

THE SHATTER &
SHOCK DUET

SHOCKPROOF

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
XAVIER NEAL

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Shockproof (The Shatter & Shock Duet #2)

By Xavier Neal

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Dedication:

To the Universe...Thank you for letting my writing shock readers (in a good way).

WARNING:

This novel contains EXTREMELY foul language (from both men and women), GRAPHIC sexual content (including some that may differ from your own), GRAPHIC violence (that many may consider gruesome or gory) and other adult situations. Some readers may find the content triggering or disagree with it entirely. This novel is intended for readers over the age of 18.

Please keep all these things in mind and proceed at your own risk.

Thank you.

- Xavier

Playlist Selects

Here are five songs from the *Shockproof* playlist!

Feel free to follow the playlist on Spotify to find more songs I felt related to the book.

1. Your Sweetness Is My Weakness – Barry White (R&B/Soul)
2. Kissin' Ears – Gym Class Heroes ft. The-Dream (Rock)
3. Bang Bang – Jessie J, Ariana Grande, Nicki Minaj (Pop)
4. Cowboys And Angels – Dustin Lynch (Country)
5. Chasing Rainbows – The High Kings (Irish Folk)

More songs: <https://spoti.fi/3slZ7J7>

Chapter 1

Slater

See, this is why they teach you to *always* clear your fucking corners first.

Deep, low, groans of discomfort rattle my already unstable frame as I struggle to find my footing – both literally and figuratively.

I mean...it's not like it's the first time I've been electrocuted.

Fuck, it's not even the first time I've been electrocuted this year.

But I swear six ways to Sunday this shit better be the last.

I'm so fucking *done* with battling electricity.

And I'm really fucking done with damn near losing to it.

Lifting my eyelids is the first action I successfully complete and strangely enough it occurs simultaneously with someone else falling to the ground beside me. Who he is or why we're now floor buddies are two questions I want answers to, just not at this moment.

Not when I have to get my ass up and save my woman's life.

Saving her is the only thing that matters.

It's the only thing that'll ever matter.

A faint voice I wish I didn't recognize quickly inquires, "*Are you alright, Arlette?!*"

"Did you just punch that guy in the face?!" the love of my life squeaks back in total, impressed surprise.

Great.

Now, her ex is the hero, and I'm just the asshole who's lying around on the job.

You know.

Just the shit this situation needed.

“Where did you learn to punch someone?!”

Punching someone isn’t hard.

She could punch someone if she tried.

Perhaps him.

Maybe she should practice on him.

I vote she practices on him.

“I know my way around the ring,” Seventeen confesses a little more clearly, indicating my senses are returning to a more stable condition.

The ring?

Doubtful.

I’ve got five hundred bucks and a bottle of unopened aged whiskey from a diplomat whose son I rescued last summer that says it was a lucky hit.

“How did I not know that?” Arley asks, voice seemingly moving closer to me.

“Guess I’m not the only one with things to learn over dinner.”

Oh...this shit just keeps getting better and better.

Instead of worrying if I’m okay or even alive, he’s *flirting* with her?

Trying to make a goddamn date?

Over. My. Dead. Body. Evander Phonyfield.

And despite how it looks, I’m not fucking dead yet.

I fight the aftershock trembles trying to keep me immobilized prompting her to cry out, “*Ohmygod, Slater!*”

The sweet sound of her voice does what it always does.

Encourages me to keep going.

Lifts me higher.

“*Please be okay! Please tell me that you’re okay!*” Prying my torso off the ground barely precedes her sweet voice croaking, “*Say something! Anything, Cowboy!*”

Unfortunately, there isn’t time to do that or threaten the man who now owes DPD a hefty donation from my *Fast and Furious* reenactment due to

the individual beside me shaking away the oversold punch. His eyes suddenly meet mine, widen in what I imagine to be fear, and begin frantically searching the scene for his lost weapon. Rather than give him the opportunity to locate it, I deliver an elbow drop center mass, not only knocking all the air out of his lungs but crushing his ribs in the process of pinning him beneath me.

Ignoring the small tremors still doing their best to rattle my system, I mercilessly clamp my hand around the assailant's throat and bark, "*Secure the weapon!*"

The lack of hesitation Arley exhibits is both surprising and exhilarating. One moment she's fearfully screeching in the doorframe – sounding and looking helpless – yet the next she's standing over the attacker with a pistol locked, loaded, and ready to shoot when I give the command.

Pretty sure if it wasn't so goddamn painful to simply move, my dick would be standing at full attention over that shit.

I can't be bothered to hide the crooked grin that grows upon meeting her gaze. "That order wasn't for you, Angel Cake."

She shoots me back a cocky smirk. "Okay, but you didn't *not* say me, Cowboy."

"Alright, but I didn't mean *you*."

"But I didn't know that!"

"I *never* mean you when we're in the field!"

"Are we in the field!?"

Seventeen cuts off my ability to respond with his panicking, "Do you even know how to use that thing?!"

Rather than retort with words, she fires off a single round into the floor space directly beside the aggressor's ear, missing it by mere centimeters, an action that causes him to twitch around in my hold. "I think I've got it covered!" Her face winces at the ear-piercing sound that's now reverberating throughout the empty hallway. "Forgot how loud that is without plugs!"

"We don't exactly wear 'em for fun, Angel Cake," I mutter more to myself than her considering the ringing she's experiencing is probably too

loud for her to hear me. Moving myself upward to a sitting position is accompanied by forcefully slamming the male into the nearby wall for additional securing. “Kill him if he moves.”

“*Roger that,*” my woman instantly acknowledges as though she’s done this shit a million times.

Which she hasn’t.

Or...at least...I don’t think she has.

I feel like it would’ve come up.

Then again...this could be the whole hunting situation all over again.

Retrieving the zip ties from my bulletproof vest begins at the same time our boss chortles, “I guess I shouldn’t be so surprised you know your way around a firearm considering you’re friends with Wahl.”

“*Best.*” I aggressively yank and shove the enemy’s hand into one of the plastic cuff holes. “*Friends.*” The zipping of one side is swiftly followed by repeating the previous action on the other. “We’re fuckin’ family, Lenkov. And you know it.”

“He must’ve trained you at the range then.” His conversation line isn’t smooth nor is it appreciated. *Especially not now. Not today.* “Introduced you to Anne. Laura.”

“No, I learned how to handle weapons out at his ma’s property. I’ve never been to the ‘official’ range with him.”

Carefully leaning over to secure his feet together is done next.

“That’s strictly ‘guy time’.”

“Hm,” our boss arrogantly hums, folding his arms across his chest, “is that what that is?”

“I do know that Anne is the owner of The Hunt Locker and adore that she gave me her recipe for *Sautauthig* after letting Slater take some home that she had leftover. I definitely added way more sugar when I made it for us, but that’s not really important right now.”

None of this is important right now.

“But I don’t um...I don’t recognize the name Laura.”

That’s because she shouldn’t.

Doesn't need to.

“You don't?” Seventeen feigns surprise. “I mean even *I* know about Laura.”

Tossing him a glare occurs in tandem with zipping closed the newest restraints.

“I thought you two told each other *everything*.”

It's impossible not to notice the tiny twitch of hurt the statement conjures.

Fuck!

I can't physically and emotionally protect her all at the same time!

And I can't stop subduing one enemy threat to neutralize the other.

Maybe I can just let her shoot Seventeen?

Wing him?

Clip him right in the mouth so he shuts the fuck up for an extended period of time instead of making *more* messes for me to clean up.

The realization that this mess could've been actively avoided has me venomously biting in his direction, “Where the fuck were you, Lenkov?” All eyes cut to me as I grab the duct tape out of my tactical pocket. “How the fuck did I beat you here when I called your ass from the highway twenty minutes out?!”

“That was only *ten* minutes ago!”

“You owe DPD a sizable donation to one of their charities as a thank you for cutting my time in half.” An arrogant, vicious smirk is wedged between statements. “Now, I'mma repeat myself jus' this one time, Lenkov. *Where. The. Fuck. Were you?*”

His reluctance to answer instantly infuriates me more. “I told you I was in an important meeting.”

“*What?!*”

“I...” he avoids allowing his stare to gravitate Arley's direction, “had to wait until the conference call was over before I could personally come down here. And I would've just sent a member of security from my floor, however, they were shifting posts; therefore, it was unideal timing.”

“Unideal?!” I seethe and slap the freshly cut tape over the wheezing attacker’s bloody mouth. “Arley fuckin’ dead is unideal!”

“I definitely think so,” she good-naturedly interjects.

“Look, Wahl, I heeded your whining-”

“*Warning!*”

“-and tried contacting the secretaries on this floor but received no answer.”

“It’s their lunch hour,” my girlfriend softly sighs. “They typically get together – at least once a week – and go out. Sometimes with other employees from other departments. Usually just with other secretaries, though. They exchange the hottest goss. Bitch about the latest problems. The married ones offer to set up the single ones for double dating adventures. Melissa always offers to bring me something back yet never invites me to go. I guess it would be weird to invite the boss? It’d be like inviting the coach to a players only meeting, right?” She takes a tiny bite of her bottom lip. “Or maybe I’m just too weird to be invited? Maybe me being too weird is the reason no one invites me to go out for drinks either? Maybe me being super weird is the reason no one invites me to do anything with them outside of work?”

“You know what’s *super fuckin’ weird?*” I segue by delivering a glare to her ex-boyfriend, successfully aiding in the alleviation of the social disappointment its evident she’s experiencing. “That you ignored the *direct* command I gave you, Lenkov!”

“I don’t work for *you*, Wahl!”

“You won’t work for *anyone* if you ever let my woman’s life be in jeopardy again because you couldn’t jus’ hang up the fuckin’ phone!”

“It’s not that simple!”

“It’s not that fuckin’ complicated!”

“Maybe not for a moonshine drinking merc like yourself, but for some of us, some of us that have fucking numbers instead of names, it’s a little less black and white!”

“You’re gonna be seein’ a whole lot of red when this shit is over!”

“*Was that a threat, Mr. Wahl?!*”

“It was a vow, Seventeen.”

“Is Arley holding a gun?” Blu unexpectedly inserts, redirecting everyone’s attention over to him. “Why does she have a gun?” Confusion and amusement collide in his expression. “How bad is the sitch if *she*’s the only one with a weapon drawn?”

“Hey!” the love of my life squeaks on an adorable foot stomp. “I can handle a gun!”

“Tell that to Slater’s ma’s windchime.”

“I only clipped its wing!”

“Creating Weird Owl Yankovic.”

Embarrassment has her lowering the weapon in her hands on a whine. “*Ohmygod*, you guys named it?!”

“Blu named it,” I quickly insist. “I jus’...didn’t discourage him.”

“Which is practically the same thing as *encouraging* him!”

“True.” My partner nods during the unholstering of his own Glock. “Very true.”

The glare he’s given is attached to me rising to my feet. “Where’s Reynolds?”

“Medical.” He aims the barrel in the direction of the disarmed threat behind me. “He found Yi barely breathing in the stairwell with a couple burn marks on his neck. If I had to venture a guess, I’d say he was lured there by this asshole, tased, and fell.” Blu meets my gaze. “*A lot.*”

Shit.

I hope he didn’t break his neck.

Those along with spine trauma are among my least favorite to deal with.

Unlike the shit you see in the movies, a broken neck doesn’t necessarily mean instant death.

It can mean dislocations.

Disc lesions.

Damaged cervical bones or vertebrae.

There's even a possibility for a full recovery depending on the exact injuries sustained; however, so much shit can go so wrong between when someone was hurt and when someone can receive proper treatment.

Let's just say having to MacGyver up some shit – as Blu would label it – to stabilize that type of wound isn't exactly taught in a textbook.

Sometimes the best thing you can really do in those situations is improvise and use a little of the Bon Jovi prayer living magic.

“Is he...Is he um...Is he um...gonna make it?” Arley quietly inquires, voice undeniably shaky.

She doesn't even let my mouth lower to respond.

“What if he doesn't?” Seeing her quivering jaw momentarily paralyzes me in place. “What if he *dies* because of *me*?”

“No.” The stern finger point she's presented is unforgiving. “You *won't* do that shit, Angel Cake. You *won't* take responsibility for somethin' that isn't your fault.”

“But it is my fault!” Tears noticeably seep into her tone. “*I'm* the one who found the pattern! *I'm* the one who wouldn't stop digging! *I'm* the one hunting for answers! *I'm-*”

“Not the one who hired someone to kill you,” I coldly state prompting her to press her lips tightly together. “*You* didn't make the mistake of betrayin' this company, Arley.” One step closer is unconsciously taken. “And you damn sure weren't the one who made the mistake of crossin' *me*.” Letting my thumb reach out to brush away the droplet that's managed to slip down her cheek is executed without a second thought. “Now, cowboy up, Angel Cake. I need *you* to help take care of *you* while I go take care of him.”

A single snuffle is presented prior to a nod.

“Go ahead and put the safety on but keep that weapon within reach at all times. Roger?”

Nodding precedes the completion of the action. “*Roger.*”

“Blu, call Reynolds.” Moving backwards towards the captive occurs during the additional instructions. “Have him meet me in sector c for enhanced interrogation.”

“You don't want me running second?”

“I want you *here*,” I bitterly state as I snatch the restrained male’s feet off the ground. “Outside that door. Shooting *anyone* or *anything* that tries to get inside while I’m gone.”

He nods his understanding. “*Roger that.*”

“What do you need from me?” Seventeen swiftly investigates, adjusting his tie to assist in signifying his importance.

“Nothing.”

The blunt response has Blu clamping his mouth shut to trap in his laughter.

Our boss doesn’t hesitate to narrow his gaze. “I can do *something*, Wahl.”

“Nope.”

“I can handle a task.”

“Nope.”

“Come on, I’m capable of doing more than you think I am. You know that.”

Do I?

“I’ve *proven* that.”

Unfortunately...he has.

First with a rifle.

Then with that sucker punch.

However, it’s the latter that leads to me reminding him, “You’ve also proven you can’t take orders, Lenkov.”

“This is different!”

“The only thing that makes this different is *this* isn’t an inconvenience for *you!*” I tighten my grip on the assailant’s ankle. “Arley’s life is just as much at risk *now* as it was *then!*”

Guilt doesn’t hesitate to grow in his expression. “I just thought-”

“You didn’t fuckin’ think!” the booming of my voice shakes the ground beneath us. “Because if you had, you would’ve realized that me callin’ *you* – of all the fuckin’ people in this buildin’ – meant I was *out of all*

other options! Had you thought about *her* instead of your goddamn self your ass would've left that call, got down here, and stopped this asshole before he ever reached the fuckin' door!" Yanking the man's leg harsher causes him to whimper behind the tape. "You wanna do somethin', Lenkov?" My head cranes slightly forward. "Stay the fuck out of my way. *Period.*"

No further argument is made.

"Blu," my attention shifts back to him, "order a tactical sweep of the entire area after you call Reynolds. I want the other offices on this floor emptied and secured. Personnel sent home. I want the ones right below hers, emptied and secured. Personnel sent home. Pairs stationed at every point of entry on this floor and leading to this floor from the one below and above. If my woman so much as *sneezes*, there better be a small army's worth of firepower locked and loaded and ready to hunt down those germs like they're starring in a fuckin' *John Wick* sequel. Is that clear?"

"It's descriptive," Arley spiritedly inserts.

"*Affirmative,*" Blu acknowledges yet again.

I redirect my gaze to the brown pair that I'm so thankful are no longer flooded with fear. "You gonna tell me goodbye?"

More relief fills her expression at the same time she slowly shakes her head. "You know I don't say goodbye to you."

"And you better not start now."

The corners of her lips finally reach her ears. "*Stay safe, Cowboy.*"

"*Stay sweet, Angel Cake.*"

"*Stay funny, Blu,*" he states to himself in a playful nature, immediately receiving a quirked brow from me. "What?" His innocent shrug doesn't affect the aiming of his weapon. "I wanted to feel included!"

Laughter from Arley successfully smothers out the lingering tension the way he knew it would.

The way he knows I need it to.

The way only *she* can.

With a much calmer, along with a much clearer, mindset I release a slow breath of focus and begin dragging the prisoner by the foot away from

Arley's office towards the elevator. Despite the fact there are faster ways for transport and that the transport itself would go much quicker if I had someone simply assist me in the carrying process, I deliberately choose the slower transferring method. Not only do I want him to endure additional bumps, bruises, and broken bones that will come from banging his frame into every hard surface I cross paths with, but I want to make an example out of him.

I want every man, woman, and fucking bug in this building to know that it's a grave mistake to come after the love of my life.

Literally.

Chapter 2

Slater

Reynolds leans his back against the nearby wall. “I don’t think he’s breathing.”

“He is.”

“His chest isn’t moving.”

I slide on the first set of brass knuckles while quietly insisting. “It is.”

“You’re not even looking at the motherfucker!” squawks the other member of my interrogation team.

Not that I *need* a second to get shit done.

It’s simply protocol.

And a good reminder for why *he* should *stay* in my good graces.

“He’s *not* breathing, Wahl.” Another heavy sigh echoes around the barren room. “And we both know the dead don’t talk.” The opposite pair being wedged into place precedes an amused grunt. “Okay, dead *people*, not ghosts. Wait. Ghosts *are* dead people, huh?” My eyes land on him just in time to see misplaced contemplation conquering his expression. “Do you believe in ghosts? You think they’re more *Casper* or like *Bruce Willis*? I kind of think it’s fucked up in both those movies *kids* were being haunted. It’s like...don’t kids have enough shit to deal with already without making *Scooby-Doo* nightmares real?”

I don’t entertain his ramblings.

I don’t even waste the breath it would take to remind him to shut the fuck up.

I merely wait for him to arrive at the conclusion on his own before turning my attention to the man slumped over in the metal chair that’s stationed right above the drain located in the center of the room.

His tattered black clothing is the result of the material getting caught on the edges of the elevator and corners of chairs and random decorative structures we passed during the transferring process. The scrapes from the

sidewalk are only slightly less apparent than the burns from the concrete and gravel; however, the blood splatters that have managed to seep through both the front and back of his outwear – courtesy of making sure to rotate him along the way like a rotisserie chicken – are impossible to ignore even in the dark colored fabric. Additional streams of crimson trickle along the sides of his oblong head to meet and mingle with the other splotches as do the droplets creeping out from the corners of his duct taped mouth.

Reynolds is right.

I can't interrogate the dead.

But this asshole isn't there.

At least not yet.

Tightening my hold to ensure I have a steady grip doesn't take long nor does letting my fist fly through the air to connect the jagged metal edge of my weapon with his already bruised jaw. Sounds of bones cracking and gargled groans instantly reverberate around the underground box we use for our "less ethical" information inquiries informing me of what it is I already knew.

"See," I heartlessly grunt. "*Still breathin'.*"

Louder grumbles are followed by Reynolds chuckling, "Fuck, man, not for much longer after that hit."

"Eyes up, soldier." When the order isn't instantly met, a second punch to the other side is executed. "*I said...Eyes. Up.*"

Despite the heavy howls of agony leaving him, the captive forces his head to lift.

Teary stare to find mine.

Attempts to focus the best it can around the swollen lids.

"It's hard to breathe 'cause your ribs are fractured." Folding my arms across my chest is done between announcements. "*Lie to me, and I'll make that shit worse. Try to lie to me, and I'll make that shit worse. Lie to me by omittin' somethin', and I'll make that shit worse. Waste my time?*"

"And he'll kill you," Reynolds smoothly finishes the declaration for me.

“Understood?”

He does his best to nod.

After removing the tape from his mouth, I ask, “I know you don’t know who hired you ‘cause if *you did* then *I would* by this point, so what I need to know right now is *when* did you pick up this assignment?”

Rather than respond, I receive a low collection of rumbles.

Rumbles that prompt me to execute a hard strike to his lower ribcage. Echoes of the critical pieces to his endoskeleton snapping like tiny celery stalks pull a smile onto my face but a cringe out of Reynolds.

“*Fuccckkkk*,” my partner for the moment hisses under his breath, “I felt that shit over *here*.”

Grabbing the man by his bruised cheeks, I clench them tightly and angle his face upward to meet my glare. “*Answer. Faster.*”

He nods once more prior to him muttering, “M-m-midnight. Midnightish.”

I relinquish my grip and resume my previous position.

Alright.

Midnight means *everyone* had already been informed we would be in the office today. The Numbers. Security. Tactical. Accounting. Cyber. Secretaries. Pretty much anyone our paths would’ve needed to cross with or *might’ve* needed to cross with. And unfortunately, that also means, *anyone* they could’ve talked to might’ve come into the know about Arley being in the building if the aforementioned let it slip out in passing. Or...if someone walked by and overheard the announcement. Or...if someone knew to follow one of them to get that information. Or hell, someone could’ve seen a fucking email pulled up on a screen – computer or phone – while they were around one of the people who received the warning.

See, the biggest issue with security is rarely the system in place itself. More often than not, it’s the *people* that are the problem.

People make even the most theoretically impenetrable places vulnerable.

They’re always the weak point.

Easy to exploit.

Hard to predict.

“When did you get information and access?”

“Two...Two...” The man’s head slightly bobs around. “Two...”

“Did you give him a fucking stutter?” Reynolds airily chuckles. “Is that shit really possible?”

“Yeah,” I offhandedly reply. “Neurogenic stutterin’ caused by a traumatic brain injury is very real shit.” My gaze lingers at the male doing his best to stay conscious enough to give me the answers I’m demanding. “But that’s not the case here. *He*’s just strugglin’ to get enough oxygen.” There’s no delay in me leaning slightly forward. “And that struggle is about to get even worse when I break your fuckin’ nose for tryin’ to buy yourself time to lie to me.”

He stills his head and swallows his building fear. “Tw-tw-two th-th-this m-m-morning.” The captive in our custody does his best to steady his voice. “I got the details at two this morning.”

“How?”

“A...um...a...uh...dead...dead drop.”

“Where?”

“An a-a-all night gas station.” Crunchy, scratchy sounds invading his speech indicate his lung is beginning to collapse. “Outskirts. Backroad. Heading s-s-south.”

“Towards Austlandia or Dos Santos?”

“Austlandia.”

“Cameras?”

“No.”

“Secluded location. Casual cover. Hard to track,” Reynolds casually comments. “That’s *smart. Real smart, Wahl.*”

Too smart.

Whoever this asshole poacher is knows how to operate in the unseen.

That’s not run of the mill basic operative shit.

That's highly trained.

Highly skilled.

Highly intelligent.

My *least* favorite combination for an unknown enemy to have.

"Tell me about the drop itself."

"Envelope." Heavy blinks are delivered as if trying to wake himself up. "Taped to uh...the um...b-b-b-back of uh...an um...off-brand cereal box. The one in the uh...way, way back."

"Less likely to end up in the wrong hands," my team member acknowledges. "More countermeasures."

More proof of a pro.

"It had everything I n-n-needed with instructions to burn and flush certain items when f-f-finished..." the wavering of his words appears just before he attempts to suck in more air. "To prevent an...an...an evidence trail."

Fingerprints can be run.

DNA checked.

Handwriting analyzed.

The love of my life *does* the latter, and something tells me they *know* that.

Whoever the fuck they are.

"It h-h-had a photo of the target. Keycard access to the gate and building. M-m-map. There was a... um...also a photo of um...*you*-"

"Me?" My brow pulls tightly together. "Why?"

"Instructions said to...wait until...*you* left to infiltrate."

They *knew* this shit would never be possible with me around, which is why I should *always* be around.

Like now.

Wait.

What if *this shit* is a trap?

A diversion to get me away from her for a secondary attack.

What if that was whoever's plan all along?

What if this asshole was just some sort of long con decoy?

"Reynolds," I snap at the same time I shoot my stare to him, "call Blu. Get a status report."

He nods, steps closer to the only door, and retrieves his cell to make the call.

"Why didn't you attack right away?" Unapproved anxiousness has questions springing free at a more rapid pace. "Why didn't you attack the *minute* I left the premises? How'd you *know* when I left the premises? Were you followin' me?"

"I was," he airily recalls, swollen lids still struggling not to fall shut. "I tailed you onto the freeway for a bit and then um...headed back. It guaranteed you were *gone*, and it uh...bought me enough time to not look... suspicious."

Attacking the *moment*, I was gone would've raised countless alarms.

It would've caused an immediate call for my return which I would've given because I wasn't in the middle of a mission. I was at the beginning, the easiest time to cut, regroup, and reschedule.

We would've turned our asses right around had *anyone* sent me a text that they simply *felt* something was wrong.

Or off.

I'm a man of instinct more than anything else.

That shit has not only saved my life but countless others.

This asshole played it the right way.

He played it smart.

Too bad that's the choice that's going to cost him his life.

"Blu says the situation is secure." Reynolds backtracks to his previous position.

Breaking eye contact is thoughtlessly done. "How secure?"

"He said like Kayley on prom night."

The reference to his twin sister who opted to go out of town for a spelling bee tournament instead of dealing with spiked punch and bad music sparks a smile, although it doesn't quite reach my expression.

Reynolds rests his back against the wall upon his return. "Who's Kayley?"

Not critical information for him to have at this time.

I shift my stare over to the problem we've got strapped to a chair and continue to interrogate, "Why were you still here? There was plenty of time between when we left and when we got back that should've had you completely done with this op. Why the delay? Why the fuck were you still here?" Watching his eyes begin to roll back into his head has me delivering two hard slaps to the side of his face, metal scraping into the skin, creating new scratches alongside the ones already established. "*Eyes. Open. Shitbreath.*"

An unpleasant grumble is given as he finds my glare yet again.

"Why the fuck were you still here?"

"Traffic."

"*What?*"

"On m-m-my way back there was...an...an...an...accident on the freeway. Tried to get around it and ran into c-c-c-construction. Tried to get around *that* and...and...and...went on a lengthy fucking de-de-detour. Then...I got...I got...*every* redlight." He sneers in disgust and frustration alike. "It was like...like...like...shit just...k-k-k-kept getting in the w-w-w-way."

Or like angels were answering prayers.

Doing the exact thing we light candles for every night.

Protecting *her*.

Protecting the one person, I consider to be a piece of *me*.

The most important piece.

"And then wh-wh-when I *finally* got back here...the signal scrambler they gave me to deal with security communications – *which was left inside the cereal box* – wasn't working, so I h-h-had to wait for that shit to get

smoothed out.”

“What a clusterfuck,” Reynolds snorts in amusement.

“O-o-only reason I d-d-didn’t just...abandon the whole thing was b-b-b-because I had already b-b-b-been paid.”

The unexpected drop of information has me quirking an eyebrow. “In full?”

Our prisoner rapidly shakes his head. “H-h-half now. H-h-half after the job was done.”

His choice of words has me clenching the weapons in my grasp tighter and preparing to forgo the foraging for information to obliterate the person who came to kill the love of my life.

“Dead or...alive...contracts...get so...so...so...messy...” he lets his voice and head sink towards the ground until a harsh backhand straightens out his curling spine. “*Fuck!*”

“Pimp slaps always hurt,” Reynolds nonchalantly announces. “No brass knuckles required for that shit to be true.”

I palm his entire, blue-shaded face with my hand making sure to dig my fingers sharply into the crevices they land into for maximum pain. “Tell me somethin’ worth hearin’, or I’ll rip off your ears to guarantee you never hear a fuckin’ thing again.”

“*Tyson style,*” the other male in the room jeers.

“*Talk.*”

“I-I-I-I didn’t have a good feeling about this shit, okay?!” Our detainee tries to shout, prompting me to drop my grip. “All the...traffic shit just left a b-b-bad taste in my mouth, so when I-I-I-I got back to the building I used the burner phone that was also left for me in the cereal box to send a text to the only number on the phone. The *same* number I was supposed to s-s-s-send proof of completion to.” He makes sure to bore his hooded eyes into mine. “And f-f-f-for the record I wasn’t gonna k-k-kill her. I don’t kill.”

There’s no stopping a sardonic expression from crossing my hardened face. “You had a gun.”

“People don’t listen the same when you point a taser at them.”

Fair point.

“I-I-I demanded half of the payment now or it wasn’t gonna fucking happen. Few minutes later...th-th-they asked for the banking information.” His wincing when attempting to suck in air increases. “Few minutes after that...and...and...there was a shit ton of money in my offshore account from The Agama Foundation.”

“The Agama Foundation,” I mindlessly echo, unfamiliar with the company.

For the moment that is.

Choosing to come after my woman gives me all the motive in the world to get *very fucking acquainted* with them now.

“Huh,” Reynolds unpredictably grunts and inches a little closer. “I’ve heard that name before.”

Delaying the speed at which my attention soars in his direction isn’t possible. “*Where?!?*”

His retort is attached to a mindless shrug. “Dontknow.”

“*What. The. Fuck.* Do you mean you don’t know, Reynolds?!”

“I mean,” he tosses his hands innocently in the air, “I’ve heard it somewhere I just don’t remember where. Or why. Or when. Or-”

“How about you fuckin’ figure that shit out?!”

“Roger that.”

“And you,” my narrowed vision returns to the assailant strapped to the seat in front of me, “where’s the keycard you used to get onto the property?”

“Back p-p-p-pocket.”

“And the burner phone?”

“C-C-Car.”

“Keys?”

“Fr-fr-front,” his gasping grows in volume, “poc-c-cket.”

A single nod of acknowledgement appears before I tilt my head to the side in a taunting fashion. “Chest feelin’ a little tight?”

He attempts to nod.

“Heart feel like it’s beatin’ a little fast?” My body lowers itself to a squat. “Maybe a little *too fast?*”

Crackling noises multiply in numbers as he pushes himself to reply. “Yes.”

“You’ve got a punctured lung.”

His eyes enlarge at the same time he fights to draw in a bigger breath.

“Sounds like it’s on the left side.”

Panic pierces his gaze further prior to him repeating the previous action.

“Interestin’ thing about havin’ a punctured lung? It’s typically *not* an instant death sentence.”

Relief makes the mistake of flashing in his expression.

“But tryin’ to kidnap my woman? *Is.*” His jaw barely has time to twitch before I’m ramming my fist into his ribcage on his right side, splintering the already sharp, severed pieces into several more. Keeping his broken bones wedged against the rigged metal, I angle my curled fingers upward, using the momentum and fragments to perforate the aforementioned organ. “I give you six minutes.” Tears begin to fill the brims of his swollen lids prompting me to push the shards in deeper to ensure maximum suffering. “Three to four if you start strugglin’.” I rise to my feet and toss an order at Reynolds, “Get that keycard and his keys and sweep-”

“*Wait, wait, wait,*” he cautiously interjects, disbelief dancing around his open mouth expression, “did you really just kill a guy with his own fucking ribs?!”

The first set of bloody knuckles is removed without blinking. “Like I told Guggenheim, I’m not jus’ trained to *save* lives, Reynolds.” Yanking off the second pair occurs next. “I’m trained to *take* them.”

And when I finally locate the person trying to kill the love of my life, that’s exactly what the fuck I’m going to do.

Chapter 3

Arley

I can't believe I almost killed someone.

Er.

Got someone almost killed.

That someone was almost killed because of me.

Because I'm too analytical.

Too thorough.

Too comfortable spotting patterns and using them.

I know Slater said what happened to Yi isn't my fault, but how can it not be?

Afterall, it was *me* he was protecting when he was attacked by the taser man.

It's *my* stupid ability to see what's not there, what lingers just beneath the lines that has evidently stamped an expiration onto my back.

You know...I honestly don't know what's more terrifying.

The fact that it's there or the fact I can't see exactly how many days I have left.

"Hey," Harvey gently nudges me in the arm, brushing the sleeve of my light pink dress, "where'd you go?"

Seeing his shaky wording match the shading of my dress only further solidifies the feelings of guilt.

Great.

It's not enough that I've put someone in the medical wing.

I've managed to break the unbreakable boss too.

This day can't possibly get any fucking worse.

Opening notes to "Careful What You Wish For" by Bad Omens immediately begins pouring from the speaker like some shitty scene change

in a b class action movie prompting me to deliver a hard eye roll.

Ugh.

I knew I should've switched to a different playlist.

My reluctance to answer causes Harvey to place his palm on top of the files I'm struggling to review. "*Arlette.*" He instantly chortles over the sneer he's conjured up. "I realize how much you hate hearing your full name, but at least I know I have your attention."

"It's like Pavlov's bell for me." Leaning back in my seat is accompanied by a small smile. "You say my full name and suddenly, I'm twenty years younger, having to pull a thesis worthy statement about different types of music affecting social psychology out of thin air."

His eyebrows launch to the ceiling at the same time his head slants in disbelief. "Did you say...*twenty years younger?*" Bewilderment deepens along with the coloring of his speech. "You were taking psychology at fifteen?!"

"I was *defying* psychology at the age of fifteen." Reaching for the DJ alien pen Slater got me during his trip to Roswell where he rescued a child from an extraterrestrial worshipping cult run by the kid's father. "Simply by being in the class." I thoughtlessly run my thumb along the length of the object, bumps soothing some of my lingering anxiety. "Patterns with people have always fascinated me even when I was the one messing them up."

"That's *one* way to view being so young in a college course."

"It's the *only* way to view being so young in an *advanced* college course that the professor did everything he could to stop you from taking."

Harvey let's his jaw plummet in surprise.

"Not everyone loves my brilliance." The pen in my possession is waved around like a wand to the timing of my declaration. "*Case and point.*"

"Not wanting you in class is a bit different than wanting you dead," Harvey nonchalantly insists, words wafting between us.

"Maybe...just...a *little.*"

We share a small snicker that successfully smothers out more of the uneasiness coursing through my veins.

This moment between us actually feels very familiar.

Working in tight quarters.

Being challenged to look at a situation from a different angle and then presenting him with a small playful pout of concession.

This is what he was like before the title and the huge office and the paycheck that could stimulate the economy of a developing low-income nation.

This is Harv.

This is the guy I had once planned to take home for the holidays.

Harvey delivers a gentle tap to the pile in front of me. “You find anything useful in the handwriting samples?”

“Useful?” Mirth does its best to bum rush into my tone. “Absolutely. I now know we need a better vetting process for our licensed in-house psychologists and counselors considering the fact *so many* of them have a habit of just sending emotionally unreliable operatives back into the field without concern of the consequences. How I’m the only one being stalked for revenge or retribution – or whatever the reason may be that I’m now on their most wanted list – is a *mindfuck* in itself given the number of mentally unstable people that were sent back into the field with *loaded weapons*.”

I’m flashed a slight cringe. “How far back did you go?”

“Further back than I originally anticipated.” Absentmindedly clicking the writing utensil occurs next. “Working with the original data I had collected and then the data I had been given access to allowed for me to construct a timeline; however, once *all* the other branches submitted their records – our international divisions were a little slower on the upload – I not only was able to create an algorithm that allowed me to pinpoint the *true* starting point in time of the poach dates but also additional poaches – like language liaison agents, environmental evaluators, phlebotomists – that I had not considered in my initial search given their more much sporadic exiting. On the upside, I was correct about the starting *place* being this branch in particular. This also explains their intimate knowledge of our security protocols, expectations, and building schematics.”

Concern and consternation chaotically collect in his glare. “How long has someone been siphoning employees from our enterprise?”

“You don’t want the answer.”

“How long?”

“You won’t like the answer.”

“*How. Long. Arley?*”

My thoughtless clicking increases exponentially. “Little less than seven years.”

“*Seven...*” the bright red lettering that falls from his lips shakes as much as his mouth does, “*years?*”

“I said a little less! About two months after you officially stepped into your number.”

“In other words...” He runs both hands through his dark locks prior to professing. “This is my fault.”

“No, it’s-”

“This is happening because of my incompetence.”

“No, you’re not-”

“My inexperience.”

I drop my hand firmly on his arm at the same time I snap, “*Stop.*”

To my surprise, he immediately ceases speaking.

“This whole thing isn’t *your* fault, Harvey. You aren’t the one who poked the African Buffalo.”

Bafflement doesn’t hesitate to arise. “What?”

“African Buffalo when threatened – *or* when one of their herd members is hurt by a creature – they unite as one and execute revenge. Oh, and the fun fact for the *What The Fuck National Geographic* article? This scary, trample your brains out bullshit applies to both other animals *and* people.”

“Hm,” hums my boss in an impressed nature, “that is quite the accurate analogy.” He allows for a softer smile to cross his face once more. “Which shouldn’t be a surprise since you are one of the most brilliant people I’ve ever met.”

“While I would *love* to take credit for this one...” I slightly snicker in

tandem with slowing down my thumb's movement, "that little tidbit is all Slater. One of his earliest missions in R&R required him and Blu to travel to Abidjan where they rescued a nine-month-old – the infant had initially been stolen from his parents off a cruise ship – and one of the ways he kept the kiddo happy during transport was with this stuffed toy buffalo that he'd bought from a local souvenir shop where they told him *all* about the animal. When they completed the return, he tried to send the toy with the child, but the parents refused, wanting *nothing* to remind them of the nightmare, so he just stuffed it in his bag. He totally forgot it was there until he swung by my place to pick up his mission success treat. He went to change in my bathroom, and when he came out, he showed it to me. Told me what they said which prompted me to encourage that *he* keep it, let it remind *him* that he saved another innocent life, yet he insisted *I* keep it. To let it remind *me* that whenever he's away from me on a mission that *that's* what he's doing. Being fearless and dangerous and brave." The image of the stuffed creature doesn't hesitate to creep into my mind. "He also said Mark Buffalo would protect me as well as his desserts while he's away which is why he has a permanent residence in the kitchen – even now."

A new wave of bewilderment bursts in his expression. "Mark Buffalo?"

"Yeah...he's unable to resist a bad dad joke the same way I'm unable to resist expensive tequila."

Amusement appears and disappears at the same swift speed. "Was that the first souvenir he brought you?"

"Huh," is mindlessly grunted before a wide grin grows on my face. "Pretty sure it was."

And it was also the first one put up in our kitchen.

His kitchen.

The kitchen we are currently sharing.

The one I hope we continue to share long after I'm done being "the client".

"And he um...he *always* brings you something back? No matter where he goes?"

"Always." I eagerly nod. "And I always make dessert to welcome him

home.”

“When exactly did that start?”

“I don’t even really remember...” Clicking the pen casually begins again. “He just...came back from a mission one day...swung by my office for...something? Saw the piece of homemade angel cake I had been snacking on and asked could he try a bite.” The brightness in my beam suddenly gets brighter. Damn near blinding. “Kind of been baking him goodies ever since.”

It’s Harvey’s turn to nod, although his is slow and sad. “How come you never baked for me?” His hands fall defeatedly to his lap without waiting for a retort. “How come I didn’t even know you loved baking as much as you do?”

Unsure of how to reply, is what leads me to not.

Yup.

Silence is *definitely* the answer here.

I don’t always know when that’s the case, but I definitely know it is right now.

“How come I never thought to buy you little things that made me think of you?”

The change in song to the cover band version of “When I Was Your Man” by Boyce Avenue has me internally swearing like I’m Samuel Jackson in a *Shaft* movie.

Oh! We should put that on our action movie watch list for the week!

We both not so secretly love an impersonation contest.

He always thinks he should be crowned the winner.

Typically, he probably should.

I’m better at musical reenactment.

Harvey shifts himself around more in his seat. “How come I never kept a spare set of glasses for you in my car?”

Okay, not *loving* the clumsy implication there.

It’s not like me breaking them is an every other week occurrence or something!

Slater just...likes to be *prepared*.

Hence a spare pair in his truck.

And one on his bookshelf.

And one at his ma's.

And one at his dad's despite the fact we probably only go over there together every three months.

The guy is just overly cautious...although...I guess I have broken a pair at all three of those locations.

You know I didn't *think* I was that klutzy until right this second.

"How come I didn't even know you preferred to be called *Arley* versus *Arlette*?"

"It's not that you didn't know that," I quietly argue. "It's just that you always thought *Arlette* sounded more sophisticated than *Arley*. Claimed it rolled off your tongue easier and that it took less effort to remember."

After an uncomfortably long pause, he breathlessly whispers out, "*Wow*." A second slow headshake is attached to him leaning away. Creating distance. Room for his wavy, light blue words to land. "*Wahl was absolutely right*."

"Well," my tone takes a playful one, "that couldn't have tasted good."

"It didn't." Harvey struggles to smirk. "It tasted similar to bad tequila."

"You mean *cheap* tequila."

His forehead immediately wrinkles in response.

"Because there's no such thing as *bad* tequila."

Rather than engage in a much more lighthearted conversation with me he somberly sighs, "I should've said to hell with it and *ended* that conference when he called."

"Harvey-"

"I should've *never* stood you up that first night."

"Harv-"

"I should've *never* picked *this job* over you."

Despite my mouth moving, no sound escapes.

“You *deserve* to feel like you matter, Arley. *Truly. Matter.*”

Pressing my lips closed seems like the most logical option to take.

“You deserve to feel the way *I know* Wahl makes you feel. The way that I can *see* he makes you feel even when he’s not *physically. Here.*” The grated lettering indicates exactly how much it pains him to admit it. “It’s the way I know I never did.” I silently study the movement of his Adam’s apple. How his shoulders sorrowfully slump. “The way I now know I never could.”

So...yeah.

I *definitely* broke my fucking boss.

Can I get fired for this?

“You deserve to feel like more than just the beautiful woman on a man’s arm at a gala or a benefit dinner or a Bridge tournament at the mayor’s.”

“The mayor hosts a Bridge tournament?”

“Every Labor Day weekend.”

Honestly, I wouldn’t have ever guessed that.

Eh, oh well.

It’s not like I know how to play Bridge anyway.

“*Arley,*” the chunkiness in the lettering recaptures my focus, “you are undoubtedly the most intelligent, most beautiful, and most thoughtful woman I’ve ever known. You deserve someone who not only appreciates those qualities but truly *treasures* them. Someone who never fails to prove that they value *you* over anything else. That *you* come first.” What appears to be additional guilt flutters into his gaze. “Someone who wouldn’t *ever* hesitate to hang up the phone for you.”

“Harvey, it’s not your fault that guy broke into my office.”

“No, but it *is* my fault that I wasn’t here when I should’ve been to stop that from being a possibility.”

“Harv-”

“I accept responsibility for all of my actions – or more accurately my

inactions – today and in the past. I also accept that...” another wave of displeasure discos through his stare, “I will never mean to you what Wahl does.”

To be fair...*no one* has ever meant to me what Slater does.

And in spite of how our new...dirty...kinky...side may or may not work out, I know no one else ever will.

A small throat clearing precedes a polite grin. “However, I would like it if we could at least have some sort of cordial relationship. I understand being ‘besties’ is obviously out of the question-”

“Could hearing you *say* besties be out of the question too?”

“*But* perhaps casual friends? Work friends? Or *working* friends? I’m sure it’ll take *work* to get there, but I’m up for it if you are.”

“You mean you want us to get our Ri Ri on?” I lightheartedly poke, yet, when there’s no retort, I find myself cautiously stating, “Okay, so that may not have been my *best* musical one-liner-”

“That was a music reference?”

Shock can’t be kept from overtaking my face, “Wait. Are you saying you don’t get the *song* reference or that you don’t know who Ri Ri is? Or both? Tell me, it’s not both.”

“Then I won’t tell you the thing that it is.”

“Seriously?!” The pen launches itself onto my desk. “You don’t know who Rihanna is?!”

“Is it necessary to become so violent about it?” Harvey jocosely investigates. “Should I be banning this person’s music for aggression it can ignite in personnel?”

“No, Sum 41 causes more disturbance in me than Ri Ri ever could. I mean between the headbanging and air guitaring and mosh pitting-”

“You host a mosh pit in your office?”

“For me, myself, and I, yes.” Giggling is attached to me springing to my bare feet. “Now, get up. There’s no sitting down to this song. That’s counterintuitive.”

His resistance isn’t a surprise by any means. “You want me to stand

to the music?”

“I want you to *dance* to the music,” I correct, searching for the song on a different playlist. “However, listener’s choice.” No movement occurs prompting me to continue speaking. “*I* will be dancing because it has this way of centering me. Freeing me. Helping me make peace with the mistakes I’ve made and refocusing on what I *can* control. And correct. And all that I’m capable of doing.” Pausing at the song is followed by momentarily meeting his gaze. “Baking often has a way of doing that, too, but I can’t exactly whip up a Blueberry Angel Dessert around verifying case assignments and altering the risk analysis algorithm.” Harvey’s small chortle encourages me to wink and press play. “Meet Rihanna aka Ri Ri.”

“You keep calling her Ri Ri. Are you two personally acquainted?”

“In my office...” casually strutting around to the front of my desk where I can dance but also reach for the firearm if necessary, is executed in the middle of the announcement, “I *am* Ri Ri.”

Louder chuckles bounce his frame at the same time I begin to sing along to the tune.

Large, bright, block lettering slowly pops and locks its way to landing in front of me, whispering to the lower half of my figure to do the same. With one hand lingering on the edge of desk, I swivel and sway my frame around in place, swiftly swept up in the spinning and swirling and snaking lyrics seducing my body.

Quieting my mind.

My anxieties.

My fears.

Around the time the chorus hits – finally arriving at the title of the song – Harvey finds the courage to not only stand but move his shoulders.

Awkwardly.

So awkwardly in fact that I’m not actually sure if he’s dancing or trying to stretch out a sore muscle until he leans backwards a bit to try to put some hip into it.

Rather than laugh or discourage his embrace of new to him music, I simply smile and continue to sing along. Allowing my eyes to open and shut

as I surrender to the sounds successfully shifts me away from the stress of the search. The pressure for answers. The straining of my mental capacity that's struggling to sort through what's truly relevant and what's not.

Yet again, I find myself spiraling into serenity when the door to my office abruptly swings wide open except this time, I'm prepared.

Of course, by prepared I mean the firearm is grabbed, the safety turned off, and the loaded gun is aimed at whatever assailant is stupid enough to try the same shit his predecessor did.

While pride is the initial response I spot on my cowboy's face, it's almost instantaneously replaced by disapproval over what I'm sure he feels is a lack of distance between me and the man I'm fairly certain I just gently let down for good. "*Explain.*"

Lowering my weapon occurs in tandem with me playfully snipping, "Or...you could say *hello* upon interrupting the dance party."

Dark, dreary blue drops to the floor from his tightening lips. "What the fuck is he even doin' here?"

"He-"

"Why the fuck isn't he in his *own* office?"

"He-"

"And why the fuck were you havin' a dance party together?"

"I just...needed a minute!"

"*You just needed a minute...?*"

"To breathe!"

"*Breathe.*"

"Compose myself!"

His eyebrows launch to the ceiling in disdain. "*Compose yourself.*"

"*Yes!*" I restore the safety, place the pistol back down on my desk in a frazzled fashion, and rest my butt against the edge. "I asked him to stick around to lend me a hand on some of the paperwork to help expedite the process. And then...one thing led to another-"

"Never a sentence a guy wants to hear their girlfriend say," Blu

mumbles into the middle of my explanation.

“-and I needed a small brain break.”

“The dancin’,” he grumbles, blue lettering still bubbling at his feet.

“So...since Harvey had never heard of Rihanna-”

“You’ve never heard of Rihanna?” Slater’s other best friend croaks from the doorframe he’s leaning against. “Like *the* Rihanna? Like in another time and place would be my baby mama Rihanna?!”

Harvey takes a similar position to mine at the opposite side of the workspace he’s closest to. “Perhaps?”

“And *this* is the dude you’re worried about with your woman?” Levity in Blu’s tone is unmistakable. “Wahl,” he gently taps him on the arm with the back of his hand, “the man doesn’t even know about the Umbrella Empress.”

“Is that what she did before she became a singer?” Our boss spouts his curiosity in my direction. “Was that her original claim to fame?”

“*Forfuckssake*,” Blu mutters under his breath prior to erupting into laughter.

“Why are you laughing?” Harvey immediately investigates. “Why is he laughing?”

“I know why I’m *not* laughing.” It takes no time for Slater’s gaze to lock with mine. “I know why I’m *not* smiling when I should be.”

Culpability quickly claims his expression.

“Maybe you should step out? Try walking in here again with a little more love? A little more respect?”

“Maybe a little bit more country,” my other bodyguard juvenily teases, “maybe a little less rock ‘ roll?”

“I know that song!” my ex gleefully proclaims.

“*Ofcourseyoufuckingdo*,” Slater mutters upon turning on his heels, ramming his balled fist into the side of Blu’s leg, and stepping out of the room. Watching Blu teeter between cackling and groaning in agony is a short-lived experience due to the love of my life once more crossing the threshold inside. Unlike during his original arrival in which rage and jealousy were uncomfortably apparent, he releases a long, deep breath. Latches onto

my stare. Tilts his head slightly to one side and attempts to smile. “*Hi, Angel Cake.*”

Wanting to still the shaky blues floating through the air is what pushes me to reply in a soft volume, “*Hi, Cowboy.*”

“You...” he points his bruised finger at me before rotating it to curl inward, “come here to me, please.”

There’s no vacillation in rushing over.

Throwing myself into his wide-open arms.

Split seconds after my face hits his damp t-shirt, one set of his calloused fingers curl around the nape of my neck at the same time the other lands on the small of my back. Slater lovingly squeezes. Sucks in sharply. Squeezes a second time. Presses all of me into all of him while exhaling the air needed to assist in steadying his frame.

Brushing my nose against the dank fabric has me inhaling scents of sweat and metal and smoke, a combination that prompts me to pull back and purr, “I’m safe, Cowboy.”

His blue glare struggles to accept the statement.

“I’m good.”

Worry barely wavers in spite of my proclamation.

“*I promise.*”

Slater offers me a small nod, drops his forehead against mine, and whispers, “You have any idea how scared I was that somethin’ was gonna happen to you while I was gone, Angel Cake?”

“A lot more than me.”

At that, he leans slightly away and quirks an eyebrow.

“Hey, between you and Mark Buffalo I know how to cowboy up.”

Loud and boisterous laughter precedes his crooked grin. “Is that right?”

“Well, it’s definitely not *wrong.*” More chuckles escape pushing me to add anything I can think of to keep the sound going. “And now that you brought up Mark Buffalo-”

“Did I bring him up?” Slater teasingly pokes back, his hold transitioning from my neck to my hand.

“He’s probably gonna need a bath when we get home. He may or may have gotten into the butter this morning.”

“Funny how there was no difference between the first and second half of that statement, Angel Cake.”

“Wasn’t there?” I playfully question while tapping my chin. “I mean I guess you would know since you’re clearly the brains of this operation and I’m merely the brawns.”

Blu manages to finally catch his breath enough to add, “Sounds like you two have been dancing *and* day drinking up in here.”

“Nah,” casually slips out of me as he shuts the door behind him with all of us inside. “I don’t drink at the office.”

“Really?” Harvey asks, genuine intrigue planting itself on his face. “*Never?*”

Slater grips my hand tighter upon my answering. “Nope.”

“And why not?” His hands find their way to his pants pockets. “It’s not against protocol for certain positions.” A small head bounce is slid between statements. “It’s actually expected and at other times encouraged.”

“I think it’s time to switch departments,” Blu good naturedly goads and rests his back against the blockade.

“Much like not being able to whip up dessert around evaluating data, I can’t exactly sip a glass of Torrez and type out a coherent explanation for why an operative with a pattern of authoritative issues isn’t the best fit for an assignment that requires him to infiltrate an operation by playing a subservient role.”

“*You don’t sip Torrez,*” my boyfriend jovially argues. “You take shots of it. *Every. Time.*”

“Okay, but I *could* sip it.”

“Can’t.”

“Can.”

“Fine then. Won’t.”

“Exactly.” I smugly smirk. “*Won’t* and *can’t* are too very different things, Cowboy.”

“And Torrez is...?” Our boss cautiously asks.

“Tequila,” we reply in tandem.

“Ah,” Harvey slowly nods his comprehension, “I should’ve known after our bad tequila conversation earlier.”

“There’s no such thing as bad tequila,” Slater swiftly states in such a way I can’t help but smile. “Only *cheap* tequila.”

See.

Meant for each other.

Harvey presses his lips tightly together, briefly meets my gaze, and delivers me a small shrug as if wordlessly echoing the silent statement I just made.

Maybe it’s easy for him to see that now.

Hell, maybe it’s easier for me too.

The individual we are all responsible for answering to redirects his focus to the man who is gently stroking my thumb with his. “Status report?”

“Each of the floors previously mentioned have been swept and are secure. Pairs are still in position at all of the entry and exit points.”

“Excellent.”

“Yi’s condition is stable with no surgery required; however, he has to wear a brace for what the doctor is predictin’ to be months and is advised to be severely medicated to withstand the amount of pain he’s currently going through. His wife arrived about twenty minutes ago and should be able to take him home in the next couple of hours accordin’ to Medical.”

“I’ll stop by there next,” Harvey professionally declares. “I’ll extend my condolences to the situation, express our gratitude for his service, and inform them that all medical expenses are covered by the company as well as three months of his temporary leave under the hazard pay clause.”

“Six,” Slater smoothly corrects from beside me.

There’s no reluctance for our boss to scoff. “Pardon?”

“It’s six months for those that are injured durin’ an active assignment.”

“Which he wasn’t.”

“Technically, he *was*,” I meekly remind. “Him being assigned to my security detail by my security detail while my security detail was executing a different leg of the mission transfers him from daytime floor security to active security thereby moving his hazard pay allowance.”

“You know I don’t think you said security enough,” Blu verbally jabs, bouncy light words immediately receiving an eye roll.

Rather than pull rank or counter that he’ll find a way around that, Harvey simply surrenders. “Six months it is then.” Holding Slater’s stare occurs while further investigating, “And the prisoner?”

“Successfully interrogated.”

“Disposed of?”

“Affirmative.”

Context clues are screaming like Linkin Park that that’s how he got those new bruises.

Swallowing down the urge to verify is followed by me asking, “Does this mean I need to stop digging for answers? That you now know who wants me dead?”

“Negative.” His grip noticeably tightens. “You should continue as is for the time bein’, and unfortunately, due to the extensive amount of information the attacker had regardin’ who to watch out for, who to avoid, when to strike, going forward we will no longer inform others of your mandatory comings and goings. Not security. Not your secretary.” He swings his glare to the man he has no reason to ever be jealous of. “Not even *you*, Seventeen.”

“Agreed.”

Surprise for the second time in such a short period of time, has my jaw falling to the ground in tandem with Slater’s eyebrows soaring to the sky. “No argument?”

“No.” In spite of the rigid edges of his words, they land sturdily at his own feet. “You have repeatedly demonstrated not only your knowledge and

understanding of protocols, but your willingness and devotion to doing whatever's best for the client. That you are more than capable of putting *them* and *their safety* first." It's his turn to choke down the apprehension in his throat. "There's no need for me to further question your calls on this assignment."

Logically, I know my mouth can't drop any lower, yet I swear it does.

"Yup," Blu quietly interjects, "you two were *definitely* day drinking in here."

"I'm glad to hear you say that, sir, because for the next step of this operation we'll be usin' Arley as bait."

Snatching my hand away is attached to a high pitch croak, "What?!"

"*Not actual bait, Angel Cake.*"

"What?!"

"Mind bait."

"What the fuck does that mean?!"

"Is that country slang for a headache?" Blu needlessly needles prompting Slater to toss him a glare across the room.

"You really want a bruise on your *other* leg?"

He presses his lips tightly together and offers up both hands in submission.

"While interrogatin' the assailant, I managed to extract financial information regardin' payment--"

"Allowing us to possibly follow the money," my other guard informs at a lower volume.

"-as well as the device in which he had been assigned to use for communication with the person who theoretically hired him. We're havin' it cloned for use and trackin' and are settin' up a package pick up of 'Songbird' for tomorrow tonight. Word around the office regardin' whether or not this kidnap attempt was a failure or success is mixed, and we're gonna use this mixture to our advantage. Seventeen, I need you to put out a vague branch memo regardin' her missin' status, that way, whoever the inside person is doesn't tip off the person we're communicatin' with about delivery. We'll

stage it to look like Arley's been successfully captured by tyin' her up and takin' a focused picture of mostly her face and hands in the trunk of the transport vehicle."

"Naturally," Harvey inserts on a nod of approval.

There's no way to stop myself from squawking, "Is that natural?!"

"However-"

"Come on, Cowboy. Not the fancy but," I thoughtlessly whine. "Anything but the fancy but."

"However, we won't actually be puttin' Arley at risk. We'll use Consuelos as a body double-"

"She looks nothing like me!"

He immediately shoots me a mirthful smirk. "In a dimly lit room, covered up, bound, and gagged, they initially won't be able to tell the difference, Angel Cake."

Valid point.

I don't *like* it.

But still.

Valid point.

My main bodyguard cuts his attention back to our boss. "We'll use Consuelos as a body double as well as additional backup for securin' the situation due to Reynolds bein' left behind to assist in protectin' the actual target."

Grumbling under my breath is accompanied by an irritated eyeroll. "And *there's* the reason for the ugly but."

"We were originally scheduled to go by Hilda and T's place tomorrow night for dinner and to solidify the last of the engagement shower details, but because of today's attack," Slater veers his stare back to me, soft, crisp, blue coloring undulating its way my direction, "I'll call T and have him and Hilda swing by our penthouse instead. He'll understand. Hell, they both will. You know the only thing your family cares about is that you're okay." I bashfully nod at the statement prompting him to resume speaking to the other people in the room. "We'll secure the scene, capture the lead, and use *them* to

hopefully extract additional information regardin' who is behind all this.” The sigh that seeps free is so heavy it damn near cracks the floor. “It’s a slow and steady climb upward, but at this point, it’s what we have. Followin’ each and every road to get us closer to endin’ this shit once and for all.”

“Agreed,” Harvey states on a slow nod. “And *permanently* shutting down this poacher is the secondary goal to protecting one of our most valued assets.”

Oh, look, Robot Boss has successfully returned to his default programming!

“Do you already have an idea for getting Arley out of here undetected?” Blu cautiously questions.

“Yeah.” Slater’s crystal gaze reverts back to me, nervousness reiterated by the slanted angle of the single word. “And you’re not gonna like it...”

Fuck. Me.

Why do I get the feeling that’s going to be his new fucking catchphrase for the foreseeable future?

Chapter 4

Arley

You know when I envisioned us spending the evening together all hot and sweaty and tangled in each other's arms in our bedroom – er *his bedroom* – this was *so not* what I had in mind.

Slater frustratedly drops his hands onto his gym shorts covered hips and shakes his head in disapproval. “How many times have we talked about that thumb, Angel Cake?”

“Today?” I bitterly bite back after blowing a loose strand away from my glasses. “Or like in general? Because last I checked you didn't mind it when I-”

“Take this shit seriously, please.” More unhappiness flutters into his gaze. “Proper formation is the difference between a subdued opponent and a broken wrist.” He lifts his right hand up to be eyelevel with me. “Curl those fingers to not see the nail. Lock the thumb here,” he fastens the digit on top of his index finger, “to stabilize and secure.” His other hand gestures in my direction. “Show me. Show me so we can get back to actually boxin'.”

“You know between being stuffed *in a box* to get out of my own office and spending the last two hours being taught *how to box*, I'm feeling a little boxed in. Pun very much intended.”

“This is important.”

“You know what other box is important?” My head tilts slightly to one side, black, box frame glasses sliding slightly down my nose. “The penalty box. Which is where *your brother* spent too much time last night for roughing. Although, I guess it's better than five for fighting.”

“Wanna know what's funny?”

Anxious to hear about something that isn't the mistakes I'm making during this forced self-defense session that came on the heels of the “how to break your restraints” lesson has me eagerly asking, “What?”

“I taught *him* how to fight.”

The unamusing segue receives a scowl.

“Same as I’m tryin’ to teach you.”

Probably should’ve seen that coming.

Perhaps if my brain weren’t sweating like the rest of me I could’ve.

“Look, protocol-”

“Is such a gross word.” My neon sports bra covered shoulders playfully bounce. “Like *the* grossest fucking word.”

“Grosser than petunia?”

Dramatically gagging and shuddering is accompanied by a collection of incomprehensible sounds.

“Yeah...that’s what I thought,” Slater lightly chuckles for the first time in hours.

“You *know* how much I hate that word.”

“And you *know* how much I hate leavin’ you unprotected.”

“But I *will* be protected,” I sweetly insist at the same time I sway my frame forward. “There are so many firearms in this penthouse you’d think Liam Neeson used to live here, T has been taking martial arts classes to get ‘in shape’ for the wedding, and while Reynolds may not be in *my* starting line – or even someone I would’ve drafted – he’s earned his way into being in *yours*, which means I can trust him,” sliding my hands around his perspire caked lower half occurs between statements, “because *you* trust him.” Slater melts into my hold the instant my fingers fold together on top of his drenched white t-shirt. “You have gotta loosen the gun holster strings a little bit, Cowboy.”

“You know gun holsters don’t have strings.”

“Straps then.”

He fights the urge to grin and tucks a few strands of damp hair behind my ear. “I just...I don’t wanna repeat of today.”

“Which part of today exactly?” my teasing tone threatens to break through the tension symphony surrounding him. “The part where we made a sticky mess in this room or the part where you made a chaos infested mess in my office?”

“The part where some asshole broke into what should’ve been a secure buildin’ and damn near got away with kidnappin’ you.”

Seeing his seriousness seep back to the surface is what stops me from attempting to lighten the situation further. “But he *didn’t*. And the next person who tries it – assuming there is a next person – won’t either, Slater. I’m as safe as I can be.”

“You *will be* once we go over the key moves a few more times.”

“But-”

“I’m not askin’.”

“But-”

“And I’m not arguin’.”

“But-”

“Angel Cake,” both hands lovingly cup my face, “you have no idea how fuckin’ terrified I was that I wouldn’t be there in time today to stop *anything* from happenin’ to you. And the fact that I can’t be there every minute of every day to protect you from so much as a fuckin’ papercut *kills Me*.” His grip sweetly tightens. “But knowin’ I’ve done everything I can to turn *you* into the most powerful weapon you’ll ever need – whether I’m there or not – is the only thing givin’ me any sort of peace of mind right now. So, *please*,” soft, shaky blue lettering cascades down past my music note sleep shorts, “let me have this?”

Ugh.

Between the sweetness and tint of his timbre, how am I supposed to deny him?

“Fine.” Quietly conceding is attached to stepping back out of his grasp. “If turning me into *Tomb Raider* is what *you* need to make yourself feel better about it then so be it.”

“I was thinkin’ more like Foxy Brown.”

“Because she’s brown?”

“Because she’s *foxy*.”

Readying myself to a combat stance occurs prior to me good naturedly inquiring, “You telling me you had the hots for classic Pam Grier?”

“You tellin’ me you didn’t?”

“*Touche.*”

Laughter leaves us both, yet it’s Slater who speaks first afterward, “How about this, Foxy Arley? Each time you successfully execute one of the maneuvers we’ve been workin’ on, *I’ll* take somethin’ off. And each time you make a mistake, *you* take somethin’ off.”

Lightly moaning over the idea of where this is *finally* going can’t be helped. “Like a game of strip poker?”

“I’ll poke whatever you like once one of us is naked.”

“Done, son!”

The tiny sneer I’m flashed receives a light snicker. “What did I say about callin’ me son?”

“That was bro!”

“They’re in the same fuckin’ category.”

“Alright, old man,” I juveniley taunt, confidence suddenly soaring, “how do you wanna get your ass kicked first?”

“Palm strikes.”

Those are easy.

Almost a little *too* easy.

I wonder what he’s up to.

With my widened stance and palms upward, fingers together but not locked, I hold my ground upon his short approach. I flex the wrist of my dominant hand, aggressively strike upward near his throat area – making sure to avoid actual contact – and swiftly yank it away which in theory will cause the attacker’s head to snap backward. Slater demonstrates the motion of the action that *should* occur next prompting me to use both open palms to gently tap his ears – again not actually trying to hurt the man I can’t wait to see naked again – in a follow up hit. Lastly, I lift my foot and gently touch his inner thigh with the tips of my toes to imply a forceful kick to the balls.

“Impressive.” My boyfriend slightly retreats in an amused fashion. “*Really impressive.*” A quirked eyebrow makes an appearance in his expression. “You been holdin’ out on me, Angel Cake?”

“Of course. There wasn’t nakedness at stake.” Wide mouth chuckles precede him preparing to take his shirt off, an action that immediately summons an objection. “Ah. Ah. Shorts first, Cowboy. I don’t need added distractions yet.”

His head tips mirthfully to one side. “You find me more distractin’ with my shirt off than my pants?”

“Only because you’ve still got on underwear.” Ego gets the better of me again. “You know. *For another minute or two.*”

“Oh, that mouth on you, baby,” he wickedly taunts while wiggling out of his bottoms. “Gonna have to teach it a lesson when it’s on me.”

Whimpers are properly suppressed by one set of lips pressing together yet the other, the set that hopes *his mouth* touches it for a very long and hard lesson, forces me to briefly clamp my thighs closed in order to keep it from throwing in the towel too early.

We gotta win this thing.

Not just to save face – although saving face is important – but so that the part of my best friend that still thinks of me as something so delicate it can’t even be put in his carry on with six rolls of bubble wrap can sleep a little easier tonight.

“Let’s do a side headlock.”

“You think you’ve still got on enough deodorant for that?” I playfully torment during my repositioning. “I mean an hour ago it was *questionable.*”

Slater narrows his gaze, swings his arm around my neck, and attempts to lock me in place. Rather than allow a choking mock to begin, I turn toward him as much as possible, tap his inner thigh to indicate a kick to the nuts, and the instant his hold loosens, I slip out. Step behind him. Lightly thump his black boxer brief covered ass cheek and watch him fall to the ground once more demobilized.

The glance I’m thrown over his shoulder is devious and delectable. “*Now*, can I take my shirt off?”

Victoriously nodding is attached to tightening my frizzy, high ponytail.

Slater slowly rises to his feet making sure to enslave my stare during

each exaggerated motion in the removal process. Lifting up the very edge of the white article has me unconsciously leaning my face to one side in anticipation of seeing the slick skin being sheltered underneath. Inch by painstaking inch, he reveals abs that Adobe should add to their airbrushing features.

This time I don't even bother hiding my soft moan. "God, you're like looking at a caramel covered biscotti. I just wanna dip you in coffee and let you melt in my mouth."

Slight redness reaches his cheeks prior to his shirt landing on the nearby bed. "You flatterin' me to aid in a distraction technique, Angel Cake?"

"No, I'm flattering you because you *deserve* flattering." Stealing a tiny bite out of my bottom lip can't be helped. "Seriously, Cowboy. You probably scare tourists every time you're in Italy by making them think those damn marble statues have suddenly come to life."

To my surprise, he sweetly asks, "Wanna go to Italy with me?"

"Like...someday in general or someday like I need to look into expediting getting me a passport?"

"You don't have passport?"

"When have I ever *needed* a passport?!"

Post a hum and nod of a fair point made, he states, "Someday like *after* this mission is over."

"But like *before* your next one?"

"I don't think there's going to *be* a next one." My brain barely has time to fathom the comment due to him resuming our sparring. "Let's do some elbow strikes." He puts himself into a deeper squat than before. "Except this time, I'mma do some blockin'." His bunched fists lift to guard his face. "*Do not* let me get the drop on you."

"Only dropping around here is about to be those bottoms," my finger flicks to his lower half, "on the ground."

Slater struggles not to smirk as he waves me forward.

From my defensive stance in front of him, I stabilize my core, lift my arm, bend it at the elbow, and swing it towards his face. Like he warned, he

opens his palm to gently block the shot, prompting me to recoil and try again. The second time goes exactly like the first, as does the third and fourth, yet on the fifth attempt is when I duck to avoid the block and come for him from the opposite direction creating my last triumph.

An almost proud grunt pops free at the same moment he creates a bit of distance. “And I’ve been defeated.”

“Like a low-level villain in a *Mortal Kombat* movie.”

He offers me a crooked beam. “You think I was takin’ it easy on you?”

“I *know* you were taking it easy on me.” Folding my arms across my chest is done on a pointed expression. “You once rescued a broken footed tween from a hostel in New Zealand using chewing gum and a penny.” It’s my turn to shoot him an arrogant smirk. “There’s no statistical probability or risk analysis that would *ever* favor me getting the upper hand on you while you’re conscious.”

“Or *unconscious*, baby. You stomp your feet like an elephant alertin’ the herd to poachers.”

“Ohhhh...just shut up and get naked already!” I squeak in a flustered frenzy.

Slater haughtily chuckles, hooks his thumbs in his boxer briefs, and banishes them to his ankles in such a fluid motion it makes me wonder if there was a lesson in the military about stripping efficiently.

Distracted by him and all of his naked, tan glory leaves me open for an attack I probably should’ve expected.

And *would’ve* expected had I not been eye fucking my best friend the way I want him to actually be fucking me.

One second I’m contemplating tucking my tongue back into my mouth and the next I’m mere inches away from the floor to ceiling windows, facing the city skyline, with both of his arms firmly locked around my chest, trapping my arms to my frame. While I know feeling safe isn’t his intent at this very moment, it’s exactly what I feel.

It’s what I always feel when I’m with him.

Against him.

“This is an important hold to know how to get out of, Angel Cake,” he purrs, corn flower blue lettering creeping along the shell of my ear and the rim of my glasses.

Maneuvering my face over my shoulder is done just enough to coo my retort, *“Unless you’re the one doing the holding, Cowboy.”*

Gravelly groans are the only noise that precede one set of fingers latching onto the front of my sports bra.

Yanking it down.

Forcing my tits to sloppily spill over.

Any chance of gasping is cut off by his hands grabbing my hands and slamming them on the glass. *“Don’t. Move.”*

“Yes, Slater,” is instantly whispered in return.

More groans liberate themselves except these are coated in gratitude.

So, while sex may not be the subject I am most versed in – thankfully that seems to be changing – I have learned that some men really, *really* enjoy hearing their name not only screamed but simply spoken.

Almost as if that alone is enough to get things swelling.

Slater’s shaft knocking against me verifies the observation seconds prior to goosebumps multiplying across my skin as his fingertips smoothly glide themselves the lengths of my arms, taking out time to circle the tiny Blink-182 tattoo that hides in the fold of my right elbow and the random beauty marks near my left shoulder.

The unhurried tracing of my trembling frame continues, now following the stretch of my spine, an action that causes him to quietly confess, *“Fuck, I want my name dancing around these notes, baby.”* He unexpectedly spreads his digits to dig into my flesh. *“Me always on you.”* His fingers possessively flex. *“Forever.”*

I’m tempted to look over my shoulder to reply, yet I recall my instructions and seek his reflection in the glass instead. *“Me too.”*

Another low, dark grumble is granted freedom at the same time his hands finally reach the band of my sleep shorts. Once there, Slater teasingly skims them along the rim, back to front, front to back, back and down the crack of my ass, devilishly chortling during my obvious struggle not to lean

into the delicious caresses.

Did he take a class on sexual warfare?

Is there a class on sexual warfare?

Is that how spies and other undercover agents get so good at sexpionage?

Ohmygod, is he so good at this torture because this is what he “dabbled in” during his transition from the PJs to HE?!

Lowering my bottoms to the ground is a swift process; however, resuming his standing position is one that my boyfriend purposely makes painfully slow. Puffs of hot air searing the skin on the back of my knees is enough on its own to cause my soaking wet muscles to throb yet the feeling of his teeth savagely scraping the territory upward has them tightening to the point I worry I might accidentally snap his dick in two when he slides inside.

If he ever slides inside.

I’m now concerned that this whole situation is another self-defense lesson that I am epically failing.

Gentle nuzzles of his nose and scruff covered cheeks begin on the outside of my thighs, wordlessly ending my worries.

Reminding me that taking his time isn’t about making me miserable.

It’s about *loving* me.

Worshipping me.

Letting me *physically feel* as wanted and as powerful as he verbally insists that I am.

All of a sudden, the very tip of Slater’s tongue drags itself along the curve of my ass cheek, tempting my figure to tense, to shy away from having him openly lick me somewhere so unusual, so typically scoffed at, but I don’t.

I maintain my still stance.

Continue to show him my dedication.

My ability to follow his orders.

Prove how I trust his word.

Him.

How he can trust me.

Mine.

“*Such a good fuckin’ girl for me...*” my boyfriend hungrily murmurs against the skin, vibrations making me wetter.

Needier.

“*Can you be a filthy one?*” The lower octave being used is carnal. Depraved. “*Spread those legs. Show me how you fuckin’ drip for me.*”

Not coming in the process of widening my stance is a feat within itself; however, the instant he runs a finger up my inner thigh, charting the trek of stickiness back to its source, I have to clamp down on the inside of my cheek to divert the climax it threatens to release.

“*Fuckkkk,*” he barbarically groans during his single digit’s drag along the outside of my lower lips, “*I love that I make you this way.*” The teasing push inside is both brief and frustrating. “*That I’m the only one who gets to make you this way.*” Thankfully, his proclamation is followed by him quickly rising to his feet, pulling my ass cheeks in opposites directions, and brutishly thrusting deep. “*Have you this way.*” Screams of ecstasy shoot up the back of my throat only to be cut off by another husky declaration. “*Claim you this way.*”

And claiming is exactly what he does.

Carving his name over and over again at the hilt.

Chiseling it into every teeny, tiny orgasmic tremble that thrums its way through my system.

Temptations to move without permission grow in strength and numbers but having him split me wide open while he primitively pounds, providing my pussy with its every need makes it much easier to remain paralyzed in pure pleasure.

To get lost to the primal pressing of my nipples against the glass during each harsh heave forward and every clit brush on the yank back.

My pussy ceaselessly clamps down on his cock, pleading for more and mercy, barbarity and benevolence, endlessness and ephemerality. His callous fingers claw at my cheeks, making sure to dig deep enough to bruise,

and I merely howl out in approval. Remind him how much I love being covered in his marks as much as he loves being the one to cover me. Sweat streaks along the length of my neck until Slater slams my head forward to bump into the window forcing its trajectory to turn.

To descend down my tit.

Teasingly linger on the tip of my nipple.

Plead for him to swipe it away, which he doesn't.

No.

He relocates the one hand that was still clutching onto my ass and whirls it around and around and around causing my sopping wet muscles to drench his dick further. Having my nipples pitilessly pinched between his fingers to the same incessant rate he's banging my head against the glass pushes me over orgasm's edge with no more than a sharp squeak for a warning. Rapid pulsations pulse around his cock, imploring him to join me, while screams of his names perpetually pour past my lips, fogging the see through surface with its heat. Every nerve ending in my body lights up like the very night sky we're facing, and the notion that the whole world can not only see me but see how *he* sees me, how he *loves* to see me, hell, how he *loves me*, has me thoughtlessly coming all over again. This time there's no resisting the intensity. Slater sucks in a sharp breath from what I imagined are gritted teeth and unleashes a heavenly burst. Before the blistering heat can satiate the swelling muscles, he slips out. Let's go of my tit and aims his next blast at the backside of my pussy. And then against one ass cheek. And then the other. The last batch is splashed along the firm stretch of my thighs and the edge of my heel. Cum continually trickles across every centimeter its near leaving me benumbed by so much bliss I can barely breathe.

The sudden feeling of Slater's lips against the shell of my ear sends faint shudders across my frame that have it shamelessly considering coming undone once more – something I didn't even think was possible. "Now," he arrogantly chortles, "*that's* how you drip for me, Angel Cake."

It sure the hell is.

And honestly?

I absolutely can't wait to do it again.

Chapter 5

Slater

This isn't the first time I've stuffed a woman into the trunk of a vehicle.

But it will be the last.

Hopefully.

Wedging my earpiece into place is promptly followed by turning it on and verifying its working order. "Com Check."

"One two, one two," Blu raps back to a familiar beat.

"Don't do that," I insist while surveying the seemingly vacant backlot parking area. "Don't choose *now* of all times to channel your inner Juelz Santana, Little Boy Blu. We both know you were never meant to have that hip-hop career you swear you could've had."

His laugh is expected and just the right amount to recenter my attention on this task at hand rather than the unfinished one I left behind.

As much as fun as it is arguing with my girlfriend about letting me handle the food being served at the engagement shower *as my gift to the couple* and it not being done to undermine her or communicate that I don't think she can manage it – which she clearly can – it's not something I should be focusing on *now*.

Not when her life depends on this op going smoothly.

And contrary to the adorable tantrum she threw right before Reynolds arrived, impressing a small group of people with her party hosting abilities is not a matter of life or death.

She cannot – *and will not* – die of shame.

It's not possible.

Hell, even if it were possible, I wouldn't let that shit happen.

I would do whatever it took for her to shine like she deserves, even if it meant *I* was the one who died of humiliation.

I'm always willing to give up any piece of me for any piece of her.

Put her first.

No matter the cost.

"*Should've had,*" Blu finally bites back after his loud laughter subsides.

"No."

"*Would've had.*"

"Still no."

"Fuck you, whatdoyouknow," he impishly chuckles once more.
"You've probably only heard mainstream shit, anyway."

"You do realize that Santana and the rest of the Dipset crew were all more or less mainstream for a while, right?"

"Why do you know that?" my best friend instantly gripes. "And why do I feel like if I were to ask you what Grandmaster Flash's real name is—"

"Joseph Robert Saddler."

"See! Why do you know *that*?! Why do I always feel like you're studying for a *Jeopardy* audition you forgot to tell me you were going on?"

"One, I wouldn't tell you I was goin'."

"Ouch."

"Two, I wouldn't *go* 'cause they don't ask enough questions in subjects I am actually versed in versus could probably bullshit my way through."

A small stretch of silence precedes him inquiring, "You've had Arley run a risk analysis and agent performance test on that possibility, haven't you?"

"That's not important." I smirk and allow my stare to sweep the back entrance for a second time. "What *is* important is that you keep a clear visual on the situation. I may be familiar with this bar – giving us the initial tactical advantage – but I'm not sure who or what to expect for this package transfer."

"*Roger that.*"

After exiting the human pinata's vehicle that we found the phone in, I pull my baseball cap down to keep my face covered and casually saunter my way towards the trunk, making sure to keep an eye on our surroundings just in case one of the nearby cameras – we've been monitoring since yesterday – happens to be hacked pre-exchange.

Which would be a *smart* move since they didn't pick the location.

And since they have no idea what the individual that they're supposed to be doing business with looks like.

They wanted to keep it that way; however, I expressed my disinterest in leaving the "package" unattended.

Especially after the slightly botched extraction.

It may pain me to admit this – like getting kneed in the nuts during a training exercise – but Seventeen has come through with what I requested. The inner office memos spread around to allude to her capture were not only convincing, they were *chilling*. They were so well crafted that had I not known for an indisputable fact she was safely in our penthouse, pouting about having to practice more self-defense maneuvers, I would've had my ass banging down his office door, demanding he gives me all the information he has for me to hunt these motherfuckers down. The notion that I *wasn't* doing exactly that was also covered by a small note which informed everyone who received the notice that we had a team on it, a team being led by the worried boyfriend further building on the cover we already had in place. When I say the man crossed his Ts and dotted his Is and scribbled his signature on every angle we needed, I mean anything we strategically requested was fulfilled in impressive timing.

I no longer have concerns he's in on this shit.

Just that he wants in on the *other shit*.

The shit no other man on this entire goddamn planet will ever be in on besides me.

Hitting the trunk button occurs in tandem with Blu investigating, "How many times have you been to this bar, again?"

"Enough."

"And you know *without a doubt* the owner is out of town?"

“Affirmative.”

“Where?”

“Jamaica.”

“*And* you’re sure he won’t mind when we break some shit?”

Definitely a *when* not *if* situation.

“Affirmative.” Lifting the backend happens between statements.

“They’re doin’ a gut style remodel next week. And damage will be factored in as part of packagin’ mishaps.”

“And you confirmed all of this?”

“This mornin’.”

“*When?*”

“After eggs but before blowjobs.” I angle my body to block any possible camera views and meet Consuelos’s gaze to receive two sharp blinks that communicate she’s fine. It wasn’t my idea to duct tape her mouth. It was hers. She wanted to be “in character” during the entire ride. Get her “fight or flight” adrenaline revved up. “*Why?*” is attached to me snatching up the brown bag for her head. “Why are you suddenly interrogatin’ me?”

“Just doing to you, what you do me when it comes to us using *my* sources.”

“Except my source can read a clock and a calendar.”

“We made it out of that shit alive!”

“*Barely.*” There’s a grumbled slew of curses prior to mission silence. I take his transition to a quieter status as my cue to check the position of our other team member. “Hands?”

Two blinks to indicate she has enough slack to slip out when the time is ready.

“Feet?”

Two more blinks along with a tiny paddling motion of her feet are showcased next.

“Bag time.”

She offers me two final rounds of fluttering her eyelashes before she

pretends to fight the process of letting me slip the rough material over her head. Once it's there, I hoist her up and over my shoulder, feigning annoyance about her wiggling nature for anyone who may be watching. The bright, sky blue, sweet treat covered leggings my grip clutches onto after shutting the trunk threatens to make me smile during our approach yet mission focus refuses to allow it.

Now is not the time to reflect on the fact I had Aviva buy two pairs of these – to match a pink top similar to the one Arley was photographed in – because I knew Angel Cake would actually enjoy wearing them.

And she does.

She was sassily sashaying her tight body around in them along with one of my old t-shirts this afternoon, which also made her tantrum even harder to take seriously.

Come on, now.

How do you have a straight-faced argument with someone who's wearing smiling donuts on their ass?

Getting into the brown brick building through the rear door is an easy task thanks to the spare key – intended for the remodel crew – that I find taped to the back of the dumpster.

See my source *is* credible.

He also just so happens to be my father.

But that's not something Blu needs to know.

I guide us inside, lock the door behind me, and use the light on the attacker's phone to illuminate us a path. The long hallway that houses two customer bathrooms as well as a supply closet ends at the bar's side opening, which also happens to be the area where the light switch is stationed. Clicking them on allows me to put the phone away and continue to carry Consuelos in a less awkward nature. While the bar is rather small – one of the reasons they're renovating – there's still a sizeable distance from us to the front door where they'll be breaching. Once I've gently placed her down in the middle of the black stool, I give her thigh a soft pat to indicate she's in position. She taps the heels of her brightly colored sneakers together to communicate she confirms the communication, and I proceed with my preparations.

The advantages to having Consuelos here are obvious.

She's more than capable of defending herself.

She's agile.

Flexible.

Has amazing response times.

She can handle firearms and is well versed in close quarter combat – with and without weaponry.

She's exactly the type of person you *want* in the field having your six.

Plus, she's not my woman.

I don't have the weight of worry about having to keep her from getting hurt.

However, I *do* have to have her six.

Which means drawing fire *away* from her over to me since she's not wearing a vest.

It also means avoiding firing in *that* direction.

Yeah, I'm an excellent marksman, but one misstep, one bumped elbow, or one poorly timed trigger pull could be the difference between a fellow agent walking out of here unscathed and having to get creative about cauterizing a wound.

It wouldn't be the first time I've had to do that.

But much like stuffing a woman in the trunk of a car, it's not something I'm hoping to have to do again.

Removing my CZ P10C from its holster is followed by sweeping what should be an already secure scene. Despite the fact no movement has been detected on the property, it's still proper protocol to ensure that no one else is here.

The last thing we need is to be ambushed on our ambush.

Post traveling around the main seating area, I move to the right of the bar into another dark hallway. I flick the lights on, cautiously explore the defrosted cooler, visually survey the rather empty executive office on the opposite side and declare the entire situation to be clear out loud for both Blu

and Consuelos as I re-holster my pistol.

Granting myself access to the bar from the open space near the hallway I most recently inspected is accompanied by grabbing items I'll be using to create in the field tactical weapons needed to minimize firing Consuelos's direction. I swipe a cocktail napkin. Scan the garnish area for the cayenne pepper I know they use for their "special" Bloody Mary recipe. Grab it and one of the Ziploc bags typically used to stash away prepped garnishes like mint. Near the dirty dishes area, I visually scour the shelves in search of the last two crucial ingredients, finding them both behind a few dry towels. Now, having worked my way to the opposite end – closer to where we first entered – I quickly get to work, measuring out the items and lining them up for easy assembly.

I've just finished adding vinegar to the baggie when Blu playfully states, "Wahl, party of five."

It's impossible not to roll my eyes especially considering I know exactly what he's going to say next.

"Wahl, your table for five is ready."

"Yeah, I heard you blow your horn, Blu." Adjusting my grip on the object occurs before an instruction is given. "Provide me with tactical intel."

"One moment, please. Let me check with the back regarding tonight's happy hour menu."

Part of me wants to ask if he's *really* gonna do this shit all night.

But this ain't our first rodeo together.

I fucking *know* that he is.

"It seems like the special is the same ol' same ol'. Securing the target served in a tall glass to be garnished with an ice cold kill you cherry on top."

Exactly as predicted.

No one who is *this good* at what they do would ever leave loose ends.

That's sloppy.

Sloppiness makes it easier for you to get caught.

Eliminated.

And while eliminating whoever is trying to eliminate my woman is

my mission, being eliminated themselves is not theirs.

“You’ve got a member of Guns and Roses about to knock on Heaven’s Door,” Blu announces prompting my next actions to take motion.

“Bob Dylan,” I needlessly correct while snatching up the baking soda, cayenne pepper mix to be thrown into the bag.

“What?”

“Bob Dylan wrote the original version for the movie *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*.” Putting the items inside and sealing it closed is what happens next. “I think it definitely belongs on the list of the greatest westerns of all time, but Angel Cake begs to differ because it doesn’t feature Eastwood.”

“Everyone knows if Eastwood’s not in it then it doesn’t count.”

Irritation over the asinine comment clashes into determination to focus on the task at hand. “We’ll finish this fuckin’ convo at the bar.”

“Affirmative.”

Leaning slightly around the edge of the wall gives me a clear view of the knob being jiggled. I toss the chemical compound in that direction, retrieve my weapon, and cautiously watch as the handle is shot off to grant the intruder access to the building. Unfortunately for him, mere seconds after he opens the door, the Ziploc bag explodes sending a toxic mixture similar to that of pepper spray and tear gas into the air. The black masked man thoughtlessly inhales a large mouthful, not only choking himself, but leaving him open for an easy kill. Knowing he’s got on a protective vest – at the very least – has me firing off a round straight through his Adam’s apple. Blood gushes from the created hole adding to his suffocating status which causes him to lose the hold on his weapon. It crashes to the ground at the same time I pierce each of his thighs with a bullet, hitting the femoral arteries to ensure he bleeds out.

From the front of the room, a secondary entry is executed, and I instantly lower myself to be unseen behind the bar, still gripping the bottle of Wilcox.

“Perimeter breached,” announces one of the men. “Package is insight.” The shortest pause is presented prior to another statement. “Affirmative, sir. Faxon, secure the package. Tompkins you’re with me.” I slide myself over into my defensive position. Wait for additional movement.

“Remember, locate the target, confirm identity, and then eliminate.”

Sudden coughing sounds inform me of Tompkins’s location like I planned. “*Fuck!*” More hacking noises reverberate around the room. “We’ve got...gas?” Another round of poor attempts to breathe precede. “Poison gas! The shit burns my eyes! I can’t-” Groans of agony increase alongside his footsteps. “Fuck, Horgan! I can’t see shit!”

The proclamation is my cue to toss the bottle up into the air next.

“Located!” shouts one of them, pushing them to both turn the same direction and fire.

Poor situational awareness results in them each clipping one another in the shoulder. Their momentary disorientation allows me to slide out into the broken glass pieces where I promptly unload a round into Tompkins’s knee, whip my weapon in the opposite direction to fire one into Horgan’s groin muscle, and snap it back to the first assailant just in time to send what should be a kill shot through his right eye. Rather than wait for confirmation of his demise, I rotate my firearm and aim it once more at Horgan, delivering a second bullet to his ankle, needing to keep my discharges low to avoid turning Consuelos – who I can’t see due to her escaping her confines – into a casualty. He grunts and grumbles and staggers. Fumbles his grip on his weapon. I shift my focus slightly upward, preparing to clip his arm, when his entire frame is forced forward courtesy of the aforementioned freed woman kicking him in the back of his knee. In tandem, we each squeeze the triggers to our guns. His round – to no surprise – ricochets off the side wall – missing me entirely – while mine soars through his open mouth, piercing his uvula during its trajectory. Blood sprays on the petite female near him and just as the projectile wedges itself into a framed photo on the far wall, she stomps her foot on the back of his neck and unloads three slugs into the side of his skull.

I shift my body and stare upward at the same time Consuelos states, “Greatest western of all time has got to go to *El Topo*.” She keeps her weapon pointed downward at the corpse she created. “Alejandro Jodorowsky is fucking legendary.” The offhanded shoulder shrug threatens to have me crack a smile. “I mean yeah, I do stunt work now, but I used to *dreaaammm* of being in an Alejandro Jodorowsky classic.”

“Yeah, experimental film shit isn’t somethin’ I’ve ever really gotten

into.” Aiming my firearm at the door is followed by her doing the same. “But pump enough tequila into the situation, and I’m a lot more willin’ to try.”

“Aren’t we all?” Consuelos good naturedly jabs back.

“Look who almost missed bar trivia with us,” Blu playfully announces while pushing his zip tied captive forward. “I made sure he cancelled his ride share so he could stick around.” Another hard shove sends the assailant straight towards me. “His mouth may be sealed now but before it got that way, he wanted me to tell you that *Dead Man* should be on the greatest western list, too.” Amusement is thrown in my direction in the form of bouncing eyebrows. “Pun unintended.”

“*Blu.*”

“Fuck, alright, fine. Great pun very much fucking intended.”

“Mediocre.”

“Fuck you. That shit was *super clever.*” He forcefully nudges the masked individual onto the nearest barstool. “*Sit.*” My best friend lifts his own pistol to press against the person’s forehead. “First round is on you, buttercup.”

The three of us rotate our positions so that I’m directly in front for interrogation, leaving them to assist from the sides. “*Consuelos, mask.*”

Keeping her gun directed at the male with one hand, she uses the other to yank off the item.

Immediately, I lower my weapon at the reveal and grunt in disbelief. “*McPherson?*”

His expression instantaneously shifts to shock too as he muffle shouts my name in return.

Blu quirks an eyebrow and cautiously investigates, “You two know each other?”

“Yeah,” I motion for Consuelos to rip off the duct tape next, “this hellhound and I go way back.”

Doesn’t mean I wouldn’t kill him.

Especially for coming after Arley.

“*Devil Dog, Superman,*” Mick McPherson grumbles prior to wiggling

his square jaw. “You know the term is fuckin’ *Devil Dog*.”

“What I don’t know, McPherson, is why your ass is barkin’ around in my backyard.” Holstering my weapon precedes me folding my arms across my chest. “Explain.” The narrowing of my gaze has him swallowing his nervousness. “*Quickly*.”

“Not much to explain. We were hired to secure a package and eliminate waste.”

“Personal?”

“Contract.” He adjusts himself on the stool. “Through the company.”

“Don’t bullshit me, McPherson. Gunz and Kammo is *private security*. Not paramilitary.”

“It’s *primarily* private security, but a few years back, Gunz branched out as a favor to an old special ops buddy. One thing led to another and now...the company does a handful of these a year. Not enough to be on anyone major’s radar – like Haworth – but enough for better baristas in the breakroom and bigger bonuses at Christmas.”

“You have your own fucking baristas?!” Blu gapes in outrage.

“Did they tell you who the package was?”

“Negative.” His brown eyes remain locked on mine. “We were given a photo for confirmation. And *that*,” he tips his head Consuelos’s direction, “is *not* the photo.”

“Show me.”

McPherson cuts his gaze over to my second in command who looks completely clueless. “This round’s on *you*, asshole.”

It takes Blu a moment to realize why our attention is on him, and once he does, he retrieves the device from his back pocket. One swipe wakes the device up. Afterwards, he angles it in front of McPherson for facial recognition, which then unveils a picture of a female the instant it’s confirmed.

Rather than respond to the building ache in my chest over seeing her most recent employee database photo, I simply ask, “That her?”

Blu lifts it up for him to confirm. “Affirmative.”

I nod to my second to put the phone in his pocket for us to have Wiz analyze later. “Were you given any other details on the package itself?”

“No.”

“Do you have any idea who hired you?”

He quickly shakes his head. “You know the drill, Wahl. We don’t look at the package unless we need to. And we don’t look at the receipt unless we’re told to.”

“*I’m tellin’ you to.*” Closing the small gap between us is accompanied by balling up the collar of his shirt with one hand and yanking him uncomfortably close to my face. “That package is not only Haworth property, she’s *my fuckin’ woman.*”

His eyes widen to the size of the shitty, round, overhead lights.

“*Blacklist her.*” Tightening my hold on the fabric mindlessly occurs. “No assignment – *of any kind from any company* – is to be taken. Let what happened here today be a goddamn PG preview of what’s to come if any other firm so much as *thinks* about coming after her. Make sure they know that if they do, it’s a declaration of all-out fuckin’ war. We clear?”

“Roger that.” McPherson does his best to nod. “But you know the Marvin Gaye Act comes at a high price, Wahl.”

“Double it.”

Another stunned expression appears.

“And then get me the fuckin’ receipt from *this* order, McPherson.” My head tilts to one side in a menacing nature. “*Your life* fuckin’ depends on it.”

Chapter 6

Slater

I thought I knew torture.

I really did.

I thought it involved shit like jumper cables and a bucket of ice-cold water and being dangled from the ceiling like fresh meat in a freezer.

But here I stand.

Corrected.

It turns out that watching my woman in a teeny, tiny blue jean mini skirt with her tits pouring out of a too tight white tank top bend over this bar, desperate to get another man's attention, takes the shit to a whole new level.

This is the very definition of torture.

We're talking look up the word.

See this moment.

This moment I would like to rip up into a million fucking pieces and never experience again.

"No matter how hard you stare at my ass in this skirt, it's not coming off anytime soon, babe." Arley tosses me a sassy smirk over her shoulder. "And as hard as this damn thing was to get on, once *it*, along with these fucking boots come off, guess what? They're *staying* off."

"Fair," I state on a crooked grin and lean in closer, "however--"

"Ohhhh..." she swivels her frame my direction, "such a fancy but for such a non-fancy place."

"*However*, while I had to stand by and watch you put all this shit on, I *will not* simply stand by and watch you take all this shit off."

Thrill instantly arises in her gaze.

"And just to be clear," yanking her downward by the beltloop hitches her breath, "I'm *not askin'*, Angel Cake." Her lips twitch in what I imagine to be debate prompting my mouth to feather hers, "*And I damn sure ain't*

arguin'.”

Rather than wait for a verbal reply, I let my tongue slip inside and steal it straight off hers. The first sweep isn't sweet. Or soft. Or even the loving shit I should be doing in public. No. It's rough and short, the exact opposite of the ones that follow, which are all coated in so much feral frustration that she doesn't know whether to moan or whimper, push me away or grab the lapels of my flannel for leverage.

“Could you two stop that?” Blu unexpectedly interrupts, voice severing our locked lips. “*That's* what's scaring away the fucking bartender.”

“He *is* avoiding this section, right?!” Arley squeaks, figure still leaning into my hold as it shifts from the loops of her skirt to possessively resting on her hip. “It's not just me?”

“Oh, no, it's *definitely* just you,” my second in command pokes between chuckles, “but that's because Wahl is using the force of his ancient Jedi ancestors to Luke Skywalker his ass away from you, Princess Leia.”

Arley cocks her head in confusion. “Weren't they brother and sister?”

Lifting my practically full beer occurs at the same time I state, “We all know if I were to be anyone in that universe, I'd be fuckin' Han Solo.”

“Which makes sense since Blu is basically a hairless Wookiee.”

“*Ohmygod*, he's totally made that sound during sex!” Aviva giggles over her boyfriend's shoulder.

“Hey!”

“Plus, he *does* usually ride shotgun like a co-pilot should.”

“You hate to let anyone else fucking drive!”

“And I damn sure would hate to let anyone else fly my Millennium Falcon if I had one.”

“I'd make your horn play ‘The Imperial March’ every time you honked it.”

“Do we really think the Millennium Falcon *has* a horn?” Aviva ponders out loud. “Like was that subject ever covered in any of the movies?” She adjusts her grip on the old fashioned she's drinking. “They're all so long that I don't think I've ever fully finished one without having sex or a nap in

the middle of it. Oh! That gold bikini costume for role playing is way overpriced, by the way. Had Khar not begged and pleaded and promised to let me lick honey off his nipples I don't think I would've splurged for it."

The corners of his lips curl upward on a halfhearted shrug. "What can I say? I'm a man willing to compromise."

"Can we compromise by endin' this conversation?" I impishly grumble prior to pressing my lips against my bottle.

Chuckles leave the three of them as I allow myself another small sip.

Technically, I'm here on assignment.

An assignment I could've easily left Arley at the penthouse while conducting.

Getting an information drop from McPherson in a public location, that's easy to write off as a coincidence, doesn't exactly require a Daniel Craig level of finesse, but it does call for some face time in a social environment. One in which it would be hard for people to eavesdrop in and be less suspicious of us having to be so close to talk. For instance, if it was a loud, overcrowded country bar downtown. Which is where we are. Having a "date night" out at The Double Barrell to further cultivate the fairytale that we're an actual couple.

Although, it's not a fairy tale.

Our relationship is real.

Very. Fucking. Real.

It's so real that I may have called her dad in Hawaii last night under the pretense to talk shop about hockey, yet really used it to discuss marrying his only daughter.

I didn't have to ask, but I know Angel Cake.

She'd want his blessing.

Hell, she's gonna want *all* of her family's blessings.

Truthfully, her parents and Monte are the easy ones while Morris will come around with a simple man to man chat over steak and whiskey. Now, T on the other hand? I'm not so sure. Yeah, he likes me as her best friend, her protector, the man who'd rip out his own kidney with his bare hands to give it

to her, but as the man who wants to marry her until death pries her out of my hands?

Something tells me that's gonna be a different story.

After their laughter fades, Arley wiggles the hot pink earplug around in her ear, prompting me to investigate, "You doin' okay, Angel Cake?"

She offers me a bashful grin and a small nod. "I'm good, Cowboy."

"They helpin'?"

"A lot, actually."

"Perfect."

I'm more than familiar with her ability to get easily overwhelmed in a crowd – hence why she wears a pair when we go to the rodeo each year – but wasn't sure if the trick would work the same at a bar. She gets a little self-conscious about it then, so I expected the same now. Part of me thinks she's just putting on a brave face in front of our friends. And if that's the case I fucking hate it.

I would never ask her to be something she's not.

Not for me.

Not for anything.

The other part of me hopes she's stretching her comfort zones because she *wants* to.

Because she wants to actually try new shit like she's been saying.

And if new shit just so happens to be being the eye candy on my arm that keeps the Backwoods Barbies at bay while we toss back a beer and listen to Dierks Bentley then who am I to complain?

My eyes have just finished doing a quick sweep of our surroundings when a woman cautiously calls out, "Vi Vi?"

Our groups attention immediately swings to the smiling, cut off jean shorts wearing woman.

"Ohmygod, Li Li?!" Aviva squeaks in return to the brunette I've met.

That right now I wish I hadn't.

That the knot in my gut is telling me I'm gonna *regret* that I have.

The two embrace in a quick, cordial hug that's followed with Blu's girlfriend stating, "I didn't know you were back in town already!"

"Hey, Lila," Blu greets, momentarily giving up on the bartender who is blatantly ignoring our area.

I'm not *that* intimidating.

At the moment, anyway.

Guy's just being a prick.

"Hey Blu." Lila offhandedly acknowledges back before resuming her convo with her friend. "Yeah, it was just this small sales retreat up in Applecourt, Michigan. Gorgeous scenery, but-

"Way too many apples?" I unconsciously interject.

"Exactly!" Her expression lights up even more at the sight of me. "Like does anyone *really* eat that many apples?"

"Accordin' to the locals, yeah. And if they ain't eatin' 'em, they damn sure are drinkin' em."

"Did you happen to try the Apple Pie Moonshine when you were there?"

The beam the memory summons causes me to chuckle. "Which type? The one with vodka or Everclear?"

"Ugh," she gags without hesitation, "there's one with fucking Everclear?"

"My feelin's exactly."

Our exchange of snickers easily segues her into a warm greeting. "Good to see you again, Wahl. Didn't think I ever would..."

There's no time to acknowledge or retort due to Arley unhappily snipping, "Again?" Her blue and brown flannel covered arms fold defensively across her chest. "As in you two know each other? As in you two have previously met?"

"Yeah, we went out awhile back," Lila nonchalantly answers.

Huh.

This assignment is about to hit an unexpected complication, isn't it?

“Like *right* before you two started dating,” Aviva describes to Arley yet gravitates closer to Blu. “Like the *day* you had that whole hospital scare and Khar had to leave our potpies in the oven to get to the office and Wahl had to like drop everything to come be with you-”

“I’m everything,” Lila states in such a way there’s no denying it makes my girlfriend’s skin crawl.

Did I say complicated?

I meant compromised.

This information pickup disguised as a date has been compromised.

If I hadn’t already been waiting for over forty-eight fucking hours for this shit, we would abort right the fuck now.

Still might.

Lila sticks an open palm out in her direction. “You must be Harley.”

“*Arley*,” the love of my life snarls at the same time she shakes her hand.

“Right.” She offers her what appears to be a polite grin. “Sorry. Wahl mainly called you Angel Cake, so it must not have stuck.”

The title has her leaning slightly more into my hold that’s remained steady.

“I’m so happy he took my advice about the whole situation.”

All of a sudden, Arley’s narrowed gaze falls down to me. “You talked to her about *me? Us?*”

“There really wasn’t an ‘us’ to discuss at that time,” Lila needlessly reminds while sauntering to the other side of Blu to the bar. “And had you not been in that accident, I don’t know that there ever would’ve been.”

Okay.

That sounded bitchy.

She didn’t mean for it to.

That...couldn’t...possibly have been her intent.

My girlfriend leans around Blu’s posted frame to snap, “*Excuse me?!*”

“I just meant had your life not been in danger, he probably would’ve

never told you how he really felt.”

Too be fair...that's *still* not when I fucking told her.

“Li Li’s totally right,” Aviva enthusiastically agrees spurring Blu to grin wide and my scowl to unconsciously deepen. “Had that *not* happened, you two probably wouldn’t have hooked up. Probably ever.” The thought I know has suddenly popped into her mind unfortunately leaves her lips. “Ohhhhh! And you two,” her finger wiggles back and forth between me and Lila, “probably would’ve!” I can’t even open my mouth to stop the next train from leaving the station. “Then *this double*,” she motions her index to me and Arley, “would’ve been *this double*.” It bounces to me and her college roommate. “How funny is that!?”

“So *funny*,” Blu mischievously pokes and waggles his eyebrows at me.

Can we go one day?

Just *one* fucking day without him doing something punch worthy?

“What’s everyone drinkin’?” Lila asks resting her forearms on the bar, clearly displaying how good her ass looks in her cut off jean shorts.

Assuming it does.

I’m not looking.

I have no fucking desire to look.

The one place I am looking, I get the feeling won’t be an option if I can’t stop this Ghosts of Women I’ve Could’ve Slept With movie pitch from fucking happening.

“I can see Wahl’s drinking the best there is,” she playfully winks at me and then relocates her gaze to Aviva. “Vi Vi?”

“An Old Fashioned.”

“With Wilcox?”

“You know it,” Aviva girlishly giggles. “It’s almost empty, though.”

“And for the love of all that is holy at this neon church, we cannot get a clergy man to take our confession,” Blu dramatically sighs.

Arley attempts to smile. “He means order.”

“I know what he means,” Aviva states back without eye contact.
“Hey, Hunt!”

Under her breath, the woman beside me mutters, “She is being a cun-”

Clearing my throat stops anyone from being able to hear it but also convinces Arley to remove herself from my loving grasp.

“Get your ass over here!”

The man who had pretty much been avoiding us since the other person working went on break finally makes his way over. “Lila...Lila... Lila...” He swings the dish cloth over his shoulder. “Those boots were definitely made for walking into this bar.”

Or another bar.

Or this bar at another fucking time.

Let’s say when I’m not here to get information about who is possibly out to kill the very woman who is less than subtly throwing daggers at someone she shouldn’t be.

Because there’s nothing to worry about.

There wasn’t then.

There isn’t now.

There *never* will be.

Arley Carmichal is it for me.

Always has been.

Always will be.

In this life and any others that may follow.

“What can I get ya?” Hunt asks while matching her stance.

“Two old fashioned for me and Vi Vi,” she coos, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, “but I’m not sure what everyone else wants.”

“Another beer,” Blu immediately announces as the male begins to get to work on their beverages.

Hunt cuts a quick glance in my direction only to receive a small headshake and polite hand of denial.

“Tequila,” Arley aggressively bites. “Preferably top shelf. Tall glass.”

My counter is right above a whisper, “Maybe start with a single?”

“*Extra* tall glass.”

“You really think that’s the *best* idea right now?” I quietly investigate, stare shifting up to hers

The second her brown gaze lands on my blue she bites, “Would you prefer me to have an Old fashion?”

“*Old fashioned*,” corrects the woman on the opposite end of the bar from her, summoning Arley’s glare like it’s Candy Man in the goddamn mirror. “Probably shouldn’t drink one if you don’t know what it’s called.”

“That’s great advice!” Aviva emphasizes the point with a bobble headed nod and places her empty glass near me. “I ordered a Moscow Mule once with some coworkers but made the mistake of calling it Moscow Moose and still haven’t lived that shit down.”

I effortlessly slide the dish forward towards the bartender yet slyly slip the garnish stick into my possession, tucking it into my curled fingers.

“Baby, how’d you fuck that one up?” Blu jovially questions as he tugs his girlfriend in closer, which instantaneously reminds me of the distance my own has created.

“You know when it comes to mammals shit is a lot harder for me.”

“Aren’t there more species of bees than mammals?” Arley’s eyebrows pinch together in confusion. “Wait. Aren’t there more species of bees than mammals *and birds* put together?”

“You’re such a good listener!” Aviva sweetly praises the woman to my left while I craftily pocket the tool for an emergency combat situation. “I just love that about you.”

“I love that about you too,” I firmly state, yanking her attention back to me. “And I also love when I don’t have to hold your hair back ‘cause you forget it’s one tequila, two tequila, six tequila, *floor*.”

“You’re exaggerating.”

“Is that right?”

“Yeah.”

“Halloween.”

Her nose scrunches in objection causing her bright, round orange frames to bounce. “That was a *holiday*.”

“When the Dragons lost their tenth game last season.”

“I was in *mourning*!”

“When Blu and I got back from Monaco in March.”

“We were celebrating!”

A pointed look is all she’s offered.

“I’ll have you know,” her hand falls defiantly to her hip, “I can hold my tequila, thank you very much.”

“Doesn’t sound like it,” Lila indifferently rebuts prior to taking her drink. “Put ‘em all on my tab, Hunt.”

He slides another of the same drink onto the bar. “You got it, Lila.”

Suddenly, the music shifts tempos from some classic Dolly to an older Carrie Underwood song that excites the woman I am secretly praying disappears into the arms of any man in the room willing to have her. Bonus points if he happens to be far, far, *far* the fuck away from here. “Oh! I love this song!”

“And I would *love* that tequila,” my better half states to the man handing Blu his beer. “Or the bottle. Can I have the whole bottle? Save on the dishes?”

“You-”

“*Do. Not.*” The tone I take is even firmer than the pointed finger he’s shot. “*Serve. Her. The. Whole. Bottle.*”

“Come on, Vi Vi,” Lila gently tugs her friend behind her, “let’s see if we can get a fun line dance going with just the ladies in the room.”

Hunt places an empty glass in front of Arley and cocks a smirk. “Man, do I love to watch that woman move.”

“Could you *pour*?” She taps the top of it. “*Please.*”

“Angel Cake-”

“*Faster.*”

He nods, pops the bottle of Torrez, and begins to fill the glass. Once it hits what would be about two shots worth, he garnishes it with lime. Unfortunately, before he has the chance to ask if we need anything else, Arley guzzles down the contents and mercilessly sucks all the juice possible out of the wedge.

Not wincing at the sight of her teeth sinking aggressively into the fruit is difficult.

Fuck, that's an image that's gonna be hard to shake the next time she's on her knees for me.

Assuming she will be, and that this accidental fuckery hasn't completely somehow managed to set us back into the cold showers and hand job zone.

Cautiously, I call out, "Angel-"

"Another, please!" This time her entire palm lightly pats the drinkware. "And maybe to the top? Like *alllllllll* the way to the top."

Instinct has me anxious to interfere again. "Arley-"

"How come they didn't invite me to dance?" The interrogation is shot around my body to Blu, proving she's purposely ignoring me, although, I'm not sure why. I didn't exactly *suggest* we summon some chick I went out with *one time* to our double date cover. That was just an unhappy accident. Or the angels asking we light better scented candles. "Am I not a lady?!"

"You're *such* a fucking lady," Blu impishly needles.

I shoot him a warning glare not to do the shit I know he's doing.

"And I can be fun!" She stomps her cowboy boot covered foot on a pout.

"So. *Fun.*" Echoes my second, receiving a kick in the side of his ankle.

He needs to knock that shit off right the fuck now.

We don't need another problem in this situation.

And a loud, drunk target would most certainly *be* a fucking problem when the objective is to blend in.

Not standout.

“And I can dance!” Arley swipes up the half full glass causing liquid to splash out. “I’m a good dancer!”

“You’re the *best* fucking dancer,” he insists on a tip of his beer bottle. “Go out there and show them!”

“Yes!” She chokes back a couple more gulps, sucks on the new wedge, and sassily slams it down. “Yes!”

Hunt lifts the bottle to top it off prompting me to gnarl, “*Pour her another drop, and you’ll be learnin’ to bartend with your fuckin’ feet.*”

He recaps the expensive beverage at the same time Blu urges her away, “Go! Go! Go out there! Go out there and dance like nobody’s fucking watching.”

“Yes! Yee-haw!”

It takes every muscle in my body not to grunt in disapproval over the stereotyped exclamation.

“*Yeeeeee-fucking-haaaaw, cowgirl!*”

His last push convinces Arley to strut out a short distance in front of us to join the easy-to-follow line dance while I slowly spin around to maintain a watchful eye on the disaster unfolding. Keeping my gaze focused on her rather than her hips that are swaying unironically to “Before He Cheats”, I mumble, “I’m prepared to stage a bar fight just to give you the beatin’ you’re askin’ for.”

Loud, unrestrained laughter bounces his entire frame.

“I’m not fuckin’ kiddin’.”

“*Relax, Wahl.*” He tosses an arm around my shoulder, arrogant chortles continuing. “This shit is good for both of you. I promise.”

I send a small glare in his direction. “How the *fuck* is this shit good for us, Blu?”

“Because *jealous sex* is just a *little bit* hotter than make up sex.”

His playful eyebrow waggles have me grumbling, “I’m gonna kill you and make it look like a fuckin’ accident.”

He laughs again at first yet abruptly stops when I don’t join in.

Tilts his head.

Grows concerned.

“Shit,” he lowers his volume, “can you really do that?”

I *can*.

I *have*.

And if he fucked up my relationship with Arley in any real way, I most certainly *will*.

Rather than answer, I train my stare back on where the love of my life is struggling to keep up with the fancy footwork that’s been added to what was initially an easy-to-follow set of steps. The intricate movement of heels clicking against the polished floors feels as if someone is doing a dance Morse Code about how fucked this evening is.

Fuck, I wonder how much it would cost for the Fire Marshall to barge in and declare this shit a hazard forcing us all out.

Whatever it is I’ve got enough to cover it.

At this point I’m not above selling a fucking testicle to stop the increasing pain coming from watching Arley panic over her inability to catch the last two toe taps that occur before the group changes directions.

“God, it’s like that scene in *Coyote Ugly* except instead of being the Tyra Banks character-” my head instantly snaps his direction, “*respectfully*,” Blu lifts his beer free palm up in a pleading fashion, “she’s that blonde Jersey chick.”

I allow my gaze to gravitate back to where it belongs.

“Can she sing?”

His continued teasing results in my jaw beginning to tick.

“Should we get her a microphone?”

The opportunity to threaten him is suddenly cut short due to the movement spotted out of the corner of my eye. Leaning my back against the bar allows me to slyly oscillate my stare between my girlfriend wildly whipping her hair around – momentarily lost in the fun of the activity – and the figure stealthily weaving around the other patrons.

Its movements are precise.

Paced.

Have me reaching for the garnish tool I pocketed earlier while simultaneously studying its progression.

Lifting my bottle to my lips is done to mask my announcement.
“*Three Thirty.*”

Blu continues to grin, elbows me in the side like he’s making another joke, and airily confirms, “*Spotted.*”

Arley and Aviva lock eyes and sassily sing the popular line in the bridge prompting a genuine smile to pierce my lips, an action that would convince the average person I’m unaware of my surroundings and an undertrained soldier that now is the perfect time to strike. And just like I predicted, the male who has had his head down during his entire trek this direction, flops onto the stool beside me, body purposely bumping into mine.

Effortlessly, I feign a chuckle and angle myself slightly in his direction, face leaned over to crowd his space. “*Touch me again and I’ll paralyze you where you fuckin’ sit.*” Letting the sharp end poke at the sensitive pressure point on his hand is followed by me pretending to laugh once more. “*Come after my woman, and I’ll bury your ass out back.*”

The male cocks his head to the side finally revealing his face. “Do you just not...*believe* in saying hello, Wahl?”

I roll my eyes and smoothly return the makeshift weapon to my pocket. “Why the cloak and dagger shit, McPherson?”

“*Subtlety,*” he announces at the same time he raises two fingers in the air to flag down a bartender. “You should try it sometime.”

“Just did.”

“You call threatening to kill me with a toothpick *subtle?*”

“I call *not* killin’ you with it subtle.”

On a slow shake of the head, he grumps, “You can’t kill a motherfucker with a toothpick, Wahl.”

“You can kill a motherfucker with just about anything.”

“True, but...” A nervous adjustment in his seat occurs next. “Not a toothpick. It’s not possible.”

“Not *feasible* and not *possible* are two different things, McPherson.”

Arrogantly smirking can't be stopped. "Shouldn't you know that shit, jellyhead?"

"Jarhead."

"Close enough."

It's his turn to roll his eyes, which allows for me to resume facing the group of women who are continuing the line dance activity, although switching steps to fit the Kane Brown song now pumping through the speakers.

McPherson waits until he has a beer to match our laid-back stance.

At that point, I nonchalantly ask, "How's the tour lineup lookin'?"

"The Marvin Gaye set is on repeat for every major venue."

For the first time since the incident at the office, relief plops onto my broad shoulders, prompting them to sink to the floor.

Thank fuck there's some good news.

Knowing Arley is blacklisted from all the major players, all the ones that could possibly be a real threat worth worrying about, will make it a little easier to sleep at night.

And for us to leave the penthouse together for more than just mission related shit or work.

She'll like that.

Hell, she might even love it.

But with the way she's currently sneering at Lila every chance she gets, popular bars downtown will probably be in our best interest to avoid in the future.

Or maybe just forever.

I kind of like the sound of forever.

"All booking fees were paid promptly by the label."

Good to know the numbers aren't dragging their feet on this shit.

Watching Arley roll her hips with a little more ease and confidence is attached to asking another question. "And the client who hired you for the latest gig?"

McPherson prepares to answer when a group of loud, giggling females wedge themselves next to him both distracting and delighting him.

I give him a moment to enjoy checking out their asses and exchange “come fuck me” expressions with a couple – primarily to maintain the casual cover we’re using as randomly running into him at the bar – before clearing my throat to regain his focus. “*The client?*”

“No go.” He chugs back a mouthful. “Some third-party company.”

He’s presented with a quirked eyebrow. “Was it The Agama Foundation?”

“No, The Seps Institution.”

The bit of relief that just graced me with its presence instantly dissipates.

Fucking, *really?*

How many companies are out to kill the love of my life?

And why?

“Getting you a merch sample took some major persuading, but it’s done.” McPherson sends his stare up to the blonde beside him while turning to face her in the stool. “You thirsty, gorgeous?”

She smiles wide, adjusts the pink cowboy hat on her head, and leans forward to give him a great shot of her tits. Instead of being irked – like someone would expect – I merely wait until he puts his beer down to give her more of his attention. When that particular execution occurs, I count to four, turn in my seat to put my own half empty bottle down beside his – snaking the cleverly hidden thumb drive in the process – and loudly proclaim, “Gonna grab my girlfriend and head out.” Patting him forcefully twice on the shoulder informs him that I have the object in my possession. “Have a good time!”

“Oh, we will...” He flashes a crooked smile at the bouncy female beside him. “Won’t we, baby?”

More theatrical giggles escape her granting me the perfect reason to abandon the acquaintance I just “happened” to run into. Locking eyes with Blu, I declare, “I’m takin’ Angel Cake home.”

My second in command nods his understanding. “We’ll be right

behind you.” He swings his face to where the line dancing has dispersed but Aviva and Lila have started to grind on one another. “Alright, maybe not *right* behind you. I kind of need to be behind *that*,” a finger point is swiftly given at the same time the drive is slipped into my pocket, “*first*.”

Spotting Arley doing her best to dance alone nearby creates an ache in my chest that faithfully follows the same tempo of the Little Big Town song that’s hitting a little too close to home at the moment.

Lord have mercy if my woman would’ve been drinking wine, beer, *and* whiskey tonight.

I’d definitely be holding her hair back.

Probably in the parking lot while she puked next to my truck.

Navigating around the few people in our way with Blu on my heels has me arriving in front of Arley with only another minute or so left in the song. As easy as it would be to take her by the hand and disappear out of the building, an unfamiliar desperation pulsates in her wide-eyed gaze.

Commands I wind both arms around her hips.

Use one hand to possessively palm her ass.

Rest my forehead against hers and sing along to the easy chorus.

Angel Cake’s hands rhythmically explore my abs and chest only to eventually cup my face in such an enticing nature that I can’t keep my mouth from pouncing hers. Tequila turns what should’ve been a quick two-step of our tongues into a *Dancing with the Stars* worthy tango. While the original plan was to promptly get her out of building, into my truck, and safely home, the fury and fire at which her mouth is fighting mine has me revising the idea.

Temporarily unlocking our lips to growl, “*Keep that shit up, baby, and we won’t make it to the backseat of my truck.*”

She steals a teasing lick of my tongue and sexily taunts. “Bathroom stall instead, Cowboy?”

Uncontrollable hunger unleashes an unholy rumble. “You know you deserve better than that, Angel Cake.”

“Can you just...” her fingertips anxiously tug at the bottom of my shirt, “treat me like you would anyone else?”

The firmness in my tone is nonnegotiable. “No.”

“Just this once?”

“No.”

“But-”

“I’m not listenin’.”

“But-”

“And I’m not arguin’.”

“But I am!” Having her rip herself out of my grip is equally heartbreaking and infuriating. “I wanna argue!”

Thankfully, our tiff is hard to decipher to the outside world due to the Jordan Davis song reverberating around the room. “Why?”

“Because I want us to be like other couples!”

My mouth doesn’t even have time to consider moving.

“Because I wanna *be* like other people!”

Even through the upbeat country pop her pain is unmistakable.

“Because I don’t always wanna be so fucking different!”

It’s impossible to stop me from lovingly pinching her chin as I bite, “*Knock that shit off.*”

“I-”

“No.” This time my interruption causes her to clamp her mouth shut. “You *are* different, Angel Cake, and that’s the shit I fuckin’ love.” Gliding my hand over to cup her cheek is an effortless action. “You are the woman I fuckin’ love.” There’s no missing the hitch in her breath. “You *have always been the woman I’ve fuckin’ loved, Arley.*” A gentle stroke of my thumb is accompanied by a slow headshake. “I’m not gonna treat you like some random fuck and forget because that’s not who you are. And that’s *never* gonna be who you are to me.” My hand falls lifelessly back to my side. “So, don’t waste your time wantin’ somethin’ you’re better than or *mine* by askin’ me to treat the woman I’m givin’ my last name to like some random one-nightstand *would’ve been.*”

Her teeth dig briefly into her bottom lip before she asks, “You love

me?”

“Of course.”

“But you’re like...*in love* with me?”

“Second verse?” I allow my expression to slightly soften. “Same as the first, Angel Cake.”

“I love you too.”

“I know.”

“Like the *in love* with you too.”

“Oh, I know.” Cockily grinning can’t be helped. “*That’s* why I’ll fuck you in the bathroom stall if you want.”

Arley’s initial narrowed gaze transitions to one of excitement.

“I am more than happy to give my woman whatever she really needs from me...” Cradling her fingers with mine occurs at the same time I begin to back up out of the dance space. “*Especially* in that department.”

After shooting her a reassuring wink, I face forward and lead us to the back corner, opposite of the front doors. We take a left into the men’s room – because in my experience they raise less hell about quickies happening – and don’t stop walking until we’ve made it into the furthest open stall. The instant we’re there, I lock the door. Tug the love of my life over to me. Hoist her off the ground like she weighs nothing and savagely slam her against the nearby wall. Any ability to breathe or speak or second guess this being a good decision is robbed directly out of her mouth. To call the fierce nature my tongue is whipping around anything less than feral would be a fucking understatement, just as describing the ripping of her tiny, lacy panties as anything other than barbaric would be a lie. Determined to give her not only what she thinks she wants but I know she needs is what pushes me to forgo any gentleness I assumed would be necessary post exchanging those three little words. Keeping my mouth mounted on hers, furiously twisting and winding and bending to devour every whimper it can sense, distracts Arley from the frantic motions of my hand unbuckling my belt.

Dropping my zipper.

Yanking my jeans and boxer briefs just low enough to free my cock.

The first thrust inside is so hard it forces her lips to abandon mine in

desperation to scream out; however, the force from my forehead knocking against hers smashes the words together. “*OhmygodSlater!*”

“*You know the rules, baby,*” I grunt on another heavy heave. “*Only.*” She’s jerked down into a third sharp stroke. “*My.*” And another. “*Fucking.*” Two more. “*Name.*”

“*Slater,*” escapes in an airy back bowing whimper that has Arley banging her head against the dingy, taupe painted wall. “*Fuck...Slater...*”

“*That’s what you wanted, right?*” Driving my dick deeper has her damn near crawling up the surface trying to reach the ceiling. “*To be fucked like this?*” Her heels kick into my ass cheeks for mercy. For more. “*To let everyone know you’re being fucked like this?*” Arley’s soaking muscles ruthlessly swell around my shaft, sucking it in deeper, smearing scorching hot juices on every inch it can reach. “*To let everyone know I’m the one fuckin’ you like this?*”

“*Yes!*” She pants, flushed face burying itself into the crook of my neck. “*Yes!*”

“*Then keep fuckin’ screamin my name.*”

Scraping my teeth along her salty skin down the side of her neck results in shudders and sharp gasps of air, while clamping them right above her collarbone causes her pussy to mimic the motion, choking my cock to the point I’m now the one struggling to breathe. Torrid wetness trickles past where my balls are slapping her ass to mark my thighs that tighten harder and harder and harder on every primitive pound. Clearly overwhelmed by the steady amount of pressure and pleasure, Angel Cake furiously bangs on the tops of my shoulders.

My shoulder blades.

The tops again.

Her torso wildly whips back and forth, hard nipples repeatedly grazing my chest, pussy growing wetter and wetter every time they’re unrelentingly rubbed through the fabric of her thin shirt. Strengthening the grip, I have on her hips has my curled fingers incessantly colliding with the wall even more, but any pain it might ignite is easy to ignore.

Hell, just about *everything* is easy to ignore with the way she’s huffing and bucking to the same tempo of the music creeping into the closed

off room.

Seriously.

Why would I give a shit that my calves are threatening to cramp or that by the time we're through there's going to be an Olympic size pool of sweat in the jeans I gotta wear home when the only person I think about... dream about...*fantasize* about is getting ready to get off so goddamn hard?

Arley's lower half suddenly quivers in a familiar nature prompting me to push my lips against the shell of ear and purr, "*Be my favorite little filthy thing and come all over my cock.*"

The light throbs grow stronger.

Quicker.

"Come so fucking hard that they can hear you over the music."

More quakes and shakes but still not enough.

And by the way heels of her boots are drilling into my ass she's more than close.

She's right there and just needs the tiniest tip.

An idea immediately slithers to the front of my mind pulling a smug smirk to lips. "*Come so fucking hard she can hear on the dance floor.*"

At that, her head snaps up towards the ceiling and unleashes the sweetest, most sinful screaming, "*Yes! Yes! I'm coming!*" One little puff is placed between the proclamation and my name. "*Slater!*" Piping hot pulsations fervidly lave my dick, daring it to withstand the amount of unremitting wetness and constriction, pleading with it to forget about stretching this moment out and putting in the work to have another. "*Come for me, Cowboy,*" my woman commands at the same time her stare drops down to find mine. "*I wanna be dirty for our ride home.*"

"*Fuccccckkkkkk,*" is hissed out between my gritted teeth prior to a single sharp suck of air coming in. There's no way to prevent my balls from drawing upward and unloading blazing burst on top of burst on top of burst as deep as they can possibly get. And despite logically knowing I can't bury them any deeper, I thrust up once more, determined to brand my name, my love, my reason for fucking existing on the deepest depths I can fathom.

Never again will she ask me to treat her like everyone else.

Because now she knows *this* is better.

Chapter 7

Arley

Much like you can tell what sort of mood I'm in based on what's coming up the most on my chosen playlist at any given moment – for example a little too much Pearl Jam or Nirvana probably means something put me in a shitty mood, while a little too much Gym Class Heroes or I Prevail, means something put me in a ridiculously good one – you can tell exactly what Slater thinks about something based solely on the movements of his face.

Especially when it comes to food.

Or my wardrobe.

He basically starts communicating like we're back in the 1800s and using Chappe code is the only way to get his message across without starting a war.

I position myself across from where he's stationed on the edge of the bed and hold up the lavender babydoll dress to the side of my half-dressed frame. "This one?"

A single twitch of his left eyebrow precedes his mouth opening.

"So, that's a no." Moving a slate blue ruffle dress to the front of the stack occurs next. "What about this one?"

The left corner of his lips faintly kicks.

"Nope." I slip a pale yellow, flower embroidered tea length piece to the front only to instantly spot a brief eyebrow pinch. "Got it. Don't even bother with that one." Shuffling another to the front, I mumble under my breath. "And this is exactly why I wanted to go *out* to try shit on for myself rather than just let Hilda go HAM on the situation while I not so secretly pray that our little Chemical Girlmance is strong enough to guide her to the right shit." A green atrocity gets a hand waved across it, yet the small nose bounce informs me he feels about it the same way I do. "Yeah. I knew this was a no. I honestly don't know why I brought it out." The last dress in my possession

finds its moment in the spotlight. “What about this one?” His stillness has me swiftly cutting my attention to the coral pink, wrap style, halter top dress. “It is this one, huh?” When no response is given, I swing my gaze back to where he’s wordlessly watching and huff, “Why aren’t you saying anything?”

“Ohhhh,” he tilts his head in a teasing fashion, waterfall of baby blue lettering flowing to the ground, “is that allowed?”

“Of course!”

“Ya sure?”

“Yeah, why wouldn’t it be?”

“Cause I’ve seen five dresses and not had an actual chance to say shit about a single one ‘til now.”

“What are you talking about?” My hand flops firmly onto my hip. “You’ve said something about them all *except* this one.”

“What?!”

“Cowboy, it’s all over your face.”

“What’s all over my face?”

“Your thoughts.”

“Huh?”

The sigh that leaves me is so heavy I swear it reshuffles the shared playlist floating through the sound system. “The lavender dress was too short. You love my legs-”

“*So fuckin’ much, Angel Cake.*”

“-but don’t need me almost flashing crotch every time I walk out of a room.”

“Me on a murderous rampage would probably undermine the actual gift I got them.”

“The blue one had too many ruffles. You were looking at me the same way you look at a pastry someone has put too much marshmallow fluff on top of.”

He innocently shrugs his bare shoulders. “It was a lot of fluff.”

“You felt the yellow one was sexy but too attention grabbing – and

we both know that isn't what I want on T's special day – while the green one looked like something I borrowed out of your ma's closet which brings me to this one." I give a casual wave to the waiting gown. "What do you think?"

"That you got mind readin' powers and forgot to tell me."

Seeing his bubbly lettering gets me giggling. "Nah, you'd know."

"How exactly would I know?" he challenges back between chuckles. "Would you call me out for thinkin' about bendin' you over all the time?"

"Seriously?" Redness can't be kept out of my cheeks. "How often do you think about bending me over?"

"Thank you for confirmin' you indeed *do not* have mind readin' powers."

"Nope. Just facial reading ones." A small pause is followed by me adding. "At least when it comes to you."

Slater allows a bashful grin to grow prior to pointing. "*That dress* is a good choice, Angel Cake."

I warmly smile at him and then the gown.

Terrible taste in attire when left alone to pick something out.

Not too bad when it comes to the assist.

"And I have somethin' special I want you to wear with it." My boyfriend gets up to retrieve a small jewelry box from the bedside table; however, before registering the possible contents has any chance to plant itself in my system, he playfully reassures, "You can relax, baby. I'm not gonna propose to you the day of your brother's engagement shower. That's tacky. Not tactful."

"Mmm..." it's my turn to impishly cock my head, "you've been known to be both."

"When have I ever been tacky?"

"Last year when we went Christmas tree shopping with T and Monte."

"I wore a sweater."

"You wore an *ugly* sweater."

“It was festive.”

“It was a *Big Lebowski* monstrosity that had actual *bells* on the cuffs.”

The man I’m crazy about smiles proudly to himself for a moment.

Further data to add to the reasons why clothes shopping is not an assignment he’s best suited for.

“How about when I *do* propose, I also promise to let you handle all the attire for our big day?” He lifts the long gray box upward in a peace offering nature. “I’ll even find a way to work that into the proposal itself if you want.”

Dropping my shoulders mindlessly occurs. “Do you...Do you really think about that?”

“Marryin’ you?”

“Yeah.”

“Since the day you gave me blue balls, Angel Cake.”

More laughs leave us both luring me to absentmindedly confess, “I think about it too. *A lot.*”

Instead of pushing me to receive the present, he cautiously pries, “And?”

“And...” my mouth bobs around in desperation for the perfect retort rather than the one I know I’m going to give. “And I honestly can’t wait to say yes.”

Slater sheepishly smiles once more yet this time it’s trailed by the encouragement to open the object. “Then think of this as a...*pre-engagement* gift. A uh...a placeholder ‘til the mission is complete.” His eyes lock onto mine so that they as well as his bright blue winding words can hold me hostage. “And the minute it is? The minute we’ve signed those papers? *I’m askin’, Angel Cake.*”

“And I’m saying yes, Cowboy.” I flash him a sweet beam, exchange the dresses for the unopened jewelry, and flick the lid open to reveal its contents. The charm bracelet inside bears only a single heart engraved with the letter W. “I assume it stands for Wahl.”

“Which I know you never call me-”

“I don’t know about never...”

“Fine. Seldom.”

“Sporadic.”

“Let’s split the difference and call it *almost* never,” he halfheartedly chuckles and kicks his chin back to it, “but *Mrs. Wahl* is the one thing I can’t wait to call you, baby.”

Not smiling is unthinkable.

“Soooo...’til I can...have you wearin’ *that* W – which will then be *our* W – this will tide me over.”

Between the overwhelming warmth of his gaze and the glowing blue of his words, I’m once more left speechless.

“Just promise me you won’t take it off.”

Confusion has my head tilting to the side. “Like ever?”

“Like if I’m not around, I want that on, so it’s *like* I’m around.”

“You’re going for cute, but I’m getting creepy.”

An impish grin immediately finds its way to his expression. “Says the woman who ordered me all new *date jeans* the mornin’ after our little run-in with a *one date stand*.”

“Just...just...” Guiltily swaying my head around ceases on an exasperated huff. “Just put it on me already, please.”

“How about we *both* go get dressed and *then* I’ll put it on you?”

I smile and deliver a sweet, chaste kiss to his lips. “Deal.”

Heading back to the ensuite bathroom, Slater hands me the chosen dress and returns the rest of the items back to the bag we’ll bring to Hilda to return to all the places she went.

Assuming she does return them versus finds a way to convince me to keep them.

She’s suspiciously good at that.

It explains why T’s watch collection has grown tremendously in such a short amount of time.

“Can you tell me about the conference call you had last night with

Wiz and Blu?” Hanging the dress on the back of the door is followed by sliding over to the spacious counterspace to give my makeup the appropriate touches now that I have a color to work with. “Anything I should know?”

“How did you know about that?” My boyfriend strolls out of the closet area with his attire draped over his forearm. “You were supposed to be asleep.”

“And you were supposed to be in bed beside me.”

Culpability quickly appears and disappears from his stare.

I lean over to apply eyeshadow at the same time I ask, “Wiz finally get somewhere with the information on the flash drive?”

“You know that technically talkin’ to the client *about* their assignment goes against protocol.”

“So does bending the client over the sink to bang her while she brushes her teeth, but you do that, too.”

Arrogance and amusement reign supreme yet again as he begins getting dressed. “Turns out there are five corporations involved in your attack.”

“Five?!” Poking myself in the eye causes me to squeak in between repeating my squawk. “Did you say five?!”

“Affirmative.” He continues his casual movements. “However-”

“I better like this however.”

“*However*, they’re seemingly all the *same* corporation. One just leads you to another. It’s just one giant circle jerk with no way to separate the operations from one another.” Slater smooths out his underwear inside his navy-blue suit pants. “Which irritates Wiz almost as much as us.”

I resume gently sweeping my lids on a hum of acknowledgement.

“The next POA is to have him cross reference bank account statements and employee records from each individual entity in hopes of uncovering some sort of lead for us to follow. Unfortunately, that in itself is probably a long process, and once you add in the upcoming holiday, it’s only gonna be even longer.”

“You should tell him to pull the executive employee signatures from

each company and do a comparison analysis.” Using my black eyeliner is attached to me expressing my reasoning. “While their names might not match, their signatures may. If they do, it means they’re the same person, using different aliases.” I apply it to the other side. “People who often have to operate under various personas will change their hair and their eyes and their accents and pretty much everything under the sun *except* their handwriting.” The exchanging of one product for another mindlessly occurs due to being so caught up in my explanation. “It’s such an unconscious action that unless it’s specifically brought up as part of the things for a person to camouflage, they often don’t. And sometimes even when they *do* there are little things, they impulsively can’t stop themselves from doing because signatures – similar to fingerprints – are really quite unique. You know graphology may be considered a pseudoscience, but I have found many of the theories and principles discussed to be quite relevant and like crazy fascinating. And some of the articles in the math and psychology journals that *support* those theories are riveting.” By the time I’ve finished with my mascara I locate his sparking stare in the mirror which prompts me to ask, “What?”

“You’re jus’ so fuckin’ brilliant, Angel Cake, that sometimes I jus’ ... can’t help but listen in awe.”

Blushing suddenly becomes the only thing I’m capable of.

Ugh.

How does he always find a way to do that?

Is *that* also a sexpionage skill?

Should he write a training manual on it?!

“I’ll have Blu contact Wiz with that information.” Slater reaches for his shirt on the hanger dangling off the edge of the counter. “See what he can do with it.”

“Think it’ll help?”

“I think it can’t hurt.”

Grateful to be helping with the situation – even if it’s only from a far distance – I happily finish slipping into my outfit while allowing my boyfriend to shift to the important subject matter of the day.

The long stressed over engagement shower.

We run over the event's itinerary, oscillate correcting pieces of each other's attire, get my beautiful new bracelet clasped on, and eventually exit the apartment within the allotted timeframe. The lack of traffic downtown and on the highway on our way out is a welcomed surprise. Our conversation along the drive to the suburbs right on the outskirts mainly consists of me claiming we're missing items and my boyfriend lovingly reassuring me that we aren't.

"Are we having Italian?" Needlessly adjusting the halter top portion of my dress happens for the fifteenth time. "Like lobster ravioli? Or bruschetta with those thick mozzarella pieces?"

No answer is given.

"Is it bacon wrapped scallops?" Fidgeting with my clutch attempts to distract me next. "Or maybe oysters? God, I hope it isn't oysters. All the slurping and the smell just churns my stomach thinking about it." Reangling the bag is followed by a small gasp. "Unless it's fried oysters. I *love* fried oysters."

Still not a clue to what he's decided we're having.

"Fine, don't tell me." I playfully pout. "But what's your plan if this mysterious food source flakes? What's the backup if the bride to be doesn't like the fact that we scrapped her menu behind her back so that you could surprise her with...something?" Another lighthearted guess is thrown out. "Don't say it's pizza, Cowboy. Hilda would *never* forgive me if we served pizza and cupcakes like it was her fucking eighth birthday instead of this huge life changing event."

A long beat – much too long – precedes his quiet retort, "It's not pizza."

His stalled response and bulky block lettering pulls my attention to where he's watching something in his side mirror. Bile brews in the pit of stomach begging to boil up the back of my throat. "Everything okay?"

To my surprise, he takes a right rather than a left heading away from Monte's house instead of towards it. "Unconfirmed." The instinct to whip my frame around to look is immediately cut off by his dark, thick, unmovable words. "*Do. Not. Look.* Directly behind us." He motions to the space between him and the console as if discussing his phone. "Slide my weapon slowly and

carefully onto my lap.”

Executing the instruction isn't hard.

Ignoring the Travis Barker tribute my heart is doing on my ribcage however is another story.

Slater makes a second arbitrary turn in silence continuing to string along whoever is possibly tailing us. I glance out my own side mirror but due to the angle getting a view of anything that isn't the blue paintjob isn't really possible.

We make three more unnecessary journey choices before it's evident we're heading back to my brother's home. At that point, Slater calmly commands yet makes an over-the-top aggressive hand movement. “Pretend you can't find your phone and reach for the weapon that's tucked under your seat. Once you have it, hide it under your bag to fire only if necessary.”

I toss my hands up in the air to add to the production and lean forward to cleverly relocate the pistol from its holster location to where I can use it. Pushing my hair away from my face is accompanied by a shaky statement. “I thought you said it was safe to leave the penthouse.”

“Safe is a fluid concept – all things currently considered.” His creeping vehicle stops at the curb right outside of my childhood home. “Blacklisted by those with skills doesn't mean those with something to prove won't try.” Slater kills the ignition, maintains his watchful glare, and sighs, “If anything happens to me, get inside. Call Blu. Have your brother barricade you in a secure space with no windows. Understood?”

“Slater-”

“Let me do my job, Arlette.”

The familiar unhappy coloring and choice of name have me instantly surrendering. “Understood.”

“Someone is gettin' out of the vehicle.” Slater unlocks the door and turns off the safety of his gun. “Papers are blockin' their face. Keep an eye on your side for a secondary attacker.”

My eyes immediately check my surroundings. While I want to be relieved that all I see is suspiciously green grass and a recently swept stone pathway waiting for the white carpet rug to be rolled out along it, I'm not.

Relief now feels like a concept more foreign to me than hosting a fucking party. “Clear.”

“The UA is approachin’.” The man sworn to protect me for more reasons than money angles his weapon while preparing to use the door as part of his attack strategy. “Prepare for necessary engagement.”

Light tapping occurs on the window, yet it takes a moment for the individual holding up the papers to uncover his face. Fear flies onto the man’s sandy beige complexion at the same time the thin objects are launched into the air courtesy of the weapon being aimed at his face from our side of the glass.

A slew of shaky, pale peach lettering in an unfamiliar formation spews from the frightened person’s mouth prompting my boyfriend to not only lower his gun but the window too. “Tamura *why* the hell have you been followin’ me for the past four and a half minutes?”

Additional unusual arrangements occur.

Except these are louder.

And much brighter in color.

Wow.

I honestly don’t remember the last time I heard someone speak actual Japanese.

Slater’s skull hits the headrest in pure exasperation. “Why didn’t you jus’ follow the directions on your phone?”

“Seemed easier to follow you when I realized it was *you*. I thought for sure you’d know how to get to where we were going.” The dark eyed male swings his stare to me. “Does he always point guns at people?”

“*Often*,” I innocently answer on a giggle.

“*Horrible. Manners.*” Tamura states to me and then repeats it in what I am assuming is his native language to my boyfriend. “*Hidoi manā.*”

“This,” Slater airily laughs as he shifts the safety back into place, “is my plan for food. Arley meet Monroe Tamura. He’s a *shokunin*.” My boyfriend’s gaze gravitates to me. “A sushi chef. When Oka – the chef I asked Seventeen to introduce me to – couldn’t make time in his busy schedule for such an appearance – regardless of the price – I reached out to

an old friend of Kolby's from high school."

"Oh, I was your second choice?" Tamura overdramatically gasps.

"He's jus' startin' out with his caterin' business, so I thought workin' an engagement event would be a great fit to add to his resume as well as an elegant choice Hilda would approve of."

Melting into the seat can't be helped.

Protective *and* thoughtful.

How the hell did I get this lucky again?

"Why don't you put away your gun-"

"She has a gun too?!"

"-and get the door for us? I'm gonna help him bring his shit inside." Slater shoots his guest a mirth-filled smirk. "Assumin' he's done freakin' out about this little misunderstandin'."

"Misunderstanding?!" Tamura shrieks in tandem with stepping back to give my bodyguard space to exit the vehicle. "Is that what you call going John Wayne on an innocent chef?"

More bursts of Japanese flood the air prompting me to tuck the weapon back out of sight and hustle to the house like requested.

The process of getting the event properly set doesn't take nearly as long as I deduced it would. Thanks to the helping hands of my burly boyfriend, Nik, my sister-in-law aka Monte's wife, and my mom – who evidently enjoy decorating more when mimosas are involved – getting the house arranged is done in half the time while organizing the non-sushi related food – including the desserts I finished and dropped off relatively late last night – is completed with about twenty minutes to spare for contemplation regarding the party breakdown I swear is going to be a disaster.

Everything – gratefully – kicks off without the slightest hitch.

Guests love walking up the fancy white carpet into the house where they have their choice of grabbing something bubbly or a cold brew. They adore dropping off gifts near the bubble prizes for the games being played later which they then admire. They even get excited playing with the free-floating balloons and taking selfies under the "bubbly" balloon arch.

I mostly keep a polite distance not wanting to invade a moment or interrupt or – if I’m being brutally honest with myself – inject myself into a conversation I can’t contribute adequately to. Beautiful, brightly colored lettering swirls around the room and the happy couple as they shake hands, give hugs, and accept praise for their decision to tie the knot. It’s mostly a manageable sensory situation; however, the instant anything gets a little overwhelming, Slater sweetly wraps an arm around my waist and insists I check on things in the kitchen, the one area guests are being directed away *from* to allow the sushi chef the space him and his assistants need to keep food properly flowing, but that I’m able to sneak away *to* in order to compose myself.

Ring Hunt is the first game we play in which guests search the downstairs areas and patio for Ring Pops. Since mom, Nik, and myself hid the gems, we opt out of playing, yet that doesn’t stop their partners from joining the pursuit due to their ridiculous competitive nature. To say they’re disappointed when they don’t even come in second or third would be an understatement that becomes easy to forget when T playfully wraps his arms around their necks and insists on consolation beer chugging together.

Fun, lighthearted conversations flow around two more games, lots of cupcakes, and the best sushi I’ve ever had in my life, sushi so good in fact that I find myself seriously running the risk analysis for investing in his catering company.

The math says keep crunching.

My stomach says give him my lifesavings.

I’ve just finished tossing another Blistered Shishito Pepper into my mouth when my parents come sauntering around Slater into the kitchen territory.

Dad releases a small chuckle, “I knew the second I spotted Wahl, you’d be within three feet of him.”

Slater merely smirks and slides a hand into his pants pocket.

“The man really does not let you out of his sight except to pee,” he adds, orange words springing around like little bouncy balls.

“Even *that’s* not always the case,” I playfully poke at the same time Dad snatches up one of the green treats.

“I take my job very seriously,” my boyfriend insists, blue lettering soft in color but firm in form.

“Would that be the job of protecting the client or protecting the woman you love?” Mom teasingly inquires on a tip of her champagne glass in his direction.

Slater’s answer is swiftly shot back with another cocky smirk. “Yes.”

Their combined laughter along with Tamura’s has my cheeks tinting and me reaching for the nearby green beans to hide my blushing.

“I think when they have kids someday he’ll do the same thing to them,” Dad states between loud chomps.

“Oh...” my mother golf claps against her glass in agreement. “I think he will too!”

“And *I think* we should end this conversation and play another game.” Licking the delicious garlic flavor off my lips is followed by picking up a napkin to clean my hands. “Maybe something less physical than Ring Toss?” There’s no preventing my head from tilting in concern. “How’s your back doing, Dad?”

“Nothin’ a little beer couldn’t fix.”

Slater’s chortle immediately receives a displeased glare that he meets with an innocent shoulder shrug.

Just because *he’s* willing to risk life or limb for every task he takes on doesn’t mean everyone else is.

Or should be.

Especially when it comes to an innocent bridal shower game!

“I’mma get us one of those bottles of wine, Delley,” Dad coos, closing the gap between him and Mom. “Don’t give up on me yet.”

She smiles wide and leans up to kiss him just as T whips into the scene. “Ughhhhh,” groans my brother, needlessly shielding his eyes, “can you not put your tongue in Mom’s mouth for like twenty minutes?” He slides over to pluck up one of the peppers. “You have any idea how weird it is to have to convince your in-laws that probably *wasn’t* your parents coming out of the bathroom from a quickie?!”

More laughter falls from everyone except this time I join in.

What can I say?

It's fun when the spotlight isn't on me.

"By the way, Arlez, this playlist?" He kicks his thumb over his shoulder. "*Insane.*"

"Slater helped," I immediately inform, not wanting to take all the credit for something we did together. "That little 80s karaoke moment brought to you by 'I Melt With You'? All him."

"Did not realize how crazy that song would make Hildy go," my brother sweetly gushes. "Or that she knew every fucking word to 'Speechless' by Dan and something."

"Shay." The effortless informing has another round of credit going to my boyfriend. "Also Slater."

"Yeah but 'Sunday Morning' and 'This Will Be' were all you, baby."

"Huh." More peppers are flung into T's mouth. "Maybe we should let you two DJ the wedding."

"Or maybe..." I attempt to segue again, "we should focus on playing the next game?" My nodding is trailed by shooting Slater a pleading look to assist in the transition. "Maybe one of the trivia ones?"

"So that Dad doesn't hurt his back again?" T quickly investigates.

"*I'm fine,*" our father insists on an unhappy grump.

"Trivia sounds like a good call, Angel Cake," Slater smoothly states. "Maybe the *Nearly Wed* game?"

"Is that the one where you ask the couples questions and they have to answer on a dry erase board? Because if so," T mindlessly smacks between shoveling more peppers into his mouth, "I vote yes. I know *sooooo* much shit about Hildy and need to bring home a win for this family. We suck out there."

Dad shakes his head in commiseration, "We do suck."

"You'd think Arlez would've catered these games in our favor," my brother juvenily criticizes.

"How is it my fault you still suck at charades?!"

“You suck at charades too!”

“I’m great at charades!”

Slater waves his hand from side to side in silent disagreement.

“*Hey!*” A sharp finger is stabbed in his direction. “Did we or did we not beat Blu and Aviva last time we played?!”

“You are an amazin’ guesser, Angel Cake,” Cowboy lovingly reassures, “but *horrible* actor.”

“*Ouch.*”

“See,” T childishly snickers only to receive a scowl from me.

“Trivia sounds like fun,” our mother announces, pulling our attention to her. “Why don’t I ask the questions, so you and Wahl can play?”

“Because I’m the host...” Feeling a bit of anxiousness tap the mic has me rushing to add. “And the host, *hosts* the games.”

“You scared, Arlez?” T impishly goads in his famous fashion. “You afraid of how bad you might lose?”

“We *won’t* lose,” Slater confidently retorts before there’s even time for my mouth to move.

“The couple that *just* started dating? *Ha.*” In spite of the fun shading soaring out of his mouth, the crisp edges infer a challenge. “How about a side bet, Wahl? *Whoever* answers more questions right about their partner coughs up twenty bucks?”

My better half slowly shakes his head. “You don’t wanna do this, T.”

“Take your money?”

“Be put to shame at your own party.”

“Make it fifty.”

It’s my turn to try to object, “T-”

“A hundred,” he arrogantly antes up.

“Make it a thousand.”

“Slater!” I squawk in newfound outrage.

“Ohhhhh...I’m gonna have *so much fun* spending your money,” T

pompously proclaims at the same time he shoves his hand out for the shake.
“Bet.”

“Bet.”

The two lock grips while my dad haughtily chuckles, “Can I place like a side bet?”

Squeaking from me shifts to him, “Dad!”

Mom laughs, places her glass down, and exclaims, “I’ll get the fishbowl of questions. Arley, you round up the guests!”

Baffled beyond belief, I simply stand and gawk at the crock of crazy my family has managed to cook up.

This...this can’t...be...happening.

Right?

I’m not about to not only have to play one of these games I specifically picked because I didn’t have to play it, but *win* too?!

No.

I haven’t had enough tequila for this.

In fact, I’ve had *no* tequila and can’t do this.

Won’t do this.

Slater offers me an open palm and soft, sweet, inspiring smile that’s impossible to resist.

Okay.

Maybe I *can*.

But I’m not happy about it.

Hand in hand, we work our way to the back patio, ushering guests outside with one partner seated while the other – the one with the dry erase board – is behind them. Being wedged between Nik and Hildy seems unwise; however, it beats being closer to Hildy’s parents or near the group of singles that Morris has been prowling around nonstop. The men – and one of the women who’s in a same sex couple – all nervously peer up at my mother and anxiously wait for her to reach inside to ask the first question.

Relief is instantly found in the first few subjects courtesy of them

being so easy.

Favorite ice cream flavor?

Favorite color?

Favorite flower?

Favorite questions are super simple and kind of a no brainer, leaving little to no pressure on my shoulders.

One by one the person scribbles an answer and turns it around to face the judge. We each get a chance to answer verbally, and Mom announces if it's a match or incorrect.

Almost everyone responds accurately, which is good because the next set of questions – strangely enough – grows in difficulty.

First crush?

Who did you take to prom?

Dream vacation location?

Slater hits each of these without missing a beat too, yet both of my brothers manage to miss two of the three in regard to their significant others resulting in their huffs and my dad as well as Hilda's dad's amused snorts.

"First *real* fight?" Mom collectively asks the group. After a few beats, she starts on our end with Monte. "Nik?"

"Spending the night together," my sister-in-law announces with such certainty that I can't help the way my face scrunches from hearing Monte's hiss of a wince.

"*Shit*," he mutters, tiny forest green letters tumbling down my arm. "Can I have a do over?"

"No," our mother informs while shaking her head. "Your answer was 'relationship status', which is *not* a match, therefore, no point."

"Again?!" Nik sassily swings her round face around to cop an attitude with her husband. "How long have we been married? How are you getting so many of these wrong?!"

"Someone's sleepin on the couch tonightttttt," T taunts loudly prompting Monte to lean past Slater to slug him. "*Ou!*"

“Deserved,” Mom points prior to moving on to us. “Arley, you’re up.”

“I have an answer,” I meekly inform yet hesitate, “it’s just...It’s gonna probably sound silly to everyone else or not like a real fight, but it was one, I swear.”

“Sounds like excuses...” my tipsy engaged brother pokes.

“She’s not you,” his future father-in-law good naturedly needles.

“*Ouch*,” T pretends to be wounded. “And here I thought you liked me Mr. C.”

“Eh, I like you enough to let you marry my daughter.”

Laughter expanding throughout the backyard precedes my mother sweetly stating to me, “Arley, all that matters is that the fight was real to the two of *you*.” A loving nod of encouragement is slipped in between statements. “Now, go on. Tell us.”

“Okay.” Straightening my spine so that I sit higher is attached to me announcing, “Walking me to my car.”

“What!?” some of the guests echo causing me to shrink down.

Back into myself.

Shut my eyes at the overwhelming amount bursts of various colors and shapes.

“The statistics regardin’ the number of women who get attacked on their way to their car is fuckin’ alarmin’,” Slater speaks up, words and temperament both steady. “I didn’t want Angel Cake to *be* one of those statistics, so I insisted she either let security do its job and walk her to her car, or she let *me* do it whenever I was still at the office when she was. She took it like I was sayin’ she couldn’t handle herself, and I was jus’ sayin’ I didn’t want anything to happen to her. *Ever*. Especially not if I could’ve done somethin’ to prevent it.”

Rounds of “aw” have my eyelids flying back open again to see my mother adoringly grinning. “That answer is a match. Your team receives a point.”

Dad snickers and marks the scoreboard while T grouses, “Stop making us look so bad, asshole.”

“You’re doing that all on your own,” Mr. C chortles causing Dad to laugh louder.

“Angel Cake,” Slater adoringly coos over my shoulder, blue wording wrapping around me just as affectionally, “think about what you want me to buy you with T’s money.”

Maybe we should give it to Tamura to invest in his business!

“What money?” Hildy immediately questions. “He owes you money?”

“He’s gonna,” Cowboy confidently states.

“Hilda,” our mother calls out, “you’re up!”

The mismatched set of answers isn’t a surprise nor is her unhappy handwaving.

More cycles of questions flow out of the bowl, some getting fits of laughter, others getting fits of frustration, but all, relatively fun in some capacity.

Except to my brothers who are losing.

Embarrassingly so.

Regardless of Slater’s perfect goal average, he never looks smug, and he never sounds cocky, and he never talks shit back to the two men who relentlessly are. He simply maintains his focus as though *this game* is now the most important assignment he’s agreed to take.

I just want to remind him that we don’t have an actual trivia game division at HE.

But if we did?

He would easily be one of the top operatives in it.

“Last question,” Mom declares, immediately receiving rounds of gratitude, “What did your significant other want to be when they grew up?” Answering starts at the furthest end yet when it gets to us, she says something unexpected. “Wahl...honey...you have to turn your board over.”

“I um...I know...it’s jus’...” Trembling blue lettering whirls around my neck and chin and cheek until its turned my stare to meet his. “I... honestly...don’t...know the answer.”

Needing to comfort his obvious ache of not knowing, of feeling like he let me down, leads to me gently pressing a hand on his leg. “It’s okay that you don’t know, Cowboy. It just means there’s still shit for us to learn about each other.”

“And that’s a good thing,” Dad shouts from his position next to Mom.

My boyfriend flashes me a bashful beam that’s almost immediately blocked by my brother T. “I know the answer! Can I have his point too?!”

“Why?” Our father snaps in a snarky fashion. “Won’t make your losing any less embarrassing.”

“And it’s so embarrassing,” Hildy huffs hard enough to rearrange her sash.

“Wahl didn’t have an answer, which means Arley doesn’t have to answer, and that leads us to Nik and Monte.” She waves her palm their way. “*Go ahead.*”

Their matching answers allows the game to end on a positive note and my directing to where fresh food is entering the living room straight from the kitchen to occur. They offer to help tidy up their spaces, yet I politely reassure I’ll handle cleaning everything up. That they should just go inside and enjoy more refreshments. Perhaps dance or do one of the other self-guided activities before more group games. Both of my brothers are given earfuls from their loves along with our mother who is loudly ashamed about her sons’ behaviors.

The instant voices disappear behind the closed patio door, I expel a loud breath of relief.

Fuck, peopling is so exhausting.

This is why I didn’t want to host.

And this is also why I didn’t want to play.

Collecting the markers that were tossed all along the couch cushion is abruptly interrupted three writing utensils in. “*Angel Cake?*”

There’s no reluctance to reply. “Hm?”

“What’s the answer?”

I shift my stare to where the man I love is squatted down in the space

in front of me.

“What did you wanna be when you grew up?”

“*You*,” a playful poke to the nose is presented, “wanted to be an astronaut.”

“I did.”

“And not because of E.T. like most kids but because of *Mac and Me*, which interestingly enough had plenty of rescue and recovery plot points that could easily add to the behavioral reasons you do rescue and recovery now.” My lips scrunch to one side of my face. “*Er...Did. Will do again?*”

“*Angel Cake.*”

Pressing my lips tightly together is mindlessly done.

“I now see I don’t have the answer to that because you don’t want me to.”

“That’s...a bit of an oversimplification.”

“Then unsimplify it.”

I clamp my mouth shut a second time.

“Why don’t you wanna tell me?” Pain struggles not to pump through his crystal gaze. “You worried that I won’t know what it is? ‘Cause I’m okay Googlin’ shit I gotta when I gotta. You know that.”

Light giggles bounce my shoulders.

“Was it an astrophysicist? A *literal* rocket scientist?”

The apprehension keeping me silent slowly starts to waver.

“Chemist? Mathematician? Cryptanalyst?”

“I love that you know what that is.”

“I know what that is *because* I love you.” He lovingly lets his hands land on my legs. “So, what’s the answer?”

A long, still beat precedes my eventual answer, “A veterinarian.”

“Huh,” is grunted out in obvious bewilderment. “Really?”

“Animals were always nicer to me than people,” I quietly confess, doing my best to smile. “They didn’t make fun of me for always knowing the

answer or reading really big books about pattern recognition or being able to see things that aren't technically there." Bouncing my shoulders appears right before a heavy sigh. "They were just...kind to me...so I wanted to do something to be kind to them."

Without another word, Slater uses both of his hands to cup mine, knocking the markers back to the couch. Rather than pry for more information about those particular moments or other emotional scars, he lovingly brings my fingers to his lips. Plants a kiss on each set of knuckles. Lowers them back to my lap and strokes them while looking affectionally into my eyes for what feels like forever. Finally, in a volume just above a whisper he declares, "You can do anything you wanna do in this life or the next, and I'll always be here to love and protect you through it. Understood, Angel Cake?"

It's my turn to coyishly nod. "Understood, Cowboy."

And *that*, ladies and gents, is what makes me the real winner of the day.

Chapter 8

Slater

We're gonna be late.

I *know* we're gonna be late.

We're gonna be late and get shitty parking and miss watching warmups, but I don't care.

I mean I *should* care.

I *know* I should care.

It's just impossible to give a shit about anything other than having my woman on her back, head hanging off the side of the mattress, deep throating me in an almost acrobatic fashion I can hardly fathom. Watching my dick repeatedly slide down the length of Arley's throat like it was tailor-made for the damn thing, while her tits are spilling out of the bra I pulled slightly down just so that I could play with her dark, hard nipples during the whole thing is more than a good reason not to give a fuck about being late to my brother's game.

Kolby'll understand.

And if he doesn't?

Fuck him.

She wanted to put her mouth on my cock.

What kind of gentleman would I be had I denied her something so simple?

Roughly cupping both boobs at once causes Arley to groan, treating my cock to ball-clenching vibrations that have my toes damn near scuffing the wood beneath them. The increase in constrictions only pushes me to give her delicious rack even more attention.

Harsher squeezes.

Tighter tugs of her nipples.

Faster executions of both.

Sloppy gargling sounds reverberate all around our bedroom effortlessly drowning out the faint Nicky Jam tunes as they tempt me into forgetting about longevity and her pleasure and plead with me to just fucking come already. Drops of dribble drip down to the tops of my feet drawing my attention to where my dick is practically ripping her mouth in two. Seeing such a sexy yet cruel sight has the savagery she begs to be treated with ripping off its chains.

Abandoning her full tits is followed by me gliding my palms down her stomach.

Curling my fingers to leave behind bruises in my wake.

Using one hand to break past the barrier of her black yoga pants while the other pins her thigh to the mattress.

Wetness wastes no time soaking the digits heading to her entrance, and those same digits waste no time thrusting themselves inside. Screams from both ends of her body are instantaneously felt resulting in my own frame shaking from the force. An intoxicating, burning sensation mauls itself up the back of my calves and thighs and ass, forcing my head to lull backwards as barbarous grunts hit the ceiling one by one, declaring that I'm too close to busting a nut to be stopped.

Louder gagging encourages faster movements.

Finger fucking gets so ferocious and frenetic that it spurs my dick into doing the same motions.

Muffled screams suddenly become attached to every sopping wet contraction, and I callously gnarl, "*Fucking swallow for me like the dirty little cowgirl you are.*"

One last screech shatters both of our resolves in tandem. Sweltering streams shoot straight into her throat, commanding she choke down every drop of cum, yet her hips greedily gravitate off the bed, milking my pumping fingers, clenching them so hard they damn near cramp from the pressure. My mind reels around and around and around with every blissful thrum until my eyes blur and the ache in my back forces me to break away.

The instant there's space between us the love of my life sucks in a giant gasp prompting me to scramble closer and ask in panic, "Fuck, Angel

Cake, did I hurt you?!”

“Yes,” is airily declared; however, it’s swiftly followed by her rolling over onto her stomach and announcing, “but I fucking loved it.”

Groans of hunger and frustration alike lead to me collapsing down on the bed beside her. “And here I thought we were just gonna be a little late…”

Arley giggles at the same time she slowly shakes her head. “We are not having a quickie, Cowboy. *This* was the quickie.”

“But-”

“I’m not asking,” she states in a singsong manner.

“But-”

“And *I’m* not arguing.”

Having my own words thrown in my direction initially irks me but the sounds of her snickers and the sweet kiss she plants on my lips afterward send the irritation elsewhere.

What can I say?

When it comes to the love of my life, I’m practically the phrase “Yes, Dear” with legs and a gun and an affinity for cake.

The two of us take a beat to properly steady our breathing before completely collecting our composure and adjusting our clothes.

Thankfully, getting from the penthouse to where the games are held doesn’t take too long, even with all the gameday traffic. Having a premium parking pass allows us *closer* spots but still not *that* close. Once I’ve found the best available space – clear shot to the exit, under a streetlamp for tactical sight advantage, and within direct line of sight to where one of the security guards is to be stationed – I kill the engine, walk around my truck, and assist my texting girlfriend out.

As much as I wanna know *who* she’s texting, I’m trying to give her the benefit of the doubt.

That it probably isn’t Seventeen.

That it’s probably T giving her shit about needing the grand he owes me for the wedding.

Or her parents who we promised during Thanksgiving dinner we

would go see in Hawaii once this issue is settled.

Hell, it could even be one of her nephews in search of homework help because Monte refuses to get them a tutor when his sister is – academically speaking – a certified genius.

And if it is Seventeen then I trust that it's just business.

An unexpected giggle escaping her has me tugging at my hoodie collar as I hit the lock button.

Alright.

I'm *trying to trust* that it's just business.

She told me about the conversation they had in her office and was adamant that he got the message.

Knowing what I know about him?

I can't say I'm so easily sold.

"Excited?" I warmly ask and tuck my keys into the pocket so that I can wrap an arm protectively around her shoulder.

"Fuck yeah," she enthusiastically replies, putting her phone away. "And I will be even more excited when we win."

"You mean *if* we win."

"No, I mean *when*." Arley nestles in closer to me during our approaching the entrance. "The team analysis I did is in our favor."

"You know as well as I do, players – like agents – don't always fit the formula."

"And you know as well as I do that patterns of performance – for both agents and players – can and often do create easier to predict outcomes." Her gaze swings up to mine. "Statistical analysis and data evaluation are part of the process for owners and managers when deciding who to keep, who to trade, who to bump down, who to bump up, who to have two-way contracts with and so on. Using that *same* information along with this season's known line pairings, I can pretty much conclude which team has the winning numbers."

"*On paper*, Angel Cake." It's impossible not to grin. "Never forget the most important behavioral trait of humanity as a whole is its

unpredictability.”

She scrunches her nose in a silent concession.

Love the woman.

Love even more when I get to teach *her* something useful.

Opening the door to the building immediately sends a sensory overload straight into our faces. While the crowd outside is somewhat strong, the lights, the security screeches, the crying kids, and yelling vendors shift everything to an astounding level.

Arley does her best to put on a brave face and joins a line to walk through.

She wanted to come.

This torture session was not my fucking idea.

Me?

I’m happy keeping her home on our couch.

Under a Dalvegan blanket.

Drinking tequila shots and eating Thai food.

She was the one insisting she wants to get out and do more things, that she can’t spend the rest of her life hiding out from the world simply because it won’t get any quieter nor will people’s words get any smaller. Since being forced to hole up, she’s stumbled into wanting to be out in the world where she can have more experiences.

Work through some of her sensory struggles.

The bar was a huge fucking first step.

The engagement shower the next.

The holiday split into two equal halves – between Monte’s and my dad’s – logically came after that.

Attending a hockey game – in person – seems like a steep jump to me, personally, but like I said before.

When it comes to her, I’m basically a broken bobble head, nodding and nodding and nodding because I love to see her happy.

“I’ve got plugs if you need them,” I reassure quietly near her ear after

we move up in the line. “They’re big D green, too.”

Angel Cake glances mischievously up at me, “Is now the place to really talk about the big D?”

A mirth-filled eye roll is the only response she receives thanks to an unexpected flash of movement catching my attention out of the corner of my eye. Whipping my head in that direction, I’m not shocked to see anything out of the ordinary.

Because there’s no reason I should.

This is a secure facility.

Amateurs wouldn’t take the huge risk of coming after her in a crowd this size.

No.

Only pros would.

A real pro – like myself – could hit a target in a setting like this; however, they know my woman is off limits.

Even to international contacts.

That came at a steep cost to the company yet was one they couldn’t wait to pay. Angel Cake did an analysis about herself the other day while I was working out. One that basically revealed how much revenue she brings in as well as saves HE with the evaluations, the programming adjustments, and ensuring the system along with the paperwork are all going smoothly. What her skills do far outweighs whatever they’re shelling out for a few weeks while we locate and eliminate the threat.

Seventeen’s *exact* words.

She texted him the numbers too.

I considered that shit work.

But still fucked her in the kitchen until I felt better about them casually chatting.

Dumping our pockets to get through security doesn’t take long, and neither does scanning our box seat tickets.

Letting my brother put us up in one of the boxes that the players share to house family members who’ve come to see them play – or females they

hope to impress – was the main reason I felt okay about bringing Arley here to begin with.

Too loud, too many people, too many points to cover becomes much more manageable when you're on the highest floor, in a private box, with armed guards pacing the perimeter.

We take the nearest elevator with a small group of other people. I keep my arm wound tightly around her, and my stare continuously sweeping the scene until the very second the doors close. In spite of the fact, I didn't see something, I felt it.

Someone was watching us.

And it'll be their funeral if they try to fucking follow.

By the time we reach the box level, it's just us and one other couple on the floor. One of the strolling ushers checks our tickets prior to pointing us to a section near the closest set of stairs. We happen to sneak inside the area mere moments just before the puck officially drops. Arley rushes to the edge, forgetting all about me, her manners, or the fact we're sharing the space with my family. She simply plants her palms on the edge, sores to the tips of her bright green Converse, and leans towards the game like a hockey themed version of that scene from *The Titanic*.

Rather than resist admiring the view or ruin the opening moment of her first in person hockey game, I hang back. Fold my arms across my chest. Try to keep my eyes not on her round ass begging for my dick to dive between it but the way she's grinning. And yelling. And enthusiastically shouting as if they're on TV instead of down below.

"Her first time?" Dad cautiously asks from the seat closest to the buffet stretch.

I answer him in the form of an amused nod.

It isn't until the first whistle is blown that she spins back on her heels to face the group she blatantly ignored. "Sorry!" Her fingers fly to shield her face. "I got too excited!"

"It's quite alright, sweetheart," my stepmom lovingly reassures. "The whole thing was really cute!"

"Thanks, Linda." Arley crosses over to hug her. "Good to see you!"

While the two of them engage in a greeting, my dad and I clasp hands into a hug doing the same, “Good to see you, Dad.”

“Good to see you, champ.” The pull back allows us to meet eyes. “Everything okay? It’s not like you to be late.”

“Yeah, we were jus’ uh...sort of...um...” my face briefly cringes during a poor attempt to find the right words, “lost track of time.”

“That’s what we call it too, ya know.” His wink occurs prior to maneuvering himself over to hug Arley presenting me the chance to embrace Linda. “Get over here, girly. You know the drill.”

He warmly squeezes her, and I give the same affection to the woman who’s never forced herself into a role she already knows is filled. “So happy you’re in one piece, champ.”

“Eh, I might be missin’ a couple chunks here or there, but nothin’ worth worryin’ ya over.”

She pulls away and gives me a playful swat to the stomach.

“Why are you abusin’ my little *mijo*?” my ma’s voice unexpectedly interjects prompting me to whirl around towards the door. “And does he deserve more abuse? Because he will never be too old or too big to be over my knee.”

“Ma?!” Even louder and more rambunctious greetings escape as I dart over to her. “What are you doin’ here?!”

“I was invited.”

Hugging the woman who is just under five feet tall isn’t done gently. Or carefully.

People mistake her tiny size for being delicate all the time.

Watching her put them in their place is still one of my favorite things to see.

“Hi, Ma!” my girlfriend squeaks and rushes our way to takeover hugging duties. “I didn’t know I’d get to see you tonight!”

“Neither did I,” I casually retort in tandem with giving them space.

“I’m in town for a few days,” she announces after they part, “and Ace invited me to join y’all.”

The smile that finds its way to my lips is wide and proud.

Sure.

Having me kidnapped tore their marriage apart but getting me returned gave them a chance to do something most split couples don't get to.

Reconcile.

And they did.

They coparented – and in some ways *still* fucking coparent me at almost forty – so goddamn well they should've written a book about the shit. Everything from diets to dating to the decision about how to handle my deployments was done together *with* Linda. Ma never saw the woman as a threat but just another person to protect me. To light a candle for. To have in our family to guide and love me whenever I needed it. And Kolby? She loves the little shit too and has always respected that we were raised differently.

I'm lucky.

On one hand, I missed out on so fucking much, yet on the other, it ended up giving me so much too.

“What are you in town for?” Arley inquires as we drop down into the seats beside Dad and Linda.

Ma waits until she's properly seated in the seat to my right. “My gentleman caller.”

Her words drop my jaw but have my woman croaking, “Like a sex worker?!”

There's no stopping the stunned expression from being shot to Angel Cake.

“What's a sex worker?” Ma ponders out loud on a quirked eyebrow. “Are those what the women on the picture app are doing?”

Arley cocks her head in confusion. “Picture app?”

“Instagram,” Linda interjects, joining the conversation.

“Oh!” the woman I've sworn to protect with or without a contract that tells me to do so squeaks. “No! Those are mainly just thirst traps.”

“But I'm not thirsty.”

“This is gettin’ off course,” Dad chuckles and lifts his beer. “Gabs is not seein’ a male hooker-”

“Is hooker gender specific?” Angel Cake needlessly wonders.

“She’s in town visiting her boyfriend.”

“*Your. What?!*” I boom loud enough to crack the ice.

What. The. Fuck. Is going on?!

“That’s what I said, Ace.”

“That’s not *quite* what you said, Gabs.”

“Well, it’s what I meant.”

“Which isn’t what you said.”

“*Excuse. Me.*” Sitting up completely straight has me removing my arm from around Arley. “Could someone please fuckin’ clarify this shit for me?” The ticking of my jaw is difficult to ignore. “*Now.*”

“Oh, look, Kolby’s on the ice!” Linda uncomfortably gestures, hoping to redirect everyone’s gaze to him. “Wooooo! Let’s go Kolby!”

“They call him WonderWahl,” Arley verbally points out only to then physically do the same causing her charm bracelet to sway. “See on that sign over there. And there. Oh! And there!”

His mother’s shoulders drop in a melting fashion. “I’m not used to seeing so many of his fans like this.”

“Let’s go, Wahl!” is shouted from someone below us and I momentarily stop scowling to smirk.

I am proud of the kid too.

He’s come a long fucking way.

We’ve put in the same dedication to our respective areas with the main difference being he protects on the ice while I protect off.

His two minutes on the ice flies by in what feels like a blink, yet the entire time he’s out there skating and checking and eventually cross checking – getting himself put in the box – none of us take our eyes off of him out of silent solidarity.

After the announcer does his job of proclaiming the penalty – one that

was accurate versus bias – I resume my earlier consternation. “Ma, what do you mean you have a boyfriend?” I turn in my seat so that we’re face to face. “Since when? Who is he? I want his name. DOB. Address. License plate. Previous places of employment. Criminal record-”

“This is probably why she didn’t tell you,” my girlfriend playfully pokes over my shoulder.

“*Mijo-*”

“Don’t *mijo* me, Ma,” I huff, poorly hiding my outrage. “How the hell could you be datin’ someone and not think your son should know?!”

“Perhaps because I don’t keep track of every *cochina*, Daisy Duke wearing fast ass girl that walks in and out of his day, so I don’t think it’s any of his business who I allow in mine.” She peers around me to politely declare. “Excluding you in that collection, *ángel*.”

“Thank you,” Arley giggles damn near having me abandon this conversation to explain my mother’s exaggeration.

And she is.

At least...*a bit*.

Okay, maybe not that much.

But enough.

“*Ma.*”

“*Slater.*” Her firmly stating my name slinks me into my seat. “I am allowed to date.”

“I know that. I jus-”

The finger lifted has me clamping my lips shut once more. “I am allowed to date and who I do or do not invite in my bed is not your business until I invite it to be.”

More slouching.

More unhappy grumbles.

“And I will not be inviting it to be until I feel you can handle the topic of Tom-”

“His name’s Tom!?”

“-without losing your mind.”

“So, what you thinkin’ there, Gabs?” Dad playfully prods. “Like Christmas?”

Her sassy smirking in his direction precedes another nugget of info. “Your father introduced us.”

“You what?!” I explode, attention snapping over to him.

“You had that one coming,” Linda snickers on a tip of her drink.

“Little bit,” he mutters.

“What the fuck, Dad?!”

“They know each other from a work event,” Ma continues keeping the pressure on him.

“Not *exactly*. I met him at a work event. He’s a fellow contractor’s younger brother-”

“How much fuckin’ younger?!”

“Couple years under us, nothing to get your blood pressure up about.”

“It’s already so high,” Arley not so quietly whispers.

“You know this is why she never told you about datin’ when you were younger.”

“No, she didn’t tell me about this shit back then because she wasn’t doin’ it back then.”

His sarcastic head tilt has me glancing around the room to see everyone presenting me with the same expression.

Fucking hell.

My own mother doesn’t trust me to know her dating history?

First, Arley.

Now, my own flesh and blood?!

New waves of rage and resentment and dejection get my mind whirling to the point I grump, “I need some air.”

“Want me to come with?” my girlfriend lovingly inquires, summoning my stare to her.

Knowing her presence will only exacerbate the unsettling emotions pushes me to shake my head. “Nah, I’m just gonna go take a leak. That’ll be enough. Swear to me you won’t leave this chair ‘til I get back.”

“Swear.”

“Dad,” I grunt at the same time I rise to my feet, “don’t let anything happen to her while I’m gone.”

“Roger that, Champ.”

“*Mijo-*”

“It’s fine, Ma...” Backing down and backing out of the row are simultaneously done. “Really.”

“It’s not.”

“It will be.” A small shrug is the most I can offer. “I’ll be back. I seriously need to take a piss.”

And breathe air that isn’t clogged by other people’s lies of omission.

I exit the closed off room yet instead of making an immediate bee line for the bathroom, I rest my back against the nearby wall. Let my head hit it on a gentle thump. Momentarily lift my eyes to the ceiling that obviously hasn’t been dusted in a while.

Why don’t the women I care most about in the world feel they can tell me this kind of shit?

All I want is to make sure no one ever hurts them or to make those that do hurt them disappear.

Does that really make me such a bad man?

A monster?

On a heavy sigh, I amble away past the stairwell, following the signs for the restroom. Considering the game is well underway, there’s no surprise the place is practically barren, a fact that’s fine by me. I pee. Wash my hands. Splash cold water on my face and silently remind myself that while I’m doing what I think is best to protect them that’s probably what they think they’re doing for me.

Protecting me from myself.

The idea is an easier one to process than believing the women I love

don't trust me and leaving the area with the new notion floating around lifts a certain weight off my shoulders.

About two steps back out of the bathroom, I glance in both directions, managing to spot a splash of quick movement that's out of place. Not wanting to chase the possible culprit down or cause a scene which would draw more attention putting Arley in additional danger, I decide to lure the individual out instead. Keeping a slower pace, I casually stroll the same path I initially took; however, when I arrive near the door to the stairwell, I abruptly pause.

Pretend to search my pockets for something.

Accelerate the movements and motions giving the impression I'm distracted.

That my defenses are down.

Like I expected, a hand lands on my bicep, leaving me with the perfect opportunity to twist the same appendage backward, grab their shoulder, and swing them into the push door to trap them inside a better area of attack. With their frame now forced up against the blockade, I'm now exposed to the identity of the individual as well as in the optimal interrogation position.

Shockingly enough, the scantily dressed female, meekly whimpers, "*Ohmygod, I'm sorry! I'm so, so sorry!*"

Despite most people's natural instinct to assume an unknown female isn't armed or dangerous, I don't.

Can't.

That's a dumb and deadly mistake.

"*Name.*"

"Claudia!"

"Who do you work for?"

"Costco!"

Confusion crunches my face convincing me to lighten my grip.
"*What?*"

"In the makeup department!"

Between her word choice and inability to stop trembling, it's easy to assess she's not a threat.

Or if she is, then she's a very good one who I'll push down the stairs if necessary.

Relinquishing my hold is followed by gently turning her around to face me. "Why have you been followin' me?"

"Y-Y-Y-You're WonderWahl's brother, right?" She gives her leather jacket covered shoulder a soothing rub. "His older brother. The military one. The one he gets lunch or dinner or goes for a run with. Listens to Willie Nelson but would never smoke with him."

Suspicion has me folding my arms firmly across my chest. "The latter is *awfully* specific."

"He did a Tok on it," Claudia girlishly gushes, twirling a strand of her dark locks. "It was so funny."

Doesn't sound funny.

Sounds like something worth beating his ass over the next time I see him.

"Anyway, I recognized you earlier from the pictures and kinda... followed you up here...to...see if maybe you would..." her fidgeting behavior tells me everything I need to know.

She's not an operative.

At least not in the sense I'm well acquainted with.

Claudia's simply a puck bunny who saw an opportunity she couldn't pass up.

"Give him my number?"

"I do that, and you forget about this little hand to hand combat hiccup that occurred here. Understood?"

"Totally!" She pulls a business card out of her black corset top and extends it in my direction. "He can text me or DM me or Snap me. Whatever he wants." Claudia leans slightly forward inspiring me to lean slightly away. "*Whenever he wants.*" Her expression transposes to one that's almost deadly. "Got it?"

“Yup.”

“Eeek!” squeaks the petite female. “Thank you! Thank you!”
Traipsing down the steps is done during a new verbal tangent to herself.
*“IgottatextCrystal. Ohmygodshesnevergonnabelieveme! I
shouldSnapthis!No!GoLive! Idefffffinnitteellyyyynееeedtogolive!”*

Baffled and slightly disturbed, I shake off the incident and step back into the practically empty hallway. I make the tactical choice to do a full circle of the floor of suites to avoid any more possible fangirls or actual attackers before heading for the room where my family is.

The door hasn’t even had time to finish shutting when Angel Cake cautiously calls to me, “Cowboy...we need to go.”

Horror does its best to stay hidden in my tone along with my expression. “Why?”

“Blu says work needs us.”

“Blu?” Pinching my brow tightly together occurs on a growl. “Why the fuck didn’t he call me?”

“He says he did. You didn’t answer.”

That’s because I was probably trying to disarm a hockey ho.

“When?” I ask as opposed to explaining my absence. “When does he need us?”

“Now.”

If my second needs us now, that can only mean one of two things.

Either she really is in danger here or Wiz finally fucking has something we can use.

Chapter 9

Arley

Blu impishly leans forward onto the palms of his hands and kicks his chin in our direction. “That a hickey?”

“What?!” Frantically touching my neck occurs without hesitation. “No!” I tug my bright green tank to one side while doing everything I can to contort myself into a better position to possibly spot the mark I don’t remember seeing earlier. “Or at least I think no.” Panic pierces my voice during the continued searching. “And now I’m praying no because talking to *all* of my boyfriend’s parents with a big ass hickey on my neck would have been the *most awkward thing* to ever happen to me.”

“Even more awkward than having a pair of underwear fall out of your hoodie pocket during a sexually mixed messages conversation with your Applied Mathematics for Non-Mathematicians professor?” Slater causally challenges from where he’s standing beside me.

“Why?!” Snapping my head up to him is attached to tossing my hands in the air. “Why would you bring that up?!”

“Seemed relevant.”

“What type of mixed messages?” Blu amusedly questions from the opposite side of the island. “Like you wanting to bang him but him being married so it would be a bad idea?”

“How is *that* relevant?”

“I – unlike the non-cape wearing crusader over there – never said it was.”

Horror and embarrassment have my jaw unhinging.

“However, if it makes you feel better, you’re not the one with the hickey.” My other bodyguard’s beam grows blinding. “*He is.*”

“I gave you a hickey?!” Mortification flies my hands over my mouth for a minor moment. “*Seriously?!?*”

“Yes.” Slater states to his best friend prior to dropping his gaze to

mine. “And yes. I noticed it when I was originally getting dressed for the game.”

“Originally?” Blu chimes in.

“Why didn’t you say something?!”

“What do you mean originally?” he quietly investigates.

“Or let me cover it with makeup?!”

“Why would you get dressed and then undressed and then redressed for the game?” Slater shoots him a quirked eyebrow and a crooked smirk, a combination that causes Blu to slowly, mirthfully nod. “*Nice, man.*”

“*Ohmygod,*” I grumble shielding my face with my palms for a second time.

“Relax, Angel Cake.” His fingertips lovingly peel mine away from my reddening complexion. “I knew my t-shirt and hoodie would do the hidin’. And even if it didn’t? I *still* wouldn’t wear makeup.”

“Because you feel uncomfortable in it?”

“It’s not that bad,” Blu offhandedly informs.

“Because havin’ my woman leave her mark on me isn’t somethin’ I’m ashamed of.”

The sweet smile he’s presented is promptly cut short by Blu’s phone buzzing against the countertop, knocking into Mark Buffalo who’s guarding the counter. In one swift movement, he answers, “Yeah. You can let him up.”

Slater waits until the call is officially ended. “Seventeen?”

“Yup.”

My boyfriend uses the confirmation as an excuse to scoot closer to me.

Stand possessively behind me.

Tug his tee down a bit more, to inevitably display the aforementioned blemish.

Well, he may be the one with a hickey now, but I know that after this powwow wraps up, we’re going to be sporting matching ones because jealousy sex isn’t complete without that particular branding left behind.

It's gotten so out of control from us both since the bar incident that I'm not gonna lie. I'm a little glad I don't have to spend extra time covering them up to go to the office.

Although, I *do* miss my office.

And all my cute trinkets.

And Melissa giving me extra data I'll never see on operatives' field reports.

For the few minutes we have to spare, Blu asks for more details about the game we left other than the initial ones I gushed about. While there isn't exactly much to tell about our very short outing, it's a bit surprising that Slater doesn't reveal his ma's new status report but in the same breath, I guess I get it.

He's still processing.

And processing is the kind of thing he does best alone.

"You went all *Equalizer* on a puck bunny?!" Blu loudly laughs right as Harvey knocks on the front door.

"I didn't know she was a puck bunny."

"Your brother's face plastered on her nipple pasties didn't give it away?"

"She didn't have his face on her nipples."

"So, you *were* looking at her nipples then?" he juveniley jeers with an eyebrow wiggle.

Slater narrows his gaze to thin slits and growls, "*Jus' go open the door.*"

More laughter accompanies Blu's checking the peephole to verify it's our boss, and once it's confirmed, he lets him in.

"What's so amusing?" Harvey politely interrogates upon entering the room.

"You don't wanna know," I swiftly insist with a shake of the head.

"Alright." He kindly smiles. "I trust your judgment."

We exchange grins, an action that prompts Slater to cage me in by

bracing his palms on the edge of the counter spaces to each of my sides. “Evenin’, Seventeen.”

“Wahl.”

“You look awfully dressed up,” Blu verbally points out while dragging his laptop closer for viewing, inspiring me to move my stuffed animal over to our side. “I’mma guess you weren’t working late at the office.”

“I was not.” The man we all answer to begins to shrug off his trench coat. “I was actually at the opera.”

“Alone?” Slater’s best friend thoughtlessly cringes. “Isn’t that like the rich people equivalence to drinking alone?”

“I wasn’t alone.”

His announcement has the man pressing his front against my back slightly untensing.

“I was on a date.” He drapes his piece of attire over the edge closest to him. “Thankfully, she was quite understanding about my necessary but abrupt exit.”

Excitement crashes into curiosity causing me to question, “Was it the museum docent you swore had a phony French accent?”

Slater wordlessly returns to his rigid position once more.

“No. And her accent *is* phony.” His hands find their way to his black pants pockets. “Trust me, Arley. I’ve been to Marseille enough to know the difference.” Rather than further elaborate on that particular subject, he announces, “It was Amia.”

“The smokin’ hot barista!?!”

“Why do you know about this woman, Angel Cake?” Slater’s crisp, jagged, red shaded lettering summons my stare over my shoulder. “Or the other woman?”

“And how hot?” Blu naturally investigates. “On a scale of one to ten, Aviva being a solid nine, where does this Amia woman fall?”

Not in the mood for what always turns into an argument, I let an exasperated sigh fall loose. “Harvey mentioned last week that he wanted to

start dating again and figured since I was in a *happy, committed* relationship that perhaps I might be able to offer him some feminine insight.”

“At least one of those things is true,” Slater’s best friend pokes.

I swiftly shift my stare back his direction and sassily scold, “You want me to tell Aviva you called her a five?”

“I said a nine.”

“And I will make it a *five* if you don’t mind your business in this conversation.”

His light chuckles are accompanied by him tossing his hands innocently into the air.

“Arley offered me some great advice,” Harvey calmly proclaims, forest green blocking settling neatly on the island. “Advice that led to me asking out a very attractive woman who turns out is only working at the coffee shop as part of a field study regarding behavioral patterns of individuals who consume central nervous stimulants – such as caffeine – daily.”

“Brains and beauty?!” Gleeful giggles can’t be stopped. “Jackpot!”

“It is a winnin’ combination,” Slater slyly inserts, red lettering skating across my cheek right before his lips plant a chaste kiss against the side of my forehead.

“It is.” Our boss agrees. “And because she herself is working on a very demanding PhD, she completely understood work interrupting our evening. We will meet for dinner tomorrow assuming whatever it is you dragged me here to see, Blumel, doesn’t require rescheduling that.” He clears his throat and motions to the laptop waiting to be acknowledged. “*Proceed.*”

“I have good news,” Blu cautiously begins, “and I have what the fuck do we do next news.” Double clicking the mousepad brings up five different shots of one individual. “Thanks to Arley’s signature tip, Wiz was able to find us a very viable lead. This ‘executive’ is the only person who works at all five corporations under different aliases *and* in the same department.”

“Accounting,” Slater confidently states.

“You are correct, tall, dark, and dramatic.” The stab in the air he throws at his best friend receives a flash of his partner’s middle finger. “This

man appears to be the most responsible for all financial activity regarding each enterprise.”

“Which makes sense,” our boss thoughtfully concludes, green wording remaining it’s faithful, simple form. “You’re operating under a shell game principle – most likely used to conceal illegal activities – therefore, you wouldn’t want too many people handling those particular accounts and records.”

“Exactly,” Blu agrees prior to continuing. “So, the good news is, we have all five of his faces, names, social security numbers, routines, and personalities. The not so good news is that there’s no way to tell which persona is ‘the most legit’ because his forgery papers are so good that they could pass high level security clearance shit.” He lifts his hand to loudly whisper beside it. “*Which Wiz is pissseeddddd about.*” Folding his arms across his chest is followed by a small shrug. “What we have is a target with a plethora of information we can use but no real way to narrow its use to make it actually useable.”

“Not true,” I mindlessly argue, immediately receiving all the attention in the room.

When I don’t add anything else, Harvey diplomatically declares, “*Elaborate.*”

“It’s basically just a case analysis assignment.”

Confused silence seems to be the collective response.

“I can essentially create an algorithm that takes all the behavioral information Wiz has managed to collect– spending habits, eating preferences, travel logs, ect – and use it to discover which alias presents itself as the *least* riskiest to be targeted because the one with *least risk* is most likely the real – or closest to the real – version of himself. It’s basic self-preservation. You may be fine burning a good alias, but it beats the hell out of burning the actual person you are.”

“The one with the least risk then makes them the best target for us because the accountant won’t expect to have that version of himself attacked,” Slater slowly follows. “By believin’ that alias to not be a threat makes him perfect for threatenin’.”

“Exactly!”

“How long do you think it’ll take you?” Our boss promptly prods. “A week? Two?”

“Three days?”

Everyone – including the man whose arms I’m trapped in – delivers me the exact same baffled expression.

Harvey, logically, is the first to speak, “Is this three days if your other work is put on hold?”

“It’s three days if I put my entire life on hold.”

Predictably, Slater objects, “Angel Cake-”

“I would rather pause our time together for a few days than keep pausing our life for a few months, Cowboy.” Angling myself to meet his stare allows him to see the seriousness in mine. “You know I love you.”

A soft, proud smile slips into place. “*I do.*”

“And I love spending time with you.”

“I know that too.”

“And I love working in the penthouse *sometimes...*”

“Just not all the time.”

“Exactly.” The shrug that bounces my shoulders is subtle. Small. “I wanna get back to the office. And I wanna stop having to arrange with my secretary about drop points for files for you or Blu to pick up. And I wanna stop having to feed Reynolds leftovers in the middle of the night because he didn’t wake up with enough time to eat before starting his elevator shift. And I wanna stop worrying about Yi or Consuelos or another security team member getting hurt because they happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.” Shaking my head isn’t gradual. It’s rapid. Furious. “I’m *tired* of having to hide and have less of a life – a life I actually am excited to live – because someone is hunting me! *Us!* Now’s our chance to really turn the tables on this person! Let’s fucking take it! Let me get you something you can use to track down this sonofabitch who can probably lead us to the individual behind this faster than I can sift through thousands of employee files.”

For longer than I care for, the entire room is silent.

No one moves a muscle.

I'm not even sure a breath is taken.

It isn't until I watch Slater swallow what I can only imagine is the last of his reluctance that I realize what's coming next. "Okay." His arms abandon their posts around me to assist in transitioning him to a mission prepared stance. "Tell us what you need."

Chapter 10

Slater

**

I tuck my hands between my legs and try not to cry.

I'm not supposed to cry.

I'm a bad boy when I cry because big boys aren't supposed to cry.

Five is too big to cry.

I get hit in the head when I cry.

And that makes me cry more.

And then he yells.

And then I cry more.

And then she says shh, and he hits her, and she cries.

He never cries.

He just makes us cry.

More bad things happen in my body making me bounce in place. "I gotta potty..."

"Hush, boy!" shouts the man from the couch. "I'm tryin' to watch the goddamn game over here!"

Tears begin to fill my eyes, and I breathe faster.

I can't slow it down.

I gotta go.

I gotta really, really go.

Letting my head hit the corner of the walls I've been looking at forever, I try not to breathe too loud.

Or cry where he can hear.

I don't wanna pee on myself.

Not again.

That makes him so mad and then he yells so much and then I don't get food.

And I need food.

I don't like the wiggly meat, but I'm so hungry.

I'm always hungry.

My real mommy and daddy never let me be hungry.

Ever.

I miss my real mommy and daddy.

I miss my big boy bed.

I miss my name.

I miss hugs and kisses.

I miss I love you.

They don't love me.

They don't want me.

Not really.

No one wants me.

What if no one ever wants me again?

Unexpected pressure is applied against my ribcage forcing my left hand to fly over and clamp down at the same time my eyes fly open to come face to face with my assailant.

“Okay, GI Joe with Kung Fu Grip,” Arley playfully sasses, “if you don't want my help with laundry, I will happily go back to watching *Baking Impossible* and daydreaming about the rock concert themed cake I'm pretty sure I could build after a good trip to the pastry surplus shop.”

Not smiling isn't even a thought to entertain. “When you say rock concert, you're talkin' more Weezer than Smashing Pumpkins, aren't ya?”

“They can perform at the same venues.”

Light laughter bounces back and forth before I return the towel she had taken back into my possession. “You shouldn’t be worried about laundry, Angel Cake.” Adjusting my ass on the hardwood floor beside the couch where she’s been working is absentmindedly done. “I got this.”

“But I can *help* get that.”

“You don’t need to be helpin’.” The folding process begins again. “You need to be finishin’.”

“And you need to be sleeping.”

“I’ll sleep when you sleep.” I cut her a guilty glance. “I shouldn’t have been sleepin’ now. That goes against protocol.”

“Pretty sure everything that happens in this penthouse goes ‘against protocol’.” Her attempt at lightening the situation is accompanied by an eyebrow wiggle.

She’s not entirely wrong.

Sleeping with the client is prohibited.

But shit happens.

Two people constantly in close quarters often can or does lead to that rule being bent or broken.

One more reason I prefer R&R assignments.

That’s not an issue or complication that comes up.

And while fucking the target is off limits, falling asleep when you’re supposed to be *protecting* the client is unacceptable.

Period.

Full. Fucking. Stop.

Especially when that client happens to be the one person in your life you know you can’t live without.

“It’s okay you took a cowboy nap,” my girlfriend sweetly insists, fingertip reaching over to lovingly stroke the nape of my neck. “I won’t tell anyone.”

“Don’t you mean a catnap?”

“No. A cowboy nap.”

“What the fuck is a cowboy nap?”

“You know in old movies where they’re like sitting in a rocking chair, and they tip their hat real low to block their face and then drift off to sleep until some broad comes running over needing help or herpes or something.”

Yet again loud, body shaking laughter floods the room.

Lord have mercy, I’ve missed this.

Her.

She’s been so engulfed in combing through the accountant’s data that she’s barely said anything to me outside of expressing gratitude for food, liquids, and reminding her to take a piss. Being nearby just in case I’m needed – however, I can’t actually be of any help because I can’t calculate complicated equations or clump together behavior patterns that might be of some use – is isolating as fuck.

It’s fucked up that this is the closest we’ve ever been together but simultaneously the furthest. We’re somehow in the same room yet millions of miles apart. She’s constantly in her own head, swept away in the sounds of music or baking or clicking of a pen while I’m left to gaze from afar. Get lost in the melancholy notes because they make me feel like she’s next to me versus on the other side of the room bouncing around laptops and tablets and notepads and mixing bowls needing me to keep my distance, so she has room to work.

Focus.

Fuck, I don’t even miss sex as much as I simply miss being able to just touch her.

We even had that shit when we were just friends.

Not having it merely because she’s too busy is dredging up shit I didn’t even know was fucking buried.

I didn’t realize how lonely the life I once lived really was.

How I still fear – even now as a grown ass man – that that’s how it’ll always be, like I did when I was kid.

After placing the finished object to my left, I retrieve another item

from the white basket. “What do you want me to make for dinner tonight?” My old gray squadron shirt she wears at least once a week is treated to the same folding treatment the towel received. “And please don’t say somethin’ in the Tex Mex family. I’ve texted Ma so many times in the past two days about old recipes that she called me cockblock.” I let my mirth-filled stare lift up to meet hers. “Which is the last shit I ever expected my ma – of *all people* – to call me.”

“You sure you *weren’t* being a cockblock,” the love of my life teases at the same time she wiggles her mismatched fuzzy sock covered feet. “Maybe on a subconscious level?”

“You mean ‘cause I’m pretendin’ I’m not uncomfortable with her havin’ a boyfriend when I really am?”

“No, I meant because you weren’t getting your cock touched, no one else should, either.”

Her snarky snickers pull a crooked smirk to my face. “Is that right?”

“I don’t know, but it doesn’t sound *wrong*.”

Arley chuckles again prompting me to abandon the half-folded clothing back in the basket, grab her ankle, and tug her frame off the couch until she’s straddling me. “You’re actin’ like you’ve got time to fuck around.” I allow my fingertips to trace the curve of her ass. “If we’re gonna fuck around, Angel Cake, let’s fuck around.”

Additional girlish giggles precede her winding her arms around my neck. “I’m actually *finished*, Cowboy.”

Surprise immediately shoots my eyebrows up. “*Completely?*”

“Yup.”

“Crossed all the Ts? Dotted all the Is?”

“You’re terrible at that.”

“But you’re not.” Brushing loose strands of hair off her Artic Monkey’s t-shirt is attached to a warm smile. “Which is why we’re perfect for each other.”

“You know if I didn’t know any better, I would say you *purposely* half ass paperwork so that you have an *extra* excuse to come by my office.”

“I don’t need an excuse to come see you.”

“You mean *now*.”

My eyes bore into hers. “I mean *ever*.”

Redness tints her cheeks encouraging me to investigate the so-called finished project.

“What’ve you got for us?”

“A location.”

There’s no stopping my body from sitting all the way up. “You know where he is?”

“No.”

“You know where he lives?”

“No.”

“You know where he’s comin’ from?”

“I know where’s he’s going to be.” An unpredicted cringe is almost immediately presented. “*Kind of.*”

“*Clarify.*”

“The algorithm was able to identify the patterns of each individual’s assumed name and essentially map out his whole life according to persona. None of them overlap. Not looks. Not locations. Not known associates. Not hobbies. Not even *cuisine* types, which is ironically enough, what created a flaw in his rather ironclad alias setup.”

I fold my fingers at the small of her back and continue to wordlessly listen on.

“There is *one* Thai restaurant, Thick Thais, that he visits here in downtown Dalvegan quarterly. I’m fairly certain it’s some sort of drop or pickup location.”

“Perfect.”

“Mmm...not exactly.” A tiny bite is stolen out of the side of her lip. “It’s always done within the same *window* of time but not the same date or day of the week or even month necessarily. What I’ve done is managed to find you a window, it just happens that window is um...let’s say midsized.”

“How midsized we talkin’?”

“Bay.”

Displeasure has me sucking my teeth in response.

“There are only a few weeks left in the quarter and according to Wiz’s monitoring, he hasn’t arrived yet, which means he *will* be arriving sometime in this month.”

“So, we have to do recon of the Thai restaurant every day from now until the 31st?”

“Technically, no. They’re closed on Christmas day.”

I force myself to find a smile. “At least I know we’ll be together for that.”

“*And* they close early on Christmas Eve; therefore, we can still spend *Nochebuena* with Ma.” Her beam is sweet. Optimistic. “I honestly don’t think you’ll have to stakeout the place that long.”

She’s tossed a quirked eyebrow of question.

“From an analyzing standpoint, he’s least likely to visit the week of Christmas. It’s a high-risk environment with too many variables he can’t control or predict.”

“It compromises the security of his situation. Puttin’ himself as much as whatever he’s there to pick up or drop off in possible danger.”

“Plus, law enforcement presence increases exponentially downtown that week in particular. That means more eyes. More eyes mean more bodies. More bodies mean more-”

“Complications.”

“Exactly. And the same can be said for New Years.”

“So, really...we’re lookin’ at a couple weeks *at most*.”

Arley quickly nods. “Not *ideal* but definitely manageable.”

“I’ll organize a mission plan and update the others accordingly.”
Allowing my shoulders to untense is followed by me asking, “What are their hours?”

“Eleven to nine.”

“Good. That means we can finally go Christmas tree shoppin’ in the mornin’. Lot opens at seven. Hot coco truck at seven thirty.”

Her excitement causes her to bounce enthusiastically in my lap, stirring my cock in a way that I can actually do something about. “I can’t believe we’re actually picking out a tree together this year!”

“Baby, we pick out trees together every year. It’s one of our traditions.”

“Yeah, except this year, we’re picking out *just one*. *One* for *our* place versus each of our separate homes.” Arley’s grin grows bashful. “Er...our place for now anyways.”

“It doesn’t have to be.”

Confusion furrows her brow. “Are you saying I can go back to my townhome?”

“I’m sayin’ I want you to make *this* your permanent home.” The declaration rolls off my tongue so naturally I almost don’t even realize I’ve done it. “I want *this* to be *our home*.” Tightening my hold is attached to a loving smile. “I wanna use that money T owes us to hire a movin’ company and get all your shit from your townhouse, here, and really move you in instead of jus’ wingin’ it like we have been.”

“You want us to really live together?”

“We already really live together. I jus’ want us to make it all...a little more...*official*.”

“First a pre-engagement bracelet and now this?” she teases, lips lowering to feather mine. “We’re moving sooooo fast.” Her lighthearted laugh heats my mouth prior to her asking, “What on Green Day’s earth am I gonna do with you, Cowboy?”

Wolfish chortles crawl out of me as my hands creep underneath the edge of her sleep shorts. “*I know what I’m about to do you, Angel Cake...*”

Fuck her until she’s fast, fast asleep.

Afterall, we’ve both missed that combination.

That connection.

And truthfully?

I know we both need it.

Chapter 11

Arley

Socks are for feet, not mouths.

Albeit it's a *clean* sock, but still.

It belongs on his foot, not jammed between my teeth to keep my screams suppressed so that no one in the other room knows what we're doing in here.

Except they do know.

Even if they wish they didn't.

Because there's only one logical explanation for two people to disappear this long into a closed room.

And that's exactly what we're up to.

Slater's large palm presses my bent leg harder against the edge of the folding counter in our laundry room at the time he growls against my ear, "*Tis the season for givin', Angel Cake.*"

Moaning can't exactly be helped.

Not when his cock is carving away like my g-spot is on his naughty list and checking it twice wasn't enough.

"*Give me one more,*" Slater begs, balls slamming against my pussy, bathing in the stifling hot stickiness dripping free over and over and over again. "*Give me jus' one more, baby.*"

My entire frame incessantly shakes in submission while I watch through hooded eyes as his thick, midnight blue lettering cascades its way down my exposed tits.

"*Give me one more to think about while I'm waitin' to come home.*" His smooth-edged words reach the tip of his middle finger, joining it in the ceaseless circling of my clit. "*Give me one more to fuckin' dream about 'til I can be right,*" a much sharper pound is delivered in tandem with a harder rub, "*back,*" another follows suit causing my slick muscles to constrict to the point of no return, "*here.*"

Burning sensations spread from the tips of my wiggling toes up through my aching calf and angled knee to fuse with the ones building between my quivering thighs.

Breathing suddenly becomes irrelevant.

Fuck, everything that isn't bucking back into his increasingly rabid pumping is irrelevant.

All I can do...all I *wanna do* is keep meeting him thrust for thrust.

Pound for pound.

Muffled moan for fucking moan.

"Come on, Angel Cake," Slater animalistically purrs as his hand glides itself around my leg towards the curve of my ass, *"make my cock filthy..."* The gentle prodding of his thumb against my tight hole isn't gentle for long. *"And I'll do the same for that pretty little pussy of yours."*

One rough push of his slippery digit further in mercilessly shoves me over orgasm's cliff. Spine arching screams are set free to be absorbed by the damp fabric doing a miraculous job at muzzling the sound while my neck snaps backwards landing on his shoulder, allowing his other hand to cup the extended area and sop up the continual vibrations being expelled.

"Fuck.Fuck.Fuck.Fuck," dribbles itself through his gritted teeth, splattering beautiful blue lettering on top of me to the same steady rhythm his cock is splashing white inside of me. Blistery spurts are met by even more fiery pulsations prompting the love of my life to bellow at the top of his lungs, *"Fuckkkkkkkkk!"*

Well, if they had any doubts about what we were doing in here before, I don't think they do now.

Spitting out the sock immediately precedes a small giggle. "What happened to we had to be quiet?"

"Rules changed." Slater crashes his mouth on top of mine rather than letting me out of the compromising position. One soft spin rolls its way into two and two lures me into a third. Having his tongue whirl around so slowly and sweetly and lovingly makes it easy to forget about the cum that's beginning to seep along my inner thigh. When he finally pries his lips from mine, it's more than apparent he's pleased about the whole thing considering

the glint in his gaze. He pulls all the way out at the same time he asks, “Think Santa will give me what I really want for Christmas this year?”

“Probably.” Reaching for a nearby, freshly washed towel, I tease, “I mean you have been a rather good boy playing real life action hero this season.”

He lightly chuckles and commandeers the cleaning of our mess.

“I take it whatever it is, it’s *not* on the list we exchanged the day after Thanksgiving.” I watch him glide my red and white polka dot “Ho Ho Ho” boy short underwear into place. “Which is *rude* because we both know I’ve been going *religiously* off that list. After last year’s book flop-”

“It wasn’t a flop.”

“You hated it!”

“No, I hated the jellyfish lava lamp you got me four years ago,” he informs during his step back to let me wiggle my distressed black jeans into place. “That visual history book about arms and armor was actually quite fascinatin’ and explained how some of our more modern techniques came about.”

Pulling the zipper up is attached to another playful expression. “Does that mean you didn’t *accidentally* break that lamp?”

“I won’t lie to you, Angel Cake.”

A tilted head is presented in response to inform him I’m listening.

“So, I won’t answer.”

We continue redressing ourselves around warm laughter. “See, *now* you belong on Santa’s naughty list.”

“For what I plan to do to you the *minute* I get home, I think he might wanna reserve me a permanent space.”

It’s practically impossible not to whimper.

I know we probably can’t keep up this pace forever, but I just want it in our file that I love how much he can’t seem to get enough of me. I’ve never been with a guy who wanted me so constantly and obsessively that I just knew with one look across a dinner table that the only thing he was hungry for was me.

Kolby didn't seem to notice but then again, he's like a stray dog. If you simply put *food* in front of him – doesn't even have to be good food – the guy's occupied until the very last bite on the table has been cleared.

Particularly by him.

“Okay, Cowboy.” Flipping my dark locks out of my bright, chunky evergreen sweater, I inquire in a more serious fashion. “What is it you *really* want for Christmas this year?”

He reaches for the sock I spit out earlier. “You pregnant.”

Shock sends my jaw to my bare toes. “*What?!*”

The lack of rebuttal only spurs more surprise to shoot through my system.

“*Seriously?!*”

Slater's instant nodding emphasizes just how sincere he's being.

That this isn't cute speak.

Or pre-sex dirty talk.

No.

He...actually *means* it.

And the bright blue hue his words had indicates exactly how much.

Slightly flustered, I adjust my neon yellow glasses and mumble, “Isn't it too soon?”

Another sock is grabbed to put on the other foot.

“We haven't even officially finished moving in together yet!”

“Your boxes are here.” His body contorts to tug on the article. “You just need to finish puttin' your shit away.”

“That's...over...simplifying.”

“Is it?” An impish grin is shot in my direction. “'Cause I've already ordered paint for the accent wall and new shelvin' for the closet and washed all your bright pink towels Mattel could sue you over.”

“They don't *own* the color pink.”

“You talkin' statistically or socially?”

The rebuttal has me hesitating to reply.

He brings up a good point.

Maybe they don't own the color per se; however, if you factor in social stock, my boyfriend may actually be onto something.

"Angel Cake," Slater sweetly interrupts the runaway notes in my head, "you're here. You've moved in. You jus' gotta finish makin' it *our home*."

My body thoughtlessly braces itself against the counter. "Okay, but should we really be thinking or even discussing *babies* at this point? I mean we're not even technically engaged yet."

"We're pre-engaged."

"That's not a real thing!"

Without hesitation, he curls his fingers around mine and lifts up my hand to expose the dangling bracelet. "Looks pretty real to me."

Scrunching my nose causes my glasses to slip down.

"Look, I'm not tryin' to rush things, Arley." Our fingers fold together. "I'm jus' sayin' I know what I want." His grip gets lovingly tighter as he pulls me closer. "What I've *always* wanted. And that's a life with you." Slater pushes a strand of hair behind my ear. "House. Kids. Pets. Holidays. Vacations. All of it." His bashful grin precedes blinding bright blue waves of words. "Pretty much everything we've always had and then a *little* more."

"Mm...babies feel like *a lot* more."

Snickers joyfully float through the air as he leads us out of the secluded space.

I don't know if he's gonna get *that* Christmas wish in particular, but I do know I can at least grant him the gift of talking about it.

Expressing my own feelings regarding what I see in our future.

Where I see it.

When I'd like to see it.

You know, particularly after we've caught the person that wants me dead.

We're just a few steps away from entering the kitchen when Blu stops shoveling a bite of waffle covered in honey to wave his fork at us. "If her underwear falls out of your pocket again, you're walking home, motherfucker."

While his wording is bright yellow and bouncy, it still manages to burn my cheeks during its passing. "*Ohmygod, that's happened?!"*

"You can't make me walk home, Little Boy Blu." Slater's fingers slip from mine so that he can continue to stroll further into the room. "It's *my* truck."

"And it's *my* eyes that you keep harming." Honey drips off the soggy treat. "My retinas can't handle anymore. I've practically been blinded by their brightness."

More heat flushes my cheeks stunning me silent.

Ohmygodthiscantbehappeningrightnow.

"You really wanna try to pull that shit?" my boyfriend pokes back, letters springing through the air indicating the level of mirth he's using. "Alright. How do you think my retinas felt when they saw that sunflower nipple pasty stuck to the bottom your shoe two days ago?"

"That's where that went?!" Aviva squeaks from the bar seat opposite of where Blu is standing.

"Fuck, I wish I had something weird to contribute to this conversation," Reynolds grouses around the apple slice he's smacking on.

"*Don't,*" Blu and Slater playfully bite in unison.

He tosses a hand up in surrender right before Aviva teases, "It's so cute when you two do that. You're like the giant honeybees working together to keep your hive cool. Or warm depending on the season. Keeping everything just right for larvae is a lot more difficult for the Asian honeybees considering where they like to have their hives." She lifts her coffee mug with two hands around the time I take the seat beside her. "You two often mirror their teamwork mentality. Putting the *bee* in brotherhood."

Aviva's science like joke causes her to giggle yet her boyfriend to quietly deny, "Baby...no. Just...*no.*"

"I thought that was clever!"

“It was smart,” I artfully try to contribute only to receive an amused grunt from Slater.

“Oh, when she makes a bad pun, she’s smart,” he places a cup of coffee down in front of me, “but when I make one, I’m tryin’ to win Dad Joke of the Year.”

“What can I say?” Picking up the mug is attached to a smirk. “She’s prettier than you are.”

“Facts,” Blu concurs and has another bite of his breakfast.

“How about we go *over* the facts one more time?” Slater smoothly segues. “Wiz is fuckin’ *sure* that was the accountant he caught leavin’ a private airstrip last week?”

“Positive,” his other best friend confirms. “Facial recognition and credit card usage all confirm it’s him. He’s *here*. He’s got round the clock security. He’s...doing...whatever the fuck he does. He just isn’t in the mood for Thai yet, I guess.”

Slater nods and adds butter to his to go cup of coffee. “And there’s *no chance* he’s gone to this restaurant after hours?”

“Surveillance footage from the cameras in the area say no.”

My timing regarding this whole thing was impeccable. I managed to get through that data only to have him arrive in town the very next evening. Digitally monitoring his movements is Wiz’s department; however, it’s almost like the accountant is going out of his way to make himself more difficult to track. Almost like he *knows* someone is watching him, which feels improbable, but sadly not impossible.

“Here’s to hopin’ he makes a move soon,” my boyfriend states on a sarcastic cheer with his beverage.

“Seriously, man,” Blu grumbles upon finishing up the last of his meal. “I’m so fucking tired of looking and smelling and moaning about Thai food in my sleep.”

Reynolds stops mid chew to inquire, “You moan about food in your sleep?”

“Who doesn’t?” Blu jabs back, genuine curiosity causing his yellow lettering to curl.

“Why don’t you two just have some?” Aviva quickly investigates. “Afterall, it’s *right* there.”

“That’s against recon protocol,” Wahl answers enroute to his go bag by the door.

“You’d think the dude was a religious nut with the way he worships that fucking word,” the man responsible for watching his six gripes during the dropping of his dishes in the sink.

The second I’ve swallowed the sip in my mouth, I eagerly state, “I *totally* understand.”

Slater shoots me a harsh yet sexy scowl. “Don’t make me change your codename to Petunia.”

There’s no resisting the disgusted gag he conjures up. “You wouldn’t...”

“You said the same thing about me streakin’ last year in thirty-degree weather when we bet on The Winter Classic and what happened?” His crooked smirk is accompanied by him swinging his bag over his shoulder. “My dick damn near caught frostbite.”

I use the peace, love, music mug to muffle my giggles.

“And here I thought you were the smart one in your relationship,” Reynolds jokes as he places his dish on top of Blu’s.

“Smart enough to have you recite me your POA for today’s outing,” my boyfriend’s bite is attached to him folding his arms across his chest. “*Report.*”

“We are to meet Miss Lindsay at Loca Mocha Casabloca at twelve hundred hours.”

“Still think that’s a terrible name for a coffee chain,” Blu grumbles under his breath in the process of retrieving his own go bag.

“We are to meet her there *unless* Seventeen sends Carmichael a text before ten forty-five indicating his meeting was moved, and he can indeed bring her the package *here* at the penthouse.”

It’s highly unlikely.

And it’s even more unlikely because I texted him that if he gets that

type of unexpected opening to go have lunch with the beautiful barista who he's totally worried about blowing it with.

I can leave this place to pick up my own mail from my own assistant.

It's not an end of the world situation like *Thirty Seconds to Spar* is making it out to be.

Slater's stare shifts to me. "What's in the package, Angel Cake?"

"Sensitive, international documents needed to help us redesign our current geographical risk analysis algorithm," I casually retort, not at all surprised to see the stunned expressions on Blu, Reynolds, and Aviva's faces.

Hey, we're all good in our respective avenues.

Mine's just a little more difficult for most people to understand.

"And you're *positive* that this cannot wait until we're done with recon?" Slater inquires for the tenth time in less than twenty-four hours.

No exaggeration.

Look, I understand he views this as a high-risk scenario while the math states it's low to medium at the highest; however, I have a job to do *around* the job of searching through files for who hates me.

And said job – on the occasion – includes requiring physical information.

"I *need* to begin evaluating, Slater." Gripping my mug tighter allows me to really ground myself into my words. "I'm already behind on this project due to helping locate this target and scavenger hunting for the other. I *cannot* afford to get anymore behind."

He reluctantly nods his understanding. "*Reynolds.*"

"Parking is to be done in front of the building on the main road, their front lot, or the lot directly across from it, all within camera range. If parking is unavailable at these locations, we are to circle until it is."

"Intense," Aviva whispers to me.

"The double doors are the optimal entry and exit location," Reynolds continues to explain, body positioning itself back at the island. "However, there are two rear locations, one is the emergency exit, one is the employees only exit, which is through the employees only door and leaks into the back

alleyway. From that point there are two possible escape routes, the one to the left is the fastest, most direct back to our vehicle, yet the one to the right is the one with the most amount of camera coverage. Regardless of which direction we take, protocol has me in front, client closely in back, body between me and possible bullets, weapon drawn to disable potential threats first and securing them for questioning second.”

“God, it’s like if guard bees were men and could talk,” the woman beside me gleefully gushes.

“You go straight there and back,” Slater states without room for argument. “No exceptions.”

“Roger that,” my day security detail affirms.

His eyes meet mine next as he saunters in my direction. “Angel Cake?”

“Mmm,” I playfully hum, big brown eyes glowing in mirth, “but what if I’m hungry?”

“We have food here.”

“Yes, but food from a drive through could be better.”

“*Angel Cake.*”

The lack of amusement in his expression only has me pushing him more. “Probably *would* be better.”

“*Arley.*”

“Probably would be best.”

“*Arlette.*”

“*Ohmygod, fine!* I will just starve if necessary. We’ll come straight home even if it means I pass out from lack of burger in the car because *you* refused to let me eat.”

Upon his arrival at my side, Slater finally lets the corner of his lips kick upward. “Thank you for your sacrifice.”

“The world needs more people like me in it.”

“No,” my boyfriend immediately disagrees while his hands lift to gently cup my face. “The world just needs *you.*” His thumbs deliver a sweet stroke to my cheeks. “Same for me.” There isn’t even a chance to return the

sentimental words. He drops his open mouth onto mine, tongue wasting no time reiterating the proclamation. Powerful, unforgettable presses are given and instantly reciprocated, an action that somehow convinces him to increase the pressure...the speed...the intensity, until I'm fighting to not only keep up but catch a breath. At that moment, he abandons the swollen mess he's managed to make and quietly says, "I love you."

Seeing the bright blue lettering fills me with the same awe as hearing it. "I love you, too."

One last dotting caress is delivered on a cooed, "*Stay sweet, Angel Cake.*"

"*Stay safe, Cowboy.*"

A tiny blush presents itself prior to him motioning to his partner to head out. Reassurance about communication is exchanged between him and Reynolds while Blu kisses his own girlfriend lovingly goodbye.

Once they're officially gone, Aviva turns towards me on an enamored sigh. "Can I ask you something?" She places her mug down on the counter. "Girlfriend to girlfriend?"

Now, there's something I don't think I ever imagined someone saying to me.

"Yeah." My shoulders innocently bounce. "Go for it."

"Is it wrong to want to cease the hive cycle that's served us so well and only have the one drone become my everything?" Her elbow lands on the counter to allow her face to flop into her open palm. "Is it wrong or weird to be ready for us to have something like that of the winter bee? Is it too soon? Is it too fast? Is too unheard of?" She purses her lips together for only a second, shaky yellow wording landing with a comical splat on my lap. "Okay, I *know* it's not unheard of. Unheard of would've been wanting this after we first slept together two dates in."

Two dates?!

They slept together after two dates?!

Is that how quickly people should be sleeping together?

Obviously, it worked for them...and I am probably not licensed to judge since it took us six almost seven years to fall into bed...but...that

seems...fast.

Maybe I should ask Hilda.

Although, do I really wanna know how quickly she and my brother got into the sack?

“What do you think?” Aviva gives my leg a light touch. “You know from girlfriend to girlfriend.”

“I’m gonna be brutally honest here.” Tossing my hands in the air is thoughtlessly done. “I don’t really know what you’re trying to ask me.”

She giggles. Wrinkles her nose. Releases another captivated sigh. “Is it too soon to want Blu to permanently live with me? I know when their assignment began it was for cover, but now that he’s here, and I’ve had him here with me constantly, no part of me wants to go back to living apart when the time finally arrives. And it will arrive because you’re not gonna be in danger forever. I mean, come on now. Sure, your landscaping and habitat have been threatened and suffered severe change, but you’re on the path of survival. You’re so not the Yellow Banded Bumble Bee.”

“The Transformer?” Reynolds curiously inquires, invading the conversation.

Aviva politely smiles at him. “*Bombus.*”

“You don’t have to call me names. I was just...asking.”

“No, it’s a species in the genus *Bombus.*”

“Ohhhhh...” he attempts to play off his confusion. “I knew that.”

The eyeroll that escapes me isn’t hidden. “*Anyway...*”

I wait until her attention is back with me.

“I don’t think it’s too soon to want that, if that’s what you both really want.” Picking my mug back up, I bashfully confess, “Afterall, Slater asked me to move in permanently like a week ago which was *after* declaring we were pre-engaged might I add.” I shake my wrist at eye level to display the bracelet. “My parents are always preaching that it doesn’t matter what the rest of the world thinks. It matters what feels right to *you*. So, if moving him in feels right to you two then I definitely say go for it.”

She nods her comprehension and reaches for her own cup. “Can I just

say that I love that we are going to permanently *beeeee* neighbors?”

Lightly laughing at her pun can't be stopped.

I don't know what it is about her and her silly jokes.

Maybe the confidence she uses to tell them?

“You know what I think is weird?” Reynolds interjects a second time, moving his frame around to be in better view of us both. “The fact those two assholes got smart, funny, and fucking beautiful women to *want* to live with them and my ass can't even get one to go out with me.”

“Like a woman in general or one who is all of those things?” I investigate between sips.

“Nowadays?” He shoves his hands into his pockets. “A woman in general.” Seeing the droopy gray lettering unexpectedly tugs at my heartstrings. “Not that I exactly have time since if I'm not on duty like this, I'm sleeping until I have elevator duty, or checking on Yi and his family – who said thanks for the lemon berry scones FYI. I know shit won't be this way forever, but I guess...” A small shrug is given. “Listenin' to you two make plans makes me wonder will some chick ever wanna make plans with me.”

Taken back by his openness, which is the most open I've ever heard him, leaves me momentarily speechless.

Reynolds isn't as bad as he once was.

Yeah, he has his obnoxious moments, but Slater was right.

He *is* a good fit for the small team.

He *is* a good fit to be their third when they need him.

To protect me even if he was once convinced, I was the enemy.

Hell, he's even thanked me for backing my boyfriend's decision to keep him on this detail because it's the best as well as most lucrative gig he's had in a while. It's also revamped his love of the job that was apparently starting to fade.

I honestly don't mind him keeping an eye on me while Blu and Slater are doing their shit. He gives me space to work without hovering. He never complains about my choice of TV. And while he cringes whenever he hears

bands like *The Killers* or *Taking Back Sunday*, he never begs me to put in headphones. While I wouldn't call our relationship a friendship, I can say we're definitely headed to that data point now.

This unexpected confession is undeniable proof.

"I'm sure someday one will," I warmly state, eyes locked onto his. "You just gotta stay open to it."

"You know Blu's sister will be here this weekend for the Haworth Christmas party." Aviva sits up straight as an idea hits her. "Maybe she can introduce you to someone!"

Reynold's head slightly tilts to one side. "Why's his sister coming to *our* Christmas party?"

Answering is effortless. "HE recruited her."

"For?"

"Bio tech shit." Putting my almost empty cup down is followed by reaching for my vibrating phone off the counter. "She was working for some company in Vlasta but recently met with Harvey who made her an offer too incredible to pass up."

He's good at that.

Almost *too* good.

Except when it comes to romance.

That he needs major lessons on.

"She's probably got hot friends," Aviva enthusiastically insists. "At the very least, *smart*." She lifts her beverage back to her lips. "And if you can only have one or the other, choose smart."

He winces as if just the idea alone hurts leading me to snicker and steal a glimpse of the unread text from Melissa who just wants to verify our meet time.

Okay, now I'm a little *less* sure that he will, but I'll keep that to myself.

We'll call it an early Christmas gift.

Chapter 12

Arley

“I don’t think it’s possible,” Reynolds argues from the driver’s seat of his SUV.

“It’s possible.”

“Parts of it are definitely possible.”

“The *whole* thing is possible!”

“Yeah...I’m not a like science dude...but pretty sure science says no.”

“Science says yes!” I helplessly laugh while shaking my head. “What do you think baking is?!”

“Cooking.”

“And cooking is...what?”

“Cooking.” Reynolds mindlessly repeats at the same time he pulls into a parking spot right outside the coffee shop. “It’s its own thing.”

This.

This is why I refrain from talking to him for extended periods of time.

Huh.

I wonder if he says this shit to women he’s trying to sleep with.

“It is more than possible to bake you a space shuttle shaped birthday cake.”

“That stands *up*?”

“Yes!”

“And is completely made out of cake?”

“Yes!”

“Nahhh,” he brushes off and checks his parking job, neon green wording roaming around the vehicle. “That’s just cooking show magic shit.”

I almost wanna make him the cake just to smush his face in it.

Voicing my rebuttal is unexpectedly interrupted by a vibrating sound that immediately catches my bodyguard's attention. "Is that Wahl already?" He adjusts the rearview to inspect the traffic behind us. "*Forfucksake*, it's only 12:01!"

More snickers are conjured as I swipe open to see who the message is from.

Melissa: Here!!! Gonna get in line and order our usual Christmasy faves!

"It's just Melissa," I inform prior to tucking my phone back into my Jingle Bells workbag. "Slater really doesn't check on you that often. He trusts you."

"That's what you think," Reynolds gripes, uneven lettering catching me off guard. "The number of demands he sends for a status report every day paints a very different picture, Carmichael."

"Yeah, but that's not about *you*, that's about me."

He stops adjusting his shirt to conceal his weapon in order to shoot me a curious eyebrow lift.

"It doesn't matter *who* I'm with. If he's not the one there to do the protecting, he's stressing about it. His biggest fear right now is something happening to me again and him not being there to stop it, especially since it's happened twice already."

"There's not gonna be a third, Carmichael. At least, not on my fucking watch."

"And see," my fingers hook the door handle for opening, "that's why we *both* trust you."

Reynolds smiles, finishes hiding his holstered weapon, and gets out of the vehicle right after me.

The two of us stroll inside the building with him constantly checking our surroundings, further demonstrating the reasons that work in his benefit when running a risk analysis assessment.

Which I've begun to do a little *less* in my day-to-day life.

Once upon a time, I'd bring out all the analytical tools for "easy" things like picking out a birthday gift for my nieces and nephews, or giving my opinion about where they should go on family vacations based on consumer patterns as much as scientific studies that state certain activities evoke better emotions depending on age, or to give Morris advice on which suit to wear on a date based solely on his past patterns and behaviors yet nowadays, I've started to just *trust* an instinct. Yes, sometimes I will then go and scramble together information to confirm that instinct was of course right; however, those are few and far between. It's like steadily being around Slater has honed a skill I wasn't aware was so underdeveloped due to others being so overly developed. I like that I now have an ability to sort of do that.

I like learning something new.

And I like that Slater's the one leading the lessons.

Even if he doesn't know it.

"Ahhhhhh!" Melissa squeaks at the sight of me, frame wiggling back and forth in excitement, bouncing pink letters following the same pattern. "I miss you!"

Hugging her in return is cordial and short.

"I swear it feels like I haven't seen you in forever!"

"We video conference on a secure line once a week."

"*Face to face*," she argues with a playful hand toss. "You wouldn't believe how much I miss bringing you coffee. And telling you about who is hooking up with who. And even hearing Paramount when I walk in to bring you your deliveries."

"You listen to TV in the office?" Reynolds cautiously questions over my shoulder. "Is that allowed?"

"She means *Paramore*," I correct without making eye contact. "And hopefully, we'll be back to that routine soon enough."

"Hopefully!" Our turn at the counter has her ordering all three of us toasted white chocolate mochas. After paying – she overly insists – we move to the side to wait for our drinks, which is when Melissa points out, "I totally expected to see Wahl today." Her attention falls to her own bag where she's retrieving the sealed documents. "I bet Britt next week's lunch that you two

were gonna come in here holding hands and wearing adorable matching sweaters because *that's* how in love you are.”

Hmmm.

I wonder if I *could* get him to wear a matching sweater with me to his stepmom’s annual cookie baking event.

“Everyone knows,” she continues to ramble while offering me the object. “Like *everyone*. And everyone can’t wait to finally see it for themselves at the Christmas party! Britt thinks I’m exaggerating but like so so many of us have just been waiting and hoping for you two to *finally* get together! It’s like everyone’s favorite hook up moment on a binge show.”

Okay...not quite sure what to make of that.

“*Again*, Britt thinks I’m giving it an *US Weekly* oversell, but I’m really, really, *realllyyy* not.”

Rather than touch that subject, I transfer the package into my bag and ask, “Britt?”

“Brittanie.” My eyes find hers when I’m finished. “Brittanie Martindale.”

“Accounting?” Reynolds gingerly ponders.

“Field admin.”

Nodding is done in acknowledgement that I’m listening, not that I know who she’s referencing.

Unlike her I don’t have a lot of time with others unless they’re operatives or other analysts or *needed* for verifying information.

Melissa reminds me of T in that aspect.

He was like this in high school.

Everyone knew who he was, and everyone wanted to be around him.

Including me.

Maybe that’s why *I* miss being around Melissa.

She’s that outside connection to a world I wanna be in but am uncertain on how to.

“Blonde hair?” Reynold’s interjects again, green wording oddly

wobbly. “Great rack? Shoulders like a linebacker?”

“Um...yeah?” Our order is called prompting us to move in that direction. “I mean, I guess? I never really thought about her shoulders like that.” Faint grumble noises escape him between my assistant’s sentences. “Or her chest.” She shrugs it off. “Anyway, she went a few blocks around the corner to grab our lunch since it’s her turn.” Melissa reaches for the first drink and offers it to me. “I offered to drive her over there once we were done here, but she said this way we could kill two birds with one stone. Divide and conquer.”

More unhappy rumbles leave my guard, yet I don’t bother to ask why.

I assume it has something to do with him not wanting to run into another chick he made the mistake of fucking from the office.

His reputation for that is much worse than Slater’s.

“I’m thinking about lunch, too.” My casual comment is presented in tandem to her handing Reynolds his cup. “What are you two having?”

“Thai! From Thick Thais!”

The announcement instantly darts my eyebrows down.

Twists a tight knot in the pit of my stomach.

“She’s actually the *only* person I can ever get to have Thai with me.” Melissa steals a sip of her beverage. “And even then, we still don’t have it that often. Probably every few months or so.”

Holy shit.

My stare cuts up to Reynolds who is poorly hiding the revelation I’m now certain reached him before it did me.

But how?!

What does he know about Britt?

What does he know about all of this?!

“We um...we really need to get going, Carmichael,” my bodyguard politely pushes, hand now protectively on my back. “I promised Wahl, I’d have you back at the computer doing whatever click click shit it is you do before 12:30.”

Lie.

Or I guess more accurately a cover.

A very clever cover that proves he's quicker on his feet than I have noted.

"They keep you on a tight schedule, huh?" my assistant giggles with a playful elbow to my side.

"Very." Moving towards the door, I nonchalantly do a little more necessary investigating. "Hey, how long have you and Britt in admin been close?"

"I don't know," Melissa mindlessly shrugs. "She's randomly done drinks with all of us assistants for the past couple of years – she's like *really* close with hers, like secret lovers close – but her and I only recently started hanging out more alone." We exit the coffee shop as easily as we entered. "Probably in the past three months? *Maybe* four?"

The lump I'm nursing in my stomach shoots itself up into my throat.

Expands.

Ceases my ability to do anything other than politely smile.

"Come on, Carmichal," Reynold's rushes again on a gentle push forward. "You know how Wahl is."

"I think we all know how he is when it comes to you," Melissa school girlishly winks on a loud giggle. "Get going before you get in trouble. Email or text me if you need anything else, okay?"

This time nodding is done because I know I can't actually speak without giving away something I know we absolutely can't.

Upon our arrival at the SUV, Reynolds holds up a hand for me to wait, wordlessly insisting on inspecting the vehicle. He checks the doors. The tires. The rims. The trunk. Shoots several cautious glances at me yet proceeds sweeping the situation until he's certain it's safe to let me inside.

And given what we just concluded a couple minutes ago, I definitely see the necessity.

In fact, all the asinine protocols I swore my boyfriend was just being extra cautious about were clearly necessary.

Once the door is shut with us both safely inside, I wave goodbye to

my assistant while Reynolds locks us in on a mumbled, “*Holyfuck.*”

Rather than discussing anything with me first, he immediately calls Slater who to no surprise doesn’t let more than one ring occur. “Status report?”

“It’s Brittanie!”

“Bitch!” Blu awkwardly adds in the background prior to impishly laughing.

Reynolds doesn’t wait for my boyfriend to make a smart retort to his other best friend. “Brittanie Martindale is the leak!”

“What?”

“She’s been ciphering information from the assistants,” I add to the conversation, which informs him that I’m still safe. “And Melissa just told me, *they’ve* gotten really close over the past few months.”

“Givin’ her the *in* to your schedule,” Slater calmly deduces. “Melissa knows your movements.”

“And cannot keep a fucking secret to save her own ass,” Blu adds to the exchange. “How many surprise birthday parties has she ruined this year alone? Four? Five?”

“Seven.”

“Until recently, she was one of the few privileged to be provided that information. It wouldn’t be hard for an operative with half a brain to gather that intel from a well-timed lookin’ over her shoulder or at a text or pretendin’ to need to borrow a phone because her’s was dead or a quick use of a laptop when she was in the bathroom – assumin’ those items aren’t already bugged with listenin’ or trackin’ devices.”

My hands fly over my mouth covering a croaked, “*Ohmygod...*”

“*She’s* where I heard about The Agama Foundation from,” Reynolds regains control of the conversation. “Remember the day I walked into Arley’s office to bitch about assignments?”

“That’s the same day I was attacked.”

“Yeah, well, the next day *after* our little parking garage...thing,” he carefully words as if unsure I know what he’s referencing, “I remember

running into her – or now that I think about it a little harder – being *found* by her on my way to return some gear. She did that whole flirty small talk shit, but then told me if I ever wanted to leave, she knew The Agama Foundation was hiring. I thought it was some weird allegiance mind test setup *by* HE to weed out those disloyal and wasn't about to be stupid enough to fall for it. I assumed I just...passed the shit...because the next thing I know you're under the radar recruiting me to help out with this whole situation.”

“And she's on her way *right now* to the Thai restaurant,” I quickly announce. “Melissa says they get it together every few months, and I bet if I run the data that those dates will match with The Accountant's. *She's* who he's there to meet!”

“For payment,” Blu quietly claims. “He comes here quarterly to meet her for payment to keep her off the official books to make no direct link back to him.”

“*Get Arley home now,*” Slater damn near growls his order. “Sweep procedures and lockdown.”

“Roger that,” Reynolds affirms and prepares to pull out into traffic.

“Angel Cake,” he attempts to calmly state, yet the rigidness of the words flooding the vehicle prove otherwise, “promise me you'll follow. *Every. Safety. Protocol. To the fucking T.*”

“I promise, Cowboy.” Buckling myself in, I do my best to offer him some much needed reprieve. “You have nothing to worry about.”

Chapter 13

Slater

One of the most important things to remember about striking is timing.

In this business?

Timing is everything.

The difference between unharmed and injured.

Capturing or evading.

Living or dying.

I may be a little off when it comes to shit in the romance department – I.E. wanting to get my girlfriend pregnant before I’ve actually proposed – but when it comes to a mission?

I’m exactly where I need to be.

At exactly the right moment.

Always.

Giving the side of my face that’s feigning confusion a contemplative scrub, I repeatedly look in both directions as if lost. One hand lands on my hip while the other points, pretending not to know which way I’m supposed to be headed. I glance at my phone. Back up at nearby street signs. Down again. Dramatically demonstrate every tourist red flag to the two members of The Accountant’s security team waiting nearby in his SUV.

The one on the passenger side keeps a watchful eye unaware that I’m doing the same.

We need them taken out quietly to minimize the chance of our target being spooked.

Without backup coverage to assist in covering the other entrances and exits of the building, we need The Accountant to continue his typical routine, unsuspecting that the two men he’s expecting to protect him have been removed from the situation.

After one more confused look, I pretend to be overly exasperated and make eye contact with the guard.

I immediately toss an overly friendly wave attached to a mildly goofy guy wave.

“You look like Elmer Fudd without his shotgun,” Blu cackles in my ear.

“Xcuse me,” my friendly hand gesture occurs during my cautious approach to the vehicle. “Xcuse me, sir?”

“Should I be wery wery quiet?” my second in command mocks from our vehicle parked at the end of the block on the corner. “Are you hunting wabits, Elmer Wudd?”

I’m gonna be hunting *him* if he doesn’t shut the fuck up.

The male in the vehicle cracks the window just a couple inches which is all I need for plan A to be put in motion. “You lost?”

Propping one arm on the roof of the vehicle with the edge of my sleeve just barely hanging over the side, I lightly chuckle, “Yup!” Exaggerating my southern accent plays up my innocent nature. “Is it that obvious?”

“Yeah,” he grunts back, unaware of the odorless chemical currently being pumped into their vehicle. “What are you looking for?”

“Where the wabit is hiding,” Blu answers in my ear threatening to make my eye twitch.

I look down to minimize the amount of vapors capable of reaching my open mouth – since my nose has a clear seal of protection – yet continue on with the lost tourist act by motioning down at my phone. “Where the uh... hockey team plays.” More downward stabs are made. “I swear this thing jus’ has me goin’ in circles. I’m pretty sure I’ve passed that same homeless banjo player over there four times.”

“It’s-”

“And all I really wanna do is get a picture of the buildin’ for my boy, Hunter. He’s a big fan of the team.”

“Yeah, it’s-”

“Even hopes to play for ‘em someday. I always hoped he’d play football, his mama always hoped he’d play soccer but nope. That boy has his heart on hockey. I’ll tell ya somethin’ else-”

“It’s four blocks that way,” the guard aggressively interrupts, pulling my stare up to his. “Go to the end of this corner and make a right. Go four blocks. The road is titled Avenue of the Dragons.”

“Huh,” is grunted in fake amusement as I lower my arms back to my side. “That’s kind of fun!”

He rolls his eyes, closes the window, and motions me to move on.

“Thanks!” Another pretend warm-hearted wave of the drug free hand is given. “Really appreciate it! Have a great day!”

Cheerfully strutting away the direction I was told, I keep a grin plastered on my face and maintain my cover of the happy go lucky tourist. My eyes monitor the area of the fairly empty sidewalk – a situation we created by putting up caution construction ahead signs just out of their sight – and listen for confirmation from the man watching my six.

“And three...two...one...” A tiny pause precedes a snicker. “Night, night, wabits.”

I wait at the street corner for the light to change to one that indicates I can legally cross. Not because I give a fuck about that but because I need to continue to blend until they’re completely knocked out. “Status?”

“Snoozing.”

Nodding is done in tandem with me crossing the street to move to the rear of the vehicle which is where Blu is heading to meet me.

The instant I grant us access to the covered truck bed, he impishly questions, “Hunter, huh?”

“Your fault.”

“You mean *my helping.*” He reaches for his tactical vest while I peel away the nose strip intended to protect me from the sleeping agent. “And since I helped you-”

“Should we really consider you poorly actin’ out cartoons as helpin’?”

“How about *you* help me?”

Now free to breathe clearly, I reach for my own chest guard that’s honestly a rather safe than sorry sort of measure for our current capture mission. “With?”

“Handling Martindale and letting me handle The Accountant.”

“Seriously?” Securing the piece of gear in place is accompanied by a sarcastic stare. “You can’t handle her? She’s like a buck fifty in a soakin’ wet, sandbag bikini.”

“Yeah, but she’s a kicker.”

“How do you know that?”

“I don’t.” He double checks his weapon’s holster. “But I just *feel* like she is. And it’s really not how I want my jingle bells rang today.” I’m tossed an unhappy scowl. “That would put me in a fa-la-la-la fuck you mood, and we are way too close to fucking Christmas for that level of Grinch shit. Coal isn’t on my wish list, Wahl.”

I’m tempted to smirk over his outrageous tantrum. “You’ll be fine.” Closing the trunk is followed by declaring, “We stick to the original plan, and we simply take Britt too. Affirmative?”

The sneer he delivers is attached to announcing his comprehension of the order. “*Affirmative.*”

Relocating ourselves to the alleyway that houses the takeout door is a quick and easy feat. We stick to our previously mapped out route to avoid camera detection and use whatever coverage is available to prevent those passing by from getting suspicious. Aware of The Accountant’s routine of walking in, staring at the menu for a couple minutes, ordering, and then waiting inside for it to be ready – all masking the payout activity we couldn’t spot due to extremely limited video footage – we know how much time we don’t have left to get into position.

Subduing his security was a necessary anticipated step; however, learning the information about the inside man was unexpected and has created an uncomfortable crunch I could do without.

Our eventual arrival outside Thick Thais barely leaves time for each of us to get into position before our subjects are preparing to exit.

Martindale momentarily puts down her black shoulder bag to inspect the contents of the brown delivery sack on the counter, a sly action she uses to cloak The Accountant picking up her bag only to leave his for the taking. The smooth money drop is easy to conceal from cameras and onlookers, who they can simply wait to exit before executing, and it confirms what we suspected earlier.

She *is* the leak.

And he *is* in town to pay her.

I wait until he's finished placing the bag over his shoulder to push my back against the brick wall. He casually exits, immediately spotting Blu who's pretending to be texting on his phone. Rather than consider an ulterior motive for my partner's positioning, he prepares to continue on his path when I swing one arm around his neck from behind, getting my elbow all the way underneath his chin, trapping his throat in the crook of my arm. Takeout crashes to the ground, leaving containers flopping open and sauce splashes in our wake during the process of me dragging him backwards out of the line of sight. I cross my other arm and expand my chest out with a deep inhale to complete the choke. There's isn't time for him to fight. Or flail. He simply goes limp in a matter of seconds leaving me only a few more to get him properly restrained. Lowering him to the ground happens just as Martindale leaves the building. Unlike the man currently spitting and slightly seizing, she goes on the attack. Not one for wanting to strike a woman unless he absolutely must, my second exerts every move he can think of to block.

Maneuver.

Evade getting a blow to the face.

The ribs.

The throat.

Her upper body strikes leave very little to concern ourselves with – weak punches, unstable wrists, improperly curled fists – but the lower body ones – the ones Blu was ultimately worried about – are admittedly impressive.

Properly formed high kicks on their own are something that could get the town talking; however, high kicks in goddamn stiletto boots are the type of shit to make a goddamn You Tube tutorial video about.

Guess she *really* paid attention during those days in Muay Thai.

Zip tying The Accountant's ankles is completed to the sound of him choking on air that's violently flooding back to him while cuffing his hands is finished around the time Martindale's heel just barely misses the side of my best friend's face.

"*Fuck!*" he huffs during another squatted dodge. "I really don't wanna have to hit you!"

"Pussy!"

"*Seriously?!*" Blu shifts his forearm upward to shield another hit. "Did you seriously just call me a pussy?!"

On an annoyed eye roll, I unholster my Glock, aim it low to the ground, and wait for her to deliver her next kick. Firing off a round at the ankle of the leg she's using for support results in her falling backwards on a blood curdling scream. "You're fine, Martindale." My emotionless reassuring is attached to the yanking up of The Accountant. "It's a through and through, which is more than you fuckin' deserve."

I could add that it's also just *temporary*.

For what she's done?

She'll be lucky if she makes it to the other side of lunch.

"And you, Little Boy Blu..." keeping my gun trained on the harshly breathing female is done alongside a smug smirk slipping onto my face, "*are welcome.*"

He flashes an annoyed grin in my direction, opens a pouch to retrieve his zip ties, and proceeds with apprehending the traitor.

We've now got the unknown poacher's inside source.

Their accountant.

And the target of their attacks all secure.

Whoever this individual is?

They're out of moves and are about to fucking feel it.

Chapter 14

Slater

Clamping the industrial grade pliers on the lower portion of The Accountant's pinky, I slowly pull the digit away from his other fingers, crunching sounds along with gut wrenching howls reverberating around the sector c enhanced interrogation room.

Why hasn't Reynolds checked in yet?

Were they tailed?

How far?

For how long?

Did they have to reach the outskirts of the city?

Further?

What number of evasive maneuvers did they have to execute to get free?

Are they free?

Hell, have they been home and just forgot to fucking give me a status report?

I abruptly give the appendage a hard twist, not only breaking the knuckle but igniting louder, blood curdling screams.

Did *he* fucking forget?

Did that ass hat forget to inform me she's secure?

That she's fine?

That she's back to reviewing data and drinking afternoon coffee and listening to cheesy Hallmark Christmas movies because it's that time of the year?

Releasing the digit is followed by me moving the tool over to the space between his thumb and index finger as he pointlessly tries to thrash his strapped down frame around.

Even if Reynolds forgot – which I will chew his ass about the second I know my woman’s safe – Angel Cake wouldn’t have.

She’d call.

Or text.

Or both if I didn’t answer.

She wouldn’t be this quiet or distant.

Not willingly.

Squeezing on the handle is accompanied by meeting his teary blue-eyed stare. “Applying enough pressure here – to your median nerve – could make you piss yourself in pain.”

“He’s probably already close, honestly,” Blu comments from his position near the requested tools.

I release the force to build a false sense of security before using my other hand to unsheathe my tactical knife and jam it straight through his forearm so that the tip sticks in the wooden chair. The Accountant’s screams reach deafening levels lessening his chance of hearing my proclamation. “*That* is your radial nerve.” One small tweak is delivered to ensure it remains in place. “This type of damage to it is gonna make it hard to straighten your elbow...your wrist...your bony little fuckin’ fingers for typin’...”

“Forgive him,” my second in command dramatically insists. “He gets like this when he’s hangry.”

There’s no hesitation to execute another round of pain with the pliers in the very spot they’re lingering.

Our captive cries out to the same steady rate blood is seeping from his arm, prompting Blu to shout, “You did keep us from having lunch!”

“*S-s-s-st-st-stooooopppp!*” the individual begs, word barely coherent. “*Motherofgodpleasejust stop!*”

I don’t.

I lower my brow.

Move the device over to the nail of his middle finger.

Let it gradually clasp down to add to the agony of anticipation.

Keeping my expression stoic during the process only pushes him to plead hastily. More hopelessly. “I’ll tell you what – what – whatever you wanna kn-kn-know! Just...just...just please,” his head rapidly whips back and forth, “*please* no fucking more!”

I allow my chin to tip a little higher at the same time the tool smashes into the sensitive space.

“*Stop! Stop! Stop!*”

“I think he wants you to stop, Wahl,” Blu impishly pokes during his stroll closer. “But I’m just guessing, man.”

Swinging my attention in his direction has me catching a glimpse of Britt who’s at this time only sporting the one patched up wound and showcasing a smirk so smug that I’m tempted to have Angel Cake delivered here just to slap it off.

But that would be against procedure.

And possibly add more damage to that beautiful soul of hers.

More damage she doesn’t need.

Not if I can help it.

Not if I can *prevent* it.

My glare pastes itself onto our other hostage. “You think this shit is funny?”

Martindale rolls her head around to meet my gaze.

“You think this shit won’t happen to you?”

Her amused expression remains.

“Can’t happen to you?”

Mirth sustains its residence.

“You think because we had somethin’ once upon a fuck, you’re gonna make it out of this shit alive?”

All of a sudden, the sound of a cellphone starts ringing, yet the fact there’s no vibration attached to it means it’s not mine.

And considering the confused look on Blu’s face it’s safe to assume it’s not his either.

“*I think...*” Her red stained lips slowly expand into an even cockier beam, “if you ever wanna see that talking crayon box you call your girlfriend again, you should answer that.”

Dread drips along the back of my throat prompting me to wordlessly instruct Blu to retrieve the ringing device.

“Front pocket!” Martindale villainously giggles, clearly aware of something we aren’t.

She can’t be.

She can’t *be ahead* of us because the decision to grab her was last minute.

She wasn’t a part of the original op, which means she shouldn’t have had a contingency plan for this situation unless of course it’s just a standing arrangement upon her unexplained disappearance.

That would be a brilliant tactical strategy.

Especially when you take into account how long she’s been betraying the people she works for.

My second swipes the answer key and places the call on speaker.

“Good afternoon, the oh-so famous Slater Wahl...” a deep voice nefariously greets. “I wish I could say it was nice to finally make your acquaintance.” His pause is too brief to retort during. “But it’s not.”

Mentally, I scrutinize everything I possibly can.

His tone.

His speech patterns.

His inflections.

I don’t recognize any of them.

The clearness of the call.

The volume.

The background noises.

Of the latter, I hear very few.

Maybe a car?

Maybe wind?

Lots of wind?

“You have something that belongs to me,” the male casually continues as my eyes cut to Britt, “and *I* have something that belongs to you.”

“*Slatttteerrrrrrrrr!!!!!!!!!!*” screams Arley with enough force to literally drop me to my knees.

No.

No...

No!

It’s not possible!

He can’t have her!

I didn’t let that happen!

It’s gotta be a recording!

Or a fake!

Or...Or...

Not that!

Anything but that!

“Thank you for that. You can put her gag back in.”

Gag?!

“Do I have your *full* attention now, Wahl?” the voice cruelly questions.

I helplessly nod in spite of the fact he can’t see me.

“Oh, relax,” her captor playfully insists, “she’s *mainly* unharmed.”

My mouth can’t even fathom how to move let alone what to say.

“Define mainly,” Blu demands, doing what I should be.

What I can’t.

“*Minor concussion* from the car wreck. *Minor.*”

Wreck...?!

She was...she was...

There's no stopping my shoulders from plummeting to the floor.

What if she hadn't made it out of that?

What if she needs medical treatment?!

"She's got a couple bumps, couple bruises, but she'll survive for now unlike the driver." The male theatrically whistles. "Pretty sure he died before the paramedics even got to the scene, but we didn't exactly stick around to find out."

Blu's eyes fall to meet mine.

Is Reynolds really dead?

Did we really just lose a member of our fucking team?

"Extracting her alive *was* the main mission. One made possible because you were *finally* occupied elsewhere."

Fuck!

This is exactly what I was afraid of!

This is exactly why I didn't want her out in public out of my goddamn sight!

"Unfortunately for me, in the process of taking from you, *you* took from *me*."

My stare lands on Martindale's smug smirk a second time.

"And I want back what's rightfully mine, Wahl."

Pushing down the knot expanding in my throat is done to grimly state, "You wanna trade *my woman* for *yours*."

"God no," he loudly gags his denial. "Don't be small minded. Britt was just a tool."

The proclamation pulls my attention up to where shock is now covering her face.

Guess I'm not the only one getting shit news today.

"She was fine in the sack but replaceable."

Ouch.

"*In every way.*"

Seeing her jaw struggle not to tremble informs me that she's about to be a little more useful to me alive than dead.

At least for a couple hours.

“For the right price...for the right compliment...for the right promises...you can always find someone else to betray their employers. Loyalty – more often than not – is truly a false notion, Wahl. You should know that by now.”

I do.

Except for me it isn't.

Never has been.

Never will be.

And there isn't a damn thing on this whole fucking planet that I am more dedicated to than Arley Carmichael.

“My accountant on the other hand is *irreplaceable*.”

The man in control of his money?

Cleaning it?

Laundering it?

Keeping those watching from being able to connect all the pieces?

Of course he's irreplaceable.

Without him, I doubt the operation itself could continue to even exist.

“We will be trading your current plaything for my righthand – both alive – in two hours, Wahl. I could break into the enhanced interrogation room myself – I assume you're using the one in c not d – but that's far too messy, and I'm far too busy. After all Christmas is coming and there are so many bonus checks to receive.”

So, he *was* a field operative for HE at some point.

It means he's highly trained.

It also means following any sort of manual approved plan should be thrown out the window.

Not that I was going to load one into play, anyway.

“You have two hours. Two hours will give you time to stitch up the damage I’m sure you’ve done.”

I grab a glimpse of the hyperventilating, shaggy dark-haired male definitely in need of medical attention.

“And if HE’s favorite resident genius promises not to bite, I may even do the same.”

“*DON’T FUCKING TOUCH HER!*”

“Fine. I’ll let her bleed to death.”

“You let her bleed to death, and we’ll drown you in a pool of your own blood,” Blu promises without missing a beat.

“She’ll be alive as long as he is.”

The nod I give Blu indicates it won’t be a problem.

“In one hour, I will give you the geographical coordinates for the trade. And the next you will use to get there. Trust me when I say, you’re gonna need that whole hour, Wahl. You’ll come alone – no reinforcements.”

“That’s a trap,” Blu grunts the obvious.

“Let’s call this a *trust* exercise.” The voice’s tone increases in wickedness. “You come alone – wear a vest if it makes you feel more comfortable – with my accountant in tow and I’ll do the same for the handoff. Your hostage for mine. We make a simultaneous exchange and then both go home with who it is we want most in the world.”

Typical field negotiation tactics.

Provide the target with parameters, allow them to do something that makes them feel they have control, explain the trade, and paint a brief yet irresistible outcome of the scenario.

Too bad I’m not falling for it.

And since he seems to know who I am, he can probably guess this isn’t my first rodeo.

Then again, something tells me he’s banking on my love for Arley to outweigh my rationale decision-making skills.

I wish he were wrong.

Holy hell, do I wish he were wrong.

“Follow the instructions you’ve been given or be prepared to spend the next few years of miserable existence deep diving for her corpse on the ocean floor instead of hunting around the world for me.”

The call ends without waiting for my confirmation.

Or even an acknowledgement that I heard what he said.

He *knows* I heard every fucking word.

That I understand the severity of the threat.

That logic isn’t riding bareback with instinct.

No.

The shit is running away towards the sunset all on its own.

Locking eyes with Martindale, I force myself to find the strength required to rise back to my feet. “I’m willin’ to burn the world down to the ground and then its ashes for that woman.”

A faint twitch occurs in her lips.

“I’m willin’ to put my life directly in the line of fire, *knowin’* I may never make it out alive, without fuckin’ hesitation over jus’ the *idea* it may save her from gettin’ so much as a goddamn scratch.”

The crimson stained area looks like it’s trying to part.

“I’m willin’ to do *whatever* it takes, *whenever* it takes, for *however* long it fuckin’ takes jus’ to try to give her one last fuckin’ breath on this earth, and yet the man you betrayed *everything for* – company...friends...self – didn’t even bother to *attempt* a negotiation for you.” Her stare tries to jerk away only to have mine follow. “Not a two for one. Not a safe surrender. Not even a fuckin’ mercy killin’.” I burrow my glare further. “You mean absolutely *nothin’* to him, Martindale.”

She snuffles but remains silent.

“How about provin’ he means absolutely nothin’ to *you*?”

Her face remains frozen.

“How about provin’ he made a *mistake* when he underestimated *you*?”

Britt continues her still position.

“How about provin’ that betrayin’ *you* was the second most dangerous thing he could’ve ever done?”

This time I let her gaze momentarily fall.

“Give me his name.”

The command conjures it back up.

“Give me his name, Martindale, and I’ll give him the proper execution we both know he deserves.”

Rather than acknowledge the tear rolling down her cheek, she kicks her chin out, strengthens her spine for what will almost certainly be the last time, and coldly states, “*Ivan Rosenkrantz.*”

Chapter 15

Arley

They say it's wrong to judge.

I think it's the perfect thing do when you've been kidnapped.

Pay attention to your surroundings.

Mark the openings.

Assess your chances of escaping for survival.

If the risk ratio is low enough, fucking go for it.

I damn sure am.

Twisting my rope tied wrists back and forth abruptly stops when the man who had someone literally crash into us in our parking garage returns from wherever he momentarily wandered off to when he ended his call to Slater.

As easy as it would be to sit here and less than patiently wait for my cowboy to come riding in on a white seahorse, it's not logical.

Nor the right move for optimal survival.

I'm sure protocol would dictate otherwise, but this is *not* a drill.

And I'm not some braindead client who can't assist in her own rescue.

If I can get out of here, maybe I can hide somewhere else on this ship or get to a sat phone or even a loaded weapon.

Hell, I will fire a fucking harpoon through someone at this point!

"Comfortable?" The dark-haired male inquires at the same time he sits on the opposite couch, dark gray lettering almost frozen solid during its descent to the ground. He gestures an open palm in my direction with a vile grin. "All things considered."

Not sneering at his rose beige goatee covered face is impossible, along with impractical.

Come on.

Does anyone outside of a poorly put together Netflix movie honestly welcome the bad guy with a smile?!

“I see you managed to spit out your own gag.” An amused grin is offered. “Impressive mouth work.” His smirk transitions to one more repulsive. “Wahl is most certainly a lucky man.”

Ugh.

My lack of response doesn't seem to falter his speaking. “Do you know who I am?”

The man my future husband is going to slaughter probably isn't the answer he's looking for.

Rather than respond with the obvious, I resume my wrist movements; however, I focus on keeping the rest of my figure completely still to avoid detection.

“Do you recall seeing my face in your files?”

Nope.

Although now I'm wondering if I should have?

“Yes, years have passed, but I still did quite remarkable work, so I *know* I have hit your desk at least once.”

Many people have.

It doesn't mean I know or remember them all.

I sort through data.

I don't memorize all of it.

“Do you plan to ignore me for the remainder of our time together?”

Hm.

I wonder if that whole get them monologuing trope from our favorite film franchises actually works?

Will it really throw them off their game?

Get them to reveal their ultimate plan?

At the very least keep him totally distracted while I free my hands since no one was smart enough to secure my feet too.

Something tells me that the monster who yanked me out of the car and was responsible for securing me is going to get his ass handed to him.

Maybe even his head.

Like his actual head when Slater takes this yacht.

“How about I go first?” He leans back against the cushions and crosses one slender slacks covered leg over the other. “I’m Ivan Rosenkrantz.”

My writhing pauses to push around the strands of the knot to aid in loosening it.

“You’ve probably heard a lot about me even if it’s not currently ringing a bell.”

Or *any* bells.

Then again, the only bells I’m hearing are alarm ones that are all screaming to get the fuck out of dodge by any means necessary.

“And *I* know quite a lot about *you*, Arlette Carmichael.”

Never a good thing to hear from the lips of the person determined to kill you.

“Math genius. Programming princess. Behavioral specialist. Data extraordinaire.”

Maybe like one of those things.

His icy coated lettering lands in my lap, sending shivers down my spine.

I gotta get out of here.

Away from him.

Away from whatever he’s got planned.

Whatever he’s capable of.

“What I *wanna* know, Arlette, is how you *found* me.”

Needing to move my arms up and down – the next step in the breaking free process we went over when I was posed like I was kidnapped – I lean forward to hide my movements behind a sassy head bobble. “*You. Found. Me. Remember?*”

His small grunt of amusement pushes me back in place to begin with step one all over again.

This shit hurts.

Plus, it hurts even more with the metal portion of my charm bracelet cutting into me, but I'm hoping I can use that in my favor. That the sharp edges will help fray the strands. Weaken its strength.

That this possibility is an extra reason my boyfriend wanted me to wear it around the clock.

Ivan folds his hands in his lap at the same time he clarifies, "How did you find out about my activities?"

I lift my eyebrows to tempt him into confessing what it is I already know.

"My...*relocating*...of previous Haworth employees."

"Poaching."

"That seems like a bit of a misnomer."

A sarcastic head tilt is delivered to further mask my more aggressive actions.

"It's not *illegal*, although some believe it to be *unethical*." He offers me an emotionless shrug. "However, given the way HE operates that's a laughable accusation."

Yet I'm not laughing.

Or giggling.

Or so much as smirking over his statements.

The only thing I'm doing is what my bodyguard trained me to do, which is keep at it until my hands are free.

Until I have that window to *act*.

"I'm very curious, you know." Seeing the corners of his lip twist causes my stomach to do the same. "My system had been working for *years* prior to your little snooping exhibition." His grip tightens while mine hastens. "What inspired it?"

Aware that I need more time to work, I reply, "Someone forgot to

sign a piece of their paperwork.”

“*What?*”

“I was reviewing forms – per protocol – and found one unsigned by a recently resigned operative. This led to me reviewing his last batch of documents that also had missing signatures, which I’m required to report on.” Feeling the tightness finally begin to dissipate sends tingles of hope throughout my burning, bent arms. “This led me to his exit eval assessment where it was noted that he was exhibiting unusual brash and brazen behaviors most likely as a result of a crucial life change. Carelessness in work in his final days – like improperly finishing tasks – was also mentioned as another indicator that something major in his life most likely transpired and the abrupt departure of his job was a direct result.” The continued unravelling situation pushes me to proceed. “The phrasing of the analysis sounded familiar, so I checked another recently resigned agent to find he too had been reported for displaying similar behaviors. So, I...pursued the data further inevitably leading me to discover the deep-rooted issue known as you.”

Ivan gives his chin a silent, contemplative stroke prior to proclaiming, “I assumed between having their files marked and Britt using her resources to do in office monitoring would continue to cloak our technique. I never would’ve imagined that a clerical fuck up would put such a dent in our operation or worry our investors.”

An attempt to yank my wrist completely free fails, prompting me to bide myself more time. “Why poach from the same company you left?”

He glances off at the ocean for a minor moment before changing the subject. “What do you know about Wahl?”

“*Everything.*”

“Cute.” He flashes a mocking grin. “What do you know about his kidnapping?”

“Enough.”

“Well, aren’t you full of all the precise answers.”

“Would you like me to go back to ignoring you?”

An impressed smirk precedes the resuming of his questioning, “Are you aware that Haworth was the company hired for his rescue and recovery?”

“Of course.”

“Are you aware of the team that handled the assignment?”

“Bannon, Kaut, and Heuton.”

“Are you aware that Bannon was not a part of the original team?”

His question successfully stops my motions. “What?”

“*Rosenkrantz* was.” My kidnapper tips his head slightly forward.

“*Nicolas Rosenkrantz*.”

“Your father I’m gonna guess.”

“Correct.” Confirmation convinces my discreet writhing actions to restart. “My father got replaced last minute as lead operative on the assignment when a paperwork princess like yourself crunched some numbers and decided that Bannon was a better candidate because his risk assessment was *slightly* more favorable.” His jagged letters slice mercilessly through the cold afternoon air. “It didn’t matter that my father had *years* on Bannon and had done nothing but show loyalty to the company since the day he was hired. No. Someone in a cushy office chair, with no idea how the field actually works, did a little bullshit math, and decided it would be better if Bannon took point while my father ran second on a completely different operation.”

I wiggle the knot a little more receiving almost no resistance.

Yes!

I’m close!

So close!

“Wahl’s rescue became national fucking news. The shit they wrote books about and made shitty unauthorized movies over. Bannon, Kaut, and Heuton’s reputation landed them much more than just the pick of the litter at HE. They did interviews. And sold exclusive rights to their version of the events under Haworth’s approval, as long as they agreed to not slander the company during their media tours. Their lives *soared*, yet my father’s? It went in the opposite direction. He received *less* of the top tier assignments. Was repeatedly passed over for one of them. Started drinking more. Eating less.” Another headshake is presented. “You have any idea what it’s like to watch the decline of Superman right in front of your eyes?”

Sympathy requests access to my veins only to be instantaneously denied.

Perhaps I would be if he wasn't trying to kill me.

Had he not fucking kidnapped me based on a grudge that has *nothing* to do with me.

“I honestly couldn't *wait* to leave for the Marines when I turned eighteen. Just to get away from watching him waste his life like that. Unfortunately for me, between him becoming a raging alcoholic and my mom's death, I was forced home. Decided I'd apply to the private sector. Join HE like him – despite how dirty they had done him – and restore the Rosenkrantz name. And I did.” The prideful hand wave occurs at the same time mine finally slips free from the rope cuff. “He let himself get to the bottom of the food chain, taking on low risk PS gigs for elderly celebs while I climbed the charts. I ended up having some of the best numbers in the whole fucking company when I quit. I was in the top five of hot saves – those in an active gunfire situation – protects and kills of all time. I had done so well and accomplished so much and made them so much fucking money that I just *knew* they would give me a number.”

The thick restraints fall lifelessly to the space between me and the back cushion.

“And then when the rumors about a new number being filled began, again, I *knew* it was me who would be getting that offer. That call. That this would be the moment I proved to my father we had lost a battle, but we were going to win the whole fucking war. I knew it. *He knew it.*” His frame slides to the very end of the seat to waggle a finger. “But then...someone who knows how to read papers and not people – much like yourself – decided that Lenkov would be a better fucking fit.” Seeing his spite sizzle its way to me has me wanting to scoot elsewhere. “Lenkov? *Harvey Lenkov?* Middle fucking management Lenkov?! That was a better fit to assist in running this company than someone who had had boots on the fucking ground?! Than someone who was basically a fucking general with information his can't fire straight ass couldn't even dream of?!”

Okay.

Management stuff?

True.

His ability to handle a weapon?

Not true.

At least not according to the target hit photos he showed me from being at the range with Slater.

“The day it was announced Lenkov would be filling the role was the last time I saw my father alive.”

There’s no preventing my jaw from dropping.

“He drank the entire bottle of Wilcox we were going to drink together in celebration – *alone* – for dinner and then got into his car in the closed garage to treat himself to a bit of carbon monoxide poisoning for dessert.”

More shock settles on my shoulders.

“They took my father’s pride,” Ivan announces as he rises to his feet, clearly in need of walking off the emotions. “His confidence.” He moves a few steps closer to me around the table dividing us. “His job.” Plopping down on the edge of the furniture directly in front of me is both horrifying and helpful. “And then finally his fucking life.” I lock eyes with him during his lean in, which is obviously an intimidation tactic. “Why poach from the same company I left?” An undeniably vile beam spreads across his face. “Because they poached everything from my family.”

Now, *that’s* an oversimplification.

And petty.

We’re talking about hiring a lookalike to star in your music video about your famous ex so that the whole world knows *exactly* who you’re talking about level of petty.

Nothing good ever comes from shit like this.

He’s about to learn that the hard way.

I stomp on the very edge of his dark boat shoes, crunching his toe with all the force possible, causing him to bark in pain and jerk further forward. After sucking in a small bit of air to brace myself for the pending sting, I once more, use all the strength I can muster up to slam my head into his. This time Ivan flails backwards and over the table allowing me an open

opportunity to take off running. While I have no idea where to go or where to hide or how the hell to get help, I know I have a better chance to figure all that shit out away from the *Jason Bourne* villain I royally pissed off months ago.

Sprinting along one side of the ship is carelessly done. Between the choppy waters rocking us and the same water creating a slippery terrain, I slide into the wall. The metal railing. The wall again. Regardless of how much wind gets knocked out of me, I scurry towards the end, anxious to round the corner into unseen territory.

Just as I prepare to swing around the edge of the deck, the brown skinned armed guard who dragged me out of the vehicle earlier appears. Confusion barely registers before he's retrieving a weapon to point in my face, yet rather than risk wrestling over it – not the most probable choice given his size and my stature – I spin on my heels to dart the direction I left, begging my Gym Class guardians that I am not the star that's about to get shot down.

Two wobbly strides are all that get completed due to Ivan stepping back into my pathway.

Torn in two over both dead ends leads to me glancing at the railing to the ship.

Going over isn't a great option.

And drowning is an even less viable one.

Unsure of where to go or how to react leaves me paralyzed in place long enough for Ivan to clip me in the bicep, bullet grazing my skin just enough to further incapacitate me on a body shaking scream.

Crumpling against the very railing I probably shouldn't have entertained climbing over occurs during my captor's announcement, "Next one will be a kill shot, Carmicheal." He aims the gun higher to reiterate his seriousness. "I told my investors – who had become shaken with your tactics at finding me – that I would show them our problems were solved firsthand – hence capturing you and summoning Wahl here; however, I'm fairly positive I can show them your corpse and give them the same reassuring speech to illustrate my point."

New ropes of panic wind themselves firmly around my throat cutting

of my ability to speak.

“Farr,” Ivan calls to the bulky male gradually approaching, “tie her up again. And this time?” His frigid gray lettering scrapes my cheek on its way by. “*Do it like you fucking mean it.*”

Chapter 16

Slater

“Yeah, I remember, Rosenkrantz,” Seventeen loudly announces over the fueling of the nearby helicopter. “Great operative.” He swipes the screen of his tablet, flashes us his photo, and skims the info further. “According to his files, he’s a retired Marine. Has some of the highest kill rates in the company.” Another scroll is followed by a displeased hum. “And some of the highest casualties as well.”

“That’s not good,” Blu mutters under his breath.

I briefly cut my stare away from the vehicle being prepared for us. “What else?”

“Arley’s notes – that she has shared – have him marked as a possible suspect noting the narcissistic red flags in several of his psych evals, his handwriting analysis that shifts from large in size – textbook attention seeker – to tiny scribbles – retreating from social structures as a whole – a combination she mentions can result in an unstable mindset – and a pattern of requests for a pay increase despite an unimproved performance.”

“Africanized honeybee much,” my second sarcastically sighs.

“His motives are unclear to me.” Our eyes finally lock. “However, if you’d like me to venture an educated guess? Some sort...unresolved revenge or vendetta for not being heard when he was here.”

“Was he fired?” Blu rightfully investigates.

“Resigned.” Seventeen lowers the device he’s been death gripping since we’ve been on the pad. “Shortly after I took office.”

My head slightly angles itself to the side. “I get the feelin’ that’s not a coincidence, Seventeen.”

“I didn’t have anything against him.”

“Doesn’t mean he didn’t have anything against *you*.”

“Killing and kidnapping seem a bit extreme for someone I can hardly recall having interactions with, Wahl.”

“People have gone to harsher lengths for less,” I coldly remind him. “People are often fueled by hate or the need for revenge the same way they’re fueled by hope.” Crossing my arms is wedged between statements. “It’s that old sayin’ about cuttin’ off the nose to spite your face.”

“And yet something tells me you’re gonna be cutting off a whole lot more than that,” Blu playfully pokes.

Probably not.

This isn’t a capture torture mission even if for the first time in my life I wish it were.

No.

It’s simply R&R.

And R&R is what I do best.

“Helo’s almost ready,” Seventeen informs, receiving a hand gesture from the pilot. Afterward, we lock eyes again. “And you’re *sure* you know exactly where she is?”

“Affirmative.”

“Absolutely fucking sure, Wahl?”

“*Affirmative.*”

“How?” He huffs in obvious irritation. “Explain to me now what you wouldn’t earlier because you needed to gear up.” His gaze narrows in nervousness. “*How* do you know where Arley is without Rosenkrantz providing you the location?”

Adjusting my gear bag is done on a blunt, “She’s got a tracker.”

Blu moves around to stand beside our boss to be in my direct line of sight. “Say that shit again.”

“She’s got a tracker on her.”

“Does she *know* she has a tracker on her?” Seventeen cautiously questions.

“No.”

“You put a tracker on your fucking girlfriend?!” Outrage and mirth alike mix in my best friend’s laughter.

“Is this another romantic sentiment between the two of you I don’t understand?”

There isn’t time to respond due to Blu cackling, “Brah, you know she’s a person not a puppy, right?”

“It was a tactical decision.”

Two sets of eyebrows dart down, yet it’s my partner for the mission that points out, “You know when she finds out you’re gonna be in *deep*. *Shit.*”

“Yup.” I lean slightly forward to reinforce my proclamation. “But she’s gonna be *alive* to put me in that deep shit.”

He pauses.

Nods in agreement.

Swings his stare back to the man, who for the first time in his life, didn’t hesitate to put my woman’s life before his own. I banged on his door, told him we needed to rescue Arley, and was immediately followed out of his office for him to make whatever necessary arrangements he could.

Not sure who he was on a call with, but they’ll understand.

Or they won’t.

Either way, I don’t care.

The only thing I care about is getting my woman home safe and sound and ending this bullshit once and for all.

“Call when you’re ready for extraction.” Seventeen slides one hand into his pocket. “In the meantime, I’ll see if there are any updates regarding Reynolds critical condition as well as what other information our indisposed guests are willing to part with prior to their demises. I’m sure by now Consuelos has retrieved *something* else. She is highly skilled.”

I give him a nod of acknowledgement and head off to the transport with Blu on my heels.

The instant we’re on the helicopter, I present the pilot with the exact coordinates her tracker is currently pinging and inform him of how many nautical miles we need to be dropped out at to prevent from being detected. Post setting his route, he points to the headsets we need to put on and motions

for us to get seated where we'll finish gearing up for the rescue.

After all...the pre-game clock is ticking.

Getting from Dalvegan to the middle of the water where his yacht is currently floating isn't the issue.

It's getting there before he places that call to tell me where he is.

Because if he gets a chance to make that call and I don't answer?

He'll kill her.

It's why I didn't waste a fucking minute leaving interrogation, getting Lenkov, or loading up on gear while Blu had someone on our tech team locate his yacht and pull up the schematics on it. Typically, a good plan takes time to concoct.

Days to prep.

Run drills.

Discuss obstacles.

But we don't have a good plan.

We simply have a fucking plan, which is just something we have to make work.

It's been a long minute since I had to drop behind enemy lines with not much more than my instinct and a basic goal, but that doesn't mean I can't do it.

And for Angel Cake?

I most certainly fucking will.

"Fuck, that waters gonna be cold," Blu whines, looking out the side window upon our arrival above the dark blue terrain. "Why don't we ever get to jump out in the shit when it's warm?"

"Cabo," I casually remind without looking up from the beeping dot on my device.

"Should we count Cabo?" He lightheartedly argues doing what he believes is best, attempting to distract me from the irrefutable fear I haven't felt since I was a child.

I know I need to be focused on bringing her home.

Not what happens if I don't.

Not what happens if we're too late.

Not what happens if he suspects I'm following a different plan.

I need to concentrate on the mission objective of infiltrate, search, and seize.

I can't picture her lying on the deck with a bullet through her brain.

Footsteps in blood from whoever fled.

I can't believe that's even possible because the second I do I know that's what I'll see.

Rubbing the tightening spot in my chest captures my second's attention. "*We got this, Wahl.*"

I apply a little more pressure in hopes of alleviating the discomfort.

"Clear eyes. Clear heads. Clear hearts. Can't lose." The corner of his mouth lifts towards the darkening sky. "That's what you said to me before we went in on our first mission together."

He was nervous.

I needed him not to be.

"So, that's what I'm saying *to you* on what I now know is our last mission together." He holds my stare hostage and extends an open palm in my direction. "Clear eyes. Clear heads. Clear hearts. Can't lose."

"*Won't lose.*" I firmly assert at the same time we clasp grips.

"We are approaching the drop point," announces our pilot prompting the two of us to remove our headsets and turn on our waterproof coms.

Side by side we pull on our masks and shove in our mouthpieces.

Blu opens the door and waits for our pilot to lift his hand into the air and wave three times to wordlessly declare "go go go".

There's no hesitation for me to step off, body immediately morphing into the ideal plummet position.

Fuck needing style today.

The only thing I need is speed.

Once we've both breached the surface, we exchange nods of confirmation and dip back down.

For the first time in over a decade, I glide through the water, determined to break my record.

Devoted to shaving off any fraction of a second that can put me closer to rescuing Arley sooner versus later.

Our swift arrival near the side of the rocking ship allows us to briefly scan the situation we were only partially prepared for. Distant satellite thermal scanning gave us a read of ten heat signatures on board, which includes Arley, Rosenkrantz, and the vessel's captain. Who was where and their possible patrol routes were all things there wasn't time to study or deduce.

All we were given were the bare minimums.

Making it work is all on us.

The first guard on the main deck rounds the corner diligently scouring the ship itself, ignoring the uneven waters that are helping conceal our location. I instruct Blu with a hand motion to follow me and sink beneath the water a second time for us to swim slightly closer to the deck's edge.

Releasing a rubber duck near the stairs we're stealthily sandwiching works the same as it did before.

He grunts in confusion.

Crosses over to inspect it.

Bends down to retrieve the bright yellow object yet receives a knife straight through his neck slicing his trachea in one clean stab. Before his frame can crash into the water alerting the others to our arrival, Blu shifts himself in front of the individual and winds both arms around his torso to force him quietly into the dark depths. Between the injury and the struggle, it doesn't take long for the male to drown or my partner to return.

Dividing and conquering to further subdue is the next strategic part of our modest plan.

I head right while he paddles left, both removing a small canister of knock out gas to toss on board for assistance.

The large build, dark-skinned opposition coming into view has me

quickly pulling the plug; however, the pale ivory enemy who also happens to be cradling a tech nine like his counter preparing to pass him becomes the perfect storm for an attack. Rolling the canister through the gap of the deck and railing guard precedes me disappearing into the watery shadows to wait for their inevitable thuds.

When I'm certain it's clear, I swim back up.

Survey the scene.

Launch myself up and over the edge where I hold my position to listen for additional movement.

Not receiving any, I ditch my flippers, keeping my knife ready in case there's a need for an impromptu quiet kill. Next, I strip out of my other gear yet maintain my firearm along with ammo rounds for refilling.

I dispose of the passed-out guards' guns into the water prior to using my knife to sever each of their brain stems in their facedown positions.

No witnesses.

And no revenge killing scenarios.

It's bad enough that's what all this shit is about now.

Blood seeps onto the deck pushing me to navigate around it to prevent creating the same crimson steps I envisioned earlier. Skulking along the exterior wall, I exchange my blade for my Berretta and cautiously peak my head around the nearest corner to verify a clear passage, something my second informs me of a mere minute later.

He motions with his weapon he'll take the stairs leading upward leaving me to sweep the ones leading down.

Each step is steeper than anticipated from first glance and leaves no possible room for coverage. Being so vulnerable prompts faster movements, but the irregular rocking threatens to expose me to my targets too early.

Just as the ship shifts directions, the first door I passed suddenly opens causing me to abruptly change directions. From behind, one hand is quickly clamped over his mouth at the same time the muzzle of my weapon is wedged into his ribcage. The first shot clears a path for the second to successfully pierce his lungs. Gurgling sounds are attached to violent twitches that result in me squeezing the trigger twice more to swiftly end his

suffering.

Not because he deserves it.

But because I know my clock has almost run out.

Letting his body drop rather than gingerly lying it down will alert Rosenkrantz – who I am banking is hiding below deck – to my presence and pull him this direction.

Away from Arley.

Away from the area she can get hurt.

And I know she's wherever he is.

You don't let your bargaining chip or successfully captured target out of sight.

Field ops 1-0-1.

"Threats eliminated," Blu announces in my ear. "Ship acquired."

With my weapon aimed at the door, I brace myself to take the shot I know I need to yet am completely surprised when a barrel curls around the edge to fire. Falling harshly at the knees has the bullet barely missing my torso and clumsily sliding across the wood. The loud thump not only tells the assailant which direction to change his trajectory to, it damn near gets me clipped between the thighs. Sliding out of the way in tandem with another hard rock from the ship knocks me into the wall once more modifying his shooting pattern.

I ignore the building pains from being thrown around against my will and scramble to the door where I grab a hold of the handle to remove the firearm from his possession by yanking it towards me. The gun goes off one last time prior to its descent. The shot barely misses my calf, and that little fact simply adds to the rage rushing through my fingertips. Slamming it over and over and over again continues until I'm convinced it's broken or at least damaged enough to be less operable. At that moment, I relinquish my hold and deliver a heavy kick to the barricade, not wanting to shoot without awareness of my woman's location.

For all I know, she could be smashed against the door as an additional line of defense.

Hitting her with the door isn't ideal, but it's damn sure more

forgivable than putting a round in her.

My arrival in the guestroom immediately reveals to me the disoriented man I'm looking for and *only* him.

Where is she?!

Where. The. Fuck. Is. She?!

She should be here!

She has to be here!

Frozen by fear that he's already done the unthinkable, that he did the unthinkable the instant he hung up the phone, that the love of my life is dead on her way to the bottom of the ocean, presents him with a chance to regain the offense. He reaches for my weapon bearing wrist, bends it, and squeezes the pressure points, forcing me to abandon my hold. His other hand automatically intervenes to catch it; however, mine immediately counters.

Knocks the gun away from both of us.

Causes it to skid across the recently washed floor near the open bathroom door.

My chest is left wide open and Rosenkrantz nails me in it using his injured hand. Fumbling backwards into the bedside table allows for the navy-blue vase to be picked up and smashed against his dark locks. He's knocked literally sideways onto the nearby bed putting me yet again in an optimal position for ending this.

Him.

Kneeing him in the gut upon his first attempt to get up is followed by another blow to his face, this one courtesy of my fist, mania and mayhem soaring through my blood, demanding I do it again.

Harder.

Faster.

One punch becomes two.

Two becomes three.

Three transforms into the prelude to me kneeling on his chest. Wrapping my hands around his pencil neck, I begin squeezing with everything I have, wanting him – *needing him* – to experience the ache he

summoned over taking her.

Over...*killing her.*

How could I let this happen?

His hands fruitlessly pound on my sides until I inch up further pinning his shoulders down instead.

How could I not save her?

His lower half kicks the edge of the wooden frame for reprieve.

How could I fail the most important mission of my goddamn life?!

His crystal stare that's similar to mine widens during the continued oxygen deprivation convincing me to angle my wrists inward so that my thumbs can dig into his ocular cavities on a malicious, madness fueled roar.

All of a sudden, an unexpected movement out of the corner of my eye draws my attention over to the bathroom door. I thoughtlessly loosen my hold at the same time I croak, "*Angel Cake?!*"

Rosenkrantz takes advantage of the slack, forcefully shoves me off, and sits up straight to suck in a deep breath. I prepare to launch myself back up onto my feet to finish what I started when a round pierces the back of his head only to come out through the very territory, I was gouging split seconds ago. His lissome frame teeters over to the headboard announcing his death with an almost cartoonish thud that sends my bright gaze back to the woman of my dreams.

She carefully lowers the gun, mangled rope dangling from each of her wrists. "Status report?"

Inexplicable relief weasels itself along every bone in my body during my hasty crawl over to her. "*Grateful.*"

"Holes?"

"No new ones."

My best friend sweetly interrogates, shaky hands still gripping the firearm "Bones?"

"Intact."

"Cuts?"

“They’ll heal.” I declare in tandem with transferring my Baretta back to me. “Fuck, everything will heal, baby. It always does.”

Sliding the safety on occurs as she asks, “So, does this whole putting a bullet in his brain thing count as *me* saving *you*, Cowboy? Or maybe we can call it a fifty-fifty split?” Softness fusing with playfulness. “That seems fair to me.”

“We can call it whatever the fuck you like as long as you’re alive to call it, Angel Cake.”

There isn’t time for her to even smile at the statement before my mouth captures Arley’s. While one palm cradles the secure weapon, the other roughly cups her face, lips savagely spreading hers to grant my tongue all the access it needs to taste what it momentarily feared it would never taste again.

Caress what it worried it would never caress again.

Claim who I broke a promise to about keeping safe.

I don’t care what I have to do in the future to guarantee that my word is never broken again, I’ll do it.

I’ll light every candle.

Beg every angel.

Bargain with the big man himself using my life for hers as long as it means she’s secure.

Protecting Arlette Carmichael from now through eternity is my new mission.

And needless to say, I think I’ve spent my whole life preparing for it.

Epilogue

About 4 ½ Years Later...

Arley

“Angel Cake,” beautiful blue lettering, glides down to land on the keyboard in front of me, “I thought we agreed to no work on anniversary trips and family vacations.”

Agreement implies both parties consented.

Nay, we did not.

He did the thing he always does, which I both love and hate even to this day.

He spoke.

Declared it.

And then refused to fight or argue or entertain anything else.

Thankfully, he didn't try that tactic when it came to naming our twin girls, Allaira – and Alura aka Lair Bear and Lu.

Not that it would've worked.

Especially considering the pregnant woman he would've been up against was told to stay off her feet due to swelling, which meant that baking her worries and stress away wasn't an option.

Without diverting my attention away from the data on the screen, I casually retort, “I'm not working.”

I'm really not.

In fact, working less over the past few years is absolutely something I have stayed committed to.

After having my life nearly ended one too many times by someone housing a revenge plot, I wasn't responsible for I chose to continue to lean into the work less, play more mentality. As a result of that unfortunate period in our lives, I found a side of myself I really needed.

I found courage.

And a willingness to be seen.

And heard.

And at times understood by the world that had been too cold for too long.

Slater and I kept going to hockey games and eventually began renting a season box, which is best for the girls as well as me. We've been to concerts – both country and rock – although we don't typically stay long. Even with earplugs helping filter the sounds, they're quite overwhelming. Dining out weekly and double dating monthly and doing things I never pictured myself doing, like skydiving or giving the speech at my brother's wedding all became big battles we won together.

While the incident inspired me to live more, it definitely encouraged my husband to work less.

After signing his official paperwork that declared the assignment over, he showed me his transfer papers that indicated he would be *training* field operatives rather than continue being one. There wasn't even time to respond to that before he was playing a Gym Class Heroes song on his phone and getting down on one knee to propose like he promised. Jokes about it lacking a tracking chip were of course exchanged – post me saying yes of course – and to no real surprise what was going to be an office quickie was interrupted by Blu who came to tell us Reynolds was going to make it as well as show me his transfer papers too.

Interestingly enough, about a month later – with the holidays and an anniversary vacation to Hawaii to visit my parents behind us – I got together for a lunch meeting with Harvey to discuss their transfers bringing up an alternative. The idea of launching a more advanced training division than the one we currently had – particularly one for those that involved R&R for children – was my pitch yet Harvey not only took it, he expanded it to include various around the globe terrain training. The other numbers were pleased. Impressed. And when he put in to have Slater run point on the new program with Blu and Reynolds as the other members of the team, he got instant approval along with a hefty bonus.

Which was his *second* for the year.

Dismantling Ivan's operations contributed to his first, of course.

Not being privy to the exact details didn't stop me from receiving any.

Once recouping the amounts spent on keeping me safe – from supplies to manpower to alternative methods for information gathering aka Wiz – were obtained – courtesy of The Accountant's impressive records – bonuses for those affected directly were handed out and followed with using the remaining amount to discover the identities of his investors. From there, all I know is, they too were handled accordingly by those at the top of the company.

Britt's life was of course ended before I was rescued yet the haunting rumors of what happened to her – what happens when you're caught betraying the business – live on to this day. And due to Melissa's unintentional supplying of information, she was reassigned to another location. They masked it as a raise in position versus an inability to be trusted with secure information. She works in HR in our Paris division where her primary objective is arranging annual functions. I miss her, but we still keep in touch. Sharing kid pictures is like a weird universal language in itself.

All of a sudden, Lair Bear demands, "Higher, Daddy! Higher!"

"You really think you can handle higher, princess?"

Glancing over at the picture-perfect moment can't be helped.

"All the high, Daddy!" she squeaks prior to being hoisted high above his head.

"Alright," he lightly chortles. "Launchin'."

Our daughter flies gracefully through the air with her water winged arms frantically flailing around to help her soar. She lands with a huge splash that drenches her slightly smaller in stature sibling. The instant she's above the surface Lu grabs her face to ensure she's okay before taking her turn to swim over to be thrown.

This is really what he retired for.

He wanted to do the dad thing to the fullest extent possible.

His change in position definitely allows it, yet not nearly to the level he implied it would.

There are still long stretches where he has to travel, which is much

more agonizing when raising two kids even if his life isn't directly on the line.

He misses important moments.

First words.

First footsteps.

First batter tasting.

And the girls?

They miss *him*.

Riding pretend horses around the backyard of the house Slater and his dad custom designed.

Riding *real* horses at his stepfather's property.

Brushing teeth, reading books, and lighting bedtime candles just like he did when he was their age.

The unexpected amounts of travel are a point of contention in our relationship, but we make it work just like we used to.

"Angel Cake," my husband begins again at the same time he lifts Lu, "could you please stop workin' and come play with us?"

"Pwease, mommy!" Lu squeals, little legs kicking in the air, hot pink letters springing each step of the way.

"Again, I am not working." Closing my laptop precedes watching my three-year-old flutter through the beautiful morning sky. "I was just doing a little data digging."

Slater slides onto the edge of our vacation rental's pool and tosses me a sarcastic stare over his shoulder. "That's work."

"It wasn't."

"Did it involve algorithms?"

"That's not a fair assessment. *Most* things involve those even when you don't realize it."

"Uh-huh." He waits until I'm sitting on the edge beside him with my feet in the water to continue his investigating. "Did it involve behavior analysis?"

“Again, doesn’t everything?” Gently wading my feet is accompanied by a sassy smirk. “Even helping Kolby with contract negotiations requires that.”

Unlike my brothers and all the other men close to us – including Harvey – Kolby *isn’t* married.

He hasn’t even had a girlfriend for longer than a summer.

From first glance one would assume he has commitment issues; however, having done the evaluation myself, it's more about the risk to reward point he’s at in his career. Hockey players don’t exactly get to play the game forever and from what I’ve deduced?

He just wants to focus on getting as much ice time as he can before he has to hang them up.

Slater tosses a water toy to the end of the pool to keep the girls momentarily occupied. “*Arley.*”

“I was looking into private preschools.”

My confession causes his attention to cut to me. “Why?”

“Statistically speaking-”

“Not my favorite words when it comes to our girls.”

“It’s the optimal window to introduce them into a more structured day to day setting that will house a more successful educational path.”

His brow pinches together in displeasure. “What’s wrong with the one they’re on now?”

“It lacks routine.”

“But-”

“Organization.”

“But-”

“Reliability.” I wave back to my curly haired daughters that are frantically waving at me for some reason. “All the studies show children need in order to flourish.”

“They don’t lack love.”

Redirecting my gaze to him is attached a sweet grin. “They don’t,

Cowboy. And just because they start attending school or developing a can't have a fort movie day with daddy on a random whim doesn't mean you suddenly love them less." I let my toes inch over to touch his. "It actually means you love them *more* because you're willing to put them first. Same as you are me."

He bashfully beams, leans back onto his palms allowing the sunlight to caress his glistening chest, and sighs, "I suppose a *little* more structure won't hurt anything."

"It'll definitely make handling the holidays a little easier versus the *Mad Max: Grandparents Rule* situation we face now."

Louder chuckles are followed by him leaning over to plant a kiss on my tankini bearing shoulder. "Speakin' of grandparents, your dad texted about an hour ago. Said they'll be pickin' up the girls for lunch and keepin' 'em for the night so that Mommy and Daddy can do those things Mommy and Daddy have had trouble doin' lately."

Between his work schedule and two creatively cock blocky children, dry spell would be a compliment at this point.

I clamp my teeth down on my bottom lip to trap a moan from escaping. "You know they're talking about moving back to Dalvegan."

Slater's eyebrows launch to the gorgeous Hawaiian sky. "Is that right?"

"Well," a tiny head bounce occurs, "*Mom* is talking about it. She wants to be closer to *all* of her grandchildren now that there are so many, while *Dad* is trying to move further away. Says we're all too close if we can keep visiting this much. He's thinking Australia."

His carefree cackling grows in strength.

"Guess we'll see who wins that argument when they come out for Christmas. Who knows. Maybe we use our hockey connections to bribe him to our side. More babysitters is always a good thing."

His boisterous laughter becomes too irresistible for the girls to keep their distance from.

Who could blame them?

I never could.

Still can't.

And no matter what data life tries to deter us with, I know I never will.

I will always find my way to Slater Wahl, and he will always find his way to me.

Thank you for reading *Shockproof (The Shatter & Shock Duet #2)*! I hope you loved this slow burn, best friends-to-lovers, forced proximity, romantic suspense novel. Find out what happens next in this couple's future with the Christmas novella *Sleighproof (The Shatter & Shock Christmas Novella)*.

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0CNDBFCMT>

You can find out more about Haworth Enterprises by reading the first book in the series, *Bulletproof (Haworth Enterprises #1)*, which features another brainy heroine and overly protective hero.

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B097LNYH1B>

Be sure to check out my other book, *Wiz's Remedy (Camelot Misfits MC #4)* where you will learn all about this off the books hacker who is determined to help save a woman from her haunting past!

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0929HC368>

And don't forget to sign up for my newsletter and receive a FREE read:

<http://bit.ly/XNNLSL21>

Did you enjoy reading Shockproof (The Shatter & Shock Duet #2)? I would appreciate you leaving a review if you did!

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0CG6NS3FH>

OTHER WORKS

Do you love EASTER EGGS in books? Well, mine are often full of them and this one is no exception.

Here are links to other stories/places/people that were mentioned/referenced in the book!

Did you catch all of these?

Austlandia (Classic) – <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B010MX9WVC> (Free Novel Alert!)

Gunz and Kammo (Already Written) –

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B01EGR3BV2>

Dalvegan/Dalvegan Dragons (The Owner) – <https://amzn.to/3IImDpx>

Applecourt, MI (Aleatory) – <https://amzn.to/3xKJQ2L>

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Wiz (Camelot Misfits MC) – <https://amzn.to/2TTnNCI>

Loca Mocha Casabloca (The Suit) –

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07G45VY8G>

Vlasta, WI (Can't Block My Love) –

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07ZFCJ4H>

GRATITUDE:

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Until next time...

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FULL List of My Works

Standalones

Cinderfella (YA Contemporary) - <https://amzn.to/2pBHZff>

The Gamble (Romantic Comedy) - <https://amzn.to/2uf4ZFw>

Part of The List (Contemporary Romance) - <https://amzn.to/2udYwuz>

Walking Away (Contemporary Ménage Romance) -

<https://amzn.to/2pAOEGf>

Can't Match This (Romantic Comedy) - <https://amzn.to/2XapsVw>

Hike, Hike Baby (Romantic Comedy) - <https://amzn.to/2PNj456> (Available
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Hush- <https://amzn.to/2pzV2gS>

Savor- <https://amzn.to/2HZsVP1>

Callous- <https://amzn.to/2pAPmTV>

Agonize- <https://amzn.to/2ILLaZw>

Suffocate - <https://amzn.to/2GjLU9T>

Mollify- <https://amzn.to/2GgRJoJ>

Blur- <https://amzn.to/2pD1rrK>

Blear - <https://amzn.to/2DQGb6a>

Blare- <https://amzn.to/33nnqV8>

Senses Box Set (Books 1-5) – <https://amzn.to/2Gkxruw>

Adrenaline Series

(Romance/ Romantic Suspense)

Classic (FREE ON MOST PLATFORMS) - <https://amzn.to/2I0wd4D>

Vintage- <https://amzn.to/2HXksMw>

Masterpiece- <https://amzn.to/2G0tWKj>

Unmask- <https://amzn.to/2Gn2tBK>

Error- <https://amzn.to/2pBakC6>

Iconic- <https://amzn.to/2G1Q8Ua>

Box Set (Books 1-3) - <https://amzn.to/2IP7GRe>

Prince of Tease Series

(Romance/ Romantic Comedy)

Prince Arik- <https://amzn.to/2pAuhbF>

Prince Hunter- <https://amzn.to/2IKzuGu>

Prince Brock- <https://amzn.to/2ufmghN>

Prince Chance- <https://amzn.to/2LuclMw>

Prince Zane- TBA

Hollywood Exchange Series

(Romance/ Romantic Comedy)

Already Written - <https://amzn.to/2G0F2ix>

Already Secure- TBA

Already Designed (The South Haven Crew #1) - <https://amzn.to/2G8A0fP>

Already Scripted (The South Haven Crew #2) - TBA

Already Legal (The South Haven Crew #3) - TBA

Already Driven (The South Haven Crew #4) - TBA

Already Cast (The South Haven Crew #5) - TBA

The Just Series

(Second Chance Romance)

Just Out of Reach- <https://amzn.to/2ubzfBe>

Just So Far Away- <https://amzn.to/2DR57KM>

Private Series

(Romantic Suspense) (Complete Series)

Private - <https://amzn.to/2IN7P7R>

Public- <https://amzn.to/2pAF7it>

Personal- <https://amzn.to/2vejdHt>

Popular (A Private Series Standalone) – TBA *(This novel will be about how J.T. and his wife, Janae got together.)

Duched Series

(Romantic Comedy) (Complete Series)

Duched- <https://amzn.to/2G4Xlim>

Royally Duched- <https://amzn.to/2pAnvDh>

Royally Duched Up- <https://amzn.to/2G089SP>

Duched Deleted (FREE Novella ON ALL PLATOFRMS)-
<https://amzn.to/2GlOQTy>

The Bros Series

(Erotic Romance) (Complete)

The Substitute- <https://amzn.to/2ub9CAc>

The Hacker- <https://amzn.to/2FZFxJr>

The Suit- <https://amzn.to/2poTcyX>

The Chef- <https://amzn.to/2Dgi7MR>

Must Love Series

(Sweet, Romantic Comedy)

Must Love Hogs- <https://amzn.to/2IMmmkg>

Must Love Jogs- <https://amzn.to/2pBliqp>

Must Love Pogs- <https://amzn.to/2ueUUUu>

Must Love Logs- <https://amzn.to/2IFGrL7>

Must Love Flogs- TBA

The Culture Blind Series

(Contemporary Romance)

Redneck Romeo- <https://amzn.to/2vYuPhM>

Cowboy Casanova- <https://amzn.to/2sxwqGT>

Horseback Hero- <https://amzn.to/2BhT91r>

Blue Jean Bachelor- TBA

Camelot Misfits MC Series

(MC Romance/ Romantic Suspense)

King's Return - <https://amzn.to/2TTnNCI> (Available in Audio)
King's Conquest - <https://amzn.to/2IaYZo8> (Available in Audio)
King's Legacy – <https://amzn.to/2YfvY1i> (Available in Audio)
Wiz's Remedy – <https://amzn.to/2PMmJDK> (Available in Audio)
Locke's (Currently Untitled) Novel - TBA
Trick's (Currently Untitled) Novel – TBA

Synful Syndicate Series

(Dark Romance)

Unleashed- <https://amzn.to/2VVhcfT>
Unleashed Syn- <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0BZQRYT72>
Unchained- <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0BZSPT8J7>

The Bennett Duet

(Dark, Mafia/Mob Romance) (Complete)

Dark Ruler – <https://amzn.to/3z5oEWI> (Available in Audio)
Dark Reign - <https://amzn.to/3H9v3SO> (Available in Audio)

Haworth Enterprises Series

(Romantic Suspense)

Bulletproof - <https://amzn.to/3FHw8nr> (Available in Audio)
Shatterproof – <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0C1CNS58X>
Shockproof – <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0CG6NS3FH>

Sleighproof – <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0CNDBFCMT>

The Hockey Gods Series

(Sports Romance/Romantic Comedy)

Can't Block My Love – <https://amzn.to/38HYH0z>

My Fair Puck Bunny – <https://amzn.to/33t2nSw>

The Forward Must Cry – <https://amzn.to/3ijTfpm>

Defenseman No. 9 – <https://amzn.to/3sqAgiJ>

Taming of The Crew - <https://amzn.to/3jo5gwR>

The Draak Legacy

(PNR Romance)

Saving Silver – <https://amzn.to/3J5jG06> (Available in Audio)

Getting Gold - <https://amzn.to/3ejkdNW> (Coming to Audio)

Pleasing Platinum – <https://amzn.to/3rsCQ9g> (Coming to Audio)

The Love Duet

(Contemporary/Second Chance Romance)

First Love – <https://amzn.to/3xrUnlt>

Last Love – <https://amzn.to/36hyjit>

Complete Boxset (w/bonus material) – <https://amzn.to/37RNpeK>

The Debt Tales
(Dark Fairy Tale Retellings)

Twisted Debt – <https://amzn.to/3c2eyhM>
Savage Debt - <https://amzn.to/3E08QrX>

Compassion Series
(Slow Burn Contemporary Romance)

Compassion: The Extended Edition: <https://amzn.to/3zI6GdI>
Silent Knight: <https://amzn.to/3FGIqfT>

Dalvegan Dragons Series
(Sports Romance, Romantic Comedy)
The Owner – <https://amzn.to/3IImDpx> (Coming to Audio)

The Free Series
(Opposites-Attract, Romantic Comedy)
Free-Form: The Extended Edition –
<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0C5RXHJBG>
Free-Spirit – <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0C5RWB63Y>