

Saving
NEW PLEASURE SERIES
Tess

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SAVING TESS

NEW PLEASURES BOOK 5

M. S. PARKER

BELMONTE PUBLISHING, LLC

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Published by Belmonte Publishing LLC

CONTENTS

Reading Order

Free Prequel

1. [Clay](#)
2. [Tess](#)
3. [Clay](#)
4. [Tess](#)
5. [Clay](#)
6. [Tess](#)
7. [Clay](#)
8. [Tess](#)
9. [Tess](#)
10. [Clay](#)
11. [Tess](#)
12. [Clay](#)
13. [Tess](#)
14. [Clay](#)
15. [Tess](#)
16. [Clay](#)
17. [Tess](#)
18. [Clay](#)
19. [Tess](#)
20. [Tess](#)
21. [Clay](#)
22. [Tess](#)
23. [Clay](#)
24. [Tess](#)
25. [Clay](#)
26. [Tess](#)
27. [Clay](#)
28. [Tess](#)
29. [Clay](#)
30. [Tess](#)
31. [Clay](#)
32. [Tess](#)
33. [Clay](#)
34. [Tess](#)
35. [Tess](#)

[Also by M. S. Parker](#)
[About the Author](#)
[Acknowledgments](#)

READING ORDER

Thank you so much for reading Saving Tess, the second book of Clay's story. I highly recommend reading them in this order:

Rona and Jalen

[1. Claimed by Him](#)

[2. Played by Him](#)

[3. Saved by Him](#)

Clay and Tess

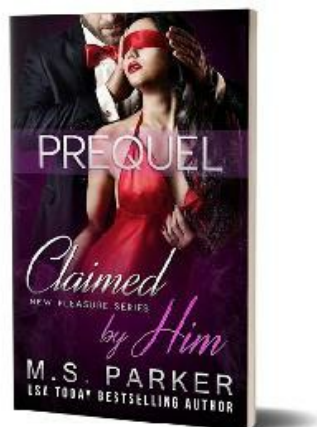
[4. Finding Brianne](#)

5. Saving Tess

6. Brianne's Secret (Dec 28)

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ONE

CLAY

IF SOMEONE HAD TOLD ME TWO MONTHS AGO THAT I'D GET TO SPEND ALL OF January in San Jose, Costa Rica, I would've told them that I'd pick a better vacation spot.

The country was beautiful, but if I'd been the one choosing where to go, I would've picked somewhere with fewer people, somewhere I could enjoy the solitude. Maybe ice fishing in Alaska or something like that.

But I hadn't been the one to choose Costa Rica, not in a typical sense anyway. My partner, FBI agent Ray Mathews, had suggested I take some time off after we'd closed a particularly difficult case, but not so I could relax. After just a couple months, he knew me well enough to know that I wouldn't just take time off and lounge around, which was why he'd given me an off-book investigation.

Through a series of connections, he'd been asked to look into a missing group of Red Care workers, and he'd passed that on to me. Since the FBI didn't have jurisdiction in other countries, I didn't have any back-up, and if I crossed any lines, I was screwed.

Except I'd found someone to back me up. Fate or destiny or whatever had brought Tess Gardener, my adolescent crush, back into my life. Her older sister, Brianne, had been with the Red Care group we'd rescued, but as far as I'd known at the time, my guy, Taylor MacIntosh, hadn't. My original assignment wasn't that important at the moment, though. Brianne and I had something more important to focus on.

Tess was missing.

It was the first Sunday afternoon in February, and she'd been missing since the second Wednesday in January. She and I had left Brianne at the

hospital that morning, intending to return later when Bri could be discharged. That was when I'd made my critical mistake.

I'd had sex with Tess. Again.

It'd been completely consensual, and I'd thought that both of us had been on the same page when we'd fallen asleep after. Except I'd woken up a couple hours later to find that she'd disappeared. No note, and nothing but her purse and phone missing. At first, I'd thought she'd gone to get Brianne on her own, but when I'd arrived at the hospital, Brianne had been as clueless as me.

And now I was searching Costa Rica for another missing Gardener woman, except this time, Brianne was looking with me and Tess was the one who was lost.

I barely glanced at the desk clerk as I walked from the front door to the courtyard entrance. Over the past two weeks, he'd gotten used to Brianne and me coming and going at all hours without explanation. Bri had taken over her sister's room, and to my surprise, had performed a thorough search immediately after entering it. I'd known Brianne had to be a badass since she'd been in the army since she was eighteen, but this was beyond normal badassery. She'd still been weak from her time being held hostage, and while her dislocated shoulder had been put back by the doctor, she wasn't exactly in fighting shape.

I took my usual seat near the pool and pulled my notebook from my pocket. The weather was gorgeous, the temperature perfect, and the scenery was something from a postcard.

I barely registered any of it.

No sightings at airport. No tickets purchased by anyone matching description. No sightings at bus stations. No tickets purchased by anyone matching description.

The words came automatically now. Every other morning, I went to the airport and the bus stations with a picture of Tess and asked if anyone had seen her. On opposite mornings, I did the same at car rental places. And every morning, no matter where I went, I got the same results. No one had seen her.

Getting out of the country without her passport would have been difficult, but getting a forged passport was possible. Not that I thought Tess would have done that. What would have been the point? She wasn't on the run from anything, hadn't done anything illegal. Sure, the drug cartel we'd rescued

Brianne and the other Red Care workers from wasn't happy with us, but Tess wasn't the sort of person to run from danger.

Hell, I'd had a nearly impossible time keeping her *away* from danger.

"Anything?" Brianne asked as she took the seat next to me.

"No," I didn't look at her as I answered. With aquamarine eyes and a tall, athletic build, Brianne didn't really look much like her indigo-eyed, petite sister. Only their dark brown curls were the same. But whenever I looked at her, all I could see was the reason Tess and I had been here to begin with.

Even though I knew that Tess and I never would've met again if it hadn't been for this trip, I would have given up the time I'd had with her if it meant she was safe.

"I finally found the desk clerk from that afternoon."

My head jerked up. When we asked about the man who'd been on the hotel desk that night, we'd been told that he was a temp brought in just for a couple days, and that had been his last day, not just at the hotel, but at the temp agency too. It seemed a little too much to be a coincidence, but anything was possible.

Coincidence or not, we still needed to talk to him. He was our only chance of finding out exactly what time Tess had left, and if she said or did anything to give us a hint about where she'd gone. Or if she hadn't left under her own power after all.

"And?" I asked impatiently when Brianne didn't immediately follow her statement up with more information.

"He moved to Cartago, about fifty to sixty minutes away from here. Explains why he isn't working at the temp agency here anymore." Brianne pulled her new phone from her pocket and studied the screen.

A few days after Tess's disappearance, I'd been curious to know why Bri kept looking at her phone, so I'd snuck a peek when she'd left it on the table, but her lock screen had only been a picture of two hands, the pinky fingers linked – a picture she still had thanks to the wonders of cloud technology. When I asked her about it, she'd finally told me that *she* was the real reason I'd been sent to San Jose.

While in the army, Brianne had met Sofie Harmon, the younger sister of Dorcus Ganesh, late wife to Secretary of State Fares Ganesh, who happened to be second cousins with my partner Ray Matthews's ex-wife, Ellie. Our own little six-degrees-of-separation.

Apparently, Brianne and Sofie had been involved for a couple years,

always careful to keep their relationship quiet, so when Bri had wanted to come to Costa Rica with Red Care, they'd both agreed it would be better for her to use an alias.

The alias Taylor MacIntosh.

Who was the person I'd been sent here to find?

It was enough to make my head hurt.

Brianne lightly touched the screen, and I knew she was thinking about Sofie. The picture was of their hands, Bri had finally told me. Not wanting to risk anyone finding her phone and seeing pictures of her and Sofie, she'd taken the shot of their hands one night in bed, knowing that the reminder of her lover could pass off as a stock photo if necessary.

I didn't press Brianne about how serious things were between the two, not wanting her to turn the questions around on me. I hadn't told her that Tess and I had slept together, but every so often, I caught Bri giving me this intense look, like she knew something about me that I was trying to hide. I was fairly certain that the only thing that kept her from demanding answers was that she was hiding something too.

"Do you think we should both go?" I asked.

"That'd probably be a good idea," Brianne said reluctantly. "This guy could just be run-of-the-mill, but if he's involved in what happened to Tess, he might not be." She rubbed her shoulder. "As much as I hate to admit it, I'm still not quite a hundred percent, and if I re-injure my shoulder, it'll just take that much longer to heal."

I nodded. "Do you have an address?"

JUAN MORENO LOOKED nervous when he opened the door, but I couldn't tell if it was the sight of two strangers or the way Brianne was glaring at him. I couldn't blame him for either one, really. This street didn't seem like the type that had a welcome wagon, and Bri was giving him a look that I was sure had scared the shit out of plenty of insurgents when she'd been overseas.

"We need to talk to you," Brianne said.

I shot her a sideways look and addressed Juan in Spanish. "*Mr. Monero, I understand you did some substitute work at Hotel Santos Tomas a couple*

weeks ago?”

“Sí,” he said, his expression still wary.

I held out my phone, Tess’s picture already on the screen. She’d been annoyed at me for taking the photo, but every time I had to show it to someone, I was glad I hadn’t let her talk me into deleting it. “*On your last day of work, did you see this woman leave the hotel?”*

He studied the picture, then nodded. “*She left shortly before my shift ended.*”

I pushed down the flare of excitement that threatened to distract me. “*Did she say where she was going?”*

He shook his head. “*But I did see that the taxi she took went to the east.*”

It wasn’t a lot, but it was more than we’d had an hour ago. “*What time was that?”*

“*Around two thirty.*”

That had only been about ninety minutes before I’d woken up. If she’d only waited for me, we could’ve gone wherever she’d wanted to go. Not for the first time, I wondered if that had been the problem – she hadn’t wanted me to go with her.

I asked Juan a few more questions, but he didn’t have anything else to offer. Still, as we got back into the car, my mind was already putting the new information into place with everything else we’d learned. It wasn’t actually much, but even these two new bits of information gave me a better picture of where we should be looking.

Tess wouldn’t have missed getting Brianne from the hospital, and she would’ve known that Brianne wouldn’t want to wait to be discharged, so it was logical to assume that she would’ve wanted to be back at the hotel by four-ish. At the very least, if she’d thought she’d be late, she would’ve let me know to go get Brianne without her. Which meant that it was logical to assume that wherever she’d gone, she’d intended to return before too long. If I factored in the time she left, and the direction she’d gone, I’d be able to determine the best area to search.

I refused to be discouraged because I refused to give up. I’d call in every favor I had coming to me, utilize every resource I had at the FBI, and even work the connections my dad’s position as a member of the House of Representatives offered.

I wouldn’t leave Costa Rica without Tess.

TWO

TESS

“YOU ARE IN COSTA RICA, AND TODAY IS THE FIRST SUNDAY IN FEBRUARY.”

I understood the words themselves, but it was the *facts* surrounding a couple of them I was having difficulty processing. Like Costa Rica and February.

The last thing I remembered before waking up in an unfamiliar room with a stranger watching over me, was talking to my mom from my apartment in Hell’s Kitchen on Christmas Day. Now, I was in another country, with someone I didn’t know, and missing more than a month’s worth of memories. If my body hadn’t felt like it’d been through a blender, I might’ve thought this was a nightmare, but no dream had ever hurt like this.

I struggled to sit up, but my mysterious benefactor put his hand on my shoulder and eased me back down onto the lumpy mattress.

“You need to rest.”

“I thought I’d been resting for the past two weeks,” I pointed out.

Two weeks here in his apartment...and three, maybe four, more weeks between Christmas and whatever had happened to make me unconscious. At some point in that time, things had been set into motion that led me here. I just needed to figure out what those things were, and then I could concentrate on what to do next.

“My name is Tess Gardener,” I said, holding out the hand that didn’t have the IV in it.

“Luis Orozco.” He shook my hand, his obsidian eyes boring into me with an intensity that made me decidedly uncomfortable.

Despite that, I didn’t squirm, but I did pull my hand back a bit faster than necessary. “You said you found me hurt?”

He nodded, his dark, shaggy hair falling over one eye. He pushed back the jet-black locks with an impatient gesture that told me he usually preferred his hair shorter, and I wondered if the time he'd spent nursing me back to health had prevented him from his usual haircut.

Speaking of nursing...

"Can I ask why you didn't take me to the hospital?" I kept my tone even and light, not wanting to set him off if he had some sort of *Misery* situation going on here. I wasn't an author, but judging by the way he was looking at me, I had to consider that he might try to hobble me if I made him angry. Maybe it was cynical of me to think like that considering he'd taken care of me when he didn't need to, but if journalism had taught me one thing, it was that thinking the worst was generally a smart approach.

"I did not have a car to take you," he said, a flush staining his cheeks. "I am unable to afford one."

"What about an ambulance? You said I was unconscious when you found me."

He shook his head. "Ambulance. Police. Fire. They do not come to this part of the city. Too dangerous."

The righteous indignation that I normally would've experienced upon hearing such a statement was muted in the face of everything else. Maybe I could check that out later for a possible story, but right now, I needed to know what had brought me down here in the first place. The possibilities weren't many.

I hadn't been working on anything specific before the holidays, though I supposed I could've found something after Christmas that had sent me down here. All I needed to do was call the paper. They'd be able to tell me more, even if I wasn't here for work. I would've had to give them some reason for my absence.

"May I have some more water, please?" Luis held the cup of water to my mouth, and I took another welcomed drink before asking, "Do you have my phone?"

"I am sorry," he said as he sat back down on the edge of the bed. "When I found you, I did not see any personal items."

Something about the way his gaze shifted made me suspect that there was something he wasn't saying, but I didn't call him on it. I needed to be smart about how I approached this. If I asked all of my questions first, I could get general information and then worry about what Luis was holding back.

My muddled mind was starting to sort itself out. I was still missing a chunk of time, but I was at least thinking clear enough now to realize that the first thing I needed to do was assess my injuries. If Luis was a threat rather than a savior, knowing if I had the physical ability to fend him off or get away was important.

“You said I hit my head.” I could feel it now, something across my forehead. It didn’t feel like a bump, but rather more like a cut. When I was six or seven, I stepped on a glass Christmas ornament and cut my foot badly enough to need stitches. This felt similar.

A scream of frustration bubbled up inside me. I could remember what it had felt like to have stitches twenty-five years ago, but not anything that’d happened in the past five or six weeks.

“I am a nurse,” Luis explained. “I stitched your head and a deep cut on your arm.” He pointed to my upper left arm.

A nurse, but he hadn’t taken me to the hospital.

I supposed if he got to work via bus or train, he could have made the argument that I couldn’t have ridden either of those when I was unconscious. Then again, it might’ve been because he was a nurse that he’d known there wasn’t any way to get me to the hospital safely, making it better for him to care for me here. It also explained how I had an IV that looked like one I would’ve been given in a hospital. It seemed like an awful lot to take on if he was going to hurt me outright.

“Your fingers are broken.”

It wasn’t until he said it that I realized my two middle fingers on my left hand were splinted and taped together. As if being aware of the injury gave my nerves permission to send signals again, my head and hand began hurting.

“You had other minor cuts and bruises,” he continued, “but nothing that needed more than a bandage. Most of them are healed. Your fingers will require at least two to three more weeks.”

As he watched, I took a few minutes to test my muscles and joints, taking stock of every twinge and ache. Most of the pain, I hoped, was from lack of movement rather than any real injury. Having two fingers out of commission bothered me more than the cut on my face, but I reminded myself it could have been worse. It could have been my right hand.

“Do you know what happened to me?” I asked. “How I was hurt?”

He hesitated before giving me an answer, making me wonder if he was merely searching for an English word, or if he was trying to come up with a

convincing lie.

“You were in a car accident.”

I frowned. A car accident? That seemed like the sort of thing the local authorities would've gotten involved with, especially since I would've either been in a rental or a taxi. I couldn't imagine a car rental place letting a vehicle go missing for a couple weeks or giving up on finding the renter who'd wrecked one of their cars.

Bad neighborhood or no, it didn't seem likely that the police wouldn't have followed up on it if the rental place had applied pressure. Besides, most of those cars had GPS units, and in all honesty, I doubted I would've rented one without a GPS. It was all too easy to make a single woman in a strange country disappear. I may have done risky things for a story, but I wasn't stupid. I took precautions.

Which meant the more likely scenario was that I'd taken a cab. If the cab had caused an accident where they'd injured their fare, I could see how a driver might panic and flee the scene, especially in this neighborhood. There were all sorts of believable lies that would be preferred to being responsible for hurting someone.

Still, I would've thought that having to pay the fare out of his own pocket would've deterred a driver from leaving a passenger behind. Once that meter was running, I would think that erasing it posed a problem. Then again, I had no way of knowing what sort of technology the cab I'd taken possessed.

“Did you see the car?” I asked.

“No,” he said, his eyes darting to the side and then back again.

He was lying.

It still wasn't the time to call him on it though. I filed the information away for future perusal, and then asked my next question, hoping Luis couldn't hear the way my pulse picked up the pace as I formed the words.

“Were you able to file a police report so if anyone came in to report a missing person, they'd be able to match the two cases?”

“I spoke with a member of the police, and he assured me that no Americans had been reported missing yet.”

Again, another lie. Maybe he wasn't actually spouting a bold-faced lie, but he was hiding things, and my gut told me that he thought he was trying to protect me from someone or something.

For some reason, that irked me more than normal.

I didn't bite his head off for it, though. I was still too weak to fend for

myself if I chose to leave as I was. I needed to be smart about this, no matter how much a voice in the back of my mind kept telling me that I was running out of time.

THREE

CLAY

WHEN BRIANNE AND I FIRST STARTED SEARCHING FOR TESS, WE'D TAKEN A map of the city and broken it into sections, spending the next two weeks taking one section at a time and going door to door, asking if anyone had seen Tess. Between being thorough and working outside the grid when it came to transportation and hospitals, we'd made far less progress than I liked.

Now, with the information Juan had given us, we'd been able to narrow our search. It was possible that Tess had been taken a different direction than she would have traveled on her own, but if we could find where she'd gone when she left that day, we might be able to find someone who knew more specifically where she went or the reason she'd left. All of this was, of course, assuming that she hadn't been taken before she'd reached her destination, but rather at the destination or after.

I didn't want to think about all the other possibilities. I *couldn't* think about them. Not without panic threatening to take over. I'd been involved in tense situations before, times where a level head had been the only thing that kept me alive, but if I'd learned anything from the stuff that happened with Rona back in Denver, it was that I didn't think clearly when it came to people I cared about, and no matter where things were between us, Tess would always be someone I cared about.

As I stepped out of the apartment building and back into San Jose's warm, humid February, I crossed off the building on my map and then squinted into the sun as I tried to read the address on the building. How their postal service managed to find anyone was beyond me.

I checked for traffic, then crossed over to the other side of the street. I understood the need to be methodical about this, but that did little to quiet the

voice in the back of my head saying that I needed to hurry up. The problem with my background in a situation like this was that I knew the longer we went without finding Tess, the likelier it was that we wouldn't find her at all.

Just like I had in the previous buildings, I started on the first floor, knocking on the door and hoping that someone would be home, and that they might have seen Tess.

“Hola. Mi nombre es Clay Kurth. Estoy buscando un amigo mío. ¿La has visto?” The words rolled off my tongue with barely a conscious thought. I'd long lost count of how many times I'd introduced myself, explained that I was looking for a friend, then held out my phone with a picture of Tess, courtesy of Brianne.

The elderly woman who answered my knock this time barely glanced at the picture before shaking her head and closing the door. With a sigh, I moved on. Unfortunately, that response had been the standard. Some people had even refused to open their doors, simply yelling at me to go away, and I wondered how many times the San Jose police had dealt with the same thing.

As I walked up the stairs to the second floor, I marked down which apartments hadn't gotten a response at all. Brianne and I were going to switch tomorrow and cover the apartments where we hadn't talked to anyone. Maybe some of the people who hadn't wanted to speak at all would be more likely to talk to Brianne. That was the hope, anyway.

After no one came to the door of the first apartment on the second floor, I moved on to the one next to it. I'd get the opposite side of the hall on my way back and hope a no-show might hear me knock and decide to talk to me. The second apartment owner answered before I could knock a second time.

The young man was probably a good four or five years younger than me and leaner, but only about an inch shorter. Unlike most of the other residents I'd spoken to that day, he opened the door wider than an inch, but he still braced it with his foot, as if he was worried I'd force my way inside.

“Hola. Mi nombre es Clay Kurth. Estoy buscando un amigo mío. ¿La has visto?”

His dark eyes flicked down to my phone, and for a moment, I thought I saw something on his face. A tightening of muscles in his jaw and the corners of his eyes. A glimmer of something in their dark depths. Before I could identify it, however, it was gone, making me wonder if I'd really seen it at all, or if I was so desperate for any sort of news about Tess that I was imagining things.

“I cannot help you,” he said, raising his gaze from the picture. *“I wish you luck.”*

He shut the door, leaving me to move on to the next door and repeat everything over and over again. Some of the tenants replied in English, most in Spanish. Some were polite, others rude. None of that mattered though because they all basically said the same thing – they hadn’t seen Tess.

By the time I returned to the lobby, it was nearing evening and was time for me to head back to the hotel to meet up with Brianne so we could compare what we’d each found. From there, we’d decide where to go next.

At least it wouldn’t take me long to sum up exactly what I’d found.

Jack shit.

I hoped she had better news, but my gut said that she hadn’t turned up anything more than I had. I tried not to get discouraged, but I couldn’t deny that any hope I’d had of finding Tess alive was beginning to fade.

FOUR

TESS

THE KNOCK ON THE DOOR WOKE ME FROM MY NAP, BREAKING THROUGH dreams that had seemed overly bright and loud, almost too real to be anything but reality. I heard the low murmur of Spanish voices but couldn't make out any of the words. Still, I focused on the sounds, letting them orient my mind. My circumstances were crazy enough as it was. I didn't need to add nightmares to the mix.

I opened my eyes but didn't try to sit up. I felt better than I had yesterday, but sudden movements were still a bad idea. A good idea was a shower. At some point yesterday, I'd realized that Luis must have been bathing me because I didn't have two weeks' worth of dirt, blood, and stink on me. As embarrassed as the thought made me, I had to admit that it would've been worse if he hadn't done it. I didn't even want to think about the sort of infection I could've gotten in my wounds.

Besides, he was a nurse. Bathing people was part of his duties. Just because I was in his home instead of in a hospital didn't change the scope of care he'd automatically give me.

"Did I wake you?" Luis asked as he came into the room. "I am sorry for that."

I eased myself upright, hating how much that simple movement took out of me. "It's all right. I needed to wake up anyway, or I'll never sleep tonight."

"Are you hungry?" he asked, a hopeful expression crossing his features.

"I could eat." My stomach flipped at the thought of solid food, but I knew I needed to at least try to eat something. "Maybe soup?"

Luis nodded, his face lighting up. "I will make you something."

As he hurried into the kitchen, I was left with the uncomfortable knowledge that Luis didn't regard me as a patient, or at least not *only* as a patient. He had a crush on me. It wasn't just a physical attraction. I'd caught him checking me out, but his attention had been more admiring than lecherous. That didn't worry me. The shy glances and blushes were what I needed to keep an eye on. I'd heard of the Florence Nightingale syndrome where patients fell in love with their nurses, but this was more of a reverse sort of thing, where the nurse was crushing on the patient.

"Who was at the door?" I asked, pushing aside the crush business. If it turned out to be an issue, I'd address it. Until then, I'd ignore it.

"No one."

Maybe it was a little petty of me, but that was one of my pet peeves, when people said no one or nothing when it was obviously someone or something.

"Sure sounded like someone." I managed to keep my tone light, not wanting to irritate him.

Luis came back to the room, but stood in the doorway, arms crossed in a pose that looked more casual than I thought he actually was. I didn't have any evidence that he was masking what he really felt, but my intuition said differently.

"It was not anyone important," Luis clarified. "A man looking for something."

Something...or someone?

The question popped into my head, making my heart give a funny sort of skipping beat. Was someone out there looking for me? Maybe I hadn't come to Costa Rica alone. Maybe I'd been sent here from work along with another reporter.

"What was he looking for?"

"Un perro," Luis said with a smile. The microwave dinged. "I will return with your soup."

A dog. The man at the door had been looking for a dog.

On the surface, it made sense, but something just didn't sit right with me. Why, if it was only a guy looking for his dog, hadn't Luis simply told me that? Why had he tried to hide it? Or maybe he hadn't been hiding it at all. Maybe he'd simply been thinking that it wasn't important enough for me to worry about.

Besides, if someone had been looking for me, Luis would've told him I

was here. It wasn't like I had some crazy ex I needed to be protected from. Sure, there was a guy or two at work who could be a little sleazy at times, but if I'd been sent to Costa Rica with any of them, I wouldn't have needed to hide from them. If they'd tried something, I would've just reported them to HR and laughed when they had to take sensitivity training or whatever.

I really wished I had my phone, or any phone. I needed to get ahold of work, but Luis's only phone didn't have the ability to call outside the country. He had only the most basic cell phone, which made me believe he was telling the truth, and considering everything he'd done for me, I didn't feel right questioning him on it. Once I got ahold of some money...

I nearly smacked myself on the forehead. I'd asked about my phone. I hadn't bothered to ask about my purse.

"Luis, did you find my purse when you found me?"

"Yes," he said as he came back into the room with a bowl of soup. "I will get it."

A rush of relief went through me. Maybe he hadn't found my phone because it was in my purse. He seemed like the sort of guy who'd feel awkward going through a woman's purse, especially a woman he was attracted to. Maybe I'd even be lucky enough to find something in my purse that would tell me why I was here.

I sipped a spoonful of the thick liquid and was pleasantly surprised. Chicken and rice with some spices I couldn't place but did wonders for the hunger gnawing at my stomach. Luis had told me yesterday that he'd been keeping me fed with a liquid diet, managing to get me to swallow enough calories to stay alive, and I was grateful for that, but I was even more glad that I could actually eat again, not in the least because I felt like I was only skin and bones.

"Do you like it?" Luis asked as he came back into the room. "It has been a long time since I have had someone to cook for."

"It's great," I said with a smile. "Did your mom teach you to make it?"

His expression tightened. "My mother died when I was six. My grandmother raised me, but I lost her five years ago."

Shit. I reached out and grasped his hand, giving it a tight squeeze. "I'm sorry. I didn't know."

The moment went from comforting to awkward when I couldn't figure out the best way to let go without making him feel like it was personal. I'd already fucked up by asking about his mom. I didn't want to hurt his feelings

by making him think I was rejecting him.

“Thank you,” I said as I gently pulled my hand away. I pushed myself up into a better position and reached for my soup again.

“Your purse,” he said, setting it down next to me.

“Thank you,” I said again. I didn’t want to look too eager, so I finished my soup and handed back the bowl before picking up my purse and opening it.

It didn’t take me long to confirm that my phone wasn’t inside, but my wallet was, which was at least something positive. My passport was there too, and a quick look inside told me that I hadn’t gone anywhere else before coming to Costa Rica. That didn’t really help me much when it came to figuring out why I was here, so I kept digging.

Brush. Lip gloss. Birth control. Makeup. Phone charger. Notebook.

Yahtzee.

I pulled out my notebook and flipped it open to the last page I remembered writing. I used my phone to record interviews most of the time, but I did tend to go old-school when it came to general notes. I’d found that the best way to keep others from stealing my sources and ideas was to hide them in plain sight. Mix them in with my general observations and no one would be able to tell the difference.

I’d jotted down a few things at Christmas, and I was relieved to find that I remembered writing all of them. Then I went to the next page and didn’t recognize anything but my handwriting. Before the spark of panic inside me could turn into something dangerous, I reminded myself that I’d figure it all out. Investigation was what I did for a living. I could certainly investigate myself.

I read each line carefully, marking every note I thought could be something I was currently working on. It was tedious, not being able to remember the context for what I was reading, but it at least gave me something to do.

At some point, I found myself nodding off. Like full-on, head dropping then jerking back up, nodding off. I tried to fight it, but I knew it wouldn’t be long before I passed out mid-sentence. Maybe when I woke up the next time, my memory would be back.

The sheets were rough against my sensitive nipples, but I couldn’t stop squirming...and there was no way in hell I was going to ask him to stop. What he was doing felt too good.

His large hands palmed my ass cheeks, holding them apart as his mouth did wonderful, sinful things to me. I'd never known that something could feel this good. My entire body trembled as his tongue teased my entrance, then dipped inside for a taste. I had fire building low in my belly, and I knew an explosion was imminent.

Two fingers slid inside me, twisting and rubbing as he prepared me for what would come next. I could almost feel the ghost of him inside me, stretching me far wider than a pair of fingers could.

"You need to come, Tess." The voice was husky, rough, and did all sorts of strange things to my stomach, and it sounded impossibly familiar. "Come on my fingers, and then I'll make you scream on my cock."

Did I know him? The voice?

My pussy clenched, and I whimpered. I wanted him so badly that it hurt.

Then his tongue rasped over my clit, and the hurt turned into the sort of white-hot pleasure that I'd only ever dreamed of.

I jerked awake when I heard the bedroom door close. Disoriented for a moment, my hand tightened around my pen, and the familiar feel reminded me of where I was and what had happened.

Or, rather, the fact that I couldn't remember what had happened.

Except a piece of me felt as if my erotic dream had been more memory than fantasy.

But that wasn't possible. I'd never had sex, oral or any other kind. Hell, I barely had a sex drive. There was no way in hell that, in the few weeks I couldn't remember, I'd met someone I would've liked enough to lose my virginity to. That sort of thing just didn't happen.

FIVE

CLAY

“I’M TELLING YOU, THAT SON OF A BITCH KNEW SOMETHING.” I CUT A sideways glance in Brianne’s direction. “He looked nervous.”

She tapped a finger to her bottom lip. “I thought you said he looked guilty.”

“He had a reaction to Tess’s picture,” I countered, my voice growling out my frustration. “Does it matter exactly what emotion I saw?”

“It does if we’re wasting our time sitting outside this guy’s building instead of searching for my sister.”

I ground my teeth together. This was why Brianne and I had been doing the majority of our searching separately. We disagreed on almost everything except the fact that we both wanted to protect Tess.

Even when we did manage to come up with a plan both of us could live with, we still bickered. I didn’t know if we’d simply changed enough in the last sixteen years that who we were now just couldn’t get along, or if it was because I now knew that it was Brianne’s fault I’d lost Tess the first time. Either way, if staking out the building didn’t yield results, Brianne was going to use it against me at every turn, and it wouldn’t do anything to help how things were between us.

“What do you suggest we do then?” I asked, trying to keep the snark to the minimum.

“I don’t know, Clay,” Brianne snapped back, “but anything that’s actually taking action instead of sitting here on our asses has my vote.”

I couldn’t keep it to myself anymore. “You know, Tess wouldn’t have even been here if it wasn’t for you. She came here to find you. It was pure chance that we met. I tried to keep her safe, but when it comes to you, she

doesn't care about her own safety."

She snorted, crossing her arms over her chest. "Real bang-up job you did there, Clay, keeping her safe."

"I was doing just fine until you showed up."

Brianne half-turned in her seat, her eyes narrowed into what I assumed was supposed to be an intimidating glare. Unfortunately for her, I'd faced off against people a whole lot scarier than her.

"Just fine?! You took my sister into a Colombian drug house!"

I looked away from her and back to Luis's building, struggling to keep my voice even as I addressed the accusation. "I don't know how well you actually know your sister, but she's not the sort of woman who can be controlled. She was determined to be part of the rescue on the off chance that you were there. If I'd told her to stay, she would've just come on her own."

"I know Tess better than you," Brianne retorted. "And she never should have had the opportunity to get involved. As soon as you realized she wasn't here on vacation or doing a story, you should have sent her home."

"And how do you think I should have done that?" My hands tightened on the steering wheel. "Picked her up and carried her onto an airplane, screaming and cursing? I'm pretty sure that's frowned upon. And illegal."

"I'm sure you could've thought of something if you'd tried hard enough. You're an FBI agent, for fuck's sake! You could've reported her to the local police and had her locked up for a couple hours while you did the dirty work."

"She's not a child, Bri." Even as I said the words, I could hear Tess in my head telling me the same thing. I promised myself that when we found her, I'd make sure she had the opportunity to mock me for my change of position.

"You think we should just stop looking then? She's an adult, so wherever she is, it's her choice to be there. That, or it's the consequences of some decision she made?"

I squashed the irritation that made me want to yell. "No, I don't think that. Tess fought to find you. She wouldn't have left without a word, or at least not for this long. Wherever she went, something or someone kept her from coming back."

"Maybe she just realized what a colossal mistake it was to sleep with you."

Shit.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Brianne turn back to face the

windshield. “Who Tess sleeps with isn’t any of your business.”

“It is when it’s someone who’s going to mess up her life,” Bri retorted. “Tess isn’t some random woman to warm your bed. She deserves better than you. Better than someone who’s going to break her heart.”

“You don’t know me!” I nearly shouted, my frayed patience finally snapping. “You haven’t seen me in sixteen years, and I know you and Tess haven’t been close in that long. You have no idea what she needs or what I can give her.”

“I know she deserves better than a guy who’s going to leave her as soon as he gets bored.”

“You don’t know a damn thing about me or what I’d do.” The fury in my voice surprised even me. “I’ve *never* hurt Tess. That’s all you, Brianne, doing whatever you want and not caring who you hurt.”

“I’ve never hurt my sister.”

I laughed, putting as much vitriol into the sound as I could. “All that ‘protection’ you thought you were giving her did more damage than I could ever do. She loves you more than anyone, even after what you did.”

“What I did?” Bri’s voice suddenly became small.

“She knows, Brianne. That you lied about you and me having sex. That you and your mom have always tried to shelter her from any truth that might be hard for her. That you two treat her like a child who couldn’t understand the way things work in the world.”

“What did you say to her?”

“The truth.” I shot a glare at the woman next to me. “She accused me of sleeping with you, and I told her that it’d never happened. She defended you, said that you’d never lie to her like that.”

“And you just had to set the record straight,” she said bitterly.

“Damn right I did!” I smacked the steering wheel with the palm of my hand. “I cared about her, Bri, and you knew it! She cared about me too, and you still told her a lie that you knew would destroy her.”

“We had to leave,” Brianne said quietly. “I knew that she’d never make a clean break if she held on to you, and we needed that to get away from Darius. He would have hurt her eventually, and I couldn’t let that happen.”

“You had no right,” I said. “Tess and I—”

“I had every right,” she countered, a note of superiority creeping into her voice. “I’m her sister. It’s my job to look out for her.”

“It was her choice to make.”

“She can’t think straight when it comes to you, Clay. She’s all heart and no head. The two of you are different people. You always have been. That works for a friendship, but she’s always wanted more with you, and we both know that it won’t work.”

“Again, that’s not your decision to make.”

Even as I said the words, a part of me couldn’t help but wonder if she was right, if Tess and I didn’t have a chance at building something between us even now. Right on the heels of that thought was the one that asked when I’d started considering this thing between Tess and me as something I wanted beyond our trip to Costa Rica. We hadn’t talked about it, and I hadn’t even really thought about it.

So why did it bother me so much to think that Brianne might be right and that the best thing for Tess was to stay as far away from me as possible?

SIX

TESS

WAKING UP THIS TIME FELT MORE NATURAL THAN IT HAD YESTERDAY. WHILE not remembering weeks of my life wasn't exactly normal, I still felt more like myself, though with more aches and pains than I liked. I couldn't move my two fingers, and I'd forgotten how much that part of having a broken bone annoyed me, but at least it wasn't an injury that would keep me from being mobile.

And I needed to get mobile.

A glance toward the small, boarded-up window told me that it was either night or the weather was bad enough that it'd made it dark outside. Since I didn't hear wind or rain or anything that would indicate a storm, I was going to assume the most logical solution was the correct one.

According to Luis, we weren't in a great part of San Jose, and since I didn't know any more than that, I wasn't about to take off into the unknown. I was impulsive sometimes, but I wasn't an idiot.

Which was why it seemed so strange that I'd ended up here by myself. Taking off to a foreign country without any real cause wasn't like me. I had to figure out what had made me come here, and to do that, I needed to leave the apartment. But I had to be smart about it.

Moving at a fraction of my usual speed, I pushed myself up to a sitting position. My arms shook with the effort, and I muttered a curse under my breath. I'd never been athletic like my sister, but I'd never considered myself weak before.

I didn't like it.

"Tess?" Luis knocked on the door. "Are you awake?"

I pulled the blanket up, uncomfortably aware that I wasn't wearing

anything under the baggy t-shirt and shorts Luis had given me yesterday. It didn't matter that he'd washed and dressed me the entire time I'd been unconscious. When he looked at me now, I felt like he was trying to see right through me, and not in a good way.

Still, he'd saved me. "Come in."

The moment I saw his face, I knew that something had changed...for the worse. Gone was the fixed attention he'd focused on me before. His gaze flitted from place to place, never landing on anything or anyone for more than a few seconds. But it wasn't just his eyes. All of him looked...twitchy.

"How do you feel?"

He'd switched to Spanish, and for some reason, that made me infinitely more nervous.

"Better," I responded in English. I wasn't trying to be an ass about it. My brain just wasn't up to translating both ways at the moment. I needed to conserve my energy.

"Good. That will make this easier. We will need to move fast."

My eyebrows shot up. "What was that?"

"I didn't tell you everything about the day I found you," Luis said as he walked over to the window.

I'd suspected that he hadn't been entirely forthcoming at the time, but I'd been biding my time before pressing him on it. Now, it seemed I was going to get some answers without having to ask. Whether this would be the truth or not, I didn't know, but him volunteering the information would at least keep me from stirring up tension with questions.

"I heard the crash, and when I got there, I saw another car driving away. The one you were in was a cab. The man driving was dead. You weren't. I had to choose between helping you and retrieving him."

My heart twisted in grief for the stranger. Who had that man been? Had his body been recovered and sent to his family, or had he simply been tossed aside with the car? I understood why Luis had needed to make a choice, and I was grateful that he'd decided to save me, but my heart went out to that man's loved ones.

"I recognized the car that left," he continued. *"It belongs to the drug dealers who live in this neighborhood. Colombians."*

The tone of his voice when he said that single word sent a frisson of fear through me. I didn't need to remember why I was in Costa Rica to know that a car belonging to a Colombian drug cartel was never a good thing. I just

hoped that I hadn't been stupid enough to be poking my nose into their business. I was all for finding the truth and exposing wrongs, but there were plenty of stories in the States. I wouldn't have needed to come all the way here to find one. So what had done it? Had I, at some point after Christmas, gotten some sort of tip that had sent me to Costa Rica to pursue someone or something important to me?

I pressed my fingers to my temples. Amnesia was a funny thing. Some things I could remember so clearly. Others were like black holes in my brain.

"Do you think the Colombians were just involved in the accident by chance?" I watched him closely as I asked my question. "Or do you think maybe it wasn't an accident?"

He pulled the curtain aside enough to peek out the window, but the way he held his body against the wall made me think that he was worried about someone seeing inside. I filed that information away for future reference, hoping it meant that we were on the first or second floor of the building. That would also mesh with Luis being able to take me into his apartment without anyone noticing him lugging me up the stairs or into an elevator.

Or his neighbors could have seen and just been reluctant to get involved.

"I have been hearing rumors that they are using the accident as an example of what happens when they are disrespected."

Shit.

Did that mean that *I* had disrespected them somehow? Was I responsible for the death of the cab driver? Had I deprived someone of their husband, father, son for a story?

I didn't want to think I was that sort of person, but the things Luis said made me think that I needed to start considering that it might have been a possibility. That was another good reason to want to get out of here – and away from Luis – as soon as possible. If I was responsible for what'd happened, I didn't want anyone else caught up in it, no matter how awkward I felt around Luis.

If I could get to the airport, I might be able to get a copy of my return ticket printed, and then I remembered that I'd been unconscious for two weeks. I couldn't imagine work letting me have an open-ended amount of time off, not for a drug cartel story in another country, and it was highly unlikely I could've found something more far-reaching in such a short period of time. All of that meant it was almost guaranteed that my return ticket date had already passed.

I could buy a new ticket, even if it meant maxing out a credit card and flying to some random country before finding a flight home. No matter how much of a pain in the ass that would be, I'd at least be safe.

"After all you've done for me, I hate to ask for a favor, but is there any way you can get me to the airport?"

Luis might've been keeping things from me, but he hadn't hurt me, which meant he was my safest bet. I didn't want to risk having to ask anyone else for help, especially in this neighborhood.

He switched to English. "No airport. They will have people watching."

"What then?" I asked, curbing my impatience. "You borrow a car? Take me to the train station?"

He shook his head. "You must not leave the country right now."

"If they haven't given up on finding me yet, when do you think they will?"

His expression grew grim. "They will not. Their honor demands they never forget."

Harsh. Unfortunately for Luis, I wasn't in the mood to deal with harsh politely. "Well, I don't plan on living here the rest of my life, so why don't you tell me your plan."

"We go to a safe place and wait," he said. "I will find a way out, but I need more time."

"The US Embassy," I said, hope rising in my chest. "I'll be safe there, and they'll help me get home."

"You will not be safe there," he said, his voice rising.

"I'd be on US soil," I argued. "I'd think that the Colombians would realize that attacking the embassy would most likely result in the US giving Costa Rica resources to get rid of the cartel entirely."

Luis glanced out the window again. "That, I do not know, but I do know that the cartel has eyes and ears in many places, perhaps even in your embassy."

As much as I wanted to tell him that there was no way anyone at the embassy would sell me out to the cartel, I was far too jaded to believe in the majority of people being decent. I'd seen far too much evil and corruption in the world not to take his statement with the weight he intended.

That also meant, however, that I didn't completely trust him either.

"What are we going to do then?" I asked.

"I know of a place where we will be able to stay tonight," he said. "In the

morning, we will make a more permanent plan.”

As he walked over to the tiny closet and began rummaging through its contents, I couldn't help but wonder if the reason he wanted to keep me close was because he saw me as a ticket to America. *Costa Rican Nurse Rescues American Woman and Nurses Her Back to Health*. It was the type of headline that could possibly grab the attention of the sorts of media outlets needed to pressure the government into getting him a visa, the perfect combination of human interest and politics. The only thing that would make it a more compelling story would be if we'd fallen in love. Maybe that even explained the looks Luis had been giving me. He wasn't actually crushing on me, but rather hoping for an attraction to help him get what he wanted.

All of this was pure speculation, however. I'd go with him now, and while he came up with a plan, I'd do my own planning, just in case.

“All right,” I said, swinging my legs over the side of the bed. “What do we need to do first?”

SEVEN

CLAY

HER CURLS FANNED OUT ACROSS MY SHEETS, BROWN AGAINST PLAIN GRAY. SHE'D never really liked the color of her hair, but I'd always thought it looked like chocolate. Not milk chocolate but the deep, rich color of bittersweet dark chocolate. The sort that made a person's mouth dry and left them unable to decide if they wanted more.

She was like that too, *I thought*. Looking all sweet and innocent, but that first taste said there was so much more to indulge in. Headstrong, stubborn, determined, all characteristics that were both endearing and maddening at the same time.

She said my name, and I pulled my thoughts away from the puzzle that was her. This was one place where things were simple. From that first kiss, I'd known the two of us would fit together, not in spite of our differences, but because of them. Back then, I'd been worried that if I'd tried to initiate anything, our friendship would suffer, but all our coming together had done was strengthen what was already there.

"Are you going to stand there all night, or are you going to come to bed?" she asked saucily. "You know, in some places, we wouldn't be considered man and wife until we consummated the marriage."

I let my gaze caress her naked body, slowly moving from ankles to knees to hips. I lingered on the patch of dark curls between her legs, then resumed my perusal, taking in her tiny waist before taking in her small, firm breasts, tipped by nipples the color of butterscotch. Her chest and neck were flushed, her lips parted ever so slightly. By the time I reached her eyes, the air between us was thick with our arousal.

"I suppose all of the consummating we did before doesn't count," I said,

wetting my lips.

She shook her head and grinned. “Nope.”

“Then I suppose it’s our duty to consummate as much as we can before the honeymoon’s over.” I gave a dramatic sigh. “I suppose I can suffer through it if you can.”

She laughed, those gorgeous indigo eyes of hers dancing, her perfect tits jiggling enticingly. Damn, she was gorgeous. I still couldn’t believe that, after all those years apart, she was finally mine. Forever.

My cock filled, thickened, rising toward my stomach, and I wrapped my hand around my shaft. The simple touch made me shudder, and I tightened my grip at the base of my cock, hoping I wouldn’t embarrass myself.

The feel of her skin against mine, hot silk that could only be rivaled by the molten heat of her mouth. The need I had for her pulsed low in my belly, an ache that never went away and only rarely faded. What I felt for her was stronger than anything I’d ever known, too intense to be called want or need. Being with her was more important than eating, than breathing.

I didn’t know what I would do if I lost her...

A loud bang startled me out of my dream. I didn’t have a chance to be pissed that I’d woken up just as I’d been getting to the good stuff because Brianne was now sitting in the passenger’s seat, and her expression was all business.

“How the hell have you made it so far in the FBI sucking this badly at stake-outs?” She glared at me. “Or do they just have low standards?”

I rubbed my hand over my face and tried to clear the sleep from my head. “I’m a profiler, Brianne. Stake-outs aren’t really my thing.”

“I’m in the army,” she countered, “and I’ve managed to do just fine.”

I started to ask her if anything happened, but then my brain caught up with my surroundings. “Wait a minute. You just got back into the car. I’m pretty sure leaving during a stake-out is as bad as falling asleep. Where did you go?”

“I got bored,” she said matter-of-factly. “I couldn’t sit here on my ass when that guy in there could have information about Tess.”

I really hoped she hadn’t done something stupid. “Brianne, please tell me—”

“I wanted a look inside,” she continued as if I hadn’t said anything at all. “See if I could figure out what he knew.”

“That was dangerous.” I thumped the heel of my palm against the steering

wheel. “Not to mention the fact that you could’ve tipped him off to us being here.”

She shook her head. “I didn’t have a chance. The place was already empty.”

Alarm bells went off in my head. “Empty?”

“Not empty,” she clarified. “Furniture and all that shit is there, but there’s no one inside.”

“How do you know?” I asked, unsure I wanted to know the answer.

“Lights all turned off all several hours ago and haven’t been back on since. No noises outside the usual appliance sounds. No running water. No toilet flushing.”

All excellent observations. “How’d you get close enough to see all of that?”

“I have my ways,” she said, her fingers tapping out a nervous rhythm on her knee. “Besides, it doesn’t matter how, only that it’s true. Your guy isn’t in his apartment anymore.”

Shit.

“We saw him go inside,” I said. “And we didn’t see him come out.”

“True,” she said. “But what can I tell you? He’s not there now.”

“Dammit!” I smacked the steering wheel. “What a fucking waste of time!”

“Maybe not,” she said. “If the place is empty, it means we can do some reconnaissance. He might not be very forthcoming, but maybe we can find something in his apartment that is.”

“You want to break into his apartment on the off chance we could find something that says where Tess is?” I’d known we were both getting antsy, wanting something to happen, but what she was talking about doing was crazy.

She shrugged. “You got any better ideas?”

Dammit.

I didn’t. And she knew it.

“If we go to jail, I’m not being anyone’s bitch,” I said as I opened the door. “Come on.”

She followed me into the apartment building and up the stairs to the second floor. When we reached the door, I knocked, ignoring the dirty look I got from Brianne. It wasn’t her I didn’t trust, but rather that I wanted to be sure before I did something irreversible.

Then again, I *didn't* completely trust her.

She'd lied to Tess for years, and anyone who would deceive their sister for that long made me think they couldn't be trusted, no matter her reasons for doing it.

No one answered the door. I went down on one knee and pulled a few small tools from my pocket. It didn't take me long to pick the lock, and there wasn't a deadbolt, which meant the two of us were in the apartment less than two minutes after we reached the door.

I waited for a moment to let my eyes adjust to the darkness, and Brianne surprised me by doing the same. Most people who went into a strange, dark room automatically reached for a light. The switch on the wall, string from the ceiling, a flashlight – it didn't matter. Brianne didn't though.

“Try not to touch anything.” I pitched my voice low but didn't whisper. Sometimes a whisper made more detectable sounds than most people realized. “If you see anything that's promising, call for me, and we'll look at it together. I'll do the same.”

She nodded. “I'll take right, you take left.”

Before I could agree or make another suggestion, she was moving. I watched her for a moment, impressed with the efficiency with which she searched. Clean, precise, methodical. The fact that it was impressive bothered me though. Brianne wasn't someone who simply had a knack for organization. She might've been a neat soldier, but this was beyond neat. Her movements were professional. So much so that I filed the information away to be discussed later.

Right now, we had work to do and didn't know how long we had to do it. Finding Tess was our priority.

EIGHT

TESS

WHEN LUIS SAID HE HAD A PLACE FOR US TO GO FOR THE NIGHT, I'D assumed he'd meant another apartment, maybe a house, somewhere he had friends and supplies. Or, at least, supplies. I wasn't so sure he was a social enough person to have friends.

I hadn't been expecting anything expensive, or even anything nice. I wasn't a snob. Give me somewhere clean to sleep, and I'd be happy. Give me somewhere safe, and I'd be content.

Instead of somewhere clean and safe, however, I was sitting on a mattress that I hoped wasn't bug-infested, in a cheap motel that probably saw more aliases and prostitutes than...well, I couldn't really think of anything that could possibly have seen more prostitutes and aliases than this hotel. The mustached man behind the barred glass had leered at me while making comments that had me wishing I didn't know Spanish, but Luis had barely blinked as he handed over a roll of bills.

Luis had claimed the bathroom first, and I'd thrown every possible lock on the door, then wedged a chair under the doorknob. Then I'd perched on top of the bedspread, determined that I wouldn't fall asleep. Fortunately, the throbbing in my hand had made that unlikely.

Or so I'd thought.

I'd been out before Luis was done in the bathroom. I'd woken up a couple hours ago, stiff and really needing to pee. Now I was back on the bed, gagging at the thought that I'd actually slept on something very likely coated in more bodily fluids than I wanted to imagine.

The first thing I would do when I got home would be to take a two-hour shower. Maybe I wouldn't even wait that long. The embassy would have

showers. At least that was what I kept telling myself. It was the little things that kept me going.

“Ice,” Luis said as he shut the door behind him. “I also found some food.”

The armful he dumped onto the bed was more vending machine fodder than it was real food, but it was something to eat, so I wasn’t going to complain.

“Thank you,” I said as I reached for what looked like a granola bar. “I have to ask, are you sure this place really is safe? I would think it was the kind of hotel that cartels would use to sell...whatever.”

“No.” He shook his head. “The cartel does not allow their members to use their product, and if they wish the services of a...prostitute, they have their own.”

Yeah, that made me feel much better.

“Do not worry,” he said as he sat next to me on the edge of the bed. “I will not let anything bad happen to you.”

I wished I could say that made me feel better, but it didn’t. I appreciated everything Luis had done for me, but I didn’t see how he’d be able to protect me from the lowlifes at this motel, let alone a drug cartel. Then there was the way my intuition kept telling me that something wasn’t quite right. The more time I spent with him, the less I trusted him, and the less I trusted his plan. I understood that local authorities could be in the cartel’s pocket, and I wasn’t naïve enough to think that the American Embassy workers were above taking bribes, but I was beginning to doubt that hiding in this motel was less dangerous than going to the embassy.

“Eat,” he said, holding out a package of a vending machine staple – cheese crackers and peanut butter.

I took the crackers and offered him a weak smile. As a teenager, I’d doubted my ability to read people, deduce their intentions, but when I’d gotten hired at the *Times*, I’d had to regain that confidence. Over a decade working in the news business had taught me a lot, and my reporter’s instincts were buzzing like crazy, but I didn’t know what course of action to take.

So I ate. My stomach wasn’t happy with this reintroduction to solid food, and each little bit I nibbled required me to pause until it decided not to rebel. Luis opened a bag of chips and ate just as slowly, but I didn’t think his stomach was the problem. He didn’t speak while he watched me, methodically going from one chip to the next as if he couldn’t even taste them.

“I need to call my paper,” I said finally. “I don’t know anyone in Costa Rica, which means the only other logical reason for me to be here is an assignment. I don’t remember getting one, but that has to be it. Nothing else makes sense.”

“You do not believe in...what is the American word? *Destino*?”

“Destiny?” I asked. “You think this is destiny? Fate?”

He nodded, his face lighting up. “Yes! Fate.” He put his hand over mine. “An unknown reason brought you to San Jose. An accident with an unknown cause left you near where I was. All to bring the two of us together.”

I wasn’t a big fiction reader, and on the rare occasions I did pick up a novel, it wasn’t romance. I didn’t have anything against the genre. It just wasn’t my cup of tea, so to speak. I could read fantasy or horror where the concept of destiny and fate were often used, but when it came to the notion of something that important moving us around like pieces on a chessboard all so two people could hook up...I found the whole thing preposterous. Love didn’t work like that, if it was even real at all.

I wasn’t about to explain all of that to Luis, because if I did, I knew the question that would inevitably come next.

Why didn’t I believe?

That was a path I didn’t want to take, a discussion I didn’t want to have.

And it was none of Luis’s fucking business.

Still, I couldn’t let him think that I believed the two of us were soulmates or some bullshit like that.

“I think me calling work is the best way for me to get my memory back,” I said. “Plus, it gives me some leverage. Print media may be having issues, but the *New York Times* is still a big name. If my people know what’s going on, I can use that to get out of the country safely.”

Disappointment flooded his face. “I can keep you safe.”

I softened my tone. “Look, it’s nothing against you. I really appreciate everything you’ve done for me. It’s just time for me to go home.”

“What if you leave behind unfinished business?”

I shrugged. “I guess I’ll figure that out after I learn the truth of why I came here.”

He reached out and tucked a curl behind my ear, his fingers lingering for a moment before his hand dropped back to his side.

“I do not want you to go,” he said quietly. The eyes that met mine were blazing with something I didn’t want to name.

“I *have* to go,” I insisted. “This isn’t my home.”

“It could be.”

He leaned forward so quickly that I barely had time to register what he was doing before his mouth was on mine.

A memory flashed into my mind. Other hands touching me. Hands I’d wanted to feel on my body for what seemed like forever. Salt on his lips from my tears. The way he took it slow, letting me know I could ask him to stop and he would. But I hadn’t wanted him to stop. I’d wanted more. More of him. All of him.

Clay.

The name jerked me back to reality.

This wasn’t Clay, and I didn’t want this. I leaned back, but Luis followed, his lips trying to pry mine apart. The need I’d felt to treat him carefully disappeared under a flood of anger. Misreading a situation was one thing, but to keep pushing when someone tries to move away was something else.

I put my uninjured hand on his chest and pushed him back. For a few seconds, I was afraid he wouldn’t respond to that either, but then he broke the kiss. He glared at me, then stood up, his hands curled into fists.

A jolt of fear went through me as I realized how vulnerable I was right then. He could hit me, force me to do things, and I doubted anyone here would even blink. Women probably screamed here all the time. I didn’t even have two hands to fight back.

Before my scrambling mind could wonder what I would do if he came after me, he spun on his heel and stormed out, slamming the door behind him. I breathed a sigh of relief that was short-lived when I remembered that my life was in Luis’s hands for the time being. If he wanted, he could go to the cartel and give me up. If that was too direct, all he had to do was leave me there. The odds of me being able to make it alone weren’t in my favor.

I felt a sudden longing for someone else, someone who’d always made me feel safe.

Clay.

Except the last time I’d seen him, I learned that everything I thought I’d known about him had all been a lie. So why did I feel like if I found him, everything would be all right?

NINE

TESS

I WIPED THE STEAM FROM THE MIRROR AND STUDIED MY REFLECTION, wondering how long it would take for me to start looking like myself again. It wasn't the stitched up cut on my head as much as it was the dark smudges under my eyes and the weight I'd lost. My cheeks were sunken, the bones in my face and at my joints poking out under the skin.

I sighed and awkwardly toweled my hair dry with one hand, grimacing at the snarls I knew were just waiting to snag my brush. Maybe I should see if Luis could take me somewhere to get my hair cut. Shorter would be easier to take care of. Then again, I wasn't planning on staying there much longer, so it didn't matter.

I detangled as much as I could with my fingers, then brushed the rest out before pulling it back into a ponytail as best I could. I applied some foundation to the bruise-like half-moons under my eyes and debated putting on more makeup. It wasn't that I wanted to look nice or anything like that. It was just that without makeup and my hair this way, I looked like I was barely out of high school.

Fuck it.

My still-healing fingers were screaming as I shoved my makeup in my purse and went back out into the room. Luis looked up from the rickety chair that had been shoved against the wall, his hungry gaze devouring every inch of exposed skin. Fortunately, there wasn't much for him to look at since the women's clothes he'd managed to scrounge up were still a few sizes too big for me.

"I want you to take me back to where you found me."

My words hung in the air between us, their meaning clear. I was done

letting him make all the decisions and determine how things would be done. I knew what I wanted, and I'd laid it out there for him to accept or reject. Where things went from there would depend on what he said next.

"I do not believe that is a good idea."

I crossed over to the bed and perched on the edge, more leaning than sitting. I studied him without a word, trying to figure out if he was saying that because he was angry that I'd rejected his kiss or if he really thought it wasn't a good idea.

Not that it really mattered. I would get back to wherever he'd found me, with or without him, though I hoped I could convince him to help me. It would make things easier.

"I need to go back," I said, keeping my voice even. "I know it's probably not safe, but I need to find out if something there will jog my memory."

"It is more important to keep you safe," he argued. "Besides, there is nothing there anymore. The street has been cleared."

That wasn't unexpected, though still frustrating. "If I go there, maybe I can remember why I was on that street to begin with. That could tell me why I'm here. Answer a whole lot of questions."

"Why do you need to know?"

The question was churlish, almost as if me wanting to find the missing weeks of my life was somehow offending him. I tamped down my frustration and reminded myself of all the things Luis had done for me, the risks he'd taken for me.

"If you woke up in the US or Canada or Brazil or wherever, and found out that you were missing weeks of your life, wouldn't you do whatever you could to figure out what had happened?"

The corner of his mouth twitched, though I couldn't tell if he was hiding a smile or a scowl.

"If I woke up in a place that was not here, I would not worry myself about knowing how I had gotten there. If you were from here, you would understand."

He had a point. I had a few more of my own. "I'm a reporter, and I want to be a good one. Finding the truth is what I do. That includes finding it about myself."

The hypocrisy of my statement wasn't lost on me. What I hadn't said out loud, what I hadn't even wanted to *think* about, was that another reason why I wanted to go there was to avoid the other things in my past I was eager to

forget. Things that Luis's kiss had brought forward. Or, more specifically, the *person* the kiss had made me remember.

It had been a long time since I'd kissed anyone, but it didn't make any sense for me to be reacting so strongly when I hadn't even thought of Clay Kurth in years. Maybe a dream or two, but that was my subconscious. I had no control over that. Just like I didn't have any control over the things that popped into my head when I was being kissed.

Right?

"You will put us both in danger if we go back there." He stood and began to pace. "Why would you want to do this?"

"Were you even listening to me?" I asked. "I just said why I need to go."

He shook his head but didn't look at me. "None of those are good enough reasons."

I raised an eyebrow and stood, wishing I would've looked intimidating, rather than like an angry kindergartener. "Fine. If you don't want to take me, you don't have to. Just tell me where it is, and I'll go myself. You can go back to your apartment and get on with your life."

He spun around, his eyes wide. "You cannot go there on your own! They will kill you!"

"Not if they don't see me," I countered. "I can sneak around there, and no one will know any different. Trust me, I know how to make people ignore me."

He grabbed my arm, fingers digging into my flesh. "*Non ti lascerò andare!*"

Wonderful. He'd switched back to Spanish.

And he was hurting me. I yanked my arm away and pointed at him. "Don't you ever grab me like that."

"I am sorry." He smoothed down his shirt, hands shaking as he worked to regain control. "I am afraid for you. I do not want you to get hurt."

I wanted to believe him, and I did to some extent, but something didn't quite sit right with me. He kept saying he wanted to protect me, but wouldn't that mean he would want to get me somewhere safe? How was I supposed to know where safe was if I didn't even know what I'd been doing in that country?

Maybe I hadn't been messing with the drug cartel. Maybe I was safe from them, but I was in danger from some other source. Corrupt government or law enforcement? Someone I'd managed to piss off during the weeks I

couldn't remember?

Why couldn't he see that I needed to know? *That* was how I would keep myself safe. And I needed to know that I could do it myself.

"Are you going to help me or not?"

A look of resignation crossed his face. "I will take you first thing in the morning."

I shook my head. I wasn't going to spend another night in that place, worrying about everything, including whether or not I was going to get eaten alive by bedbugs. I'd been sitting around – or rather, lying around – long enough. Time to get things done.

"I'm going now," I said. "I can't take not knowing."

"What if your memory never comes back?"

I considered the question before answering him honestly. "I have to try."

The thing I didn't tell him was that my gut was telling me that whatever I'd been on to wasn't something I could easily forget. I only hoped I'd survive long enough to find it again.

TEN

CLAY

THE SUN HAD HIT THAT POINT WHERE IT WASN'T QUITE DAYLIGHT BUT WASN'T night either. I knew the correct word was *twilight*, but I'd made the mistake of saying it on one of my first cases and nearly caused a riot with a group of teenage girls and their mothers. I'd made it a point to never use that term since. I'd shared that particular memory one day when Tess and I had been looking for Brianne, and she'd told me how she'd covered some event the lead actors from the movies had done.

The memory popped up as Brianne and I cornered a sketchy-looking cokehead in an alley down the road from The Black Cat. We'd checked out the bar back when Tess had first gone missing, but no one had claimed to know anything then. Since we'd lost what I'd hoped was a lead when our friend at the apartment building – we'd learned his name was Luis Orozco from some receipts – I'd decided that we needed to go back over everything again, this time looking for Luis.

A half hour ago, Brianne and I had been at The Black Cat, asking people if they'd seen someone matching Luis's description around the time Tess had disappeared. One of the regulars had said that he'd heard a cokehead ranting about some *marica* who'd been sneaking around after an accident. The regular didn't know more, but he'd told us to wait because it was almost time for the druggie's fix. Maybe we could get more out of him than others did.

"We just want to talk," I said as I held up my hands, palms out to show I didn't have a weapon.

Brianne was the one with the gun. I didn't ask where she'd gotten it or if it was even legal. She was a soldier. Of all the trust issues I had with her, worrying about her with a weapon wasn't one of them.

The blank look the guy gave me told me either he didn't speak English or the drugs he was on kept him from understanding what I was saying. I switched to Spanish and repeated my statement.

"About what?"

"About a guy you saw two weeks ago near a car accident."

His eyes widened, and he shook his head violently from side to side. *"I don't know anything. Please."*

Shit. That didn't sound good.

I decided to start simple. *"Can you at least tell me where the accident was?"*

"Why should I?"

Brianne muttered a curse behind me and then stepped up with something in her hand. The druggie darted out and grabbed what I saw was money. He quickly rattled off directions and then ran past us, either in a hurry to get away from us or get to some cocaine, probably both.

"Do you think she was in that accident?" Brianne asked as she stuck her gun back into the waistband of her pants. *"We checked the hospitals and the morgue. Even if she was a Jane Doe, we should have found her."*

The haunted look in Brianne's eyes made me say what both of us were thinking. *"Unless she wasn't taken to the hospital."*

Tess and I had rescued Brianne from a hostage situation the day before Tess had gone missing. The thing that Brianne and I hadn't said to each other – although we both knew it was the most likely answer – was that Tess had become the one needing to be rescued.

The cartel who'd had Brianne and the others in her Red Care group had given us two bodies in exchange for the ransom money I'd borrowed from a friend back in Colorado. If they'd found Tess and learned the role she'd played in rescuing the survivors, I doubted they'd be looking for money rather than revenge.

My stomach clenched at the thought of what those men could have been doing to Tess. They hadn't sexually assaulted anyone in the Red Care group, and Brianne's own injuries had been from trying to protect the others, but I didn't think Tess would get the same consideration.

A touch on my arm pushed back the dark thoughts. Brianne's expression was grim, but not hopeless.

"We're going to find her," she said. *"Let's go check out that accident site, see what it tells us."*

When she made comments like that, it made me wonder exactly what she'd been up to in the years since we'd parted ways. In the FBI, I'd met a lot of military personnel from different branches and of varying ranks, and something about the way Brianne handled herself didn't quite mesh with the picture of an average army soldier.

My curiosity, however, would have to wait.

The sun had been reduced to a thin sliver on the horizon by the time we reached the site, and we could hear the city changing from day to night around us. Not all parts of San Jose were bad, but there were only a few places where it was safe to be out after dark. While searching for Tess, Bri and I hadn't exactly been following the unspoken rules, but there were some parts of the city even we hadn't ventured unless it was daylight.

This area was one of those.

Neither of us wanted to wait though. This was the first real lead we'd had in days and returning to the hotel to sit on our asses until dawn wasn't an option. I just hoped that we didn't have to find out if the two of us were enough in a fight against some of the thugs we'd seen skulking around lately.

The car – or cars – were gone, which wasn't surprising, but enough damage remained for me to piece together what might've happened. Between the tire tracks, the pieces of colored plastic, and drops of oil still left, I deduced that one car had been hit from behind by another hard enough to at least tip it onto its side, if not completely flip it. Some of the dark splotches on the road could have been dried blood, but I couldn't tell for sure, not in the dim light I had now.

Still, I followed the possible blood trail away from the street. It didn't go far, but since it didn't end with a big stain, I was hopeful that if someone had been injured, they hadn't died there. We just needed to figure out where that person had gone and who they were.

Low voices from across the street reached my ears, and I quickly signaled for Brianne to hide. I ducked into a shadowed corner just as they came close enough for me to identify a single male speaker. He spoke English with a heavy accent, but the voice sounded familiar enough that I wondered if it was someone I'd spoken to recently.

"I carried you in that direction," the man said. "You were bleeding, but I did not want to risk being seen out in the open, so I waited until I was hidden from view to bandage your wounds."

"There's nothing here."

Those three words were enough for me to identify the voice. It didn't matter that she was almost whispering. I would have known her anywhere.

"Tess!" Brianne was a step ahead of me, enfolding her sister in a hug that surprised Tess as much as it did me. Bri had never been overly demonstrative, though I supposed thinking someone was dead and finding out they were actually alive was a better reason than most for a hug.

"Brianne?" The bewilderment on Tess's face was almost comical, but I didn't focus on that.

My attention was on the lean young man next to her. The one who'd told me he'd never seen her before. At least he had the good manners to look guilty.

"What the fuck?!" I stepped right up to him, leaving only an inch between us. "You had her right there in your apartment, and you lied to my face?"

"I was protecting her," Luis said, glaring at me. "I did not know who you were or if you wanted to hurt her."

"Luis, you said it was..." Tess's voice trailed off. "Clay?"

I turned toward her, already raising my arms to embrace her, and she took a step back.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

I dropped my arms to my sides, confused. As Tess moved back to Luis's side, my heart dropped. Had she, while being held by this man, fallen for him? Did she blame me for the accident? I couldn't imagine she was angry with me for the time we'd spent together before she'd left. She'd seemed happy.

Could I have been so wrong?

"Who is this guy to you?" Brianne demanded. "He told Clay he'd never seen you before."

"Luis rescued me," Tess said, her chin taking on that stubborn set I knew so well. "And you heard him say that he didn't know what Clay wanted with me."

I didn't like the way she said my name. Like I was nothing to her.

Bri turned to Luis and held out a hand. "Thank you for taking care of my sister. We can take it from here."

"We?" Tess echoed, shaking her head. "You could barely bother to talk to me on holidays but *him* you kept in touch with all these years?"

Something was wrong here.

"I don't know why I'm surprised," she continued. "It's not like the two of

you gave a damn about my feelings back then. Why would you now?"

Did she...did Tess think that something had happened with Brianne and me while she was gone? That didn't quite sound like what she was saying, but she also didn't sound like she knew the truth about what had happened when we were younger.

"And *you*." She rounded on me, her eyes flashing. "Coming in here and questioning Luis, as if you have a right to know anything about me. You can go fuck yourself."

I stared at her. What in the world had happened in these past two weeks? "Tess, I—"

"Not here." Brianne tapped my arm. "We're too exposed out here. We need to get somewhere inside, away from prying eyes, and then we can talk."

I didn't like it, but she was right. We'd get to the bottom of what was going on, but not here and now. Safety first. The rest would come.

ELEVEN

TESS

WHAT THE HELL WAS CLAY KURTH DOING HERE?!

I didn't even want to try to imagine why he was here with Brianne, of all people. And that was another thing. Why was my sister here? When we spoke last, she hadn't mentioned going to Costa Rica. Had we talked since I could last remember? Had *I* told *her* I was coming here, and she'd followed me? Had I told someone else, and when I'd virtually disappeared for two weeks, Brianne had gotten notified? As shitty as our relationship had been since that last night in DC, I liked to think that if either one of us were ever in real trouble, the other would come to help.

But that didn't explain Clay.

My stomach twisted painfully as I considered the possibility that Brianne had been with Clay when she'd made the decision to come to Costa Rica. Why he would have come with her, I didn't know. Maybe for sentimentality's sake, or maybe he'd become a decent guy since we'd parted ways.

The reason didn't change what the two of them had done to me. I liked to pretend it was all in the past, but seeing him here, seeing them together, it was like hearing Brianne say it all over again.

"Grow up, Tess. Clay is a player. He hooks up with a different girl every week. You're not that kind of girl. You need a relationship before you have sex. Clay doesn't. I don't. We didn't."

Brianne had been right about us needing to get away from the open space, and Luis had already told me on the way to the site that we needed to keep our voices down. Having to wait to release everything I had to say made every step build my anger even more. I'd been able to let go of other things

from my past, but what Brianne and Clay had done to me had left a scar deeper than any physical wound. The two people I'd loved the most had betrayed me. I'd lost my two best friends, and I'd never trusted anyone like that again.

Hell, I was still a virgin because I'd never wanted to let a guy get that close to me.

Information that would follow me to the grave.

"Here," Brianne said, pushing open a gate. "Move it. Come on."

I glared at her as I walked by, resisting the urge to remind her that we weren't all in the army and none of us had to take her orders. I wasn't going to risk our safety because my sister and I didn't get along.

"Who are they?" Luis whispered as he followed me into the alley.

As I slowed my steps to keep our conversation private, I tried not to grimace at the smell of cat pee. The Big Apple. Costa Rica. Cat piss was cat piss.

"She's my sister, Brianne. The guy's name is Clay Kurth. He used to be Brianne's friend when we were younger."

He didn't need to know any more than that. As grateful as I was to Luis for what he'd done for me, it didn't mean we were friends. He might've been caring for me for two weeks, but we'd really only known each other a couple of days.

"Will you tell them about your memory?"

I heard no judgment in his voice, only curiosity, and I wondered if a part of him hoped that I wouldn't confide in them, that he'd know this secret no one else did. I was aware of how he watched me and had no doubt that he'd see such a secret as something that bound us together. Because of that, I was tempted to tell Brianne and Clay everything, but I knew I had to be careful. I couldn't trust anyone completely. Especially not them.

"Not yet," I said. "I want to know what they're doing here first."

Luis nodded, the pleased smile on his face telling me that I'd been correct in my assumption about what he'd wanted me to do.

"I will follow your lead," he whispered, putting his lips close to my ear. "We are in this together."

"We should be safe here," Brianne said, stopping a few feet from the gate at the opposite end of the alley from where we'd come in. "For a few minutes, anyway."

"Time for explanations," Clay said.

I stiffened. Who was he to be deciding what we discussed?

“What happened?” he asked, looking at me as if Luis and Brianne weren’t even here. “You just left without saying anything. I was worried.”

I stared at him, unable to believe the arrogance of him, thinking that this was the time and place to insist on answers he had no right to demand. “Don’t you think there are more important things to talk about?”

To my surprise, he actually looked sheepish as he rubbed the back of his neck. “You’re right. The first thing I should’ve asked is if you were okay.”

I rolled my eyes and turned toward my sister. “What are you guys doing here?”

“Looking for you,” she said, frowning at me. “Did you think we were just going to up and leave you?”

“You must not have looked hard for her,” Luis interjected. “Or you would have been at my door much sooner.”

“Stay out of this.” Clay pointed a finger at Luis. “We’re going to come back to your lying, but right now, this isn’t any of your business.”

I wanted to ask what made it his business, but I was doing my best to ignore him and focus on Brianne. We weren’t close, but she was still my sister. Clay was just an asshole from my past who had no place in my present.

“It is not safe,” Luis said. He put his hand on my shoulder. “We should return to the hotel.”

“You’re going to want to take your hand off her.” Clay’s voice held a dangerous tone I’d never heard before. Something that sounded almost... possessive.

The antagonistic part of me wanted to tell Luis to leave his hand there just to irk Clay, but I didn’t want to give Clay the satisfaction of knowing how much his presence here bothered me. I’d heard once that the opposite of love isn’t hate but rather indifference, and that was what I wanted him to get from me. Not that what’d happened years ago had hurt me enough to want to make him jealous, but that I didn’t actually care what he thought.

Except I was now in a conundrum. I couldn’t shake off Luis’s hand without Clay thinking he’d gotten to me, but if I left it, I’d be sending signals to Luis that I was interested in him for something beyond friendship. Even if I never saw Luis again, he didn’t deserve to be strung along even for a few hours.

Thinking quickly, I crossed the space between Brianne and me, ignoring both of the men completely. Aside from this solving the problem of who

they'd each think I was supporting, it also eliminated the need for both of them in the first place.

"How long have you been here?" I asked her. "In San Jose, I mean."

Brianne's gaze flicked above my head, then back down to my face. "A bit longer than you."

That helped me about as much as a pile of horseshit.

"Tess, we should return to the hotel before...*they* find us."

"Who's *they*?" Clay asked.

"The Colombian drug cartel that runs this part of the city," I answered, not looking at him.

"Shit," Brianne said, her eyes darting to Clay. "Were they the ones who did this to you?"

I shrugged. "Don't know. I can't identify them."

That was true, though not for the reasons I was sure Brianne thought.

"Can't this wait until we get out of here?" Clay asked.

"You go right ahead," I said, crossing my arms. "But I'm working on a story and hiding isn't going to help anyone."

"They are of no help, Tess," Luis said. "Let us go back to the hotel and make another plan of action."

"You found a story." Brianne made it a statement rather than a question. "Of course, you did. You can find something to write about no matter where you go. All right, tell us what you're looking for so we can look too."

Found a story. The way she said it made me think that a story wasn't the main reason I'd come here.

Before I could question it further, I heard a loud crack, and chips of brick from the wall behind me peppered my skin.

TWELVE

CLAY

I WRAPPED MY ARM AROUND TESS'S SHOULDERS AND PULLED HER TO THE ground, using my body as a shield between her and the gunman. My mind raced, running through possibilities and escape routes. There was a chance that the shot had simply been a stray, but I hadn't heard any gunfire prior to it, and I wasn't going to take any chances, not with Tess's life.

I looked around, noting that Luis was on the ground to my right, his hands over the back of his head, his face down. To my left, on Tess's other side, was Brianne. She'd taken up a position that was a mirror to my own, her body hovering over Tess's, ready to put herself in harm's way for her sister.

Brianne's eyes met mine, and she nodded. We didn't need to say a word to know that we were on the same pace. Tess came first. Everyone and everything else was secondary.

Another shot came our way, thudding into the wall on the other side of the alley. The pause between shots made me wonder if the shooter couldn't actually see us but was rather going by sound. He was using the time to listen for our responses. Cries, screams, sounds of pain, the shuffle of feet, labored breathing as we ran.

That meant we not only had to move quickly but quietly.

"When I say, you take Tess." Brianne's voice was barely audible. "Go through this gate and get as far away as possible. I'll cover you."

"No!" Tess started to roll over, but Brianne and I shoved her back down.

"Shh!" I hissed in her ear.

Another loud bang. This time it was concrete from the ground only inches from my head.

"He's trying to use sound to figure out where we are rather than come

into the alley,” I explained, my lips brushing against Tess’s hair as I spoke.

“We all go together or not at all,” she said, keeping her voice down. Her body shook under mine, and I wondered if it was from fear or because of how closely our bodies were pressed together.

After all, despite the situation, my body was reacting to her proximity.

“Just do what we tell you,” Brianne said.

I could’ve told her that was the absolute wrong thing to say.

Tess glared at her sister, a mutinous expression on her face. “Fuck you.”

Brianne wasn’t fazed. “Go with Clay, and I’ll catch up.”

“What about Luis?”

Brianne gave Tess a shake. “If he’s smart, he’ll follow. No more arguing.”

Tess opened her mouth, but as Brianne pulled a gun out of her waistband, the ability to speak seemed to flee. I seized the opportunity, and so did Brianne. She rolled up into a crouch and squeezed off two quick shots. I grabbed Tess’s arm and pulled her up with me. I didn’t bother looking to see if Luis followed as I dragged Tess toward the gate.

A bullet slammed into the wall next to my head, and behind me, Bri fired again. The sound of her gun in the alley was deafening, making it nearly impossible to hear Tess shouting behind me. It didn’t, however, keep me from understanding that she wanted me to take her back toward her sister. The tugging on my arm made that clear.

In the dim light, I couldn’t make out whether or not the gate was locked, so I hit it at full speed, hoping it’d give without me stopping. For once, luck was on my side. The gate popped open as my hand collided with it, and I was able to pull Tess through despite her protests. I took her around the corner a few feet before stopping.

“Fucking bastard!” She punched my arm and yanked her hand out of mine. “You just left them there!”

I grabbed her, hauling her up against my body as I put my hand over her mouth. “You keep yelling like that, and we’ll really leave them. I should be getting you as far away as possible, but instead, I’m waiting for your sister. The least you could do is stop behaving like a child.”

She recoiled as if I’d slapped her, and I immediately regretted my word choice. I took my hand off her mouth and eased my grip on her arm. I didn’t quite trust her not to go running back, but I hadn’t needed to be an ass about it.

“I’m sorry,” I apologized. “Brianne and I just want to keep you safe.”

Tess’s expression morphed from anger to relief, but before I could determine the reason for the change, it made itself known.

Luis staggered around the corner, his eyes narrowing as he saw how close Tess and I were. Some primal caveman part of me wanted to kiss Tess on the spot to let the little punk know that she was taken, but I knew this wasn’t the time or place. Two more gunshots reminded me of that, and I prepared to move again.

“Let’s go!” Brianne called out as she ran around the corner. “Head to the hospital.”

“I’m not hurt,” Tess protested.

“We’re going there to hide,” I explained, understanding Brianne’s reasoning. It would give us a chance to get our bearings and decide what to do next. Things had gotten a lot more dangerous.

WE SLOWED to a jog after only a few blocks. Tess’s breathing was coming in harsh gasps, and her face was pale. I kicked myself as I realized I hadn’t noticed the splint on her left hand or the cut on her arm. Hell, I’d barely noticed the cut on her head. How could I have not considered any of the injuries she might’ve had from the accident? When I reached out to help her, though, she jerked away. I didn’t know what was going on, but as soon as we had a couple minutes to ourselves, I intended to ask.

By the time we reached the hospital, Brianne had her arm around Tess and was half-carrying her sister to the entrance. Shit. We had to be careful. If we wanted to stay under the radar, we had to pose as visitors or at least patients with minor enough injuries that we wouldn’t be seen right away. The way Tess looked right now, we were lucky no one was running out with a gurney.

“Can you walk?” Bri asked softly. “We don’t want to draw attention.”

Tess nodded, a determined expression on her face. I wasn’t sure if Brianne knew it, but Tess would’ve answered *yes* no matter how she felt. After finding out how much her sister had protected her – even to the point of lying – Tess wasn’t going to do anything that made her appear weak.

I didn’t argue though. It wouldn’t do anything but make her even more annoyed at me, and since I didn’t understand what I’d done to piss her off in the first place, I wasn’t going to add fuel to the fire.

“Let me do the talking,” Brianne said as she moved in front of us. She didn’t give us the chance to argue as she went straight through the doors and up to the front desk. Tess, Luis, and I moved a little slower, arriving as Brianne finished whatever she’d told the nurse on duty.

“Sígame, por favor,” she said as she came around the desk. She led us to an empty room and said something softly to Brianne who nodded and gave a quiet reply. The nurse then offered the rest of us a small smile as she left the room.

“What’d you tell her?” I asked after the door closed.

“That we’re not on the best of terms with the family of a friend of ours who’s in surgery upstairs, but we can’t bear to sit at home and hope someone will tell us what happened.” Brianne looked out the small window, then turned back to us, seemingly satisfied with what she’d seen.

“How long do you think we have?” I asked. “Because when she figures out that we don’t actually know anyone in surgery, she’ll be back, and we’ll be lucky not to get arrested.”

“I didn’t give her a name,” Bri said. “Look, we’ve got enough to talk about without bringing all that up too.”

She leaned against the door and stuck her hands in her pockets. For all intents and purposes, she looked at ease, as if the last few hours hadn’t happened. I understood that a few tours overseas could’ve made her more used to this sort of thing than the average person, but I didn’t get how she could have done all of that in the alley and not look at least a little rattled.

“We need to get somewhere safe,” I said. “For the night at least, maybe a couple days. We can’t go back to the hotel, probably not even to get our things.”

Luis took a step closer. “Tess and I can go back to our hotel.”

A flash of jealousy went through me at the thought of Tess and Luis sharing a room even though I knew she wouldn’t have had sex with him. Not if she’d only known him for two weeks. It’d taken her three decades to lose her virginity, and she’d done it with me, someone she’d known since childhood. All reasons that I kept going over in my head to reassure myself that I hadn’t lost her.

“That motel won’t be safe either,” Tess said. “I think that’s probably how they found us. Someone there sold us out.”

“Sold you out to who?” Brianne asked, a hard edge to her voice. “The cartel?”

To my consternation, she looked at Luis, as if he'd have the answers to Bri's questions. Once we got to whatever safe place we found, Tess and I were going to talk about what exactly had happened between her and her new 'friend.'

"There was a car accident," she said. "Right where you found us. Luis said he saw the car that hit the cab I was in, and it was one that belonged to a local drug cartel. I think they think I can identify them, even though I can't."

Something about the way she said the last bit didn't sit right with me, especially since she knew the cartel had a much better reason to come after all of us than her just being able to identify them for a hit and run. I glanced at Luis, finding another reason to dislike his intrusion. We should have been able to speak freely, but if even Tess was censoring what she said around him, then we couldn't talk about the real reason we'd come here or where we'd found Brianne.

The look Brianne sent my way told me she was thinking along the same lines.

"If it's the Colombians," she said, "we really need to find somewhere safe to hunker down. Somewhere they won't be able to connect to any of us."

"Do you know anywhere?" I reluctantly asked Luis.

He shook his head. "If it is the Colombians, then they know Tess has been staying with me, and it would not be difficult for them to learn about any place connected to me."

Shit. He made a good point.

"Dammit," Brianne muttered. She sighed and pushed herself off the door. "I think I know somewhere we can go."

THIRTEEN

TESS

IF MY SISTER AND CLAY DIDN'T KNOCK OFF THE NOT-SO-COVERT LOOKS THEY kept giving each other, I was going to go off, no matter who was coming after me. They were hiding things again, and I didn't give a damn if that made me hypocritical to be pissed at them when I wasn't telling them about my amnesia. It wasn't like I was missing anything that had to do with them, only bits of my own life, and it was my right to decide what I wanted to do about those missing weeks.

Brianne hung up the phone and came back over to where the rest of us were standing on the opposite end of the room. I think Clay and I both had been surprised when she'd asked for some privacy to make her call, and now I was more curious than ever to see the person my sister would trust in a situation like this.

"Let's go." She didn't look at any of us as she practically stalked out into the hallway.

"So much for not drawing attention," I muttered as I followed. Since none of our group had light hair or overly fair skin, we could've made it out of the hospital without anyone really noticing, but our appearances weren't worth anything when she was marching through the place like she was going to hit something.

"Any idea who she called?" Clay asked as he fell in step next to me.

I shook my head and pressed my lips together to keep from snapping at him. I'd barely spoken to Brianne in sixteen years, and certainly not about anything remotely personal. He'd obviously 'reconnected' with her at some point, which meant he was more likely to know the people in her life than I was.

“If you do not wish to go with them, I will find us somewhere safe,” Luis said from my other side.

I didn’t speak to him either. I understood he was trying to help, but considering the place he’d taken us before to be ‘safe,’ I wasn’t too confident in his ability to protect me. Even if I didn’t understand what Brianne and Clay were doing here, I didn’t doubt that they’d be able to get me back to New York in one piece.

The moon was almost directly overhead by the time we reached a pleasant-looking white house surrounded by trees. The closest neighbors were at least an acre on either side, and the house was a single story, so the trees kept visibility to a minimum. I might not have been in the military like Bri, but I was smart enough to know that this was a good place to hide for a bit, especially if the neighbors here were the kind who minded their own business.

Brianne paused a few feet from the front door and seemed to steel herself before taking those last steps. Whoever was in that house was someone she hadn’t planned on seeing again, I’d bet on it.

The short, athletic woman who answered, however, wasn’t who I’d expected. Her dark curls were cropped short, and I could make out a few silvery hairs from where I stood. She looked at Brianne for a long moment, then moved her gaze past Bri to the rest of us and smiled.

“Hola.” She stepped to the side and motioned for us to come into the house.

As I passed her, I noticed that her eyes were dark blue, rather than the brown the shadows had made them appear. If she was a native of this country, someone not too far back had to have been an immigrant. Once Luis shut the door behind him, Brianne made introductions.

“Everyone, this is Sylvia Nuez. Sylvia, this is Clay Kurth, Luis Orozco, and my sister, Tess Gardener.”

I put out my hand. “It’s nice to meet you. Though, I suppose, the circumstances could be better.”

Sylvia smiled. “I learned years ago, when your sister is involved, circumstances are rarely simple.”

What did that mean? Dammit! Instead of having more questions answered as time went on, I kept finding new questions.

“I appreciate you putting us all up like this,” Brianne said. “You know I’d never put you in danger but—”

“I understand,” Sylvia said, holding up a hand. “It is not an inconvenience. I am grateful for the chance to see you again and learn about the life you now lead.”

“If the others want to get cleaned up first,” Brianne said, “I’ll be glad to sit down with a cup of coffee, and we can exchange stories.”

“Of course.” Sylvia turned her attention to me, though I wasn’t sure if it was because I was Brianne’s sister, or because I looked the most in need of cleaning up. “Follow me.”

I SHOULD HAVE BEEN able to fall asleep with no problem considering the sheer volume of physical activity I’d put in, even without factoring in the fact that I’d barely moved in the past two weeks. Thanks to some amazing painkillers Sylvia had been able to provide, the pain I’d been in after my shower had faded away. It would be back, I knew, but I should have been able to sleep now.

My brain, however, didn’t want to rest. Thoughts kept chasing one another, sometimes connecting to a previous thought, but often completely random. At one point, I even had the song “I’m a Little Teapot” stuck in my head, and the only way I was able to get it out was to start mentally singing every Disney song I knew. Somewhere around “Circle of Life,” I accepted the fact that I wouldn’t be sleeping any time soon and got up.

The alarm clock next to the bed told me it was a quarter to two in the morning, and as I paused by the bedroom door, I was the only one awake. The guest room I was in was tiny, but the bigger room had two beds for both of the guys. Brianne and I could’ve shared, but she said she preferred to sleep on the couch. My gut told me she’d be doing more guarding than sleeping, but that was her choice. I hadn’t asked her to do any of this.

I slipped out of my room and made my way down the hall and through the kitchen to the enclosed back porch. It was barely big enough to hold one of those carved wooden swings, but the fact that the screens kept out the bugs more than made up for the size.

The night was clear, with nothing hiding the stars or the three-quarters moon. As much as I loved New York for giving me a home and a place where I could do what I loved for a living, there were times I wished I lived

somewhere I could see the stars.

I folded my arms, rubbing my hands up and down from shoulder to elbow in an almost unconscious motion to warm my chilled skin. The breeze that came through wasn't unpleasant though. The air was fresh, and after having been kept cooped up, it was more welcomed than usual. I was used to the smells of the city, both the good and the bad, but that motel had been rank, worse than the hottest day in the worst neighborhood back home.

"Couldn't sleep either, or were you just waiting until everyone was in bed to find me?" Clay stood up from where he'd been sitting on the swing, hidden in the shadows.

"Why would I be looking for you?" I asked, tipping my head back to look up at him. I'd forgotten how much taller he was than me. "I just wanted some air."

He nodded, a pensive expression on his handsome face.

No, not handsome. Pretty. Clay had always been what most people referred to as a 'pretty boy.' The years had done little to change that. Even though he was thirty-three now, he could've passed for late twenties, probably younger if he was clean-shaven. I'd never been a fan of scruff, but on him, I found it obnoxiously appealing.

"How you and Brianne handle things is between the two of you," he said, "but I'm not going to pretend that you're not acting weird."

"Weird?" I laughed. "How in the world would you know what's weird for me?"

"Don't do that," he said, the intensity in his voice cutting off my laughter. "Don't pretend like what happened between us...Tess, I don't understand. I thought things between us were fine the last time we saw each other."

I shook my head. "Of course you do. Because you still think that I don't know what you were really doing that night."

His eyebrows drew together, his face a picture of puzzlement. "Something's off here, but I don't get what it is. Did something happen during these last two weeks to change what went on with us before that?"

I shifted my weight from one foot to the other, suddenly uncomfortable with the direction this conversation was taking. If I was going to tell anyone about my amnesia, it would be Brianne, not Clay. I'd never be vulnerable with him again.

He shoved his hand into his hair. "Why are you acting like you don't remember what happened the last time we were together?"

“I remember it fine.” I pointed at him. “I think the problem is that I don’t remember it the way you *want* me to remember it. Brianne told me everything.”

His jaw dropped open in surprise, leaving him speechless. It was how I’d always imagined the moment, but now that it was here, something didn’t feel quite right about it. I told myself it was because he’d mentioned things being off, and my brain had gotten caught up in that.

I intended to leave him that way, sputtering and without answers, but before I could even turn toward the door, he closed the distance between us. The still-familiar scent of him rolled over me, and my stomach clenched painfully. An ache spread through my body, and I could have sworn I felt the ghost of his touch on my skin, the feel of him inside me.

“I’m not having this conversation again,” he said, his irises the color of a coming storm. “I told you what really happened. If your sister’s telling you something different, then she’s still lying because she doesn’t want to admit what she did. She’s the one you need to have it out with, because I’ve already done this dance.”

I heard the words, but they didn’t make sense. Why would Brianne have lied to me all those years ago? Better yet, why had she kept lying to me about her and Clay sleeping together, especially after our relationship took a hit? Clay was the one who benefitted from making up a new narrative.

“If you want to never talk about this, fine,” he continued, “that’s on you. But I’ll be damned if I let you pretend like the attraction between us isn’t still there.”

He caught my mouth in a bruising kiss, and my lips parted with a gasp. His hands grasped my arms as his tongue took advantage of my surprise and swept into my mouth. I made a sound I’d never made before, and he pulled me closer, one hand dropping to the small of my back. His tongue stroked over mine, then pulled back to allow his teeth to fasten on to my bottom lip.

Heat flooded my body, and my blood pounded in my ears. I’d heard the expression “weak in the knees,” but I’d never felt the literal sensation of not knowing if my legs would hold me. I grabbed the front of his shirt, unsure if I wanted to hold him in place or push him away.

And then I remembered who he was and what he’d done.

I shoved him as hard as I could, catching him off-guard enough that he stumbled a couple steps backward. That look of shock was back on his face, and I wondered how many women before me had ever refused him, or if he

even cared to think about anyone other than his next conquest. He hadn't changed.

His gaze stayed on me for several long seconds, and then his expression hardened. Without a word, he turned and walked away, leaving me on the porch alone.

FOURTEEN

CLAY

I COULDN'T DECIDE WHO I WAS MORE PISSED AT, TESS OR MYSELF. SHE'D been acting weird from the moment we'd found her, acting more like the woman I'd first seen on the airplane than the one who'd fallen asleep in my arms the afternoon before she'd vanished. I'd suspected that the scar on her head had come from a blow that had scrambled her brain a bit, and now I was as close to positive as I could get without her actually telling me.

When she'd first started acting like nothing had happened between the two of us here, I'd thought Brianne had kept lying, and Tess had chosen to believe her sister over me. Now, however, I wasn't so sure. When we'd been arguing this time, I'd seen the expression on her face. With the anger, I'd also seen confusion. Not the sort that said she didn't know who to believe, but more like she didn't understand...as if she didn't remember.

Was that what happened two weeks ago when she'd been in that accident? Had her head injury messed with her memory to the point where she didn't remember the things we'd talked about? What happened between us?

If that was the case, it wasn't her fault that she'd shoved me away when I kissed her. She didn't remember we'd done more than kiss.

But why hadn't she told us? Brianne at least. We could have filled in the blanks for her, helped her know what she'd been missing. Everything that she'd been struggling with, the weight on her shoulders, all of it would have been taken care of if she'd just been honest with us.

I was so absorbed in my own thoughts as I walked outside that I didn't realize I wasn't alone until I ran into Luis. Literally.

“¡Disculpe!” He glared at me. “*Watch where you're going!*”

I held up a hand and took a step back. Not that I thought I was in any danger from him if he lost his temper. Our position here was precarious enough that I didn't want any extra trouble.

"Sorry," I said. "I wasn't paying attention. I have a lot on my mind."

The loathing on his face didn't change with my apology. "Do not let me keep you. I am sure you have important things to do."

"What is your problem?" I snapped. "You don't know me."

"I know everything I need to know," he countered, stepping into me. "I have known men like you my whole life. Men who think they can treat people however they want because of who they are, how they look, the money they make."

It was the most I'd heard him talk, but I had a feeling he'd been itching to get all that off his chest from the moment he first met me. I doubted he knew anything about who I was to Tess – at the moment, *I* didn't know who I was to her – but he had to have sensed something because I'd never had anyone adamantly despise me as quickly as Luis did.

"Bullshit. You don't like the fact that you don't have Tess all to yourself anymore. You must have loved getting to play hero for someone like her."

His face flushed. "I was there for her when you were not. That is not my fault."

"I didn't know where she was," I said, letting my frustration bleed into my voice. "I would've been there if I'd known."

"For two weeks, I took care of her." He held up his hands, as if the sight of them would prove just how intimately he'd cared for Tess. "Then you and the other one come in as if you are the only ones who care about her."

"Did you seriously just refer to Brianne as 'the other one?'" My temper rose to the surface. "She's Tess's *sister*. You're lucky Bri didn't hear you say that. She'd kick your ass."

"If Tess and Brianne were so close, why did Tess not ask for a phone to call her sister right away?"

I wanted to knock that smug look off Luis's face, but I settled for giving him a partial truth. "Bri's in the army. She's not exactly the easiest person to get ahold of."

"Why did she not call you?" Luis pressed on. "If you are important to her, why were you not the first person she called then? She did not call anyone. She stayed with me because she knew I would keep her safe. She trusts me."

What irked me the most was that he was right. If Tess had indeed lost her

memory of our time here in Costa Rica, of course she wouldn't have even known to call me or Brienne. While I knew Tess wasn't as trusting as it seemed Luis thought she was, without the truth about what'd happened, she probably would have trusted him more than Bri and me.

"You can tag along all you want," I said finally. "But the moment Brienne or I think that your presence is putting Tess in danger, you're gone."

"I think Tess will be the one to make that decision."

The tone of his voice left no doubt as to what he thought that decision would be, and if things didn't change, I wasn't so sure he wasn't right.

FIFTEEN

TESS

THE CONVERSATION BETWEEN CLAY AND ME DIDN'T DO MUCH TO HELP ME GET to sleep, but the kiss had been worse. Not because the kiss itself had been bad, but because I couldn't get the damn thing out of my head. I swore my lips were still tingling when I finally did fall asleep.

Fortunately, my sleep was dreamless, and when I woke the next morning, I felt much better. My muscles were sore, but I knew once I got up and moving, I'd work the stiffness out. The bone-deep weariness that had settled into me yesterday was gone, and I felt a burst of anticipation for the day ahead. Planning and then following through. No more waiting. I'd be on my way home by nightfall.

That thought got my eyes open. A smile began to curve my lips, but my expression froze when I saw that I wasn't alone in the tiny bedroom. Luis sat at the end of the bed, his dark eyes focused on me. I jerked upright, my heart pounding as adrenaline dumped into my bloodstream.

"Dammit, Luis! You scared the shit out of me!"

"I am sorry."

He ducked his head, and I wondered if he was embarrassed...or if there was something else on his face that he didn't want me to see. He'd kept up the sweet, shy guy persona with me, but I'd caught a few glimpses of something not-so-sweet, especially around Brianne and Clay, making me wonder how much of the Luis I saw was who he really was.

"How long have you been sitting there?" I asked.

He shrugged but didn't actually answer my question. I shifted on the bed, pulling the blanket up to my chest. I liked to think that I hadn't encouraged Luis's crush, but aside from shutting down his kiss, I hadn't exactly

discouraged it either. I'd basically written it off as a harmless infatuation. Watching me sleep, however, was creepier than most romance stories made it out to be.

"I, uh, need to get dressed," I said after several long moments of increasingly uncomfortable silence. When he didn't move, I added, "Could you close the door on your way out?"

His shoulders slumped as he stood, and the dejected expression on his face made me feel guilty, but I couldn't rationalize letting him stay. He might've already seen me naked when he'd been taking care of me, but there was a huge difference between that and me consciously allowing him to watch me undress.

I didn't want to give him the wrong idea. In fact, it bothered me that he had almost seemed to expect to be allowed to stay. A little voice in the back of my head kept asking if Luis had expected more than I'd offered.

Had he thought coming here with me meant we were together? I appreciated all he'd done, but I wasn't one of those damsels in distress who thanked their rescuers with sex. If things got any more awkward between us, I would have to say something. I really hoped it didn't come to that. I much rather preferred avoiding confrontations. Which was probably why Brianne and I had never talked about the whole Clay thing, no matter how angry at her I'd been.

I purposefully took longer than necessary to change into the clothes Sylvia had laid out for me, and when I opened the door, I saw that it'd had the desired result – Luis wasn't waiting for me. I knew there was a good possibility that he was sulking somewhere, but he was an adult. If he couldn't handle a woman turning him down, that was on him, not me.

Still, I glanced toward the closed door to the guest room Clay and Luis had been sharing. I had the sudden and inexplicable desire to go over and knock, just to see who answered. I shook the thought out of my head. Imagining a shirtless, sleepy Clay made me want things I hadn't wanted in a long time, and I wasn't going back there.

It figured that the first guy I'd had a strong attraction to was the same guy I'd felt my first real attraction to. I didn't know if it was karma or coincidence, but it sucked either way.

Forcing myself to turn away from the door and head toward the kitchen, I tried to mentally prepare myself for the conversations ahead. After last night, I knew I needed to tell Brianne about my amnesia, and it probably would go a

lot more smoothly if I made it a generalized announcement, so we were all on the same page when I also informed them that I didn't plan on leaving the country until I knew what had brought me here in the first place.

Brianne wasn't going to like it. Even though our relationship had been strained since we'd left DC as teens, she'd never quit being the overprotective big sister. Fortunately, being in the service meant she was away more often than not, so I mostly dealt with her over the phone rather than in person.

This time, however, I wasn't as lucky. Our conversation would have to be face-to-face.

I made my way to the kitchen, the faint murmur of voices drawing me forward. I was nearly to the doorway when I recognized Brianne's voice. The other female voice was, I assumed, Sylvia's. I hadn't really been paying much attention to what they were saying, but Brianne's words suddenly registered.

"Do you ever wish things had been different between us?"

I stopped just outside the doorway, a reluctant eavesdropper allowing my curiosity to get the better of me.

"I've thought about it," Sylvia said. "We both knew it was the right thing to do, but there were times I wished we could've made another choice."

After a beat, another question from Brianne. "Are you seeing anyone?"

That didn't sound like a pair of friends simply catching up. Her tone was softer than anything I'd heard from her since I was kid, almost tender. I knew it wasn't right of me to keep listening, but underneath all the old feelings of betrayal was something I'd never wanted to admit.

I missed her.

"I was," Sylvia answered. "But no one serious. My work keeps me busy."

"You always did work too hard."

"You're one to talk." Sylvia sounded amused. "I was always surprised when I managed to peel you away from the embassy for some alone time."

I frowned. The embassy? When had Brianne worked for the embassy in Costa Rica? Had there been some sort of security detail her unit had been assigned to? I tried to remember if she or my mom had ever said anything about an assignment like that, but nothing came to mind.

"I was surprised to learn you'd left Colombia," Brianne said. "I'd always thought you were happy there."

The Colombian Embassy then? What the hell?

“I was, but when my dad passed last year, I realized that I didn’t have much reason to stay without him. I wasn’t about to go back to Canada though.”

“I heard about your dad. I’m sorry. He was a good man.” After a pause, Brianne added, “I’m guessing that not wanting to go back to Canada means you and your mother still aren’t on the best of terms.”

“I called her to let her know about Dad’s passing, and she told me that if I was coming back to Canada, she would insist on a public apology to her husband, one where I would say I made up all the things I said he did.”

“Bitch,” Brianne said with feeling. “She deserves to be with the abusive bastard then.”

“I’d rather talk about something more pleasant,” Sylvia said. “Like who you’re dating.”

Brianne laughed. “Who says I’m dating anyone?”

“And now I know you are, so spill it. Who is she?”

She.

Shit.

Brianne was a lesbian.

How did I not know that?

Except, as I stood there, frozen, something clicked. Memories ran through my mind too fast for me to separate, but the knowledge was there. I’d been right. I’d known that she was gay, but not for long.

And Clay had been the one to tell me.

Why had he told me? There’d been a conversation with him. I could remember that much, but I didn’t know what the conversation had been about, or why he’d been there in the first place.

What had brought us together after sixteen years? And did it have something to do with why he kept acting weird around me? With why he’d kissed me?

Fuck.

Ever since I’d woken up in Luis’s apartment, I’d been trying to figure out what had happened since Christmas, but now that I had some of those memories back, I found myself terrified of what the other memories would bring.

I needed to get out of there.

Now.

SIXTEEN

CLAY

I HEARD THE FRONT DOOR CLOSE, BUT I DIDN'T SEE WHO LEFT. I HOPED IT was Luis, for both our sakes. My patience with him was wearing thin, and I didn't think Tess would take too kindly to me knocking out her new friend. Which made me want to hit him even more.

"Tess!" Brianne nearly knocked me over as she ran from the kitchen into the hall.

I caught Brianne's shoulders, steadying us both before she pulled away and kept going toward the door.

"Bri!" Sylvia called, hurrying around me to follow Brianne outside.

What the hell?

I turned and went after the women. I really hoped all this didn't mean that Tess had left. We'd just found her, and it was dangerous out there.

"Shit!" Brianne smacked the doorframe. "How the hell did she get away so fast?"

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Brianne and I were talking in the kitchen," Sylvia said as we watched Brianne jog out to the road. "I'm not sure what made Tess freak out, but Bri and I heard a noise, and when we looked up, we saw Tess leaving."

"What were you talking about?" I asked. Color flooded Sylvia's cheeks, and I knew what had happened. "Oh."

"I don't understand why that would've made Tess leave," Sylvia said before going after Brianne, leaving me to debate whether or not I should tell them what I suspected.

"Dammit!" Brianne stomped past me and back into the house.

I followed her, and Sylvia came in right behind me. While Sylvia went to

calm Brianne down, I went back to the guest room Sylvia had given Luis and me. As much as I hated to admit it, if anyone knew where Tess would go, it'd be him.

Except he wasn't there.

It didn't take long to check the rest of the house and confirm that he wasn't anywhere. As I went back into the living room, I asked, "Do either of you know where Luis went?"

Both women looked at me.

"He's not here?" Brianne asked.

I shook my head. "I don't know if he left first or what, but I think if we find him, we find Tess."

"What the hell is going on with her?" Brianne shook her head.

I shoved a hand through my hair. "I think she has amnesia." When Brianne gave me a disbelieving look, I added, "She's acting like she and I hadn't been here together trying to find you. The things she says...it's like the last few weeks haven't happened."

"And you think that's why she's sticking with this Luis guy instead of trusting me and you?" Brianne said, tapping her fingertip to her lips.

"I think she still thinks that you and I slept together sixteen years ago, and she's never gotten over it."

Sylvia's eyes went wide. "You two what?"

"We didn't," Brianne said after a long sigh. "It's a long story."

I gave Sylvia the short version. "Tess and I figured out that Bri was trying to protect her, like she always does. Basically, Bri lied to Tess so she would accept moving away from DC. And then Brianne lied about being gay because if Tess had learned the truth, she would've questioned what Bri had told her about us."

"She overheard Sylvia and I talking about who I was dating."

"I think it might've triggered her lost memories," I said. "If everything she'd forgotten came back to her, it'd be overwhelming. She'd want to take time to collect her thoughts."

Brianne nodded. "And she'd figure Luis would be the only person she could trust since he wouldn't have been involved in any of what'd happened in the past."

I turned to Sylvia. "Where around here could Luis have suggested they go to regroup? I'm not sure I trust him, but I don't think he's stupid. He'll want to have a plan that can convince Tess to stay with him."

Sylvia thought for a minute as I worked to curb my impatience. After what seemed like an eternity, she had answers.

“The only places I can think of nearby are a small park a few blocks to the east, and a private library half a mile north. My car’s transmission went out, which means either going on foot or calling a cab. Sadly, the cab would most likely take longer than walking.”

“I’m faster,” I said to Brianne. “I’ll go to the library. Sylvia, can you stay here in case she comes back?”

With each of us having our ‘assignments,’ we went our separate ways. The morning was cool, but not even close to what it was like back in Denver, and for that I was grateful. I wouldn’t have wanted to have to do a search on foot at the beginning of February in that cold.

I set out at a light jog, knowing I needed to pace myself rather than run full blast like I wanted. I had to pace myself since I didn’t know what I might need to do later. A little voice in the back of my head whispered that I might get to knock out Luis, but I tried not to focus on that.

Lost in my thoughts, I nearly passed the sign, and if that’d happened, I wouldn’t have found the library at all. It was in a house that looked no different from half a dozen other houses on the street, with the exception of the small wooden sign planted in the front yard, declaring that it was a library and that the entrance was around back.

I followed the worn path, briefly wondering how many people it’d taken to get through the grass and keep it down to dirt. Then I rounded the corner and stopped dead in my tracks.

I’d found Tess, but she didn’t look upset. In fact, she appeared quite content in Luis’s arms. Their faces were turned away from me – well, Tess’s was pressed against Luis’s chest – meaning neither one saw me.

My choices were clear. Intentionally draw their attention and go ahead with the mini-speech I’d prepared, asking her for the chance to fill in her missing weeks so she could make any future decisions with all of the information. Or I could turn around and walk away before they saw me and trust that Tess would return to Sylvia’s house when she was ready.

The jealousy clawing at my chest wanted a third course of action. March over there and pull the two of them apart. Tell Luis to stay away from Tess because she was mine. Then kiss Tess until she remembered everything.

The thing was, I had no right to be jealous. Even if Tess did remember that we’d been together, we’d made no promises to each other. In fact, as my

obnoxious brain was quick to remind me, the last time she and I had been together, I'd intended to give her the 'this was fun but' speech. After what'd happened with Rona, the last thing I wanted was to be in a relationship.

Maybe it was the coward's way out, but I couldn't bring myself to confront her. Not like this.

Slowly, I turned around and walked away, a part of me wishing she'd see me and call me back. I couldn't, however, in all good conscience, just leave her there, especially not with Brianne so worried.

Which meant I needed to stick around to keep an eye on her and make sure she didn't try to take off with Luis. At that point, I'd need to get involved for Tess's own safety. Since Luis had rescued her, I didn't think he would intentionally hurt her, but I didn't know enough about him to feel comfortable leaving him in charge of her.

The jealousy continuing to try to rear its ugly head had nothing to do with it.

I needed to find something to do while I stood around though, or I was going to go nuts. As I selected the best spot to keep my eyes on Tess, I pulled out my phone. I sent off a quick message to Brianne, explaining what was going on, and then called the other person who needed an update.

"Clay, I was beginning to wonder if you were the one missing now."

Ray sounded as dry and bored as he usually did, but I knew him well enough now to know that his statement meant he'd been worried. When I'd called him to tell him that the three of us wouldn't be coming home as planned because now Tess was missing, he'd cussed me out in that same even tone and told me to do whatever needed to be done to find her.

"We found Tess, but what's going on down here...clusterfuck would be putting it mildly." I scratched at a piece of bark on the tree I was leaning against. "Let's put it this way..."

I gave him a rundown of everything that had happened since the last time I talked to him. It'd only been three days, but it felt like three lifetimes.

"So, I'm standing here waiting to see what the two of them do next and hoping that Brianne isn't going to chop off my balls for not grabbing her sister and dragging her back to the house," I finished.

"Damn."

Leave it to Ray to sum everything up in a single word.

"What's our best play here?" I asked. "Do we go to the US Embassy and let them go through the usual channels to get us home?"

I really wanted him to say yes, that all we had to do was get to the embassy, and they'd take care of us from there. I'd never been the sort of man who shirked from his duty, who wanted other people to do things for him, but I hadn't realized until this very moment just how tired I was.

"We can't acknowledge that you're in Costa Rica," Ray said, frustration in every word. "There's something going on here, behind-the-scenes politics, that sort of shit. The secretary of state can't have any attention coming his way."

I fucking hated politicians.

SEVENTEEN

TESS

I DIDN'T RUN FROM THE HOUSE, BUT IT WAS CLOSE. MY MIND RACED, memories and thoughts crashing together until I couldn't think straight. All I could do was walk. One foot in front of the other. I didn't know where I was going, only that I needed to keep moving.

Brianne had been lying to me my whole life. Why hadn't she told me she was gay? Had she thought I'd care? I didn't care. Not in a negative way anyway. I would've cared about supporting her when she came out. Had she come out to other people? How many people knew this about my sister and knew that I was in the dark?

Clay had known. How had he known? How *long* had he known? Had he found out after they'd slept together? Was that why Brianne had slept with him, to try to convince herself she wasn't a lesbian or because she was trying to figure out if she was attracted to men at all?

Did that make a difference?

Maybe on Brianne's side, but not on Clay's. Unless the two of them had come to some sort of agreement...

I shook my head.

The details weren't the issue. They'd lied to me. *That* was the problem.

I didn't understand why they were here. I hadn't regained that particular memory – if I'd ever had it to begin with – but I couldn't think of a single good reason that explained why the three of us were in Costa Rica.

And I wasn't even sure I wanted to know.

I'd spent years building a life for myself, and I'd done it without any help. They'd all been looking out for themselves, so I'd done the same. I didn't need them then, and I sure as hell didn't need them now.

I wondered how many times I'd need to tell myself that before the deceit stopped hurting.

I wasn't sure how long I'd walked before I finally realized I needed to know where I was. This wasn't New York where I could wander around, then hail a cab and give my address. I didn't see any cabs, didn't know if it was even safe to take a cab here, and most of all, I wouldn't have known what address to give, regardless of whether or not I wanted to go back to Sylvia's.

I looked around, hoping I could find some place safe to figure out what I wanted to do next. I breathed a sigh of relief when I recognized the word on the sign. *Biblioteca*. Library.

I'd only gone a couple yards when someone yelled behind me.

"Tess!"

For one heart-stopping moment, I thought Clay had followed me, but when I looked toward the voice, I saw another familiar face. "Luis."

"What is wrong?"

He reached for me, and this time, I didn't pull away. I needed someone solid to ground me, and right now, as far as I knew, Luis was the only person I knew here who hadn't lied to me. I pressed my face against his chest and closed my eyes, begging my brain to simply turn off and give me a minute of peace.

"Don't worry, Tess. I'm here. I won't let anyone hurt you. I'll take care of you."

Luis spoke in Spanish, saying the sorts of things that I assumed didn't require responses. Soothing nothings that people said when someone was upset, and they didn't know what to say. I let my mind make the translations anyway, giving myself a sort of white noise that chased away everything else.

I didn't know how long we stood there, but at some point, his embrace shifted, and he went from his arms wrapped around me to his hands on my waist, moving dangerously close to areas I didn't want him touching.

Before things went too far, I took a step back. A flash of anger showed in his eyes, then disappeared. I ignored it, not wanting to draw attention to the elephant in the room. We hadn't talked about how he felt about me, and I really wasn't in the mood to do it now. I had enough to worry about. Especially if he was going to be difficult about me preferring friendship to romance.

"Thank you," I said, fidgeting with the hem of my shirt. "I needed a hug."

"What happened?" His face darkened. "Did someone hurt you? Did

Clay?”

I shook my head. “No, no, nothing like that.”

As I tried to figure out the best way to explain what I was feeling, Luis took a step toward me, not touching me, but still in my personal space. I looked down at my hands as I answered, “I heard something that revealed some lies that I’d been told, and then I remembered a couple things from the past few weeks.”

Simple and honest. The best way to do things.

“I will call us a car,” he said. “We will leave the city and live in the country until you are safe. You will not need to worry about—”

“I’m not leaving,” I said. “Not before I figure out what I was doing here in the first place. I need to go back to Sylvia’s.” The thought knotted my stomach.

“Perhaps we do not need to go back right now,” he said as he put his hand on my arm. “We can take some time to explore the library. Maybe walk to the park.”

I nodded slowly. “That sounds like a good idea.”

EIGHTEEN

CLAY

I WAITED OUTSIDE THE LIBRARY WHILE TESS AND LUIS WENT INSIDE FOR AN hour, and then I followed them to the park where they lingered for another hour. I wasn't bored though. I spent the time continually fielding calls and texts from Brianne, talking her out of coming after Tess and causing a scene. I reminded her that it seemed that Tess had left because she needed space. Treating Tess like a child was what had put us in this position to begin with. Bri hadn't liked it, but she'd at least agreed. Unless Tess was in danger, we wouldn't intervene.

I just hoped she didn't see me following her.

When she and Luis finally headed back to Sylvia's house, I breathed a sigh of relief...until I realized that meant I'd be in close quarters with them both again, and I wasn't sure how I was going to handle that. I'd been trying to convince myself that my jealousy was unwarranted, but every time I saw the two of them laugh or touch, I had the overwhelming urge to beat Luis into a bloody pulp.

I'd need to steer clear of them or things would get even more complicated.

Now, nearly twelve hours later, I sat in the dark on the porch and listened to the sounds of the Costa Rican night. I could've been in the guest room, sleeping in the bed Sylvia had so generously offered for a second night, but that would've meant being only a few feet away from Luis, and I didn't think I had the sort of self-control I would've needed in that situation.

I tried to force my mind back to the problem Brianne and I were faced with – namely, how we were supposed to get the three of us out of the country unseen – but every time I tried to figure out a solution, my thoughts

kept coming back to the problem of Tess and Luis.

What would Bri and I do if Tess decided she wanted to stay with him rather than coming back to the States with us?

I reminded myself that she had a job to go back to even though I wasn't entirely certain that the *Times* hadn't fired her when she'd been off the grid for two weeks. Since it hadn't been her fault, I hoped they'd be understanding, but I knew that too often, employers only cared about the bottom line and not what circumstances had contributed to the issue. I also knew Tess wouldn't give up her position without a fight, and the thought made me smile.

But, just because she came back to the US with us didn't mean she'd want anything to do with us. Granted, I hadn't done what she thought – again – that I'd done. Once she learned the truth, she might return to how she'd felt about me before she'd gone missing. We could pick up where we'd left off, or at the very least, just start over from where we'd been the last time she'd found out what Brianne had done.

The question that hadn't let up over the past few hours, however, was if I *wanted* that opportunity. For every excuse I gave why it wouldn't work, why I shouldn't want it, a memory came forward that made my reasoning pale in comparison.

I lived in Denver, and she lived in New York City.

Her golden skin was silk beneath my palm.

I wasn't looking for a relationship.

As my tongue moved over her sensitive skin, the fresh, salty taste of her exploded across my taste buds.

The time for Tess and I had passed years ago; we'd simply been together for closure now.

I slid inside her wet heat, her silken walls tight around my cock.

And so it went, one after the other, until I found myself struggling to come up with something that seemed more important than the way I'd felt when Tess had been in my arms. How...right, as if we were two parts of the same whole.

The back and forth was enough to give me a headache but wasn't enough to exhaust me to the point of being able to sleep. I stood and stretched, bending my back until my spine popped with a series of sounds like that cereal that crackled in milk.

I walked over to one of the screened windows and looked up at the moon.

The sky was rich velvet, speckled with chips of diamond, like nothing I could see in the big cities back home, not even Denver. Something inside me had shifted in the time I'd been in Costa Rica, and it wasn't only because of the insanity that seemed to keep finding me. There was a restlessness I hadn't had before, an inability to settle.

I needed this to be over. I needed to get back to my real life. Structure, schedule, work, routine. The things I'd been looking forward to once the craziness with Rona had ended. I'd had more than enough spontaneity in the past few months. When I finally went home, I planned on sleeping for an entire day.

A sound from the house caught my attention. A low sort of sound that could have been one of pleasure or one of fear. I could have ignored it, justifying that the house had four other adults in it, all of them completely capable of hearing the sound too. Hell, for all I knew, whoever was making it wasn't alone in their room.

But then I heard it again and knew I couldn't leave it to someone else. Not when it could be Tess in trouble.

I went back into the house and turned down the hall. This time, I could tell that the noise was coming from the room Tess was using, but I still didn't know if it was something I needed to investigate.

A series of images flashed through my mind. Me opening the door to find Tess and Luis in bed together. Her on top of him, lithe body moving, head tossed back, eyes closed. Him behind her, gripping her hips as her small breasts moved enticingly. Her mouth wrapped around his cock and her head bobbing up and down.

The notion made me ill, but if she was in trouble, I had to help.

I knocked, but no one answered. Then she whimpered, and there was no mistaking the fear in that sound. I opened the door, and the moonlight streaming through the window allowed me to see Tess thrashing in her bed – alone. All the arguments I'd given myself disappeared. The only thing that mattered was that she needed me.

“Tess.” I leaned over the bed and reached for her. Her face twisted, the emotional anguish clear. I caught her shoulders and gave her a shake. “Tess, wake up.”

Her hands latched on to my forearms, her nails digging into my flesh. Pain shot across my nerves, but I didn't pull away.

“Tess, sweetheart, wake up.” My words were soft, but I made my tone

hard, giving her a command, not a request.

With a gasp, she jerked awake, the top of her head almost colliding with my chin as she bolted upright. Her eyes were wide, still shadowed by whatever nightmare she'd been trapped in.

I risked letting go of one of her arms and put my hand on her cheek. The touch seemed to orient her, and the tension left her body. With a little cry, she buried her head against my chest, her arms wrapping around me. Not a single part of me debated returning her embrace.

"It's all right," I murmured as I pressed my lips against the top of her head. Damn, she smelled good. "It was just a dream. You're okay. I'm here."

I kept repeating my statements over and over until her trembling ceased, but even when I stopped talking, I didn't stop stroking her hair. I'd only had a short time to enjoy the privilege of doing something I'd fantasized about throughout my teenage years, and I wasn't going to let this opportunity pass me by.

When she pulled back, I reluctantly let her go, but I made no move to leave the room. I wasn't going anywhere until I knew she was okay. Over the last year, I'd wondered if things with Rona would have been different if I hadn't backed off as often as I had. Even if Tess and I didn't continue a physical relationship, I didn't want to lose her as my friend. Not again.

She wiped at her eyes with her hands, sniffing. I reached over to the small end table and plucked a couple tissues from the box. As she dried her eyes and cheeks, I asked, "Do you want to talk about it?"

I more than half-expected her to say no, but when she nodded her head, she seemed more surprised than I was.

"It wasn't bad at first. Not nightmare bad, anyway. It was that last night back in DC, when I came to see you."

"The night before you left."

She nodded again, looking away, as if even the memory of that night embarrassed her. "It started just like it really happened. Me coming over. Us...kissing. But then someone came in, and it wasn't Bri. It was Darius. He said you called him and then you handed me over to him. He squeezed my wrist tight enough to hurt, but you just laughed. He started talking about how he was going to kill my mom and Bri and make me watch."

She shivered, and it was all I could do not to reach for her again. I curbed the desire, thinking I'd have a better opportunity in a minute, one that wouldn't just let me hold her, but one that could make things right between

us again.

“There wasn’t anything I could do,” she continued. “All the people I cared about were being hurt, and I was powerless to stop him. Completely helpless.”

“You are the least helpless person I know,” I said with a half-smile.

“I’m pretty sure my sister has me beat on that one,” Tess said wryly. Her cheeks, however, couldn’t quite hide the flush of pride that came with my words.

I shook my head. “I’ve seen the both of you in some pretty tough situations recently, and you’re definitely far from helpless. Brianne, she uses her military training, which is all well and good for certain situations, but she doesn’t have your ability to adapt, to think outside the box. Too many people downplay the importance of that sort of thinking.”

She gave a dismissive wave of her hand, but not before I saw the pleasure my words had given her. While only some of Milly Gardener’s boyfriends had been verbally abusive, I knew that the Gardener household under Milly lacked much in the way of warmth and maternal affection, particularly when Milly was involved romantically with someone. Brianne had never needed much in the way of encouragement, but Tess had always struggled with her own self-worth. That, it seemed, hadn’t changed much.

“Did I wake you up?” Tess asked suddenly. Her eyes darted away. “Or were you up with...”

Her voice trailed off, but I knew where her mind had gone. Her forehead furrowed as she tried to match up what she’d always believed with the ‘new’ information she’d learned today. I wasn’t going to let this keep happening.

“I know you don’t remember,” I said, “but two days after we met on the plan, you and I talked about that last night in DC.”

Her head jerked up, her expression startled.

“You told me about what Brianne said on the way back to your place, and I told you that Brianne had lied.”

Tess’s jaw dropped.

I continued, “If you want to know her part of the story, you’ll have to talk to her, but you and I have already gone through my side. Since you don’t remember, I’ll say it again. Even back then, I knew Brianne was gay, but even if she wasn’t, I wouldn’t have slept with her. I didn’t want her then, and I don’t want her now. All she and I have ever been is friends. Me and you... *that’s* what I’d wanted that night. What I realized I still wanted from the

moment I saw you again.” I paused, then plunged ahead, “And it was what you wanted too. I’m not saying it was smooth sailing between us, but we were together before you disappeared.”

I could see in her eyes when everything clicked. “We slept together.”

“We did,” I answered evenly. “More than once.”

“That’s why you’ve been acting so strange,” she said. “Like you want to touch me but aren’t sure if I want you to.”

I nodded. “I’d never force myself on someone, and it’s not your fault you can’t remember what happened between us. Hell, I don’t even really have any proof for you. You’ll have to take it at my word.”

“Why didn’t you tell me as soon as you found me? There were plenty of times where explaining all this to me would’ve made things a lot easier.”

“I know. When I realized that you didn’t remember, I should have said something. All I can say is that I didn’t think you’d believe me. I thought you’d accuse me of lying.”

She fell silent after that, stretching the quiet out so long that I wondered if she’d fallen asleep. Then, instead of saying anything, she moved.

Wrapping her hand around the back of my neck, she used it for leverage as she pulled herself up to capture my mouth with hers.

NINETEEN

TESS

I HAD NO MEMORY OF THE FEEL OF HIS MOUTH AGAINST MINE, NONE BEYOND that almost-chaste kiss from years ago and the one he surprised me with last night, but this felt familiar and somehow right. I had only his word as proof of what we'd become in the time since we'd reunited, but I sensed no lies, nor any plausible reason for lying.

All this went through my mind rapid-fire, and then disappeared as he leaned into the kiss, his arms going around my waist. My lips moved with his, letting him take over the lead. I knew where I wanted this to go, and that I'd been there before, but since I didn't know if my memory of that night would ever come back, I wanted to make a new memory.

The tip of his tongue brushed against the corner of my mouth, and I parted my lips, eager to experience everything I'd lost. He made a sound in the back of his throat as his tongue slid across mine.

My hands moved up into his hair, the silky locks slipping between my fingers. I pushed up onto my knees to bring our faces level, and he tightened his grip on my waist. In a move that made me let out an embarrassing squeak, he pulled me onto his lap, situating my legs to either side of his thighs.

A shiver went through me as I settled. Thanks to my lack of clean clothes, I'd decided to wear only a large t-shirt to bed, meaning the only thing between me and the hard length pushing up against me was a thin layer of cotton. Embarrassment flooded my cheeks with heat, and I broke the kiss, but I didn't move off him. I wanted this too badly to stop, no matter how unused to these physical reactions I was.

"Fuck, Tess, I missed you." He rested his forehead against mine, his hands sliding down my back and then over my thighs.

I knew when he realized how little I was wearing because his hands stopped and the rest of him went still. He raised his head, those beautiful eyes of his dark as the sky during a winter storm.

“You’ve got to help me out here, sweetheart,” he said in a low rumble. “I don’t want to read too much into this and do something you’ll regret.”

“Tell me the truth,” I said, taking his face in my hands. “Did I enjoy having sex with you before?”

One corner of his mouth tipped up in a rakish grin. “I hope so. Otherwise, I didn’t do a very good job.”

His response startled a laugh out of me, and a knot in my chest eased. I hadn’t realized how hard it had been to breathe until now. Even as the air between us thickened with desire, the levity remained, and it was this mixture of emotions that I remembered. Not an actual memory of something we’d said or done, but the feeling of being with him.

“Take off your shirt,” I said, yanking at his t-shirt impatiently.

Even if I could remember being able to touch him, I’d want to do it now just as much. I suspected that, no matter what happened, I’d never have my fill of him. The thought should have frightened me, but right now, here with him, nothing scared me.

He tossed his shirt onto the floor, and I let my gaze devour him the way I’d always wanted to. He’d filled out since we were kids when I’d seen him swimming or playing basketball, but he still had an athlete’s build. Broad shoulders, but not too broad, strong arms but not overly muscled. His chest and stomach were defined, the dusting of dark hair coarse against my palms. The thing I liked best, however, was how he caught his breath when my fingers traced his abs.

“Your turn.” His voice was hoarse. “Fair’s fair.”

I reached for the hem of my t-shirt and hesitated. I should have felt shy or embarrassed or any number of emotions that would make me reluctant to bare myself. I didn’t feel any of that. The only thing remotely odd was the realization that he’d seen me naked before, and I didn’t remember it.

“We don’t have to do this,” Clay said, his words gentle despite the desire I could see burning in his eyes.

He would stop, I knew. Even with his erection straining against his pajama pants, he wouldn’t go any further than I allowed.

“I want to,” I said. “I just needed a minute to get used to the idea that this isn’t new for you.”

He put his hands over mine and looked straight into my eyes, his expression serious. “Trust me, Tess, this is new for me too.”

I could take him literally and debate the point, remind him that he’d seen me naked, touched me, been inside me. Or, I could acknowledge that he wasn’t talking about the physical act, that whatever this was between us was bigger than us both, somehow more intimate than two bodies coming together.

I chose a third option and leaned forward to brush my lips across his. It was a simple act, a kiss that would’ve been chaste under other circumstances, but it spoke volumes that I knew he would understand without any explanation needed. When I rocked back so I could see his face, he gave me a slight nod, and I knew our discussion was done for now.

He released my hands, and I finished what I’d started by pulling the t-shirt over my head. He muttered a curse and pulled me to him, his mouth crashing into mine with the sort of hunger I understood all too well. The hair on his chest chafed my nipples, hardening them into little points that throbbed in time with the ache between my legs. I ground down on him, moaning at the hard length rubbing against my sensitive skin.

“Fuck, Tess.” He tore his mouth away from mine. “You’re killing me.”

I went up on my knees, reaching down between us to free his cock as he kissed his way down my neck. When my fingers wrapped around his thick shaft, he sank his teeth into my flesh, and I gasped, my grip on him tightening. I dug my nails into his shoulder, using his body to balance me as I sank down onto him.

My eyelids fluttered, and my mouth fell open as my body opened to him. Logically, I knew I’d done this before, but a part of me still expected pain, or at the very least, the discomfort of something foreign pushing its way inside me. Instead, it was as if a part of me I hadn’t known was missing had finally been found.

His hands moved to my hips, helping me balance as I reached beneath to guide him to my entrance. My orgasm had left me wet and relaxed, but the sheer size difference between the two of us still made it a tight fit. I put my hands on his stomach and closed my eyes, putting all of my concentration on slowly lowering myself onto him. He didn’t rush me, his hands remaining a source of strength without trying to direct me. When I finally had him completely inside me, I breathed a sigh of relief. I was full, almost uncomfortably so, but there’d been no pain.

The memory clicked into place so suddenly that I gasped. My eyes flew open.

“Tess?” The concern in Clay’s voice caught my attention.

I shook my head and smiled down at him. All of my memory hadn’t come back, and that single sliver wasn’t enough for me to set aside what we were doing. This would be a new memory, and one I was eager to make. The past could wait. I’d wasted far too much time there already.

His hand slid up my spine and cupped the back of my head, fingers tangling in my hair. Little pinpricks of pain danced across my scalp, adding to the warmth in my belly. I rocked against him, moaning as the motion put the most delicious pressure on my clit.

When his expression tightened, and I knew he was close, I took his hand and guided it where I needed it most. Together, our fingers found that sensitive bundle of nerves, and I showed him how I liked to touch myself, wanting us to come as close together as possible. We didn’t need to wait long. I came twice in quick succession, the first triggering his climax and the second making him cry out my name.

Another memory came forward, the recollection so vivid that it made my pussy clench. Clay said my name like a curse, his grip on me tightening. My hips moved back and forth, muscles clenching and releasing in time with the movements. Snapshots of memory came faster now, weaving in with my present until my brain swirled with it all.

His mouth moved along my jaw and down my throat, teeth taking little nips at my skin. When his lips latched onto my nipple, my entire body jerked. The jolt of pleasure went straight through me, lighting up every cell in my body. With each pull of his mouth, I spun higher, raced faster.

I tipped over the edge with a cry, and it was like a dam burst. Memories and emotions came out in a flood, and I squeezed my eyes closed, pressing my face against his shoulder. A shudder went through my entire body, and then I was aware of Clay swearing, of him emptying himself inside me.

I still didn’t have all of my memories, but I had enough to know that everything Clay had told me was true, and I was safe here in his arms.

And that I was quite possibly falling in love with him.

Again.

TWENTY

TESS

“WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON HERE?!”

The shout pulled me out of a dreamless sleep, disorienting me enough that I barely registered the movement by the door.

“Quiet down, Bri.” Clay’s voice was tight. “You’re going to wake her up.”

“I sure as hell mean to wake her up!”

Why was my sister shouting at Clay?

I was halfway out of bed before I realized I was naked. I grabbed the sheet and wrapped it around me as I headed for the door. In the hallway, Clay and Brianne were arguing.

“She’s had a rough few weeks.” Clay spoke through gritted teeth. “Let her sleep.”

“That’s what you should’ve been doing last night, asshole. Letting her sleep.”

“What’s everyone yelling about?” I asked mildly. I tightened my grip on the sheet and tried to look dignified.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Brianne pointed at me, her eyes flashing.

“I *was* sleeping,” I said, meeting her eye. “But your big mouth changed that.”

She took a step toward me, and Clay shifted so that he was between us. I put my hand on his arm and gave him a gentle push. He didn’t need more than that to move out of the way, but he didn’t go far.

“If you have a problem with something I’m doing, then you need to talk to me.” I started to cross my arms, then realized that wouldn’t work well with

keeping my sheet in place. “But, then again, you’ve never been good at that, have you?”

“I don’t know what lies he told you to get you in bed...”

I shook my head, unable to believe the nerve of her. “He’s not the one who’s been lying to me. I remember, Bri. Not everything, but enough to know that you and Clay never had sex. Not back then. Not now. You fucking *lied* to me.”

She flinched as if I’d slapped her, but I refused to feel sorry for her. She’d brought this on herself. And I wasn’t done yet. I had a few other things to discuss with my sister.

“You kept being gay a secret because you knew if you told me, I’d ask about that night. You could’ve just come up with another lie to cover the first, told me that it was an experiment or some shit like that, but you didn’t. You kept me at arm’s length intentionally.”

“I did,” Brianne admitted. She squared her shoulders, looking proud of herself. “I did it for your own good.”

I snorted a scoffing half laugh. “My own good? You told me that my best friend had fucked my sister and that he wanted to fuck me, not because he liked me, but because that’s what he did.”

Clay moved in my peripheral vision, but he didn’t interfere. If he wanted to have his own discussion with Brianne, that was between them. He knew me well enough to know that I wanted to do this myself. I wished I’d had enough courage to stand on my own two feet back then.

“You never would’ve left DC if you’d thought the two of you had a future,” Brianne countered. “And if you wouldn’t leave, then Mom wouldn’t leave, and we had to get away from Darius.”

“I was fifteen, Bri. I would’ve hated leaving Clay, yes, but I would’ve understood.” My throat grew tight. “Do you really think I’m that selfish? That I would’ve put having a *boyfriend* over our safety?”

She lifted a shoulder. “Like you said, Tess. You were fifteen. You might’ve thought you understood the world back then, but you didn’t.”

“I didn’t because the two of you sheltered me.” It was my turn to point a finger at her. “And it still doesn’t justify lying to me for sixteen years.”

“What about you?” she asked. “I lied to you. *Sixteen years ago*. I told you that I had sex with the guy you had some childhood crush on. Who the fuck holds on to something like that for nearly two decades?”

“You really don’t get it, do you?” My eyes were burning, but I refused to

give in to tears. “It wasn’t the lie. It was the betrayal. You knew how I felt about him and how much that lie would hurt me. I never trusted anyone after that because if my own sister could do that to me...” I couldn’t finish. The emotion was simply too tight in my throat for more words to pass.

Brianne’s face softened. “Tess, I...I thought I was doing the right thing.”

“You can’t even say it, can you? You can’t apologize to me like a normal person.” I clenched my teeth, one hand curling into a fist. “Just admit that you fucked up. I don’t expect you to actually understand or care about how badly you hurt me, but you could at least admit that you made a mistake.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “You think I don’t care?”

“I’m pretty sure your actions are what say you don’t care.”

“You’re my little sister, and I love you,” Brianne said. “But if you tell me I don’t care about you one more time, I’m going to...” She frowned. “Dammit. I can’t think of what I’ll do, but I’ll do something.” Her eyes met mine. “I’m sorry, Tess. For all of it.”

I reached out and took her hand, squeezing it. “Thank you.”

We stood like that for a minute, but before things could get awkward between us, Sylvia came into the living room.

“Where did Luis go?”

TWENTY-ONE

CLAY

“WHERE DID LUIS GO?” SYLVIA ASKED.

I really hoped this was a bad joke or Sylvia not having looked hard enough, but that was all it was, hope. There was no way Sylvia had overlooked a guest in her own home, especially since it wasn't a large space to begin with.

“Isn't he in the guest room?” Tess asked, more concern on her face than I liked.

Sylvia shook her head. “I went to ask him if he would like breakfast, but the room is empty. Both beds are made.”

Brianne shot me a glare. “If *someone* would have stayed where he was supposed to last night, we'd know where Luis is, or at least when he left.”

“Knock it off, Bri,” Tess snapped. “Who I sleep with is none of your damn business.”

“Does it really matter if he left?” I asked. “The three of us are trying to find our way back to the US. Luis lives here.”

This time, it was Tess who glared at me. “So because he's not a US citizen, it doesn't matter if he's in trouble?”

“That's not what I meant.” I fought to keep my voice even. Tess was upset because she was finally remembering what Brianne had done. She didn't mean to take it out on me.

“That's what it sounded like,” she retorted. “Or maybe it has nothing to do with his citizenship. Maybe you're just jealous because I'm not focused on you all the time.”

Brianne laughed. “I guess I shouldn't have been worried if you can't get through the morning after without bickering.”

“We wouldn’t be *bickering* if you hadn’t stuck your nose in our business,” I glowered at her. “She’s not a kid anymore, Bri.”

“You’re right,” Tess said, readjusting her sheet. “I’m not. Which means I don’t need you fighting my battles either.”

I raised my hands. “Whoa. What did I do?”

“We need to find Luis,” Tess said. “That’s what’s important now. He could be in trouble.” She gave me a hard look. “Trouble he wouldn’t have had if he hadn’t helped me.”

She had a point, as much as I hated to admit it. It still didn’t make me like Luis anymore. I didn’t trust him either, and that didn’t have anything to do with my feelings for Tess, complicated as they were.

“He could have decided he wanted to go home,” Brianne said. “He helped you find your family. You don’t need him anymore.”

Tess stared at her sister for a moment and then turned on her heel, stalking back to her room without a word.

“Stay away from her,” Brianne said as soon as the door closed behind Tess. “I’m serious, Clay. She’s vulnerable, and you don’t need to be taking advantage of that.”

I raised an eyebrow. “I don’t know if you’ve been paying attention for the past decade, but your sister knows how to take care of herself.”

Brianne made a dismissive gesture that would’ve pissed Tess off if she’d been here to see it. “You think I haven’t been watching out for her this whole time?”

“You’ve been in the army. How much ‘watching’ could you do?”

“I can do enough,” she said, a familiar stubborn set to her jaw. “Why do you think a reporter with her skills hasn’t been given more dangerous assignments?”

I let out a low whistle. “If you think she’s pissed at you for lying to her all those years ago, that’s nothing compared to what she’s going to be when she finds out you’ve been fucking with her career.”

“She’s not going to find out.” A steely look had come into Brianne’s eyes. “You keep your mouth shut and your pants zipped.”

I opened my mouth to say something, but the sound of the door behind me shut it again. I wasn’t necessarily going to follow Brianne’s orders, but this wasn’t the time to make that fact known.

“We’re going to work in two groups,” Tess said as she came back into the living room. “Sylvia and I will search to the east. The two of you are going to

search to the west.”

“Tess, I don’t think—” I began.

“I don’t care what you think,” she cut me off. “You and Brianne can argue as much as you want as long as you’re looking for Luis. I don’t have the energy to deal with your shit today on top of everything else.”

Dammit!

I shoved my fists into my pockets rather than putting a hole in Sylvia’s wall like my temper wanted me to. I needed to be patient. Things with Tess and me would get better once we got back to the States. What happened between her and Brianne was another matter, but it wasn’t my business.

Just when had I decided that I wanted to still be involved with Tess when we got back home?

The question startled me enough that I almost missed Tess and Sylvia heading out.

“Be careful,” I called after them before turning to Brianne, who was looking even more sullen than she had a minute ago.

This was going to be fun.

And I meant that in the most sarcastic way possible.

“I think we’ll cover more ground if we split up,” Brianne said. “You take southwest, and I’ll take northwest. We go three miles, then cut around to come down from the north and up from the south on the east side. We do that, and we’ll be able to tell Tess that we did all we could.”

“What rank are you again?” I asked. “Because you sound a lot more like you’re used to giving orders than taking them. Private First Class? Corporal?”

“Staff Sergeant, actually.” She somehow managed to look down her nose at me even though she was a few inches shorter than me. “And you’re, what, doing the exact same shit you were doing ten years ago?”

“I’m a profiler with the FBI,” I said, keeping my voice flat. “I don’t exactly have ranks to climb.”

She shrugged. “Guess that means I’m in charge.”

I made a scoffing sound. “How do you figure?”

“Because I’m the one giving orders. Now, let’s go.”

This was going to get really old, really fast. “Let’s get something straight,” I said. “This is not a military mission. It is, however, something Tess wants us to do. How about we agree to do what we did when we were looking for Tess and focus on the one person we can both agree we want to

see home safe?”

For a moment, she looked like she'd rather do anything but agree. Then she nodded. “We look for this asshole, and whether we find him or not, we get Tess out of here.”

“Agreed.”

When I got back to Denver, Ray was going to owe me a steak dinner. Maybe I'd have him pay for a nice meal for Tess and me. A date, like the one we should've had years ago.

TWENTY-TWO

TESS

“THANK YOU,” I SAID TO SYLVIA AS WE WALKED AWAY FROM THE HOUSE. “I appreciate you coming with me. I couldn’t handle being around either of them right now.”

“Things were getting heated in there,” she said, her eyes meeting mine before beginning to scan the street again. “If you want to talk about it...”

I started to shake my head, but then paused. I didn’t have anyone else to talk to about this. I had acquaintances, but not friends. Not really. I’d never trusted anyone enough to let them close. Sylvia, however, didn’t have to be close to me to understand what was going on.

“How much has Brianne told you about our childhood?” I asked as I scanned the area for Luis.

“Enough to know that she would do anything for you,” Sylvia said with a lift of her shoulder. “No matter the cost to her.”

Said like that, I almost felt guilty for being angry with Brianne. Almost. “That’s still no excuse for what she did.”

Sylvia’s dark eyes exuded understanding as she let me talk.

“She helped raise me,” I said. “She was my best friend. My only friend until I met Clay. All three of us got along, but Clay and I had always been closer. That’s what made things so much worse. Thinking that the two of them had been together, knowing how I felt...” I had to force the words past the lump in my throat. “That betrayal fucked me up.”

“It would,” Sylvia agreed. “The two people you cared for the most, betraying you in that way.”

I rubbed my temple, trying to soothe away the headache building there. “Now I find out it had all been a lie. I spent sixteen years angry with the first

boy I ever loved, and it was all for nothing. He hadn't done anything wrong. It had all been Brianne."

Sylvia stopped and put her hand on my arm. But instead of offering advice as I thought she would, she pointed a block up where a young man stood on the corner.

"Is that Luis?"

I studied him for a moment, then shook my head. "Too short."

"He might have seen him."

We made our way over to the young man, and the closer I got, the more differences I could see between him and my friend.

"Hola," Sylvia said with a smile. "¿Has visto a un joven llamado Luis?"

The guy shook his head and rattled something off in thickly accented Spanish. Sylvia rolled her eyes and said something back. The stranger grinned and shrugged.

"What was that all about?" I asked. "I know Spanish, but I couldn't follow what he said."

"He was hoping we were propositioning him," Sylvia said with another roll of her eyes. "More or less."

"Lovely," I said dryly. "Nice he took the rejection well."

"I didn't ask before," Sylvia said as we started to walk again. "How far are we going to go? How far do you think we should walk?"

I wanted to tell her that we would keep going until we found him, but I knew that wasn't reasonable. There were two of us to cover a hell of a lot of territory, and we had no clue when Luis had left the house. He could've come this exact same way hours ago, and Sylvia and I would never know.

"I don't know," I answered honestly. "I don't know if I'm out here because I'm actually concerned about Luis or because I feel like my brain is on overload and this was the only way I thought I'd be able to get any peace."

Sylvia gave me a quick hug. "I can't pretend to know what you're going through, and Brianne certainly didn't tell me much about what brought the three of you to Costa Rica. What I can tell you is that those two care about you more than anything, and that I can see you care about them too. Take the time you need to figure things out, but don't give up."

Sylvia's words stayed with me as we resumed walking down a sidewalk that became more uneven and cracked the farther we went. After two blocks, I started to talk again, telling her the rest of the story of what had happened, all the way through the pieces of memory that had come back to me last

night. Granted, I didn't give her graphic details, but it was enough to paint a picture.

When I finished, we'd gone more than a mile, and I still wasn't any closer to sorting out my thoughts than I had been before. Sylvia was right. I wanted to be able to go back to her house after this, forgive Brianne and Clay, and move on with my life. I didn't know what that meant yet, but I did know that it'd be nice to live without all that baggage.

"Before we go back, I want to tell you something," Sylvia said, reaching out to touch my arm. "I was wrong before. Don't wait."

I looked over at her. "Don't wait for what?"

"I understand wanting to process everything, to work it all out before you talk to them, but take my advice...don't wait." A flicker of pain went across her eyes. "When Brianne told me that she was leaving, and things were over between us, I accepted it because I thought that was what she wanted. I thought if I didn't make it hard for her to leave, if we stayed friends, she'd see how much she missed being with me."

Every word she spoke was full of how much she cared for Brianne, and I wondered how she'd hidden it this whole time. The way the two of them had talked in the kitchen had made it sound like they'd gone their separate ways and loved the lives they had now.

Sylvia stopped and grabbed my hands, her expression earnest. "Getting that call from Bri the other night made me realize that even though I've been happy in the years since she and I broke up, there's been something missing. It was like...if you asked someone who's been on oxygen for years, even though it's giving them life and they can enjoy the world around them, most of them would give anything to go outside and breathe real air."

I found myself nodding at her illustration. I understood it all too well. It was exactly how I felt after seeing Clay again, no matter how pissed I'd been at him at the time.

When I was in college, my roommate loved romantic comedies from the late 90s and early 2000s, and I'd done everything I could to avoid watching them, but one night, for some reason, I'd found myself watching Reese Witherspoon say that she'd given her heart away years ago and had never really gotten it back.

It was the first, and only, time I'd ever identified with the heroine in a rom-com. I hadn't consciously acknowledged it at the time because I hadn't wanted to admit how badly I'd still been missing Clay.

“I thought I had time,” Sylvia said with a tight smile. “I thought that she’d come back to me. Not because she needed a place to stay, but because she needed *me*. I hadn’t considered that the next time I saw her, she’d be in a relationship that makes her as happy as she made me.”

My mind immediately conjured up images of Clay with another woman, perhaps even this mysterious Rona, and my heart twisted painfully. What if he returned to Denver and she realized that she’d made a mistake in letting him go? I didn’t know the details of the circumstances surrounding their break-up, but if she wanted him back, it was entirely within the realm of possibility that he could go to her.

An even worse thought hit me. What if I’d been his rebound? What if he’d only had sex with me because it was a convenient way to get over her?

Sylvia squeezed my hand, pulling me away from my negative thoughts. “Take my advice. If you want him, fight for him. Don’t find yourself in my position in a few years, wishing you’d done everything you could to keep him.”

I opened my mouth to tell her that I’d think it all over, but before I could, a familiar figure came up the sidewalk toward us. I’d almost forgotten why Sylvia and I were out here in the first place. Seeing Luis, however, brought it all rushing back.

I needed to focus.

I didn’t have time for games or romance or whatever else might get in the way of what was most important. I needed to get Clay and Bri out of Costa Rica before I even thought about anything else.

TWENTY-THREE

CLAY

I HADN'T REALIZED HOW LATE IT WAS GETTING UNTIL BRIANNE AND I PASSED the second café filling up with people getting off work. My stomach growled, and I tried to remember what time it'd been when we'd picked up *granizados* – mine coconut and hers mango – and *queso palmito* at a small stand. It hadn't been more than a couple hours, but I was hungry again. Absently, I wondered how many miles we'd walked.

“This probably would've worked better if we'd had specific search perimeters,” Brianne said, her voice nearly a growl of frustration.

I didn't acknowledge the statement. Almost from the moment we'd left the house, she'd been criticizing how Tess had handled things, and arguing with her wouldn't do anything but rile her up and annoy me, so I ignored her. The fact that she didn't seem to notice, or care, could have been a blessing or a curse. I hadn't yet decided.

Then again, when I considered that we could've spent this entire time arguing, it was easier to see Brianne's complaints as positives rather than negatives.

I snuck a glance at the older sister, considering her in this new light.

More than two weeks together and I still had a difficult time accepting this version of the girl who'd been my friend for so much of my childhood and adolescence. True, I'd always been closer to Tess, even before I'd realized that my feelings for her were different than how I felt about other friends, but I'd always considered Brianne one of my closest friends too. When Tess and I had found each other again, even with Brianne's lie between us, we'd fallen back into the same comfortable rhythm we'd always had. That hadn't happened with Bri and me, and it wasn't a sex thing.

Honestly, I didn't know what the hell had happened. Sure, after I'd found out she'd lied to Tess, I'd been pissed, but that wasn't it. I'd heard more than once that the opposite of love wasn't hate, it's indifference. While what Brianne and I had experienced wasn't in the realm of romantic love, we'd still cared about each other. But now...I was angry; she didn't care.

No, that wasn't entirely accurate. It wasn't that she didn't care. She was treating Tess the same way, and I knew she loved her sister. It was more like Bri was keeping us at arm's length. She'd always been a private person, but this was beyond keeping certain things to herself. She'd put up walls against every person in her life, and every gut instinct and FBI agent intuition I possessed was telling me that she had a bigger secret than being the girlfriend of the secretary of state's sister-in-law.

Which meant it was a huge-ass secret.

"It doesn't look like they're back yet," I said as Brianne and I reached Sylvia's house. "None of the lights are on."

Brianne glanced at the house, then turned her attention in the direction Tess and Sylvia had gone. "I don't have a key," she said. "And I don't really like sitting around doing nothing. I'm going after them. You do whatever you want."

I heard the rest of what she wanted to say. *You do whatever you want.*

At first, I'd been waiting for her to finish ripping into me like she had earlier today, but she hadn't said a word about it since we'd agreed to focus on what was best for Tess. I wasn't stupid enough to think that meant she approved, but at least she had her priorities in the right place.

I followed her as she continued down the sidewalk. Even though I hadn't said so, I agreed with her assessment of Tess's search. In fiction, two people in one direction and two in another always resulted in the searched-for person being found. In reality, we'd walked a single street in both directions. Luis could have gone up or down any number of streets and then turned right or left, if he'd turned at all.

We were never going to find him unless he wanted to be found.

"How far do you think they got?" Brianne asked the question directly.

"Probably half of what we did," I said with a *how in the hell should I know* shrug. "Tess is still healing from that accident. She'll push herself past what she should, but there's only so much her body's going to let her do."

"You don't think she's turned back yet."

She'd made it a statement, but I felt the need to respond to it anyway. "I

don't think she'll ever admit she can't find him. Sylvia or one of us will have to force her to see it."

"Shit," Brianne said with a sigh. "You're right."

I was surprised she didn't choke on the words. "Do you think Sylvia will feel comfortable enough to tell Tess to stop?"

"Probably," Brianne said. "But I doubt Tess will listen."

I walked faster, and Brianne matched my pace. The longer I was with her, the bigger my suspicion that there was more to her than I'd originally thought. I'd met soldiers who were tough, but there was an edge to Bri that made me wonder what else she was.

Neither one of us said anything as we covered the next dozen blocks at a jog. When we reached the corner of another block, I stopped, waiting for Brianne as she went another few feet. She turned around and came back to me, still moving in place to keep herself from tightening up. I stretched and shook out my limbs.

"We should have caught up to them by now." Brianne voiced what I was thinking. "Or at least be able to see them."

"Do you think they would've gone in another direction?" I asked, turning in a circle to scan the area again. "Maybe Tess thought they should come back a different way."

Brianne shook her head. "I don't think so. They wouldn't be likely to run into Luis going back toward Sylvia's house. Not unless he'd just gone out for a walk or something."

"You don't trust him either."

Brianne met my gaze with a steady one of her own. "I don't trust much of anyone, but no, I especially don't trust him."

"Which one of us do you think she'll be more likely to take a call from?" I asked.

"You," Brianne said, her nose curling in distaste of her own answer. "She's annoyed with you, but she's pissed at me."

Less than two minutes later, we were forced to reconsider that particular position. My call had gone straight to voicemail, which meant she either had the phone off or she'd refused to accept my call. As Brianne tried her luck, I sent a text. Tess didn't answer either one.

"Shit," Bri said as she shoved her phone back into her pocket.

The possibility I'd been trying to ignore came forward, unable to be pushed aside any longer.

“What if Luis took her somewhere?” I looked up and down the street as if I’d be able to see the past right there in front of me. “If he pulled up in a car, said he’d bring her back to us, then took off with her, that could explain it.”

“I don’t think he could take both Tess and Sylvia *and* get their phones from them.”

“If he had a gun he could,” I said, rubbing my forehead. “Think about it, Bri. He comes up to them, says he’ll give them a ride, and once they’re in the car, he pulls a gun on them. He threatens to shoot Sylvia if they don’t hand over their phones. Tess might not do it to save herself, but she’d do it to save someone else.”

Brianne let out a stream of curses.

“We need to find out if they made it this far,” I continued. “If we have any hope of picking up their trail, we need to find out where he caught up with them.”

Most of the space behind us was empty, businesses or houses torn down – or in one case, burned down – lots neglected. These were the kinds of places that became overgrown with weeds, nature checked only by the trash people discarded there. It reminded me of the yard around the drug cartel’s house.

Across the street, however, were a couple small businesses. A laundromat, a place that sold herbal remedies, a massage parlor that might have been something else, and a liquor store.

“I’ll bet they have security cameras.” I gestured at the liquor store. “Or at least people who pay attention to anything that could threaten their livelihood.”

A bell rang when we opened the door, and less than five seconds later, someone was right there, greeting us with a smile. I exchanged some small pleasantries as Brianne walked around the store, clearly scoping it out in a way that was more detective than soldier. Yet another thing to file away for future discussion.

“Hola,” I said with a smile before switching to English. “I was wondering if you’ve seen a friend of ours.”

Playing the tourist seemed like the better move. If he thought Bri and I were some sort of government officials, he’d most likely clam up, and that was the last thing we wanted.

“Who is your friend?” He came back with English, but I could still see the suspicion in his eyes.

“Two friends, actually. Women.” I held up my hand to indicate their

approximate heights. “Both short with dark hair. They were looking for another friend of ours, and we aren’t sure if they found him.”

“You have a lot of friends,” the man observed, eyeing me closely. “Why were you not with them?”

Brianne finished making her rounds and came back to stand by me, a bottle of tequila in hand. “Because he was with me.” She gave him a charming smile and wrapped her arm around mine. “I’d like this, please.”

We followed the man to the register, and as he rang up the tequila, he started to talk again. “I did see a pair of women that looked like Americans. They stopped at the corner over there. A man came to them. About your height, but thinner. Black hair. They talked and then followed him around the corner. I could not see them after that.”

“That sounds like them.” The expression on my face tightened into a mask of barely controlled fury. “They went around that corner?” I pointed to make sure the man understood.

“Yes.” The man handed Brianne the tequila. “They might have gotten into a car. There is a parking lot around that corner, and a few minutes after they left, a car came back this way. It was speeding.”

“Oh, no,” Brianne said, her eyes going wide as she played the damsel. “I hope they didn’t get hurt. Which way did they go? Is there a hospital that way?” She tugged on my arm. “I told you we should have given them phones.”

“It’ll be all right,” I said, patting her hand as I turned back to the man at the counter. “Would that have been the way someone would go to get to the hospital?”

He shook his head. “Nothing good is that way.” His eyes narrowed suspiciously. “Unless your friends were looking for drugs, they should not have gone that way.”

Fuck. The cartel.

“Thank you,” I managed to say before Brianne pulled me out the door.

We moved a few feet down before either of us said anything.

“It had to be Luis, right?” I asked. “He’d be the only person Tess and Sylvia would trust enough to get into a car with. Unless you think Sylvia might’ve known the guy.”

Brianne shook her head. “She knew we were looking for Luis. She wouldn’t have gone off with some guy, no matter how good a friend he was. The only thing I can think is that she might have asked a friend for a ride

back to her house, but they would've driven back the way we came, not down that way."

"You don't think it's a coincidence that the car went in the direction that the cartel lives." I didn't make it a question because I knew she was thinking the same as me.

We didn't believe in coincidences, neither of us.

"He couldn't be working for them," Brianne said. "It wouldn't have made any sense for him to get her out of his apartment and away from them if he was working for them. Hell, if they were the ones responsible for the accident, why would he have even saved her?"

"Unless he was double-crossing them," I said, my own mind working through the possibilities. "He could've saved her, thinking he could trade her for something. Money maybe. Drugs."

"And he left today to tell them that he had her," Brianne said. "But why *her*?"

"Because she and I screwed up their plans to ransom your Red Care group," I said. "If they found out we were the ones who rescued you guys, they could want revenge."

A bright streak of panic went through me at the thought of what a drug cartel could do to Tess as revenge for what we'd done. I'd seen what they'd done to Brianne when she'd tried to fight them, and I'd seen what they'd done to the two bodies they'd handed over to Tess and me when we'd paid the ransom.

"It's my fault," Brianne said, her face a mask of guilt and anger. "Neither of you would be here if it wasn't for me."

"It's not your fault," I said. "You were trying to do something good. You couldn't know how dangerous it would be."

I believed what I said, but something about the way she wouldn't look at me made me wonder if that was the entire truth.

TWENTY-FOUR

TESS

“WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?” I ASKED, TAKING A HALF-STEP TOWARD LUIS. Sylvia’s hand on my arm kept me from getting any closer. I glanced at her, catching the warning in her eyes. She was right to be wary. We didn’t know why he’d left or anything else, for that matter.

He smiled at me, that same charming smile he’d given me before. “I have been making things safe for you.”

“Making things safe?” It sounded good, but after finding out how my own sister had been lying to me, I refused to take anything for granted.

“Safe to get you out of the country,” he said. He put his hand on my shoulder, shooting a dirty look at Sylvia when she moved closer to me. “Eventually. First, a safe place for us to wait.”

“That’s wonderful!” I said. “Clay and Bri will be thrilled to hear it.”

His expression darkened. “I was not able to find much room. I do not know if they will be able to come with us.”

“They have to,” I protested, taking a step back.

“They can safely find their own way home.”

The knot in the pit of my stomach soured. He hadn’t even thought about Brianne or Clay. Okay, Clay, I could understand. Luis had a crush on me, and clearly, Clay and I had...well, whatever we had. But Brianne was my sister. No matter how pissed I was at her, Luis shouldn’t have assumed that I wouldn’t want her going home safe with me.

Still, I chose my words carefully.

“I think we should all stick together.” I took a step back so that his hand fell away from my shoulder. “They should be heading back to Sylvia’s by now.”

“Maybe you should call them,” Sylvia suggested. “Let them know we’re coming to them.”

“Good idea.” I started to reach for my purse...and remembered that I didn’t have my phone with me. “Dammit. I took it out of my purse to charge it and forgot.”

“That is all right,” Luis said with another smile. “I have a car. It will not take us long to get where we are going.”

I didn’t like the way he worded that. “Back to Sylvia’s, you mean.”

He took a step closer to me but didn’t try to touch me again. “I think you should see what I was able to do for you first. Then you can decide if you want the others coming with us.”

He kept saying *us*, but I didn’t know if that was because he was thinking of him and me as a couple, or because he thought he was coming to the States with me. Or both. No matter how grateful I was for what he’d done for me, him leaving Costa Rica with me wasn’t in the cards.

“I appreciate you getting everything set up. It’s probably a good idea for you to run everything by Bri and Clay. There are some things they need to watch out for.” I wasn’t about to tell Luis that Clay was an FBI agent who might not have disclosed that little fact when he came into the country. I remembered a bit of my discussion with Clay before my accident, but not all of the details.

“I can order us dinner,” Sylvia said, pulling out her phone. “What are you in the mood for?”

“We should wait to ask the others,” Luis said. “We will not want to order something they will not like.”

He had a point. My gut still said something wasn’t quite right, but I didn’t want to believe that Luis would do anything to hurt me. He might have been keeping secrets, but I suspected they had more to do with how to win my affection than any malicious intent.

“My car is around the corner.” Luis pointed.

The three of us couldn’t all fit on the sidewalk, and it didn’t take more than two steps for it to become obvious that Luis wanted to walk next to me. When I didn’t move over to squeeze Sylvia out, he moved into the street, keeping up a conversation that cut Sylvia out as neatly as if he’d pushed her behind us.

“I believe I can get train tickets for us,” Luis said. “I have just completed Agatha Christie’s *Murder on the Orient Express*. Have you read it?”

“No,” I said quickly, then came back to the more important statement. “What train tickets?”

Luis winked at me. “Do not worry. There will not be a murder mystery. Have you read any of Christie’s other books? I am also a fan of *And Then There Were None*.”

“I saw the movie. Where are we supposed to take a train?”

“Have you seen *The Girl on the Train*? I have heard it was a good interpretation of the book.”

He wasn’t going to answer my questions, and I wasn’t sure if I was supposed to be annoyed or scared by it. At the moment, it was more of the former than the latter. It seemed like ever since Luis and I had left his apartment, the sweet, shy young man who’d nursed me for two weeks had been replaced by this slick, obnoxious guy.

“I am a fan of Emily Blunt,” he continued. “I believed her performance in *A Quiet Place* was worthy of an Oscar.”

As he kept talking, he explained how much of his English he had learned from books and movies. I had surmised as much, but this was the first time I’d heard him speak at length on the subject. By the time we reached his car, the glint in his eyes made me wonder if, in his head, this was another story.

I was tempted to sit in the back, but it seemed like a small concession. Besides, a happy Luis was a nicer Luis. In theory anyway. I also figured it was a good way to get a read on what Luis really wanted. What his end goal really was.

“That’s my street,” Sylvia said, pointing as Luis drove right past.

“We are going to see what I have spent the last few hours preparing.” Luis gave Sylvia a tight smile.

I wished I could say that Luis was acting crazy, but I saw calm, controlled sanity in his eyes. I’d met crazy people before. He wasn’t one of them. The disappointment in yet another person distracted me enough that we were pulling up in front of a familiar house before I realized where we were going.

“Luis? What the hell?”

He actually looked remorseful, but the next words out of his mouth contradicted that. “I am sorry, Tess. I made a deal to keep us safe. A trade.”

I could barely force the words out. “What sort of trade?”

“They let the people spread the word that they wanted your sister. I promised them her, and they canceled the order to kill you and me.”

Bri.

This *asshole* promised my sister to a drug cartel.

A black van pulled up next to Luis's car, and his agitation went through the roof. His face flushed as the van's passenger door opened and a man roughly the size of two defensive linemen got out.

"Since she is not with you, I will need to convince them that she will trade herself for another."

"She's not going to trade herself for me," I said, the words coming out from between gritted teeth. "She's going to kick your ass and their asses. Her and Clay."

Luis brushed the back of his hand down my cheek, and he frowned when I flinched away. "I would never give you to them. When I saw Brianne with Sylvia, I knew I had someone to trade, even if I could not deliver Brianne directly."

"I'm not letting you take—"

Pain exploded across the side of my face, and the world spun. I slumped against the door, vaguely aware of a struggle only a couple feet away. Someone was calling my name, but I couldn't focus on anything except how much my face hurt.

TWENTY-FIVE

CLAY

WE DIDN'T NEED TO GO VERY FAR TO REALIZE WHERE LUIS HAD MOST LIKELY taken Tess and Sylvia. When the clerk told us that the car had gone past Sylvia's street, I'd hoped that it'd meant Luis was taking the women back to his own apartment. While that wouldn't have been the best thing, it wouldn't have been the worst either.

This was the worst.

"You do realize what's in this direction, don't you?" Brianne broke the silence without looking at me.

"I do," I said grimly.

We slowed down as we got in sight of the cartel house. No one was outside, but we approached cautiously nonetheless. We both wanted to get to Tess and Sylvia before something happened to them, but if we got caught, we wouldn't be any help to anyone.

The first difference I noticed from the previous time I'd been here was the absence of barking dogs. The second was that the secure gate was ajar. Alarm bells went off, and my stomach sank. Something here wasn't right.

"Stay here," Brianna said quietly. "I'm going to take a look around."

"Like hell you will," I said. "Tess will never forgive me if I let you do that alone."

"I think she cares more about what happens to you than me," Bri said, casting a sideways glance in my direction.

I ignored her as I pushed the gate open, waiting for someone to come out and see what was going on. Nothing happened. Brianne followed me up the short sidewalk, and I didn't need to look back at her to know she had my back. We might've been trained by different people, but the essentials were

close enough that it'd been easy for us to fall into a simple rhythm as we'd worked together these past two weeks.

My knock on the door sounded impossibly loud, the echo telling me what I'd already suspected was true. There wasn't anyone in the house. The cartel had left. Sure, there might be some furniture, maybe spoiled food, but the people who'd been here when Tess and I had snuck in to rescue Brianne and the rest of her group were gone.

"Are you sure that was a good idea?" Brianne whispered. "A direct approach isn't always the best."

I shot her a look. "There's no one here." I pushed on the door, and it creaked as it opened. No one came running. No one threatened, and there were no gunshots. None of the usual things that should have come with approaching a drug cartel's house happened.

"When did they move?" Brianne asked. "I checked this place out three days before we found Tess and she was there."

I decided that addressing why Brianne had come here without me wasn't the most pressing issue at the moment. "I think the better question would be why now? If they were worried about you leading the authorities back here, why wouldn't they have left as soon as we got you guys out?"

"What's happened in the past three days that might've made them want to move?" Brianne asked as she peered inside. "I'd rather not risk overdosing or getting stabbed by a dirty needle while taking a look in there."

"Tuesday evening was when we found Tess," I said, running all the possibilities through my mind. "And when the cartel shot at us."

"We found Luis the same day too," Brianne said. "Let's not forget that. If we would've just left the little bastard where we'd found them, we could've avoided this whole mess."

The idea hit me then. "Do you think he could've contacted the cartel when he figured out that they had you? He could've pieced together who we are. Who we work for."

"You think he told them to move because I'm a US soldier and you work for the FBI?"

She sounded doubtful, but I caught the glimmer of something different in her eyes, something...dark. I had my suspicions about why she was ashamed, about why some things didn't quite add up, but that'd keep until we had Tess and Sylvia back.

"I think whatever Luis said, it led to this point," I said. "Unless you think

he might've been taking them somewhere other than here. I mean, it's not impossible."

Brianne didn't say anything as she walked back to the sidewalk. She turned from one side to the other, then went still. The color drained from her face, and she darted forward, crouching to pick something up from the driveway.

"Bri?"

"This is Sylvia's," she said as she held up a silver bracelet. "I gave it to her on our last date. I didn't know she still had it."

"He brought them here for the hand-off," I said, going to her side.

"And Sylvia dropped this when she and Tess were being moved into the cartel's vehicle."

"Excuse me." A pig-tailed girl tugged on my sleeve. "Are you going to bring the doggies back?"

I glanced at Brianne, then bent over to put myself closer to the child's height. "Did you see what happened to the doggies?"

The little girl nodded. "The men in the vans took them away."

Vans. That was something at least. But, maybe she knew more. "Did the men in the vans take anyone else? Two women maybe?"

"Just one van," she said, her big brown eyes bright. "And just one woman."

"One woman? Not two?" Brianne asked.

The little girl shook her head. "One. She didn't want to go with them even though they had the doggies. Will you bring the doggies back?"

I gave her a soft smile. "I'll see what we can do."

The little girl took off, skipping happily back to what I assumed was her house.

"Luis didn't turn over Tess," Brianne said. "That has to be what happened."

"Not surprising." I was annoyed that I hadn't thought of it first. "He's infatuated with her. This makes a lot more sense now. He gave them Sylvia, and they let him have Tess."

"They went in separate directions," Brianne said. "Which means we can either split up and each go after one..."

"Or we can choose one and leave the other."

TWENTY-SIX

TESS

THE BASTARD HIT ME. HE'D ACTUALLY *HIT* ME.

I'd only been out of it for a few minutes, but it had been long enough for us to be on the road and Sylvia to be gone. Luis had assured me that she was okay. The cartel didn't want her. That hadn't really made me feel any better because I'd known who the cartel was after. My sister. And maybe even Clay.

Luis hadn't really said much of anything after he'd given me that bit of information, but that wasn't surprising considering he seemed to think he needed to concentrate on driving fast enough that I wouldn't throw myself out of the car. I wasn't an idiot though. I didn't know the city or its people well enough to consider escape that way. No, I knew the wiser path would be to use this time to plan so I'd be ready when the opportunity arose.

We didn't go back to his apartment, or to the motel where we'd stayed previously, which I would've been glad about if I hadn't known those two places would be the first places Brianne and Clay would look for me. I didn't recognize the neighborhood we were in now, but I wasn't planning on running away when we finally stopped. No, I was going to take advantage of the fact that Luis was far from the most intimidating person in the world and rely on the odds that at least one decent person would be staying at whatever hotel we went to. If not a guest, then an employee.

Either way, I was certain that someone would help me as soon as they were aware that I was being held against my will. I just needed to decide what the most effective method would be. I could scream, naturally, and alert people that way, or I could wait until I was close to someone I thought appeared trustworthy. I doubted Luis would actually let me get close enough

to talk to a stranger, but once we were settled in a room, I'd be able to leave a note, maybe even call down to the front desk while he was in the shower.

I was assuming a lot, I knew, but despite the throbbing reminder of recent violence, I didn't think Luis intended me any harm. He'd hit me because he'd panicked, not because he wanted to hurt me. I could be wrong about him, I supposed, but I didn't think I could be *that* off base. Then again, I wouldn't have thought he could hand over Sylvia to a bunch of murderers either.

"We are going to stay here," he said as he pulled into a driveway.

A gravel driveway. Not a parking lot. It was a house.

"Who lives here?" I tried to keep my voice light, as if I was interested for completely normal reasons.

"No one," he said with a smile. "An old woman came into the hospital two months ago and told me about the house where she and her husband had lived for thirty years. She asked me to stop by and water her plants. The last day I was at work, she went into a coma. She has not woken up yet, so we will not be disturbing anyone."

"Great." I forced a smile. No one at the house meant no one for me to ask for help. I supposed, on a positive note, it also meant there wasn't anyone to help Luis keep me prisoner. He'd have to sleep sometime.

I made a show of stretching my neck and hoped he didn't realize that I was checking either side of the house to find the closest neighbors. My heart sank when I saw that the house was on a corner, and its only neighboring house was a burned-out shell. I doubted if anyone would hear me scream, and it made the possibility of reaching another person much lower than I would have liked.

There was a house catty-cornered across the street that looked promising, but the more I thought about it, the more I had to consider that getting another person involved might push Luis over the edge. I kept telling myself that he wasn't crazy, but as much as it irked me to say it, I didn't know Luis as well as I kept insisting I did. I knew nothing of his past, nothing of his family save the small bit he'd told me. Hell, I didn't even know how much of what he'd told me was true. It was entirely possible that he'd rescued me with a fantasy in mind, one where I'd fall head-over-heels for him, and we'd live happily-ever-after.

That, I suddenly realized, was my best chance. Instead of tolerating him, I needed to play to his fantasy. If he didn't believe it, I could end up in more trouble than I already was. But, if I could convince him that I could be

trusted, I might be able to get information about Sylvia from him and then escape, both without many of the risks other plans contained.

I had to be careful, though. If I came on too strong, he'd never believe it. He had a good grasp of my personality from our time together, especially since I hadn't had the strength to keep anything from him. I wasn't trained military like Brianne or FBI like Clay, but my senior year of college, I'd been assigned interrogation methods as a research topic. While doing my interviews, one military interrogator mentioned something that had stuck with me, even if it hadn't been on point for my topic.

The people who best withstood interrogation weren't necessarily the ones who were the smartest or – in unsavory circumstances – the ones with the highest pain thresholds. Trying to remember lies when under any form of duress was a lot harder than remembering the truth, which meant that the best way to avoid slipping up was to put as much truth into the story as possible. Use deceit only when absolutely necessary.

“Stay there,” he warned. “If you try to run, I might have to hit you again, and I don't want to do that.”

“I don't want that either,” I said honestly. “I'll stay here.”

He walked around the front of the car, his eyes on me the entire way. When he opened my door, a look of relief was on his face. He held out his hand, and I knew it was another test. I let him help me from the car and didn't pull away when he failed to release my hand.

As a reporter, I'd held the hands of various informants and witnesses, sometimes to offer comfort, sometimes empathy. Most of them, however, were ones who'd truly been through an ordeal. Only once had I played a sympathetic ear to someone I truly detested, and I'd nearly scrubbed my hand raw when the interview was over.

The woman had been married to a man who'd kidnapped a pair of sisters and made them his 'wives' despite the fact that they were only nine and eleven years old. This woman had not only lived in the same house where the girls had been kept for six years, she'd participated in some of the assaults. When the couple had gotten caught, the woman had claimed to be a victim as well. To get her to talk, I pretended that I wasn't feeling revulsion being in the same room as her. I'd hoped that she'd reveal something that would allow me to change my opinion of her. Instead, I'd found a woman as self-absorbed and sadistic as the man she'd married.

Luis wasn't even close to that bad, making it much easier to keep holding

his hand as he led me into the house.

A thin layer of dust coated everything, making me sneeze, but nothing seemed to be dirty. The place had a slightly musty, unused smell, but none of the waste and filth stench that had permeated the motel we'd been in before. If circumstances had been different and I'd been here of my own free will, I might've actually liked being here.

"Much better than the motel," I said, again able to stick with the truth.

"There is only one bedroom," he said, color rising in his cheeks. "I will sleep on the couch out here. You can use the bed."

I got the impression that he was waiting for me to offer to share, but I wasn't going there, not unless absolutely necessary. Considering the short amount of time we'd known each other, I figured I could use that as an excuse to keep physical things moving at a snail's pace.

"Would you like something to eat?" he asked. "The kitchen is small, but I stocked it well when I was here last."

I gave him what I hoped was an embarrassed smile. "I'd really like to use the bathroom."

His eyes narrowed. "The window in the bathroom is too small, even for you."

"I just need to pee." I made a show of looking hurt. "Seriously. I haven't used a bathroom since this morning, and I'm about ready to burst."

Embarrassment flooded his face, and he pointed at the short hallway. For a healthcare professional, he was oddly discomfited about bodily functions. "Go, but hurry. If I suspect you are trying to find a way out, I will not be happy."

I nodded understanding and hurried in the direction he'd indicated. I hadn't been lying about needing a bathroom. Having some alone time to think would be a bonus.

I emerged from the bathroom five minutes later, feeling better for the extra time I took to wash my face. One look at the tiny bathroom had been enough to confirm that what Luis had told me was true. I'd never fit through the bathroom window, even if I could get it open. I'd run my hand along the edges to see if I'd be able to get it open quietly enough for Luis not to hear and use that to slip out a note. When I found it sealed tight, I hadn't been too disappointed though. Even if I was able to go through all the necessary steps to sneak out a note, the chances of someone actually finding it and doing something about the message were microscopic.

“Thank you,” I said. “I feel better now.”

“What would you like to eat?” He seemed mollified now that I was speaking politely and showing the proper amount of gratitude.

“Anything is fine,” I said. “Whatever you would like.”

I followed him to the kitchen, determined to use the time he was cooking to get some answers. Well, that and make sure he didn’t slip anything into my food. I *was* hungry, and I wasn’t a picky eater. I didn’t want to have to worry that I couldn’t eat a full meal because of what might be in it. I needed to be both at full strength and have all my wits if I was going to get myself out of this situation.

“Thank you for cooking,” I said as I leaned against the counter. I wanted him to see that I wasn’t going to run the first time I had an opportunity. And that I wasn’t going to grab the first weapon I saw and use it on him.

“You are welcome,” he said as he set out beans and rice, as well as various seasonings. “Have you had *gallo pinto*?”

I nodded. “A couple times. I like it.”

It was easier to smile at him this time because I did genuinely like the dish, and I was grateful that he planned on feeding me. It supported my suspicion that he didn’t want me to be his captive but rather his girlfriend.

“This is my grandmother’s recipe,” he offered shyly. “It is special.”

“Then thank you all the more.” I watched him for a moment, wondering if things would have been different between us if my cover story for coming to Costa Rica had been the reality. Then again, if I’d really been here to write an article on Costa Rica as a vacation spot, I doubted I would have met him at all.

“*I will call the hospital in the morning.*” His switch to Spanish forced me to pay closer attention. “*I am hopeful that I will be able to begin working again soon. I will also ask after the woman who owns this house. If we care for it while we’re here, she won’t mind us staying.*”

“*How long do you think we’ll be here?*” I made the transition to Spanish as well. It was amazing how quickly the language had come back to me.

He glanced at me, suspicion in his eyes. “*Until it is safe for us to go back to my apartment.*”

“*Do you think the cartel will ever let you go home?*” I asked. Brianne and Clay were more of a danger to Luis than the cartel, but I wasn’t going to bring that up. I needed to find out exactly what he’d done with Sylvia, but I didn’t want to ask outright.

“They will,” he said. “If they don’t hold to their promises, no one will believe anything they say. Strange as it may seem, they rely on the reputation of their honor. If people don’t believe that they will earn something for anything offered, they will provide their services to the cartel’s enemies.”

I was having a difficult time believing that a drug cartel who shot two members of a Red Care group and dropped their bodies off like two sacks of garbage, had anything close to honor, but when it came to choosing my battles, this was one that didn’t matter much.

“If there had been another way for me to secure our safety, I would have done it,” he said quietly. “I know you care for your sister, but they would not have stopped until they had her. They would use you, or anyone else they could find, to bring her to them. As long as Brienne cooperates, Sylvia will be safe.”

But Bri wouldn’t. He didn’t have the balls to say that part. Instead of helping all of us get back to America – which I refused to believe wasn’t possible – he’d chosen to ‘make sure I was safe’ through sacrifice. Not a sacrifice of something or someone *he* loved though. And no matter what he said, I didn’t believe for a minute that him getting back to his apartment wasn’t a factor in his decision-making too.

“You know, it looked like they were leaving when they...took Sylvia.” My word choice almost choked me, but I managed to keep going with barely a pause. *“How will Brienne know where to go if they moved?”*

“They didn’t go far,” he said as he stirred the contents of his pan. “When they’re ready, they will find her.”

That wasn’t ominous at all.

“They have someone watching Bri?”

He shrugged. *“I don’t know their methods.”*

As much as I hated to admit it, I wasn’t so sure that was the truth. He had been able to get in touch with the men who’d been shooting at us and talk to them without getting killed. Maybe that could be explained away, but I hadn’t gotten a job at the *New York Times* when print papers were becoming an endangered species simply because I was pretty to look at.

I was a damn good reporter, and if I’d been interviewing Luis, I’d immediately be digging deeper into his past. And when I did, I’d almost certainly find out that he was lying.

I'D PLANNED on spending at least a full day convincing Luis that he could trust me to move around the house on my own. Another day or so before he'd leave the house without taking me with him.

Now, it was just before midnight, he was asleep on the couch, a pair of earbuds in, their cord connecting to the smartphone in his pocket. I wasn't sure if I was pleased or insulted by the fact that he seemed to think so little of my escape abilities that he could actually sleep with music playing.

At first, I'd thought he was faking it, but after going through a half dozen rigorous tests – all of which consisted of me standing behind him and making random noises – I was confident he really couldn't hear me.

I was tempted to run out of the house right then, but I made myself slow down and take stock of what I had, what I'd need, and where I would go once I left the house. I needed to make those decisions now so that I wouldn't be trying to make them on the fly.

When I finally disengaged the locks and opened the front door a quarter of an hour later, I half-expected some unseen alarm to go off or Luis to jump off the couch, exclaiming that he'd caught me. Except none of that happened.

I didn't let myself dwell on that though. I had people to save.

TWENTY-SEVEN

CLAY

THIS WAS STUPID.

I didn't know what had possessed Brianne and me to decide the best way to find Tess and Luis would be for one of us to stay at Sylvia's house in case Tess – or Sylvia – returned there. Neither of us admitted that it was also in case the cartel came looking for us. We didn't want to hide from them anymore, and if they hurt either woman, they'd be in a hell of a lot more trouble than they could ever imagine.

Even as I made my way back to Sylvia's house, all these thoughts were racing around in my head, telling me all the ways this could go wrong, but I was still scanning the sidewalks for Tess. Yes, I wanted us to find Sylvia safe and sound, but it was Tess consuming my thoughts.

It couldn't happen again. Seeing her on that plane, then finding her at that accident site, had made me feel whole again in a way I'd never expected. Since she'd been missing...I couldn't find the words to describe what it had been like in these few short hours.

The first time I'd lost her, there hadn't been anything I could do. I'd been a teenager without any way to track a fifteen-year-old who'd moved away with her mother and sister. The second time, when she'd been in the accident, I'd made a vow that I wouldn't leave Costa Rica without her.

That vow still held.

If I had to get a job here so I could stay in the country, I'd damn well do it. When we left here, it'd be together, or not at all.

“Clay!”

For one terrifying moment, I thought I'd lost it, that I was so desperate to find Tess that I was hearing her voice. Then I heard footsteps and turned just

in time to open my arms and catch her as she leaped into them.

“Tess!” I crushed her to me, burying my face in her neck as I breathed in the scent of her. She didn’t have the same soap she’d come here with, but that didn’t matter. She still smelled like her.

We both started talking at the same time.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t know that going with him...I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay. You’re safe now. I’ll take care of everything.”

It was another voice, however, that startled us enough for me to put Tess on her feet.

“Fuck, Tess! You scared the shit out of me!”

Brianne grabbed her sister in the biggest display of emotion I’d ever seen from the elder Gardener sister. Judging by the shocked look on Tess’s face, she was as surprised as I was.

“We need to get inside,” Tess said, looking around to scan the immediate vicinity. “You need to know what happened, and quickly. Sylvia’s in danger.”

And that was the end of the hugging.

I locked the door while Tess took a seat and Brianne went to get something for us all to drink. Once we were settled, Tess quickly explained what had happened, each word making my hands curl into tighter and tighter fists.

“Where did he take you?” I asked the moment Tess paused to take a breath. “Where is that bastard? I’m going to beat the shit out of him.”

“We need to focus,” Tess said, putting her hand on my arm. “Sylvia needs us to find her more than you need to beat up Luis.”

I wasn’t so sure about that, but I knew I wouldn’t win an argument for a change of priority. Besides, my brain knew that Sylvia was more important than my need to avenge Tess.

“We know the two of you were split up,” Brianne said, “and that Sylvia was put into a black van, then taken north.”

“Luis said he’d made arrangements for our safety, and I’d thought he meant for all of us, but he’d meant for him and me. He traded Sylvia to the cartel for a pass.”

“What are they going to do with her?” Bri asked, her features clouded with concern.

“Use her as bait,” Tess said grimly. “You must’ve really pissed them off when you fought back, Bri, because that’s why they’re coming after us so

hard.”

I frowned. Why Brianne? Sure, she’d resisted them, but if that had been enough of a problem for them to come after all of us, why hadn’t they just shot her in the first place? I was glad they hadn’t, even if she wasn’t too pleased with me at the moment, but they’d killed two people before we’d even given them a ransom. Why hadn’t she been one of them? Could those two bodies have given them more trouble than Bri? Somehow, I doubted that very much.

“Then it’s a simple solution,” Brianne said. “I make the trade, and once Sylvia’s safe, the two of you go back home and let me take care of myself.”

“No way in hell is that happening,” Tess said vehemently. “The three of us will get Sylvia back, and we’ll do it without sacrificing you.”

“Three of us against a drug cartel?” Brianne raised an eyebrow.

“Are you forgetting that Clay and I got you and your group out safely?”

“They’ll be looking for us to come after Sylvia,” Brianne pointed out.

“Then I guess we’ll have to think outside the box,” Tess countered. “Come up with a plan they wouldn’t see coming.”

“Maybe we should get Luis,” I suggested. “Force him to help us since he obviously knows the people involved.”

Tess pointed at me. “Leave him out of this. We go in ourselves, get Sylvia, get home. After that, if you want to report Luis to the local authorities for kidnapping or whatever, I won’t argue, but right now, we have more important things to focus on.”

Even though I technically agreed with her, I couldn’t help but wonder if she had an ulterior motive for wanting me to leave Luis alone. Was it possible that she actually had feelings for him? He had rescued her from the car accident and cared for her during the two weeks she’d been unconscious. Some form of Stockholm Syndrome, maybe. Or maybe she’d simply gotten tired of me and wanted someone more exciting.

Women married criminals all the time. Hell, there were men on death row who’d gotten married after they’d been convicted. I hoped Tess had better sense than that, but who really ever knew what was in another person’s mind or heart?

TWENTY-EIGHT

TESS

IT WAS NEARLY TWO IN THE MORNING BY THE TIME WE FIGURED OUT WHERE the cartel was holding Sylvia. Luis had told me it wasn't far from the place they'd been before, and the little girl who'd talked to Clay and Brianne earlier had told us the direction the van had gone. From there, we made our way down the street, looking for any sign that would tell us which house the cartel was now using.

At first, I wasn't sure exactly what we were looking for, but then Brianne mentioned the van I told her I'd seen. The cartel had no reason to think that I'd be back with my sister and Clay since Luis had made it clear to them that he wanted me. We were hoping that meant they'd have the van right in front of the new place.

If we weren't able to find one, however, we would need another way to find them. Clay would most likely want to find Luis and use the excuse of getting information out of him to take out his anger. Brianne would probably go along with it because the only other option would be to wait until the cartel contacted her to arrange a trade. She was willing to do it, but she knew neither Clay nor I would go along with it.

I didn't like either scenario, which was why I kept looking for the van even though we'd been walking for blocks. The muscles in my legs burned, but I forced myself to go one more step, then another. At some point, I wouldn't be able to go on, and then I'd need to decide how much I still felt like I needed to protect Luis from Clay.

Or maybe, I considered, I was actually protecting Clay from himself. If he beat up Luis, he'd probably feel better for a bit. Hell, I'd probably feel better if I threw a punch or two myself. Later, however, Clay would regret it. He

was a good man, a better one than I had given him credit for in the past, and he would hate himself if he purposefully sought out someone for vengeance.

“Tess, we need to stop,” Clay said as he fell in step next to me. “You’re dead on your feet.”

“Would you stop if I was the one being held by the cartel?” The question slipped out before I could stop it. I wasn’t sure I wanted to know the answer, but I waited for it anyway.

“Never.”

No hesitation and way more intensity than I’d expected.

A shiver went down my spine, and it had nothing to do with the chill in the air. This entire trip had been such a rollercoaster of emotions, it was difficult to know how things would go when we left the country. I’d barely had any time to even think about it beyond those few precious moments before exhaustion took over.

I moved another couple feet along the sidewalk, then stopped dead. I backed up as Clay kept going. By the time he realized I wasn’t next to him, I’d caught up to him and grabbed his hand.

“What’s wrong?” He tried to slow us down, but I pulled him after me.

“Not here,” I said quietly. “If we lurk, they’ll notice us.”

His fingers tightened around mine, but that was the only physical proof that he’d heard me. We kept going to the corner and only then stopped. I glanced across the street and saw that Brianne had stopped as well. I motioned her across the street, and when she reached us, I shared what I’d seen.

“The van.” I looked down the street and didn’t see anything suspicious. “Five houses back. The van in the driveway is the one I saw at the other house.”

“Are you sure?” Brianne asked. “Pretty much any dark van would look black at this time of night.”

“How many other vans have you seen?” I asked, trying not to show my impatience. “Trust me, Bri. That’s the place.”

“What if they moved her?” Brianne asked. Her skin was pale, and she twisted her fingers together, more agitated than I’d seen her since before we’d moved to Arizona. “This is my fault. I’m the one who got her involved in this. She never would’ve been in danger if I’d left her alone.”

“We needed her.” I put my hand on Bri’s shoulder. “And she was glad to help. This isn’t anyone’s fault except those drug dealers.”

Brianne shook her head. “You don’t understand.”

“Not to interrupt the blame game,” Clay said, “but we need to worry more about how to get Sylvia out of there than we do about how we got here.”

“He’s right,” I said. At the quick grin on his face, I added, “Don’t get used to it.”

“We need to get a closer look.” Clay turned back to the problem at hand. “We need to know that Sylvia is in there and that they didn’t take her somewhere else.”

“How about Clay takes the back. Bri, you take the left, and I’ll take the—”

“Hell, no,” Brianne hissed before the last word even had a chance to come out of my mouth.

“Um...what?”

“You are not going anywhere near that house,” she said. “I didn’t even want you to be out here at all, but I knew you’d insist, and we’d waste time arguing, so I figured I’d wait to see what we found.”

“Brianne,” I began.

“She’s right,” Clay said. Bri gave him a surprised look, and he echoed my previous statement, “Don’t get used to it.”

“What, you guys want me to go sit in time-out while the adults go do the work?” I folded my arms. “I’ve had enough of that, thank you very much.”

“Tess, we’re just looking out for you. You’re still recovering from that accident. You still have broken fingers, for crying out loud.”

Only the fact that Clay’s tone was sincere rather than patronizing kept me calm.

“If I have to tell the two of you that I can take care of myself one more time, I’m tattooing it on both of your foreheads.” I turned from one to the other. “Did I, or did I not, rescue *myself* earlier tonight?”

“She has a point,” Clay said, looking at Bri.

“Good,” Brianne said, returning his gaze with narrowed eyes. “Then you can watch her.”

“I don’t need a babysitter.”

Clay slid his arm around my waist. “I’ll be glad to take her to get something to eat so we’re all ready to go when you get back to Sylvia’s.”

“Clay,” I said, warning ringing in the syllable.

“You want to be strong enough to help us get Sylvia out, don’t you?” he asked, his thumb moving in a distracting back-and-forth fashion just above the waistband of my pants. “As you said, you rescued yourself not too long

ago. You need to regain your strength and doing recon won't help you there. Come with me, and we'll get something to eat, get off your feet for a bit, and then we'll figure out how to rescue Sylvia."

His logic made too much sense to argue with.

"All right," I said reluctantly.

Even though I'd agreed to do what she wanted of me, Brianne didn't appear to be any happier. I supposed it had something to do with Clay's arm around me, but that wasn't any of her business. And it was one thing I damn well didn't intend to listen to her opinion on.

"We'll meet you back at the house," Clay said to her without meeting her eyes. "If you need us, call."

AS MUCH AS it pained me to admit it, I did feel better after I ate and got off my feet. Clay insisted I stay seated while he cleaned up, and I actually listened. I was more tired than I'd realized, but it was that bad sort of tired where my body was exhausted, but my brain was going a hundred miles an hour. In this state, I knew I'd never be able to actually sleep.

"You can go to bed if you want," Clay said, breaking the silence between us. "I promise that I'll wake you up when Brianne gets back."

I shook my head. "I'm comfy here." That was the truth. "Besides, I won't be able to sleep either place, so what's the point in moving?"

"Aren't you tired?" Clay asked as he came over to sit on the low table in front of me.

"Body, yes. Brain, no." I shrugged. "You know how it is, when you've got too much on your mind to get that switch to flip."

"I do," he agreed. He reached down and pulled my foot up onto his lap. Before I could ask what he was doing, he took off my shoe and sock, then pulled the towel from where he'd hung it over his shoulder and began to wipe my foot with the cool, damp cloth. He did the same to the other foot, then put both my feet on his lap again. It was crazy how much better a person could feel from having their feet cool.

"Clay?"

"Relax," he said as he pressed his thumbs into the arch.

My head fell back, and I couldn't stop the moan that came as he kneaded

my aching foot. Neither one of us said anything as his strong hands worked their magic. I was distantly aware that the sounds coming out of my mouth bordered on the obscene, but I couldn't help myself. He did one foot, then the other, then started on my calves.

My muscles unknotted and promised a much less painful future, and for that alone, I planned to show Clay just how grateful I was. Unfortunately, at the moment, movement didn't seem like a possibility. I was still thinking too much to sleep, but my body at least had transitioned from painful, aching tired, to the sort of heavy limbs that came from a hard day's work.

Clay stood and swung my legs around so that I was stretched on the couch. I reached up, surprised at the effort it took, and grasped his hand.

"Don't go."

His eyes lit up as they met mine, and for several long moments, we stayed like that. Our time in Costa Rica was coming to an end, and we both knew it. We'd been living on borrowed time here, and once we landed in LA, our lives would be waiting.

"Brienne will be back soon." He turned his hand so that his fingers threaded between mine.

"I know."

Another beat of time and then he moved behind me on the couch. As he settled, he pulled me back against him, cradling my body with his. Even with our clothes between us, I could feel every place we touched. I'd never been as aware of another person as I was of him. He rested our joined hands on my stomach and kissed my temple.

"Try to sleep."

"This is enough," I said on a long exhale of breath. "I can rest like this."

"Brain still won't turn off?"

I gave him a smile. "It got pretty close there. Where'd you learn how to do that?"

"My mom, actually," he said. "When I was little, my parents would hire someone to stay with me while they went to one fundraiser or another. I always wanted to stay up until they got home, but I was never allowed. Instead, I'd pretend to sleep, and then when they got home, I'd sneak to my mom's room and rub her feet while she took off her jewelry and did her nightly whatever routine. She'd tell me about the people she talked to and the things she'd seen. Those times were probably the closest I ever felt to her. All that was before I'd balked at the path they'd mapped out for me, of course."

“How did I not know this about you?” I asked. Not knowing something from the time we’d been apart, that made sense, but I thought we’d known everything about each other from back then.

He shrugged, raising our joined hands to brush his lips across my knuckles. Heat feathered out from where his skin touched mine, moving down my body to coil into a tight, hot ball low in my belly.

“How long did it take them to believe that you didn’t want to go into politics?” I asked.

I’d known about their plans ever since I was fourteen and I’d overheard his mother telling him that he’d better not even think about asking Brienne on a date because a ‘girl like that’ would only come back to haunt him, even if she didn’t trick him into getting her pregnant. She’d then assured him that they had the money to pay for an abortion, but it’d be better for everyone if he just avoided it to begin with. I never told Clay that I’d heard what his mother had so cruelly said, but I’d never looked at her the same again.

I’d also heard Clay’s response. That he never intended to date Brienne, but not because of what his mother had said. He told her that he’d choose for himself who he would date, and what career he’d pursue.

He’d gotten grounded for that, but it hadn’t been the last time he’d challenged them.

“I wonder if she knows I’m here,” he said quietly. “I know Dad always kept tabs on me at the Bureau, but since I didn’t go through the FBI to get here, I don’t know how much they’d be able to find out.”

“Things haven’t gotten better with them, then?” I ran my fingers over his forearm, still marveling that I was allowed to touch him like this.

He scraped his teeth along the curve of my ear. “I don’t think I want to talk anymore.”

My insides gave a pleasurable squirm. “What do you want to do?”

He released me and slid his hand a couple inches lower. The tips of his fingers brushed bare skin, then slipped under the waistband of my jeans to find even more skin to touch.

“Clay...yes...” I hissed out the word as he dipped one long finger between my folds.

“Do you know how many times I imagined being able to touch you like this?” he murmured in my ear. “To feel you, hot and wet, and know that I was responsible for making you this way?”

“Mmm...” I moaned, closing my eyes as his fingers dipped lower. “Not

even close to as many times as I used to think about what it would be like to have you touch me.”

“Doubtful.” His first two fingers easily found my clit and made two quick strokes over the little bundle of nerves. “I still remember the first time I was thinking of you when I jacked off.”

I caught my breath, and it wasn't all from the way his fingers were playing between my legs. Circles over my clit, then dipping down to slide inside me. All of that felt amazing, but I wanted to hear the rest of the story.

“Tell me.”

He pressed an open-mouthed kiss to the side of my throat. “Do you remember the summer I turned fifteen? My parents dragged me up to the Hamptons for the longest six weeks of my life, and when we got back, I went straight to find you.”

I remembered that summer, but I hadn't seen him the night they'd gotten back. In fact, it'd been almost a week later, and I'd run into him by accident.

He continued talking even as his fingers coaxed me closer to climax. “You were in your back yard, dancing. There was no music, but you had your eyes closed and were moving like you could hear it. That was when I realized you were beautiful.” He nipped at my neck, the sharp sting soothed by his tongue. “I instantly got hard, and I was so embarrassed that I ran back home. Not embarrassed because I was turned on by you, but because I didn't want to be the sort of guy who couldn't control himself. I got in a cold shower, but that damn erection wouldn't go down.”

The edge of humor in his voice made me smile, adding something sweet into the web he was spinning with his words and his hands. We were in a cocoon here, building something that felt powerful and fragile at the same time. We were both clothed, and while what we were doing wasn't just kissing, we weren't having sex either. This was...different.

“I never liked thinking about girls I knew, but as soon as I grabbed my cock, all I could see was you. Didn't matter how much I tried to think of some model or some faceless body, every time I closed my eyes, it was you, dancing. I'd never come so damn hard in my life.”

His fingers pressed hard on my clit, and I exploded.

“That's it, sweetheart.” Rough circles of friction and the sound of his voice in my ear pushed me higher. “Come on my fingers. Show me how beautiful you are when you come.”

What else could I do but obey?

TWENTY-NINE

CLAY

I'D INTENDED TO HOLD TESS UNTIL SHE FELL ASLEEP, THEN GET UP AND TAKE some time for myself. Instead, I'd felt her body relax against mine, and I'd kept watching her. In sleep, all the tension faded from her face, and for a moment, I could see that thirteen-year-old again.

I drifted off, still thinking about the moment when I'd realized I wanted my friend to be more than a friend.

"What the fuck?!"

Brianne's voice jolted me from sleep, but Tess barely stirred.

"Shh," I said as I eased myself out from behind Tess. "Let her sleep a little longer."

"What the hell are you doing?" Brianne's voice was quieter, but no less intense.

"Sleeping." I motioned for her to follow me into the kitchen. "None of us have gotten much sleep lately."

"It didn't look like you two had been doing much *sleeping*."

"Is this really what we should be spending our time doing?" I knew I was a hypocrite, trying to get her to focus on Sylvia when I hadn't been thinking about the missing woman a couple hours ago when I'd had my hand down Tess's pants.

"Leave her alone, Clay. I'm warning you. We get Sylvia out, then you and Tess are heading back to the States. To your lives on different sides of the country. She doesn't have time for you to fuck around with her life."

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell her that she didn't know her sister as well as she thought she did, but I kept my mouth shut because fighting with Brianne wouldn't do anyone any good. And then Bri opened her mouth, and I

wondered if I'd be able to avoid the fight much longer because if she said another asinine thing, I was going to lose it.

"Brienne?" Tess's sleepy voice interrupted what could've become something explosive.

"Hey, sleepyhead." Brienne's voice was overly bright and cheerful. I shot her a look, but she purposefully didn't look at me.

"When did you get back?" Color suffused her cheeks.

"Just a couple minutes ago." Brienne's smile was tight. "Let me get cleaned up and get something to eat and then we'll sit down and talk. We've got a lot of work to do."

She disappeared into the bathroom, and I turned to Sylvia's cabinets. I was going to need caffeine if I planned on making it through the rest of today without biting someone's head off. When I got back to Denver, I was going to sleep for an entire day. I'd never been as wrung out as I was on this trip.

"Want some help with that?" Tess asked.

"Sure."

The silence between us was filled with all the things we should have talked about by now, but neither one of us seemed to want to make the first move. I didn't blame her for it. She'd barely had time to adjust to the fact that Brienne had lied to her before the shit had hit the fan. I should've been the one to initiate the discussion, but I was a coward, terrified that if I brought up anything about the future, Tess would tell me that we didn't have one.

That should have been what I wanted, and a few weeks ago, I probably wouldn't have even given it a second thought. Now, however, I didn't know.

"Do you remember that time we stole some of your mom's fancy coffee?" she asked suddenly.

I laughed as the memory came to me. "We were convinced it had to be the best drink in the world because she guarded it so fiercely."

"I thought it had to taste like chocolate even though it didn't smell like it," she said, her whole face lighting up the way it had that day. "It'd looked like melted chocolate chips."

"You were so excited that I had to give you the first cup."

She screwed up her face, making me laugh. "I took a big gulp and then spit it right out."

"All over the new dress shirt Mom had gotten me for school pictures." I'd hated that shirt.

"I was furious, sure you'd done it on purpose. Made me drink something

gross.” Tess reached up and put her hand on my cheek, her thumb brushing against the corner of my mouth. “To prove me wrong, you drank the entire rest of the pot.”

“And I spent the night in the bathroom, vowing to never drink coffee again.” I put my hand over hers and waited until her gaze met mine to add, “But it wasn’t to prove you wrong.” Her forehead furrowed as her face took on a puzzled expression. “I didn’t want you to think I’d ever do anything to hurt you.”

“Oh.”

The word was so small, barely a breath, but the way her eyes glowed told me that she’d understood me.

“Good, you put on coffee,” Brianne said as she came out of the bathroom.

I took a step back, hating the way Tess’s face fell, but knowing that we needed to focus. This wasn’t the time to get distracted by Brianne’s disapproval or my own lack of self-control. Sylvia had to come first. Brianne would understand that too. She and I worked in fields where the personal had to take a back seat to the necessary. Tess didn’t get that.

THIRTY

TESS

FOR TWO PEOPLE WHO WERE AT EACH OTHER'S THROATS MOST OF THE TIME, Brianne and Clay were an awful lot alike. Even when we were kids, the two of them had always bickered as much – if not more – than Bri and I had.

Back then, however, they'd still been friends. The way my sister had been glaring at Clay pretty much constantly since they'd found me earlier this week told me that things were strained with their friendship, unlike Clay and me. Once certain things had been cleared up, the two of us seemed to slip right back into the same roles we had before.

In a way, I was back where I'd been that last night all those years ago. Infatuated. Crushing. In...*like*. Yes, like. Not that other four-letter word. I wasn't going to go there. Not when things were still chaotic.

Which meant I had to wait to see where things went, or at least until circumstances calmed down enough that I could ask him. The 'where is this going' conversation wasn't really one I wanted to have, but I knew it was one we needed, for both our sanities. But until it was possible, I'd put it aside.

As much as I could, anyway. It was damn hard not to get distracted by Clay, who was even more gorgeous than usual when he was in his element, and this was definitely his element. As I watched him poring over the plan, I wondered what it would be like to see him in the field, using his skills as a profiler to help people, save people.

Damn if the thought didn't make me hot.

"I think this could work," he said finally.

"Great," Bri said dryly. "Now that we have the FBI's stamp of approval, think we can move on to the next step?"

I hadn't said much of anything as they'd outlined everything we'd be

doing, waiting until the right time to speak. Now was the right time because there was something neither of them had addressed, and it needed to be before we went any further.

“When Clay and I rescued you and your group, we snuck in because we knew we didn’t have what we would have needed to take on a drug cartel. I’m not quite sure our circumstances have changed in that respect.”

Both of them turned to look at me.

“What?” Brianne asked.

“We don’t have weapons,” I said flatly. “So unless you want to go after the cartel with your one gun and whatever knives you can find in Sylvia’s kitchen, I think we might need to rethink the plan.”

“There’s nothing else that will work,” Brianne said with a shake of her head.

“Why not?”

“Fool me once, shame on me. Fool me twice...” Bri said. “We’ve lost the points of weakness that allowed you two to get inside before. No element of surprise, and there’s no way these guys are stupid enough to leave an unguarded entrance like they did before.”

“It’s worth a shot, isn’t it?”

“No, it’s not. I scouted the house, remember? No dogs, but lots of guys with guns. Which is why we need the distraction.” Brianne’s voice took on the condescending note that always pissed me off.

“Tess has a point,” Clay said, frowning. “If that place is as heavily guarded as you say it is, do you really think you’ll be able to pull off your part of things?”

“You don’t need to worry about me,” Brianne said cryptically. “I have everything I’ll need.”

“Spell it out for me, Bri,” I said. “Because I’m a part of this, like it or not.”

She looked like she was barely refraining from rolling her eyes. “I have what I need. Weapons that aren’t kitchen knives. Guns, Tess. All right? Are you satisfied now?”

She had guns. As in plural. I folded my arms to keep from making fists. “And when, exactly, did you have time to get these weapons?”

It was Clay who answered this time, and he looked just as unhappy as I was. “It didn’t take her that whole time she was gone to scout the house.”

I was tempted to ask how she’d found someone to sell her weapons,

plural, when she'd spent her time in Costa Rica working for Red Care and being held a prisoner. Then I remembered that she and Clay had been searching for me for two weeks. She could have made contact then, though I doubted what she'd acquired had been through legal means.

"I'm sure she'll be happy to give us a detailed inventory if we really want them," Clay continued, "but it'd probably just be a waste of time."

"Exactly," Brianne agreed. "And we should—"

"Okay, I'm going to stop you right there," I said, holding up both hands. "Both of you, actually, because I've sat here for the last couple hours listening to you going over a plan that doesn't include me."

"You don't have the training we've had," Clay said.

"Bullshit," I said simply. "You're both doing that protective thing that makes me want to slap you both."

The startled expression on their faces would've amused me under other circumstances.

"Here's something I don't think you took into account when you were figuring all this out. The cartel was after me, but as far as they know, I'm still with Luis. Out of their hair."

"You're not going into that house," Brianne snapped.

"I'm not an idiot," I said. "I know I'd be useless in the house. But I bet seeing me would provide a hell of a distraction."

"If you think I'm letting you—"

I didn't let Brianne finish her sentence. "Would you like to hear my plan before you waste more of our time arguing?"

Her eyebrows shot up. "All right."

"Keep everything how you have it, with one exception," I said. "A bigger distraction that will hopefully get more people out front."

"And I'm assuming that's where your plan comes in?" she asked.

I nodded. "They've dealt with Luis selling us out, and from what I understand, they're used to people doing stuff like that. I think I should offer them someone else they want."

"No way are you offering up yourself." Clay was already shaking his head.

I grinned at him. "Wasn't planning on it. I figure I can get a better price for you."

For once, he was speechless.

Brianne let out a low whistle. "Damn, Tess. Maybe you should be the one

going into the house. That's cold."

"Glad I could amuse you," I said. "Now, what do you say we come up with something convincing so we don't sound like we're faking it."

THIRTY-ONE

CLAY

I COULDN'T STOP STARING AT TESS, AND I WAS PRETTY SURE THAT BRIANNE was going to kill me for it...or possibly cut off my balls. Either way, I was taking a risk.

Still, I kept looking at Tess. She wasn't a soldier or an FBI agent. She'd gone to school to be a journalist. Everything that we'd done here had been outside anything she'd ever known, and she'd faced all of it with the sort of unflinching courage that made it hard for me to think about walking away from her when this was all over.

"I have to admit," Brianne said with a reluctant sort of admiration, "this is going to work a lot better."

"You're welcome," Tess said with a hint of smugness that I felt was well-earned.

"Now that we've got that all covered, I think we need to get some rest before we do this. She gave me a pointed look. "I'm guessing none of us have gotten much sleep recently."

"It's almost noon," Tess said, pretending to be oblivious to the tension between Bri and me. There was no way she was that unobservant. "Should we set our alarms for four o'clock? That seems like it'd be a good time to get things started."

"That will work," Brianne said. "You take the room you were in before. I'll take the room the guys were in, and Clay can take the couch. We all get our own space. Besides, Clay looked like he was comfortable on the couch before."

I supposed I deserved that.

Color flooded Tess's cheeks, but she met her sister's gaze head-on. "No,

that's not what's going to happen. You sleep in whichever room you want, and I'll take the other one. Clay can sleep wherever he wants. In the other bed, on the couch...or with me."

Brianne's eyes narrowed, and she opened her mouth. Tess held up a hand.

"Consider this part of the massive apology you owe me for lying about Clay for sixteen years and lying about a hell of a lot more for a hell of a lot longer."

Brianne actually flinched, but Tess didn't back down. She just kept staring at her sister until Bri looked away.

"Agreed." She pointed at me. "But if you keep me up because you're defiling my sister, I'll wear your nuts as earrings."

Defiling? That seemed...harsh.

"I might've seen some earplugs in the drawer by the sink," Tess said. She held out her hand to me. "Coming with me?"

I took her hand without hesitating. There'd probably be fallout later, but it was worth it if I could be with her for a few more hours.

The moment the door closed behind me, Tess was in my arms. I lifted her up, our mouths crashing together hard enough for me to taste blood when my teeth gouged my lip. She whimpered as my hands squeezed her ass and pulled her tighter against me. I could listen to that sound for hours.

"Clay," she moaned as she wrapped her legs around my waist, her arms around my neck.

Her back slammed against the wall, and I heard a muffled curse from Brianne on the other side. I ignored it, far more focused on plundering the sweetness of Tess's mouth. Her nails scraped my scalp, her splint catching in my hair and reminding me that I needed to be gentler with her.

This, however, wasn't a memo she'd gotten because she was writhing against me as if it were possible for our two bodies to meld into one. For both our sake's, I needed to get to the place where at least part of us could manage that particular miracle.

I walked us over to the bed and sat her down, bending over to give myself those few extra seconds of contact before I had to let her go. It was only for a moment, but I didn't want to stop touching her. I wanted to imprint the feel of her skin on mine. Her scent. Her sounds. I never wanted to have a time when I couldn't recall every second of what it was like to possess her.

I tugged her jeans off and tossed them over my shoulder, then reached for her panties. A soft giggle made me look up.

“You look so serious,” she said.

I sat back on my heels, a little confused by the comment. “I thought women wanted guys to take sex seriously.”

She propped herself up on her elbows and gave me this soft, searching look that made my chest tighten.

“You told me earlier about the first time you saw me as more than a little kid. Do you know the first time I realized that I liked you as more than a friend?”

I shook my head.

“Get rid of everything but the boxers and come up here next to me,” she said. “It’s not a long story, but I’d rather we were both comfortable when I tell it.”

I did as she asked and stretched out next to her, my skin humming every place it met hers. I put my arm around her and pulled her tight against my side. She rested her head on my chest, her fingers tracing patterns on my stomach. Her touch did little to ease my erection, but I ignored it, determined to hear her story.

“It was my twelfth birthday,” she began. “I hadn’t seen Dad since he’d left almost two years before, and I was sure he was going to show up that day. He’d missed my birthday the year before, but I’d gotten a card from him saying that he was traveling for work and how much he missed me.”

I remembered that party. That’d been when I’d first learned what’d really happened with Mr. Gardener. I’d found Brienne smashing some model airplanes she’d made with her dad, and she’d told me everything, including how she and her mom had hidden from Tess that Mr. Gardener had a new baby and didn’t want anything to do with his first family.

“I know now that Mom and Bri probably wrote that card, just like they probably wrote every card or letter I ever got from him, but at the time, I’d really thought my father still wanted me.”

I kissed the top of her head, wishing I could take away the pain in her voice.

“Kids from school came, and we had cake and ice cream. We played games, and it should have been the best party ever. Except I couldn’t stop waiting for Dad to arrive. But he never showed. You know that, of course, because you were there.”

I thought I knew now where she was going with her story because I knew what happened at the end of that party.

“You found me, crying, after everyone left, and you didn’t tell me that I didn’t have a reason to cry. I’d gotten more than a lot of other kids got for their birthdays, and I knew I should be grateful, but you didn’t say any of that.”

The memory came forward with a rush.

Tess had been even smaller back then, with the sort of fine features that made people think she was some delicate little princess. She’d cropped her curls short a few weeks before her birthday, and when I’d found her that night, they’d been wild, with leaves and twigs all tangled up in them. Sitting there under the weeping willow, she’d looked like something straight out of Tolkien.

“You didn’t try to make me feel better by making excuses for my dad like Mom and Brianne did.” Tess flattened her hand on my stomach, her thumb moving back and forth across the dark hair just above my belly button. “You sat down with me, offered me a tissue, and then told me that if I couldn’t count on anyone else, I could always count on you.”

In that moment, I hated Brianne for the damage her lies had done. Tess should have been able to trust that promise I’d given her. She should have been able to trust *me*.

Then Tess raised her head, shifting her weight to one elbow to put our faces at the same level. “And then you made me laugh. I never knew if it was because you thought I needed it or because you were embarrassed at saying something so sweet, but whatever the reason, you told me a joke, and it was horrible.”

“I remember.” My voice was rough. “We tried to see who could tell the worst jokes.”

“You won,” she said with a smile. “You were my knight in shining armor that night. Partly because of your promise, but mostly because you made me laugh. You weren’t some goofy class clown or anything like that, and you knew when to be serious, but you also always found ways to make me smile.”

I cupped her face in my hands and sat up as I kissed her. Her words echoed in my mind as she eagerly parted her lips, her tongue tangling with mine. She went up on her knees and moved to straddle me, but I grabbed her hips and flipped us so she was underneath me.

“Let’s see if I can make you smile again.”

I kissed my way down her body as I stripped away the last of her clothes,

leaving her bare, nipples tight and skin flushed. I went up on my knees and palmed her small breasts, rubbing my thumbs back and forth across her nipples. Not for the first time, I thought how lucky I was to be the only man to ever see her like this.

A treacherous voice in the back of my head suggested that maybe that wasn't true anymore since Luis had taken care of her for two weeks while she'd been unconscious. I pushed it back. She hadn't had sex with him, I was certain of that. If he'd seen her naked while bathing her or whatever, it wasn't the same thing.

She *wanted* me to see her like this. Wanted *my* hands on her body. *My* mouth tasting her. Wanted *me* inside her.

I arranged her legs on either side of me, and then spread my body over hers. I kept the majority of my weight off her but didn't immediately bury my cock in that sweet place only I'd ever been. Instead, I took a nipple between my lips. I worked over the sensitive skin, teasing with teeth and tongue until she thrashed about underneath me. Her nails raked up and down my back, hard enough for me to know she'd scratched the hell out of my skin by the time I'd paid equal attention to the other breast.

"Please, Clay," she begged. "Want you."

She tried to shove my boxers down, and I chuckled at her efforts. When her teeth sank into my shoulder, I jerked up to find her grinning at me. My eyes narrowed.

"Aren't you a little hellcat?" I lightly nipped her jaw. "Better be careful, sweetheart, or I'll bite back."

"Please do," she said with a sultry smile.

I buried my fingers in her hair and tugged. She didn't need any other prompting to tilt her head and offer me her slender neck. I pressed an open-mouth kiss against her soft flesh, and she moaned. Her hips pressed up against me, and I cursed, the sound muffled by Tess's neck. When she did it again, I bit her hard enough that she gasped, then sucked on her skin, bringing blood to the surface.

"Clay, we don't have time..." Her back arched as I bit her again. "Fuck!"

"There's never enough time," I grumbled. She was right though. We needed this, but we needed rest too.

She reached down between us, shoving my boxers down far enough to wrap her hand around my cock. My entire body stiffened, and it was all I could do not to spill all over those soft, small digits.

“Let’s not worry about that,” she said, shifting her hips until I felt her slick arousal against the tip of my cock. “I don’t need slow. I just need you.”

Damn if that didn’t do something to me.

I slid inside her, my eyes closing at the feel of her velvet pussy wrapping around me. It was beyond the mere physical pleasure of it. I’d told her before that this was new for me, and in a way, that was true, but in another way, it was like what we’d always been moving toward. Like this had always been the end game.

Because *we* were end game.

THIRTY-TWO

TESS

BRIANNE SAID SHE'D SLEPT, BUT SHE STILL STOMPED AROUND AND SCOWLED as she downed a cup of coffee. I didn't think it was the lack of sleep. She knew Clay and I had spent the afternoon together, and she was pissed.

Too bad that it was my life, not hers.

I was glad when we finally left for the cartel's house because that meant we all had something new to focus on. When we were done and safe, I'd deal with my sister.

I didn't want to think about what that might mean for Clay and me though. Especially not after what we'd shared just a few hours ago. We hadn't talked about it, but I knew he'd felt it. His eyes had met mine when we'd climaxed, and I'd seen something there that had gone deeper than I'd imagined.

"Are you ready for this?" Clay asked.

I appreciated that he didn't ask if I wanted to do this but rather if I was ready to do it. Other people might not have appreciated the nuances of his word choice, but I did, and he understood that about me.

"I am," I said. "This is going to work."

"It is," he agreed. He reached over and squeezed my hand but didn't hold it. I understood. We needed to focus.

"If they make a move toward you, you run," Brianne repeated her previous instructions. "You don't wait for me, you don't wait for Clay."

I didn't answer her. If it came to that, I'd make the decision then. And I'd be the one making it. If it was better for me to run, I'd run, but I sure as hell wasn't letting my sister dictate what my choice would be.

When we reached the block the house was on, Brianne went one way

while Clay and I went the other. We'd made a rough estimation of time based on information we'd pulled from some online maps, and we made a point to keep at the same pace we'd used in our planning. As we reached the decided point, I took a slow breath. It was time.

"Will you tell me where we're going?" Clay's voice was only a little louder than how he normally spoke. Not loud enough to sound fake, but enough to ensure that he would be heard.

"What's wrong, honey? Don't you trust me?"

We'd written out a script of what we'd say, and since the cartel didn't actually know anything about us – and we'd be speaking English – we didn't have to worry too much about sounding natural. That was good since I'd never called anyone 'honey' in my life, and it definitely wasn't the sort of nickname I'd have given Clay.

"I just don't understand why we had to meet out here. You've been gone all day, baby. I'd rather we ordered room service and stayed in bed." He grabbed my arm, stopping us in front of the house.

"I told you I didn't want to." I put a little edge in my voice. "Especially since it's not like we're a couple or anything. Right, *honey*?"

I crooked my arm around his and pulled him closer to the gate in front of the cartel's house. I could feel eyes on us, but I wasn't sure if they were the right sets of eyes. Still, we had to keep going. The slightest bit of hesitation and we'd be made.

I'd always wanted to cover serious stories, and the threat of danger had never really made me think twice. This, however, was a whole other kind of danger, and I definitely *didn't* like it.

"How about those rumors I heard that you've been seeing some guy while we're waiting for our government to figure out how to get us out of this damn country?" Clay sounding belligerent would've been funny any other time. "You know I don't share."

"Don't worry," I said, using a sickening sweet voice. "What's going on between me and Luis doesn't have anything to do with you."

"Luis? What the fuck kind of name is that?"

"*Hey! Take your fight somewhere else!*" someone yelled from inside the house.

"We're not fighting!" I yelled back, sticking with English. The longer I could draw this out, the better. "I want to talk to your leader!"

"What are you doing?" Clay said in a stage whisper.

I tightened my grip on his arm. “Quiet.”

“Who is asking for the leader?” The front door opened and a tall man with toffee-colored skin came out onto the porch. He carried a gun over his shoulder. I didn’t know what kind, but it was big, and that was enough for me.

“I am,” I said, silently congratulating myself on being able to speak without my voice shaking. “I know you were looking for three people. Me, my sister, and this guy. Luis told me the deal he made with you. I want to make another one.”

“Tess, what the hell?” Clay started to pull away but froze the moment the man on the porch raised his gun. “What’s going on?”

“I’m selling off the asshole who used me in return for enough money for me and Luis to get out of the country.”

“You bitch!”

“You would use him for money and not for your sister?”

“My sister and I aren’t exactly on the best of terms,” I said tightly. “I’ve barely talked to her in fifteen years.”

The leader came down the steps, and a few other men trickled out of the house to stand on the porch. “Then why did you help him?”

“For our mother,” I said. “She was worried about Brianne, and I gave in because she’s my mom.”

“What has changed?”

“I’m tired of my sister fucking up my life.”

He looked impressed, either by my language or my attitude, either of which I hoped meant he wouldn’t shoot me.

“How could you do this to me?!”

Clay was shouting now, drawing the attention from me to him. He began to curse at me in both English and Spanish, coming up with every insult he could think of, even ones that didn’t make much sense.

He’d expressed his extreme dislike of this part of the distraction, but we’d both agreed that saying all sorts of nasty things to me would create more chaos, and it would keep me from actually having to hand him over to the cartel. I’d told him that it wouldn’t bother me because I knew he’d never speak to me that way. Hell, I doubted he’d speak to anyone but the worst criminal like that.

I caught movement through the window and quickly looked away. I didn’t know if it was Brianne or not, but I didn’t want to do anything that

could jeopardize her and Sylvia's lives. I couldn't imagine being angry enough at anyone I loved to actually want them dead, and no matter how complicated things were, I did love my sister.

"That is enough!" the leader shouted.

Clay stopped mid-word, and we both froze. Here was where things were going to get really tricky. We'd bought Brianne as much time as we could, and we could only hope it'd been enough. It was up to her to get her and Sylvia out and back to our meeting point a few blocks away. Clay and I getting away was a bit more complicated.

"Bring them both," the leader said.

"You made a deal with Luis!" I took a step back as two of the men came toward us.

Clay shifted, putting himself between me and the men.

"And I will honor it," the leader said. "You will enjoy my hospitality until your sister arrives. I will then let you go back to Luis, with payment."

Shit.

Suddenly, a loud, piercing whistle cut through the air just before an explosion of sound and light burst from the house. Clay tucked me against his chest, shielding me from debris even as I tried to process what was happening. I caught a glimpse of men in the dirt, clinging to porch posts, guns scattered, and then Clay had my hand and was pulling me down the sidewalk.

We'd gone only a few feet when someone stepped out in front of us. Clay skidded to a stop, and I bumped into him as my momentum carried me forward. Luis stood less than a foot away, his expression haggard.

"Tess, where have you been?" He looked at Clay's hand wrapped around mine, and his face darkened.

"I don't have time for this," I said, looking over my shoulder. "Clay and I have to go. I'd stay away from the cartel. They're not too happy with me right now."

"What did you do?" He grabbed my arm.

"You little—"

I shook my head at Clay, and his mouth snapped shut, the muscle in his jaw twitching as he tensed. I was going to give Luis one chance.

"Let me go."

"I *saved* you," he said, giving me a shake. "You owe me."

It'd been a while since I'd taken self-defense, but this was one move I'd

always remembered. I moved my arm in a tight circle, easily breaking Luis's grasp, then struck with my uninjured fist.

Luis's head snapped back, and he let out a howl of pain as he dropped to the ground. I didn't wait around to see what damage I'd inflicted, or to warn him that as soon as Clay and I were at the rendezvous point, I was calling the cops. Luis wasn't my problem, and contrary to what he might have thought, saving my life didn't entitle him to rule it.

My life was mine, and mine alone.

THIRTY-THREE

CLAY

WE ARRIVED AT THE RENDEZVOUS ONLY A FEW SECONDS BEFORE BRIANNE and Sylvia, so I didn't have a chance to tell Tess how much I'd loved watching her deck that asshole Luis. I'd wanted to do it myself, but I was glad I'd let her take care of it. She'd been right about how Brianne and I were treating her, and unless I wanted things between Tess and me to become as stilted and problematic as they were between the sisters, I needed to start changing.

"Everyone okay?" Brianne asked as she and Sylvia stopped running. She seemed to be helping Sylvia along a bit, but neither one of them appeared to be injured.

"We're fine," I said.

"I'm so glad you're okay." Tess ignored her sister's question as she moved forward to hug Sylvia. "I'm so sorry I couldn't stop him."

"It's not your fault," Sylvia insisted. "I saw him hit you—"

"He *hit* you?!" Brianne sounded practically murderous.

I saw red. "I'm going to kill him." I turned to go back, but Tess grabbed my arm.

"He'll get what he deserves," she said as she pulled a phone from her pocket. "Does anyone know the number for the police department?"

As Sylvia rattled it off, I pulled Brianne aside, needing something to focus on so I didn't go beat the shit out of Luis. "What the hell was that back there? You said you had what you needed, but that was a hell of a lot more than a couple guns."

"I have some connections," she said uneasily. "It's no big deal."

"I'm not stupid, Bri." I lowered my voice. "You're wearing a vest under

your shirt, and it's a top-of-the-line one if I ever saw one. You took at least two hits, and you clearly kept going, which doesn't happen very often."

"Leave it."

"No." I glanced at Tess, but she was still talking on the phone. "I didn't hear a single gunshot, but I don't think that's because you didn't use a gun. I think you had a silencer. Probably more than one. And that last thing? That was a flash-bang. How the hell did you get your hands on all of that stuff in a foreign country in that short amount of time?"

Brianne looked up at me, something sparking in her eyes as she faced off with me. "I'm only going to say this one more time. Back. The. Fuck. Off. This is none of your business."

The challenge in her voice made me want to keep pushing, but she was right. It wasn't any of my business. I might've been sent down here to find her, but this wasn't an FBI investigation.

"The police are on their way," Tess said. "I gave them Luis's name and description so that even if he runs, they'll go after him."

"Are you okay to walk?" Brianne asked Sylvia. "There's a car two streets over."

"My house—" Sylvia began but Brianne was already shaking her head.

"Not tonight." She gave the other woman a wan smile. "We need to make sure it's safe before you go back there. We're going to take you to the hospital and then to a hotel."

"No hospital," Sylvia said, holding out her hand in clear dismissal. "I'm okay. Nothing a good shower and a bed won't cure. What about you?"

"I'm fine," Bri said shortly. "Let's go."

"Why wouldn't you be fine?" Tess asked as she followed Brianne. "What happened in there?"

"Don't worry about it," Brianne said. "I'm okay. Just some bumps and bruises."

I nearly bit my tongue to keep back my suspicions. I didn't like hiding my thoughts from Tess, but I wasn't going to get between the sisters. I stayed behind the three women, letting Brianne take point. I didn't know if she still had any of those weapons on her, and I had questions, things I thought she was lying about, but I trusted her to take care of her sister and Sylvia, which was the only thing we needed to worry about right now.

"Where are we going?" Sylvia asked. "If we're not going back to my place, then where?"

“I made a couple reservations at a hotel on the other side of the city,” Brianne said. “We’re going to hunker down for the night, then meet for breakfast to figure out what we’re doing next.”

I’d assumed we’d get Sylvia to wherever she felt safe, and then we’d head back to the US, but now I was starting to wonder if Brianne would be coming with Tess and me...or if I’d be heading back alone.

THIRTY-FOUR

TESS

I CLOSED THE BATHROOM DOOR BEHIND ME AND LEANED BACK AGAINST IT, closing my eyes as I let the silence surround me. The tiled walls kept out the other hotel noises, and the cool tranquility of the small room was exactly what I needed. I didn't regret going today, but it definitely wasn't something I was comfortable with.

Not the way Clay and Bri seemed to be.

Something had happened between them out there, and I couldn't figure out what it was. I suspected it had something to do with the way Clay and I had gotten away. I was no expert, but I'd seen enough movies and TV shows to take a guess about what had happened. *How* it had happened was another matter.

What was worse was that I felt like I should know more. That something I still hadn't remembered from my missing two weeks would help shed light on all this.

Dammit!

I stripped off my clothes and turned on the shower. It would've been nice to take a bath, but we hadn't gotten a room with that option. I'd just been grateful I hadn't needed to argue with Brianne about Clay and I having a room of our own. She and Sylvia were sharing a room, though I doubted it was because they were rekindling their relationship. Even if they were, it wasn't any of my business. I'd done what I'd set out to do. Find my sister. Everything else was up to her.

I put my hand under the spray, waiting until it was warm before I stepped into the shower. The plastic curtain brushed against my leg, cool and smooth, and I shivered. The motion seemed to set something off in me, and I began to

shake. I moved under the water, reaching out to increase the heat until it was nearly too much for me to handle.

The door opened, but I stayed where I was, curling in on myself as I waited for the trembling to stop. Over the white noise of the water, I heard the whisper of the plastic rings sliding across the curtain rod, and then I felt him behind me.

He placed his hands on my shoulders, sliding them up and down my arms in a deliberate, unhurried rhythm. His cock was soft as it brushed against the small of my back, reassuring me that he wasn't here to pressure me for sex. Still, warmth curled inside my belly.

"Clay..."

"Shh." He kissed the top of my head. "It's shock. Adrenaline." He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me back against his chest. "Relax and let it happen. I've got you."

Even after everything we'd been through together, it wasn't easy, but little by little, my muscles unclenched, and my body stopped shaking. Just as gradually, the tension between us shifted from comfort to the now-familiar energy that had been humming between us pretty much non-stop since that first hug in the airport. I'd lied to myself about it, tried to pretend it didn't exist, that it didn't mean anything, but I was tired of pretending, tired of thinking. If this was the last time he and I would be together, I wanted it without artifice, without brooding.

I turned in Clay's embrace, reaching up to clasp my hands behind his neck. His wet hair slipped across my fingers, making me realize how much longer it was than it had been when we'd first arrived here last month. One more thing that had changed.

"Better?" he asked.

His voice was husky, his eyes dark, both telling me that he'd felt the atmosphere between us change. Not that I needed those two clues when the thick shaft pressing against my stomach was still growing.

I nodded. "Thank you."

I looked away from his face and leaned forward to flick my tongue over one dusky, flat nipple. He caught his breath, his hands dropping down to palm my ass. Encouraged by his response, I used my teeth to worry at the sensitive flesh, using the flexing of his hands on my ass as a gauge of how much he liked what I was doing.

"We don't have to do this," Clay said, his voice strained.

I looked up at him with a partial smile. "I appreciate you trying to be chivalrous." I sank down onto my knees, water slicking my hair flat to my head. "Should I return the favor and tell you that we don't have to do this if you don't want to?"

He cupped my chin in one hand, his thumb tracing the line of my bottom lip before pressing inside. I moved my tongue over the pad of his thumb, then sucked on it, my eyes locked on his.

"Fuck, Tess, that mouth of yours," he groaned. "I need it on my cock. Need to see your lips wrapped around me."

He didn't have to tell me twice.

I should have wanted to savor it, draw it out until the feel and taste of him was a permanent part of me. What I wanted, instead, was to make him lose control the way he did to me.

I leaned forward and took as much of his thick shaft as I could all at once. He cursed, palm slapping against wet tile. I locked my lips tight around him, his girth stretching my mouth almost uncomfortably. One hand moved to cup his balls, silk skin softer than anything I'd felt before. I was tempted to stoke the heat between my legs, but denying myself somehow made what I was doing...hotter.

"Tess, fuck," he groaned. The hand not on the wall tangled in my curls. "Babe, your mouth...not gonna last long."

Water streamed down my face and into my eyes, blurring my vision, but I didn't want to look away. I wanted to see him come apart as much as I wanted to feel it. I needed it.

I stroked the underside of his cock with my tongue, then swept up to circle the head. The salty taste of pre-cum spread across my taste buds, and I was suddenly hungry for more. My hand tightened on his balls, earning a stream of curses surrounding my name, but he didn't push me away. Instead, he used the hand on my head to move me closer.

I scraped my teeth across his sensitive skin, soothing with my tongue before sucking hard on the flesh in my mouth. His hips jerked, driving him almost too deep, but I repeated the combination two, three, four...

"Tess fuck babe yes almost fuck yes please yes Tess fuck..." The words poured out of him in a torrent, ending with a strangled groan as he came.

I swallowed each pulse of liquid, not releasing him until his cock was soft and shudders ran through his entire body. As he slipped from between my lips, he reached down and pulled me to my feet, bending down to give me a

thorough, bruising kiss that warmed me straight down to my toes.

THE GLOWING red numbers on the hotel clock said it was two thirteen in the morning when I woke up to use the bathroom. When I came back out, Clay was up and standing at the window. The pale moonlight played across his tanned skin, creating dancing shadows on the landscape of his body. I let my eyes travel from the nape of his neck, down his muscled back to the pair of dimples at the base of his spine. His buttocks flexed as he shifted his weight, and I followed the motion down his thighs and calves, moving my gaze back up only as he turned to face me.

He held out his hand, and I went toward him, enjoying the way his eyes darkened as he took me in. I suddenly remembered how, the first time we slept together, I worried that he wouldn't like my body, that I was too petite, too delicate. That sort of concern seemed laughable now.

His fingertips lightly traced my cheekbone, and I leaned into his touch. He didn't say a word as he bent his head to brush his lips across mine in a gentle kiss. As he straightened, he picked me up. My legs went around his waist, and I found him already hard. With one arm under my ass, he easily moved me over his cock, eyes seeking permission. When I nodded, he pushed up into me with one smooth thrust.

I gasped as we came together, the sound loud in the silent room. He wrapped an arm around my waist, using his hold on me to grind our bodies together. No romantic words or promises. No long, hard strokes. Just our bodies joined together as tightly as possible and small jerks of our hips that sent ripples of pleasure through us.

Our breathing mingled, harsh and rapid, with the movement of flesh against flesh, a primal symphony that spoke to a carnality, a sensuality, that I'd never had before. Some might have said that it had only been hidden because I'd been a virgin up until recently, but I knew it had less to do with experience and more to do with Clay.

And that scared the shit out of me.

Because if the reason for these changes was him, what did that mean for when we went our separate ways?

"Tess," he rasped out. "Look at me."

My eyes locked with his, and everything else fled my mind as I exploded.

THIRTY-FIVE

TESS

“TAYLOR MACINTOSH!” I JERKED UPRIGHT, MY HAND FLAILING OUT TO smack Clay’s chest.

“Did you just yell another man’s name?” Clay’s voice was thick with sleep. “Give me a minute and I’ll—”

“I remember!” I turned over, grabbing Clay’s arm as he pushed himself up. “I remember what I was doing before the accident.”

The light came on, and I blinked at its brightness. Even that couldn’t distract me though. All of the pieces were finally back in place.

“Brienne is Taylor MacIntosh, the person you were sent down here to find.”

He gave me a puzzled look. “I know. Brienne told me.”

My shoulders slumped. “What?”

Clay put his hand on my back. “While we were looking for you, she admitted that she’s been seeing Sofie Harmon, the secretary’s sister-in-law, for a while. When Brienne wanted to come down here with Red Care, she and Sofie thought it was a good idea to have her use an alias so no one could connect the two of them and try to use Brienne to influence the secretary.”

“And Taylor MacIntosh was the alias,” I said. I frowned as I put that information together with what my informant had told me. Some things still didn’t add up. “My informant said that the government sent us here.”

Clay shrugged. “I suppose, in a way, that’s what happened.”

I shook my head. “No, he meant the government. Not someone calling in a favor. It sounded like something that came from high up.”

“Your informant’s mistaken then,” Clay said. “The entire reason Ray asked me to come here was so the government *didn’t* get involved.”

“Or maybe he asked you to come because the government had to be able to *pretend* to not be pulling the strings. My guy said that the cartel was more than just some Colombian thugs. That they have their fingers in the Colombian *and* Costa Rican governments.” I tossed the covers off and got out of bed. “I need to talk to Brianne.”

“Now?” He glanced at the clock. “It’s not even six o’clock.”

“I need answers,” I said, snatching up my clothes. “Something’s not right here, Clay. I felt it from the moment my mom told me that she’d gotten an anonymous call that Bri was in trouble. She’s hiding something, and I need to know what it is.”

He must’ve heard something in my voice that told him I wasn’t going to let it go because he got out of bed too. We dressed quickly and then headed down the hall to the room Brianne and Sylvia were sharing.

I knocked as quietly as possible, not wanting to disturb other guests. Clay rested a hand on the small of my back as we waited, and I drew a measure of comfort from having him there. I’d come down here, expecting to do everything on my own, and I’d been annoyed that Clay had interfered with my plans. Now, I wasn’t sure I could’ve done any of it without him.

Just when I was ready to knock again, the door opened.

“Tess?”

“I need to talk to Brianne,” I said, barely resisting the urge to shove past Sylvia into the room.

“She’s not here.”

“What do you mean she’s not here?”

Sylvia rubbed her arms as if she was chilled. “I don’t know. After we first got here, she went to take a shower, and I fell asleep. You knocked, and I woke up. She wasn’t here.”

I wasn’t sure if I wanted to freak out, punch something, or throw my hands in the air and say to hell with all of it. Any of those options seemed to fit, but the only thing I knew for certain was that my sister was missing.

Again.

She was getting a fucking GPS chip for her birthday.

THE END

*The New Pleasure series continues in the final book, **Brianne's Secret**, coming December 28.*

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The Billionaire's Muse

Bound

One Night Only

Damage Control

Take Me, Sir

Make Me Yours

The Billionaire's Sub

The Billionaire's Mistress

Con Man Box Set

HERO Box Set

A Legal Affair Box Set

The Client

Indecent Encounter

Dom X Box Set

Unlawful Attraction Box Set

Chasing Perfection Box Set

Blindfold Box Set

Club Prive Box Set

The Pleasure Series Box Set

Exotic Desires Box Set

Casual Encounter Box Set

Sinful Desires Box Set

Twisted Affair Box Set

Serving HIM Box Set
Pure Lust Box Set

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

M. S. Parker is a USA Today Bestselling author and the author of over fifty spicy romance series and novels.

Living part-time in Las Vegas, part-time on Maui, she enjoys sitting by the pool with her laptop writing her next spicy romance.

Growing up all she wanted to be was a dancer, actor and author. So far only the latter has come true but M. S. Parker hasn't retired her dancing shoes just yet. She is still waiting for the call to appear on Dancing With The Stars.

When M. S. isn't writing, she can usually be found reading– oops, scratch that! She is always writing.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I would like to thank all of my readers. Without you, my books would not exist. I truly appreciate each and every one of you.

A big THANK YOU goes out to all the Facebook fans, street team, beta readers, and advanced reviewers. You are a HUGE part of the success of all my series.

Also thank you to my editor Lynette, my proofreader Nancy, and my wonderful cover designer, Sinisa. You make my ideas and writing look so good.