, and none of them are any newer.”

The simple admission that it had been a while for him, too, eased the bit of tension that, until then, she hadn’t realized she’d been hiding. That maybe he’d been searching for someone, too, without really knowing it. That he was thinking beyond tonight and didn’t seem overly scared if something happened.

That this was some kind of destiny.

Kennedy managed to push onto her elbows, impressed she had any strength left, at all. “Call me crazy, but I’m having a hard time worrying about any possible consequences. But maybe that’s because you’re worth the risk. So, either stand there and let me have my payback, or put that thing on and make love to me.”

CHAPTER 13



SHE WAS SERIOUS. Not just about the blowjob or them finally getting to the main event. About him being worth the risk. That, if they ended up pregnant like Mason and Isabella, Kennedy wouldn't threaten to shoot him in the ass. Which Ryder hoped meant she was thinking about the future, too. That she wanted far more than just tonight.

She arched a brow, giving him a long slow once-over when he just stood there, staring at her. "Does this mean I'm going to my knees? Because I can definitely get on board with that." Her lips kicked up. "You *will* be able to go, again — after you recover, right?"

Ryder shook his head, ripping open the packet then sheathing himself before prowling across the bed. Loving how she watched every movement, every twitch of his muscles. "Are you still questioning my stamina? Because I'm pretty sure it was your voice begging to come just a few minutes ago."

She laughed when he pounced on top of her, slipping his arms under her shoulders as he wedged himself between her legs. Every damn inch of their bodies touching. "It was. Though, I'm glad you're not the type of guy who'd be smug about it."

Damn, he was crazy about her.

"That would make me an ass."

Kennedy palmed his jaw. "Kiss me."

He grinned, then leaned down — took her lips in his. But not hard, like before. When he couldn't think past the need to taste her. Feel all that smooth flesh move beneath his. This was soft. Coaxing. He wanted her to realize it wasn't all about the sex. About him grinding her into the bed. That he wanted more than just her body.

He wanted everything.

Which started with a gentle seduction. Kissing her over and over until her fingers slid back along his jaw and threaded through his hair. That had him repositioning himself enough he could tease her with a hint of penetration. Not enough that he was actually inside her, just a slow nudge. A preview of his intentions.

Having her fist his hair as she moaned in his ear, her other hand clawing at his back as her hips punched up — tried to sink him fully inside her — was his cue to step it up. Not completely, but he thrust forward — claimed half of her.

Kennedy inhaled, her legs lifting to cross behind his back as her head tipped toward the headboard, accentuating the long line of her neck. How her muscles strained as she fought to adjust to his width. Take him deeper.

He gave her a few moments, then thrust, again, not stopping until he'd bottomed out. And damn near came — all that white hot pressure taking his breath away.

He clenched his thighs, his ass, his everything... managing to stave off his release by working through some old strategies. Focusing on anything but how fucking hot she was. How this was exactly how he'd always envisioned coming home would be. That somehow over the past few weeks, she'd filled that void inside him. Made forever possible.

Kennedy held tight, raising her head enough to nip at his ear. What he assumed was her signal to start moving. Slow, at first. In, a long pause, then out. Each stroke a bit firmer than the one before, until he had a steady pace going. Still not hurried. Just enough to get her close without going over. Keep her perched on that thin line between not enough and too much.

She moaned Ryder's name, snapping his attention fully to her face. God, she was beautiful. Skin flushed pink. Eyes open — her gaze fixed on him. As if she'd miss something important if she looked away. Or maybe she just wanted to get lost in the moment. Like him, staring down into her hazel eyes. Nothing but them and the ever-building heat between them.

He pulled her closer, using her reactions to gauge every move. A bit faster when she gripped his back — slower when her head pressed into the pillow. Drawing it out until her entire body tensed, and she lifted her head.

“Ryder.”

That's all she seemed capable of getting out. No demands, no wishes, just his name.

That low rasp ruined him. Had him levering onto his hands — pumping his hips harder. Faster. Kennedy inhaled, holding her breath as her eyelids fluttered, only to gasp when he stopped.

He grinned at her wide eyes then dipped his shoulder, rolling onto his back. Effectively swapping their positions. Her hands landed on his chest her knees splayed around his thighs as she stared at him as if he'd lost his mind. That she'd never considered he'd want her to take control.

Ryder smoothed his hands up her torso, cupping her breasts as he nodded at where they were joined. “Your turn.”

She opened her mouth, looking as if she was going to protest, before laughing. “A whole lot more hope than just a glimmer.”

She rose, pausing with him barely inside her before slowly lowering — making him question if he'd thought this scenario through, too. Because she was teasing him. Torturing him, really. Like she'd claimed she'd do when she got the chance. And this wasn't even that blowjob she'd promised. Just her body moving along his, driving him mad. He was seriously considering flipping them, again, maybe taking her from

behind so he could really thrust, when she tensed, her head falling backwards and her nails clawing at his chest.

He levered up enough to spear his fingers through her hair — drag her into him for one long, deep kiss. Then he rolled, wanting to watch her go over. Feel every muscle as it contracted. Savor the rasp of her breath when she finally exhaled.

Kennedy didn't question him, wrapping her arms around his back, again, then arching into every stroke. He didn't hold back, pumping so hard the damn bed shimmied against the wall. Started tapping out a rhythm. Not that he cared because she was close. Her breath held, her body strung tight. All it took was a few more passes, him nipping at the soft spot at the base of her neck, and she broke. His name sounding around them like a ragged prayer. Her body contracting along his length.

He managed to keep moving, watching her face until she blinked enough to open her eyes — meet his gaze. That did him in, and he let go, head tilted back, eyes squeezed shut as his release burned through him and into her. Endless spasms until he wasn't sure he'd remain conscious before it stopped, and he collapsed on top of her. His face buried in her hair, her arms still wrapped around him.

Was he squishing her? Could she breathe? He managed to push onto his elbows, gaze down at her and damn... if he'd thought she was stunning, before, then this was beyond that. Her hair tousled, her skin flushed. Not an ounce of makeup. Just her inner beauty shining through.

Her eyelids fluttered, again, then she was smiling. Palming his face as she drew him back down for another kiss. This one soft. Deep.

Kennedy hummed, and his heart thumped over. Like a damn lock turning inside his chest. And he knew, this was what Mason had been trying to tell him. A connection Ryder hadn't really believed existed until this exact moment.

Here, with Kennedy.

She brushed her thumb along his lip, still smiling at him. “Looks like Isabella was right. You are exceptional at challenges.”

“Does that mean you might finally forgive the prancing comment?”

She laughed. “Let’s not get too crazy. I think you need to do that a few dozen more times...”

“Right now?”

She swatted his biceps, biting her lip when her hand just bounced off. “Fine, I’ll compromise. Kiss me, and you’ll be forgiven.”

He lowered, loving how her eyes rolled slightly at the increased pressure. As if his weight soothed something inside her. “I think you need to work on your negotiation skills. One kiss?”

She brushed her thumb over his mouth, again. “We’ll start with one, but I’m hoping you’re in for a whole lot more.”

“I was wrong. Your negotiation skills are on point.” He closed the distance — took her lips with his. Tasting and teasing until he thought he’d pass out.

Kennedy sighed, watching him as he reluctantly pulled out, then disposed of the condom. He made a quick trip to the bathroom, bringing back a damp cloth to clean her up, then gathered her in his arms, loving the weight of her head on his chest. How each breath feathered across his skin.

This was definitely forever in the making.

Ryder smoothed his hand down her arm. “Sleep. No nightmares, tonight.”

She kissed his chest, burrowing closer. “Don’t be too heroic. If I wake up from one, it means you’ll have to find a way to help me get back to sleep. And I still plan on bringing you to your knees.”

“You just did.”

Kennedy lifted her head. “Now that was charming.”

“Maybe that left hook is finally wearing off.”

“And, he’s back. Sleep. I’ll be waking you up in the best way in a few hours.”

Ryder dropped a kiss on her forehead, chuckling when she drifted off moments later. Like she’d flicked a switch and simply shut down. Not that he blamed her. It was well after one, and with everything that had happened, he knew she was exhausted.

He was wired, though that was likely because they might have finally caught a break in her case. He hadn’t mentioned it, but Darius had uncovered one person who’d been at five different locations Kennedy had been investigating as possible sites for a new clinic within the past year, alone. And there was no way it was a coincidence. Not when her travels had covered a few thousand miles and several countries.

Darius had mentioned something about running a different kind of program. That it was a long shot but... At least, it was something. Because sitting around, waiting for another attempt on Kennedy’s life was slowly chipping away at Ryder’s sanity. And the last thing their new division needed was for one of them to go rogue.

He would if he had to. He just hoped it wouldn’t come to that.

Ryder closed his eyes, listening to Kennedy snuffle in her sleep as the room faded, her steady heartbeat easing some of his lingering tension. He drifted off, waking what seemed like moments later to someone pounding on the door. He bolted up, palming his Sig from the nightstand before remembering he’d locked the door.

“Ryder.”

Ryder cursed under his breath, putting his gun back on the table, then kissing Kennedy when she startled awake beside him. He motioned for her to stay, then stumbled out of the bed and made his way across the room.

He managed to yank on his pants, scrubbing his hand down his face as he turned the bolt, then slivered open the

door. “It’s not even light outside.”

Mason crossed his arms over his chest. “Two weeks, and I swear you’ve never locked that door.”

“Is that why you got me up? To tell me the door was locked?”

“That, and that you’re not wearing a shirt. Fly’s undone, too.”

Ryder leaned against the door. “And I’m barefoot. Are we good, now?”

“Darius has something. He says it’s important.”

“Next time, start with that.”

“And miss an opportunity to say, I told you so? We’ll be in the conference room.”

“Give us ten.”

Ryder closed the door, then turned and leaned against it when Kennedy tsked at him. He looked up, and his breath stalled. Hair curling around her in a tangled mess, a rosy hue coloring her cheeks — she looked fucking gorgeous.

She cracked a smile, gazing at him as if he was the answer to some secret she’d been keeping. “For someone who just got news there’s a lead, you don’t look all that impressed.”

He pushed off the door and stalked toward her. “I’m thrilled there’s a possible lead. I just hate Mason’s timing. I had big plans for this morning.”

Kennedy slipped out from under the covers, stepping into his arms, and Ryder had to remind himself they didn’t have time for him to ravish her. “I’ll make you another compromise.”

“This should be interesting.”

“You humor your buddies and see what they’ve uncovered, and I’ll show you how grateful I am as soon as we get back in this room.” She tip-toed up and nipped at his bottom lip. “Oh, the things I’d love to do to you.”

He wouldn't get a boner. He wouldn't. He had more control than that, even if he wanted to simply lift her up and plunge inside. "That sounds like another challenge."

"It is."

"Then, you've got a deal, just do me a favor?" He tucked her hair behind her ear, loving how soft it felt against his skin. "Stay close."

He didn't know how else to say it. That a part of him needed her beside him. Not just so he could jump in front of a bullet, since he doubted that was going to be a problem. More that he needed to feel her presence. Know that she was safe. That he could kiss her. Hold her hand. Just be with her.

Her gaze softened, and she drew him down for a soft kiss. "I will. Promise."

"Then, you'd best get dressed. And I highly suggest another pair of those yoga pants." He grinned. "For safety. So you could kick a tango if one busted down the door."

She stepped back, giving him a bright smile. "Pretty sure that's why I have you."

And just like that, he fell a bit harder. Knew this was more than a simple crush or convenient fling.

"Touché, sweetheart."

She laughed, then headed for the bathroom. "I'll grab a pair and be out in a minute. Oh, and Ryder..." She gave him a long slow sweep. "I want to undress you, myself, later. So, make peace with that, now."

She disappeared into the adjoining room, the splash of water a reminder of why they'd been dragged out of bed. Darius had a lead. Ryder only hoped it panned out. And that Kennedy wouldn't walk away once he'd finally eliminated the threat. Because for the first time in his life, he was ready to jump.

CHAPTER 14



HADN'T she just been in this room? Watching all the men *watch* her as if she really did have bodies buried someplace? Though, this time, it was different. Not because Darius had a lead or that they already knew her deep dark secrets. It was Ryder. Or, maybe it was her.

Them, she supposed.

Which seemed a bit crazy. It wasn't as if this was the first time either of them had had sex. Quite the contrary. And she wasn't foolish enough to think that a romp between the sheets had changed everything.

Except where it hadn't just been a romp for her. Sure, it had been incredible. Definitely the best damn sex of her life. But somewhere between him undressing her and holding her while she'd slept, she'd given him more than just her body.

The bastard had stolen her heart.

But what was more surprising was... she didn't want him to give it back.

It had been a surreal discovery after being fiercely independent for the past thirty-six years. Never wanting anyone to get in the way of what she wanted to accomplish. Only, now, she was starting to realize that accomplishments without anyone to share them with, weren't as fulfilling as she'd once thought. That they fell flat. Were missing a piece.

A Ryder-shaped piece.

She was definitely crazy. Maybe suffered some kind of long-lasting complication from the head injury. The kind that had her throwing caution to the wind and falling in love in an insanely short period of time.

Or maybe she'd simply been falling a bit each day since they'd first met months ago but hadn't realized it. Had brushed it off because neither of them had been willing to look beyond the surface. She understood that, now. That she'd judged Ryder the same way he had, her. From appearances. And she'd gravely mistaken indifference for vulnerability. Because that's what he'd been trying to avoid. Caring for anyone who might end up being his weakness. The one part of his life he couldn't control.

Couldn't protect.

It all seemed so clear to her, now. How losing Mary Lou had changed him. Scarred him, really. It didn't matter if they'd ever been involved. If he'd loved her. She'd been important to him, and he hadn't been able to protect her.

Just like Mason.

And Ryder's perceived failure had shut him off. Shut him down.

He wasn't holding back, now. Had made a point of staying dangerously close the entire walk down the hallways and into the room. Even now, his chair was closer than it needed to be, and he'd rested his arm along the backside of her seat. Essentially wrapping it around her shoulders without *actually* touching her. But she felt the heat from his body, sensed his presence on an almost atomic level. Like they were two atoms vibrating at the same frequency. The reason the world stopped spinning whenever he was close.

The other men were gathered around the table, all smiling far too smugly. As if they knew she'd spent the night loving Ryder. And, maybe they did. Maybe she wore their encounter like a tattoo across her forehead. Either way, she couldn't seem to muster the strength to care. Not with Ryder hovering next to her, looking as if he might kiss her at a moment's notice. That

he didn't care what his buddies thought because he was far too focused on her.

He smiled, and her stomach dropped as her chest squeezed tight. God, he was handsome when he smiled. And knowing how he felt moving inside her, how he tasted... She was definitely going to make good use of her time, later, and run her tongue over every inch of him. She hadn't gotten to discover nearly enough about him, yet, and she planned on correcting that mistake as soon as possible.

One side of Ryder's mouth kicked up higher, as if he'd followed her internal thoughts, and knew he was the reason she was smiling. Had a flush heating her cheeks.

He inched closer, half of his body skimming hers. "You're glowing, sweetheart."

"Am I?"

He reached over and brushed his thumb along her jaw. "It looks good on you."

A throat cleared nearby, and she had to physically drag her gaze away from his. From that stunning blue color that matched his shirt. Lighter than last night but still edging toward steel.

Mason looked at her, chuckled, then panned over to Ryder, arching a brow. "Are you two back with us, or do you need to finish whatever's going on here?"

Ryder didn't move an inch, still crowding against her chair. "I don't think we have time for that, so why don't you get to the part where it was worth leaving our bed."

Our bed?

Had he actually said, *our bed*? As in the one they'd obviously shared? And in front of everyone. As if he wasn't the least bit fazed his buddies all assumed she and Ryder had finally slept together. Because he wasn't tense. Wasn't trying to hide the change in their relationship. If anything, he was owning it. Daring Mason to challenge him. And damn, it fluttered those butterflies in her stomach. Had more heat

burning beneath her skin. She only hoped she made it through the meeting without melting into a puddle of lust.

Darius shook his head. “You Air Force guys are always so serious. Fine, we’ll skip the pleasantries and jump right into the fray.” He glanced at her. “I have to say, Kennedy, you were incredibly ambitious. There were far more images than I thought there’d be of stuff not pertaining to your work. Do you always take that many photographs?”

She shrugged. “Let’s just say some places give off a creepy vibe, and I tend to compensate by snapping more pictures. I know it doesn’t change anything, but it gives me a false sense of control.”

Ryder huffed, pursing his lips together in what looked like an effort not to comment.

She reached for his hand — gave it a squeeze. “I know... It was reckless, and dangerous, and I’m lucky this creep didn’t try to kill me until I was home and had you and your team to save my ass. And I’m sure we’ll be discussing — at length — my security for all future trips. And I promise, I’ll listen.”

His scowl softened, and he simply nodded.

She turned to Darius. “So, I assume the photos helped?”

“In a matter of speaking.” Darius flashed a few up on the giant screen. “It took a lot of number crunching and having my programs scrub the images looking for facial similarities. We’ve discovered that cartel members often change their appearance in the hopes of avoiding facial recognition software. Beards and hair length can confuse some programs, as does wearing glasses or hats. Anything to prevent a camera from getting good reference points to compare to. But after hours of searching, all four of these men were at multiple locations you visited.”

Darius highlighted two of them. “We’ve identified these two men as the recent casualties from your place. The ones Ryder eliminated after they tossed a flash bang through your window. Like all the others, there aren’t any records as to who they are, where they came from, or what organization they

might be with. But the fact they were in Africa with you during this past trip, suggests they followed you here.”

Ryder leaned forward, any trace of lightness gone. “You thought you had a lead on one of the other guys, last night. Please tell me that’s why you dragged us in here.”

“I was getting to that part.” He highlighted the image on the far left. “Out of all the people you photographed, this guy is, by far, your biggest fan. I have him in Guinea-Bissau, Chad, and Kenya.”

Darius shook his head. “I can’t believe you walk around those places, alone. But, now’s not the time for a lecture. And I can tell how Ryder’s practically foaming at the mouth at the mere mention of the countries, he’s using every trick he knows, not to comment. So, let’s continue.

“When all the databases came up empty, just like I assume happened for your Interpol friend, I decided to approach it a different way. Search the databases for known cartel and weapons’ dealers who shared similar features with the guy. Which I knew might generate far more targets than we liked, but at least, it was a place to start.”

Kennedy inhaled, glancing around at the other men. “You were looking for a familial match. Like a brother or cousin.”

Darius grinned. “Give that lady a cigar. That’s exactly what I was hoping for. A lot of the big players are known threats but can’t be linked to any of the crimes because there’s a strong family bond that’s incredibly hard to break. As we’ve discovered here, even when they get caught, they won’t turn on the other members of their organization.”

Darius paused, glancing at Mason before putting a new image on the screen. “So, Ryder. Do you recognize this asshole?”

“You’ve got to be fucking shitting me.” Ryder pushed to his feet and rounded the table until he was a foot away from the image. “Please tell me that’s not who I think it is.”

“If you think that’s Joseph Mwangi, the biggest drug cartel boss operating out of Albuquerque, then you get a cigar, too.”

Darius switched the pointer to the previous guy. “Turns out, Kennedy’s secret admirer is his cousin, Kamau Thironga. Here’s the only known photo of them together, taken about eighteen months, ago.”

Darius put a third image on the screen, though, Kennedy had to admit, it was hard to tell if it was the same two men. That Joseph guy, definitely. But the other man didn’t have any of the scars or burns on his face. Looked as if he’d aged several years in the span of one.

Darius held up his hand. “I know. You’re not convinced it’s the same guy, which is why I’m sure this bastard hasn’t been flagged.”

Kennedy eased back in her chair. “Would he really burn himself just to fool facial recognition?”

“This wasn’t an act of self-preservation.” He paused, again, and Ryder immediately turned.

Ryder glanced at her, then back to Darius. “Just spit it out because I already know it’s going to make me see red.”

Darius nodded to Logan, who’d been quietly sitting there, observing.

Logan gave Ryder a grim smile. “When Darius found this guy, then this second image, I asked Harlow if she’d be willing to do us a solid. Since most of the photos Kamau appeared in were from Kenya, Harlow reached out to an old contact of hers inside the Army Special Operations Brigade.”

Logan glanced at Kennedy. “That’s a unit within Kenya’s Special Forces. While they aren’t directly tasked with quashing drug cartels, they’re very aware of the players. And according to her contact, Kamau Thironga, a suspected member of the Mwangi family cartel, was involved in a deadly skirmish in the Kenyan desert about a year, ago. He survived because a mobile medical unit happened upon the scene shortly after the skirmish ended, though there were apparently still armed assaults continuing in a nearby town. But these doctors stopped and saved a handful of the men left behind to die.”

Ryder's head dropped toward his chest before he looked over at her. Held her gaze. "Let me guess. One of the doctors was Jacklyn Sinclair."

Logan nodded. "Along with Dr. Gregory Paxton, Dr. Julien Hansen, and a handful of staff who were all responsible for saving the men. They also went on to treat civilian casualties in the neighboring towns who were devastated by the incident. All in all, Dr. Sinclair and her crew were credited with saving over a hundred people over the course of two days. And at great risk to themselves. None of which is public knowledge since a task force unit was sent in a few days later to contain the situation."

Ice cold.

That's how she felt. Sitting there, hearing Logan recount the one memory that haunted her more than any of the others. How she'd been driving the damn mobile unit that night when she'd spotted the flames in the distance. Or how the headlights had illuminated the grisly scene when they'd finally arrived.

There had been guns firing and bombs going off. Blood soaking the ground. Arms and legs blown in every direction — someone's head propped up on a stake. But her mom hadn't even faltered. And Kennedy had jumped right in when she'd realized her mother wouldn't be swayed. That her oath ran deeper than politics or legalities. That her only job was to save lives. Anyone's life because in her mom's eyes, they were all precious.

Fingers snapped in front of Kennedy's face, and she jolted back, blinking until she was able to bring Ryder's face into focus.

He gave her a shake, looking her straight in the eyes. "Breathe, Kennedy. Or you're going to pass out."

Breathe?

That's when she realized, she'd been holding her breath. Not wanting to get a whiff of burning flesh. Or taste the metallic scent of blood in the air. That, for her, it was still real.

Still living inside her waiting for any opportunity to break free. Like in the storage room that fateful night.

Ryder placed his forehead on hers. “I’m right here. Not going to let anyone hurt you, so try to relax and just breathe.”

Her chest tightened as dots started swarming her vision before he dropped a kiss on her lips, and she managed to gasp in some air. Ryder eased her forward, sticking her head down by her knees, all the while rubbing gentle circles along her back. Whispering for her to relax. That he was there. That she was safe.

She wasn’t sure what eventually eased the panic seething beneath her skin, but after several minutes — hell, maybe hours — she was finally able to sit up. Brace her weight on her elbows on the table.

A glass of water appeared beside her, and she nodded her thanks to Logan. Ryder placed his hand over hers as she took a cautious sip, keeping her from dropping it or spilling it down her shirt.

He leaned forward once she’d managed to swallow without spitting it all over the table. “Better?”

She shivered, and he cursed, making some kind of hand signal to Mason, who appeared a moment later with a blanket. Mason draped it over her shoulders, encouraging her to have another drink.

It took half the glass and another round of shivering before everything settled. Left her wishing she could crawl back into bed and sleep for a week.

A side effect of that PTSD she was still denying she had. The adrenaline rush, then dump, that often left her completely ruined.

Ryder took the seat beside her, keeping the blanket clasped tight at her chest. “You still look like a damn ghost, but I’ll take it.”

She snorted, fighting off another round of shivers in case they decided she needed to be medevaced to the freaking

hospital. And with Logan sitting there, she knew it was a viable possibility. “I’m better. Thanks. I...”

She didn’t know how to finish that sentence. Whether to apologize or brush it off. Maybe pretend it hadn’t happened, at all.

Ryder shook his head. “Don’t fucking apologize for having a flashback. And yeah, sweetheart, that’s what that was. Common with PTSD, but I’m sure you’re actively denying that, too. Because it’s not like you’ve lived through anything horrific, right?”

He muttered something she couldn’t make out, then added, “I knew that night in the museum you’d experienced violence before. That’s why you were so calm. So controlled. But we can discuss that later. For now, I assume you remember that incident?”

She nodded, reaching out to hold his hand in the hopes she wouldn’t fade, again. “I was driving the mobile unit. It was...”

Mason gave her shoulder a squeeze. “We all have a pretty good idea what you saw. Don’t focus on that. But do you remember if that man — Kamau — was one of the men your mother treated?”

She forced herself to glance at the image. “He was the first person we found alive. I never would have put it together because...”

Because he’d been horribly burned — had a chunk of metal embedded in his face. More injuries than were evident in the photo.

“We get it. Just... are you sure?”

She nodded at Mason. “I recognize his eyes, now. They’re the same. But I don’t understand. If my mother saved his life, why is he trying to kill me?”

Darius sighed. “The DEA has been attempting to prove Joseph has ties to Africa for nearly five years. That he’s importing his drugs from there, via Mexico. But no one can tie these men together. Even this one photo isn’t enough since no

one can prove that's really Kamau. But if you caught a recent photo of them together on your last trip..."

Darius grinned. "That would change everything. And I'll bet Logan's best girl, ROXY, that there's an image of them together, in Kenya, on one of those SD cards that were stolen. Which would be all the proof the DEA needs to launch a full investigation into Joseph's business. What would probably land them one hell of a drug ring bust."

Darius crossed his arms over his chest. "I double checked your cloud server. It looks like your camera attempted to download some of the images from the last card that was still inside when you got home, and it connected wirelessly with your network. But for some reason, it didn't complete the upload. Most likely, the battery died. I'm trying a new program to see if I can recover any of the images. That may shine some new light on it. But, at least, we have a theory as to who and why. Now, all we have to do is figure out how to get this bastard to show his face long enough for one of us to put a bullet in it."

Logan walked over and gave Darius a shove. "You just had to involve ROXY, didn't you."

"You'll get over it."

Logan gave the man a punch in the arm, then looked at her and Ryder. "Are you sure you're okay? ROXY's always standing by. I can swing you up to Colorado Springs, if needed. Let your mom give you a once-over. Maybe stop Ryder from hyperventilating, over there."

Kennedy focused on Ryder. Logan hadn't been far off. Ryder did look as if he might need a blanket, too. "I'm fine. Honest. But, at the risk of giving you all a heart attack... I have an idea how to draw this Kamau guy out."

Ryder groaned, then stood, shaking his head as he moved to the other side of the table. "This is where you spin some crazy plan that ends up with you in the crosshairs as bait, right?"

She grinned. “It’s not completely crazy because it involves all of you. And I’ll bet my best Gucci that you and your team can outwit these hacks, any day. So... What do you say, soldier? Wanna end this?”

CHAPTER 15



IF RYDER THOUGHT he was crazy for allowing Kennedy to make the trip to her house, then this was certifiable. Because there she was, walking out The Centre's front door a few nights later, dressed to kill, with the hopes of attracting the men targeting her to their impromptu virtual charity event.

Granted, it was a pretty solid plan. She'd host a redo of the botched event in one of The Centre's training cabins — manned only by a handful of Brotherhood Protector employees and a few local law officers — all masquerading as proxies for the fundraiser's guests, who would attend via a secure satellite link. From the surface, it looked benign. And by staging it in the less secure area of the facility, it gave Kamau and his crew enough leeway to feel confident launching an attack.

The only wild card was Kennedy.

Ryder knew, better than anyone, that missions seldom went according to plan. That there were always risks involved, regardless of how much he and his team tried to minimize them. Which meant, he couldn't guarantee her safety. Not if bullets started flying or the assholes launched a missile at the place.

They'd spent every waking moment since agreeing to the idea, planning for that. Had Nash sitting in a nest constantly scanning for enemy snipers. Logan was patrolling the skies in ROXY, with Simon and Spencer in tow. Manning binoculars and rifles and god knew what else. The Falco brothers were on standby, in case this ended like the attack on Harlow, with half

the damn trees alight. And Darius had the entire place wired. Was actively monitoring a number of enhanced sensors and cameras.

They'd purposely left a section of the area open — nothing covert to alert a rogue group that they were walking into a trap. With any luck, the men would use the corridor to access the cabin, and Ryder's team would shut them down before they'd gotten off a shot. And with the rest of Ryder's team intermixed within the crowd, they'd covered as many angles as possible.

Jacklyn Sinclair was also in attendance, along with Dr. Paxton and Dr. Hansen — the other two physicians who'd been involved with the Mwangi cartel incident. Not that Ryder approved of having civilians present, but Kennedy had brought up a good point. That this Kamau guy knew the Sinclairs well enough to realize it was a setup if her mom wasn't in attendance. That Jacklyn Sinclair had never missed a charitable event, and she wouldn't simply bow out, now. That's why she'd brought the other doctors along. Jacklyn always included representatives from the hospital to talk shop — help convince the prospective donors that this was the best use of their money. And if they were going to successfully lure Kamau into their ruse, they needed to sell it.

That, and Jacklyn Sinclair was as stubborn as her daughter, and had simply stated she was attending.

Ryder met Kennedy at the edge of the porch, his heart lodged in his throat, his damn pulse pounding in his head. Not from the upcoming mission. He'd protect her at all cost. No doubts. No hesitations.

It was her. The way her gown flowed around her like a sea of blue silk, the color highlighting the gold in her eyes. The clean lines and clingy fabric accentuating her graceful silhouette. He'd never seen her so radiant. As if she was standing beneath her own personal spotlight, and not just the lights from the porch as the sun set in the distance.

Kennedy took his arm, smiling up at him, and he couldn't breathe. Couldn't speak. "You look devastatingly handsome.

Do you really have a Kevlar vest under that tux?"

He blinked, realizing she was expecting an answer. As if her beauty hadn't blown him away. "Not making the same mistake, again. Though, that dress..."

She beamed as she released his arm, then spun. "It's one I can run in and..." She lifted the hem to showcase the thick-heeled boots she was wearing. "Shoes I can definitely land a round-house kick in."

He swallowed, nearly choked. "You're stunning. Beyond stunning, I..."

She giggled as she reclaimed his arm, her skin reflecting the red hues from the sky. "If I knew this would leave you speechless, I would have worn it months, ago."

He leaned down, brushed his mouth over hers. "I would have been too much of an ass to appreciate it, back then. I'm not, now. You..."

She kissed him, brushing his lips with her thumb once they'd parted. "Then, I'm glad I saved it."

"Me, too. Did you put that tracker in your bra like we talked about?"

"It's worse than underwire, in case you're wondering."

"It's only for tonight. A Hail Mary on the off chance something goes horribly wrong."

"I have complete faith in you." She nodded toward the cabin in the distance. "Shall we?"

He didn't want to leave. To put her in harm's way. Even if it meant finally catching the bastard. But, he worked up a smile, and started walking toward the cabin. He didn't reiterate the plan. She knew it. They'd gone over it until he knew she'd wanted to punch him and Mason in the face. But she'd resisted, nodding and reciting her part, each time. What she'd do in each possible scenario. Even now, she wasn't shaking or obviously scanning the grounds. Just the occasional twist of her head, and her hand firmly in his.

They followed the stone path, Mason talking in Ryder's ear — getting everyone to check in. Kent and Asher were just commenting on the folks inside the cabin when the comms went dead. Asher's voice confirming that all three doctors were safe and accounted for, then nothing. No hissing static, no patchy voices crackling in and out of range. Just a click, then deadly silence.

That's all the evidence Ryder needed to react — spinning Kennedy, then racing for the next cabin over. Spencer's he thought, though Ryder hadn't spent much time in the buildings outside The Centre, other than Logan's hanger. Not that it mattered when bullets started flying. Pinging off the trees and stone — pelting them with bark and dirt. Ryder upped the pace, taking them both through the door and onto the ground as something exploded behind them.

Not huge, like a missile would have done. More like a grenade. Either way, Ryder was up and making for the back door before anyone had time to flank him.

Kennedy pulled in behind him, jumping when another grenade blew out the glass in the front window. “How did they get past all the security? I thought you'd left a corridor open for them?”

“That's an excellent question. And we did. Makes me wonder if they knew it was there.”

“A mole?”

He didn't answer because it seemed impossible. No way anyone in his team, Darius' team, or any fucking ex-soldier involved with the Brotherhood Protectors would turn on them. But after spending a few days running through every possible scenario, it seemed unlikely Ryder's team had left a hole this large unmanned.

Ryder opened the door, clearing the area before nodding at the path leading down to Logan's hanger. “We'll make a run for it. Stay close and don't you dare die on me.”

He didn't wait for an answer, just did one more sweep then took off. Feet flying. Kennedy racing beside him. He didn't

bother trying to zigzag, praying his team would have his back. That they'd prevent anyone from landing a fatal shot.

A red light bounced off the tree beside him, shifting to him, then Kennedy. Ryder grabbed her and spun, aware he couldn't take out a guy at that range but hoping his vest would stop anything from hitting her. What could kill them both if the caliber was large enough. Having it vanish when another shot echoed through the forest had him spinning, again. Smiling because he knew it was Nash. Taking out whoever was behind the first scope. Clearing Ryder's way.

Ryder hit the steps down to the hanger going full out, his grip on Kennedy's hand ensuring she didn't fall. Didn't lag behind. Not that she seemed to have trouble keeping up. The girl was right there, hugging his six as he wove down the single flight then onto the landing pad. Logan's chopper sounded in the distance but too far away to be a viable option. Not when Ryder was sure there were more men.

Seeing one pop out from the opposite side of the hanger had him firing his Sig without slowing down. Just a raise and a shot. He hit the guy a bit low, but he still toppled backwards. Hopefully fell down the hill in the process.

Ryder steered them toward the other side, wanting to regroup a bit before deciding their next move. Maybe gauge how his team was responding. Having gunfire erupt back toward the main facility assured him his buddies were in prime soldier mode. That they'd engaged the enemy. With any luck, Ryder could wait out the whole ordeal, here, where Kennedy was safe.

A pounding of footsteps down the stairs crushed that hope. Obliterated it as more shadows moved along the edge of the landing pad. It wasn't quite dark, but enough Ryder couldn't distinguish between the men and the foliage. But, it would help hide him and Kennedy, too.

He motioned toward the side door on the hanger, then carefully picked their way toward it, using barrels and equipment to keep them hidden. He kept her close, ready to

jump in front if needed, when some asshole barged through the door.

Ryder shoved Kennedy behind a large tool chest, avoiding the knife the guy swung at him as the creep lunged forward, eliminating any chance of ending it quickly with a shot. Another arcing swipe caught him on the arm. Not too deep, but enough it stung. Got Ryder's full attention on the fight.

A step and a pivot, and he'd avoided the next strike — was in dangerously close to the asshole's torso. A punch and a kick, and the guy was bent over, trying to recover. His wrist bent back, that knife barely staying his grip. A knee to the head, then a firm cross, and the guy was down. Unconscious on the floor. Blood pouring from his nose. His arms twitching a bit.

Ryder turned to get Kennedy, only to have her tackle him to the ground as a bullet ricocheted off that damn tool chest, while another hit the wall where he'd been standing. What would have caught him in the side, possibly missing the vest, if she hadn't grabbed him.

He rolled them over, covering her body while he gauged if they could make it through the door without getting shot, when the entire hanger rattled a moment before Logan dropped into view beyond the hanger doors. His chopper's downwash swirling anything not tied down across the pad. Sending one guy diving for cover.

Logan spun, what looked like a damn machine gun hanging out one side. Ryder didn't know which of Logan's teammates was behind it, but it started rattling off rounds — eating up the forest beside the hanger.

There were shouts and cries, then the chopper was sliding off as Mason and Cruz came barreling down the steps, M4's notched in their shoulders. Heads on a damn swivel. They released a few rounds, then it was over. Nothing but eerie silence as if the entire mountain had stopped to breathe.

Ryder checked the area, just to be sure, then eased off Kennedy, helping her to her feet. She had dirt matted in her hair, and grease smudged along her face, but she was still

stunning. Even more so in his eyes because she was alive. Winded and definitely dirty, but alive.

He pulled her closer, crushing his mouth on hers for a soul-searing kiss before easing back — resting his forehead on hers. “Are you nuts? Tackling me to the ground like that. You could have been shot.”

Her fingers palmed his jaw, her eyes gleaming when he stared down at her. “I told you this was a dress I could fight in.”

He laughed. Damn, he loved her.

The thought hit him hard, but he didn’t pull back like he normally would. Didn’t think about all the ways it could go wrong — that he could lose her. All he saw was Kennedy Sinclair. The woman destined to be his undoing.

He dropped another kiss on her lips. “Have I told you how much I love this dress? You need a dozen of them. Several pairs of those boots, too.”

“Oh, I can hear Isabella rolling her eyes from here. She’s not a boot kind of girl.”

“Then, I guess it’s a good thing I’m hooked on you. Because you make those boots look fucking hot.”

Kennedy tapped his mouth, raising an eyebrow. “Just wait until later tonight. I’m wearing another black thong with your name on it.”

Ryder groaned as his damn dick hardened in his pants. “You did that on purpose so it’s difficult for me to focus. Hell, to walk.”

Kennedy merely shrugged, then frowned, trailing her hand along his arm. “You’re hit.”

He brushed it off, despite the burning line along his biceps. “Just a cut. I’ll clean it up, later.”

“You’re going to clean it up? With what, a paper towel and a freaking Band-Aid?”

She shook her head, waiting until he'd shucked his coat and opened his shirt for her to get a look at it. "It's deep enough you'll need stitches or at least skin adhesive and a row of butterfly bandages."

She grabbed his pocket square, then used his tie to put pressure on it. "This will at least slow the bleeding until we get some supplies. I'm sure my mom has her magic bag stashed away. She can fix it, or I can take care of it for you, if you'd like. And yeah, it won't be the first time I've dealt with knife wounds."

He growled, slipping his jacket back on then pulling her in close. "That's not exactly the kind of thing I need to hear, right now. But I suppose I can let it slide until we have a very in-depth chat about your security and how you can't continue *investigating* on your own."

Kennedy arched a brow. "Are you volunteering to be my bodyguard whenever I go to Africa? Because that's one sword I can fall on."

He grinned, her words soothing the uncertainty lingering inside him. That part that was worried she might not want him around once the threat was over. Hearing her suggest the opposite...

He kissed her, again. "Damn straight. But let's go check in with Mason. Make sure this is over before we talk about flying off to the fucking Congo, or Chad or somewhere equally endearing."

She laughed, following him out to where the rest of the team were corralling anyone still breathing.

Mason shook his head as they moved in beside him. "Are you two okay?"

Ryder tugged her close. "Still in one piece."

Mason motioned toward his bloody arm. "Are you sure?"

"It's just a small slice. Nothing serious. Unlike the shitstorm that just went down. Any idea what the hell happened? One moment I'm listening to Asher check in, then

the comms are down, and someone's shooting at us. Grenades are going off, and we're running for Logan's hanger."

Mason fisted his hands, cracking a few knuckles in the process. "Asher found a jamming device outside the cabin."

Ryder frowned. "Someone attending the charity event brought a comms jammer?"

"Darius is scouring the footage, and Kent's out looking to see if anyone managed to sabotage some of the tech. But it's looking like an inside job." Mason stopped Ryder from interrupting. "I know. There are only a handful of people here, and none of them would do that. Maybe it was planted earlier. Or one of Kamau's men slipped in through that corridor without tripping any of the sensors, then set it off. Either way, we'll investigate everything, but for now..."

Mason pointed at a man face down on the landing pad, hands secured behind his back, blood staining his right arm. "Looks like Kamau won't be bothering Kennedy, any longer. And the DEA's already on the way. They'll have him carted off within the hour. I can't see his crew continuing with him out of the picture. In fact, with the number of casualties, here, I'd actually be surprised if there was anyone left."

"That's not exactly the benchmark I was looking for."

"Which is why Kennedy is staying until the DEA confirms our ringleader, Joseph Mwangi, and his entire operation are no longer a threat."

Mason frowned as he glanced at Kennedy. "But, even taking them out, you do realize it might not be safe for you over there. The DEA might be able to cripple his forces here, but in Africa..."

Kennedy nodded. "I doubt my parents will abandon what they've started, but I think it's time we reconsidered our approach. Hire a company who specializes in security to give us some viable options. Which I'm sure you and Ryder will be more than willing to outline once this is over."

"Oh, I'm sure Ryder will have plenty to say on the matter. But for now, go." Mason pointed to Ryder. "Get that arm

looked at and hang tight. We should know something, soon.”

Ryder took Kennedy’s hand and led her back to the stairs. He cringed a bit when he realized the grenade had done more damage to Spencer’s cabin than he’d first thought, but nothing that couldn’t be fixed. And, in the end, Kennedy’s life was more important.

They picked their way to the other cabin, nodding at Asher once they’d stepped inside. All the other Brotherhood personnel were gone, leaving only Asher and the doctors still there.

Asher ambled over, constantly checking every direction in case he needed to adapt to a dynamic situation. “Kent has the others helping him do a thorough sweep of the perimeter. This place is far too large for just him. No injuries...” He chuckled, then motioned toward Ryder’s arm. “Well, no injuries, in here. Looks like you had some fun.”

“I’ll live.” Ryder nodded at Jacklyn and the other two men. “Quick question. Did you have a visual on our guests the entire time?”

Asher frowned. “All except for when the lights blinked out for a few moments. But they were still standing in the same place once they came back on. Why?”

“Just working out some theories. Do me a favor and hang tough for a bit. We need to keep everyone here until the DEA’s done, and Captain Oakley is willing to let everyone leave. It’s gonna be a long night.”

Asher simply nodded, maintaining his vigil as Ryder made his way over to where Kennedy was chatting with her mom and the other doctors. Jacklyn pulled him in for a hug, tsking when he bit back a groan.

Jacklyn eyed his arm, smiling over at Kennedy. “Looks like Kennedy isn’t the only one who has a knack for getting hurt. Kennedy? Does he need stitches?”

Kennedy shuffled in next to Ryder, taking his hand before he’d even had a chance to offer it. “That or some good

adhesive and strips. Which might be easier unless you have some Lidocaine in your bag.”

Gregory Paxton inched forward, cutting Jacklyn off. “Your mom was driven here by that Brotherhood guy, so even if she brought her bag, it’s on the other side of the compound. I have mine in my car. It’s close. I’m sure we can fix your friend up fairly quickly.”

Kennedy winced. Not that anyone else noticed it, but Ryder did. The subtle way she scrunched up her nose as her muscles tensed. She really didn’t like the man. “I can bandage it. I need the practice.”

Paxton merely grinned. “Of course. Come on. I’ll get the supplies for you, and you can show off your skills.”

Ryder blocked the man from walking past him. “Kennedy stemmed the bleeding, for now. I can wait until we’re clear.”

Jacklyn shook her head. “I can tell from here that it’s still bleeding. Whatever my daughter had on hand to patch you up won’t hold up much longer. You really can’t wait, Ryder, without risking infection and other nasty side effects.”

Asher joined them. “I’ll keep an eye on everyone, here. You can go with Kennedy and Dr. Paxton to get that arm stitched. I’m sure Mason would agree. And the lot’s not that far.”

Kennedy sighed, giving Ryder’s hand a squeeze. “My mom’s right. We really shouldn’t wait if you think it’s safe enough.”

If he thought it was safe enough? Did she understand what it meant to him that she’d left the decision up to him? That, regardless of what anyone else thought, she trusted him to make the call. That her safety overruled any other concern.

He’d have to remember to thank her later. Or even better, show her.

“Let me touch base with Mason.” Ryder gave his buddy a call, confirming Kent and the others had cleared the lot and were fanning out toward the perimeter.

Not that there wasn't still a minor risk. Ryder would assume Kennedy was a target until the DEA had Mwangi locked up. But, with the caliber of men and women scouring the grounds, Ryder doubted they missed a tango hiding in the bushes.

He motioned to the door. "Even though the area's been cleared, we stick together, and if I tell you to get down or run, you need to follow the directive. Agreed?"

Paxton nodded, striking off in front. Completely oblivious to the fact he was already breaking the first rule. Kennedy took Ryder's hand, smiling up at him as they jogged a bit to catch up. No wonder she disliked the doctor. Paxton was a complete ass.

Ryder scanned the grounds as they headed for the parking lot, double checking every shadow for evidence some asshole wasn't about to pop out. Only a handful of vehicles remained, and he made a point of cataloging each one, just in case.

Paxton headed for a black BMW on the outer edge of the lot, removing his keychain and unlocking the vehicle while they were twenty feet back.

Ryder snagged the man's arm, holding him still. "We'll just wait here for a few moments."

Paxton frowned, glancing at Kennedy, then his car. "Is there a problem, Mr. Callahan?"

"Just taking a few extra precautions." Ryder held firm for a minute, then motioned them to stay put. "I'll clear the vehicle, then you can get your bag, and we'll take it back to the cabin. Kennedy can patch me up, there."

Paxton shrugged. "Whatever you say. My bag's in the trunk."

Ryder nodded, smiling at Kennedy before side-stepping over to the car, his gun snugged against his shoulder. He did a quick recon, taking a moment to check the undercarriage before moving over to the driver's door. One last glance at Kennedy and Paxton, then he was opening the door — clearing the inside.

When no one jumped out or tried to shoot him, he hit the trunk release. A soft pop sounded through the car as the trunk jumped up an inch.

At least, the car hadn't exploded. A win in Ryder's book, not that anyone would have suspected Kennedy would be anywhere near Gregory Paxton's car. But Ryder couldn't afford to take any chances.

He moved around to the rear, giving Kennedy and Paxton one more glance over his shoulder before wrapping his hand around the lip. There was a click and a jolt, then he was flying backwards, his body jerking, everything tingling and jumping as he hit the ground, eventually skidding to a halt. Pain shot through his chest and into his temples, the scenery fading in and out of focus. Someone screamed his name, the sound getting hijacked by the ringing in his ears — the woozy feeling in his head. He managed to open his eyes for one brief second as Paxton dumped Kennedy into his trunk before a series of dots blurred his vision and everything faded into black.

CHAPTER 16



PAIN. Pounding through his head and into his chest. Making it hard to breathe, to freaking open his eyes. He tried, blacked out, then woke a few moments later, head throbbing. Everything spinning. Ryder managed to roll, puke, then roll back — staring up at the stars as they twinkled in the sky. Tiny dots that seemed to flash to the steady pulse echoing in his ears.

He took a moment to breathe, to force the scenery from dipping left and right, before rolling the other way. It took him a few attempts to push onto his hands and knees without falling back down, but after several attempts, and one bruised jaw, he succeeded. He wasn't steady, and it wasn't pretty, but at least he wasn't still lying on his back, staring into the sky.

Another few minutes of rocking back and forth, using the momentum to lever himself up, and he was standing. His legs shaking, and his head still spinning, but he held his ground — took a step without collapsing. He tripped on the next one but caught his balance before he'd landed on his knees. Had to fight gravity all over, again.

He held his arms out for the next attempt, stumbling his way like a drunk to the back of a truck before his strength gave out, and he tumbled against the tail gate.

Not continuing down to the ground, again, was his one lucky break. Using the side panel to move forward another one. He stopped once he reached the grill, leaning against the chassis as he took a few deep breaths — cleared more of the dots clouding his vision.

Fucking Paxton.

Ryder should have seen that coming. Trusted Kennedy's inherent dislike for the man. That her subconscious had pegged him as a threat, all along, without her realizing it. That it was more than the man being a conceited asshole. And Ryder bet his Sig that one of the images on Kennedy's camera had caught Paxton liaising with Kamau and Mwangi. That Paxton was using the Sinclair Foundation and likely the hospital to smuggle in Mwangi's drugs.

Ryder wasn't sure what Paxton had done to his trunk. What, exactly, had sent Ryder flying through the air. He assumed it had been some sort of electrical current, based on the raised burns on his hand. The way his brain wasn't fully functioning. Not that it mattered because it had resulted in the same outcome.

Him out cold, and Kennedy gone.

All of which he could deal with later, *after* he'd gotten her back.

Ryder reached for his phone, praying the jolt hadn't fried it. The screen was cracked and the upper left side was dead, but he finally got his fingers working enough to open it without dropping it — launch his tracker app.

It took a while before her dot started flashing — steadily moving away. Not as close as he'd hoped, but not as far as he'd feared. About fifteen minutes. A decent head start, but not insurmountable. Especially if he was flying.

He forced his legs to move, stumbling his way across the parking lot — praying Logan was still hanging around — when his phone buzzed. He juggled it a few times when his hands didn't quite work right, nearly falling because his brain couldn't process more than one command at a time, but he finally hit the button. Answered the call.

“Ryder?” Mason, and his buddy didn't sound happy. “Christ, where the hell are you? Darius finally retrieved a photo from Kennedy's camera. Got an ID on our inside guy —”

“It’s fucking Paxton.”

Had he got all three words out? He thought he had, but he couldn’t be sure. Wasn’t convinced he’d even spoken aloud with his head buzzing, and the ground tilting beneath his feet.

“How?” Mason breathed into the phone, shouting something to someone in the background. “What the fuck happened because you sound like you got hit by a truck.”

“Close.” He tripped against another car, cursing when it opened up the laceration on his arm. Made his head throb. “I need Logan to fire up ROXY. And for the team to head for the pass. He took her.”

“Who’s he?” Mason inhaled. “Paxton? He took Kennedy? How?”

“No time, just... Tell Logan to be ready.”

“Ryder?” Cruz’s voice echoed in Ryder’s ear, sending a shiver down his spine. Because he knew that tone. “There’s a massive system moving through the pass. It’ll be here within the hour. Fog’s got visibility down to zero. Logan’s good, but...”

But the man didn’t have X-ray vision. Couldn’t fly if he couldn’t see the terrain. Even if Kennedy’s life was on the line.

Ryder turned, scanning the lot. A silver Jag was parked a few rows over, the top down from the earlier drive.

He headed for it, still juggling the phone. “Who’s Jag is in the lot?”

Mason snorted. “The classic silver one that’s worth more than we both make in a year? I think it’s that Hansen guy.”

“Tell him I’m borrowing it, and I’ll pay for any damage.”

“Ryder. I don’t know what happened, but I can tell just by talking to you, you’re not in any condition to drive. I’ll be there in ten—”

“Kennedy doesn’t have ten minutes. She doesn’t have ten seconds. I’m fine. And I’m sure my reflexes will recover by the time I reach them.”

“Ryder.”

“Get everyone moving. Have Logan try. I don’t expect him to make it but...” But Ryder needed to feel as if he was utilizing every weapon in his arsenal.

“You can’t save her if you’re dead, buddy.”

“I promised her I wouldn’t let anyone hurt her. I need to keep that promise, Mason. I can’t...”

He couldn’t fail. Not this time.

He crashed into the Jag’s door, tumbling his way over it and into the seat. He tossed his phone on the console, ignoring Mason yelling his name as he oriented himself. Five seconds, and he had the bottom panel ripped off. Another ten, and he’d unsheathed his knife — had the wires stripped. He cut his hand in the process, but he got the wires exposed — had a spark arcing between the two lines. A couple tries, and the engine hummed to life. The low purr vibrating through the vehicle.

He grinned, picking the phone up. “I know you think this is crazy but... I’ll share my screen so you can see her location. Just... Have my six.”

“You know I will. We’re closing in on the cabin. If you just wait five more...”

That’s all Ryder heard before he was hitting the gas, squealing out of the lot. He found the button for the roof, closing it as he fishtailed onto the road, the headlights punching a hole in the darkness. He glanced at the dot, smiling when it looked as if they’d slowed. What he hoped was the weather screwing up Paxton’s escape.

One chance.

He pushed the pedal to the floor and settled in.



DEAD. She had to be dead. Nothing else explained the numbing cold seeping through her veins. The heavy feeling weighing her down. As if she’d been encased in cement. Tossed in the sea.

Realizing she was still breathing eased that worry, until she tried to open her eyes — stared at nothing but darkness. Not a natural kind. This was complete. Not a hint of light shining anywhere.

That had her moving — reaching out in the hopes of grasping onto something. Having it feel as if she was spinning crushed that idea. Had had fighting off a wave of nausea. Kennedy couldn't tell which way it was rotating in the utter blackness, just that floating sensation in her gut. The lingering dizziness in her head.

She closed her eyes and counted to ten, then slowly opened them. Taking a full minute before she was staring into the shadows, again. She didn't move her head, didn't so much as twitch, taking long slow breaths until the scenery settled, some of the nausea roiling in her stomach, easing.

It took her another full minute before her eyes adjusted to the dark, and she was able to make out a few shapes. Nothing concrete, but there were definitely lighter patches on each side in front of her. A line of gray going from left to right just above her head. Like a horizon breaking through some fog. Which meant she wasn't blind — was definitely in some kind of container...

Shit.

She was in the trunk of a car.

She felt it, now. The carpet beneath her side. The cold metal above her. There was a row of rectangular objects behind her. Hard. Heavy. Weights or toolboxes. Something that didn't move when she pushed against them. Which meant the slightly brighter areas were the lights, and that line was where the trunk hatch connected with the rest of the car.

She wiggled a bit, tracing her fingers along the roof toward the back — searching for some kind of release mechanism. A failsafe built into newer cars. Coming up empty meant either the car was old, or someone had removed it. Likely the latter if they'd come prepared to stick her back there. Though, hadn't they caught that guy? What was his name?

That's when the everything came rushing back. The bullets. The explosions. Ryder fighting off some mercenary with a knife. Her mother telling him to let Kennedy fix his wound. Paxton clicking his remote as Ryder palmed the trunk...

He'd been thrown.

Tossed backwards like a doll before skidding along the pavement. Nothing but his limp body slumped amidst the shadows. Blood marring his temple. A hint of burned flesh drifting in the air. She'd tried to reach him but...

That's where it all went black.

Paxton.

He'd done something to her. She remembered a sharp stab in her arm, then she'd been falling except she hadn't hit the ground. There was a flash of his face twisted into a gleeful snarl, then Ryder's fading image as Paxton had closed the trunk.

Ryder was dead. He had to be because she knew he would have gotten to her, otherwise. Would have taken Paxton apart, even if Ryder had needed to crawl across that lot. Dragged broken limbs. Nothing would have stopped him short of his heart not beating. His brain no longer sending messages.

She'd gotten him killed. And all before she'd told him, she loved him.

Tears burned in her eyes, but she blinked them away. She wouldn't lose it. Not yet. Not before she'd made Paxton pay for taking Ryder away from her. Threatening her family and endangering her friends. She'd see Paxton paid for his crimes, even if it killed her.

One more deep breath, and she was focused. All in. She traced her fingers along the carpet beneath her, searching every crevice for something she could use as a weapon. When that came up empty she twisted around, curling into a ball so she could roll — switch positions. She'd nearly given up hope when she came across a long metal rod. It was cold and smooth — with a ninety-degree bend at one end.

A tire iron.

Not a huge one that would have made cracking Paxton's head open, easy. More the size of a large screwdriver. But it was enough to give her an edge. The element of surprise. And that's all she needed.

Kennedy clasped it to her chest, running through the plan in her mind, when the car slowed, then turned sharply, a hint of red shining through the thin slit. The hum from the tires changed as the car started bouncing, pings from rocks echoing through the trunk.

He'd switched to a dirt road. Probably some kind of forest service track. Hell, maybe it was an old logging road. Or a damn field. She did her best to brace herself, not that it stopped her from getting tossed around. Hitting her head on those things behind her or having her shoulder smack into the hard metal above her.

Kennedy started counting. She needed to know how long they traveled if she had any hope of finding her way back to the main road on the off chance she actually lived through this. Not that the prospect of dying was going to stop her. Paxton would pay, regardless of the outcome.

About five minutes had passed when the car finally stopped, more of that eerie red glowing through the cracks. The noise from the engine faded, replaced by a numbing silence until something chimed in the distance.

He'd gotten out of the car.

Footsteps crunched across gravel off to her right, moving slowly toward her until they stopped in front of her. A click, and the trunk released. Not fully, just a soft whoosh, and an inch of space appeared across the back. She readied the tire iron, holding it close. All she needed was to fake being out, then she'd crack the bastard in the head once he reached in to lift her out.

Fingers stabbed through the gap, wrapping around the lip when his phone rang, the sudden blast of music making her jump. She managed not to scream or shriek, using that tire iron

as an anchor. Her tether back to Ryder. How he'd want her to stay calm. To bat Paxton over the head and find a way home.

Paxton's voice cut the silence, the irritating nasal quality to it sending shivers along her spine. "Where the fuck are you?"

A pause as he obviously listened to whoever was on the other end.

"I know how thick the fog is. I just drove through it. Nearly crashed a dozen times. But I'm here, and I'm not hanging around when I'm sure that bodyguard of hers has alerted every cop in the state, already. I've got my other car waiting. You've got five minutes, or you can just retrieve her corpse."

Ryder wasn't dead?

Had she heard that right? Paxton hadn't said Ryder's name, but she only had one bodyguard. Surely the bastard had been referring to Ryder. Which meant, he was coming for her. She knew it. He'd promised her, and Ryder didn't break his promises.

A huff, then the lid sprung open, and Paxton was standing there, one hand on the trunk the other shoving his phone in his pocket. He wasn't even really looking at her, his gaze focused toward the front of the car.

That's all the distraction Kennedy needed.

A push and a twist, and she was rising out of the trunk, that tire iron gripped like a baseball bat between her hands. A shift and a swing, and the metal was flying through the air — crashing into the side of Paxton's head. His eyes widened, his mouth gaped open as she connected with his left temple, sent him tumbling backwards.

She scrambled to her knees, hitting him, again, when he managed to stumble back over — tried to grab her wrists. Her second strike caught him under the chin, and he reeled backwards, landing flat on his back with a dull thud. Eyes closed. Blood tricking down his face and dripping onto the dirt road.

Kennedy grabbed the edge of the trunk, and climbed out, nearly toppling onto the ground when everything tilted, sliding left and right a few times before finally stabilizing. What she assumed was the aftereffects from the drug the bastard had given her. That sharp sting she'd felt. Probably a damn autoinjector that looked like a pen.

Luckily, he'd either measured the dosage wrong or hadn't depressed the button long enough to release the full amount. Not that it mattered. She was on her feet. Unsteady, but upright.

All she needed was to steal his keys, and she was free.

The sound of tires crunching along gravel had her looking down the road. Not that she could see anything with the fog blurring everything into a dull gray. Like a scene out of a horror film with everything beyond a few feet ghosted into an eerie glow.

Were those headlights?

It was hard to tell when all it did was brighten the entire fog bank, but there was definitely a vehicle coming toward her.

Paxton's conversation. He'd talked about not waiting. That he had another car parked some place. Was going to leave her behind. But she'd been so preoccupied thinking that Ryder might still be alive to focus on the other words. How he'd planned on meeting someone else.

Here.

It was definitely a vehicle. Not big like a truck. An SUV, maybe. Either way, she couldn't wait around to find out. And she doubted she had time to find Paxton's keys and barrel her way past the oncoming vehicle. Not with her head still fuzzy, her legs shaking.

She took off, stumbling her way to the side of the road. Scrubby brush appeared out of the fog, disappearing down an embankment. She didn't know what else was out there, but she wasn't going to stay and become a victim. She took one last look, then started running.

CHAPTER 17



RYDER RACED ALONG THE HIGHWAY, alternating his gaze between the dense fog bank blanketing the area, and that dot on his phone. The one he'd been gaining on since he'd peeled out of the parking lot and pegged the damn speedometer as far to the right as he could. Some insane speed guaranteed to catch Paxton's car.

Or kill Ryder in the process.

He'd nearly crashed a few times, the fog hindering his already compromised reflexes. But he'd managed to avoid a deer without hitting an oncoming truck. Had kept the car from spinning out of control when he'd been late on a corner and had drifted onto the gravel shoulder.

But his recklessness had paid off.

Paxton had stopped a few minutes ago, that dot flashing over the same spot. Which was either a blessing or a death omen. Because it meant he'd reached his destination. And Ryder had no idea if keeping Kennedy alive was part of Paxton's plan.

It made sense that it would be. That, if all Paxton wanted was to kill her, outright, Ryder would have regained consciousness with her body splayed out beside him. Visual evidence of his failure. The fact Paxton had taken her...

It opened up a number of other possibilities, none of them good. It meant Paxton had darker motives — like handing her off to someone else.

That made the most sense. Especially when all the other attempts had focused on killing her. Not that Ryder was sure Paxton had it in him to kill someone. Aiding in drug smuggling was one thing. Murder was something else. And Paxton didn't strike Ryder as the kind of man who was willing to get his hands *that* dirty. More likely, he'd pawn her off to someone who enjoyed it.

Joseph Mwangi.

Ryder wasn't sure why that name kept springing into his head, especially when the guy's empire was situated in New Mexico. But he couldn't shake the feeling that the crime boss had decided to take matters into his own hands.

Or maybe Mwangi had always planned on making the trip. Rendezvousing with his cousin and Paxton — setting up a full-fledged drug division in Colorado Springs. What made sense if his operation in Albuquerque was getting too much heat, and he already had Paxton on the payroll. Especially if Paxton was possibly using his trips with the foundation and his position at the hospital to move Mwangi's drugs.

Not that it mattered. Ryder was going in hot, and if Paxton had harmed Kennedy...

Ryder pushed that thought aside. He needed his mind clear, and thinking he might arrive too late wasn't doing him or Kennedy any favors. Which meant focusing on the road. Closing that distance even more. Not gunning it when he came around a corner and caught taillights bouncing down some two-bit dirt road off to his left. Not Paxton's car, but it was involved. Ryder knew it. Especially when it was headed toward that flashing dot.

He hit the brakes, spinning the Jag one-eighty, then heading back to that road. He waited until all hint of light was gone then slowly followed. He turned off his lights, praying they'd keep theirs on. That he'd see the glow long before he'd rolled up behind them. Possibly put Kennedy's life at risk.

That's what made him nervous. If they'd taken her hostage, he needed to ambush them without her ending up in the crossfire. And with his muscles still twitching from getting

shocked, he couldn't chance a close shot like he normally would.

Not a problem. He'd simply find a way to go hand-to-hand if necessary. Because he was getting Kennedy back.

Glowing fog brightened the night ahead of him, and he pulled over, parking the car already facing the other direction as far off the road as possible. What would give him and Kennedy the quickest escape route. While he had no qualms about killing Mwangi or even Paxton, he'd avoid contact if it posed less of a threat. If it meant Kennedy wouldn't be put at further risk.

Ryder checked his weapon — cursing the way his hand still shook — then stepped out, darting over to a stand of trees on the edge of the road. He followed the line down and around a slight bend, crossing over, then taking the high ground on his left. What would give him the advantage — slide the odds more in his favor. Even if the men had automatic rifles, his elevated position would give him all the edge he needed.

This was his wheelhouse. His playground. He hadn't spent twenty years dragging soldiers back from behind enemy lines — doing whatever was necessary to see his brothers survived their ordeal — to allow a few drug cartel to hurt the woman he loved. It was time he showed them exactly how focused he was.

It only took Ryder a couple minutes to climb the hill and make his way over to where the vehicles were parked. That black BMW, and some kind of Ford. What looked like another car off to the left. Only the Ford was running, the headlights casting a bright glow over the area. Paxton was on the ground several feet back from the trunk, which was open, but empty. Four other men were gathered around the car, rifles slung over their shoulders. Heads bent in conversation. He didn't recognize three of the men, but he knew the one on the far right, kicking at Paxton's foot. Seeing if the bastard was still alive.

Joseph Mwangi. Drug cartel leader, and the number one man on Ryder's shit list.

Ryder searched for Kennedy, but she wasn't there.

He rechecked the tracker. It was definitely within a few meters of the car. Either she was hiding just over the edge of the road, or the tracker had fallen out. Either way, she was free.

Heat billowed in his chest, and he smiled. She'd done it. Had obviously ambushed Paxton, then taken off. Probably down the hill. What would be the fastest route when she likely had no idea where she was. That it was nothing but miles of forest in either direction, albeit a better option than hanging around. Getting waylaid, again.

No doubt about it, his girl was all grit.

Ryder removed his phone and snapped a few photos. They'd be grainy and the exposure would be off, but it might be enough to prove Mwangi was there. That he'd teamed up with Paxton.

Then Ryder shot Mason a text, hoping it would send. That between the fog and the terrain and the overall crappy service, the message might still make it through. Give his buddy a rundown of the situation before he came barreling around the corner and straight into a firefight.

Having three of those men suddenly take off across the road and down the hill got Ryder moving. He hoofed it back to the bend, then raced down the bank, across the road and over the other side. He didn't go too far down before he was angling toward them — his best guess for intercepting those bastards. He picked his way through the scrub and trees, thankful his eyes had somewhat adapted to the dark. Not great, but at least he wasn't tripping over every bush. Getting tangled in the brush. Not that having a flashlight would have accomplished more than lighting up the fog — broadcasting his location — but night vision would have been nice. What he would have had if he'd taken his truck.

No sense worrying, now. He'd adapted before. He'd do it, again.

Hearing someone crashing through the forest up ahead had him darting behind the next tree. Scanning the area. Not that it was hard to spot the flashlight beam bounding all over the ground, lighting up bushes and grass. Dancing along branches. The way the fog glowed an eerie gray. The guy obviously didn't think there was anyone else out here but his buddies, and Kennedy.

Big mistake.

Ryder stayed low, circling around to the guy's six. Careful not to make a sound. Not when he'd have to eliminate the guy without using his gun. He couldn't afford alerting the other men they had company before he'd eliminated everyone, but Mwangi.

It only took Ryder a minute to get into position — crouched low, knife in his left hand. His target made it easy, telegraphing his movements with each loud step. Virtually counting down Ryder's strike. The man flashed his beam Ryder's way, then proceeded on, his gaze focused out front. That's all the leeway Ryder needed.

A step and lunge, and he was snugged in behind the man, ready to strike. Another step and a reach, and he had the guy by the jaw, head turned off to the right, his knife glinting in the white light. A raise of his arm and a swipe of his blade, and the man was down, nothing but a gurgling rasp escaping.

Two left.

Not that Ryder enjoyed using lethal force, but with Kennedy in the wind, he couldn't afford to leave any viable threat still breathing. Mwangi *might* get away alive. If Ryder could work it that way.

A grunt. Off to his left. Followed shortly by another glowing patch of fog. Even if Ryder wasn't out hunting them, no way Kennedy wouldn't see them coming. But, maybe the men thought she'd be too scared to think clearly. Would end up running straight for them, looking for help.

She wouldn't. Ryder had no doubt she was either long gone or tracking them, just like him. He hoped it was the later

because even if he cleared the board, she could still die if she got lost in the woods.

He had to have faith in her. She'd survived all those months overseas in far more questionable areas. Avoiding three guys who were lighting up their positions like spotlights would be easy for her. And if she knew he was alive...

No doubt she'd count on him coming after her.

He tailed behind the next target, sighing when he met up with the third man. What would make Ryder's next takedown a bit more complicated. Not impossible, but downing both men without either of them making a sound might be difficult.

He'd worry about eliminating them, first. If Mwangi was tipped off and left, the DEA could hunt the creep's ass down, later. All Ryder cared about was finding Kennedy.

He stayed low, using every tree and scrubby bush to hide his presence. One of the men stopped and held up a radio. Probably calling the guy Ryder had already taken care of. And when the bastard didn't answer...

Ryder needed to make his move, now. Before they realized they weren't alone.

He picked up speed, knife in his left, Sig in his right. What might end up being a double shot in order to finish them off, quickly. Noise be damned. He only hoped there weren't more guys out here. Maybe another car he hadn't seen that had been trailing behind Mwangi. The guy's backup. A viable option, and the whole reason it made more sense to deal with these men quietly.

Ryder got within several feet before one of them must have sensed his presence and turned. He didn't slow, tossing his knife at the one on the left — praying his damn muscles had recovered enough he at least hit flesh — then dove at the guy on the right. He caught the bastard around the waist, then tackled him to the ground. The guy rolled with the force, regaining his feet quicker than Ryder had thought based on his size.

Ryder chanced a quick glance at the other goon. He'd caught the man in the shoulder — not quite the lethal blow he'd been hoping for. But it had slowed the guy down. Had him grunting and writhing on the ground.

Which left the one reaching for Ryder's arm. The guy's flashlight shining on them from a few feet away. Ryder dodged the first attack, landing a kick to the guy's head. It snapped to the right, knocking him off balance. All it took was a couple more strikes, and he was down. Blood smeared across his face. One arm bent off at an odd angle.

Ryder turned, cursing when the other guy stumbled to his feet, his rifle not quite pointed at Ryder, but it wouldn't take long for the guy to zero in — even looking as if he might drop at any second. Ryder raised his gun, when a shadow charged out of the darkness, barreling into the man and knocking him sideways. The guy tripped a few steps, then turned only to get a boot to the head. Then another to his chest.

He fell backwards, hitting his head on a rock, the low crack dulled by the fog. The guy convulsed, then collapsed, eyes open but glazed over. Blood pooling on the ground.

Kennedy stepped into the circle of light, kicking the creep one more time, before turning to face him. Dirt caking her skin. A line of scratches along her neck. She took a step toward him when a red dot flickered on the guy she'd downed, slowly panning over to her.

Ryder moved, sprinting the short distance, all the while waving at her to get down. He hit her full force, wrapping his arms around her and launching them both through the air just as the report of a rifle echoed through the canyon. Pain flared through his side and into his chest, stealing his breath as they hit hard, rolling a few times until they were out of the light — slightly behind a tree.

He managed to push to his knees and shift them farther back. What he hoped eliminated any viable shot. Because... He was already a mess. His right side starting to numb. A dull ringing in his ears. He wasn't sure if was the bullet wound or the blood loss — maybe just that stupid shock Paxton had sent

tearing through his body. Regardless, he wasn't going to be much help if he didn't find a way to get everything working. Especially if this was that other carload he'd been worried about. Another set of three or four men Ryder would have to deal with.

Or if Mwangi was the one behind the scope.

Kennedy ripped a strip off her dress, balling it up then pressing it against his ribs, wincing when he bit back a growl. "I know, but I need to slow the bleeding. Damn thing missed your vest. Is probably lodged in your ribs or maybe your chest cavity."

She tore a few more, placing them over top before glancing around the tree. "How far off do you think that was?"

"Not far enough." He let his Sig rotate around his finger then handed it to her, pointing toward the highway. "Take this and run. Mason and the team are on the way. If you head for the highway, and hide, they'll find you."

She shook her head, tears shining in the muted light from the flashlight behind them. "No. I'm not leaving you."

"Kennedy..."

She huffed, took the gun, cocked it, then nodded. "I've only ever fired a rifle a few times, but I can at least let them think we're a threat."

Ryder snorted, blinking a few times when only half her face came into focus. "You really are badass. Okay, new plan. I'll shoot. You help me stand."

"You'll bleed out if you move. I—"

"Do you really think this is the first time I've been shot?" He pursed his lips to stop from shouting as she levered him up, bearing most of his weight. The other half braced against the tree.

Ryder motioned behind them. "Can you see anyone, yet?"

Kennedy took another peak, inhaling as she nodded. "Two shadows about a hundred yards off. They're moving slowly down the hill."

“Do you see a red dot bouncing off anything?”

She looked, again, shaking her head. “Nothing. But that doesn’t mean we’re safe from another rifle shot, does it.” She hadn’t really asked, and he didn’t lie.

“Probably not. But the fact he aimed when you were standing in the flashlight beam might mean he doesn’t have a night vision scope. At least, I hope he doesn’t. We should head east a bit, then circle around to the south. With any luck, we’ll end up back at the car.”

Kennedy looked at him as if he’d lost his mind, and he couldn’t argue. His limbs felt heavy, and his vision was speckled with dots and lines. But, he’d give it his best shot. Hope she’d take off running if he collapsed.

Ryder wrapped his arm around her shoulders, following her as they started walking. Far too slow to put any distance between them and those men, but at least, he was moving. He pointed out any obstacles he noticed, smiling when she avoided anything that would give away their position. Put a giant bullseye on their backs.

They’d just started heading south, when something scuffed the dirt in front of them. Ryder shoved her behind a bush, falling in beside her, his weapon sweeping the landscape. He tried to focus, squinting in an effort to clear his vision when a soft whistle sounded up ahead. He froze, wondering if he’d imagined the call, when it echoed a second time. Closer. A bit louder.

He whistled back. Not the same tune or the same force, but he got something out. Considered it a win when he didn’t puke up blood.

Two heartbeats later, and Mason and Cruz materialized out of the dark. Deep shadows one second, their steely silhouettes the next. Dressed in body armor and tactical gear. Everything that would have ended Ryder’s fight quickly if he’d been able to grab them.

Mason ducked down beside him, waving Cruz to the next tree. “Jesus Christ, Ryder, are you determined to get yourself

killed?” He shook his head, wincing as he took a quick look at Ryder’s side. “Shit. Hey, Kennedy? Can that asshole, Paxton patch Ryder up?”

She stared at Mason, looking as if she wasn’t even sure any of it was real, before shaking herself. “If he wasn’t a lying douchebag, sure. He specializes in trauma wounds.”

Mason merely grinned. “Pretty sure he’ll choose to cooperate with a forty-five pressed against his head. Kent and Asher flanked around. Had a bead on a couple of mercs on your six. I don’t imagine those men will be with us much longer.”

Ryder relaxed against Kennedy, hoping he wasn’t too heavy. “Mwangi? He was in that Ford. He stayed up top.”

“Nash, Logan, and Darius said they’d make sure Mr. Mwangi stuck around until the DEA got here. Police should be arriving soon, too. By the time I carry your sorry ass over there, Mwangi should be all tied up. Or dead. Whatever Logan feels like doing, I suppose.”

Ryder nodded, closing his eyes before grunting when Kennedy nudged him. Hard. “Are you trying to break my other ribs, too?”

“You need to stay conscious. Close your eyes like that, again, and next time, I’ll squeeze your balls.”

“Still giving me grief.”

Kennedy leaned in. “For as long as you’ll have me around.”

He smiled, trying not to fade. “Guess it’s going to be a long fifty years.”

“Make it sixty, soldier, and you’ve got yourself a deal.”

“Sixty, it is.” He blinked, probably passed out for a few seconds, then wet his lips. “I need to tell you something...”

She shushed him, moving back as Mason positioned himself to heave Ryder over his shoulder. “Tell me after we get you fixed up. Because I want you to be a hundred percent

conscious when I confess I've fallen in love with you. Okay? So you'll remember."

She loved him.

He smiled. "Like I could ever forget that. And I love you, too, but I can wait to tell you that until later."

Mason hiked him on to his shoulder, shaking his head. "How about you both shut it so I can carry his ass out of here?" He nodded at Kennedy. "Stay close, and try not to kill Paxton when you see him until after he patches Ryder up."

Ryder thought Kennedy replied, but all he heard was the echo of her voice telling him she loved him, and the smile on her face when he'd replied in kind.

CHAPTER 18



TWO WEEKS LATER...

“YOU ARE, hands down, the worst patient I’ve ever dealt with.” Kennedy crossed her arms over her chest, staring at Ryder as he tried to shove her away.

Only two weeks since he’d nearly died — twice — and he refused to stay in bed and get the rest he needed.

Ryder smiled, grabbed her hand then pulled her onto the bed beside him. “You’re just sore because I heal faster than you do.”

“Is that so?” She nudged his ribs, grinning when he grunted. “You’re right. You don’t hurt, at all, anymore.”

“Brat.” He gave her a playful shove. “Fine, I’m still sore, but I’m well enough to move around. Maybe go look at some houses either here in Fool’s Gold or over in Colorado Springs.” He frowned when she simply stared at him. “Unless, you’ve changed your mind. Want to stay in Logan’s cabin with me until your place is fixed?”

She laughed. She couldn’t help it. He just looked too damn sexy when he was slightly unsure. They’d spent most of the time he’d been conscious over the past fourteen days discussing the future.

Their future.

And she had to admit, she’d never been happier. Not that everything was picture perfect. Once the DEA had confirmed Paxton’s involvement, they’d launched a massive investigation

into the man's connection to the Mwangi family drug cartel. Apparently, Paxton had been using his trips overseas with the Sinclair Foundation to set up drops. Had recruited a few other volunteer staff to package the goods so he could arrange transport while he was onsite. Then, he'd used his security clearance at the hospital to store the merchandise until he could ship them to Albuquerque.

One giant mess, with the fallout still to be determined.

At least, her parents' foundation hadn't been directly involved, though, Mason had sat them all down and had a candid conversation about security for not only the clinics, but the staff, as well.

Kennedy had listened to Ryder's crew outline the options. What they considered minimal needs versus optimum outcomes, until they'd all stood there, arms crossed. Those stoic faces daring Jacklyn or John to disagree. Her mother had turned to Kennedy, eyes wide, as if she was worried her head might explode, when Kennedy had smiled, and addressed the crew.

She'd agreed.

To everything.

No arguing, no compromising. Just a nod, and the word, "Yes."

Ryder had squeezed her hand, despite the fact he wasn't even supposed to be in the room, and asked her if she was only giving in because of him. If this would come between them because he'd been clear. He wanted them to have a future, even if it meant she'd only agree to having him accompany her.

She'd looked him in the eyes, then had focused on Mason, saying she trusted Ryder and his crew to provide a level of security that would keep them all safe without hindering their ability to do their job.

And that was the last they'd talked of it.

In retrospect, Ryder had been stunned. Or maybe he'd just been happy it wasn't something they'd be constantly arguing

about. But after he'd nearly died, agreeing to an appropriate level of safety while overseas, didn't seem like a subject worth losing him over.

Ryder sighed, gaining her attention. "Hey? Are you back here with me?"

She gave him a playful swat. "What are you talking about? I'm sitting a foot away."

"True, but you were miles away in your mind." He arched a brow. "I called your name. Three times."

She leaned in and gave him a soft kiss. "Sorry. I was just thinking."

He firmed his lips. "If you're having second thoughts about moving in together—"

"What? No. Why would you even think that?"

"Because you drifted off when I asked if you still wanted to go look at houses or stay here. Maybe you don't want to give up the carriage house."

"Men. Always jumping to the worst-case scenario. Of course, I want to shack up with you. I mean, who doesn't dream of having their shower checked every night. And I know, for a fact, I'll never have to worry about monsters hiding under my bed."

"Very funny."

She shifted until she was snuggled on his left side, his arm around her waist. His heartbeat thundering against her ribs. "Except, I know, now, that monsters are real."

"He can't hurt you, anymore." Ryder tucked some hair behind her ear, a slight pinch of his mouth the only indication his chest still hurt. "Are you worried about going back to Africa? I already cleared it with Mason and Jake. I'll go with you, every time, regardless of all the other precautions."

And just like that, she fell a bit harder.

"I know you will. And I love you for it, it's just..." She sighed, leaning more heavily against him. "Is it bad if a part of

me doesn't want to spend as much time over there? I'll still design the facilities. Still spend a few weeks helping out. But, I was kind of hoping that maybe we could focus on us."

Ryder stared at her for so long she wondered if one of them had fallen asleep and this was all a dream. "Are you serious? Because that's a sword I can fall on."

"Ryder."

"I mean it. But, I don't want you to give up something you love because my blood pressure might hit two hundred."

"I'm not doing this because of your blood pressure. I told Isabella that I'd reconsider how much time I spent in Africa once I had someone worth staying home for. Until you, that wasn't an issue."

He cupped her chin, giving her a long slow kiss. "Whatever you decide, I've got your six."

"Good, because I think we need a new place. One we can make ours."

"Then, why the hell are we sitting here? I think I can manage walking around a few places. Maybe taking you out to lunch."

"Oh, no. Your doctor told you to stay in bed." She grinned, lifting up then straddling his thighs. "And that's exactly what you're going to do."

"You realize I'm an expert in hand-to-hand combat, right? That I could have you pinned on the bed in under a second."

Kennedy palmed his chest, drawing her finger down the left side, skirting the bruises still marring the right. "If you pin me, you can't appreciate the new thong I have on." She leaned forward. "It's camouflage."

Ryder groaned, closing his eyes as if she'd hurt him. "You really are going to be the death of me. Show me."

She grinned. "Have you been cleared for physical activity, yet? Because I can't have you passing out on me halfway through."

“Can I go for a run? No. Can I lick you until you scream? Hell, yeah.”

She arched a brow when he moved, deftly scooting her forward then shifting on top, pinning her like he'd claimed. His elbows braced on either side, his face hovering over hers.

She grabbed his arms. “Ryder. Your chest.”

He dipped down, claimed her mouth until she was the one who was struggling to breathe. “My chest doesn't hurt nearly as much as when I woke up in the parking lot, and you were gone. I swear, I aged ten years.”

She palmed his cheek. “I thought you were dead. When I heard Paxton say he needed to hurry before you regained consciousness... I knew you'd come for me.”

“Still impressed you beat the bastard senseless.”

“Who cares about Paxton. He lost. We won. Now, weren't you going to examine my new fashion statement?”

He shifted onto his left side, using his right hand to lower her yoga pants. The ones she'd bought in the hopes he'd want to tear them off her. “I'm not sure different shades of pink really count, but I applaud your effort.”

“I couldn't go for green. What if I needed you to rescue me in the woods, again?”

“If you're only wearing these out in the forest, I think I have bigger concerns, but I'm willing to play a round of hide and seek if you are. As long as you're the prize when I win.”

“I think you owe me a turn after I saved you from that guy holding an Uzi.”

“It wasn't an Uzi, and if by turn you mean, screaming out my name, I agree.”

He tugged at her pants, pulling them over her hips then tossing them on the floor. Her shirt disappeared next, followed by her bra until it was only them and the pink thong. Ryder held her gaze as he looped his finger in one side then ripped the seam, tearing the other side before yanking them off and throwing them over his shoulder. “Now, this is perfect. You.

Naked. Already strung tight. I bet I can have you coming in record time.”

“At least, you aren’t smug about it.” She raked her fingers through his hair, holding him tight. “Are you sure your chest doesn’t hurt?”

“Only over my heart because you stole it.”

Damn, she loved him. “Then, I’ll give you mine in return.”

“Is it pink camouflage, too? Because I’m not sure—”

She kissed him before she ended up punching him in the eye. “Shut up, and make love to me.”

“Only if you tell me what I need to hear.”

She pulled him close, looking him straight in the eyes. “I love you, Ryder Callahan.”

“I love you, too, Kennedy Sinclair.”

“Great. Now, make me scream.”

EPILOGUE



EIGHT MONTHS LATER...

“ARE you sure we have enough food? I’ve seen your team eat, and we’re going to have three teams, here, as well as Jake, RJ, and some of the other Brotherhood Protectors.”

Ryder shook his head as Kennedy placed another plate of appetizers on the long table they’d set up outside. “Sweetheart. You have enough food to feed a dozen teams, and everyone is bringing something. You need to relax. Breathe.”

Kennedy palmed her hips, looking so fucking hot he had to pound on his chest to get his heart beating, again. “It’s the first time we’re hosting a party. And not just any party. It’s your team’s one year anniversary. Even Jake’s amazed you all survived this long.”

“Brat. And Jake’s just jealous because *our* team scored your foundation’s protection detail overseas. I think he’s feeling a bit redundant.”

“Please, the man’s in charge of *all* the teams. I don’t know how he gets any sleep.”

“I’m pretty sure that has more to do with RJ keeping him up all night, than us guys.”

Kennedy blushed, looking at him as if she was replaying the other night. How he’d insisted they make love in any rooms they hadn’t yet christened. He’d barely gotten three hours of sleep before Mason had been banging on his door, telling him to get his lazy ass moving. Ryder had been playing catch up ever since.

She sauntered over to him, stepping into his arms when he opened them. “But I still have a few boxes I haven’t unpacked.”

“No one cares about some boxes. They’re coming here to celebrate, not judge. Besides, the house looks amazing. You really outdid yourself. The design...”

They’d spent a month after he’d been shot, looking for a place in both Fool’s Gold and Colorado Springs. But nothing had seemed to fit. Kennedy had been adamant about it being modest. Not too big, but enough room to grow. He’d arched a brow and asked her what she’d meant by grow. She’d simply shrugged and said they needed room for a few kids — just in case.

Once he’d picked himself up off the floor, he’d decided to buy a stretch of land, instead. Have her design their home. He’d never seen her so surprised. As if she hadn’t considered it a possibility. He’d kissed her and confessed that she was the only one who could combine what they both loved. Who really knew him. And he had to admit, their place was perfect.

Kennedy looked up at him and smiled. Hell, she glowed. Like that first time after they’d made love. All smooth skin and ruby-red lips. The woman was stunning. And he still couldn’t believe she was his.

“Please, you two, just get a room.”

Ryder glanced over his shoulder, smiling as Mason and Isabella walked across the lawn, their little girl cooing in Isabella’s arms. They’d called her Mary Lou Madeline Quinn, after Mason’s sister and Isabella’s mother. And Ryder could already tell, she was going to be a handful, just like her namesake.

Ryder pointed at the three containers in Mason’s hands. “Seriously? We’re all going to be eating leftovers for a month.”

Mason motioned toward Isabella. “I told her that, but she insisted. Something about how we can all eat our weight’s worth.”

Kennedy poked Ryder. “See? I’m not the only one who thinks that.”

She hurried over to Isabella, taking Mary Lou into her arms, and Ryder felt his heart give a hard thump. Watching her cuddle the baby did something to his chest. Had heat washing through his core.

Mason nudged him. “I know that look. You two have something you want to share?”

Ryder gave his best friend a shove. “Like I’d keep...” He paused, thinking back over the past week. How Kennedy had been more tired than usual, not to mention that her stomach had been off. She’d chalked it up to jet lag from their trip back from Kenya. That she’d probably eaten something questionable that had made her sick. But now that he looked at it with fresh eyes, maybe Mason was onto something.

“Buddy? You’re kinda scaring me with that goofy look on your face.”

Ryder grinned. “Like your face is any better. And there’s nothing to share, yet. Ask me, again, tomorrow.”

Mason laughed. “I think we both already know the answer. And yeah, she’s glowing. Really glowing. Albeit with a touch of green. How long has she been puking?”

“Just a few days. We thought it was from Africa, but...”

“Do yourself a favor and sleep now. You won’t be getting much of that for the next twenty years.”

Ryder shook his head as the rest of the teams started arriving. Cruz showed up next with Ayla, who looked radiant with her baby belly showing through a pretty summer dress. Ryder couldn’t tell which of them looked happier. though, with the way Cruz was hovering around her, Ryder was pretty sure the guy was already smitten. They’d elected not to find out if they were having a boy or a girl, and Ryder concurred. After all, there were very few true surprises in life.

Though, finding Kennedy had definitely been one of his.

An hour later, and the party was in full swing, with teammates and kids and dogs racing all over the place. Kent was there with Rita, their two mutts chasing after birds and toddlers. Making sure the little ones didn't stray too far. Their rescue training shining through. Kent and Rita were getting married next month — the classic June wedding.

Asher had finally asked Liberty to marry him. It had been a long road, but it seemed as if they were finally on the right track. Had put the past behind them. Ryder figured there'd be another big wedding in the future. Unless they followed in his and Kennedy's footsteps, and road tripped down to Vegas on a whim one weekend. Mason had thought they were insane, but he'd grabbed Isabella, and they'd shared in Ryder and Kennedy's own version of a shotgun wedding.

It was crazy how much all their lives had changed in a year.

Not that he had time to get sentimental over it with music blaring and people dancing. They'd carried on until well after sunset before the last stragglers finally left, leaving Ryder alone with Kennedy.

In the house she'd designed for them.

They'd kissed their way upstairs, and were busy undressing each other, when she'd stopped and rushed off to the bathroom. Five minutes and a lot of heaving later — with Ryder holding her hair for her — she'd managed to make it back to the bed. Collapse on it.

He relaxed beside her, brushing his fingers along her jaw. "You okay?"

She snorted. "I swear it was those pickled whatever Harlow dared me to eat. I've downed some pretty nasty things in Africa, but I swear nothing tasted that bad. I don't even know who brought them. But I couldn't turn down a double dare."

He grinned. She was just too fucking beautiful. "Of course, you couldn't. Especially with Harlow. Though, I have a feeling she might have been testing you."

Kennedy pushed up onto her elbows. “Testing me? For what? To see if I have an iron stomach?”

“To see if you’d acknowledge what the rest of us see.”

She gave him a swat. “I’m far too tired for you to be cryptic.”

“You’re pregnant.”

Her eyes widened as she stared at him. “You think I’m pregnant? *Everyone* thinks I’m pregnant?”

“You’re tired. You’re puking, and I’ve never seen you glow like this before. There’s also the part where I’ve been ravishing you every night for a couple months without protection.”

Her mouth kicked up into a smile. “Pretty sure I’m the one who’s been pouncing on you. But...” That smile widened. Made that glow go supernova. “*I am* a week late. Not that it’s unusual for me, especially when I’m traveling — the stress and the lack of sleep. But... I didn’t want to say anything until I knew.”

Ryder shook his head then stood. He walked over to the nightstand and removed a bag, holding it out to her. “Then, let’s find out.”

She arched a brow. “You have a pregnancy test? Since when?”

“Since Mason was sure, and I snuck out to the drugstore to get one.” Ryder palmed his chest. “I’m hurt you didn’t notice I was gone for half an hour.”

“Please, you and Mason and Cruz disappeared for over an hour, twice. I just assumed you were getting something ready so the *Trés Amigos* could have a bit of fun.”

“We don’t get that much guy time, these days. Which, I’m not complaining. I’d much rather hang out with you.”

“You’re just saying that because I might kick you in the head, otherwise.”

“I’ve seen you in action, and I like my brains intact, thank you. Now, come on. I’m sure after all the punch you drank, you can pee on a stick.”

She took the bag, hitching one hip out to the side. “Before I do this, I need to know you’re okay with whatever it says. Because I’m not exactly twenty, and there’s a real possibility we might not be able to have kids. That I’ve missed that window.”

Ryder moved in close and pulled her against him, dropping a kiss on her nose. “Whether it’s you, me and a handful of crazy, or just our own crazy, I’m all in. I love you, Kennedy. And that won’t change no matter what. So, take the test. Either way, I’ll still be the happiest, luckiest guy in Colorado.”

Tears misted her eyes, and she gave him a long, slow kiss. “I knew I was a goner that night in the museum. I love you, too.”

Then she tsked when he went to follow her, closing the door behind her. Ryder stood there, wondering if he should barge in or wait, when she emerged a few minutes later, holding the test against her chest.

His damn stomach dropped, the anticipation killing him when she simply stared at him. “Well?”

She smiled, and he knew. He’d been right.

Kennedy held it out. “It says it’s a good thing I designed this place with a lot of bedrooms.” She flipped it over, the big plus sign nearly taking him to his knees. “Because twins run in the family.”

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