



# surrender

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

J. SAMAN

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**SURRENDER**

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**J. SAMAN**



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Edited by: My Brother's Editor

Cover: Shanoff Designs

*Thank you to you the readers. For it is you who I write for.  
Writing as part of this world has been nothing short of a joy  
and a highlight of my author career. I hope you enjoy  
Surrender. Kellin and Alanna are extremely special to me and I  
know you're going to love them as much as I do!*

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## LETTER TO READER

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For those of you who don't know me, I'm *USA Today* bestselling author J. Saman. I've been writing contemporary romance and romantic suspense for more than five years and have over seventeen published works not including this book. I cannot begin to explain how excited I am to be writing as part of Corinne Michaels' Salvation Society world.

I became a fan of both Corinne and this series when it was released, devouring each one as fast as they came out. So to me, to be able to continue this incredible world and these amazing characters with my own story and my voice is truly an honor.

I've lined up all your favorite characters for you, so get ready to be thrown back into the world with Surrender.



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# PROLOGUE

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## Kellin

“Kellin, do you care to comment on that?” The sound of my boss, Tom’s, voice snaps me back to the room. Back to the *situation* at hand. Being debriefed after a mission gone wrong is never a good time, but this feels more like a grand inquisition than a simple debriefing.

“Francois and Antoine Badeaux are dead, sir. Same with Samuel Blackbourne.”

And that’s all he needs to know.

The pertinent details I’m going to hold on to for just a bit longer.

Especially when I have no idea if I can trust the man sitting across the table from me.

The fact that three very prominent drug and arms dealers are now dead, ostensibly at my hand from what I’m relaying today, makes this case seem like a win. I did my job. I took them down.

Only it’s not.

Only I didn’t take them down.

Instead, I was shot in a safe house in Las Vegas four months ago. I put my trust in the wrong man and it nearly cost me my life. So, you can understand why I’m a bit reluctant to share all my details and fantastic finds when the man who sold me out was none other than my boss’s boss.

The director of the CIA, Christopher Asher.

I appreciate that a mammoth shakedown took place after it was discovered that Christopher Asher was really Al Mazir, numero uno on the terrorist hotlist, but that doesn't mean I trust that all his pawns were flushed out. Yeah, he not only fooled us all, but got plenty of his own men and women killed in his fight for global terrorist domination.

The fact that my case is linked to all this, and I'm the only one who knows it, is what's keeping my mouth shut. We may be a government agency, but that's never stopped us from killing in the best interest of our country when the mood strikes, and the deal is right.

"How about you walk me through what happened in Vegas."

I stare at Tom, a pencil pusher for the last fifteen years after being a decent field agent for at least ten, a man who rose through the ranks, getting as close to the top as he'll ever climb, and know that I will not be telling him anything resembling the truth. I passed my polygraph already, but then again, we all pass our polygraphs.

They train us to.

Hence why we bother with debriefings.

They want us to slip up. To grow emotional over our missions that we sink our life's blood into. That has better agents than me turning to alcohol and other lovers than their partners to buffer the perpetual festering weight that surrounds our hearts. After all, our lives are built on lies. Our trust in our fellow agents is half-assed at best.

And you never know from one day to the next if it'll be your last.

That said, I can bullshit this game better than most who have been part of this agency as long as I have.

I clear my throat. Sit up straight. And then I lie while my mind replays that night, as it's done every day since it happened.

*Emma fidgets silently on the bed, folding and unfolding her legs, playing with the sleeve of her shirt, staring at the*

*dark bruises on her arms. Anything not to think about the situation we find ourselves in. "I don't like being kept out of this, Kellin. Antoine is mine to take down. Not Gavin's."*

*I nod in understanding, but don't have much to say that will change the situation or make her feel any better. The truth is, she's right. It should be her to take down her half-brother, Antoine Badeaux, after what he did to her. After all the things he's done to her since she was a child.*

*Emma Small, or rather Emeline Badeaux, has been chased her entire life by her uncle and half-brother. Chased for a key to a vault and chased so that they can kill her and end their vendetta. Emma already took out her uncle Francois, and now her half-brother Antoine is on the warpath.*

*Emma being beaten to within an inch of her life has made her assassin boyfriend, Gavin, a bit on the overprotective side. He'll do anything to keep her safe and away from Antoine. Which is how we find ourselves here in this safe house on the outskirts of Las Vegas.*

*But in this moment, I can't focus on Emma's plight. My job is to keep her safe and alive, and I will do that because I owe Gavin my life. But my mind is elsewhere. Stuck on the things I've discovered on Francois Badeaux's cell phone.*

*The calls. The texts. The men behind them...*

*It took me a little while to put all the pieces together. To figure out this mess. A three-way conversation in half-baked coded messages isn't always the clearest.*

*I didn't waste time on agency middlemen. I called Christopher Asher, the director of the CIA, the moment we got to the safe house. Something this big, this monumental, and with this many implications cannot be handled by just anyone.*

*When you discover a conversation between Al Mazir himself, Francois Badeaux, and an unknown third-party who I believe to be a high-ranking United States government politician discussing trafficking both illegal drugs and arms throughout the US and to the Middle East as well as*

*laundering the money they take in, you have to play it cautiously. Involve as few people as possible.*

*Chris responded that he would take care of it and that once this was done, I was to return to Langley for a lengthy, and private, debriefing. And to bring Francois' phone.*

*All of which is standard protocol.*

*But something isn't right. Something is eating at me. I can't even put my finger on what necessarily.*

*"Kellin? Did you hear me?" Emma asks in that soft, sweet voice of hers. My eyes have been fixed on Francois' phone since my initial correspondence with Chris. I'm not even sure what I'm looking for anymore. I've scoured the thing pretty good by this point.*

*I glance up, meeting her light blue eyes. "Sorry, darlin'. What was that?"*

*"Why did the CIA get involve in the first place?"*

*I stare at her, blinking a couple of times as I work through what I should tell her and what I shouldn't. If I lie, she'll read it in a second. After all, Emma Small was trained by the best. The agency sent me after Samuel Blackbourne, Emma's ex and a rival of Antoine and Francois Badeaux.*

*In fact, Antoine and Francois were not my initial targets.*

*"I was to get close to Sam, find out all I could about his operation, and then take him out. Sam had killed a couple of our operatives in the Middle East who were hunting a well-known terrorist by the name of Al Mazir. It was believed that Sam was helping to supply Mazir with drugs and guns."*

*I pause here, because this is what isn't adding up for me. It wasn't Sam who was supplying Mazir. It was Francois and Antoine Badeaux with the help of someone else. Sam wasn't the one who took out our operatives either.*

*It was Badeaux and Mazir working together.*

*And now everything is a mess. This whole operation is upside down and I can't tell who the patsies are versus who the real players are.*

*Emma swallows hard and looks away.*

*“I wish you had killed Sam before he turned me over to Antoine and Francois. Now we’re stuck in this safe house and who knows what’s going to happen to Gavin when he goes after Antoine.”*

*“Gavin will kill him. That’s what he does best.”*

*“I can’t tell if that makes me—”*

*Her words are cut off and we both freeze, having heard the sound at the same time. Her eyes widen and she silently slips off the bed, standing beside me. I reach into my back holster and pull out my gun, loading a bullet into the chamber. Emma slides out her small gun and we hear it again.*

*A quiet click that can only be the front door of the apartment.*

*My head swivels around to the window behind me, but I know before my eyes even glance at the glass that it’s useless. We’re ten stories up and there are no balconies in this building.*

*Reaching out, I shift Emma behind me, moving us both over to the side near the closet and behind the door. It’s not Gavin. I know this. We’re in total radio silence and he would never be stupid enough to show up and try to sneak in.*

*He’d announce himself.*

*This is someone who not only knows where we are but is after us.*

*The problem with that?*

*Only Gavin and Christopher Asher know about this place. And Gavin would rather die than hurt Emma.*

*So that can only mean Christopher Asher sold me out.*

*My heart starts to thrum out a punishing rhythm as a steady stream of adrenaline courses through my blood, clearing my mind and focusing my thoughts. I can hear whoever it is in the living room, searching around. It’s a two-*

*bedroom apartment and luck seems to be on my side as they go into the other bedroom first.*

*I slip out my phone and type out a quick text. It's impossible to know who to trust right now. How deep this goes. If Christopher Asher is involved, who else is? But in this situation, right now, I don't have a choice but to trust Daniel.*

*I just hope he can get to us in time.*

*I catch soft voices whispering words we cannot understand. I'm growing impatient, waiting on them. Not knowing who's on the other side of the door. I chance a glance through the crack in the door frame and spot three men, all wearing black, all holding silenced guns.*

*Well, I guess that answers that.*

*I pivot to look over at Emma. In this room, we're sitting ducks waiting on them to come to us. Her eyes meet mine and I know she's thinking the same thing.*

*My instinct is to stick her in the closet and take them on myself, but the look in her eyes tells me I better not dare try it. She holds up her gun, silently telling me she's ready. That she can do this. Frankly, I don't have the luxury of time to argue with her.*

*Holding up my hand, my fingers count down from three. I suck in a deep breath and then we move, forcing Emma to stay behind me. They obviously hear us as the three of them begin to weave around the living room furniture in our direction.*

*My eyes land on the first man and I fire off a shot, taking him out.*

*He falls to the floor, and I swivel around, ready to kill the next, but before I can get the shot off, I'm knocked to the ground, hitting my head on the side of the coffee table.*

*Silver spots dance behind my eyes, and I do everything in my power to shake them off. To clear my vision. The room sways as a warm trickle of what can only be blood flows down from my temple. I drag myself back up to my feet and lift my gun, when a swift kick lands straight in my ribs.*

*White-hot pain sears through my side as the air in my lungs is expelled in one forceful gust. I stagger forward, the hand not holding the gun clasp against my side. I hear sound all around me. Emma yelling, mouthing off as she always does.*

*My vision sways once more, but I fight against it, trying to get a clean shot on the man in front of me. The one now holding Emma, who is struggling against him with all her might. Her eyes meet mine and in them, I see her terror. She knows that if they take her, that's it.*

*Antoine will kill her.*

*"Come now, pretty," the man holding Emma murmurs into her hair in French. "It'll only hurt more if you fight."*

*French. So these men are working for Antoine Badeaux.*

*And they were sent here by Christopher Asher.*

*It's the only way they could have found us. I go to take my shot just as a high-pitched piercing shot rings out and I go down.*

"Kellin..." Tom snaps and I clear my throat, focusing on him. His eyes are narrowed. "Is there more you want to add?" I shake my head. He knows nothing of the safe house. Only that both Badeaux men as well as Samuel Blackbourne are dead. "Okay. I think it's clear we're done here for now. Take some time off. Go home. See your sister. Get your shit together," he orders. "And come back to us with a full report. I know you've been through it after everything that happened with Christopher Asher. We all have. It's messing with all of us. But we need you, Kellin. I hope you don't forget that."

Home. The way he says that, so cavalier. Like that's a real place for me anymore.

"Thank you, sir."

I stand up and exit the conference room.

Home. That's where I'm headed.

Only there will be no rest in my future. Not until I find the third person involved in this and take them down.



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# CHAPTER ONE

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## Kellin

“I just got into town,” I say into the phone, standing in front of what used to be my parents’ estate. Now it belongs to another family. Their children’s playscape is hidden in the back of the grounds on the other side of the pool. Beyond that is the ocean. They must have taken down the treehouse my sister and I built with our father because I don’t see it.

“So you’re having dinner with us?” my sister Kayleigh asks, unable to hide the hope and excitement in her voice and my gut twists. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen her. At least a year or two and that was when she and Sean got married in New York. I haven’t been back to Virginia Beach since my parents died five years ago.

But Kayleigh is not the only reason I’m here now.

She is not why I didn’t stay in my tiny, never-lived-in apartment in DC.

Charlie Erikson is. Her husband Mark Dixon is.

I need answers and since Charlie and Mark are the ones who discovered that Mazir was really Asher, they’re the best place to start with this.

“Not tonight, babe. I have to meet someone, but I’ll be home after. And I’ll make you pancakes in the morning before you leave for work. Get up early with me. I won’t go for my run and you and I can spend the morning talking and eating sugar and bread.”

Kayleigh laughs and instantly, I feel lighter. It’s a fantastic coincidence that my sister still lives here. The same place as

the headquarters for Cole Security Forces where Mark and now Charlie work.

“Okay. You’ve got a deal. I’m just so glad you’re home. I know you’re still working, but this last stretch without hearing from you was rough.”

And just like that, the guilt is back.

“I know. I’m sorry. I couldn’t help that. It was—”

“For my safety,” she finishes for me. “Yes. I know. Doesn’t mean I like it.”

“I love you too. I’ll see you later.”

We disconnect the call and I stand here for a few minutes longer, allowing the memories of my childhood to run through me. My father wasn’t home much either. In fact, he was gone for the first few years of mine and my sister’s lives. A general in Operation Desert Storm, he was one of the men who directed the entire invasion. Most of the later portion of his career was serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, and when I was old enough, I served in the Army too. Not under him, but every soldier knew my last name. Knew who my father was.

It’s not exactly like four-star generals are a dime a dozen in this country.

Former presidents, senators, congressmen and women attended my parents’ funeral.

It honored not just him, but her—a woman who sacrificed just as much for her country as an Army wife and mother. A noble end after such a random and unexpected death. They were hit by a car while crossing the street. The man blew through his red and struck them both.

A tragic accident and a great loss for our country.

And right now, I could use my father’s no-bullshit advice and stern words.

Never in my life have I held information back from the agency. In all my years of being a CIA agent, I’ve always completed my missions. I’ve never withheld vital intel. Never had to.

Now I'm holding everything back.

Possessing a key piece of evidence because I don't know who to trust.

Driving back into town, I take in all the ways it's changed over the years. And all the ways it hasn't. I'm set to meet Charlie in town at a local bar. I want to talk to her alone first and then with her now-husband, Mark whom I've never met.

Charlie was an agent as well. Her father, CIA royalty. We joined around the same time and went through much of our training together.

After what she went through with taking down Asher, she's also one of the few people I trust.

Parking my truck, I hop out, slamming and locking the door. I wait for the light to change, look both ways, and then jog across the street in the direction of the bar Charlie mentioned. Slipping out my phone, I note the time. I'm early, but that works fine for me.

I could use a beer and a few quiet moments to myself to decompress.

Just as I'm sliding my phone back into my pocket, something, or rather someone, catches my eye. Or maybe it's the sound of her laughter that I notice first. It's familiar enough to have me looking up. To have me almost instantly tracking the sound and locking on to a tall, slender woman with long, rich coffee-colored hair that curls down past her shoulders, and stunning hazel eyes that seem to sparkle with her smile.

A smile that suddenly seems to steal my breath while leaving me paralyzed in the middle of the sidewalk.

She glances up, looking along the street, and for one incredible moment, I envision her eyes falling on me. Eyes I remember being a little more green than they are brown.

I stand here, lost in time and space as I watch her laughing with another man, walking in my direction. Unfortunately, or fortunately—I cannot decide which I prefer—she hasn't noticed me. She's far too engrossed with her conversation with

the man and before I can stop myself, my eyes cast down to her left hand.

No ring.

But she's clearly with him if their obvious comfort and close proximity are anything to go by, though he's not touching her.

I shouldn't take comfort in that. I shouldn't care or even notice.

But I do. I notice it all and it somehow brings a small, reluctant grin to my lips that I instantly move to rub away.

But God...this woman.

My eyes take her in, every incredible inch of her. Her feet are tucked into pretty pink heels. Cute and sexy, just like the rest of her. Long, shapely legs showed off to perfection in her tight, skinny jeans, black sweater that hugs her curves in just the right way, soft and feminine with the perfect amount of temptation in the form of one bare shoulder.

I hear her laugh again and I smile, no stopping it this time.

Her laugh is unchanged. Her smile just as alluring as it was that night all those years ago. A different lifetime, really.

How is she here?

Before I can stop myself, I'm following her into the restaurant. Just so I can see a little more. Observe a little closer.

Alanna... I never even knew her last name. But that certainly doesn't mean I've forgotten her.

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## CHAPTER TWO

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## Alanna

“Christ almighty, that was the most ridiculous delivery ever,” Sophia, the twenty-year veteran nurse, says to me as we walk through the hallway of the labor and delivery unit back toward the nurses’ station. “I swear, I’m all for a natural birth, but these women who decide they need the epidural mid-push do me in.”

I chuckle lightly, pulling out my phone to check it, making sure I haven’t missed anything crucial. “No doubt,” I agree. “My favorite part was when she refused to push her baby out until we gave it to her.”

Sophia shakes her head in bewilderment, her short brown hair still as perfect as it was when she came to work at seven this morning. “I know, and her husband was freaking useless. He couldn’t even watch his child being born. It was like if he looked at her vagina in that way, he’d never be able to get it up for her again.”

Laughing, I press my hands against the lip of the counter, twisting my back to try to work out the tightness I perpetually seem to have. “Yeah. I caught that too. Some men really rise to the challenge.” I cast an eye in her direction. “Figuratively speaking, of course.” I wink and she grins. “And some just fall apart when they realize that yes, the baby does actually come out of a vagina.” I sigh, beyond exhausted after a very long week of very long shifts. “Is it weird that I actually feel bad for that baby?”

“No. Both those parents were real pieces of work. I couldn’t get over how she kept reapplying her lip gloss and

demanding that her husband get a better angle of her with the baby because he didn't get her good side with the first try. Then she immediately asked when she could send the baby to the nursery because being a new mother is exhausting.”

Caroline, another nurse, looks up at me, drawing her eyes away from her computer screen with an appreciative smile. She's a new graduate which makes her all of twenty-two at the most. She's eager to please and is a good listener when being instructed.

Both pluses in my book.

“I'm sure you got her through it, Dr. Contreras. Even if she was a difficult patient.” Caroline smiles from ear to ear. She also sucks up to me and every other physician every chance she gets.

Sophia rolls her eyes, not even caring if Caroline notices. She doesn't. She's still focused on me.

“Thank you, Caroline.” But before I can continue on with thanking the staff who worked tirelessly with me, I watch as the young nurse blooms into a blush for the ages before my very eyes. Her gaze casts down, her body shifting, and I grin as I catch the hint of a familiar male cologne.

“Evening, ladies,” the smooth male voice says coming in to stand close beside me, all business and professional despite the somewhat intimate gesture.

“Dr. Fritz,” they simper in unison, even Sophia who is very married and ten years older than Dr. Carter Fritz.

“I hope you won't mind if I steal your favorite doctor away?” he jests. The kiss ass already knows he's their favorite. “It's not every day I'm able to convince this beautiful woman to have dinner with me.”

They sigh and when he throws them a wink, they giggle on cue.

I can't exactly blame them. Carter is about as charming as a man can get. And the fact that he delivers babies into this world? Yeah, he's pretty great. Ovaries explode like fireworks on the Fourth of July whenever he walks the halls.



It's my favorite thing to tease him about.

"Enjoy yourselves, you two," Sophia says with a knowing gleam to her eyes. Too bad she's got it all wrong with us. Everyone does.

I throw a wave and a thank you to all the nurses who worked their butts off with me all shift. Turning on my toes, I face Carter whose smile lights up his dark-brown eyes. His slightly longer on top, thick, wavy hair is the same color as those gorgeous irises, and easily puts McDreamy's hair to shame. If he were banging interns in the storage closet, he'd be the ultimate *Grey's Anatomy* cliché.

He must have just scrubbed out of surgery as he still has a slight indent from the face shield on his forehead and his hair is slightly damp with sweat.

"Way to lay it on thick," I tease as we make our way down the hall.

He shrugs an unapologetic shoulder. "My father taught me to always treat your nurses like the angels they are, and your women, even the ones who are only friends" —he cocks an eyebrow at me— "like the goddesses they are."

"Your father is a brilliant man."

"So he likes to think. Did you have a good shift?" he asks, leading me to the stairs and ultimately down to the locker rooms so we can get cleaned up.

"Pretty mild, actually, so I can't complain. What about you?"

"Crash section to end it, but otherwise not bad." The moment we hit the secluded stairwell, he stops us, turning to face me and stepping in just a little too close. His eyes flicker over my face.

Carter is a flirt.

A top-notch one, and as such, he likes to test limits and boundaries.

Despite that, in the four years I've known him, he's never tried anything. Never even come close. That doesn't mean the

fact that I'm female, have a nice set of tits, a pretty face, and a pussy hasn't escaped his notice.

And if I were the type of person who fell in and out of beds the way Carter does, I might consider it. But Carter Fritz comes with three problems. One, we work together. Two, he likes women—a lot of women. Three, he's a fantastic friend.

“Are you hungry? I was thinking of tapas and drinking a bottle of really good wine. Are you working tomorrow?”

I shake my head. “I'm doing a twenty-four Wednesday into Thursday.”

He grins. “Same as me. So, what do you say to spicy Spanish food and sweet red wine?”

Well, when he puts it like that... “I say I'm in. Anyone joining us?”

“Nope. Just us. I propositioned a few of our nearest and dearest and they couldn't make it work.”

I shrug a shoulder. “Okay. But we're splitting the check.”

“We can argue about that later. Come on. Let's get cleaned up. I'm going to take a quick shower.”

“Me too.” Nothing like blood and placenta all day to make you desperate for a shower.

He steps back and we descend the stairs, heading for our own locker rooms. “See you in a bit.”

Stepping into the open locker room, I strip out of my scrubs, tossing them into the soiled laundry bin on the side. I never leave the hospital in scrubs if I can help it. Normally I would just change into a spare pair of yoga pants and a sweater and shower at home, but Carter mentioned tapas and wine so instead I'll wear my going out after work outfit that I keep here, which consists of a fitted, one-shoulder black sweater, skinny jeans, and heels, even though my feet are aching after being on them for twelve hours.

Still, any excuse to be just a little girly is a welcome one.

My phone buzzes against the wood bench and I quickly glance down to see who's calling, praying it's not my boss or the floor asking me to come back up. It's not. It's a private number without a name, but I don't need either to know who's calling me.

He's the only number that ever shows up like this.

My stomach twists reflexively.

"You have a lot of fucking nerve calling me," I hiss out under my breath, instantly hitting the side button to ignore the call. David hasn't dared call me in almost a year. Not since I threatened his ass with a restraining order if he didn't leave me the hell alone. I would have been sublimely happy never hearing from him again, but I should have known he'd try to find me eventually.

He never goes too long without reminding me he's still out there. And that he hasn't let me go just yet.

I turn on the shower, doing my best to shake off the phone call. He didn't leave a message, and it's just as well. Closing the curtain behind me for privacy, I wash off a day of delivering babies.

Once I feel like a human again, I towel off and slip on my pretty outfit and heels, blow out my hair so it's not soaking wet, apply a smattering of makeup and by the time I step out the door, Carter is there waiting for me. He takes me in from head to toe, his gaze appreciative and a little heated at the same time.

"Wow," he hums. "You look beautiful, Alanna."

"You're not so bad yourself."

"Hungry?"

"Starving."

The restaurant Carter picked for tonight is new to town. It's beautiful with dark red and gray tones, dark wood tables, and flickering candles. A soft, hypnotic beat complements the din of couples and friends chatting and enjoying their after-work hours.

Carter walks up to the hostess stand, but I pull back, standing off to the side so as not to be in the way. It's overcrowded. Warm. And the smell of garlic and spice that lingers in the air makes my stomach growl and my mouth water.

Taking a step back, I bump into someone, turning around and apologizing to the man whose toes I just stepped on and that's when I feel it.

That prickling sensation that you're being watched.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand at attention and instinctively, I reach up, rubbing at them. I make quick work of glancing around the large restaurant and bar area only to come up empty. No one seems to notice me or even so much as be glancing in my direction.

And yet, I can't seem to shake the feeling and uneasiness.

It lingers like a bad stench, clinging to my skin and making my heart beat just a little faster. Off to the side of the door is a small alcove and I tuck myself in there, looking around once more, this time with a bit more persistence.

But still, no one is there.

Raising my hand to my chest, I will my heart to slow. I haven't felt like this in such a long time, and David's call earlier is no doubt responsible for why it's creeping in now. I suck in a deep breath followed by another. *Cool your shit, girl. He's not here.*

But the old paranoia leaches in all the same and despite the familiar mental pep talk I'm giving myself; I still feel off.

I peek over at the hostess stand just as Carter turns back to me. He catches my eye and treats me to a smile that instantly relaxes me as he heads back my way.

"They said about five to ten minutes for a table."

I nod absently, still looking around without trying to be obvious about it.

"Do you want to go to the bar and get a drink while we wait?"

I open my mouth to say yes please with a cherry on top and while you're at it, add on a double margarita, when I feel a tap on my shoulder.

"Dr. Contreras?" a soft female voice behind me chirps and I spin around, smiling as I go. Relief hits me square in the chest as I take in a patient of mine, Natalie Dempsey, who is standing beside her husband, Liam. Natalie has been my patient practically since I started my residency, and I delivered both of her children.

She's also as sweet as they come.

"Natalie!" I exclaim. "How nice to see you."

She reaches out and gives me a hug that I return quickly. Natalie has been through so much, not just with multiple miscarriages and IVF treatments, but also with her first husband, Aaron. It's nice to see her as happy as she is now.

She pulls back and I quickly introduce her and Liam to Carter. "No kids tonight?" I ask, searching around for their little ones.

Natalie laughs, resting her head against Liam's large arm. "Liam's dad is watching them for us so we could have a date night."

"Oh, that's wonderful. I bet those are hard to come by."

"Yes and no," Liam says with a wry grin. "Occasionally we let our friend Mark watch the kids." He laughs and Natalie rolls her eyes, and I feel like I'm missing some sort of inside joke.

"Ignore him, Dr. Contreras."

"Call me Alanna, please. I've known you a long time now and we're most certainly not in the hospital or my office at the moment."

"Alanna." She beams, her blue eyes twinkling. She blinks up at Liam with a questioning brow and he nods his head at her before she turns back to me. "I don't know if this is weird or not, but I would love to invite you out for drinks with a couple of girlfriends of mine if you'd be interested? We were

thinking this Friday. I know you work long hours, so if you can't make it, I completely understand."

"Wow," I gasp, resting my hand on my chest, totally taken aback.

Natalie is a few years younger than me, and I don't typically make a habit of socializing with my patients. But I also haven't been out for a girls' night in a very long time. I have Carter, obviously, but he's not a girl. I also have Billie, who I've known since medical school, but that's about it. No one else that I'm close with. Everyone else in my life are hospital people I'm friendly with but wouldn't exactly call tight.

"Sure. I'd love that. Actually, I think Friday should work great for me. Thank you for inviting me."

She plugs my number into her phone with a promise of calling later in the week, but the moment they walk off, that feeling is there again. Almost as if it was never gone to begin with and I was simply distracted enough with Natalie and Liam to have not noticed it.

Carter touches my shoulder, pulling my attention back to him. "Everything okay?" he asks, concern in his features as his eyes dance along my face.

I nod numbly, about to offer reassurances I do not feel when our name is called signaling that our table is ready. We approach the hostess who is patiently waiting for us, following as she guides us into the main part of the restaurant to our table.

That's when I look up.

That's when I turn my head in the direction of the bar.

That's when I lock onto a pair of slate-blue eyes.

Eyes I haven't seen in nine years. Not since the night my entire life fell apart.

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## CHAPTER THREE

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# Alanna

## *Past...*

“I don’t know why you’re being like this,” my friend Sandra grouses at me as she practically drags me up the steps of the frat house. Not so easy to do in her five-inch heels and tiny dress. “You’ll have fun. Like you always do.”

Except I don’t usually have fun at these parties. I go with her, she gets trashed, and I end up cleaning up her latest mess and carrying her home. So yeah, not so fun for me. Plus, the last time we came to this house, I was groped by some drunk asshole on the dance floor. Again, not so fun for me.

I kned the guy in the balls, and he proceeded to call me a bitch. So I did it again and walked out. I haven’t been back to one of these since. I figured that was a mic drop moment and that’s a difficult thing to follow up.

“You have fun. I don’t,” I tell her. “I get boob grabs and name called.”

“I won’t get drunk tonight. I promise.”

I roll my eyes, because that’s what she always says. And then proceeds to get really drunk. Then again, I’m already here, standing on the freaking porch, so what’s the point in protesting? “Fine. But I’m only staying an hour. After that, you’re on your own.”

She turns around and gives me the puppy dog eyes that likely work on all the guys who fall at her feet. I shake my



head and she frowns. “Okay,” she caves. “One hour. But you need to lighten up. Mingle. Meet a hot guy.” She bounces her eyebrows up and down suggestively.

I’d love to meet a hot guy. I’d love to go out on dates and hookup at parties. Hell, I’d love a real boyfriend. But if I want to get into Johns Hopkins for medical school, then I have to graduate with top honors. I have to have a perfect GPA. My goals don’t exactly lend themselves to a lot of extra time for things every other female my age is obsessed with. Boys.

That, and I have the problem of David.

My father’s business partner’s son.

The man our parents are chomping at the bit for me to marry because that’s how it’s done in my family. You marry for financial and business gain. Not love.

Because after all, marriage is business, not personal. My family is like *The Godfather* without the cool mafia ties and awesome one-liners.

The last thing in the world I want to be is my mother. A doll on the arm of my father who treats her like the brainless pond scum he pays our gardener to remove on our family’s property. I know he cheats on her. Everyone does, including my mother, who has never opened her mouth about it. Not once.

I won’t do it. I won’t be her, and I won’t live that life.

I refuse.

Something I’ve told both my parents and David over and over again, despite his adamant declarations of loving me. Except the man has no idea how my mind works, and I doubt he cares enough to try and figure it out. The guy I end up with will be so very different from that. Until then...

“Right. I’ll work on that,” I deadpan.

Sandra turns back to face me, her expression troubled. “David still trying to get you to come and see him?”

I shrug because I don’t know why he’s bothering. I told him we can never happen. “He wasn’t happy when I said no.”

“All the more reason to enjoy yourself tonight.”

She has a point.

“Okay. Let’s go.”

The party is the same as every other frat party I’ve attended in my tenure at this university. Lots of red plastic cups and drunk grinding to overly loud club music. Guys staring at anything in a short skirt, ready to make their play. Girls clustering together and laughing while they talk shit about other girls in the room.

Sandra leads me into the kitchen where I assume the keg is, but warm crap beer is not what I’ll be drinking tonight. Instead, I leave Sandra in the keg line and find the bar splayed out on the counter. A couple of people are milling about but leave just as I approach it, giving me full access to whatever I want.

There isn’t much. Slim pickings at best. I end up pouring some whiskey into a clean cup, drop in a couple of ice cubes and a splash of ginger ale, and decide I’m good to go.

“You like whiskey?” a deep, warm voice asks behind me. I turn around and look up into a pair of slate-blue eyes attached to one of the hottest faces I’ve ever seen in my life. Light-blond hair, cut very short on the sides—almost a buzz—and just a little longer on top. High cheekbones; jaw chiseled by Michelangelo; full, soft lips, and dark eyelashes framing those spellbinding eyes of his.

*Wow.*

He’s tall. And broad. Something I’m growing to appreciate more as he steps toward me, a slightly playful smirk curling up the corners of his lips. He’s wearing a black T-shirt, dark, low-slung jeans, and the most out of this world delicious cologne.

He leans his hip against the counter beside me, folding his tanned, muscular arms across his equally muscular chest, and I laugh as I think about his line.

“It depends on the whiskey, I guess. The only stuff they have here is hardly worth the name. If you don’t cut it with ice

and soda, it'll burn a hole in your esophagus before it even hits your stomach."

"That I believe. It's why I brought my own." He pulls out a flask from his back pocket.

I eye it, impressed. "Badass."

He chuckles, the sound sending sparks of electricity across my skin. "I like to think so. Honestly, it's my first frat party, so I wasn't sure what they'd have other than water-downed beer, which is pretty much the equivalent of drinking piss. Pretty damn gross."

"Now you know why I went for the nasty whiskey."

"You want to dump that drink and share this with me?" He holds up his flask, shaking it so the contents slosh about inside.

"That's a bold offer for someone whose name you don't even know."

He shakes his head, leaning in just a bit closer and my pulse quickens. "I know your name, Alanna." I suck in a rush of air and he grins, misreading my panic completely. "I asked my cousin for your name the second I saw you step into the house. I also asked him if you were seeing anyone after he told me your name and he said no. After that, not much was going to stop me from talking to you."

Damn. That's just...my face grows hot.

"That line work for you often?"

He laughs, kind of loud actually. "Not a line if it's true, darlin'. Besides, with what I do, if I use lines on the women I'm around, I'll likely get a punch to the nose or a kick to the balls. Neither of which I'm all that interested in. That said, if it works and it gets you to talk to me, you can call it whatever you want."

I tilt my head. "Okay. I'll bite. What do you do since I know I haven't seen you around campus before, and this is the kind of school where you know everyone, at least by face."

"I'm in the Army."

“Badass indeed. How is this your first frat party?”

He shrugs. “We don’t exactly have a lot of frats in the Army.”

“Touché. You said that’s what you do. How long have you been...serving?” I scrunch my nose. “Sorry, I’m not sure what the right phrasing is for that.”

He grins, his eyes sparkling with mirth. “Serving works. I’ve been active duty since I was eighteen, so four years now.”

“Pretty impressive there, soldier.”

“The only one pretty here is you.”

I angle my head playfully, looking up at him through my lashes. “More lines. Did your cousin tell you anything else about me other than my first name and that I’m single?”

He shakes his head and I can’t stop myself from smiling at him.

“So you know my name and relationship status, but I seem to be at a disadvantage.”

He slides in directly beside me, taking that flask in his hand and opening it up. He downs a small swig of whatever is inside it and then hands it to me. I take the flask, but I don’t bring it to my lips. College Girl 101, never drink something you didn’t see poured.

I wait him out.

“I’m Kellin. Single. You already know I’m in the Army, and I swear I’d never drug a girl. *Ever*,” he emphasizes. “It’s why I took a sip first.”

I grin, because I believe him. When you grow up in a world that’s consumed by lies and half-truths, you learn how to read people and their bullshit pretty quickly. This guy is all honesty, and it’s throwing me for a loop. I lift his flask to my mouth and take a sip. It’s whiskey, and it’s good.

I lick my lips and hand him back his flask. “Thank you.”

“I’m happy to continue to share if it’ll get you talking to me longer.”

“I’m happy to continue to drink it if it means you’ll take me out back, so I don’t have to lose any more of my hearing to this shit music.”

“No dancing for you tonight, hazel eyes?”

“No dancing for me. What about you, blue eyes?”

He smirks. “The only girl I want to dance with tonight is in front of me. And she just asked me to take her out back.”

He reaches out, taking my hand and intertwining our fingers. And when he does that, I feel that zap of electricity course its way across my skin, lifting the hairs on the back of my neck. It almost makes me want to laugh. It’s like something you read about or see in movies, but damn, I feel it all the same. He squeezes my hand as if he too is feeling this strange, kinetic connection.

He wordlessly guides me through the back of the house, and I don’t dare glance over my shoulder to see who is watching this mysterious man lead me outside.

Right now, I don’t care.

Let them talk.

We step on to the worn deck that’s in bad need of a paint job and continue on to the back yard toward a pair of abandoned Adirondack chairs positioned in front of an ash-filled firepit. He sits in the first chair and I try to pry my hand away to sit in the other, but before I can manage it, he tugs me down, directly onto his lap.

“Talking is easier like this if you’re okay with it.”

I shouldn’t be. I don’t know this man from Adam, but something about him makes me not want to pull away. Makes me want to throw caution to the wind and do everything I’ve never allowed myself to indulge in.

I settle in against his hard thighs and firm chest, positioning myself so that I can see his face and keep myself close. He sets his arm around my waist, shifting me even closer before he leaves it on my hip, his thumb brushing up and down against the pop of skin that is peeking out.

I shudder and his breath catches, his eyes dipping down to my lips before forcing them back up to mine.

His free hand comes up, his knuckles brushing against my cheek. I watch as his eyes darken further, shutter down just a bit. I have no idea what's happening between us, but I like the way he looks at me.

I like it a lot.

“How long are you here visiting your cousin for?” I ask, my voice a little husky.

He blanches, looking contrite. “Just the weekend. I leave Sunday and I won't be stateside again for a while. Is that a deal killer for talking to you? If so, I understand.”

Is it? It likely should be, but why? It's not like I can actually date him. Not like anything between us can ever go anywhere. Not just for him, but for me. Like I said, I don't have the time for more.

“No. I like talking to you. Leaving or not.”

He smiles, showing off all his perfect white teeth. His gaze flitters around my face, drinking me in. “Good,” he whispers. “Because I honestly cannot remember a girl ever catching my attention the way you have tonight.”

His head dips in even closer to mine, his focus on my lips and mine on the way his eyes turn smoky with heat. My heart starts to pound in my chest with the most delicious anticipation.

“Tell me to stop, Alanna. I'm being forward as hell with you and I don't want you to feel like I'm trying to take advantage.”

I smile and shake my head. I don't want him to stop. “Kiss me, Kellin.”

A growl sears past his lips just as they press to mine, the feeling nothing short of electric. His hand rakes through my hair, cupping the back of my head and angling it until he has it the way he wants.

Then he devours me.

His lips moving with mine, wet and sweet as he plays with my mouth. A growl of pleasure emanates from deep in his throat as he licks the seam of my lips, demanding I open for him.

The moment I do, his tongue takes over, dancing with mine as he shifts my body, moving us so the soft swell of my breasts press into his muscular chest.

His kiss is powerful. Commanding. It steals my breath and my common sense, rendering me helpless against him. My hands squeeze his biceps, holding on as the kiss turns fervent and reckless. All of this is.

But I can't stop it.

I don't want to stop it.

Because nothing has ever felt this good.

*And he's only kissing me.*

As if proving my point, his erection thrusts against my ass and I whimper into his mouth, shifting until I'm straddling him, settling myself down directly against it. A stranger. A man I met no more than twenty minutes ago. I must tense up or freeze because he pulls back, his breathing ragged and his eyes drunk with lust.

He cups my face in his hands and smiles into my eyes.

"Sorry," he says through a strained laugh. "I might have taken that farther than anticipated." He glances down at the large bulge between his legs and then back up to me. I giggle and his smile widens. "In fairness, that was one hell of a kiss."

*That's putting it mildly.*

"Talk to me, gorgeous. I feel like I just fucked everything up."

I shake my head, chewing on my lip. "You didn't. I just...I like kissing you, Kellin."

He laughs, running a hand through his short strands. "I think I more than like it." His eyes turn that smoky color again as he stares deeply into mine. "I think I'd like to do it again,

but not tonight. I know this isn't going beyond the here and now, but can I take you out for breakfast tomorrow and spend the day with you?"

My heart speeds up in my chest. I hesitate, but only for a moment. "Yes. I'd love that."

Kellin leans in and kisses me again. Softer this time. With a bit more purpose and a touch more meaning, and I don't want this to end. I don't even know the guy, but I already know I don't want him to be deployed wherever the hell he's being deployed to.

"Yo, Kellin—" a male voice shouts out into the darkness. "That you, man?"

Kellin smiles again at my lips before yelling back, "Yup. What's up?"

"We gotta go. The party got busted up."

He blows out a heavy, disappointed breath. "I'm burning up here for you." He leans in and kisses me again, deeper, harder, his hand falls to my hip, squeezing me.

"You coming, man?"

"Shit," Kellin hisses. "Yeah, I'm coming. Just give me a minute," he yells back before turning back to me. "Tomorrow? Breakfast?"

I nod.

"Tell me where to go and I'll be there."

"Murphy's diner on Broadway. Ten good?"

"Ten is perfect. And then you're mine for the following twenty-four hours."

My belly dips and flutters at the thought of that. Leaning in, I kiss him again, sucking on his bottom lip and loving the groan that follows. "Can't wait."

"Fuck," he chuckles, pulling away and scrubbing at his face. "I already know twenty-four hours won't be nearly enough."



I wink at him and climb off his lap, straightening my blouse and fluffing out the hair he mussed up.

Movement out of the corner of my eye startles me, and I glance over Kellin's shoulder into the darkness that's edging the property. Landing on a pair of dark eyes. Instantly knowing that I'll never see Kellin again. Despite how much I want to.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

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# Alanna

## *Present Day...*

Suddenly, it's as if time stands still. The room around me evaporates. Sound ceases to exist other than the whomping of blood rushing through my ears. It's just *him* and me, and he's staring at me with an unfathomable expression.

There is mild surprise in his features, along with curious observation and a tease of a smirk.

It's been nine years. And yet, he still looks the same. Older, for sure. But the same.

His eyes. The slope of his nose. The color and style of his blond hair—though it's longer on top than it was with just enough disarray to be dangerous and sexy. His jaw is more angled, stronger, and now boasts two days' worth of stubble.

He's also taller, maybe. Definitely more built and defined with muscular arms and broad shoulders that lead to his chest, sloping down into a narrow waist. He's wearing all black—black jeans, black button-down with a black jacket over it.

Didn't he wear black that night?

It's funny, in all the random times I've thought of him over the years, his clothing is suddenly difficult to recall.

But *wow*. And *damn*.

Was he this hot that night? I inwardly want to laugh at that. He was definitely hot. But now, it's like he's reached another

dimension with his looks. A mysterious bad boy instead of the clean-cut one from my memory. Rugged with an appeal that demands notice.

What are the odds that I see him on the same day David calls since my memory of him is so closely tied to what happened to me that night?

His body shifts on the stool he's perched on, his gaze taking me in inch by agonizingly slow inch. The heat in his eyes is unmistakable and my heart finds a new rhythm. One that instantly has my skin warming and my cheeks heating.

"Alanna?" Carter's voice breaks through the haze, snapping me back to him and the crowded restaurant with a pounding swoosh as noise.

I blow out a ragged breath, suddenly feeling lightheaded. Was I holding my breath? *Yikes, get control, woman.*

"Are you okay?" He squeezes my shoulder, and it's just now that I realize he's been holding it this entire time.

Am I okay? "Um. Yeah. I think so."

His hand reaches up, cupping my face, and somehow that small gesture seems to ground me. "You sure, your cheeks are flushed."

Ha! Awesome, because if Carter noticed then...Kellin certainly did. Wow. Kellin.

"I'm fine. Just thought I saw someone I know."

That was him, right? I mean, nine years is a very long time ago. Plus, most of that night was spent in the dark with him.

"Okay. Did you want to go say hi?"

I take in the pretty place setting on the pretty small two-person table I'm somehow magically standing in front of, adorned with a glowing votive and a small red rose, and then turn to glance over my shoulder, back at the bar.

*He's gone.* What the hell?

My eyes flicker about, almost frantically, but there is no sign of him anywhere.

Did I imagine him? Did he get one look at me and run for the hills?

Was it even him?

Suddenly, I feel stupid. Even if it was him, what are the odds he'd even recognize me in return and stick around to say...what? It's not like we know each other or are old friends. We kissed at a party and then I stood him up because my life was crashing down around me while he was waiting for me in the diner.

"Hey," Carter says. "Alanna, what's going on? You're now white as a sheet and look as though you've seen a ghost."

A ghost? That's exactly what that must have been.

"I..." I swallow thickly and clear my throat. "I just need a minute. Long shift and I think I'm a bit dehydrated."

"Are you sure? We can leave if you're not feeling well." God, Carter really is perfect.

"No." Because I don't want to leave. I want food and wine. And to see that guy again so I can figure out if it really *is* Kellin. "I'm fine. I'm just going to run to the ladies' room."

He eyes me warily and then nods. "I'll get you some water."

*And a vat of wine*, I think, but don't say. "Sounds perfect."

I quickly maneuver through the restaurant, scanning around and around only to come up empty. Then I practically laugh as I push through the bathroom door, mentally shaking my head at my ridiculousness.

I splash some cold water on my neck and then wash my hands.

Exiting the bathroom, I take one final look around the restaurant and decide to let it go.

Carter is staring at the menu as I arrive back at our table, but the moment he catches me in his periphery, he sets it down, standing as I sit because that's how he was raised.

"You look better."

“I feel better.” Sort of. I mean, that’s a hard thing to shake.

I sit down and we order our food and wine and yet, I can’t stop my mind from cycling back in time. From thinking about David calling. From all that happened that night, including Kellin.

“So yeah, we could do that in the summer. The Charles is beautiful that time of year, and so is Boston Harbor. I mean, we wouldn’t have to be with my family on the boat. We could take it out. Just us. I have my boat license. It would be fun.”

I blink, coming back. “What?”

“Do you not like your food?” he asks, and my eyes drop to my plate of shoved around paella and empanadas and potatoes bravas and wow, I really haven’t touched much, have I? Honestly, I don’t even know if I’ve tasted it or not.

“It’s delicious. Just this headache.” And maybe a touch of insanity.

He frowns, reaching out and taking my hand, giving it a squeeze before releasing it just as quickly, and I feel guilty for being the worst friend ever.

“Really, I’m fine. The food is wonderful.” I scoop a big spoonful of rice and shrimp and Spanish chorizo up onto my spoon and take a bite. It is delicious and I swallow it down with the wine he chose, and as I clear my head and my thoughts, I’m starting to feel more like myself. “Damn. That’s sensational.”

He chuckles. “It is. Welcome back. I was starting to think I was talking to myself.”

Crap. “No. I was listening.” Wait. Was he just talking about Boston in the summer? About me being on a boat with him there?

He laughs a little harder now, reading my expression. “No, you weren’t, and I don’t blame you. You’re trying to be a good sport for me. Let me get the check and I’ll just take you home. I feel terrible that we stayed this long when you’re not feeling well.”

This man is every woman's dream man. "I swear to you, I'm good. Really. The food is helping a lot." I take another bite and with each taste on my tongue, I'm perking up. "I'm actually starting to feel a lot better."

"Good. I was worried there for a moment if I'm being honest."

I stare at the handsome, perfect man before me and sigh. "How have you stayed single this long, Carter?"

"Are you asking why I haven't made a move on you or why I'm single as a whole?"

My eyebrows hit my hairline and he grins devilishly. "What? Don't pretend like you don't know I have a secret thing for you. And let's not pretend you don't have a secret thing for me back."

Oh boy. I hold my hands up in surrender. "I shouldn't have gone there."

"No. You should have. Actually, I was hoping that's where this meal was going."

"Carter!"

"Are you saying you don't?"

I take a sip of my wine, stalling, and he reads me perfectly, smirking like the arrogant bastard he can be sometimes. "Every woman does. But you and I both agreed why it would never be a good idea for us to date or do anything else, so cut the shit. Don't start something neither of us is ready to finish. The last thing I want is to be one of your many casualties."

He grabs his chest like I wounded him, but it's true. The women he's slept with follow him around like besotted puppies.

I cock an eyebrow and he laughs, wiping at his mouth with his white linen napkin before placing it back down in his lap. Carter has manners. He has class. He knows things like the quality of wine by vintage. He dresses in designer clothes. He spends money on his haircuts. His apartment is beautiful and expertly decorated—even for a single guy.

As a girl who comes from big money, I recognize it easily in others, and Carter Fritz screams big money. Another reason why he's the ultimate catch. Not for me necessarily, but for other women, so again, it begs the question.

"Fine. You want to know why I'm not married off or engaged or matched up with a woman I don't want to be matched up with? Why I've stayed single, only sampling from the buffet without fully indulging in it?"

I smile, unable to stop it. "Kind of, yeah."

Because that had been my life. David was designed to be my husband whether I liked it or not. Going to college was meant to be a pastime. And becoming a doctor? Can you imagine anything more crass or ridiculous? Those were my mother's words when I informed my parents of my decision.

"So, I know we haven't talked about this yet. About anything serious, actually. Our friendship over the years has been what it has been, work-based and fun."

I frown some more at that description, and he shifts in his seat, leaning back and taking his wine with him.

"I'm not being disparaging, Alanna. I love our friendship. I love everything that it has been, including all the things it hasn't gotten to yet, but we've kept our particular hands close to the chest. If I had to guess, I'd say it's how we were both raised."

"Okay. I'm listening."

"But I'm not blind either, and I know you come from money, same as I do."

I nod. There is no point in denying it.

"Well, my mother's family is old money. Very old money. My father's is as well, but not like my mother's. My father is a doctor, as I know you know. A very prominent cardiothoracic surgeon back in Boston, and obviously all of his children have followed in his medical footsteps with the exception of my eldest brother who plays professional football."



“It’s actually one of the things I love about your family. How close you all are. How loving and supportive.” Because that’s not something I’ve ever experienced with my own.

“We try to be. Being one of six isn’t easy.”

I snort out. “I am one of two, so I wouldn’t know.”

“Your sister?” I hum out a nod, though fundamentally he knows nothing of Clarissa or the name she’s made for herself. “The only one of us who must marry or do things in a certain way is Kaplan. The eldest. And probably Rina, as my mother is constantly trying to marry her off to one of her friends’ sons. Kaplan bears the weight of the family name and obligation. Especially when he retires from the NFL. The rest of us get to be us.” He shrugs like it’s just that simple. “So, since we’re finally doing this after all these years...what about you?”

He turns the question back to me, a raised eyebrow as if to suggest, I told you mine, now you tell me yours.

Only, I haven’t told anyone mine. Only Billie knows.

“My family is not like yours,” is all I can come up with.

Carter frowns and waits me out. Now would be the time to tell him. My eyes cast to the table, staring at my food. *Now would be the time* to tell him. My lips seal themselves of their own volition. I like Carter too much to have him look at me the way I know he will once he discovers the truth. Even if I tell him, most people don’t understand. They see money, they see a big family name, and they think you’re what’s wrong with that picture, not them.

I glance back up and offer him what I hope is a sheepish half-smile.

Carter studies me intently. Trying to read in between the pages and lines I allow no one access to. “That bad?”

I nod once. “Worse than that bad.”

“You know I adore you, right? That you can trust me with anything, and I’d do anything for you.”

Shit. “Carter—”

“I’m not telling you that for you to tell me your dark and ugly. I’m telling you that so you know you have someone who will always be on your side.”

“What on earth did I do to deserve you?”

He grins. “You’ll be screaming that at me next month when my mother blows into town and wants to meet you. But until then...” He trails off before finally clearing his throat and saying, “I was offered an attending position in Boston. At Mass General.” His hands flatten against the tablecloth. “It’s why I wanted this dinner with you.”

A smile sprints across my face. “That’s amazing. I’m so happy for you.”

He shakes his head and my smile slips some.

I tilt my head questioning. “What?”

“I might have done a thing.”

“What does that mean?” I press, his expression making my heart go haywire.

His gaze slowly casts up to mine. “I might have mentioned you to the hospital, told them all about your credentials and talent, and now they’re very interested in bringing you onboard for an attending position.”

“You did *what?*”

He holds his hands up. “Just hear me out. You’re too talented to stay in this small town. We have a great hospital here and a cool place to live, but Boston is the big-time for medicine and I know you know that. Think of the research dollars and the complexity of the cases. Think of it all. The city. The job. Me,” he adds before swallowing audibly, clearing his throat. “I want you to think about coming with me.”

I practically choke on my tongue. But as I stare at him. At the man before me. At all that he’s offering me. A pang of loss hits me. Could I fall for Carter Fritz? Could I date him, one of my closest friends? Could I get swept up in all that is Boston medicine?

Yes. I could, especially to the latter end of that.

In fact, I want that. I want a real life again.

It's been so long. I haven't even come close to trying beyond my world. But it's time, right? My past is a distant memory and despite the random call today, none of them can touch again.

"You want me to come with you to Boston."

He nods his head in certainty. "Yes."

"As..." I trail off, tilting my head and angling it in his direction, waiting for him to elaborate.

"Whatever you're willing to come with me as. My friend. Or...more." He shrugs breezily.

Christ on the cross in the heat of summer. Or spring. Whatever.

"But...we..."

"Have never really talked about that?"

I nod.

"I guess that's what I'm trying to do with you now."

"But..."

"I sleep with everyone in a skirt?"

I nod again.

"I think it's time I grow up a bit. I only slept with them because the skirt I've been most interested in chasing always made it clear that I'm just her friend."

I blow out a loud breath. I didn't expect this from him. Not even close. It's one thing to know when your friend is attracted to you. It's another when they ask you to pick up and move states and jobs to be with them like it's a full-time gig. That's big time.

"Can I think about it? It's an amazing offer, Carter. You're amazing. But it's a lot very suddenly. So, can I think about it?" I repeat and cringe and shake my head. "Is that okay for now?"

He grins boyishly, and my heart, the distorted organ inside my chest, thuds ever so slightly.

“That’s all I can ask. Do you want dessert?”

“No,” I laugh. “I think I need to go home and have a heart attack and a stroke and a seizure.”

“I figured as much. I landed a solid blow, huh?”

“Yeah.” I nod emphatically. “That’s one way to put it.”

Carter stands instantly, tugging out his wallet and tossing down two one hundred-dollar bills, though I doubt the total comes anywhere near that amount. “Good. Glad I can shake you up a little. Now I’ll take you home so you can freak out in peace.”

“You’re a real gentleman,” I deadpan, smiling.

But as I stand up, I can’t stop myself from searching around the restaurant one last time.

He’s not there, of course.

But that doesn’t shake the niggling thoughts of the man I saw earlier tonight. The man who I should not be thinking of now. The man who has me wondering if he remembers me as clearly as I remember him.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

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## Alanna

“I think I’m going crazy,” I tell Billie, my best friend, as we sit in a secluded spot in the hospital café taking a much-needed break while we drink our much-needed caffeine. She and I went to medical school together and clung on for residency. I’m about to be an attending, but she’s a neurosurgeon and they have insanely long residencies—as you would imagine and hope. She is the only person in my life to know anything about me, and that’s simply because I broke down one drunken night and spilled all.

“So are we talking needing a full-frontal lobotomy or just a minor lobectomy?”

I stare at my friend. “There are so many things wrong with that question, I hardly know where to begin.”

“Actually,” she says, taking a sip of her latte, “that was my way of testing your level of sanity, and I think you’re good. Well, for you.”

I roll my eyes. “Thanks,” I mutter dryly.

She shrugs up one shoulder. She’s tucked up against the corner of our booth, knees up to her chest as she surveys the shop’s patrons. “I’m just saying that you willingly stick your hands up another woman’s vajayjay on a regular basis and treat STIs, which is pretty much eww. That alone requires a particular level of crazy.”

“We’re seriously going there again?”

She holds up her hand, cutting me off with a raised eyebrow. “But we *also* know you have this other craziness and

I'm willing to bet right now it all revolves around a certain gorgeous doctor who is madly in love with you, who pretends you're just friends, who also happens to have an affinity for women's vajayjays. Am I right? You're freaking over the male OB-GYN?" She says that last part like it's a curse on her tongue.

"He's not in love with me. And how did you know?"

She waves me away. "Agree to disagree. Spill it all. I want to compare your story with the rumors I heard to see if they're all right."

Fabulous. There are rumors already.

"What do you have against women's vaginas?"

"Nothing. I just don't want to stare at one all day or deal with the things that come out of them. But you're deflecting now."

That and then some.

"Yes. Part of me is freaking out over Carter." She grins smugly at me, but that challenging eyebrow is still raised in my direction. "Okay, a large part of me is. He asked me to move to Boston with him when our residency is done this summer."

Her mouth drops into the adorably predictable O-shape Billie's notorious for making when she's feigning surprised with something she's not the least bit surprised over.

"Well." She clucks her tongue in dismay. "Fuck me gently with a chainsaw. That totally sucks."

I frown, drawing back and taking a sip of my coffee before setting it back down on the table, keeping my hands wrapped around the warm paper. "Nice *Heathers* reference, but why does that totally suck?"

"Aw, don't look at me like I just killed your cat. I'm not pissed about Carter. He's the best. I'm pissed because the rumors were correct, and I bet in the pool that lover boy wouldn't ask you for another two weeks."

“You have a pool going?” My eyebrows shoot up to my hairline.

She nods, staring at me like it’s common knowledge and something I should already know. Evidently, I’m the last to know everything.

“I didn’t start it. The OB nurses did. I just got in on that action. Dammit.” She smacks a hand against her knee. “I think Dr. Rogers nailed that one and now I’m going to have to deal with his smug, gloating ass for the next week.”

“Why do you always call Leo, Dr. Rogers?”

She narrows her eyes. “Because calling him anything but would please the cocky bastard too much and I make it a habit never to please him.”

“You two have the weirdest foreplay.”

She shakes her head at me, her dark eyes narrowed into slits against her black skin. “It’s only foreplay if it leads to sexier times. This is just straight up war.”

I roll my eyes at my friend, taking another sip of my coffee.

“What did you tell Carter?” she asks in a softer tone, reading my hot mess expression for what it is.

“I told him I needed time to think about it and since then I’ve been dodging him like a bullet. He called me twice this morning, and I didn’t pick up.” I drop my face into my folded arms on the table. “I’m a horrible friend. A horrible person.”

“Why are you dodging him? He’s perfect. And I’m not even saying that in a sarcastic way. Carter Fritz really is perfect. And he loves you, and I think part of you could love him back if that were your thing, so why not give it a try?”

“And move to Boston?” I raise my head, dropping my chin to my forearms. She shrugs like it’s really not the big deal I’m making it out to be. “He and I aren’t even dating. Don’t you think that’s kind of a big move to make given that?”

“Did he base the move solely on you dating him?”



“Well...no. Not exactly. He said he was cool either way.” Right? I think that’s what he was saying, though he was leaning heavily in the direction of being together. “It’s crazy, though.”

“Yeah. Sure. It’s crazy. It’s also life, right? At some point you need to try it out and see if it fits.”

“Carter doesn’t know anything about me, Billie. Plus, it’s a huge thing to do with someone who has only been your friend.”

She snorts sarcastically. “It’s not like you have to move in with him or marry him straight off the bat. Please. This is a job and new city where your friend will also be living and working. But you both have chemistry, so the sex will be hot. You both scream money, so that won’t be an issue. You have like interests with your work.” She points a stern finger in my direction. “*Aaand* he doesn’t know anything about you because you don’t *tell* him anything about you. I know you have a past. I know it’s not the happiest or the prettiest. But Carter is a great guy, and I genuinely think he’d understand. All of that was so long ago. It’s time to start living your life.”

She’s right. I know this. That’s what I’ve been trying to do more of lately. It’s why I agreed to drinks with Natalie and her friends. Now that my residency is winding down and I’m no longer a complete slave to the hospital, I’ve run out of excuses for avoiding the inevitable.

But there is still this piece of me. This piece I can’t seem to shake off or move past or fix. Even after all these years. David calling me yesterday and not leaving a message isn’t helping this.

Then there’s seeing Kellin.

For some reason, it’s sticking to me like glue. Probably because the man made my heart race and my belly swarm with a simple look. That, and I got that creepy feeling again that I was being watched. My entire walk here this morning, I couldn’t shake it.

Which brings me to phase two of my meltdown.

I sit up, glance around cautiously to make sure no one can hear us, and Billie sits up just a little straighter, noting the change in my demeanor. “Since last night with Carter, I keep getting the feeling like I’m being watched. But when I look around, I don’t see anyone there.”

“Spooky. But my spidey sense is telling me there’s more.”

“I…” I puff out a breath, covering the side of my face with the hand not holding my coffee. “That, and David called me yesterday. He didn’t leave a message.”

“Jesus,” she hisses out between her teeth. “Do you think it was a wrong number?”

I shake my head. “Impossible. He’s the only one who ever has a call show up as a private number. The last time he called was a year ago and you know that’s how he rolls.”

Her expression grows somber. “I remember that night.”

Yeah. Me too. That was the night I got drunk and spilled everything to her.

“Is that all? He called and didn’t leave a message? I thought you changed your number.”

“I did change my number. Obviously, he found it somehow. Again. He does every single freaking time I change it. At this point, I don’t know why I bother anymore.”

“Why does it feel like there’s more you’re not telling me?”

I shake my head.

I can’t tell her about how I thought I saw Kellin. She really will think I’m crazy and I feel crazy for even thinking it. I spent a lot of time last night mentally analyzing the man I saw at the bar. Second-guessing if it were even him. It’s more likely that my overactive mind went to places it knows better than to go.

Billie wouldn’t know Kellin anyway, so there really is no point in saying anything.

But I felt more excitement over possibly seeing Kellin than I have in I don’t even know how long. Where does that leave

everything? Poor Carter. He called and texted, asking if I wanted him to pick me up so I wouldn't have to walk here to get my car. Neither of us is working today, and yet, he still offered.

I'm messing everything up with him and I can't even tell if I'm doing it on purpose or if I'm genuinely freaked out about the other thing.

"What?" Billie presses when I don't continue.

"It's nothing. I just don't know what to do about Carter is all, and I think my mind is playing tricks on me as a result."

She opens her mouth to say something when she gets paged up to the neuro ICU. We say our goodbyes and I linger here, more thoughts that I can't seem to stop recycling through my mind.

Finally, they rest on Carter. On the things he said to me last night and I know Billie is right. I need to stop allowing my past to dictate my future. Whether Carter and I ever become a thing or not, Boston might be the adventure I'm looking for.

Getting in my car, I end up driving in the direction of the beach instead of my apartment. It's a beautiful spring day. The air is mild, but not cold, and the sun is high in the blue, cloudless sky. The wind whipping off the choppy Atlantic draws my hair back and off my face, peppering me with splashes of salty wetness. I slip off my shoes and walk barefoot in the granular sand toward the water. Off in the distance, there are a couple of surfers braving the frigid waters, but other than that, it's relatively quiet out here. A couple walking their dog, but that's about all.

I spend forever out here, lost in thought, staring out at the water.

I've been on my own for so long. Always the one in control. Always the one making every decision.

It's exhausting, in truth.

Not having people. Not having a family or opening yourself up to life and love. Protecting your heart is a full-time job. There is no time off or hazard pay.

I've spent every day since I was twenty-one doing nothing but distancing myself from the world and its inhabitants. No guys. Hardly ever dating. Very few friends. I hardly even recognize the girl I used to be hidden beneath.

But when you've been hurt, I mean truly, irrevocably, soul-changing hurt, it's nearly impossible to live any other way.

The alternative just isn't worth the risk.

But then the thoughts begin to creep in. Like they are now. Because there really is one question I haven't been able to brook past. How much longer can I live like this and still consider it living?

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# CHAPTER SIX

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# Alanna

## *Past...*

“Are you coming in to find your friend?” Kellin asks, holding my hand and trying to lead me back toward the house. I can’t move though. I’m locked in place, my heart hammering in a way that’s making me sick to my stomach.

David’s menacing glare drops down to our conjoined hands and then slowly, so fucking slowly, up to the side of Kellin’s face. Shit. Kellin needs to get out of here before David takes out his wrath on him and Kellin ends up testing live grenades for the Army.

“I’m sure she’s already gone by now. I’ll catch up with her later.”

He frowns, reading my expression and looking concerned. “Can I take you home?” He shakes his head at the way that sounded. “I meant so that I know you get there safely.”

Damn. I really like this guy.

And part of me aches for that. Knowing I’ll never get to kiss him or touch him or smell him or feel him again. Or be on the receiving end of his delicious smirks and fun banter. I want to meet him in that diner tomorrow so badly, I shake.

I guess I’m glad there is no potential past the twenty-four hours.

That might have ruined me for good.

I take a step forward, reaching up on my toes and planting my lips on his. David has already seen me kiss Kellin, what's the difference at this point? "I wish life weren't a cruel joke wrapped in tragic irony," I whisper to him. "Because in another life..." I pause and then realize there is no sense in holding back when I'll never see him again. "In another life, we could have been so much more than we'll ever be. Something incredible."

His hand cups my face, his gaze forcing mine. He doesn't stare at me like I'm some psycho crazy girl who clings on to men they just met.

He stares at me like he knows exactly what I'm saying is true.

And wow. That's just...fuck.

I quake with that. I almost wish he were like every other guy I've ever encountered.

Instead of this man.

He swallows hard and kisses me again. And in this kiss, I feel it all. His conflict and turmoil. His desperation. His desire for things he cannot give me. I feed them all back to him tenfold.

*Please know it's not my choice.*

I take a step back and then another, his hand finally releasing mine when I create enough distance between us.

"How are you getting home?" he asks.

"I have my car. I'm all set."

He nods, though I can tell he still wants to argue it but decides to let it drop.

"Tomorrow?" he questions as if he already knows I won't be there.

I can't answer him. I can't lie. So instead I take another step back, into the shadows, and his cousin who is in my organic chemistry class, clasps him on the shoulder, dragging him away.

I watch him go and he watches me until it's the last I see of him.

Until he's gone from me for good.

Then I turn. Then I find David once more, who is silent and unmoving in the dark. How fitting for someone with such a black heart.

"Why are you here?" I ask him, not bothering to hide my annoyance at his presence.

"I'm saving my fiancé from fucking some random stranger and turning herself into a public whore."

I bristle so hard at that I practically break in two.

"Only I'm not your fiancé. I'm not your anything. And I can fuck whoever the hell I want."

He takes a step in my direction and my pulse skitters through my chest. He looks dangerous tonight. A touch unglued and I'm not sure what to do with that. I fear him in a way I never have before.

His hand reaches out, forcefully grasping my forearm and yanking so hard I have no choice but to go in whatever direction he chooses.

His hot breath meets the shell of my ear as he holds me tightly against his chest. "That's where you're wrong. You're mine, Alanna. You've always been mine. Since the day you were born, you were born to be mine. My girl. My wife. My fucking property. And as if I didn't already know that, your father and mine promised me so. Just the other night, in fact, as if I needed the reminder. Newsflash, I didn't."

"Go back to law school, David."

"Not without my trophy, Alanna."

Bile climbs up the back of my throat that I quickly swallow down. It's in this moment that I see what my future will look like if I don't do something. I'll be David's. His wife, which is synonymous with slave. His plaything and screw-toy while he goes about and does whatever his arrogant, black heart desires.



More money. More power.

It's never enough for men like them. Growing their empire is all they care about.

And I will have nothing.

No medical school. No delivering babies. No life.

Steeling my nerves as much as I can, I suck in a deep breath and force myself to hold his eyes as I say, "I'm not marrying you, David, and I never will. I am not yours."

"That's where you're wrong. I think it's about time I make you see that." His hand comes out of nowhere, slicing at me through the darkness. And I know I'll never be the same again.

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# CHAPTER SEVEN

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## Kellin

### *Present Day...*

Alanna's stunned-wide, incredible hazel eyes greet mine like a familiar bedtime story told to her in a foreign tongue. She recognizes me. She did so instantly the other night when I first saw her at the restaurant. So that's not what this is about.

This is more looking at someone you had a connection with years ago and wondering how you should react to them now, because you're not exactly sure you're on the same page. But just as it was all those years ago, with her, I can't seem to stop myself.

It wasn't my intention to run into her tonight.

I wasn't meant to be a voyeur in the shadows. Privately enjoying watching her.

In fact, I'm only here lingering in the back of the bar because I was set up to make contact with Charlie. She never ended up making it out the other night, the night I first saw Alanna. So we rescheduled to meet at twenty-three hundred hours.

But then I saw Alanna walk in.

Tall and gorgeous, she knocked the wind from me, same as she did the other night. Same as she did the first time I saw her all those years ago.

She was my last simple kiss. My last easy moment.

A girl I weakly thought of over the years who somehow turned into this woman not to be missed.

I will admit, when she stood me up at the diner, I was pissed. And disappointed. More so than I had any right to be. But in this moment, who gives a shit about something that never happened nine years ago.

I meet Charlie's eyes over Alanna's shoulder, registering her slight frown, and I know I fucked up. After all, it's not like I can come out and acknowledge that I know Charlie. But there was absolutely no way I couldn't step in. Alanna was falling. End of story.

"You alright?" I finally ask as her lips stay slightly parted without producing any sound.

Her cheeks redden instantly.

"I'm fine. Thank you for rescuing me." She stares at me, waiting to see if I'll say more. If I'll clue her in on the fact that I remember every single second of the evening I spent with her nine years ago.

"It's not a problem." I lick my lips, debating my next move. There are several eager women hanging on our entire encounter, and though I am curious enough to ask her why she stood me up all those years ago after an incredible evening that I was pretty damn positive was mutual, this isn't the time or place. "Have a good night, hazel eyes."

Her mouth pops open farther at the nickname, and she takes a small step back, almost as if she suddenly needs the distance to regain her composure. I throw her a wink and head for the door of the bar without so much as a backward glance. I can hear the women peppering Alanna with a dozen questions, and for that reason alone, I'm glad I left.

But as my sneaker-clad feet meet the sidewalk and the rush of cool wind hits my face, I suddenly wonder if she'll get my silent invitation. If she'll remember the nickname I gave her that night. I start to walk in the direction of my car when I hear the door open and the din of the bar filter out into the street before it abruptly snuffs out with the shutting of the door.

“Kellin?” she calls out, and I can’t stop my smile. She remembers. Not just my face from all those years back, but my name.

I spin around and take three long strides to cut our distance by half.

“You...you remember me.” It’s a statement, not a question, but I nod all the same.

“Yeah.” I chuckle at her bewildered expression, my eyes casting about her face, unable to get enough. Seems like nothing about that has changed when it comes to her. “You’re pretty hard to forget.”

“But...the other night. You—”

“Is he your boyfriend? The man you were out with?”

That pulls her up short and she shakes her head. “My boyfriend? I don’t have one of those.”

I shouldn’t be as relieved by that as I suddenly find myself being. It feels almost ridiculous. I spent half an hour with her one night nine years ago. But there is something about this woman that lures me in.

“You were there on a date, were you not? Didn’t seem like the right moment to come over and introduce myself when it’s been such a long time and I wasn’t sure you recognized me.” That’s a total lie. The moment our eyes locked, I knew she knew who I was. I could practically read her every thought for how it was displayed on her pretty face. Though the remembering of my name is something else entirely.

In truth, I was just as shell-shocked to see her as she was to see me.

Certain people you just know you’ll never get the chance to see again, and she was one of those for me. I still can’t believe it’s her.

She smirks playfully, tilting her head almost as if she’s challenging me. “Not a date either. Just a friend. I looked around for you. Just to make sure I wasn’t insane.” She laughs, running her fingers through her long, dark hair. “You had me

convinced though. I was two seconds away from seeking out a shrink.”

“On my behalf?”

She shrugs. Smirks a bit more. Her eyes slay me completely.

“Not insane. Beautiful, yes. But not insane.”

She takes a small step in my direction, the wind kicking up and blowing her enticing fragrance directly at me, and I can’t stop myself from taking a deep inhale. Her perfume is light. Floral. Different than what she wore that night.

“Honestly, I’m surprised you recognized me after all this time.”

My face searches hers. “It has been a while. Doesn’t mean I’ve forgotten you though. It’s not every day a gorgeous woman stands me up after kissing me like tomorrow wasn’t coming.”

My voice comes out light, blatantly teasing, but her expression falls instantly and not in a typical way either. It’s not regret for standing me up, it’s something else entirely. Something dark and laced with tragedy.

“Hey,” I start, reaching out for her arm and squeezing her soft, smooth skin. “I didn’t mean it. I—”

“No,” she interrupts quickly, forcing a smile that doesn’t come anywhere close to reaching her eyes. “You’re right. I owe you a long-overdue apology.”

“You owe me nothing. I wasn’t exactly offering you all that much considering I was leaving. I don’t blame you for bailing.”

“I wanted to show up, Kellin. That wasn’t my issue.”

I’m desperate to ask just what her issue was, but that despair in her eyes is back and my gut is telling me to abort.

“Good to know. If you wanted another try at a date with me, all you had to do was ask.” I smirk.

She rolls her eyes. “Still charming with the lines, I see.”

“Something about you brings that out of me.”

“Words every woman wants to hear.”

My smirk turns impish. “I’d shower you with a million others if I thought for a second you were the type to fall for them.”

“Really now?” She cocks an eyebrow and I practically breathe out in relief when I see some of her sparkle shine through the dim cloud that seemed to be hovering over her head like a bad omen. “I’ll have to think on that. Your lines thus far haven’t been so great. Then again, you don’t strike me as the type of man who needs lines to get a woman to fall at your feet.”

A burst of a laugh rumbles through my chest and I drag my hand through my hair. The thought of Alanna falling at my feet in front of me has my mind going in a million filthy directions. Does she have any idea how dirty that sounds coming from her sweet mouth?

“Didn’t you nearly do that already tonight?” I lean in, holding her eyes with mine, making my heart jump and my stomach coil with an anticipation I have no right to.

Her eyes darken and I know she still feels this with me. This hum of electricity that seems to course between us.

“I guess I did.” She fights a grin as she tilts her head, her long hair falling over her shoulder, and I have the strongest urge to reach out and wrap a strand around my fingers. “Do you live around here now?”

“Wondering if you’ll go another nine years without seeing me?” I quip, hoping to redirect the question I have no place answering.

“Something like that. Twice in one week feels like a strong coincidence.” She laughs, her eyes dancing about my face before settling on my lips once more. She licks hers in return before dragging her gaze up to mine, but it’s too late. That one small gesture has my cock twitching in my jeans.

“A lucky one, I’d say.”

She smiles brightly and I can't stop myself from looking her up and down. From feasting on every single perfect inch of her. She's stunning. Drop a man to his knees, stunning.

Something about her makes me reckless in ways I know better than to be.

Behind her I hear the door to the bar open and close as a group of young guys stumble out, lighting cigarettes and laughing loudly.

I grasp her hand, pulling us farther away from the bar. Away from her friends. "Are they expecting you to return?"

"No. I don't think so. I wasn't planning on staying long anyway."

I nod, glancing down to check my watch. It's getting late and while I'd much rather spend the night talking to Alanna, I need to get answers from Charlie. Not only that...I am the last man in the world this woman should have anything to do with. Still, the thought of not seeing her again, after seeing her twice in one week after such a long bout in between, hits me in all the wrong places.

"Is your car close?" I ask, glancing up and down the street.

"Just up the road." She points behind her.

"I'll walk you to it."

Her eyes hold mine, almost as if she wants to object. As if she wants to offer me something else. Something I'm insanely interested in saying yes to, even if it's just another drink and a couple more hours in her company.

Which is why I blurt out, "I'm here visiting my sister. I don't live in Virginia Beach."

She swallows hard and gives me a slim nod, but doesn't respond. Instead, she turns on her heels and steps in the direction of her car. I follow her. She didn't agree to bringing me along and she didn't invite me to, but that doesn't matter to me. Aside from the fact that she's a woman walking alone at night, it seems I'll do anything for just a few more minutes.



I glance in her direction as we start off down the street, a familiar pang of regret where she's concerned hitting me square in the chest.

She makes some kind of noise in the back of her throat. "Are you still in the Army?"

"No. I work as a cybersecurity consultant." The lie rolls right off my tongue as it always does, but it doesn't mean it doesn't have a bitter aftertaste. Lying is second nature to me by this point. It's how we're trained. I can beat a polygraph. I can stare some straight in the eye and not so much as flinch or shift my gaze or have my pulse change from anything but its steady rhythm.

This is why I haven't dated much and if you meet other agents in the field, they're no different. You don't bring people into this world casually when everything you tell them about yourself is a lie. When your chance of dying on a mission is a very real and present thing.

It's why I shouldn't be flirting with Alanna. Why I shouldn't have encouraged her to follow me out of the bar the way I did.

"What about you? What do you do for work?"

A breathtaking smile lights up her face. "I'm a doctor. An OB-GYN."

"Sounds pretty amazing."

"It is. Where do you live if not here?"

Good question. "Technically, I have a place in DC, but I'm not there very much. I travel a lot for my work."

"I'm finishing up my residency this summer and then I have some choices to make about where I'll go next and what I'll do when I get there."

"Such as?" I push when she ends that there.

"Such as I could do a fellowship year somewhere. I could stay where I am and become an attending. Or..." She licks her lips, her gaze falling to the sidewalk. "Or I could go to Boston. A friend might have gotten me a position there."

“My sister went to school in Boston. She loved it up there.”

“And you’re here visiting with her. You two must be close.”

I shrug because I guess I’m as close with Kayleigh as I am with anyone in this world, but I wouldn’t exactly call us close.

“I have a sister I don’t see much. It’s nice that you’re close with yours.” The shadow that falls over her expression tells me this is yet another thing not to push her on. Alanna has a darkness about her, and I wonder if that became a part of who she is in the last nine years or if it was always there to begin with. Something in my gut tells me it’s the former, and if nothing else, that lures me in more to the enigma that is Alanna...

“What’s your last name?”

“Contreras. What’s yours?”

“Shaw.”

“Well, Kellin Shaw, this is me.” We stop in front of a sleek, black BMW X6 M50i and I can’t stop the crack of a smile as it spreads across my face. “What?”

“I just didn’t expect you to have a car like this.” I point to the car now behind her as she turns to face me on the sidewalk.

“Why not?” She tilts her head, her eyes glitter as they challenge me. “Women can’t drive hot, fast cars?”

I step into her. “You have no idea how insanely sexy that is. You and your hot, fast car.”

*Shut up, Kellin. Shut the fuck up now before you do something stupid like kiss her again.*

And on cue, my eyes drop to her lips. To her pretty, full, red lips. I still remember the way they felt against mine. The way she tasted like whiskey and mint. The noises she made as I plunged my tongue inside her mouth.

“How long are you in town, Kellin?” she whispers, her voice heavy.

“I don’t know. Not long,” I murmur regretfully. I look back up and meet her eyes, swirling marbles of green and brown with touches of blue. So fucking gorgeous I can hardly keep my wits about me. Her breathing has changed, the rise and fall of her chest more exaggerated. I can practically feel her pulse racing even though we’re a few feet away. “I want to see you again,” I tell her. “Even when I shouldn’t.”

“I want to see you again too. Even when *I* shouldn’t.”

I take a step, swallowing our distance by half, crowding her back a little and dipping my head until it’s close. So close to hers. I watch the pulse at the base of her neck thrum, and I reach up, my fingertips skating along it. Her breath hitches, her eyes growing darker.

“I have somewhere I need to be now. Otherwise...” I trail off because I should not vocalize the thoughts following that one hanging word. That one word that lets her know just how interested I am. Just how stupid and dangerous I’m being.

But it’s like my mouth has a mind of its own. I have no idea how to stop it.

How to control this...*pull* I feel with her.

“You should go,” I tell her, my knuckles gliding up her throat, along her jaw, grazing the crest of her cheek.

“I know.”

“I shouldn’t ask for your number.”

“I’m not going to give it to you, Kellin,” she says on a low breath. “But just so you know, I want to.” She reaches up and presses a soft kiss to my cheek before stepping back and hurrying into the street. She unlocks her car and opens the door, but before she slips inside, she throws me a wink and a smirk. “Good night, Kellin. Who knows, maybe I’ll run into you again.”

Without waiting on a response, she gets in and shuts the door. “Good night, Alanna Contreras,” I murmur, though she

can't hear me. "I certainly hope this isn't the last time I see you."

The car begins to drive away, and I blow out a heavy breath. Fuck. Now that I know she lives in town, there'll be no resisting her.

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# CHAPTER EIGHT

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## Alanna

The alarm on my phone goes off with that incessantly annoying beeping that I dread every time I set it. I roll on my side from my back, reaching out to slide my finger across the screen of my phone so it will shut up. It does, so I roll onto my back again, reaching my hands above my head and scraping the fabric of the headboard, pointing my toes in a full-body stretch. I groan, relishing the feeling of my muscles, stiff from a night of sleep, relaxing.

I stand up quickly, enjoying the slight head rush, and go about getting myself ready in my running clothes and sneakers. I throw them on, stretch the muscles in my legs, and head out.

I don't lock my door when I leave.

I hate running with things like keys on me. The only possessions I run with are my iWatch and AirPods.

“Alanna!” a female voice yells out directly behind me as I slip the second pod into my ear. I jump ten feet in the air, spinning around and coming practically face to face with my neighbor, Kay. “Shit,” she hisses, her expression sheepish. “I'm so sorry. You had your earbuds in, and I thought you were already listening to music. I didn't mean to startle you.”

“It's fine. Always nice to get my heart rate up before I start my run.”

She laughs. “I'm glad I caught you. A box was left in front of our door and Sean accidentally brought it inside without checking the name.”

“Oh. Okay. No worries. Thank you for taking it in for me. Would it be okay if I grab it later?” I ask as I stretch out a bit, drawing the heel of my left foot up until it hits my butt, then repeat the motion with the right.

“Of course!” Kay glances down, checking her watch. “I’ve got to get to work anyway.”

“On a Saturday?”

She scrunches her nose, staring up at me. “Yep. It’d be nice if I made partner. Then I wouldn’t have to kill myself with these hours.” Kay is shorter than I am, maybe five-foot-three if she’s an inch. Her blonde hair is pretty and falls down her back in long waves. She’s dressed for work in a black pencil skirt that hits right above her knee, with a matching tailored suit jacket and white blouse underneath. There’s a small pink, blue, and purple butterfly pin on the lapel of her jacket.

She’s like me in that. Always wanting to add on a girly touch when she can.

“Oh, I meant to ask. I haven’t seen you in a while. How’s Walter?”

This gets a laugh out of me. About four months ago, Kay and I ran into each other outside and were talking when we saw a tiny tortoise almost get hit by a car. We rushed to his rescue and decided that we couldn’t send him back into the wild to get run over.

I offered to keep him since Kay has a cat and was afraid her cat would try to eat him.

“He’s awesome. Getting big. You’ll have to come down and see him.”

“Definitely,” she agrees. “I should get going or I’m really going to be late.”

“Okay. Have a good one.” I throw her a wave and start to head off.

“Wait,” she calls out, grabbing my arm and stopping my getaway. “What are you doing tonight?”

“Um.” I turn back to her. “I’m on call today, but nothing tonight.”

“Perfect! Would you like to come over for dinner? That way we can give you your box. Plus, we haven’t gotten to hang out in months.”

“Sure. That sounds like fun,” I grin. “Thank you. Can I bring anything?”

She shakes her head. “Nope. Just yourself. How’s seven?”

“Great. I guess I’ll see you tonight,” I say, setting my AirPods back in and throwing her a wave as I set off.

The Strumbellas’ “Salvation” starts blaring in my ears as I run through town, heading for the walkway that lines the beach. This is normally a pretty busy area, but right now, at this very early hour on a Saturday, it’s quiet. It smells like the rain that fell overnight, saltwater, and wet concrete. I find my rhythm quickly, enjoying the solitude of the gray morning.

Anything to avoid thinking about last night. About Kellin.

Only this time there is no David to break me apart. No parents to finish me off.

But there isn’t any potential to be a permanent fixture either.

Quite the contrary, and is that something I really want to get myself mixed up in? I’ve got my work. I’ve got Carter breathing down my neck in more ways than I can even start to understand. I’ve got the end of my residency and my next professional steps looming over my head.

I have no room for a distraction like Kellin. Even a temporary one.

But that doesn’t mean I don’t want it.

Just the thought of his eyes and the heat in them when he stares at me had me touching myself before falling asleep last night.

What is it about that man? I can’t even put my finger on it, but it’s most definitely something. That said, I’ll probably



never see him again. He's only in town to visit his sister.

He's temporary.

Which means I need to forget about him before I drive myself insane with impossible possibilities.

Pushing thoughts of him aside, my mind clears, allowing me to only focus on my breathing and footing on the slippery concrete.

Before I realize it, I've hit the end of my route, the point of return, only instead of doing that, I head for the railing, choosing to stare off into the turbulent waters instead. The wind is blowing in my direction, a welcome fine mist of cool saltwater accompanies it.

All around me the city has come to life. The streets and sidewalks are filled with the typical hustle and bustle that is to be expected for a Saturday morning. Couples in workout gear, glued to their phones, brush past me with quickened steps as they sip their required dose of caffeine. Women pushing baby strollers chatting with their friends. Elderly couples walking their dogs. The sun is finally starting to peek out, and despite the hollow feeling in my gut, today looks like it's going to be beautiful.

I start off back toward home, needing to get myself going for the day. I don't have a shift, but I'm on-call and Saturdays can get pretty busy.

As I catch sight of my building off in the distance, my thoughts instantly cast back to Kellin, who, if I'm honest, hasn't been far from them in the first place. Will I see him again? What am I even expecting if I do?

My pace slows a bit as these thoughts flitter through my mind along with a replay of last night. I smile to myself, glancing down at my feet as I recall the way he looked like he wanted to devour me. The way I know he was remembering our first kiss all those years ago. The way his throat bobbed, and his jaw worked with tension that had only one way of releasing it.

Blustering out a breath, I glance up just as I smash into a large, solid mass followed quickly by my chest being doused in something freezing cold. I'm knocked off balance, a startled half-gasp, half-scream escapes past my lips at the icy shock as I fall back, my bottom hitting the unforgiving cement sidewalk with a painful thud.

"Oh shit," a surprised male voice says above me. My eyes lock on the large mocha-tinted, coffee-scented stain that's dripping down my chest in thick rivulets. Chunks of ice drop to my lap and the sidewalk. "I'm so sorry," the voice says again. "Are you hurt?"

Am I hurt? I have no idea. My ass is certainly smarting.

"No. I think I'm okay," I say through a bubble of laughter that comes up out of nowhere. But really?

The guy chuckles too before dipping down into a crouch and taking in my sodden appearance. A hand brushes hair away from my face, his voice dipping into a growl. "Dammit, Alanna. Why did it have to be you that I spilled my coffee all over?" My attention finally pulls away from the ice-cold liquid sticking to my chest and up the brick wall of a man that I ran into. Startling, slate-blue eyes filled with concern, and maybe a little amusement, greet me. They're so pronounced with the streaming sun hitting them that it takes me a second longer than it should to blink or even look anywhere else.

"I've never seen you in daylight."

He grins. "Worried I was a vampire?"

"Possibly. I'm not sure if I'm disappointed or not that you're human."

He chuckles, reaching out and swiping at a stray speck of coffee on my cheek. Or so I presume. I really couldn't care less what he's wiping at as long as he's touching me.

Didn't I *just* tell myself that he's not a good idea?

"I have no idea what to say back to that. Did you hit your head? Maybe we should take you into the hospital for further examination."

“Now you’re teasing me.”

He smiles dopily and I can’t help but admire the cleft in his chin. It doesn’t show until he smiles, and I think that might be my new favorite feature of his. “Yep. But in fairness, you’re comparing me to a vampire, so it’s not without merit.”

*Touché.*

“My head is fine. My clothes are another matter.” I glance down again and I note he does too. Is he staring at my boobs? Is it weird that I hope he is?

“I’m really sorry,” he says again as he sucks in a rush of air, cupping my chin and dragging my face back up to his, our eyes locking once more. Those mesmerizing blues hold me paralyzed for a moment as he says, “I didn’t see you there. I was checking my phone when you plowed into me.”

“I’m fine. It’s fine. I wasn’t looking where I was going either.”

A smile lights up his face as he rubs the rugged sandy-colored stubble on his chiseled jaw. “Do you think you can get up?” He reaches a hand out and hesitantly, I place mine into his. Warm long fingers envelop my much smaller colder ones before I’m suddenly hoisted off the ground in one surprisingly effortless move. “There now,” he says when I’m steady on my feet, his hand instantly releasing mine. “Are you sure you’re okay?” His eyes search me, his full lips quirking up into a lopsided grin. “I mean, other than the large coffee stain on your shirt, which I fully intend to pay for.”

“That’s not necessary. It’s as much my fault as it is yours.”

He shakes his head, his short blond hair glinting against the weak sun. “No. It’s absolutely my fault. Please, I insist on paying for your shirt. At the very least, let me buy you a coffee.” I look up at him and he looks down on me and then our barely contained grins turn into laughter. “Okay, that was a stupid line. You’re clearly already wearing my coffee and I doubt you want to sit around and have more when you’re soaked.”

I shake my head. “As tempting as that sounds, not really. You should really work on your lines. They’ve never been very good.”

He laughs harder, shaking his head at me in mock indignation. “You’re wounding my ego, Alanna. Not something I’m used to.”

“I think your large ego is just fine.”

“It won’t be by the time you’re done with it. If you think my lines suck, how about I just ask you out for coffee?”

“I’m on call. I have to check to see if I have patients. But if I don’t...”

He steps forward, his eyes sparkling. “I know this place,” he whispers. “It has really good coffee. Hot coffee, if you prefer. The bonus...” He smirks. “And this will blow your mind. It’s unbelievably close. Like...right there.” He points across the street. “You can even go home, shower off the coffee you have all over yourself, check to see if you have any patients, and then come meet me after.”

“Is that so? Seems almost too good to be true.”

“It might be. Especially when I’m willing to throw breakfast into the mix.”

“Breakfast, huh?” I tap my bottom lip with my finger as if I’m actually mulling this over.

He nods emphatically. “Definitely breakfast. The really good, greasy kind. Unless you’re a crazy health nut who only eats egg whites and fruit.”

I scrunch up my nose, shaking my head.

“Thank god. Then in that case join me for a decidedly semi-healthy breakfast and fresh coffee that you won’t have to wear.”

His full lips bounce on one side, his stance shifting as he waits me out.

How can I say no to that? I can’t. Third time’s a charm, right? “Okay. You sort of had me at semi-healthy breakfast.”

He chuckles, leaning in and tucking a wayward strand that wrangled itself out of my ponytail behind my ear. “Perfect. I guess it’s lucky for me I ran into you again. Though it wasn’t my intention to do that literally.”

“Mine either. But again, I’m on call, so I might have to leave at any moment if a patient needs me.”

“That’s okay. And though we said we shouldn’t ask; can I have your number? It might kill me if you stand me up again. I’m not sure my *large* ego can take that after you already poking at my lines.”

“Wouldn’t want that, now would we?” I give him my number and he enters it right into his phone. Then he texts me, so I’ll have his, and what the hell am I doing?

“I’ll hope to see you later then. And maybe I can coax you into turning breakfast into lunch and dinner.”

“I have plans for dinner.”

He leans in, cupping his hand by his mouth as if he’s about to tell me a secret. “Wishful thinking. Shhh. Don’t ruin this. A man can dream.”

And just like that, I like Kellin Shaw.

For so much more than your run-of-the-mill lust. The butterflies in my stomach are in agreement. So is the unstoppable smile on my face and the strange pounding of my heart.

“Your secret is safe with me. How does an hour sound?”

“It sounds perfect.” He presses a kiss to my cheek. “See you then, hazel eyes.”

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## CHAPTER NINE

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## Alanna

I end up getting called in. I showered. Did my hair and makeup. And then a call came in that one of my patients was in pre-term labor, and since I'm on-call, I had to go in. I texted Kellin to let him know and asked for a rain check. Something I've been regretting since.

I don't know why I'm bothering with him.

Liking him or not, it can't go anywhere. It can't lead to anything real. And though I don't have a ton of dating experience as of late, I know that if I like him now, I could really like him if this thing between us continues on the path it's headed on.

"Hey," Carter says with a smile lighting up his face. "I didn't expect to see you here today."

I shrug, joining him over by the staff room. "I got called in."

"Lucky for me. Are you done with your case?"

"Yeah. She just delivered. Baby is in the NICU, thirty-two weeker, but doing well."

"Good. That's always a relief. How was your girls' night out last night?"

I laugh. "Fun. Kinda awkward. Ashton Caputo was there."

Carter stiffens, and I cock an eyebrow. "She didn't—"

"Mention you?" I finish for him. "No."

“It was just one night, you know. Mutually agreed upon too.”

I hold up my hands in surrender. “You don’t have to explain it to me. What you do and who you do it with is your business.” His eyes hold mine and he nods solemnly, reading what I’m telling him for exactly what it is. “I have a video interview with MGH next Thursday.”

His face explodes into a wide grin. “Yeah?”

I nod. “Yeah. I’d be crazy not to explore it. I think the bosses that are here got wind of it because they want to talk to me about possibly doing a fellowship with the minimally invasive gynecologic surgery department.” Carter’s eyebrows hit his hairline. He knows how rare those fellowships are. He knows I’ve had my eye on it for a while.

“For real?”

“Yep. Pretty cool. A lot to think about.”

Time to take the next steps. Time to put the past behind me once and for all and start living a normal life again.

“That’s the best fucking thing I’ve heard all day.” Without warning, Carter scoops me up into his arms, swinging me around in a circle. A squeal escapes my lips at the suddenness of it before transforming into peals of laughter. He sets me down, cupping my face with his hands. “I’m so happy for you. As much as I want you to come with me, whatever you choose, big things are happening for you, Alanna.”

I shake my head against him. “No one has offered me anything yet.”

“They will. I know they will. And no pressure, babe. You’re my friend first and foremost. My favorite work friend and no matter what happens or doesn’t happen between us or work, that won’t change.”

And any hesitation and reservation I was having about Carter or Boston is gone. He understood what I was saying and there are no hard feelings. Because while I could possibly like Carter in that way if I tried, I shouldn’t have to try. Kellin,



whom I barely know, looks in my direction and I feel a million things and none of them are platonic.

I've known Carter for years.

You can't force something. It's either there with someone or it's not.

In this case, friends are all we're meant to be.

And as if the universe is trying to tell me something, my phone vibrates on my hip where it's clipped to my scrubs. I quickly glance down to check it, butterflies in my belly before I even see that it's him. It was the hope that it was that got them going and now that I see that it is, they're in full-blown flight.

***Kellin: Is tomorrow too soon for that rain check?***

Just as I'm reading that, another text comes in.

***Kellin: This is a bad idea, right?***

Dammit.

"Everything okay?" Carter asks, eyeing my phone and reading my expression for what it is. Conflicted.

I glance up, putting my phone back. "Yup. Are you here all day?"

He nods. "You done?" I nod back and he laughs. "Okay. How about Thursday night dinner? I'm taking you out to celebrate. We can drag Billie along if she's not working."

"It's a deal. And thanks, Carter." I lean up on my toes and give him a kiss on the cheek. "For everything."

We say our goodbyes and the entire drive home, I'm deliberating over what to text Kellin back. My heart and mind are at war.

Part of me is saying to go for it. If I know the situation going in, then I won't get hurt when it's over. No expectations. No strings or hope for more. Just some fun with a guy who sets my blood on fire and makes my knees weak.

I deserve this. I mean, when was the last time I allowed myself to indulge?

Then there's the flip side of this. The side that knows better.

So here it is, 6:57 p.m. I'm expected downstairs in three minutes for dinner, and I still haven't texted him back. He hasn't texted again either, and it's sitting on my chest. I'm dressed casual but not too casual. I'm wearing skinny jeans, a clingy deep purple tunic blouse with a lowcut back, and purple heels to match. My hair and makeup are done but nothing is helping.

The mirror says I look good. But my insides are doing all kinds of gymnastics. I'm scared about what saying yes could do to me. I hesitate for a second then type:

***It is a bad idea. Maybe resisting is the way to go.***

I squeeze my eyes shut and hold my breath as I hit send.

Then I tuck my phone into the pocket of my jeans since I'm still technically on call for another few minutes and head downstairs to Kay and Sean's place for dinner. Grateful for the distraction, even if I'm a bit of a third wheel.

Rapping my knuckles against her thick wooden door, I clutch on to the bottle of red that I brought probably a little tighter than I should, but my tension has to go somewhere and it's my only option. The front door opens with a swoosh, and Sean is there to greet me with a big smile that lights up his dark brown eyes.

His hair is chestnut brown and styled nicely. It says expensive, as does the pinstripe navy suit he's wearing. I look to my left and right, just in case I got the wrong door. But no. "I'm underdressed."

He laughs. "No, you're not. I'm overdressed. I just got home from work."

I shake my head. "You two really bring new meaning to burning the midnight oil."

"Look who's talking, *Doctor*. Come on in."

He steps back, holding the door open wider so I can enter the apartment. I look around the kitchen, but don't see Kay, or anyone cooking anything for that matter. Did I get the wrong night?

I turn back to Sean who followed me, handing him the bottle of wine.

"Thanks. Make yourself at home." His hand waves to the dark metal barstools tucked under the island in the center of the kitchen. "Kay got stuck at work, but she should be home any second."

"Okay, great." I give him my best smile, trying not to make this awkward. In the years I've been living here, I've spent time with Kay and Sean, but never Sean alone. I slide out one of the stools, settling down onto it.

"Can I get you something to drink?"

"Sure." I definitely need something if I'm going to make it through this night in one piece.

"I have wine, both red and white as well as harder stuff. Kay likes her cosmos and will definitely want one tonight. I can make you one of those if you're game."

I check my watch. "I am officially off the clock. Mix it up."

His palms flatten against the counter as he pushes off, standing up and walking over to the dark cabinet to pull out a metal martini shaker. "I like to greet her with one when she gets home on Saturdays anyway."

"Wow, that's pretty amazing."

He throws me a conspiratorial wink. "That's why she keeps me around."

I laugh at that, because how freaking cute is this guy?

I open my mouth to tell him how lucky Kay is when the front door flies open, banging against the wall as it does. I hear Kay call out. "Is she here? Oh my god, I'm so late." The blonde comes bursting into the kitchen only to halt when she's right in front of me. Her hair is windswept and all over the

place, her cheeks are flushed, and her blue eyes are wild. “I am so sorry I’m late,” she moans dramatically. “I’m the worst. I invite you over for dinner and I’m not even home to make you any.”

I laugh, waving my hand in the air flippantly. “Stop. I don’t care about any of that. Sean here,” I nod my head in his general direction, “is mixing me a drink, so I’m all good. Who needs food when you have alcohol?” And I mean it. Not necessarily the alcohol part, but she doesn’t have to fuss over me. Given everything that’s happened in my life, friends are rare and precious commodities, and these two have always been solid. They respect my privacy and never push for any details.

“And here you both go.” Sean slides two pink beverages in high, cut crystal martini glasses toward us. I feel like I’m in an expensive bar. That’s how professional these look. There’s even a lime wedge perfectly placed on the rim of the glass.

“This looks amazing. How did I not know this was your secret talent before?” I smile at him.

“It’s why I fell in love with him,” Kay explains with a broad grin. “He was working as a bartender when we were in law school together. He made me one of these and that was it.” Kay leans in to give him a small kiss on the lips. “Cheers.” She turns to me, lifting her glass up, waiting for me to do the same. “To being done with work for the day.”

“I’ll cheers to that. I got called in to a delivery this morning.” I clink my glass with hers and enjoy the ping that only crystal can make. Bringing the rather full glass up to my lips carefully so as not to spill, I draw the cold liquid into my mouth. It tastes as perfect as it looks. “Damn. This is really good.”

“Told ya,” Kay asserts. “So, would you hate me forever if I just ordered a pizza for dinner?” She looks at me sheepishly, biting on her lip.

“Oh god, are you kidding me? Forever,” I say dramatically, but with a smile so she knows I’m kidding. She giggles

sweetly. “Don’t be ridiculous. You had a full day of work. If I had thought more about it, I would have offered to cook.”

“Only you got called in so we’re all hopeless,” she sighs, taking a sip of her drink. “I do have appi’s though so we can munch on those for a bit. And don’t hate me, because I didn’t want you to think I was trying to set you up when I invited you to come to dinner. I swear to you, I’m not, but my brother will be joining us. If it helps, I’m ambushing him too because I forgot to mention you’d be coming.”

“Your brother?”

The words are no sooner out of my mouth when the front door opens yet again. “Motherfucking hell, it’s windy as balls out there.” Both Kay and Sean are smiling and rolling their eyes. But the loud booming voice, heavy stomps toward the kitchen, and angry swearing make my heart rate jack up. The voice is oddly familiar, yet I’m not quick to place it.

A very tall man stalks into the kitchen with his blond head down, wiping dirt and leaves from his shirt. “That’s my brother,” Kay says with an edge of playful annoyance to her voice.

“What?” the man asks, finally lifting his face to the room.

Holy sweet baby Jesus. It’s Kellin.

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# CHAPTER TEN

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## Alanna

My mouth pops open like a reflex.

He looks equally stunned to see me. His eyes glued to my face, looking over each one of my features like he's in fact confirming that it's me. Finally, after what feels like several minutes, though I'm sure it's been barely a couple of seconds, he tilts his head and scrunches his eyes like he's trying to figure something out. "It's you."

"Um. Yeah. I guess it is." What do I do? Do I run? Do I laugh it off?

Why do I have to be so bad with social situations?

"Do you two know each other?" Sean questions, standing with his arm casually draped over Kay's shoulder.

I'm nodding. "We've um...we've met before." I shrug, staring helplessly at him.

"Yeah. I tossed my iced coffee all over her in the street this morning," Kellin states, folding his arms across his broad chest and smirking like the devil at me. "You know my sister?"

Jesus. He's staying here? In my building? One floor directly below me?

"Looks that way," is about the best I've got right now.

But seriously? What the fuck?

"She lives upstairs," Kay declares, waving a hand in my direction.

“Well, then.” He throws me a wink. “I guess that makes you my new temporary neighbor. Were you ever able to get that coffee out of your shirt?”

“I was.”

“Good. I was wondering about it all day.”

The way he says that has my face heating.

He walks into the kitchen, leaning over and giving Kay a kiss on the cheek and a knuckle pound to Sean. He reaches into the cabinet, pulling out a crystal glass, similar to Sean’s, and fills it with scotch. He takes a small sip, his eyes holding mine, and I can’t help the flutter that takes flight low in my belly.

He’s watching me closely, even though he’s doing other things. I can feel his eyes.

“Well, I got home late, so I didn’t have time to cook like I hoped to.” Kay cringes, evidently still feeling bad about that. She turns to face Kellin, who looks like he couldn’t care less. “You good with a pizza?”

“Sounds great. I can run out and pick it up if that’s easier. Alanna can come with me.”

“She just got here,” Kay argues. “And she’s the guest.”

“I don’t mind,” I offer, trying to push aside the part of me that’s telling me not to do this. The part that reminds me that I already like Kellin a touch more than I should, considering he’s leaving who the hell knows when.

Kay looks over at me and then back to Kellin, a knowing smirk quirking up her lips. “Okay, then. That would be great.”

I wordlessly stand up, taking a final sip of my drink. Kay’s trying and failing to hide her shit-eating grin and the awkward tension in the room just skyrocketed. I can practically feel the unspoken questions and curious stares.

But Kellin doesn’t seem put off by it in the least.

He walks in my direction, picking up his discarded keys and wallet before asking, “Can we take your car? Or better yet,



can I drive it?"

I laugh, shaking my head. "No way. She's my baby."

"I won't hurt her. I just want to test her out a bit."

"I don't know you well enough for that yet."

He leans in, his mouth brushing my ear, sending shivers down my spine, and I'm almost painfully aware that we have a very captive audience watching us. "Yet. You don't know me well enough *yet*. But you will."

He takes my hand, leading me to the door, and like a high school girl getting caught with the bad boy, I'm afraid to look back over my shoulder to see Sean and Kay's expressions.

"Which apartment is yours?" he asks once we step into the hall.

"Five D."

"Right above ours."

"Looks that way."

"How will I resist you now when you're sleeping right above me?"

"You'll have to find a way."

"I'm thinking that's an impossibility."

Kellin steps into me, crowding me back when the door behind me flies open, making me jump. "Oh Alanna, dear. I'm so glad I saw you." I spin around to find my neighbor, Mrs. Porcino, dressed in a nightgown with rollers in her hair. Behind me, I can feel Kellin getting in closer to my back, but before I can so much as look over my shoulder in his direction, she continues with, "I'd like to give you my son, Bobby's, number. I told him all about you. He's quite the catch, you know." She shoots me a conspiratorial wink, completely ignoring Kellin who is standing right here.

Mrs. Porcino has a voice that betrays her forty-year smoking habit. I first met her the day I moved in when she accosted me in the hallway. Much the way she is now. She

forced me into her apartment and showed me pictures of her son, Bobby.

He's at least fifteen years older than me, divorced, and has two teenage sons. Plus, he looks every bit of a middle-aged man. So I think it's safe to say, I won't be dating Bobby Porcino anytime soon.

I can't help it. I laugh. Her timing is incredible.

I take a step back, catching Kellin's eye for a brief second before I turn back to her. "Thank you, Mrs. Porcino, that's very nice of you, but I'm not dating much right now." I told her the same thing back then and every day she's mentioned him since. Kellin takes a step into me, a smirk playing on his lips.

It makes me smile even more.

"Oh, honey. You gotta get out sometime," she cackles with a throaty croak.

"Mrs. Porcino," Kellin interjects, taking a step in her direction while maintaining our eye contact. "Alanna must regretfully decline your generous offer," he says firmly. "She's otherwise engaged for the foreseeable future."

He grabs my hand, tugging me to the elevator, leaving the poor woman to stand there in the hall. "Have a nice evening," I throw over my shoulder to her just as the doors close behind us.

I start cracking up, hitting the button and spinning around in place, standing in front of the metal doors. Kellin is about a foot away, his eyes carefully watching me, though amusement dances in his features.

"Regretfully decline? Otherwise engaged?" I giggle. "Why does that sound like you just checked a box for me on a wedding RSVP?"

"What?" He looks down at me confused.

"Never mind." He's still holding my hand and when I try to pull mine away, he yanks on it pulling me closer. His face dips down toward mine.

“You said much,” he whispers, staring at me with those intense blue eyes of his.

“Um, I’m sorry. What?” Now it’s my turn to be confused. The doors open and he pushes me on backward, not giving me an inch of breathing room or space between us.

His free hand comes up, brushing across my cheek. “You said you’re not dating *much*. Are you seeing someone else?”

I chuckle. “Oh. No. I’m not.” I tilt my head, raising a questioning brow. “Someone *else*?” Apparently, we’re playing the word game with each other because everything has meaning.

He shrugs, watching the pulse at the base of my neck thrum, and like he can’t help himself, his fingertips skate along it. My breath hitches and his eyes grow darker.

We ride down silently, but when the doors to the elevator open, Kellin pushes himself back from me. I briefly close my eyes as I force myself to get my shit together. Kellin steps out and I feel like I can take a breath.

That is until he reaches back, intertwining our fingers once more as we head outside into the windy night.

“Alanna?”

“Yes?” I look up as he gives me a sideways glance.

“Don’t go on a date with Bobby Porcino. Or anyone *else*.”

I fight my grin. “Wasn’t planning on it.”

“Good.”

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# CHAPTER ELEVEN

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## Alanna

“I should get going,” I tell Kellin, though I haven’t budged from my seat beside him on the couch. The four of us ate pizza and drank really good wine, and we didn’t stop talking. I mean, the kind of talking you do with people you feel totally at ease with and have known forever. Kellin sat beside me and played with my fingers beneath the table. And when he wasn’t doing that, he was skimming my thigh, tickling me through the fabric of my jeans.

Kay and Sean left us alone after dinner, using the excuse of cleaning up the non-existent mess in the kitchen.

Kellin leans into me and whispers, “Do you still think we should resist each other?”

Yes! No! “I have no idea.”

Because we both have a lot in common. I mean, we like the same kind of ice cream and television shows and movies. We both love the beach and can pass on the mountains. We both love to travel but with work haven’t found much of a chance to really explore the world as a tourist. We both love classical and indie rock music and don’t care so much for country or pop.

You’d think saying, *same for me*, after nearly every sentence would get old or boring, but it wasn’t. It almost became like a game for us. It makes me like him more and the more time I spend with him, the more I like him.

And the more I like him, the stupider I’m becoming.

“Me either. I was trying to talk myself out of you all day. I told myself it was for the best that you got called into work and that we couldn’t meet for breakfast. But now you live right above me and I...” He runs a hand over his short hair. “Fuck, I seriously have no idea what to do.”

You see what I mean about liking him?

“Right. So I’ll go then. That’s really the only thing to do.”

Tonight was absolutely the most perfect non-date I’ve ever been on. And I realize I don’t get out much, but that’s not what this is. If this had been a date, it would have easily fit into the ranks of best first date caliber. You know, the kind that has you so anxious for the second that you don’t want the first to end. You want it to continue into the night. Into the next morning.

Into however long you can make it last.

Fucking chemistry. Look what it’s doing to me.

I’m a conflicted mess of a woman.

“Yeah,” I say again because Kellin is ignoring my statement with a smirk and a sparkle in his eye. “I should go. You know. Because it’s late.”

Right. Super cool. Not awkward at all. I mentally roll my eyes at myself. I’m like the teenager I never was around him. It’s disconcerting, to say the least.

“You don’t have to.”

I nod. “That’s exactly why I should.”

Taking my hand in his, he helps me to stand. His eyes search mine as if he’s seeking an answer to an unasked question. “Okay,” he says softly. “I’ll walk you up.”

I swallow as heat blooms between us, coating the air in tension so thick it has my belly coiling and my skin tingling with anticipation.

He glances over toward the kitchen only to find his sister and Sean occupied with their own conversation. He leans in and presses his lips to the corner of mine, lingering for a moment without making any attempt to meet my lips or

deepen the connection. “I’m kissing you like this because you’re telling me you need to go.” His warm, sweet breath brushes across my face, up toward my ear. I shudder involuntarily. “Even though this is absolutely not the way I want to kiss you tonight, Alanna.”

I clench and unclench my fists and toes so I don’t do something reckless and impulsive like maul him right here where he’s standing.

He pulls back, his pupils dilated, and I want to surrender myself to him so badly my mind is wild with it.

I wanted him that night at the frat party all those years ago. I wanted him last night when he walked me to my car, and this morning when he doused me with his coffee and flirted shamelessly.

But I want him so much more now.

To the point where I can hardly think past it.

Does he have to be so perfect when I can’t keep him? It’s just not fair.

I force myself to take a step back and then another and he reads me. He knows I’m struggling. Hell, he is too. What a mess.

I say my goodnights and thank yous to Kay and Sean. The pleased, knowing smile hasn’t left Kay’s lips all night. She of all people knows that her brother is not here for long and I wish she wouldn’t smile at me like that. Like me getting together with her brother is as perfect as it feels when we all know it’s anything but.

Without a word, Kellin guides me out his door, up the stairs, and over to my apartment. Living in the same damn building directly above him isn’t going to help anything.

Unlocking the door, I walk inside, cling to the wood like it’s my sanity lifeline. “Thank you for an amazing night, Kellin.”

“Are you working tomorrow?”

I shake my head.

He pauses, staring into my eyes with caution as if debating the wisdom of continuing this...*thing* between us. “Will you spend tomorrow with me, Alanna?”

I shouldn't. I should say no. But... “Yes.” Because I want to see him again too much to say no.

I close my door before anything else can be said or done but sneak a last look through the peephole. There isn't much to see. He just walks back in the direction of the stairs and I blow out a silent breath. Turning around with a giddy smile plastered all over my lips, I lean my back against the cool wood of my door thinking about the night I just had. With my head still pressed against my door, I jolt forward as a knock reverberates through me. Spinning around at light speed, I peek through, just in case it's Mrs. Porcino, and find Kellin on the other side through the peephole.

“Forget something?” I ask through the wood.

“Yes,” he says gruffly. He's frustrated with something. His hands running through his hair as he continuously shifts his weight.

“What?”

His laugh is pained. “Just open up. I can't talk to you through the door.”

I smile like the mindless fool I'm becoming in his presence and open the door with a raised eyebrow. “Yes, Mr. Shaw? Something I can do for you?”

“This,” he growls before he takes one determined step forward, his hands reaching out to cup my face as his mouth crashes into mine. A startled gasp escapes my lips and Kellin takes full advantage, swallowing down the sound and demanding access with his tongue. I give it. Freely and willingly, as I cannot remember ever being kissed like this.

Even in college. Even in medical school when the boys had turned into men. Even by Kellin that first night. Kellin's kiss slams into me with enough force to make me forget anything and everything but the way his mouth feels on mine.



The way his husky moans reverberate through me. The way his scent and warmth envelop me.

The way my knees go weak and my heart races and my palms sweat and my body tingles.

He pulls back and meets my eyes, his forehead dropping to mine as he tries to steady his ragged breathing. The way his eyes burn into me, my entire body ignites.

“*That’s* why you knocked on my door?”

He nods with a grin that cannot be contained. “Yes. I figured a sneak attack was going to be the only way you’d submit to me.”

“I don’t submit.”

“I’d never ask you to.”

*Jesus*. My fingers rake through his hair and I tug his mouth back down to mine. Kissing him with abandon. Our lips and tongues dueling. Fighting for dominance.

I shove him back and regret the move instantly when I see his swollen, glistening lips and dark, lust-drunk eyes.

“I should go.”

I nod.

He licks his lips and takes another step into me, grasping the back of my head, only instead of diving in and kissing me with the same passion he just was, he peppers my lips, cheeks, and neck with soft, sweet, open-mouthed kisses. The kind that makes your eyes roll in the back of your head and your toes curl.

“Tomorrow,” he whispers into me, and I hum something out that I think is a yes. “Do you want to go for a run with me?”

“Okay.”

More kisses as he trails lower, slipping the corner of my shirt to the side so he can reach my collarbone and the curve of my shoulder. I tilt my head back, giving him better access, and

a moan slips past my lips when I feel his tongue sneak out for a taste.

“Alanna, kick me out.”

I giggle. “Get out.”

“You don’t sound like you mean it.”

“I don’t.”

He groans into me. “I’m trying to be a good guy here.”

“Okay.” I clear my throat and the fog of lust that’s clinging to me and step back because even though I’m dying to sleep with him, I’m not sure that’s such a good idea. My head is already mixed up enough and if his kisses are any indication, sex between us will be mind-blowing.

And then I’ll really be screwed.

Pun intended.

“You’re right. You should go.”

His dark eyes hold mine, desire and resolve warring within them. A crooked smile lights up his face and he presses his lips to mine, speaking against me. “What time should I come get you in the morning?”

“Early.”

“Early it is. Goodnight, Alanna. I have a feeling you’ll be filling my head with naughty dreams all night long.”

He takes a step back and then another, approaching my door, and I’m dying to reach out and yank him back into me. I’m dying for more of his kisses and touches and...god, I’m just dying for him.

Kellin winks at me before closing the door behind him. I sag against my wall, smiling stupidly, and touching my warm, swollen lips, wishing it were already tomorrow morning.

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

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## Kellin

“We can agree to disagree,” I say, staring out at the deep blue water. It’s a mild day for this time of year. It’s hovering around sixty-something degrees, and though Alanna and I finished our run about an hour ago and have been walking the beach since, I’m still hot and sweaty. I want to take off my shirt, but the scar on my chest and back will raise all kinds of questions I’m not yet ready to answer.

We’ve been doing this for a week. Waking up early and running together. Spending time together when we have any. This week has been nothing short of turmoil, both personally and professionally. Charlie convinced me to go back to DC tomorrow to meet with Mandi, who was her handler and the person who not only saved hers and Mark’s lives, but shot Erik, the son of Christopher Asher who had been not only helping Asher but had been trying to hurt Mark and Jackson Cole who owns Cole Security Forces. The company Erik worked for.

It’s all extremely interwoven.

“I don’t get it. You’re American.”

I laugh. “Irish American. My mother was born in Ireland. She immigrated to the United States and then met my father.”

“Who was a general in the Army?”

“Yup. Pretty cool guy.”

“Sounds like both your parents had some amazing stories.”

“They did. But you’re deflecting now.” I would turn this around on her and ask about her family, but the one time I tried, she shut down completely.

Alanna has a past.

A history.

And while part of me is tempted to dig further into that, I won’t invade her privacy like that.

“Okay, Irish. But again, you were still born here. You grew up here. So how can you think that soccer is better than football?”

“I’m not saying it’s better, it’s just more fun to watch. Especially live. It definitely requires more skill and athletic ability from all players. No helmets or pads either.”

She rolls her eyes at me. “Less contact and chance for traumatic brain injury. Hence the reason football players wear those helmets and pads.”

“Spoken like a true doctor.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“Nah.” I wrap my arms around her waist, tugging her adorable little body into me. “I think it’s insanely sexy that you’re a doctor. Smart women turn me on. Especially mouthy ones with dark hair and hazel eyes and a body that makes me hard whenever I think about it.”

I press my hardening cock into her ass to prove my point and she gasps.

“And what am I supposed to do with that?”

I grin, rubbing my jaw along hers. “I don’t know. You’re the doctor. I’m sure you can figure something out.”

Her hand catches on my chest over my tight athletic shirt, her fingers walking down my chest and abs, driving me insane. They linger for a moment on the hem of my track shorts before continuing their descent until she boldly grabs my cock in her hand.

Right here on the beach.

The very public beach.

“I feel like I’ve felt him before,” she murmurs, and I release a choked laugh as she squeezes me. “Only, I’m not sure if I remember him being quite as impressive as he feels now.”

I grunt as she squeezes me again.

*Jesus.*

She keeps this up and I’ll toss her down in the sand before doing a million dirty things to her body, not caring in the least who sees us.

“I’m not sure if that’s a compliment or a dig.”

I feel her smile against my cheek. “Well, if you recall, I never got the chance to explore him with my hands that night. I only had the *pleasure* of grinding against him.”

“Fuck. You’re trying to kill me.”

“Maybe I just like to play the tease.”

And tease she is.

“How about we spend the afternoon watching a movie and eating popcorn and pizza? And just so we’re clear, that’s code for making out.” Maybe making her come if she’ll let me. I’ve been really good this week. Holding myself back at every turn. It’s taken all my herculean strength not to make a move and fuck her brains out.

It’s all I think about.

All I dream about.

This woman totally undoes me.

She laughs, trying to pull away, but I continue to hold her close. I haven’t been able to go longer than a few minutes without touching her. She also runs like a demon, able to keep up with me. It’s the hottest thing ever.

It sort of hit me all at once that she’s a civilian.

The only women I’ve spent any sort of time with in recent years have either been in the Army or the CIA. All they

wanted to talk about was work. Guns. Terrorists. Missions. I get it and I was like-minded.

But with Alanna, I can't talk about any of that.

It's forcing me to talk about me. About who I am and the things I like. Things I haven't thought much about since all I've done for the past twelve years is work.

No breaks. No vacations. Just living this life, coasting from one assignment to the next and eager for it. And though I'm in the middle of an assignment now, an assignment I take quite personally after what happened to me, I'm enjoying this interlude more than I should.

"You just basically described my version of porn," she says.

"Oh yeah? Which part?"

"All of it. Movie, popcorn, and pizza."

"Not the making out?" I whisper, kissing her neck.

"Oh, right. I forgot about that."

I pinch her side, making her laugh.

"No chick flicks," I warn.

She spins in my arms, her hands around my neck, her face tilting up to meet mine. "Medical documentaries?"

"Come again?"

"That's for later."

I raise an eyebrow and she smirks. Now I know she's just messing with me. "No documentaries."

"I suppose you like the blow 'em up, shoot 'em up types of movies?"

"I'd settle for a classic."

She raises a dubious eyebrow at me. "What sort of classic are we talking about?"

I lean in and kiss her. Hard. My tongue swirls with hers and I pull out all the stops. I kiss her like the starving man she

makes me. Our tongues meld together, her hands dragging up, raking through my hair and holding me against her. My girl is just as desperate for me as I am for her and it's a high I can't escape. A high I want to indulge in. Drown in.

This woman.

Goddamn, this woman has always had me. She never even had to try.

"I don't give a shit what we watch, Alanna. I just want to spend the night with you. And all that entails."

"I need a shower first. And before you start, no, that is not an invitation."

I laugh, taking her hand and dragging her away from the beach. I'm not exactly on a pleasure cruise here. I know I have calls and emails to return. I'm technically on a break from the CIA. Though that's not going to stop me from doing my job or searching down the third asshole in that text conversation I intercepted.

That said, it's easy to get swept up in her and think of nothing else.

But the truth of the matter remains... I'm here on a mission. And when it's over, I'll leave. Alanna Contreras does not fit into my world, and I do not fit into hers.

"I have to go back to DC tomorrow for work," I tell her cautiously, watching her expression closely. She hums out some kind of response, nodding like a bobblehead.

"Are you coming back?"

Am I? I honestly don't know. It depends on what I find out tomorrow. Charlie and I talked to Mandi, and she told me she'd start to do some digging. Then she called to inform me that she had some intel. That it involves Cole Security Forces. That it's all coming back around to their doorstep. Hence the need for a face-to-face tomorrow.

"Yes." For now, I don't add.



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Alanna and I spend the afternoon fighting over movies. We fight over pizza toppings too. She ends up ordering two different pizzas, one with all my meat toppings—she called me a caveman when I told her that’s what I wanted and hers veggie—I called her a rabbit when she ordered that.

She’s wearing leggings and an oversized T-shirt. Her hair is still damp from her shower and her face is clear of makeup.

And she is, without a doubt, the most gorgeous woman I’ve ever seen.

There is nothing sexier than a woman comfortable with herself, and that’s Alanna. She knows exactly who and what she is and isn’t afraid of that.

It makes me want to open myself up to her.

It also makes me want to bury myself deep inside of her and never come up for air again.

Our second movie ends, and the room goes quiet. The pizza boxes are half-forgotten on the coffee table, as is the mostly empty bowl of popcorn.

Her dark gaze casts over to mine, her breathing heavy, and her expression unsure.

But I’m done playing this cool. I’m done being the good guy. My time with her is borrowed. And there are certainly no guarantees on tomorrow.

I know that firsthand.

So I lean in and press my forehead to hers, meeting her eyes. My hand cups her jaw and I hold her steady. “You can invite me to stay, and I can kiss you again, strip you out of all your clothes, and spend the night making you scream my name. Or you can kick my ass out now. The choice is yours.”

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# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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## Alanna

Despite me desperately wanting to say yes, I hesitate. I know exactly what will happen to me if I bring this man into my bed. I can bullshit myself all I want, but the truth is, he won't just be in my bed.

He'll be in my heart in no time.

His knuckles graze the crest of my cheek as he stares deeply into my eyes. "It can mean as much or as little as you want. I'm open to anything with you. I know what our situation is. So, I'm leaving the ball in your court, though if we're making preferences known, I want you. I want you in a way I've never wanted another woman. And not just for tonight, Alanna." His eyes search mine. "But like I said, it's up to you."

He has no idea how much that shift in power means to me. It says I'm the one in control. It says he'll take what I give him and not the other way around. It says...shit, it says he gets me.

And because of that, I should make him go home. I should push him back and off my couch and shut the door in his face.

But I don't do that.

Maybe it's the week we've had or his smile or the fact that he kisses like the arrogant, sexy bastard he is, but it has me rising off the couch. It has me standing over him. It has me crooking a finger at him.

"Shit," he breathes, his eyes devouring every inch of me. "I'm well and truly fucked now, aren't I?"

“I believe that’s what you promised me, Mr. Shaw.”

Kellin closes his blazing eyes. Takes a breath. Opens them again and smiles devilishly.

“That doesn’t even come close to what I’m going to do to you tonight. I’m going to show you what it is to be fucked by me and when I’m done, no other man will ever exist for you again.”

My heart rate picks up as anticipation slams into me, causing my breath to hitch and my stomach to flutter. I can’t even play it cool. I’m pure want. Pure need and judging by the heat in his gaze, he’s right there with me.

Kellin stands up and lifts me into his arms, my legs wrapping around his waist, but instead of kissing me the way I expect him to, he just holds me close, watching me intently.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispers reverently and then his mouth dips to mine, his teeth clamping down on my bottom lip, sucking it into his mouth before he does the same with my top lip. He smiles against me when I whimper as he moves to capture the sound in a searing kiss. Kellin’s hands glide up my back, under my blouse, his fingers caressing the bony prominences of my spine. “So soft,” he murmurs against me, and I moan, arching and grinding against him, unable to get close enough. “I love your skin.”

I realize now just how much I need this. How empty I’ve been feeling for so long. How alone and lost and unconnected.

“Please,” I beg, unsure of what I’m asking him or maybe just too terrified to verbalize it. He doesn’t demand an explanation for my plea. He takes it as a directive, laying me down on the couch before he covers my body with his, our lips never parting.

He’s kissing me like he’s starving for me.

Like I’m the air he needs to breathe.

We’re frantic. Pulling at each other’s clothes, my fingers tugging on his shirt, desperate to take it off. His hands working on mine with equal ferocity.

My tee comes up and over my head, his eyes at half-mast feasting on my breasts, every dip and curve and swell of my skin. He reaches back behind his head, grasping his collar and tugging his shirt over his head the way only guys can do. I reach out, hungry to touch the corded muscles and hard ridges of his chest, abs, and shoulders.

I knew he was built. Anyone who looks at the man can see that, but I had no idea he would be this perfect.

Before I can fully explore him the way I'd like, his hands cup my breasts, squeezing and rolling his thumbs over my nipples through the fine lace of my bra. My eyes close as my lips part on a silent moan. "Does that feel good?" I can only nod. My breasts have always been sensitive, my nipples especially so. "So fucking beautiful," he breathes. "Your skin is turning the most perfect shade of rose." He continues to tease me, torture me until he rips the cup of my bra down, exposing me to him. "The most beautiful woman I've ever seen," he groans, the sound desperate.

His mouth descends and takes my peaked bud into his mouth, nipping at it before flicking it with his tongue. I cry out, my back bowing, my hands flying up to tug on his hair, forcing his head to stay exactly where I need it to.

He chuckles against me, eliciting a wave of chills to erupt across my skin.

I'm close already.

It's been too long since I've been touched by a man who gave a shit about what he was doing. Random, meaningless encounters with random meaningless men haven't exactly led to the pleasure of my life.

My body hums, the sensations taking over are the sweetest torture. Kellin's hand glides down the expanse of my stomach until he reaches the edge of my leggings. I can't take it, it's almost too much. I feel everything. His mouth on my nipples, his hand slipping inside my pants. The warmth of his body covering mine. His delicious weight pressing into me.

"Yes," I breathe, and he moans against me.

His fingers reach the thin lace of my panties, rub against my throbbing clit over the material before tugging it to the side and slipping a finger inside. My head swims as stars dance behind my eyes. I whimper, my fingers digging tighter into his hair as he slides another finger in, pumping them in and out of me at a slow pace.

“More. Please, I need more.”

“Tell me what you need,” he purrs, his eyes bouncing back and forth between mine and his fingers sliding in and out of my pussy.

“Make me come.”

He grins, speeding up his pace just as his thumb presses into my clit, rubbing it in tandem with the motion of his fingers. “Like that?”

“Yes,” I cry out. “God, just like that, Kellin. Don’t stop. I’m so close.”

“Fuck, you’re so sexy. Look at you. Come for me, baby. Come all over my fingers so I can lick your sweet pussy off them.”

And that’s it. His dirty words push me over the edge. I come. I come so hard, stars dance behind my eyes as I scream out his name over and over again.

“Jesus,” he says against me. “You’re incredible. *That* was incredible.” I nod. I can’t speak, but it was everything he just said and so much more. “You’re so damn responsive to my touch.” I open my eyes and he’s grinning down on me like a boy tearing open presents on Christmas morning. His gaze holds mine as he slips his fingers into his mouth, sucking me off them just as he said he would. “Mmmm. That’s going to be so much fun to explore.”

Reaching up, I grasp the back of his head, yanking his mouth back down to mine, tasting myself on his lips and tongue.

I need more of him and I need it now.

He kisses me with reckless abandon, our tongues thrashing wildly, our hands exploring everywhere they can go. My leggings hit the floor, followed by his jeans. Kellin dips his fingers into the thin sides of my thong before he ever so slowly slides it down my legs.

Then he stops, his eyes roaming over me, starting at my toes and deliberately making his way up until he reaches my eyes. I've never felt this before. This wanted by a man. This desired.

“Here or bed?”

“Bed.”

He nods like he agrees and sweeps me up into his arms, carrying my naked body across my apartment into my bedroom. He sets me down, before he sweeps my legs open, drops to his knees, and buries his face in my pussy.

His mouth claims my flesh, licking, sucking, and nipping. Sounds I never knew I was capable of exploding from my mouth, my nails scratching into the flesh of his shoulders and through his scalp. I don't care and judging by the groans of pleasure radiating from him, neither does he.

“So goddamn sweet,” he rasps against me, blowing his hot breath on my heated skin, over my most sensitive parts. “I could do this all night.” My back hits my bed, my eyes closing as I absorb every sensation as it rushes through me. “I'm going to fuck you with my mouth and after this sweet pussy comes on my tongue, I'm going to spend the rest of the night buried inside of you.”

“Now,” I moan. “I need you inside of me now.”

He shakes his head, his blue eyes twin pools of molten fire. “Not yet, baby. I want you to come again first.” My nerve endings ignite, every synapse firing at once as he takes my clit into his mouth and sucks so hard, my eyes roll back in my head.

His tongue thrusts inside of me, licking at my wetness while his thumbs spread me apart, playing with my clit. My

legs wrap around his shoulders, my body writhing against him, seeking as much of his touch as I can.

It doesn't take long. Much like before, I'm too wound up to hold off for long. I come violently, grinding against his face and probably suffocating him as I ride out the waves of my orgasm.

Kellin climbs up my body, placing wet, open-mouthed kisses as he goes. His lips meet mine and instead of more out of control all-consuming kisses, he's languid and tender, like he has all the time in the world just to kiss me.

I know in this moment that I'm in trouble and he's not even inside of me yet.

I feel exposed. So very vulnerable, but instead of that making me want to stop, it's driving me forward, and I can't even understand how.

"Are you sure?" he asks, as if sensing something stir in me. My eyes meet his and I nod. "You have to tell me, Alanna. Tell me what you want."

"You," I say and internally die a little. God, my chest hurts. *Don't hurt me, Kellin. I can't take it. I won't survive it.*

I begin to tremble, and he wraps his arms around me, kissing my neck, my cheeks, my eyes. "We don't have to."

"I want to," I gasp. "Please. I've never wanted anything so much in my life. I'm just scared," I admit.

I expect him to get up and leave. I expect him to stare at me like I'm crazy or laugh it off. I expect any number of scenarios, but I don't expect him to stare intently into my eyes and say, "Me too. You scare the shit out of me. Being with you is terrifying because all I seem to want is more."

Something happens to me when he says that. An inner strength and desire I wasn't sure I possessed anymore when it comes to men. I push Kellin onto his back, moving down his perfect torso with my mouth and hands, his muscles contracting beneath my touch as I go. He smells like masculine body wash and some sort of cologne that I can't get enough of.



I slide his boxer briefs to the floor and take in the incredible sight before me.

He's big and hard and waiting for me, his eyes blazing as they bore into mine.

And when my mouth wraps around his cock, taking it in as deep as I can go, he lets out a guttural moan, those beautiful eyes closing momentarily before they reopen. He wants to watch me and that fills me with a power I've never experienced before.

It's heady. It's a high. It's fucking fantastic.

"Condom," he rasps. "In my jeans." My lips and tongue slide up his length, releasing him with a wet pop. I climb off him just long enough to find one before I scurry back onto his lap, straddling his thighs. Opening the condom with my teeth, I roll it on him as he chuckles at the determination on my face. "Hey, this is not my particular field of expertise."

"Could have fooled me with the way you sucked me down the back of your throat."

I cock an eyebrow at him and he grins, light and playful but so full of desire it makes my heart pound.

Once I get it on, he tugs my hands, pulling my body against him, and then he rolls us over so that he's on top of me, our eyes locked as he slides inside of me with one hard thrust.

"Oh god," I moan, closing my eyes because it's too intense not to.

"Open your eyes," he commands. "I want to watch you. I want to see what you look like when you come with me inside of you."

He begins to move, sliding in and out of me, each drive in going deeper, pushing me a little harder. It's so good, it's impossible to continue to look at him. Grasping the underside of my thigh, he brings my leg up, resting my calf on his shoulder. Then he pushes in again, the angle forcing my head back as I cry out, scratching at his shoulders.

It's mind-blowing. It's intoxicating. It's everything I never knew I was missing.

One hand presses into the mattress, the other reaches under me, cupping my ass and squeezing me as he lifts me up, pumping in and out of me at a faster pace. Skin slapping against skin, the bed banging into the wall as he plows into me.

It's primal, the way he's fucking me.

Harder and harder, over and over again. Sweat slicks his temples, his eyes ravenous and feral, locked on mine.

He growls, reaching down and twisting my nipple before sliding his hand farther down and finding my clit. He starts to rub me in perfect circles until I can't make sense of anything other than the building of my orgasm.

"Fuck, Alanna. Jesus. So tight. You're so fucking tight. The way your pussy grips me, baby. You feel too good. I'm getting so close."

Pulling back he climbs off the end of the bed, standing up and sliding me down to the edge before he slams back into me. His hips piston faster into me, slapping my tits as he continues to rub my clit.

And that's it. I detonate. Splintering off into a million pieces as my orgasm hits me with a vengeance. He yells, cursing out and muttering my name as he follows me over the edge, pounding into me until there's nothing left of either of us.

He collapses onto me, breathing impossibly hard against my chest. He lets out a small breathless chuckle, the smile lingering on his face.

"I think I blacked out there for a second."

I giggle, running my fingers through his slightly damp hair. "Me too. I'm really glad I went with option one."

He chuckles, pinching my nipple and making me yelp. I smack the back of his head and he laughs harder, lifting himself up and staring down at me. "Don't move."

“I won’t,” I promise, smiling stupidly at his feigned serious expression.

Kellin rolls off me to dispose of the condom and is back in a flash, wrapping his arms around me and pulling me into his strong warm chest.

“Can I stay tonight?” he asks softly, kissing my neck. “I can’t guarantee we’ll sleep much if I do though.”

“I’m used to not sleeping much, so yes. Stay,” I whisper, my voice suddenly soft. Because that last word. Stay. I think that just turned into a wish I know can never come true.

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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## Kellin

As I walk across the embossed gray and white seal of the Central Intelligence Agency, I get that same buzz in my bones as I did the first day I entered this building so many years ago. Only this time, I'm not here as a rookie agent, eager for my first assignment and desperate to rid the world of those who threaten the safety of my country.

This time I'm here for a conversation I'm not particularly looking forward to.

Mandi and I have been going over a lot of different intel and we've discovered who the texts were coming from.

All of the texts including the third unknown person.

It's enough to bring me in here today. It's enough to shake up a lot of shit, not only for our agency but for our government and country.

My phone vibrates in my pocket and my thoughts instantly fly to Alanna, though it's unlikely that it's her. Last night with her was everything. And I don't just mean the sex, though that was fucking phenomenal.

I mean...she was everything.

This past week with her has been everything.

And now here I am, walking into CIA headquarters, and she knows nothing of this. Nothing about me or what I really do. She believes the lie, because why wouldn't she.

And I don't know what to do about that.

About her.

Sliding my phone out, I check it and find it's Gavin, Emma's boyfriend and the man who took down Antoine Badeaux. Working with assassins for hire, like Gavin, isn't what we do often. But I knew him in the Army, and truth be told, I wanted not only his input, but his approval on this.

***Gavin: Feel free to disclose whatever intel is necessary. I'm fine either way. And if you'd like me to do some under the radar digging of my own, let me know. I'm happy to help after all you did for Emma. I owe you one.***

***Me: Actually, I think we're even now, but I wouldn't mind some extra help on this. You have methods and ways that I don't, and with this case, I'm going to need all I can get.***

***Gavin: You got it. And Emma just hit me because I didn't extend her own personal gratitude, but she says she owes you a big, sloppy kiss next time she sees you.***

I chuckle under my breath, rubbing a hand over my smile.

***Me: Tell her I'll happily collect.***

***Gavin: Fucker***

I grin, sliding my phone back into my pocket and readying myself for what I know I'm about to face. Tom gave me time off, telling me to return when I was ready to talk. But as I stand here, I have to wonder if I am.

Between Charlie, Mandi, and I, we dug up some rather ugly shit.

Turns out the man I shot and killed back in the safe house in Las Vegas worked for Christopher Asher. His job was to eliminate me and recover the cell phone belonging to Francois Badeaux. Only, that didn't happen, did it? I killed the man before he even had the chance.

That evidently sent Chris into a tailspin of panic. My whereabouts were unknown. The phone, not in his possession. A mile-long dirty trail leading directly back to him, two international drug and arms traffickers and...a United States senator as our third party.

“Kellin,” Tom says, reaching out and shaking my hand. “It’s good to see you again. I didn’t think it would be this soon, but I’m glad it is. How are you healing up?”

“Pretty good, sir. Glad to be back.”

Tom frowns, leading me to where the conference rooms are located. “It’s been a rough couple of months. Not that I have to tell you that. People are still having a hard time wrapping their heads around what Chris did. Who he was all this time. All the lives of good operatives and innocent civilians that were lost at his hands.” He throws me a sideways glance as we enter a boardroom and I take a seat. “I suspect you have more to tell me on this.”

“Will the entire proceedings be recorded, sir?”

Tom nods his head as this is standard protocol for debriefings.

“Given recent events and the intel I have to share, I’d prefer this conversation off the record. At least initially.”

That’s when the door opens and Mandi Milostan enters, taking a seat beside me and offering me a warm smile. “Tom, I’m in agreement with Kellin on this. At least for now. You’re not going to like what we’re about to tell you.”

I look to Tom, who gives me a slim nod and then back over to Mandi. “I will discuss all the particulars of my Las Vegas mission if you need more than what I gave you initially, but what I have to tell you prior to that goes beyond Christopher Asher. It’s the reason I was shot in the safe house in Vegas and why one of Mazir’s men was found shot and killed in that same safe house.”

Mandi and Tom exchange stoic looks, and then Tom says, “This conversation shall remain between the three of us at this point. Any further conversations that require us involving Dean Tubb, who is now the acting director, or any other agents will be taken with the upmost consideration and discussed once again between the three of us prior to any action being taken. That said, I think Dean is going to want all the intel we have on this. He’s the one who broke the code and figured out

that Asher was Mazir. It's taken us months of digging and searching to get everyone we think was involved. Are there more? Possibly. Which is why we're going to keep this close."

"Agreed," Mandi states clearly, swiveling in her chair so that she can face me better.

I lean back in my seat, allowing myself to fall into a more comfortable position than I typically would during a debriefing. I take in a deep breath, thinking through everything that's happened in the last four months. All that's happened in the last week even.

Part of me wishes Charlie were here, but she made it clear she's out and I respect that.

"After Francois Badeaux was killed, his personal cell phone was recovered along with the ability to unlock it."

Tom's eyes widen, but he's smart enough not to ask how the cell or the passcode were obtained. Mandi didn't ask either, and though Gavin said that he doesn't mind if I share his place in this, I have no plans to. I will not tell them about Emma or Gavin. Ever.

The CIA has been interested in Emma for years. In her connection to Antoine and Francois Badeaux. To Samuel Blackbourne. Emma, though far from an innocent, does not need the agency breathing down her neck. She's done with that world and I will ensure it stays that way.

As far as the CIA is concerned, I killed Francois Badeaux and Daniel, the agent who came and saved my ass from the safe house, killed Antoine Badeaux. Both of their bodies were disposed of and that's the end of that.

"In searching through the phone, I came upon a three-way chat between Mazir, who we know to be Christopher Asher, Francois Badeaux, and...a United States senator." Tom blows out a heavy breath, rocking back in his chair. He knows exactly what this means. The implications behind it. So does Mandi, which is why this conversation is staying between us for now.

It's why I was nearly killed four months ago.



“A senator?”

“Yes. An influential one.”

“What were their conversations about?” Mandi asks, her voice strong. I never got into the details with her. I was testing the waters when I told her about it. I wanted her to do some digging and digging she did. She discovered who the number belonging to the third person was. How the burner phone—which are often untraceable, though not in this case—was purchased.

And that was all we needed to uncover this.

“It appears they were all partners in the trafficking of illegal drugs and arms, both in the United States and to the Middle East. They were also laundering the money obtained through such deals. The senator was involved in ensuring that the products made it to US borders without being stopped. He also helped funnel them to Mazir’s asset in Afghanistan, calling the crates and shipments ‘aid’. That is one way some of the money, at least on the American side, was funneled and cleaned. It was done through a charity created by the senator that helps women and children in areas devastated by war and famine. This ‘aid’ was even, on occasion, hand-delivered by US troops who didn’t know better. All three parties were making an untold fortune, knocking out anyone who got too close or too curious.”

“Were either Francois Badeaux or this senator aware of who Mazir actually was?” Tom asks.

I shake my head. “It does not appear so. Only first initials of last names were used, but after reading through the chat a few times, it became very obvious that we were dealing with Mazir. It took a lot more digging to uncover the senator. Chris obviously could not make his true identity known, and for primary access to the United States, he involved the senator. An easy enough patsy since it’s his charity and he’s a far more public face. The senator could go down if any of this illegal business was discovered without implicating Chris. We had already been on an unsuccessful hunt for Mazir, so this changed nothing for him.”

“Right,” Mandi murmurs thoughtfully, bouncing a pen softly against her bottom lip as she thinks all this through. “So now there is no more Mazir and no more Antoine or Francois Badeaux. Or even Samuel Blackbourne to pick up the slack and continue distributions of arms. And drugs too?”

“Yes. Cocaine mostly, but heroin as well.”

Tom whistles through his teeth. “And with the aid of the senator, none of the shipments that touched our borders were screened?”

“No. It appears the senator was involved on the US front and Mazir kept himself to Afghanistan and the Middle East side of things to continue to throw people off his identity.”

“But now the senator is out of partners.”

“Exactly,” I agree, looking over at Mandi. “But that doesn’t mean he isn’t holding on to several crates worth millions of dollars just waiting to be sold and traded.”

“So now he has illegal drugs and arms sitting on US soil, attached to his name since he’s calling it aid and placing it through charity, with no way to move them,” Tom surmises.

“Not exactly.” And this is where things are just snowballing out of control in the last forty-eight hours. “He’s gone the private route. He’s just hired a security company to help move his ‘aid’ shipments out to the Middle East, directly into the hands of terrorists. More directly, Mazir’s Afghanistan asset, who we still have not been able to identify or take out.”

“Jesus,” Tom whispers, shifting in his seat. “And your positive it’s a United States senator? You’re positive on all this?”

“Yup. It took a lot of digging since Asher shut down the three-way chat the moment I sent him the text from the safe house in Vegas informing him I had Francois Badeaux’s phone and had found the chat. But it seems our senator is not as cautious as he previously was. He’s used his personal credit card to purchase the cell phone, though he put it in a dummy name. That’s how we discovered the senator. I’m assuming he’s panicked, now that his comrades are dead. The last thing

he wants is his name tied to this and his extensive role made public. It's likely why he's hired on a private firm to handle the transfer."

"Who?" he pushes. "I need a name, Kellin."

"Senator Gerald Beaumont from the great state of Georgia."

"He's the Senate majority leader," Tom growls on a cursed breath, shaking his head, and frowning the way he tends to do.

I nod.

I set Francois Badeaux's phone down on the table and both Mandi and Tom lock in on it.

"It's not enough," Mandi states. "A phone and some conversations are not enough. Not even the credit card he used to purchase the phone. He can brush that off easily enough and say his card was stolen or that he was simply transporting aid for charity and had no knowledge of anything else. Plausible deniability. The man is a senator, after all. How often do they deal with the nitty-gritty? We need to catch him in the act of trying to get the goods out of the country. We need more proof of all his illegal doings. Emails. A money trail. Photos. Anything. Who is this company he's hired?"

I smirk at Mandi. "Cole Security Forces."

Mandi sucks in a rush of air. "You've got to be kidding me with this? You know that's who—"

"Mark Dixon, Charlie's new husband works for? The company Charlie herself now works for?" I interrupt. "Yes. I know. She and I have already spoken about it."

"Charlie's out," Tom says. "She retired immediately after she and Mark were attacked in a safe house by Chris' son, Erik, who worked for fucking Cole Security Forces. This is insane. Do you think that's why the senator hired them? Is he trying to bring the heat down on them next and tie off any loose ends there?"

"Don't know, sir. Charlie and Mark as well as the other co-owner, Jackson Cole, have been made aware of the situation

without the lengthy details.”

“Good,” Mandi breathes out. “We’re going to need Charlie on this. And Mark and Jackson, too. We need all of them if we’re going to nail the senator’s ass.”

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# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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## Kellin

I returned from DC yesterday after my meeting with Mandi and Tom. Virginia Beach, this small, otherwise sleepy little tourist town is turning into a hell of a lot more than I bargained for.

The fact that the senator picked Cole Security Forces is troubling to me.

Why them of all security teams? Yes, they are more than qualified. Yes, they are among the best out there.

They're also the company that was involved with Christopher Asher and his son Erik. Its employees are those who I have been speaking with. Who took down Asher himself.

It could all be a coincidence. I know this.

But nothing about this mission has been a coincidence, and it makes me wary.

Is the senator on to me? Did Asher tip him off that I was in possession of the cell phone containing his conversations? That we've since been able to link him directly to that? Is he trying to take down the rest of the people involved?

At the same time, despite the growing mission and the uncertainty surrounding it, I'm relieved to be back here. I couldn't drive fast enough yesterday, and neither the mission nor Cole Security are the reason. The moment I returned, I went straight up to floor five, apartment D, bypassing my sister's floor and apartment altogether.

Alanna.

She was all I could think about.

She is my siren's call, and I was powerless to resist her pull. By the time I knocked on her door, she was asleep. Rumpled and sexy when she opened the door. I kissed the hell out of her and then put her right back to bed.

After she fell asleep, I stayed up, researching Gerald Beaumont's public persona. The one he shows Washington and his voters.

There isn't much.

The man is careful.

A daughter who is married to the son of a newly appointed Supreme Court Justice. A wife who looks like well-injected candy on his arm. A squeaky-clean record. A man who always follows party lines because he believes in them and is respected for doing so.

So how did this man, this totally clean, conservative, family man get involved with Antoine and Francois Badeaux as well as Mazir?

Is it blackmail? Did they have something on him that no one else does?

Is that why he's so hastily trying to get rid of his shipment?

Or is he the ultimate wolf in sheep's clothing?

Per the conversations on Francois' phone, they had been at this for years. Feeding terrorist organizations throughout the world, especially in the Middle East. They accrued quite the body count. Earned god only knows how many millions of dollars—yet another thing I haven't been able to locate. But it's a bit too late now to try to shut down your business and remain unscathed.

So the question poking at the fires in my head...did he have any idea as to Mazir's true identity? My gut is telling me no on that last one, but with a Supreme Court Justice in his pocket and enough pull in the White House and in the Senate, who knows.

Maybe he's just that sort of arrogant prick, believing he's untouchable.

That's what this mission is for me. A way to shut it all down. To close it out. To bring the last asshole standing to justice any way that turns out. Dead or alive, I don't care.

As long as it's at my hands.

I want vengeance.

And after that? Well, that part I'm unsure of.

To the outside world, I am Kellin Shaw, geeky cybersecurity consultant. One that was just hired by Cole Security Forces to ensure their systems are up to date. Protected. After all, they've had some issues in the past with security, though none of that was cyber-related and it was all an inside job.

Once again relating back to Mazir.

Between all that Cole Security endured with him personally and professionally, I have to imagine they're just as anxious to take down this senator as I am.

They certainly don't want him using their business to continue to feed this crime cycle they were directly caught in the middle of.

Alanna is still asleep beside me. As promised, I kept her up late and though neither of us got much sleep, old habits die hard and I woke with the sun. And since then, I've been watching her. Thinking about what it means to get involved with a woman like her while on the biggest mission of my career.

My phone vibrates and I slip out of bed, picking it up as I enter the living room wearing only my boxer briefs. "Mandi," I answer.

"I just received word that Senator Beaumont is going to be heading into Virginia Beach on Tuesday. He's set up a meeting at fifteen hundred with Jackson Cole and Mark Dixon."

"That's less than a week from now. Almost a week earlier than we expected him."



“Yes,” she agrees.

“Did he comment on the change?”

“No, but I’d be willing to bet he’s getting antsy. There is only so long you can have crates of arms and drugs sitting on a US loading dock without people starting to ask questions. That and we’ve been seeing an increase in cell activity in the region where the drop is expected. If the handler Mazir was using is growing impatient, who knows what their next steps will be. Just because Mazir is no longer running things, that doesn’t mean that terrorist cell dies. If anything, it grows.”

“Agreed. Do we know who he’s paying off to hold on to his shipment or keep customs and the Coast Guard out of it?”

“I’m assuming some dock manager somewhere though there is no money trail or location I can find yet. For all we know, this shipment he last spoke of in that text chat is gone and his arranging something with Cole Security Forces is to feel out what they know about him personally. I’m honestly not sure. But if the senator has offshore accounts, which I’m sure he does, he hides them well.”

I nod, staring into the tank in the middle of the large floor to ceiling bookshelf, Walter, the small turtle is munching on some lettuce. I grin, looking at him. I like that Alanna and Kayleigh have a friendship. That they saved this little guy together. It’s a strange connection, but I can’t find it in me to regret anything that’s happening with Alanna.

“Okay. I’ll meet with Charlie tomorrow at zero-nine-hundred and go from there. Let me know if anything changes, but I think it would be smart to get a crew together for an ops. There is no way we cannot have boots on the ground if the cell in Afghanistan is increasing in activity.”

“Tom already mentioned something about that. We’ll set up a call for Tuesday after the meeting at Cole with the senator. It’ll likely have to include team members from Cole since you won’t be able to be in the room.”

“I can ask them if we can set up video and audio in the conference room. The less we have to involve the members of

Cole Security Forces, the better. They've already been through enough and we don't know what the senator is capable of."

"I think that would work," Mandi agrees.

I hear the bedroom door open and I finish my call quickly. By the time I turn around, Alanna is standing there wearing a sheer white tank top and a thong. Her long, dark hair is sleep-mussed, her cheeks are rosy, and I don't think I've ever seen a sexier sight in my life.

"Hey," I say, devouring her with my eyes as I stalk across her living room like the fucking predator she makes me. "I'd say sorry if I woke you, but if this is how you look when you get out of bed in the morning, I might have to wake you up every day just so I can enjoy the view."

I reach her, wrapping my arms around her waist, my hands squeezing her glorious bare ass. Her arms encircle my neck, pulling me in for a kiss and god, I think I like everything about this woman. She has already turned me into an addict. I have no idea how I'll survive without a fix once this mission ends and I move back to DC or go wherever it is I'm headed to next.

Yet another reason I'm pissed about the senator upping the schedule.

I don't have much time with a woman I want nothing but time with.

Lifting her up into my arms, her ankles cross over my lower back and I carry her to the kitchen counter because the bedroom is just too far away. I set her down, watching her shudder against the cold stone, then I part her thighs, move her pretty thong to the side, and kiss her glistening pussy.

She makes that humming sound I love so much in the back of her throat as I lick her, flicking my tongue in her opening and savoring her taste before I suck her clit into my mouth. She throws her head back, her hands raking through my hair, strumming the strands.

"You're my new favorite breakfast," I groan into her, unable to get enough. I eat her like a starving man being

offered his favorite dish to feast on.

“Kellin,” she whispers, her voice ragged as I slide two fingers inside her soaking heat, angling them to hit her spot. She loves this. It drives her wild. Her legs capture my head, holding me in place as her pussy rocks against my face, fucking me as I fuck her with my tongue and fingers.

Her grip tightens in my hair and seconds later, she comes hard and wet and so fucking good, I can hardly think past the want I have for her. She sags against the counter, yanking my hair up until her mouth meets mine in a hungry kiss. Her tongue dives in, tasting herself, and I meet her fervor with equal ardor.

Before I even know what the hell I’m doing, I lift her off the counter and cover her body with mine on the floor. It’s hard and unrelenting, but I can’t stop, and she doesn’t seem to care.

“Alanna,” I growl into her lips, kissing her like the crazed beast she makes me. “Fuck me, baby. Climb on top and ride me until you come all over me.”

She makes quick work of my briefs and I make quick work of her thong and tank top, and in the next second, I’m inside her, her body on top of mine.

She bounces up and down, rocking back and forth, almost as if she’s testing the feel of me. But she’s so tight. And so warm. And so wet. And *fuuuck*, she feels so good.

My hands grasp her ass, lifting her up before slamming her back down. Hard. She yelps out, but that’s not where I end. I set a punishing rhythm. An unrelenting pace. Thrusting up into her over and over again.

Her hands climb into her hair, lifting the long strands up as she rides me with gusto. Her tits bounce all around and I reach up, squeezing at one before sitting up and taking her nipple into my mouth and sucking it hard. “Oh my God. Yes. That. I’m so close, Kellin. So close. Don’t stop.”

“You want it harder?”

“Please,” she whimpers as I drive into her, pleasure zapping up my spine the closer I get.

My fingers strum her clit, my other hand clutching her hip, guiding her until she’s a panting mess. Sweat slicks my forehead, my heart racing around in my chest as I press her against me, skin against skin.

My lips catch her bottom one. “Say my name, Alanna. When you come, I want my name on your lips. All over your dirty mind. Swimming in your every filthy fantasy.”

“Kellin. Kellin. Kellin. Yes!” She comes, fucking me with wild abandon, her cries reaching every corner and crevice of her apartment. I follow her over the edge, grunting and groaning as I spill everything I have into her.

We collapse back onto the floor, breathless and smiling. Sated and happy. My heart sinks like lead as I stare up into her eyes, so light, so pretty. I cup her jaw with my rough hand, holding her steady and forcing her gaze. “I’m not sure how long I have here.”

She frowns but nods all the same. “Then we’ll make the most of it.”

“You deserve better than that.”

“I know. But right now, all I seem to want is you.”

I lean in and kiss her lips. “How did this happen like this?”

She shakes her head against me, unable to answer the unanswerable.

“Can I stay until I have to go?”

“Yes. And even after that, you can find me and stay a little longer.”

*If only*, I think. *If only...*

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# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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## Alanna

“I’m sleeping with a man I have no future with,” I blurt out in the cafeteria right in the middle of the hospital lunchtime rush.

Billie gives me a sideways glance as she scoops a ridiculous amount of carrots onto her salad. Sometimes I swear the woman is half-rabbit. “Is he at least good in bed?”

“That’s what you have to ask me? If he’s good?”

“Wow.” She pauses to turn and scrutinize me. I get the full head-to-toe sweep before she nods her head and finishes making her salad. “So, he’s amazing, and you like him and now you have no idea what to do with yourself.”

I follow after her as she goes to pay. I’m not eating anything. My stomach is in knots, not just over Kellin, but I have my interview with MGH in a few hours and I’m nervous as hell. I talked with my boss and her boss and their bosses yesterday and they offered me a fellowship with the minimally invasive gynecologic surgery department. Plus, they offered me attending hours to continue my OB work. It’s seriously the best of both worlds for me.

But Boston...MGH...

I point the paper straw that’s sticking out of the lid of my soda at her. “I hate you.”

“Oh, shut it. You love me, which is why you tell me these sorts of things.”

She motions to a table in the back, and I nod because we definitely need privacy for this. Hospitals are filled with

gossip. Sick patients and gossip are what keeps this place running.

“No. I think I hate you.”

She rolls her dark eyes at me. “The only thing you hate is that I can read you better than the Pope can read the bible. So dish it girl and you better serve it up hot and steamy.” She bounces her eyebrows up and down suggestively.

I laugh, shaking my head and taking another sip of my soda to stall. “He’s transient and I have my interview with MGH later this afternoon. Liking him isn’t an option.”

“Is that why you’re sleeping with him?”

“That’s a low blow.”

“That’s what I hope you gave him. But no. You notoriously only sleep with vanilla men who pose no real threat to you or your impenetrable tower. And I rarely ever hear about them. But you’re telling me about this guy and doing so with a slightly crazed, bug-eyed thing going on, which tells me the sex is mind-blowing and you like him.”

“Why am I friends with you?”

“Because I tell you like it is and I’m always right? Come on. What’s going on?”

I stare down at the table, my fingers tapping aimlessly against the plastic. “I met him in college. We kissed at a frat party and he was set to be deployed overseas for the Army. Despite that, he wanted to spend his last twenty-four hours stateside with me.”

At Billie’s silence, I chance a glance up and find her eyes widened as she leans back slowly into her chair.

“You never mentioned him before.”

I shake my head, swallowing thickly past the frog clogging the back of my throat. “I um...I never saw him again after the frat party.”

“Why not?” she asks, her eyebrows scrunching together, but the worry on her face tells me she has an inkling about

what I'm about to say next.

"It was the night David showed up."

"Shit," she hisses, scrubbing her hands up and down her face and then over her head, removing her scrub cap as she goes and allowing it to fall beside her. She picks up her fork but hasn't taken a bite of her salad yet. "And you met this guy again? When?"

"Almost two weeks ago now."

"And you're crazy about him, but he doesn't live here in Virginia Beach, and you're possibly moving on to Boston."

"Yes. To all of that."

"For the first time in my life, I am unsure how to proceed. Do you date him while trying to initiate preventative therapy, knowing that with this course of treatment, there is a very real potential for him to metastasize in your head and your heart and eventually take over everything? Or, do you cut him out now and pray you got clean margins?"

"You're equating my sleeping with Kellin to treating cancer?" I push out incredulously.

"Yes." She nods emphatically. "What do you think men and love are? If everyone had the perfect happily ever after no one would have to read about it in books or watch it on television or sit in a shrink's office. Love can hurt, doll. It can kill if left unchecked. The question is, would you rather enjoy the moment, be with the guy, and risk the consequences knowing there is no future for you, or sever all ties so you don't get hurt?"

"Christ. Well when you put it like that..." I trail off with a grumble.

"I'm just being practical. He's obviously different. I just don't want to see you get hurt."

"I'm tired of running and hiding," I tell her, admitting something that has become so much a part of who I am I'm surprised I'm even able to utter the words.

"Then bring him out with us tonight when we celebrate."



I shake my head. “Carter is jumping the gun with this. The reality is, MGH isn’t going to offer me something on the spot.”

“Carter wouldn’t suggest dinner if he weren’t sure that’s exactly what they’re going to do.”

“I still haven’t decided what I want.”

“Then we’re going out to celebrate nearing the end of your residencies. Just enjoy it.”

“And you don’t think it’s weird to bring Kellin out with Carter?”

She hitches up a shoulder. “You told me Carter was cool with just being your friend. Besides, that guy parades around with women all the time. It’s not like the two of you ever dated. You had one conversation where he suggested he’d like more. Honestly, I think he’d be fine with it.”

“You just want to meet Kellin.”

“Um...” She takes a heaping bite of her salad before saying, “Damn skippy, I do,” through a mouthful of lettuce.

“I’ll think about it. I need to get home to prep for my interview.”

Billie and I say our goodbyes and I leave the hospital, heading for home so I can get ready for my interview. But it’s Billie’s words about Kellin that are occupying my mind in a vicious cycle.

It’s only been a short time with him and already I can tell what I’m risking. All my crap about protecting myself and how I won’t get hurt if I go in knowing it can’t lead to anything else is exactly that. Crap.

Whatever. For now, I’m not going to think too deeply on it. I’m going to take everything as it comes.

Smiling slightly to myself, I get out of my car, lock it up and just as I turn to walk toward my building, my phone rings in my purse. I fumble with my keys for a moment, tugging the black leather across my chest so I can fish through it for my

phone. And when I locate it, I freeze mid-step when I see who is calling me.

David. Again.

My heart thunders in my chest as I deliberate answering it or not.

This makes two calls in as many weeks. He won't stop and I need him to stop.

"Why are you calling me?" I spit into the phone, walking to the building so I can get inside. I don't like being out here all alone. I doubt David is here, but I feel vulnerable and exposed all the same.

The freaking hairs on the back of my neck stand up when he answers, "Because I've missed you, sweetheart."

Entering my apartment, I shut and lock the door, clicking the deadbolt into place. "You have so much fucking nerve calling me. Don't do it again."

"You didn't really think I'd let you go that long without talking to me, did you?"

"I'm going to call the police and file a restraining order."

He laughs. "I'd love for you to try. Besides, I'm nowhere near you. Not much that piece of paper can do. You change your number, and I find it. You move apartments, and I know. I know everything you do, Doctor. I told you that night, you're mine. It's only a matter of time."

He disconnects the call and I fall to the ground, the phone slipping through my fingers and hitting the wood floors with a dull thud. I never understood David's obsession with me, and I understand it even less now. Why won't he just let me go? I've lost everything. My family. My home. What more does he want from me?

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# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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# Alanna

## *Past...*

Tears stream down my face in an uncontrollable river as I cling helplessly against the door of the police cruiser, my body coiled in on itself. Everything hurts and not just my body. I always knew David had a darkness to him. Something deep-seated and ugly.

But I never expected he'd take it this far.

Never once thought his darkness would turn violent.

"We're here, Miss," the officer says softly, almost as if he's afraid of scaring me. Too late for that.

I blink open my eyes only to realize I'm at my parents' house and not campus. I had been so lost in thought I hadn't even realized. I sit upright, finding his reflection in the rearview mirror. "I asked you to take me back to my apartment," I accuse.

He doesn't reply. He just gets out of the car, opening up the door so I can step out. I do so warily, on shaky legs. I hadn't wanted my parents to know what happened to me tonight because I didn't want them to try to talk me out of pressing charges against David.

It will be a mess. My father's business. His connection to David's family.

But I don't care.

I refuse to allow David to get away with what he did to me tonight. With the things he did to my body and my soul. I've heard about other girls on campus who went through something similar. They never recovered. They left school or turned to drugs. They were publicly shamed.

The victim was made to look like the predator.

Like a liar and a slut.

Their integrity and personal character raked over the coals.

It's not for the faint of heart or the weak minded. But I won't allow someone like David to believe his actions have no consequences. That he can ruin me the way he did and still come out unscathed on the other side.

The officer leads me up the front steps of my parents' grand estate, but before we can reach the door, it opens with not only my parents standing there, but David and his parents behind them. I stop dead in my tracks, meeting my father's unforgiving gaze.

I shake my head at him. Hoping he sees me. His daughter. And not just his career and business ties and fucking bullshit that he's consistently placed before me.

David's face is downcast, likely trying to hide the black eye I gave him from the officer. I got in a good couple of swings. Fought him as best I could. It turned out to be enough, but just barely. David so very nearly overpowered me with his size and strength. If it hadn't been for the slamming of a car door at a neighboring house, and my desperate scream for help, he would have taken everything he could.

As it was, no one came to see what was going on. I'm not even sure whoever it was heard me. But the car was enough to scare David off and have him running, and for that alone, I'm grateful.

"Thank you very much, Officer," my father says to the man standing behind me. "I will be sure to let the chief know of your immeasurable assistance and service. He and I go way back, you know."

I want to roll my eyes. My father goes way back with everyone. It's how I ended up here instead of back on campus.

My father steps forward with his hand outstretched. An obvious wad of cash in his fist. He doesn't even try to hide it as he shakes hands with the officer who thanks him graciously before turning tail and fleeing the scene.

And for a moment, it's just us. Just me and my father out here on the vast porch filled with perfectly placed furniture. Perfect. My father tolerates little else.

The moment the officer is gone, David raises his head, his eyes locking on mine, impenetrable steel with a cocky smirk to go along with it.

It makes him look as evil as I now know him to be.

"Do you know what he did to me?" I ask, turning my focus back on my father.

"If we're going by the evidence, I'd say it appears my daughter was cheating on her fiancé with another man. Straddling his lap at a party and kissing him."

My breath stalls in my chest. It's like the man just sucker-punched me.

"Look at me, Daddy. Look at my face."

He doesn't. He ignores me completely, pushing on fast and furious. "It's obvious that when your fiancé came to confront you and this man, that the man attacked your fiancé who was merely trying to separate the woman he loves from this... *stranger*."

"Oh yeah?" I challenge, my ire growing by the second. "And what of my side of the story? What of the evidence that's sitting in the hospital as we speak?"

"I'm sorry to inform you, but there is no such evidence. There is no such hospital visit. No police report either. Your wounds were inflicted by the man you were straddling. No one else."

I shake my head. That doesn't even make any sense. How can he do this? How can he stand here, looking at me, and take

David's side?

I glance past my father, over to my mother who is staring at me as if I just interrupted her garden party by trudging mud through the house and spitting on all the tea sandwiches. I'm met with disgust and disdain.

David is watching me more as a casual observer, his still eyes cold and smug. His parents are wisely standing back and allowing my father to eviscerate me.

"Do you think that's going to stop me from coming forward?"

My father steps up to me, grasping my biceps and squeezing tightly in warning. His voice drops to a harsh growl. "Do not fuck with me, Alanna. I will not let you ruin everything I've built. You are going to put this nonsense behind you. You are going to apologize to David for going around with another man. You are going to accept his proposal and you are going to marry him."

A lone tear slides down my cheek. Because although I saw it all before, I never accepted it. In my mind, in my heart, I was still his daughter. One he should love above all else. The one he should fight for. But all those beautiful clothes and the expensive parties and schools were a show. A way for him to appear as the doting and adoring father.

I'm a pawn. A weapon. A way for him to secure billions more through an advantageous marriage.

"He attacked me. *He tried to rape me,*" I emphasize, my voice catching on the gruesome words.

My father dismisses that immediately. "If you cry wolf over nothing, Alanna, I'm sorry to say that the man whose lap you were straddling will take the fall." *Kellin. He'd destroy an innocent man to protect another who hurt his daughter?* "I have the pictures to prove it. And no one saw David. No one would dare question or challenge us. Our word against this stranger's. Because so help me, if you open you're lying mouth, I will make you pay. And it will hurt worse than the scrapes you have tonight. You can count on it."

“Do you not care at all?” I manage past my ravaged lungs that are trying desperately to keep up with the gasps of air that are pathetically making their way past my lips.

“What I care about is you upholding your family name. Is you not making baseless, factless accusations over a man when there is no evidence to support your claims.”

“Because you got rid of it!” I shriek, and I watch as my father’s face turns red, his grip on my arm bruising as he jerks me forward.

“Be careful now, daughter. I gave you everything and I can just as quickly take it away.”

“I hate you,” I seethe. “You and your whole twisted fucking world. I’m going to become a doctor. I’m going to live my own life away from all of you and your sickness that breeds like an infection. But most of all, I will never marry him.” I point to David without removing my gaze from my father. “And there is nothing you can do to make me.”

I yank my arm free, turn around, and walk off the porch. Out into the darkness of the cool fall night.

“Hey David,” I yell at the top of my lungs. “If you ever touch me again, I’ll kill you.”

I listen as my mother placatingly talks about how I’m just being overly emotional. How I just need time to cool off and then I’ll see the error of my ways.

I won’t. I’m done with them.

We’re miles from anything, but I don’t care.

A swell of freedom and determination surge through me.

I don’t need their money and I don’t need them.

My grandmother Contreras left me more than enough to get by on. I can finish college. I can pay for medical school. I can make my own life. One as far from their poison as possible.



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## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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# Alanna

## *Present Day...*

Somehow, I manage to make it through my entire interview without a hitch. I smile and appear enthusiastic. I laugh and chat animatedly about my profession. I express interest in their various departments and surgical offerings for OB-GYN. The position they have in mind for me is three days in out-patient, two days on the labor and delivery floor, with a twenty-four-hour shift every other week. It's pretty standard.

And just as Carter predicted, they offered me the position.

Right then and there on the phone.

Evidently the Fritzs have a lot of pull in that hospital system, and Carter told them I was the best, so that seemed to be it for them.

I told them I needed a couple of days to think about it, and when I hung up with them, I texted Carter to thank him. I debated not going out tonight to meet them, but I can't let David win. I can't let him know that he got to me.

But at the same time, I can't stop the images.

Hearing David's voice again rattled me more than I like to admit.

I should have known better than to pick up but ignoring him feels like a weakness. Not that anything I said made me feel particularly strong or brave. I still feel like he had the upper hand, and nothing infuriates me more.

After what he did to me, I told myself I wasn't going to let it affect me. In my mind, I forced David to be the exception, not the rule. Most men were not out to harm me.

I had sex, although not very often, and the first couple of times only after drinking a little to relax myself. I still went out and met men. Flirted with them and made myself as normal as a woman can be after something like that happens to them.

It wasn't easy. Some days it felt downright impossible. And I was one of the lucky ones.

But my life was exactly as Billie said. Vanilla.

I dated boring men who I knew could never threaten me. None of them challenged me. There was a little heat but no fire.

Until I saw Kellin again.

Kellin who was there the night all of this happened. Kellin, a man I hardly knew, but he somehow became mixed up in my family nightmare and their threats.

After I left my parents' house, I went back to the hospital. I asked to see the evidence that was collected. There was none, and the nurse and doctor who had performed the exam acted as though they had never seen me before. The officer who I spoke with was bought and paid off by my father right in front of me.

I asked if they could repeat the exam.

They refused. They had already scraped under my nails, so there was no evidence left there anyway and since there had been no rape, I had nothing except for some cuts and bruises that could have been inflicted by anyone.

I left, feeling hopeless, more alone and scared than ever before.

I had nothing to go on. I had lost the war before I could even fight the battle.

So, I turned my back on my parents. On David. I finished college and went on to medical school. And my parents let me. They all but wrote me off as their daughter.

But David never stopped.

He was always there, lurking in the shadows, creeping back into my mind just as I begin to forget about him. It's all about the power for him. I rejected him. Made him look the fool. And no one does that to David Weston.

The sound of the door knocking startles me out of my thoughts and I realize I've been standing here in the middle of my bedroom, soaking wet and wrapped in a towel, for far too long.

The knock happens again and a shot of adrenaline spikes through my blood. That is until I hear Carter's familiar voice. "Alanna? Are you in there?" Shaking myself out of my stupor, I run over to the door, peek through the hole and then open it up. "Hey," he says, taking me in with a furrowed brow. "Are you okay? I've been calling and texting you for over an hour."

I blink at him, a little stunned. "Yeah. Sorry. I um..." I glance down at myself and then back up to him. "Lost track of time, I guess."

"Did you get the text from Billie?"

I shake my head. "She got stuck in surgery and asked us to start without her, but then you never showed up at the restaurant. I got worried when I didn't hear back from you."

Christ. I'm a mess.

I grab Carter's arm and drag him in, shutting and locking the door behind him. "I'm so sorry, Carter. You went to all this trouble to set up everything for me. I didn't mean to blow you off. I showered and meant to get ready and then..." I shrug, shaking my head because I have no explanation I can give him. "How's this? I'm going to get some clothes on and then we'll order in some takeout and open a bottle of wine. I have some really good ones I've been saving, and this feels like the occasion to open them."

"Sure," he says cautiously, eyeing me carefully. "Are you sure you're okay?"

I nod, forcing a smile I'm starting to feel more of as the seconds progress. David called to rattle me, but he's not here.

He's nowhere close. Last I heard, he was living in California or something. Who cares?

"Yes. I'm good. Freezing, but good."

Carter cracks a smile. "Okay, I'll order us some food. Please go get dressed because I know we said friends, but you're still naked under that very small towel, and well, I'm still a guy who thinks you're hot."

I laugh, more of the tension slipping from my muscles with it. "Noted." I run off to my room, calling out, "I want Thai."

He groans. "You always want Thai."

"Fusion?" I call back, trying for a compromise. Carter is not the biggest fan of Thai food, but he loves sushi.

"Deal," I hear him yell as I shut the door and dig through my clothes. I pick up my phone and find about a dozen missed calls and texts from Carter and Billie. And a few from Kellin too. I shoot Billie a text to let her know I'm fine and that we've moved to my place for dinner. Then I read through Kellin's texts.

His say he should be getting back here around now and wanted to know how the interview went. I tap my fingers across the screen, deliberating my next moves. I never invited him to join us. But...

I throw on a long cream-colored sweater and a pair of black leggings and stick my head out my door. "Carter?"

He turns to face me, his phone up as he's likely looking over menus. "Yeah?"

"Would it bother you if I invited someone over tonight to eat with us? A male, non-doctor someone?"

He blinks at me, a little stunned, and then slowly shakes his head. "No. It's your place and your night." I raise an eyebrow and he laughs. "I mean it. I'm okay with it. If you're seeing someone new, I'd like to meet them."

"You really are the absolute best. You know that, right?"

He grins arrogantly. “Yes. I do know. Why do you think I’m such a good doctor?”

“And friend.”

Some of his smile slips, but he holds my eyes as he says, “And friend. Always.”

I send Kellin a text, inviting him over for dinner with my friends, and then I finish getting ready. By the time I step out of my bedroom, there is yet another knock on my door. When I open it, I find Billie there, standing beside Kellin who is fighting back a smile.

“If this isn’t Kellin, then I call dibs on the random hot dude at your door,” Billie states, and I can’t stop the bubble of laughter as it flows past my lips. “I haven’t actually introduced myself to him, but that’s only because I haven’t stopped staring.” She walks in, giving me a hug and whispering in my ear, “That’s him, right?” I nod, glancing over at Kellin who is chuckling under his breath. “Dammit. I should have known. The hot ones always go for you.”

“Not Leo.”

She pins me with a death stare. “Do not mention Dr. Rogers in my presence. That prick is the reason I got stuck in surgery tonight and was late. Though it seems I’m not the only one who missed your big celebratory dinner.” Billie cocks an eyebrow at me, and I shake my head, my expression telling her not now.

Billie walks in Carter’s direction who is still staring at his phone, seemingly lost in indecision. She hops up on the counter beside him, snatching the device out of his hand. He yells at her and the two of them start to go at it.

I turn my back on them, facing Kellin. “Hi,” I say, taking him in. Billie’s right, he looks pretty damn dreamy at the moment. Light-blue button-up shirt that makes the blue in his eyes pop, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. Dark jeans and black Vans. His blond hair is tousled in just such a way that I want to dive my fingers into it as I kiss him senseless.

“Hi.” He steps in, placing a soft kiss on the corner of my lips, the scent of his cologne and the heat of his skin shooting zaps of electricity across my skin. “Congratulations on your new position. MGH is very lucky to have you.”

“Thank you. I haven’t decided yet if I’m staying or going though. And thank you for coming despite the crowd.”

He grins. “Your friend is intense.”

“That’s one word for her.”

“I heard that,” Billie yells out before turning to Carter who is taking it upon himself to dig through my wine collection. “Would you call me intense?”

Carter snorts out a laugh. “I’d call you crazy if I didn’t think you’d come after me with a scalpel.” He finds a bottle he likes and holds it up for my approval. I nod my head and he sets it down on the counter. “Hey, man. I’m Carter Fritz. Friend and colleague of Alanna’s.”

“Kellin Shaw. Nice to meet you.” The two shake hands.

“Glad you could make it to our little party. If Billie lets you have a look, check out the menu on the screen. I’m fucking starving.”

“Is that why you’re being a cranky bitch?” Billie calls out, swinging her legs over the edge of the counter. “Or is it for another reason?” I glare at Billie who is starting shit she should know better than to start.

Carter meets my eyes, and for a flicker of a second, I think I catch a hint of sadness in there before it’s just as quickly gone, and he winks at me. “Alanna almost made me order Thai,” he grouses. “You know how I get about Thai food.”

“Hey,” I smart. “I compromised with fusion. Now order it up because I’m starving too, and if we’re going to not scare Kellin off, then I think it’s best if we all start drinking now.”

“Come on, man,” Carter says, slapping Kellin on the shoulder and tossing his arm around him like they’ve been friends for years. “It’s nice having some more testosterone

around. I may work with women and love women but spend an hour with these two and you'll know what I mean.”

Kellin twists his head over his shoulder and finds my eyes. He throws me a wink and a sexy smirk before Carter drags his attention away.

And all I can think is, stop it heart. Don't do this to me. Stop beating extra hard when he enters a room and stop going berserk when he gives me that panty-melting smile. Just stop it altogether. Because nothing good can come of falling for Kellin Shaw. And the longer you indulge in him, the deeper he weaves himself in. And there is no surgery or treatment for that.



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# CHAPTER NINETEEN

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## Kellin

“I like your friends,” I tell Alanna as we’re lying in bed together, my fingers trailing along her spine.

“Really?” she laughs the word in a slightly sleepy tone. “They didn’t scare you off? Billie can be...intense.”

“That’s one word for her,” I say with a wink, throwing Alanna’s words from earlier back at her as I think about the blunt and sarcastic, but amazing black woman. She’s staggeringly honest, and I’d be lying if I said that was something I have experience with. “She seems to really love you.”

“I’ve known her since our first day of medical school. We clicked instantly. She’s my family. The only one I have.”

Something in her voice draws me up short. We haven’t talked a whole lot about our pasts or our family lives yet. I wouldn’t say I’m avoiding it, but it’s obvious we haven’t gotten too deep or too personal. It feels wrong to think what’s the point. The more time I spend with her, the more aware I am of how much I like her.

How easily I could fall head over heels for her.

Maybe it was getting shot, staring death directly in the eyes, and coming out on the other side. But I’m starting to want things I’ve never cared much about before. I’m starting to want a future with someone and staring into Alanna’s stunning hazel eyes has me thinking it’s her.

That she’s the one I never knew I always wanted.

The problem is, in my field, you don't tell someone who you are unless you're all in with them. You lie and cover and dodge truths. More times than not, the other person can't handle coming in second to your job. Understanding that your loved one might not come home on any given day is no small thing to manage. It's a big ask. Many couples don't make it or end in divorce.

And until now, I never had a moment's hesitation about it.

I dated sporadically and never seriously. I slept with women who were just as invested in this work as I am. It was safer that way. No commitment. No attachments. One hundred percent focus on the mission at hand.

But I want Alanna to know me. And I want to know her.

Sucking in a breath, I ask, "Where are your parents?"

"Not part of my life anymore," she replies quickly. She rolls onto her back, dragging the sheet up her chest and I quickly pull it back down so I can run my fingers along her gorgeous breasts and sexy soft belly.

No hiding, my expression says.

"Kellin," she whispers my name on a hard swallow. "I feel like I need to tell you something. I feel like it's part of our story when I'm not even sure we have a story. Does that make sense?"

In a way, it does. We met years ago, though it was only for one night, but that doesn't mean I don't feel like I've been part of her life forever. It's only been two weeks and we're transient, but that message doesn't seem to be reaching either of us.

We dove into the deep end headfirst, and now we're trying to tread water without drowning.

I lean in and press my lips to hers. "I've wanted you since I first laid eyes on you that night. And seeing you again, nothing has changed. I still want you. I'm trying to play this cool. I'm trying to prevent either of us from getting hurt, but I don't know how to pull back where you're concerned."

Her eyes grow glassy as she says, “Me either.”

What happens when you meet the woman you know you’re meant to be with, and you can’t keep her? It’s not even like it’s too soon, because I meant everything I just told her. I had those thoughts the moment I laid eyes on her at that frat party nine years ago. She was an angel among the fray. She walked into that house and my eyes zeroed in.

They hung on and I felt... I’m not even sure what you’d call it.

A connection, maybe? I remember my chest squeezing so tight it was difficult to draw in air.

All I knew was that I had to meet her.

I had to talk to her. The moment she opened that sweet and sassy mouth of hers, I might have been a goner.

Just like that.

Now, I have no idea what to do other than hope for more of... *everything* with her. Knowing she can never be mine.

“You can tell me anything.” My knuckles graze her cheek as her expression grows grim. I kiss her lips, my thumb gliding under her eyes, catching a stray tear as it falls and clearing it away. “Alanna? What is it, baby?”

She shakes her head, unable or unwilling to tell me. It’s all over her face. I don’t know how to push her when I’m already holding so much back, but the expression on her face makes it so that I don’t care. I’m suddenly seeing red, ready to kill whoever the hell I have to kill.

“Is someone hurting you?” Because the fear in her eyes is unmistakable.

Her head rolls away from me, staring sightlessly up at the ceiling. She covers her chest with the sheet and this time I let her. But I don’t move away. If anything, I draw in closer.

Finally, she murmurs, “Not anymore.”

My fists clench so tight I can feel the blood draining from my hands. “When did they? And where the fuck are they

now?”

She blows out a silent breath and then twists back, locking on my eyes. “The night of the frat party.”

I shift onto my stomach, holding my weight up with my elbows as I cup her face in my hands. “Alanna?” My voice catches on her name as guilt slams into me. I knew something was different as we were walking back into the frat house. I assumed it was just hesitation at fooling around with a complete stranger and promising to spend the next twenty-four hours with them. She told me she had her car there and my cousin was pulling me into the house.

I didn’t walk her to her car. I didn’t make sure she got in it safely.

An inexcusable mistake I hate myself for now.

“He was standing there in the shadows, watching us.”

*Fuck!*

“Who?” She shakes her head in my hands, trying to pull away, but I force her back to me. “Babe, who?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“The hell it doesn’t. Tell me.” I pause, practically swallowing my tongue. “Did he...” I trail off. I can’t even finish the words.

“No,” she says, shrugging me off and sitting up, drawing her knees up to her chest and closing herself off. I sit up too, wrapping my hands around her slender calves, needing to hold her in any way she’ll let me. “He tried, but I fought him and finally a car door slamming on the street scared him off.”

“You knew him?”

She nods. “Yes. I knew him. He was the man my parents had promised me to since I was born. I was to marry him because his father is my father’s business partner. Or was. I don’t even know anymore. I walked away from my family that night because they sided with him. Had my hospital exam eliminated. Had my report to the police trashed too.” Her head tilts back, her eyes unfocused, staring out into her room. She

blows out a breath and shakes her head. “Kellin, they told me if I pressed the matter, they’d say it was you. They had pictures of me on your lap, kissing you. And no one other than me ever saw David.”

I’m up on my knees in an instant, grabbing her body and hauling her into my chest. I wrap my arms around her and hold her so close as she shakes and trembles. There’s more to this. I can feel it, but this isn’t the moment to press her.

She’s not a criminal I can interrogate. She’s a scared and perfect woman who I want to protect with every drop of my blood.

“That’s why you never met me at the diner the next morning.”

“That’s why,” she murmurs against my skin, her hands clutching the skin of my back. My chest clenches, just the way it did that first night when I saw her. Only this feels different. This is desperation tinted with a fiery rage.

“Have you seen him since?”

“No. But he’s called me.”

I draw back, holding her face once more and searching her eyes. “Recently?”

“This afternoon.” And just like that, I am making plans to hack Alanna’s phone records. Wrong? Absolutely. Will I actually do it? I...don’t know. No. I can’t. That’s unforgivable.

“Did he threaten you?”

She blusters out a sigh. “Sort of. He’s nowhere close. He even said so. He does this every year or so to make himself feel powerful or something. I don’t even know why he bothers other than I never wanted him and I let him know it. He hasn’t come to me in the nine years since it happened. He hasn’t even tried as far as I know. He just calls. That’s all.”

“Alanna...” Her name hangs in the air between us. Because I want to tell her who I am so badly in this minute. I want to lay it all out for her. I want her to know that I can get him. That I can protect her.

She can see my warring indecision all over my face. She glances down at my scar as if proving that point. “What is this?” she asks softly, her fingers scraping down my bare chest until they land on my healing bullet wound.

Her eyes flash back to mine and in them, I know she already knows exactly what it is.

Alanna is a doctor and she’s not stupid. I thought about what I’d say to her when she asked, knowing that at some point, she would. When you do what I do, you don’t go around telling people about it. It’s why we have aliases.

It’s not only for my safety, but hers.

I could lie, but she would know.

“What do you think it is?”

“I think it’s a healing bullet wound. Recent as the skin is still red, just starting to turn pink. It was surgically repaired.”

“And what else do you think, Doctor?”

“I think you haven’t told me about it for a reason.” I nod my head. “I think we both have secrets we’re holding on to, Kellin.”

“I think you’re right. I have secrets. I have things I cannot tell you, but I want to. I want to tell you everything.” Shit. “Alanna, I can keep you safe. I can...”

My eyes close and her hand presses to my cheek.

“I don’t want to make promises we might not be able to keep.”

“Alanna...” I rasp.

“There’s nothing to tell. Nothing to say,” she whispers, moving back into me until her chest is pressed against mine. She looks up, meeting my eyes. “I told you because I wanted you to know why I never showed up. It wasn’t because I didn’t want to.”

I press my lips to hers, holding her so close.

“I also don’t think I want to know your secrets, Kellin. Not if this isn’t real.”

Christ. This woman...she just ruined me. I’m hers. I’m not sure there was any other option for me. And I will do whatever it takes to protect her. Consequences be damned.



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## CHAPTER TWENTY

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## Kellin

I wake up Monday morning alone in the bed. Alanna fell asleep with me here but had an early shift, so I'm not surprised when my alarm goes off at six and she's not here. I was hoping to get up and run with her again, the way we did yesterday morning. I was hoping to make her breakfast again, the way I did yesterday morning.

I was hoping to spend yet another perfect day with her, inside of her, talking to her, smelling her, smiling at her, breathing her in.

The way I did all weekend.

Shutting the door to Kayleigh's apartment behind me, I lean against the wood, resisting the urge to bang the back of my head against it.

Fuck.

I think I'm in love.

I want to start asking things of her. Real things. And it's definitely not my style to do that. To *want* to do that, but that's where I'm at.

I pull myself away from the door and walk across the apartment and into my bathroom, turning on the shower. I wash quickly, shave, and rinse off. The last thing I want to be today is late.

Towelng off, I go into the closet, grab my usual all business attire and in under fifteen minutes, I'm ready.

Opening my bedroom door, I smile, hearing Kayleigh singing off-key in the kitchen to some cheesy pop song. She's in a good mood today, which makes me happy. "Morning, Kayleigh," I call out as I enter the kitchen.

"Morning yourself. I didn't hear you come in last night," she teases with a smirk on her lips.

"That's because I never came home," I say back evenly. Kayleigh's making scrambled eggs and bacon. It's for me, I know this. Sean isn't a fan of eggs. I'd ask her why the hell she's up at six in the morning making eggs, but I think that's for me too.

Her eyes glide up, away from the pan on the stove that's sizzling and popping, and looks me over, sees the two guns in my holsters and frowns. "You're going in?"

I nod. "I told you that yesterday. Can't be helped, babe."

She scowls. "Is this mission going to get you shot too?"

I don't respond, because I understand her concern and frustration with me. We're all each other has left as far as family goes, and my job isn't exactly easy on anyone. She chooses not to say anything else to me. I walk around her over to the coffeepot and pour myself a mug of black, sipping it slowly without bothering to blow on it.

"Here. Eat before you go at least," she orders, dishing out some eggs and bacon onto a plate.

"Thanks. That looks amazing." I walk over to her, leaning down to kiss the side of her head before making my way back around the slab of granite and sitting down in front of the plate she's so generously made. "Where's the man?"

"Still sleeping. He tossed and turned a lot for some reason, so I'm not waking him." I nod. Sean is a shit sleeper lately and I know why, though Kayleigh is totally clueless. It's sort of cute, really. The fact that he's still sleeping says it was a really bad night of sleep. Sean is normally up at the crack of dawn no matter what day it is. He should just tell her he wants to start a family already and get it over with. He knows she'll say yes.

She's hellbent on making partner first, but Sean is ready for a family.

And life is too short to wait for the perfect moment when there really is no such thing.

"This is very good," I tell her as I shovel a forkful of creamy eggs into my mouth. I need to tell her about Alanna. That's why she's up, but things have changed, and I won't stay away from her. I won't. I'm not sure what that means, but I'll figure something out.

And Kayleigh needs to know this because they're friends and neighbors, no matter what happens with me in the future.

"I'm seeing her," I start, wondering why I'm such a pussy and can't come out and say it. It's Kayleigh, honestly. For a small woman, she scares the shit out of me.

Kayleigh picks up a piece of bacon and starts munching on it as she leans onto the counter, elbows propped up, giving me the eye. "For how long?"

"It's not what you think, so don't start. It's not a fling. It's not something to pass the time and fill in the empty moments." Her eyes widen at this, clearly surprised. "I'm in on this one."

"Seriously?" she asks through a mouthful of food, her eyes giving me a look that I know all too well. She swallows as she walks over to me, stopping a few feet away. "Does she know anything about you? About what you really do?"

I shake my head, not moving from my position. "I haven't told her yet, but I'm going to."

I just don't know how.

It means so much to do that and I'm not sure how she'll react. She asked me not to give her my secrets unless I was planning on being with her. That's certainly not something I take lightly.

But I can't lose Alanna. Selfish as that may be, I love her.

"Yes." She nods sternly at me. "You're going to tell her, Kel. Dating a CIA agent isn't for everyone. Hell, being the sister of one is hard enough. I couldn't handle Sean doing it."

I snort, trying not to think too deeply on that. “That is the least of everything right now.” She opens her mouth to argue, but I hold up my hand, stopping her. “Look, she’s a big girl and I’m a big boy and we’re going to talk. There is a lot you don’t know or understand about this situation. But I’m on top of it, so ease up on all this motherly stuff.”

Kayleigh’s brows furrow as she continues to eat that bacon, watching me with eyes that make me want to squirm. “Don’t start with me, Kellin. I have zero patience for that shit. Besides, she might not like you back as much as you clearly like her.”

“Brat,” I tease, making her smile.

“Don’t get hurt on this one, Kel. Even the player gets played every now and then.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I told you, this is different. And I’m not a player,” I grouse. “I seriously hate it when you call me that.”

She grins, winking at me as I take a last sip of my coffee before bringing my plate over to the sink. I wash everything out and load it into the dishwasher.

“I gotta run, babe. Give sleeping beauty a kiss for me.”

“Will do,” she says absentmindedly, a far off look in her eyes that I don’t have the time to explore. I blow her a kiss and head for the door, but she stops me. “Will you be home for dinner?”

“I’m having dinner with Alanna, I think.”

“Good,” she calls out. “I’m not cooking tonight.” I laugh at that as I grab my keys off the entry table, shoving them into the pocket of my work bag, along with my phone, and head out the door. I throw her a wave over my shoulder. “Kellin?” She waits for me to turn back around and when I do, her expression cuts me to the quick. “Just...” She pauses like she’s not sure how to phrase her words. “Be careful. I can’t lose you too.”

I nod. I can’t even say something like, you won’t. Because she very nearly did and I learned a long time ago, never to

make promises you don't know you can keep.

Today, I fall under the pretense of doing cybersecurity work for Cole Security Forces while secretly/not-so-secretly discussing the senator who hired them to hand-deliver weapons and pressure-packed heroin and cocaine to the Middle East.

As I walk in the building—messenger bag filled with shit including my gun, over my shoulder—and am met by Natalie, I have to wonder who else in this office knows what I'm up to.

I was promised that only Mark Dixon, Jackson Cole, Charlie Erikson-er Dixon would know what my true mission is. Not Natalie, the beautiful blonde who greets me with an overexuberant smile as I step onto the floor.

“I saw you a couple of weeks ago at a bar. You know my OB, Alanna Contreras.”

At the mention of Alanna's name, I pause. If only for a half-beat. Her expression is clear and genuine, and I know Natalie to be an honest and loyal woman and employee. A mother to two children. A woman who has been through more than most since she plays the part of a military wife. Times two, since her ex was presumed dead for a year.

“Yes,” I tell her with a smile to match her own. “Weird coincidence. Alanna and I met when she was in college.”

Simple. True. Innocuous. Wholesome sounding. Perfect.

“She told us before running out after you.” She laughs, that smile still on her face as she leads me toward the back to where I know Jackson and Mark's offices are located. “I love that. I was so thrilled she made it out to join our little get together that night. I was terrified we'd scare her off since we're already a pretty close group. I have no idea how long you're in town for, but I'm sure she was happy to see you after all this time.”

I smile back before I can stop it. There is something about Natalie, I guess. Maybe that's why they have her greet people walking into their building. She reminds me of the ace up the

sleeve. Creative and clever while portraying an air of innocence.

“She said she had a really nice time with you ladies.”

“Oh,” she exclaims, meeting my eyes. “So, you’re seeing her?”

See what I mean? Fucking disarming this one, isn’t she?

“Something like that,” I admit, throwing her a wink as I enter Jackson Cole’s office. It’s simple in its furnishings, but the pictures on the wall of him with his men, his friends, is anything but. A badass Navy SEAL, I can’t help but respect the fuck out of. Same with Mark Dixon.

“Kellin.” Jackson stands up, rounding his desk to shake my hand. Mark is standing off to the side. Charlie is nowhere to be seen, and I don’t like that. I need Charlie’s direct intel on this mission. She’s the person who brought down Chris. Mazir. I need her.

“Mister Cole. It’s nice to finally meet you.”

“Jackson, please.” He chuckles lightly, turning to Mark who steps forward to shake my hand, though he and I have already met a couple of times. Jackson lives and works out of California, so he flew in here just for this.

“Sparkles, has my better half come through yet?” Mark asks Natalie. She shakes her head, rolling her eyes and pursing her lips. I wonder if it’s because of the nickname Mark just called her in front of a stranger.

“No, *Twilight*,” she emphasizes his nickname, I suppose it is. “And since she’s your wife and not mine, I assume you’re the one who should know that.”

Mark huffs out a laugh, looking to me. “She’s just upset I’m married now. Everyone knows Lee has always had a thing for me since my super sperm got her pregnant with Liam’s baby.” I blink at him and he winks at me.

“Oh yeah. Old surfer dudes with man-buns have always been my weakness.” Natalie folds her arms over her chest, but you can see she’s not really upset. I’m guessing this is their

thing. Especially when so little of it makes sense to me. “Would you like me to call your wife for you, Mark, since you obviously have no idea where she is?”

“Nah. I think I’ve got it.” He turns to Jackson. “What do you say, Muff? Should we go out and find her? I’d really love her input on exactly what our elaborate cybersecurity needs are going forward.”

Jackson nods his head. “Agreed. Lee, Mark and I will be back later, but if anything should arise, just call or text.”

“Sure. Of course. Whatever you need.” She eyes Mark and Jackson for a moment, clearly suspecting some form of bullshit lingering in the air, but smartly turns on her heels and heads back to her desk.

The moment she’s out of earshot, Mark shuts the door and Jackson perches himself on the edge of his desk. Mark turns on me, meeting my eyes head-on. “We’re intentionally keeping Charlie in the background on this. Not just with you. I want her out of the office whenever there is potential for the senator to come through or we suspect he’s keeping a close watch on us. We have no idea how deep the man is in and what his intel has been all along on Christopher Asher. But at the very least, after everything that happened and became public, he knows that Christopher Asher was Mazir. If they were doing business, we have no idea what agents Asher put out to Francois Badeaux or Senator Beaumont. For all we know, he could already know exactly who Charlie is.”

I nod in agreement. “Per Francois Badeaux’s text conversation that I confiscated from his personal phone, there was never any mention of double-crossing agents though we know there were some. There was also no mention of Asher’s son, Erik, who I know worked for you. I think it’s safe to say, there are a lot of unknown variables to this, and the more we can play it safe, the better.”

Both Jackson and Mark grimace in unison, both with devastated expressions on their faces. “Agreed,” Jackson says, his eyes casting over to his wall of pictures before just as quickly turning back to me.



“The same goes for all the other staff,” Mark promises. “I realize they’re all trained, but I’m done putting our men at risk, and I sure as hell won’t do anything that could potentially hurt Natalie.”

“Or Charlie or Cat.”

“Them either,” Mark agrees.

“There really is no need to involve anyone else at this point. I can continue to meet with Charlie on a private basis if that makes this easier for you, and I appreciate you giving me access to your conference room and recording the senator. I received word that there is more action on the ground where we believe Asher’s Afghan asset is located, which makes me think the senator is up to something.”

“It’s going to get that far?” Jackson asks.

“Not if we can help it. The senator will obviously expect your crew to be in charge of the mission to deliver his goods, and you need to discuss this with him as if that’s the case, though your men will never have boots on the ground and there will be no delivery of anything. Our hope is that by simply doing a round-about interrogation through you it will be enough to get him and the intel we need. Unfortunately, he’s a United States senator. Not someone we can just detain and...interrogate using our typical methods. I have his text conversation, but it’s not enough without anything physical. He’s careful and deliberate, so I need him to tell you the exact location of where the shipment is set to go from and to. I need names from him. I need him to give up who his supplier is and why he is suddenly using you for this mission when he never has before. I highly doubt we’ll get anything, but we have to try, maybe since you’re a private third party he’ll be a bit more forthcoming.”

Jackson stares at me incredulously. “Do you honestly think a man who is associated with drug and arms dealers and terrorist organizations is going to tell us anything that can indict him?”

“No. I don’t. But I have people working on that. Right now, we have to play this smart and cautiously. We’re trying to

nail him for aiding multiple terrorist cells and profiting from it. After losing Francois and Antoine Badeaux as well as Christopher Asher all within a couple of months, my guess is he's going to be nervous. Extra cautious. And potentially really fucking dangerous.”

Mark and Jackson exchange weighty glances before turning back to me. Mark grins, a spark of excitement lighting up his eyes. “Alrighty then. Sounds like a good time to me. Getting on the bad side of government officials seems to be my new hobby. You up for a sketchy-ass car ride into the Virginia wilderness?” he asks me.

“Sure. As long as it doesn't get me shot again.”

“We make no promises,” Mark says, grasping my shoulder and shaking me a little. “Now come on.”

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# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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## Kellin

“I want you to tell me what wasn’t in that report,” I explain to Charlie as the four of us, me, Charlie, Mark, and Jackson sit in a car in the middle of Virginia somewhere. I can’t even tell you where Jackson drove us. All I know is that we drove around for over an hour, turning here and there just to make sure we weren’t followed.

Obviously, I’m not the only paranoid bastard out of us. They don’t take risks and I like that about them.

“What makes you think I didn’t put everything in there?” she retorts, raising a challenging eyebrow in my direction.

“Charlie, I’ve known you since we both entered the agency. We went through our training together. Don’t bullshit a bullshitter.”

“Shit,” Mark hisses at my grin. “Please tell me you didn’t fuck my wife.”

“Right, like I don’t have to deal with that with Ashton?” Charlie snaps.

Mark opens his mouth, about to argue, but I quickly hold up my hand, stopping this before the two of them get started the way they’re known to do.

“No. I did not fuck your wife,” I tell him. “So now that we got that out of the way, can we can do this? I’ve got a case to work here.”

“Sorry. Sometimes dealing with Mark is like dealing with a child.”

“Tell me about it,” Jackson grumbles.

Mark starts to get going again, so I quickly intercept. “Tell me what happened with Asher and Erik. Because even though you’re the best and have an impeccable reputation, the senator chose you guys for a reason beyond the fact that you’re private sector.”

Charlie turns to me, staring at me with worry in her eyes, and I know she’s already had this thought.

“You think he knows about our involvement in bringing down Asher and is feeling us out to see what we know about him?” Mark surmises.

“That is part of my hunch. No mention of Erik or anyone else from Cole Security was made public. The only thing to come out was that Asher was Mazir and was taken care of. That’s it. But suddenly, the senator is here knocking on your door. You already told me the basics, Charlie, but that was before the senator came along and I need more details. These assholes were all making millions of dollars pushing their shit around the Middle East, all the while taking out spies and shifting focus all over the map. Then the suppliers were knocked off, followed by the puppeteer. The senator is the last man standing, and I have to imagine he’s not so excited about losing his secondary income or getting nabbed by us or the FBI.”

“All the more reason we’re keeping you out of this, baby,” Mark says to Charlie, taking her hand and holding it in his.

“For once, I’m not going to fight you.” Her hand drifts protectively to her belly, hovering over the growing life inside. “Okay, so this is how it went down...”

Charlie and Mark spend the next hour telling me everything that happened from the moment they started to work together up until a couple of months ago when Erik shot himself at the safe house.

Most of it I already knew. Mandi and Charlie told me the rough outline of it. Some of it is new, mostly the stuff from Mark’s perspective because he never worked for the agency.

Mark may have been a SEAL, but he is now a civilian, and technically should not have been part of this in the first place.

Charlie took one hell of a risk, and luckily for all of them, it paid off.

They drive me back into town, dropping me off at Cole headquarters. I should go back to my apartment and work. I should sift through all those text messages again. Collate them alongside the information I just received. Go over everything we have on Christopher Asher and his son Erik, and everything I have on Antoine and Francois Badeaux.

But I don't do any of that.

Maybe it was seeing Mark and Charlie together. A woman who I never would have pictured giving up the life of an agent to become a mother and wife. That woman was so deep into her cover, desperately trying to get Mazir after her father's death, that she missed several check-ins.

Maybe it's the notion that there is the potential for something beyond the mission.

I'm not really sure, to be honest.

But I drive directly to the hospital Alanna works in, parking my car and walking in the main entrance.

"May I help you?" an elderly woman sitting at an information desk asks me. I approach her, wondering what the hell I'm going to say. I have no plan other than to see her. It's not exactly as if Alanna is going to be able to spend time with me. She's working.

But I'm dying for a glimpse of her like this. Working as a doctor. Wearing scrubs. I'm dying for a glimpse of my beautiful, confident, incredible woman.

"Yes, I'm here to see my...wife who is delivering our baby." Shit. I have no idea if they'll question me beyond that. She eyes me for a moment, about to start typing into her computer, and I know time is of the essence. "Wow, what a beautiful scarf you're wearing. Did you make that yourself? My wife knits, but nothing close to the skill and craft of what you're wearing."

The woman's eyes abandon her computer, locking on mine with a prideful glimmer. "Yes. I did knit this." She fingers it gently, almost flirting. The blush on her cheeks tells me that I'm hitting my mark.

I nod my head, leaning into her with a wink and a smirk. "Don't tell my wife what I just said. She'll never forgive me, and I make it a point to always have my wife on my good side."

And right on cue, she flutters her eyelashes. "Your wife sounds like a lucky lady."

My grin grows as I sink in a little closer. "And I love reminding her of that." The woman giggles and I know she's mine. "They told me on the floor that I need a sticker or badge to get up there."

She nods emphatically. "Yes." And without checking anything on her computer, she asks my name, writing it down with a flourish on the white sticker. I leave her, proper directions in hand, hitting the button for the labor and delivery floor, wondering just what the fuck I'm doing.

The elevator doors part and in front of me is a large reception area that announces labor and delivery as well as antepartum. I have no idea where Alanna would be and staring at the people in the waiting room, holding blue and pink balloons and presents, I know I'm way out of my depth.

The nurses behind the partition aren't so much as glancing my way and when a nurse comes out, announcing the joy of new life and asking for the relatives to come forth, I sneak undetected through the double doors, into the ward. It's very white and there's a sterile feeling in here.

Women in gowns, clutching IV poles, accompanied by their spouses are wandering the halls. Cries of pain can be heard and tears of joy witnessed around every corner. I tell myself I'm just going to give it one lap. One lap and then I'm...my breath catches as I spot Alanna wearing pale blue scrubs exiting a patient room, her hair up in a messy bun, her expression one of pure delight.

Someone follows after and I stare in awe as the man hugs her with exuberance, relaying what can only be the best moment of his life that Alanna was a part of. Her smile is just as infectious, her hug just as genuine and I think I fall a little bit harder.

She says goodbye to the man and turns, almost instantly catching my eye. She tilts her head, a smirk lining her face as she carefully saunters in my direction.

“Mister Shaw, you have no business being here,” she tells me just as she reaches me.

“Dr. Contreras, come with me.” I take her hand and I lead her out of here. Off the ward or the floor or whatever you call it. She doesn’t question me. She doesn’t so much as utter a peep though I have zero idea where I am or where I’m headed.

“Here,” she whispers, dragging me into an empty room at the end of a quiet floor. “Here,” she repeats, pulling me off to the side, standing beside medical equipment that has me jittery until she puts her lips on mine.

In a second, my lips devour hers, sucking all her oxygen out and claiming it as mine. I press her into the wall, tugging angrily at the drawstring of her scrubs, so fucking pissed that it’s holding me back from my prize.

From the woman whose body I was born to live inside of.

My mouth hits her jaw in a rough scrape, a growl searing past my lips as I nip and bite and rake at her flesh. I’m furious. An animal with no limits. Because she is not my Charlie and I am not her Mark. She is not my forever and I am not her hero.

But I want to be.

I want to be all of that.

If I had any illusions before, seeing her like this, they’re all gone now.

I never believed in loving too quickly, but I don’t think I stood a chance with this woman.

“Kellin,” she cries, my mouth muffling the sounds I’m desperate to let loose. But we’re in a hospital. Her hospital.



And fucking her like this, raw and unrestrained, requires a certain amount of couth.

In the next second, her scrub pants are on the floor along with her light-blue panties, and I lift her up, entering her in one swift motion. No foreplay. No toying. She's wet and wanting, and I take full advantage.

Her body bows against the wall, her pussy clenching, thrusting upward, seeking. I drag her face down, my thumb on her bottom lip as I hold her steady, my body poised.

"Can you be quiet?"

She shakes her head no and I grin.

"Then I'll have to smother your screams."

I thrust into her, hard and unrelenting. She cries out, gripping the back of my head and yanking on my hair. I don't care. She can hurt me all she wants. She's going to get fucked and love every second of it. I start to pound into her, my mouth on hers, our breaths one as I swallow down her moans and whimpers and screams.

I don't ease up. I don't go light.

I fuck her as if I'll never get another chance again.

Her back against the wall, her ass in my hands, my cock encased in her warm pussy, I give her everything without stopping. She meets me, match for match, thrust for thrust. Wet slaps of skin fill the room, eclipsing the sounds of the hospital beyond.

"Kellin," she rasps, biting my lip until she nearly draws blood.

I reach between us, finding her slick clit and rub it, marveling at how her eyes grow heady, darker, consumed. She can hardly take it. The build of her orgasm all over her face.

"Watch as I fuck you, Alanna. Feel everything my cock is doing to you. Do you feel it?"

"Yes," she pants, those nails digging in deeper, driving me on further.

“Come, baby. I know you’re close.” I rub her clit harder and she starts to shudder, her pussy clamping down on me, and I groan so loud I’m sure the whole floor can hear it. Alanna comes hard, her body holding mine closer than ever before, my name an expletive on her tongue. I follow her over with a harsh groan, a loud grunt, and after the last of her spasms are done and she’s milked every ounce of my manhood from me, I stare into her eyes, kissing her lips.

*I love you...* And it’s far too soon. Way too messy. Absolutely impossible to keep.

Her forehead meets my shoulder as she slowly glides herself off of me.

“That was a fun break,” she murmurs, and I think a piece of me dies. Again. Because I know what she’s doing. And I don’t blame her for it creating a distance and calling this fun.

“Wake me up when you get home later,” I tell her, knowing she’s not expected until well past midnight. “You’re sleeping in my bed or I’m sleeping in yours until we can’t anymore.”

She nods against me, her expression stoning up, and for the first time in my career, I hate my job. I hate the dangerous implications it comes with.

Because I may want this woman.

I may be willing to risk it all.

But I’m not willing to risk her. And that makes all the difference.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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## Alanna

These past few weeks have floated by in a bubble of work and Kellin. When I'm not at the hospital and he's not at Cole Security Forces, we're together. Watching movies and making out like teenagers on the sofa. Walking along the beach. Going for early morning runs and having late night dinners. Sleeping in each other's beds, in each other's arms.

All night talks and hot, steamy sex.

I still can't believe he showed up at the hospital like that yesterday. It was...wonderfully unexpected. And I'm not even just talking about the orgasm.

I've forced myself not to think too deeply on anything else. On the fact that I know there is so much more to Kellin Shaw than what he's telling me. He's good at hiding it. Nearly perfect in fact, except for one small flaw.

He wants to tell me.

And with that, comes hints.

That fresh bullet wound isn't the only scar Kellin has. And I know he was in the Army, but some of these scars are fresher than that. Some of those scars came within the last year or two.

I'm starting to get the impression that my sexy Clark Kent is really someone else. Something more. When you grow up the way I did, you learn how to read people better than most. When you're fed so many lies, you learn how to spot honesty.

And Kellin is an impeccable liar.

Which only adds to my suspicions about him.

But I also know he'd never hurt me. That if he could tell me, he would. That the way I feel about him is not one-sided. That thrills and terrifies me to no end.

What happens when his...work is done here?

What happens when/if I move to Boston this July?

I could look into DC hospitals for an attending position, but would he even want that? And besides, it's too soon for such things. Way too soon.

So I'm focusing on this bubble we're in, ignoring the fact that it'll one day pop.

"Alanna?" a voice startles me out of my thoughts and I blink, coming back, a shopping cart in my hands and my eyes stuck on the boxes of cereal in front of me. Yikes, how long have I been standing here like a mindless idiot staring off?

I turn around and find Natalie Dempsey, all bright smiles and sparkling blue eyes making her way toward me.

"Hey!" I say, turning to give her a hug. She has both of her little ones with her. Aarabelle is in the large part of the cart, sitting and playing with a small toy and baby Shane is in the front, sitting in a green puffy cart protector and drooling all over a rubber chew toy. "Wow," I marvel, staring at both the kids. "I cannot believe how big they're getting."

"I know," Natalie exclaims, her smile unstoppable. It's nice seeing Natalie as happy as she is. The woman had several miscarriages and failed IVF treatments so I know just what it means to have her two perfect babies with her. "This guy is starting to talk a little, and as you can see, is teething like a monster."

I reach out, taking his loose hand, and he wraps his tiny fist around my finger, squeezing. "Hey little man. I remember the day you were born," I tease and Natalie laughs.

"Yup. You did a brilliant job with these two."

I laugh, twisting to meet her eyes before turning back to her little ones.

“Actually, I think you did all the hard work. I just helped you along. Are you guys done with kids? As your OB, I can totally ask that overly personal question.” I wink at her.

“I don’t know. It’s so hard to say right now. I think we are because two is a handful, but you never know.”

“I hear that. Thank you again for inviting me out that night. I’m sorry I ran off on you guys. I hope no one was put out by that. I realize how rude that must have come off.”

Natalie waves me away. “Oh, I didn’t mind you running off. And not rude at all. I sort of ambushed you with the friends thing.”

“No, I really liked meeting everyone. It was just...”

“You ran into Kellin?”

I nod, feeling my face warming as Natalie says that so bluntly. Like she’s got the inside track.

“I get to see Kellin at work now and the man, though very serious, looks very happy.” I can feel my blush growing. I forgot that Natalie works at Cole Security Forces where Kellin is...doing whatever the hell Kellin does. “So, you two...” She trails off with a raised eyebrow and I shrug, fighting for a smile I don’t fully feel.

“I guess. He’s only here for a short time and I’m, well, just between us because I’ve been offered a position in Boston.”

Natalie’s eyes widen. “You have been? You’re moving?”

I gnaw on my lip at her sad expression and shake my head. “I don’t know yet. I was offered one here as well and both are extremely tempting. It’s a big decision to make. Plus, well, Kellin doesn’t exactly live in either place.”

“Wow. I mean, that sucks,” she says and then her eyes dart over to her little ones who are too preoccupied with their toys to care. We both giggle lightly, Natalie shaking her head. “I’m going to have to really watch that. But yeah, that word. I mean, that is, if you move. I feel like we were just becoming friends. But that word was also about you and Kellin.”

“I know what you meant. And yes to all of that. If I move, I will miss you. You’ve been with me since the beginning of my career.”

“And you’ve been with me since the beginning and held my hand through all of it.”

I find myself hugging her again, both of us growing emotional right here in the middle of the grocery store.

I laugh, wiping some moisture from my eyes. “Look at us. We’re a mess.”

“I know.” She laughs with me. She squeezes my forearm, her expression suddenly growing severe. “And I know this is absolutely none of my business, but you’ve done so much for me over the years that I have to say it. I don’t know Kellin all that well. But he seems like a great guy and it doesn’t take a genius to see that you both make each other very happy. I saw the way your face lit up when I mentioned him and any time I mention you to him, his face does the same.

“You know I’ve had a rough time of it between Aaron and Liam. But I truly believe that everything happens for a reason. I don’t know if you and Kellin are getting serious or not, but if you’re half as crazy about each other as you both appear to be, don’t let something like you moving away or him finishing up a job stand in your way. Fight for each other.”

I nod, swallowing past the emotion clogging up my throat. “Thank you for saying that. I might have needed to hear it.”

She winks at me. “Anytime. And if you decide to move, we’ll definitely have to go out for lunch or dinner or something before you do that. And if you don’t move, we’ll still have to go out for lunch or dinner or something like that.”

“Absolutely.”

We give each other another hug and she walks off, talking to her babies about what type of cereal they would like, and I think Natalie is right.

Fight for each other. That’s what she said. And that’s what I want.

But how can you do that when the odds are not only stacked against you, they're insurmountable?



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## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

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## Kellin

The senator arrives exactly on time at Cole Security Forces. His driver, who is also his security, insists on taking him to the conference room. Natalie isn't here today. Mark and Jackson made sure she worked from home, and I'm grateful for that. The senator shakes hands with Mark and Jackson, thanking both men for their service to our country.

But the moment the driver leaves, sitting directly outside the door, and they all sit down at the large table, his demeanor changes completely.

I'm sitting in the office directly beside the conference room they're in.

I have video set up, aimed directly at the senator's face. I have audio too, but it doesn't feel like enough. I hate sitting here and letting Jackson and Mark get deeper on this case than any civilians should be.

It should be me in there.

It should be me talking to him and asking him questions.

I would kill to be in that room. I would kill to look the motherfucker in the eye and impose my force to get the answers I need.

He's polished. He's refined. He's the definition of an arrogant asshole.

But he also comes across as scared.

There's a hint of fear behind his eyes. I have to imagine it's being in possession of things that will ultimately lead to his

end. Greed. Power. Hubris. Underestimating all those around them.

These men are all the same, and it's ultimately what leads to their downfall.

Because as I sit here, I'm plotting all the ways he'll try to sneak out of this. I'm plotting all the ways he'll try to spin it.

But I'm also plotting all the ways I'll be one step ahead.

"Tell us about this shipment, Senator," Jackson starts, sitting up straight in his chair and staring the man straight in the eyes. I like Jackson. He's got balls. "What exactly are we to be transporting?"

"Aid to regions that are economically depressed, have few natural resources, and have been ravaged by terrorist organizations."

"What sort of aid?" Mark pushes, leaning back in his seat, seemingly casual and unaffected.

The senator goes about explaining that it's the same aid that's been delivered to the region through military delivery for years. Years! Mark and Jackson ask for logs that the senator refuses to provide. This goes on, back and forth, for more than an hour. The fact that the senator did this meeting in person instead of sending a lackey speaks volumes.

He's alone in this. And he needs it out of his hands quickly.

At the same time, not much information of value is provided.

I didn't expect much. The senator, despite being a treasonous prick, isn't stupid. Then again, he's a one-man show now, and that has to be wearing on him. Hopefully to the point that he eventually lets something slip.

The plan is in place that the senator will personally meet Cole Security's team at the airfield and sign the documents that state he's giving this property to them for distribution. Mark and Jackson were adamant that this could not be done beforehand and that he had to be the one to do it.

It isn't much.

There is a lot of room for deniability on the senator's side. We need a smoking gun and unfortunately the text conversations along with this, likely aren't enough.

The door to the office I've been sitting in opens after the senator has left and both Jackson and Mark shut it behind them, their expressions deliberate. "We want to help," Jackson states plainly. "We lost a lot of good men because of the senator. Because of everything he's been a part of since the beginning."

"You are helping," I tell him because I know what he's intimating and I cannot allow it. "That shipment will never leave US soil."

"It's not enough to nail his ass and you know it," Mark grouses, echoing my previous thoughts.

"No. It's not. But that's for me to worry about. Not you. What I need from you is a few men you trust here on the ground at the airstrip. They need to go about loading up the 'aid' and then flying it out only to return about an hour or so later. They'll be met by a couple of agents I trust, but your men need to keep quiet."

"You're going in, aren't you?"

I meet their eyes but say nothing.

They exchange glances, their eyes having a conversation the way only people who truly know and trust each other can do. Finally, Jackson says, "We can do that."

I can tell they want to ask more but understand the top-secret nature of this. Mark especially, being married to Charlie must get that.

The truth is, we have a location on Asher's Afghan asset. It's going to require more than drone attacks because we want this fucker taken alive. If our intel is correct, he's an expatriot. An American running a terrorist ring now that Asher or rather Mazir is gone.

Asher must have been given this asset's bio when he defected, and somehow, the two of them linked up. People like that, who defect for their cause and ideals, are particularly dangerous. They will stop at nothing until people like me come along and do it for them.

It'll be my job to do the heavy lifting. Something I used to look forward to in the past. The no guts, no glory mentality. The living off adrenaline and the high of chasing someone down. The uncertainty and relying solely on your instincts and training as the difference between surviving or not.

But now, everything feels different.

The desire to go in and be the commanding officer, in charge of the entire tactical operation, is lacking appeal.

Alanna is my game changer.

I know my time with her was always temporary. But the difference between knowing something and accepting it is everything.

"When do you guys hit Afghanistan soil?" Mark asks as the three of them head for the door.

I laugh, shaking my head. Bastards obviously already know everything. "A week. Right before the senator is set to meet you at the airfield."

"And your girl?" Mark pushes. "Does she know anything?"

I shake my head. "No. But I'll have to tell her something, I guess."

Jackson shrugs. "You could go with the truth. We knew about Charlie and Charlie's mother knew about her husband. Might make it a little easier on you both if she knows what she's up against."

"She deserves more than an agent who can't give her anything she's after," I explain.

"Isn't that her choice to make?" Jackson continues, giving me a sideways glance.

Is it? Would I really want this life for her?

No. Alanna needs someone who can be there. Who can love and support her. She's lost enough in her life. Been hurt by the people who were supposed to love her most. I'm planning on leaving on this mission and I shouldn't come back after that.

I should let her go.

She deserves a man like Carter Fritz, though just the thought of him with her makes my stomach knot up and my fists clench.

"Charlie left. Doesn't regret it for a second."

Charlie is also pregnant. But...could I do that? I've been tossing it around. Playing with ideas. Fantasies, really, because that's what Alanna feels like.

Could I move here? Move to Boston? What the hell would I do?

I've been a soldier all my life.

"In any event, I'll have Charlie keep an eye on her. She already mentioned getting in touch with her to set up an appointment."

I force a grin, slapping Mark on the shoulder in gratitude.

I leave Cole Security Forces with a vacuous hole in my chest. An emptiness in my gut. I always considered myself a company man for life. A few weeks with one woman and everything I thought I knew is flipped upside down.

Could I change for her? Could I find something else? Could I do this work, the work Charlie now does?

I don't know. But it might be worth figuring out.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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## Alanna

“Let’s get out of here,” Billie says as we stand outside the hospital, grabbing my wrist and tugging me up and off the sidewalk.

“Where are we going?” I ask, confused. “I thought we were waiting for Carter to finish with his patient and shower.” The sun is setting behind the hospital. The day went by in a blur of patients, which is exactly how I prefer it. But Billie and I both finished up early and idle time notoriously makes Billie antsy.

“Out,” she states simply, dragging me away from the hospital and toward the parking garage. “You’re on your own tonight and I’m sick of waiting for Carter. He can meet us in progress.”

Kellin had to drive back up to DC today for a couple of meetings and I haven’t asked too many questions because I don’t want the answers.

He told me point blank that his time here is almost up.

Hell, I don’t even know when he’s coming back.

Ever since Monday, he’s been...different. A little distant. Watching me more and talking less. He comes in late, crawls in my bed, we have sex, and then both pass out.

It’s left me feeling unsettled.

I don’t want this to be how we are, and if we truly do only have a few weeks or even days left with each other, then I want to make the most of it. I’ve had so many things in my life



I wish I could do over and Kellin Shaw will not be one of them.

We reach Billie's car, but instead of getting in, she opens her trunk. "What are you doing?"

She digs through a bag and tosses me a green dress and a pair of heels. "Get dressed."

I stare down at the slightly crumpled clothes in my hand and then back up to her, my eyebrows pinched. "I am dressed."

"Not for what I have in mind for tonight."

I groan. The wicked glimmer in Billie's brown eyes tells me this could be trouble. "This won't fit me."

"It will. It'll just be short on you, but nothing wrong with that. And the green will make your eyes pop."

"Billie," I whine.

"Alanna," she mocks in the same tone. "Get in the back seat and move your ass or I'll undress you where you stand. You know I will."

Yes. I do know she will.

Climbing in, I make quick work of undressing and redressing, tugging hopelessly at the stretchy green fabric. "My ass is showing."

"Lucky for you then that it's a nice ass." I throw her a glare and she winks at me. "Come on. I already texted Carter to let him know the plans. I can't stand you moping anymore. We're going to have fun."

"I'm not moping."

Her dubious expression suggests she knows otherwise. "You're a crappy liar."

"I am not. I'm a fantastic liar."

She lets out a loud scoff. "Your nose scrunches up right before you say something untrue. It's always been like that. How do you think I can read you so well?"

Dammit. I'll have to work on that.

Billie slips on a silver sleeveless top and tight black pants and I have to wonder at the fact that she has clubwear in her trunk. Only Billie.

Crawling over the center console, I climb into the front seat as she starts the car. "Where are we going?"

"On a training exercise. Someone has to teach you how to lie like a big girl."

I snort. "There's a worthy goal. Seriously, where are we going? I don't like it when you plan things and don't tell me."

She rolls her eyes. "Chill out here, teenage angst. We're going to a bar. You think you can handle that or are you worried your fake ID will get nabbed by the narcos?"

I flip her off and she heads away from the hospital, toward town.

I shut my mouth, watching the streets and the buildings pass. Part of me is all too aware of what she's doing. "You're trying to distract me."

She hums something out, but we both know it's not Kellin I need the distraction from. He's just part of the mess that is my mind.

"Don't give David the satisfaction, Alanna. You get to call the shots on your life. Not him. You blocked the number he called you on. He admitted he was nowhere nearby. You called the police and they told you, again, there isn't much they can do. The last thing he wants is trouble. It's been nine years. He was just trying to get a rise out of you. He's not coming, babe."

She has a point. A good one at that.

It's really more the way he said, it's only a matter of time. He might have said it just to scare me, but it worked.

We pull up to a large building, but I don't recognize the area. We're still near town as I can see lights from the main strip, but this isn't a place I've been to before. Lifeline is

written on the red awning in gold script. The sound of a live rock band playing inside wafts out into the parking lot.

There's a bouncer at the door checking IDs, and Billie throws me a smirk to which I roll my eyes. The room is a big rectangle with high-top tables on the right and a large bar that takes up the entire wall on the left. The center of the room is clear of furniture, filled with swaying and dancing bodies, all facing the stage at the far end where the band I heard outside is playing rock covers.

I smile before I can help it, bumping Billie with my elbow. She shrugs and laughs a little as the band is not the best, but still entertaining and the songs they're choosing to rock out to are catchy and fun.

Billie waltzes up to the bar like she owns it, ordering up two drinks I didn't hear the names of. This isn't the type of place where you go for martinis or margaritas, and I have to wonder why she made me change out of my casual jeans and blouse since it's not the type for club dresses and hooker heels either.

"What is this?" I scream over the fray as Billie hands me a plastic cup filled with...something pink.

"I ordered a vodka soda for both of us. I have no idea what we got."

"Great," I mutter, eyeing it harshly. "Do you think it's safe?"

She shrugs. "He's a bartender, not a date rapist."

I flinch noticeably at her words, and she offers me a sheepish smile. "Together?"

I nod. We both take a sip and smile in relief when we find it's vodka and cranberry with a splash of soda.

"Okay, finish that down because I want you to dance tonight."

I laugh. "Get the fuck out of here."

"I mean it. We're here to dance and enjoy ourselves. What are you so afraid of?"

“I’m not afraid.” It’s kind of a lie.

The reason why I never dance in public is pathetic. Even I know it is.

I went to a dance when I was in high school that my mother chaperoned. I was dancing with some friends and my mother stormed out onto the dance floor in front of everyone and dragged me off, telling me I looked ridiculous and was embarrassing both of us.

I haven’t danced in public since.

“No one gives a shit, Alanna. Own who you are.”

She’s right. Again. Didn’t I recently vow to start living again? To put my past completely behind me? I chug the rest of my drink, which is mercifully very weak, and then allow Billie to pull me into the sea of gyrating bodies.

Billie instantly starts bopping around wildly, obviously not caring what anyone around her thinks even as she garners a few smirks from some random people.

She cackles when she catches my expression. “What? Just because I’m black doesn’t mean I kill it with the dancing. I just don’t give a fuck.”

I can only smile, shaking my head at my friend.

But really, why should she care? And why do I? My mother’s issues were her own and they no longer have to be mine.

All my good breeding, etiquette, and dutifully doing what I’m told can finally go suck it.

Several men approach Billie, and within seconds, she’s completely diverted. And yet, I’m still standing here looking stupid. Just as my body begins to sway along to the beat, I feel a hand on my waist.

I jolt, spinning around only to come face to face with a smirking Kellin standing before me. He’s wearing different clothes than he was this morning when he left for DC. Now he’s in dark jeans and a black button-down. His hair is

rumpled and sexy, and he's got a nice layer of stubble on his face.

He looks insanely hot. Dangerously so.

The ultimate bad boy that makes me weak in the knees.

"How did you know I was here?" I shout, my expression incredulous.

He scans the crowd on the dance floor, his gaze finally resting on one particular spot. I turn over my shoulder to find Billie dancing with Carter, both look to be partying their faces off.

I turned back to Kellin, my head tilting.

Without a word he takes my hand, resting it on his shoulder, and repeating the motion with the other. His hand drops to my lower back, and he guides me forward until our bodies are pressed together. My fingers find the sharp prickly ends of his hair. He moves us into the center of the dance floor, a slower song now plays.

Leaning down, his temple presses against mine as he whispers in my ear, "I missed you. I haven't seen you since this morning."

"Kellin—"

"Relax." His lips meet mine, coaxing a kiss out of me before murmuring into me, "I've got super-secret ninja skills. Dance with me, Alanna. I missed you today."

I shake my head, hearing his unspoken truth at the end of that statement. And time is running out. But still... "I don't like stalkers or men who randomly show up when I wasn't expecting them."

His expression turns grim at the reminder of what David did to me, but the struggle in his eyes is unmistakable. "Do you want the truth or the lie?"

Jesus. "The truth." I pause, licking my suddenly dry lips.

"I went to the hospital when you weren't at your place. I ran into Carter, who told me you and Billie were here."

Oh. Now I feel kind of stupid for assuming the worst.

“You okay?”

I nod numbly. “Yeah. Sorry if I accused you.”

He shakes his head. “You just made my shitty day so much better. Just looking at you makes everything better.”

His hand slides up along my arm until it reaches my hair, his fingers diving in, gripping me tightly and bringing my face to his, cheek to cheek instead of lips to lips. For a moment, he just continues to dance with me. I close my eyes, trying to force my head to clear. We continue to sway at a slower pace than those around us, his hot breath tickling my ear.

“I’m fighting a losing battle with myself. I’m going to be leaving in less than a week. And I’m not sure if I’ll be coming back.”

My breath catches in the back of my throat as tears instantly coat my eyes. His tone is grim. Dejected. But strong and full of resolve.

“Where will you be going?”

“Nowhere I can tell you about.”

“Hmmm...” I trail off, frowning and trying my fucking best not to. Damn, this *hurts*. Distantly, I knew it would. I expected it. I even made myself believe I was prepared. And that if I’m prepared, nothing can knock me down for long.

Foolish. I was so very foolish.

Because I’ve never experienced falling for someone before.

Kellin is my first.

And losing the man you’re falling for is so very different than walking away from your family that you can’t tolerate the sight of. This...it’s knocking the wind out of me.

“Say something,” he pleads, and all I can do is shake my head because I don’t trust my voice right now if I speak. “Ask me why I can’t tell you where I’m going or why I won’t be coming back.” I shake my head again, and I can feel his anger

growing. He steps back, his eyes burning into mine. “Fucking ask me, Alanna. Please. Tell me you’ve figured me out and now you’re demanding answers.”

Figured him out. Have I? I don’t know. I have my suspicions certainly. Snippets of conversations. Talks of secrets. The barely healed bullet wound. Yes, I have my suspicions.

But the truth is, I’m not sure I want to know.

He’s telling me he’s leaving. He’s telling me we’re done.

So why ask this of me? So that I understand something that I already know I won’t be able to? So that I hurt and worry more?

He grabs my face, pinning us forehead to forehead, nose to nose. I suck in a sharp breath, doing my best to stop my trembling body.

“Ask me,” he demands again, his voice softer this time. “Tell me that if I tell you...”

“What?”

He blows out a breath, his eyes closing in defeat. “I don’t deserve you, Alanna, but fuck, I’ve never wanted anyone so much in my life.” My breath stalls as a tear hits my cheek. “I have to go. I have no choice. But...”

“But what?”

“Ask me.”

I shake my head. “I can’t, Kellin. If you’re not coming back—”

“I want to. I want to come back.”

I press against him, biting my lip so I don’t sob, hating how weak I feel right now with this man. How owned. His lips crush into mine, his hands now cupping my face as he infuses me with something I dare not name.

“Can I go home with you?”

I swallow and nod. Because it's too late now. I'm already hurt. I'm already in deep. Why not allow myself to drown, hoping that one day I'll find air that doesn't hurt so much to breathe.



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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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## Kellin

“You’re sure these are his exact coordinates?”

“Yes. How long he’ll be there for that, we don’t know,” Mandi tells me as I pace Alanna’s apartment, the woman I don’t want to leave sleeping in her bed. “Kellin, I have transport set for the day after tomorrow at zero-seven-hundred. By the time you land, it’ll be well past nightfall. With any luck, your team can be in possession of the package and out by zero-three-hundred Afghanistan time. But you need to come in tomorrow. We need to organize the tactical team and go over the operational details for once you’re on the ground.”

Sweat slicks my brow as I stare back at the closed door. I check my watch, noting that it’s little more than eleven-thirty at night. My last night with her.

“And what of Cole Security Forces and their team?”

“Charlie is on it. I’ve spoken with her and they’ve arranged for a team of SEALs to be present, including Liam Dempsey, the husband of Natalie Dempsey who works for Cole. He’s as trained as anyone, and him and Mark will handle all the operational details on that front.”

I swallow thickly, my heart smashing against my ribs as if to remind me of all I’m about to leave behind. “I’ll be there,” I tell her and disconnect the call. I’m going to have to leave here before dawn. Mandi is a handler and she will ensure the team is ready and up to my specifications, but that’s not good enough.

Not for me. Not for this mission.

I have my desert camo packed away, ready to go, in the duffel under my bed. My guns are there too. Socks, boots, I don't take much else with me that is not necessary. Only this time, I feel like I'm leaving something behind.

Something I'll never get back, no matter how hard I try.

Dialing the number, her sleepy voice picks up on the second ring. Always an agent, I think as she says, "Yeah," into the phone with a pissed-off tone.

"She has an ex," I start, not bothering with formalities. "He's been calling her and has been violent in the past."

"And what would you like me to do about it?"

"Watch her for me. Make sure the prick doesn't come back for her or rattle her cage more than he already has."

Gavin is already trying to figure out who he is. Alanna wouldn't tell me his last name, and I don't want to push her. But Gavin can do things I can't under the umbrella of working for the United States government.

Even agents have restrictions.

She clears her throat and then asks, "Are you coming back for her?"

"If you hadn't been pregnant and the director of our agency hadn't killed your father, would you have left?" It's something I've wondered about. Charlie was the job. All of her. Now all of that has changed. I get it. Hell, I respect it.

But I'm still curious.

"I don't know," she admits. "I'd be lying if I said I haven't asked myself the same question. But the reality is, I can't change my reality. This is it. This is my life now and I choose the people in it over the job. That was not an easily won battle, but I watched what my mom went through, what my brother and I went through after we lost our father, and I can't do that to Mark or this baby." I make another circuit around the living room, thinking all that through. "Is she a company wife?"

I shake my head. I never liked that phrase. It means is the person you're with capable of staying strong and holding

down the fort, okay with oftentimes being left in the dark about your whereabouts and whether or not you're safe and alive. No communication. The threat of waking up every day to opening your door and being told that your loved one is dead a possibility. Most likely never getting the answers you need.

"I don't want her to be whether she is or she isn't."

"Then I guess you need to ask yourself who you love more. The company. Or the woman."

The woman pops into my head unbidden. I can't even force myself to think or answer any differently. It doesn't matter. Charlie is already gone, not waiting for my answer. She doesn't need it.

The question was for me.

Padding barefoot across the quiet, dark apartment, I open the door to the bedroom. I stand there on the threshold, watching a sleeping Alanna, back bare and facedown in the sheets. I watch her and I know I'm coming back for her, despite what I told her. I know I'm not only coming back for her; I'm moving to Boston or staying here. Whatever she decides.

I'll follow her anywhere.

I also know this is my last mission as a company man.

A personal case that needs finishing.

My fingers hover over my scar and my resolve solidifies. I will take down Mazir's asset. I will take down this senator. And when that's all done, I will be Alanna's. And she will never have to worry about losing someone again.

Stripping out of my boxer briefs, I climb into bed beside her, tugging her sleeping, naked form into mine. She hardly stirs, her body exhausted after a day of working and a night of making love. I kiss her face, planting my nose in her hair as I breathe in her fresh, floral scent.

"I love you," I tell her. "It's too soon. Too insane. But I don't give a shit and I know you don't either. I knew it was

you from the moment I asked you if you like whiskey in the kitchen of a disgusting frat house. I'm not much, Alanna. Barely anything at all. But with you, hell, with you, I have greatness in me. I will not just do my job because that's what I do. I will do my job so I can get my ass home safely to you."

I roll her over, covering her body with mine. She groans, slowly blinking open her sleepy hazel eyes that are nothing but darkness in the muted stillness of her room. "Kellin?" she rasps, her hand coming up to cup my jaw.

"I love you."

Her eyes glisten.

"When you wake up, I'll be gone. But if you wait for me, if you want me, I'll come back and never leave your side again."

Her breath hitches on a small gasp. "I want you," she tells me, and my chest clenches so tight it's as if a vise is squeezing the blood from my heart. Instead of feeling lighter, I feel heavier. Moored to this spot, this bed, with her. Her hands hold me so close, almost as if she's terrified to let me go.

"Alanna, what I'm about to do isn't going to be easy. It's dangerous and I—"

"When beggars die, there are no comets seen; The heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes." She sighs. She knows. My girl knows.

I grin, leaning in and kissing her lips.

"Cowards die many times before their deaths; The valiant never taste of death but once. Of all the wonders that I yet have heard, it seems to me most strange that men should fear; seeing that death, a necessary end, will come when it will come."

Her eyes pour tears, one after the other. But the fact that she quoted my favorite Shakespearean play, Julius Caesar? I can't help but know I'm making the right choice. It may seem stupid or petty, but that quote, the one I just gave her, has been my soldier's motto since I joined up at the age of eighteen.

In fact, my mother said it to me before I left for basic. The wife of a four-star general, she was no stranger to the responsibilities and life of a soldier.

“Love me tonight, Kellin. Love me so I never have to wonder again.”

Fuck. This woman...

Dipping down, my lips crash into hers, a feral roar ripping past my larynx. I was ready to walk out. Grab my shit and go. But one look at my sleeping goddess in this bed and here I am. Loving her. A storm in the night. A downpour intent on a flood.

I'm the motherfucking lightning before the thunder, and there is no stopping the destruction that is yet to come.

For either of us.

My girl is already naked from the last time I took her before we both passed out, so I make quick work of skating down her body, parting her legs and folding her knees up until they kiss her perfect breasts. My tongue meets her clit first, a sweet introduction to the pleasure I will bring her. Skirting lower, I thrust my tongue inside her, flicking and lapping up her wetness like the starving man she makes me.

No. Not man. I can be her prince. I can worship her body like a fucking king.

Because Alanna Contreras is my queen.

“Kellin,” she cries out as I play with her tight hole in the back, my tongue still doing wicked things to the front of her.

Her eyelashes flutter like a butterfly's wings. Her body undulating like the waves of the ocean. Her sighs as soft and gentle as snowflakes falling.

I kiss her again, before crawling back up her body, staring down into her eyes. The way I plan to forever.

I enter her body on a loud groan, holding her face as my hips fuck her at an unrelenting pace. I don't go easy and I don't go slow. I claim her. Brand her body with mine. Pray that this is our beginning and not our end.

I spend the night inside her body. Our passion making us one. Our lust insatiable. Our eyes watching the other.

And just as dawn begins to crest over the dark, murky waters of the Atlantic, I kiss her soft, sleeping lips goodbye. I promise to return. Hoping I'm able to keep that promise. Not entirely sure I can with what I know lies ahead.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

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## Alanna

By the time my alarm goes off, I'm already awake. I heard Kellin creep out in the predawn hours and after that, I've just been lying here, trying to make sense of my thoughts. Of the words we spoke to each other last night.

Of the uncertainty of our future.

I get myself up and out of bed, but I can't make myself linger and eat breakfast knowing he's not here anymore. I can't make myself spend any more time in a building that he should be living in and is not. Instead I leave, heading to the hospital to catch up on things that don't really require catching up on.

I enter the locker room, grab a clean pair of scrubs, throw my hair up into a messy bun, and I'm on the floor, checking the board behind the nurses' station and seeing if there is anywhere I can lend a hand.

"Hey," Sophia says to me. "You're here early." I turn and nod, forcing a smile I don't feel. It's all I can do. "I have a midwife stuck in the middle of a complicated delivery. The baby seems to be larger than the ultrasound indicated. I bet she'd love a fresh set of eyes and hands on it."

"Sure. That's why I'm here."

Six hours and two deliveries later, I'm feeling more like myself. This is who I am. This is what I do. I'll focus on work because the alternative is a rabbit hole of inner turmoil and destruction.

I'm about to head into another room when a hand on my shoulder stops me. Carter is wearing his favorite Avengers scrub cap and a smile. "You disappeared last night." I frown instantly before I can stop it, and Carter takes my arm, guiding me into an empty patient room. He shuts the door and spins me around to face him. "You okay?"

I shrug. "Not really." I laugh mirthlessly, only I don't know what to say. What I can say. "Kellin had to leave town for a while for work."

Carter steps into me, cupping my chin and raising my face up to his. His eyes bounce back and forth between mine, and then without another word, he takes me in his arms, holding me close.

Damn him.

My body starts to tremble, unable to stop my reaction as my hands cling to his back, my nails digging into his scrub top.

His lips land in my hair and he whispers, "I'm sorry, sweetheart." He kisses my hair, holding me closer as I cry like a fool into his shirt. "It'll be okay, Alanna. It will. I don't know what's going on between the two of you. I can spout a bunch of shit like if it's meant to be, it'll happen. And that might all be true. But at the end of the day, you're so strong and fierce. So incredible. Whatever you need, I'm here. Billie is here. We're your family, and no matter what, you're not alone."

"Dammit, Carter!"

He chuckles into me, kissing me again, squeezing me once more and then releasing me. He smiles down at me, cupping my face and wiping away what is very likely black smudges beneath my eyes. "Much better."

I laugh when he winks at me. "I love you, friend."

He grins. "I love you too, friend. And since you're on your own tonight, how about you come over for pizza and we'll apartment shop."

"Apartment shop?"

“Yup. One of my brothers said I could stay at his place in Boston since he won’t be there for the first few months I start work. But yeah, we’re kinda going to need a place to live.”

“Um...”

He rolls his eyes. “I didn’t mean together, Alanna. I got the message loud and clear. Crying into my chest about another man sort of hits that one home.” He gives me a cocky smile that I can’t help but laugh at.

“Apartment shopping for you and pizza sound amazing. I still have until tomorrow to make my final decision about where I’m going and what I’ll be doing.”

“Perfect. I’ve gotta get into surgery, so I’ll catch you later.”

I reach up and give him a big hug. “Thank you, Carter. For everything.”

He throws me another wink before heading out the door, and I follow after him, taking a deep breath and tucking my emotions down. I can do this. Whatever comes next, I can do it.

But for now, I have to believe Kellin will keep his word. He’ll come back to me. The alternative is just too painful to imagine.

The rest of my day flies by. I focus on the task at hand. I don’t check my phone because I know he won’t call. I try to ignore the lead weight that’s suddenly moored in the pit of my stomach. I don’t know where Kellin is. I don’t know what he’s doing.

But I know it’s dangerous.

I know he’s doing something that could cost him his life.

And I don’t know how to come to grips with that.

Shaking my dark thoughts off, I plow through my apartment door, ready for a night of pizza and apartment shopping when my phone rings. I fumble it twice as I

overzealously try to yank it from the pocket of my jeans, and then nearly drop it when I see the number.

It's not Kellin.

Or even Billie or Carter.

It's one I don't recognize, but the area code I think is from DC, and as I swipe my finger across the phone and bring it to my ear, I hold in a breath as I answer, "Hello?" But before I can hear their response, all the fire alarms in my apartment start to blare at an ear-splitting decibel.

I jump ten feet in the air, spinning around, but my apartment is exactly how it was when I entered. Fire free. Opening the front door, I quickly discover all the alarms in the hallway and throughout the building are going off.

Stepping away from my door, I inhale deeply, coming up with nothing. In all the years I've lived here, I've set off my own fire alarm, but I've never heard the entire building like this.

I catch the sounds of Mrs. Porcino screeching, crying out that there's a fire in the building and without thinking twice, I make my way down the stairs, heading for the first floor and the exit. I find Mrs. Porcino in the stairwell, and she instantly latches on to me, her grip bruising and her terrified eyes wild with panic.

"It must be that couple beneath me. I smelled smoke and then the alarms started going off. I called 911 immediately and they said they were already on their way."

"It's going to be okay," I reassure her, helping her down the stairs. "Let's get out of the building and wait for the fire department to arrive."

"But, all my things."

I shake my head. "It's going to be okay," I repeat. "You just said the fire department is already coming. But if there is a fire, it's not safe to be in here. We need to evacuate."

She wordlessly follows me down the rest of the way until we're standing in the dark in front of the building. The alarm

is still going off, garnering a host of bystanders on the sidewalk and around the building. The scene is chaotic, people yelling and screaming. Dozens lining the sidewalks.

Thankfully off in the distance I catch the faint screech of sirens approaching.

I stare into the building, dumbstruck and worried as are my neighbors who are talking about where they think the fire started and what could have triggered the smoke detectors.

Because even though Mrs. Porcino swears she smelled smoke, there are no signs of anything, nor did I smell any smoke on our trip down the stairs.

A couple of minutes later two large fire engines appear, and one by one, firemen and women jump off the trucks, getting out their equipment. Some head for the building. Others question the neighbors, Mrs. Porcino front and center with that.

I step away from the building, drawing myself closer to the street and away from the chaos. My phone that I forgot I was still holding rings again in my hand, and I quickly move to answer it, the number the same DC one as before.

Only this time, before I can bring the device up to my ear, it's smacked out of my hand, crashing to the sidewalk. A hand grabs ahold of my arm and I'm spun in place only to come eye-to-eye with the cold, dark eyes of the man I prayed I'd never see again.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

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## Kellin

My phone rings the second I step foot onto the stairs of the airplane. The sun is just starting to rise over the horizon, the fluttering of the mission and what's to come ahead already thrumming through my veins. I texted with Alanna briefly yesterday while she was in between patients, but nothing since. But when I check my phone, everything inside me stops short.

Instead of climbing up onto the plane, I'm turning around and standing just off to the side, one hand pressed up against my ear to try to block out the sound of the engines as I answer Gavin's call.

"Hey," I bark loudly, walking just a little farther away and catching the eye of Daniel, another agent and the man who pulled me out of the safe house in Vegas and saved my life. He's frowning at me, but two extra minutes won't fuck anything up.

"Where are you, Kellin?" Gavin growls, and his tone has me turning around, staring out at the tarmac and the air force base beyond.

"About to board a flight out of the country."

"David, as in the David your girl Alanna mentioned, is David Weston, Kellin. The son-in-law of Senator Beaumont."

My breath catches in my chest as my heart jumps. "David Weston? Are you sure?"

"Positive. But that's not all, man. He's been blackmailing the senator for what seems to be years. Don't ask me how

because you really don't want to know, but I hacked his computer. He's all over the dark web, but his firewall isn't all it's cracked up to be. Anyway, he has all kinds of files on the senator and is using what he has as leverage over him. David seems to be the one holding all the cards. Making sure all the deals get done. I'm talking about pictures of the senator having sex with men. With women other than his wife. All kinds of shit. I'm working on getting access to his cell phone, but haven't managed it yet."

"Fuck," I hiss, running a hand through my hair as I try to think.

"What the hell does Alanna have to do with this?"

"Everything," he says as if I should have already pieced this together. "Alanna is Senator Beaumont's daughter."

I stagger back a step like I've been shot. Again. Because that's how this feels. I can't even call it a betrayal, because as far as I know, Alanna knows nothing of my mission or who I'm after.

Or does she?

Is this all a setup?

No. I throw that possibility away immediately.

"Gavin. No way."

"I'm sorry, Kellin, but yes. To everything."

I shake my head, my eyes staring off into nothing as I try to come to grips with this. "The senator's daughter? Really?"

"Yes. But the senator isn't even the big dog in this."

Motherfuck! "Tell me!"

"This guy David, who is married to Alanna's sister for fuck's sake, is obsessed with Alanna. I'm talking full-blown, off-the-rails, stalker. He has pictures of her everywhere."

"Goddammit!" I yell.

"Pictures are all over his computer, starting when she was in high school. Pictures of her in the hospital, in her apartment,



walking the streets, out to dinner. Pictures of her with you, brother. He's been stalking her for years, Kellin, and once you showed up in her life again, that seemed to be his tipping point. It's why they chose Cole Security Forces. There was something on his computer that suggested a contract already in place to move the shipment, but they pulled out three days before they got in touch with Cole. She is why they chose Virginia Beach. Yes, your boys at Cole can move their illegal goods in a precise military-style way, and yes, Mazir had that connection to Cole Security, which is likely how the senator and David knew of them. But that's not fully what this is about. This is about David's obsession with Alanna. My guess is David doesn't give a shit about the shipment and the senator is at his mercy with it. Getting their goods moved and off their hands is just an added bonus."

A sick knot of dread fills my stomach.

"Where is he now?" I ask, already knowing the answer before I ask the question.

"He's there. In Virginia Beach."

I hang up on Gavin and run over to the airplane. Daniel is still there, leaning against the side of the hatch, but when he catches my expression, he rights his body. Our eyes meet and he nods. "I've got it," he yells. I don't even have to explain it to him. "We'll take care of business."

I nod in return, grateful beyond words.

My feet are sprinting before my mind can even catch up.

Sweat slicks my brow as I reach my locker, practically skidding across the room. In no time flat, I remove my keys and grab my gear as I race toward the parking lot. I call Alanna on my way, but she doesn't pick up. That's not uncommon if she's at the hospital and either in surgery or with patients.

But it doesn't set me at ease. Not even a little.

If anything, it ratchets this to another level.

"Call me the second you get this," I curse into her stupid, unhelpful voicemail that I'm pretty sure she never checks

anyway.

How did I let this happen? Why didn't I push her for more details on him? Look her up. I respected her privacy and now this bastard is after my girl. If he hurts her, if he so much as lays a finger on her, I will end him. There will be no mercy for this motherfucker.

Hitting my clicker, my car does that loud beep-beep thing and I slide into it, starting it up with the push of a button and racing out of there.

"Mandi," I bark, going through my call list like a goddamn teenager.

"Kellin, Jesus, you're supposed to be on a plane," she says, cutting me off. "Daniel just texted to let me and Tom know he is leading the ops. How on earth did you already hear?"

My mouth was already open, ready to interrupt her, but what she just said pulls me up short. "What do you mean? How did I already hear what?" Because as far as I know, Gavin only went to me with this. He doesn't even know about Mandi.

"That the senator has been detained."

And for the first time in my life, I think I'm actually at a loss.

"Explain," I manage, my eyes wide as I drive at more than double the speed limit, heading toward Virginia Beach and ready to flash whatever credentials I need to if I get pulled over.

"Wait. I'm confused. I assumed that's why you left right before takeoff."

"The woman I'm seeing, it turns out she's Senator Beaumont's daughter."

Mandi sucks in a rush of air and there it is, right? The unspoken war raging within me.

Is Alanna using me? Or is it all coincidence?

She lives beneath Kayleigh and I met her back in college and... “A third party told me about it right as I was stepping onto the plane. Her ex,” I whisper, almost to myself, “he roughed her up back in college. Tried to sexually assault her and her parents stuck with him. Not her. She told me she walked away from all of them after that, and I believe her. She and I met years ago, and she’s been living in the apartment above my sister’s since way before this all started.”

“Who’s the guy?”

“David Weston. According to my source, who is never wrong, David’s been blackmailing the senator for years. Has tons of pictures of him that would destroy him. I’m guessing that’s why the senator sided with David over his own daughter. That’s why he’s mixed up in this business with David as his silent partner. Only now, David came to Virginia Beach for her. For Alanna. The senator may, it seems, be a patsy.”

“Christ, Kellin. David Weston is a Supreme Court Justice’s son. And Beaumont’s son-in-law.”

I nod. I already know that.

“I have no idea about David Weston, but Beaumont must have gotten twitchy because he sent texts and made calls to Mazir’s asset in Afghanistan, the man you were supposed to be on your way to hunt. The senator made these calls and texts from the same number that was part of the text string. It’s stupid and careless, and not exactly like him. In any event, what he was texting was enough for us to come knocking on his door and collect him. He barely put up a fight.”

“Where is he now?”

“At a location outside Virginia Beach. We debated moving him back to Langley but felt that the ride up might smarten him up and we want him scared and stupid. He believes he’s being held for a threat against him.”

“Is he singing?”

“Not yet. We have him in a holding room in the basement of Cole Security Forces. Can you go and interrogate him?”

Can I? I'd love nothing more than to do that. "My source says that David Weston is in Virginia Beach and after Alanna."

"What's her last name? I'm assuming it's not Beaumont. I'll get a team going."

"Contreras."

I hear Mandi clicking in the background. "When you google Alanna Beaumont, nothing, and I do mean *nothing*, comes up. But..." She trails off while she searches our databases. "Yes, here. A birth record for Alanna Beaumont. But that's seriously all. I have the record of her changing her name, and now that I'm starting to dig, it's coming up, but not at first or even second or third glance. Not at all."

"Why go to such extremes to hide your daughter?"

"I don't know. But if it helps, Alanna is squeaky, Kel. The top five percent of her medical school class at Johns Hopkins. A good doctor with a clean patient history. No complaints against her. No lawsuits. Not even a freaking speeding ticket. It seems she really did change her name and leave her family behind."

My body practically sags with the relief of that, only to build immediately back up with a panic that will not abate until I have my girl back in my arms where I know she's safe.

"From what I'm reading Alanna is his eldest daughter. May or may not have been linked to David Weston, but it's difficult to tell since now he's married to her sister. All I know is that shortly before Alanna Beaumont was set to graduate college, she disappeared."

My stomach twists. "Does it say when or why?"

"Not why. Her parents removed all traces of her from the internet or even searches on the family, and when she arrived at medical school at Johns Hopkins, she was Alanna Contreras, which appears to be her grandmother's maiden name. It looks like she filed for the name switch her senior year of college. The timeline of everything I'm able to find fits in with what you just told me."

“Jesus,” I hiss under my breath before just as quickly reining myself in. “Get a team on her Mandi and find fucking David Weston. I’m heading in and will be there soon.”

I disconnect the call, feeling an unbearable weight sink in the pit of my stomach. I dial Alanna again and once again; it goes immediately to voicemail. The senator is in custody. David Weston is somewhere prowling after Alanna.

And I can’t get ahold of her.

Dread like I’ve never experienced before hits me square in the chest, knocking the wind from me. I need to find her.

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## **CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT**

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## Kellin

I make it back to Virginia Beach by midmorning and my first instinct is to drive to the apartment building before I talk myself out of something as useless as that. She's not there. I call my sister, but her assistant tells me she's in court, and the last thing I want to do is upset Kayleigh.

If she's in court, she's safe.

Instead of going to Cole Security Forces, I drive to the hospital. I need to find Alanna first. The senator can wait. Hell, he can fucking stew. But first I call Mark since Jackson is back in California.

"How's our friend doing?" I ask once he picks up.

"Not happy, which is how I like my detainees. He's been told there is a security threat, and that's why he's being held against his will. That bullshit will only sell for so long though. He's already threatening to call every member of Senate and even the President," Mark snickers. "There are two of your people here and I have a few of mine on him as well. I sent Charlie home, though she wanted to stay."

"Good. I'm glad. I don't want her involved more than she already has been."

"Agreed. But you do know we can't legally hold him here, right? I mean, we're a civilian company and there is no security threat against him. Your people will have to move him out of here and soon."

"Can you give me an hour?"

“Yeah, but no more. Muff is already breathing down my neck, threatening to get back on the plane and come here. He really gets his feathers ruffled when things go tits up the way they have.”

“I get you. I’ll be there soon, and I’ll get Mandi on the transfer.”

Mark and I hang up, and I send Mandi a quick text as I walk into the hospital flashing my CIA ID badge without fucks to give to anyone who tries to stop me. I make my way up to the labor and delivery floor, which is a secure floor, and they basically give me the finger when I try to show my badge. Instead, I ask them to page Alanna for me and I’m quickly informed that she’s not there. That she’s out sick today.

I don’t hesitate for a second, I sprint out of the building and drive directly to the apartment building. Kicking myself in the ass for not having come here first. My mind is racing all over the place. Trying to wrap my head around everything that’s happening.

I can’t.

Alanna is not supposed to be part of this mission. She is supposed to be safe. Working in a hospital and delivering babies.

She is not supposed to be mixed up in any of this ugliness, but it seems all this ugliness now revolves around her.

My feet hit the stairs, forgoing the elevator because it will take just too damn long. My feet carry me up five flights, and the moment I reach her floor, I stop short. Carter Fritz is standing outside her door, his fist poised in the air as if he’s about to knock. He freezes too, turning to look at me and frowning when he takes in my haggard, sweaty, wrecked appearance and desert camo that I’m still wearing.

“Where is she?” he asks softly, his voice nervous, his eyes matching his tone. “We were supposed to have dinner last night and I couldn’t get ahold of her. Now she’s called out sick and in the four years I’ve worked with her, she’s never once done that. Not even when she had the flu with a fever of a



hundred and two and I made her get an IV and rest in one of the patient rooms. Never, Kellin. So where is she?”

“I don’t know.” *But I’m sure as hell going to find out, I don’t say.*

“Tell me you’re going after her and that you’ll get her.” I open my mouth to say something, but he holds up a hand, stopping me. “I know who you are. I have friends in high places too, so I know what you do. I looked you up the moment you came into her life. If you love her half as much as I do, then you will find her. And if she’s anything other than the perfect woman she left as, you and I will have big fucking issues. I may not be as trained as you are, but I don’t fight fair. Find her and never leave her side again. Or I’ll be there to take your place faster than you can blink.”

All I can do is nod.

Because I get him.

I knew it that first night I met him.

He’s in love with Alanna. Only, he’s been stupid enough to keep it hidden and now it’s too late. I won’t let him have her, and he knows it. But his love for her goes beyond me. It goes to her being alive and happy, even if that’s with me and not him.

Which makes him an incredible person, one I respect.

So I say, “I will bring her back and I swear to protect her with my life from here on out.”

His eyes burn into mine, and then without a word, he walks off. Back to the elevator. His steps slow and sluggish, a little broken.

“If your people in high places find anything?” I call out.

“I’ll be in touch. I have your number.”

I grin at that. It’s the most I can hope for since the fucking CIA, the secret keepers who are supposed to know everyone else’s, aren’t on top of their shit. Myself included. My girl is missing, and no one knew she’s been taken. The senator is

detained, but Gavin is the one who had to tell me about David Weston.

But there is one thing Gavin said that's been sticking with me. None of this happened until I showed up. My being in her life was the tipping point for David. Which means maybe I have something to barter with.

Me. My life for hers.

But first I have to find her.

I storm into Cole Security Forces and immediately spot Mark instead of Natalie who is nowhere to be seen. "I sent all non-essential personnel home," he explains when he catches me looking around. "It's mainly just me and Aaron as well as your two people." He falls in stride with me, leading me down toward the basement where the senator is being held. "And as much fun as this has all been, I wouldn't mind you guys all fucking off. Seriously. I'm done with this shit. I retired from the SEALs so I wouldn't continue risking getting my dick blown off every day. You know what I'm saying here?"

"We'll be out of your hair within the hour."

We reach the bottom steps and I pivot to face Mark. At the end of the hall I find a guy with dark hair and dark eyes talking to two agents. He throws me an assessing eye and I give him a slim nod, already knowing that's Aaron.

I turn my focus back to Mark and reach my hand out to shake his. "Thank you for all your help on this. I owe you a beer and a really nice bottle of whiskey."

"I'll take both. But don't tell Jackson or he'll be jealous."

I grin, shaking my head at the big man. "Tell Charlie I'll be in touch." I slap his shoulder and make my way down the hall, my steps quickened and my mind clear. I pause in front of the other two agents. "It's going to get noisy. Knock when transport arrives."

I pull out my gun, ignoring their slightly surprised expressions, and enter the room. The senator is sitting in a large office chair that looks like it's been down here for a

while. The room is small and stark with a couple of other chairs and some long-forgotten office furniture off to the side.

The senator eyes me as I walk in, noting the gun in my hand as his lips stay silent.

I stand directly in front of him, staring down at the man who thinks he maintains the superior advantage by sitting. Fool. “Where is she?” I ask on a harsh whisper.

He doesn’t react. Just folds his arms over his suit-clad chest and red tie, and stares up at me like I’m fucking with his time. Dude has no idea.

When he sees I’m not to be trifled with, he asks, “Who?”

“Alanna,” I tell him, not even bothering to play games.

His eyes widen for a fraction of a second, but the man is as trained as they come. Knows how to play the game, but I don’t have time for his bullshit. “I don’t know what—”

I spin around and kick one of the chairs, sending it crashing against the far wall, pieces of it cracking and breaking apart. “I said, where is she?!” I boom. Flipping back around, I watch as he jumps in his seat, sliding two feet back. My gun is still at my side. Pointing a weapon at a United States senator isn’t likely the smartest move I could make today, but I will if I have to.

“I—” He clears his throat, blowing out a harsh breath, and I see him start to come apart. “He got her, didn’t he?”

“David Weston?”

He nods grimly, his elbows going to his thighs, his face falling into his hands. “I wondered why he was so adamant on Cole Security Forces. I tried to talk him out of Virginia Beach. I told him no. We had a contract in place, but he wouldn’t hear of it. I told him there are dozens of other private companies. But it’s always been about her.”

Then it clicks. “He was your security when you came here for the meeting. Your driver.” He nods into his hands. Christ. The guy has been here all along.

“Do you know why you’re here?”

“Because David wants me dead, I assume.”

He looks up at me, and I shake my head. “Because we have phone records of you calling and texting with known criminals and terrorists. Because you’ve been moving illegal drugs and guns to the Middle East and Afghanistan, and because you’ve been laundering money.”

He stares blankly up at me, his hazel eyes the same shade as Alanna’s.

“Do you know what you’re dealing with here, Mister Shaw?” I tilt my head at him, and he smirks. “That’s right, I know your name. I learned all about you the night my daughter was found in your lap at a frat party. You’re illegally holding a United States senator against his will.”

“Something tells me you won’t be a United States senator much longer. I know all about the blackmail. I know all about what David has been holding over you.” He blanches, physically recoiling, and I nod my head. He lets out a shuddered breath. “We have a record of your calls and texts from last evening to Mazir’s asset—”

His eyebrows scrunch together, and he shakes his head. “I have done no such thing.”

“Don’t fuck with me,” I yell.

“I’m telling you the truth. I have had no communication with Mazir’s asset. I have not been laundering money. I have not done anything other than try to move aid.”

“You motherfucker,” I snap, reaching out and grabbing him by the throat, squeezing and watching as his eyes bug out. “I will end you and I will not care. Tell me where Alanna is.”

“It’s all been David,” he rasps. “Yes, he blackmailed me. He’s been doing it for years. Check his accounts. Look into *him*. I’ve kept my mouth shut because I didn’t have a choice and I’ve been trying to protect my daughters. He’s been obsessed with Alanna since they were kids, and the night you showed up at that party, he lost it. That was the night the blackmail started, and I erased what he did to her. I let her walk away, I removed her from our family, because I thought

she'd be safer that way. Then he married Clarissa, and all seemed fine. He barely paid any attention to her anyway. He's been using my name. He's been acting as me. I swear, I didn't know what was in the crates. I was told it was aid, and I never questioned it. I couldn't."

Jesus fuck.

I release him, not caring that he collapses hard into the chair, nearly falling to the floor. Stepping back, I cross the room as I try to work all this out in my head.

"He took her," I say, pivoting back around and staring into his bloodshot eyes. "The calls, the texts, you being detained. He got her when I was away. He dumped all the evidence on you. And now I don't know where he is."

The senator's face falls, his breathing labored. "He wouldn't take her anywhere easy. David is very careful. He'd want her completely to himself somewhere she couldn't escape."

"Tell me," I demand. "What does he have access to that fits that description?"

His face comes up, his expression dejected. "He has a yacht. It was a birthday present for Clarissa, but he uses it more than she does. If I had to guess, I'd say he took her there." He sags back in the chair with a sigh, scrubbing a hand over his face. "I love my daughters. Both of them. I've done what I could to protect them, but..." He sighs again, heavier this time. A defeated man. "David is ruthless and smart. Do not underestimate him. And when you find her, tell her that I love her and I'm sorry."

"I'll think about that." I holster my weapon and head for the door. "In the meantime, you might want to lawyer up, Senator. Your transport will be here any minute." I bang on the door and it opens, the two agents as well as Mark and Aaron on the other side. "He's ready."

I make my way up the steps and out of the building. "Mandi," I clip into my phone. "I need a location on a yacht and a team ready to go. That's where he took her. David

Weston is the one who has been running the show. The senator is the pawn. Look into David. Dig it all up. I'm going to find Alanna." I don't have a second to waste.

I tell her all the details and then head for my car.

Slipping into the driver's seat, I covertly draw my gun before my ass even hits the leather. I start my car up, and pull out of the lot, back onto the street. "Aftershave. Sweat. And fear," I mutter dryly, a smirk on my lips at just how brazen David Weston is. And stupid. Did he really think I wouldn't know he was hiding in the back seat of my car?

"Well, I would have parked my ass in the front if it hadn't been for the security entourage that just showed up to collect my father-in-law." He laughs, dragging himself out of the narrow well and sitting directly behind me.

I rub at my jaw. "Aren't you worried about him? About yourself as his accomplice?"

He chuckles. "I see he told you some things. I have to say I'm surprised he opened his mouth with what I have on him."

"His daughter's life is a pretty powerful weapon."

"Maybe. Blackmail's a stronger one."

"Then I'm shocked you're allowing him to live."

"He poses no threat to me. He may have suggested to you I was in on his schemes, but that's as far as it will go. He has to know my plans with you, so anything he says won't reach anyone else. He's not stupid enough to risk what I have on him becoming public. Besides, at the end of the day, everything came from him. Those calls and texts were made from a phone purchased with his credit card. Numbered offshore bank accounts on his home computer. Pictures of him with the crates and shaking Christopher Asher's and Francois' Badeaux's hands—also on his home computer."

Nicely played.

"I would have figured you'd be hundreds of miles away by now. Your prize in tow. Why bother to come back for me?"

“Because you’re the type of asshole who won’t rest until you find her, and I can’t have you in her life anymore. And now, it seems, you know too much to live anyway.”

That’s...a break. He believes I received all my intel from the senator just now. He knows nothing of Gavin or the intelligence he provided me this morning. He knows nothing of the things Mandi and I have discussed.

“Care to explain that?” I ask, my right hand resting comfortably on my gun, the other on the wheel as I drive us farther away from town.

“You’re not owed my explanations, Kellin Shaw.” He chambers a bullet in his...Smith and Wesson M&P Shield 2.0 from the quick glance I catch of it in the rearview mirror. It’s a small gun. But at this range, it doesn’t matter what the gun is, it’ll kill me if it hits me in the right place. “We’re going to chat, and if I like your answers, I’ll kill you quickly instead of the way I’d like to. How does that sound?”

“Or I shoot you in the thigh and we talk my way.”

“I wouldn’t try it. The gun is aimed at the back of your head.”

“You do realize I can kill you before you can even get a shot off.”

“Probably,” he admits. “But then you’ll never find Alanna. I’d shut up and listen close if I were you. If you want her alive and unharmed, you’re going to do everything I tell you to do exactly the way I tell you to do it.”

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

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## Alanna

I hate boats. Yet every summer since before I can remember, we'd spend our summers alternating between weeks at sea or splashing on the sandy beaches of Sea Island. I always thought I hated the yacht because boats make me seasick. But in sitting here now, locked in one of the crew member's bedrooms, I realize it's not the boat I hated so much.

It's the people.

Because being stuck on a hundred-eighty-foot yacht in the middle of the fucking ocean with David Weston is not exactly what I'd call a good time. Not that I've seen him since he took me here.

The bastard drugged me.

Stabbed a needle filled with something into my upper arm, and when I woke up, I was in this room with David standing over me.

I asked him what he was doing, but he didn't say much. Only that he and I needed to talk, and that in order for me to really listen to him, we had to be someplace secluded. He said he'd be back, pointed a gun at my head as he stabbed my arm with more drugs, and then he left, locking me in here.

When I woke up, it was daytime. I have no idea how long I was sleeping for since there are no clocks in here. The crew bedrooms down on this part of the boat only have small portholes, but I don't need a big window to see the ocean and nothing else. I have no idea how far we traveled overnight while I was passed out. Could be hundreds of miles. We could

be in the middle of the goddamn Atlantic or just a few miles offshore somewhere.

I have no way of telling anything in here.

I'm stranded. Completely at David's mercy.

I have to assume eventually someone will call the police and report me missing, but even if they do, they'll never know to look for me here—wherever here even is.

I don't have my cell phone or computer. I have nothing.

A couple of old paperbacks and a few journals from the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, which I've already read since they're a year old, so thanks for nothing on that.

The rumbling of the engines starts up, the vibration running like a current through the room, and I climb out of bed, clamoring the half a foot over to the window, pressing my face against the cool glass, desperate to see something. Anything.

The boat starts to move, surging powerfully through the water that kicks up against the hull of the ship, splashing lightly against the porthole I'm staring out of.

*We're moving fast.*

And unfortunately, because this is a freaking yacht meant to weather nasty ocean storms, all the furniture is fixed to the floor or walls. Even the lamps. Everything.

I have no weapons I can use against David.

My stomach growls and I shove myself uselessly away from the glass. Terrified and angry and hateful and so full of questions my mind is overflowing with them. I pick up an apple from the fruit bowl, the only food in here, and head for the en suite bathroom.

At least I'm afforded that luxury.

I lock the bathroom door, turn on the shower to hot, strip out of my nasty clothes, and wash myself off quickly, not wanting David to attempt to enter when I'm naked. I change

into some of the clothes he has here for me, a white T-shirt and white linen pants. I wonder if they belong to my sister, but I quickly brush that off, and by the time I exit the bathroom, David is standing there wearing a sleek smile that doesn't touch his dark eyes.

“Hello, sweetheart. I'm glad you're up and showered. I brought you food. You must be hungry.” I eye it harshly and he chuckles. “If I wanted to drug you, I'd give you the needle. Eat up, we have company waiting for us.”

He sets a tray down on the bed filled with salmon, salad, and bread. “David, what on earth am I doing here? This is madness. You can't just kidnap someone. I have patients. I have work.”

He steps back, leaning heavily against the door, watching me as I unwrap the silverware from the cloth napkin. I take a bite of my salmon, chewing slowly and staring directly back at him, waiting for him to respond.

“I've tried to talk to you over the years. I've called and sent letters. I even showed up once at the hospital, but your friend, Billie, I believe her name is, threatened my life with a scalpel if I ever came back. Told me precisely how she'd get rid of my body too.”

I grin at that, and if I ever got off this boat and back home, I'm going to hug the hell out of my friend. She never told me she did that, and I understand why. I would have lost my mind. But I hate that she took that sort of risk.

“Why would you ever think I'd want to talk to you? Any time I spoke to you, you threatened me. All you've ever tried to do is scare and intimidate me.”

He shakes his head, folding his arms over his chest. “You were never interested in anything I had to tell you. In anything I had to say. Do you know how hard that was for me? To be ignored like that by the only person I've ever loved?”

Instead of lost or vulnerable, he's angry.

No, he's furious.

His fists are balled up and his dark eyes are blazing. So that's what this is? I rejected him and he can't handle it? I suppose it's a bit too late to tell him to grow up and get over it.

I take a bite of my salad, but suddenly, my stomach is churning violently, and I can't handle another bite. "David, where's Clarissa?"

When I walked away from my family, my socialite sister went with them. She always loved David. Always hated how he wanted me and not her, though she's three years younger than me and David is six years her senior. I found out they had married three months after the fact. Too late to warn her, though I did try. I haven't heard from her since, and any time I've Googled her or tried to look her up, she's always smiling and appearing happy.

"Shopping or getting drunk somewhere, I'm sure."

I frown at that. "You married her. How can you speak like that about her?"

"Because our marriage is an arrangement—"

"Not to her, it isn't—"

"The same arrangement you and I were supposed to have —"

"I didn't want an arrangement, David. You knew that—"

"That's because you never gave us a chance!" he bellows, his voice so harsh it slays right through me, causing me to jerk back, my heart rate shooting up. "It wasn't going to be an arrangement with us. You and I were supposed to be everything, Alanna." His hand slashes the air before he points his finger at me. "You were mine. I loved you. I would have given you anything. Anything you wanted including being a doctor. All you had to do was be mine and you threw me away for that guy. That stranger. That nobody!" He runs a tremulous hand down his face before he takes a slow, deep breath, reining himself in. "Can you understand how deeply that hurt me?"

I swallow thickly, trying to think.

I'm a doctor and as part of our training, we're taught to think clearly and logically under duress. Your patient is bleeding out or coding on the table in front of you, what do you do? How do you fix them? We also do a psych rotation in medical school. But this is not something you learn in a textbook. This is not patient observation.

I have no idea how to fix this.

David is the definition of unhinged. I see it in his wild eyes. In the way his balled fists shake ever so slightly. In the sweat that's coating his brow.

I straighten my posture and meet his eyes, giving him my best attempt at my calm doctor expression and tone. "Tell me why I'm here, David."

He laughs mirthlessly. As if the answer should be obvious. "Because for my entire life, all I've done is love you. You and no one else. You spent time with me when we were kids. Gave me your attention. You saw me, Alanna, when no one else did. Cared for me when no one else did. You were always meant to be mine." He runs an agitated hand through his hair, his voice coming out in a growl. "You're here because that man, that fucking man, who stole you from me all those years ago came back for you. He used you to get information on your father. Information on me. And I can't have that, Alanna. I can't let him use you like that when he should have never had you to begin with."

I shake my head in bewilderment, his words not making any sense to me.

David notes my expression and alters his stance, standing up straighter, suddenly so in control and deviously cold it sends a shiver up my spine. "You don't know, do you?"

"Know what?" I bark out, exasperated and tired and scared.

"Who Kellin Shaw really is. What he was really doing with you and what he was ultimately after."

"Why would Kellin care about who my father is? Who you are? I never told him anything about my family and I only

mentioned you by your first name.”

David starts to laugh, but there is no humor to it. “Your lover works for the CIA, sweetheart.” David watches me closely for a reaction I try desperately not to give him, but it leaks out anyway. *The CIA?* I assumed he worked for the government in some way. The FBI was my guess. “Not only that, his mission was to find and take down your father.”

I scrub my hands up and down my face. “Why would he try to do that?”

“Because your father has been involved in illegal operations for years. Operations your boyfriend was working to try to stop. Did you really think it was a coincidence that he saw you again after all these years? That he was so keen to pick right up where you left off?”

It should surprise me that my father has been involved in illegal doings, but it doesn't. And honestly, it's impossible to concentrate on that when David's words are boomeranging around my head. Kellin told me he had secrets. But he never told me what they were. Hell, I told him not to tell me even when he pushed me to ask him what they were.

Is it possible?

That everything I thought was happenstance and fate isn't?

His sister lives right below me. She has since I moved in there two years ago.

And in all that time, I never heard her mention her brother. He never came to visit her.

Was that a lie too? Did Kellin use Kayleigh and Sean to get close to me? Do they work for the CIA too?

“It can't be,” I whisper, more to myself than to him, a thick lump of emotion suddenly clogging my throat making it hard to breathe.

I think back on the weeks Kellin and I spent together. Yes, we got serious quick. Yes, we said words that spoke to that. Is that why he told me he might not come back? Why he asked on a few occasions about my family? My past?

My insides tumble around like clothes in a dryer. My heart getting in on the action.

Because I fell for Kellin Shaw.

I fell so hard for him.

And I was pretty damn positive the feeling was mutual.

“Don’t believe me, sweetheart? Come on. He can tell you all about it himself.”

My eyes slingshot over to David’s, and he grins, reaching out his hand for mine. Waiting for me to make the decision for myself.

I stand up slowly, shaking my head at his offered hand, and he turns away from me, giving me an extra second.

Kellin is on this boat. I have no idea what David has planned, but I can imagine. David is as twisted and evil as they come. If Kellin really is CIA, then maybe, just maybe, he can get us out of here alive.

But if what David is telling me is true, then once that happens, once I’m safe and back home, I never want to see Kellin Shaw again.

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# CHAPTER THIRTY

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## Alanna

My heart is lodged somewhere in between my throat and my chest. I don't even think it's beating as David silently directs me from the bedroom I've been staying in down the narrow hallway, through the modern and industrial kitchen toward the stern of the boat. We're still moving at a good pace, which makes walking in this part of the boat slower as I fight against the motion, hoping I don't topple over.

"Where are the staff?" I ask David because typically there are always people lurking about. A chef. A steward. Someone.

"You mean the crew that's loyal to me?"

"Have I screamed yet, David? Just answer the question."

He chuckles softly behind me, reaching out and running his fingers through my still slightly damp hair. "I think it's your fire that first caught my attention. You didn't fawn over me the way every other girl did."

He stops us here, in the hall between the kitchen and some of the back rooms. One arm wraps around my waist, tugging me back into his chest, and my eyes squeeze shut as my breath stalls in my chest. He's breathing heavily, like a man at war, hovering on the edge.

His barely contained desperation is what has me most on alert and scared.

"I love you," he breathes into me, and I sink my teeth into my bottom lip so I don't whimper. Him touching me makes my skin crawl and I try, I try so hard, not to tense up or show my revulsion. "God, Alanna, I've loved you my whole damn

life. How could you pick him over me? Over our families and all that we could have been?"

"You attacked me," I murmur.

"Because you were all over him," he rasps harshly, his hot breath fanning across my face.

"I'm sorry," I say and force myself to sag back into him. "I was young and drunk at a frat party, David. You were with other women in law school."

"They were nothing. Meaningless whores."

"I didn't even know Kellin back then. I had just met him that night."

"I saw the way you looked at him. The way he looked at you. The way he wanted you. And I saw it again when he came back into your life. Dammit, Alanna. Of all the men you had to take into your bed, why him? I handled the meaningless ones. The guys you barely looked at or noticed. I tried so hard to let you live, knowing that when you were done with your residency, you'd be mine again. For good." My eyes snap open at that. I have no idea what that means, but the connotation behind it is terrifying. "I was biding my time, married to Clarissa out of obligation, but I just couldn't take it anymore. The way he was using you. The way you were getting involved with him."

"David," I whisper, my voice hoarse. I clear it and try again. "What are you saying?" I can't even formulate the words to fully ask. My heart is hammering in my chest as blood rushes through my ears.

"Clarissa can't get pregnant. She's a pathetic drunk who can't give me an heir. She was just a placeholder anyway. You wanted to be a doctor, you were angry with me after what happened, and I was letting you follow your dream. That's how much I love you." He squeezes my arm in a bruising grip. "But my time of waiting is over, Alanna. My patience is all used up." The hand on my waist grips me tighter, holds me closer to his chest as his mouth meets my cheek. I suck in a breath and hold it. "Mine." He pushes against me. "You are

mine and no one else's. It's time to clean up all the loose ends so we can start our lives together."

I swallow thickly and nod, sending out a silent prayer to the universe.

"Boats make me seasick. Can we go back to shore?"

"Are you mine? Tell me and mean it."

Fuck. I can't... "Yes. I'm yours." I hold in my sob as a piece of me dies. "I'll be yours if you start treating me better. Stop trying to scare and hurt me."

"I won't ever again. I promise."

"So can we go home now?"

"Not yet. Not until it's done."

He spins me around in his arms until I'm facing him, my wide hazel to his dark and volatile brown. He leans in and plants a punishing kiss to my lips, the faint tint of copper filling my mouth as my lips smash into my teeth.

He pulls back and cups my face, smiling at me like a man with a plan. Like he has a million aces up his sleeve and is about to reveal each and every one with careful precision.

"Don't worry, sweetheart, I'm going to kill him for the way he's been using you. But first, I want him to tell you what he's been doing. So you know once and for all I'm the only one you can trust."

Oh, Jesus Christ.

David reaches down, taking my hand and intertwining our fingers. He drags me along behind him on weak legs, my thoughts scattering every which way as I think through the burgeoning panic that's taking up residence in my chest.

David leads us past a couple of rooms until we reach a large storage closet filled with extra life preservers, a couple of unused surfboards, and some spare rope. Sitting uncomfortably on a too-small dock stool is Kellin, his hands are tied behind his back and his ankles are bound with knotted rope. His face is cut-up and bruised with a swollen right eye

and a small laceration on his cheek. His nose is oozing a thin trail of blood over the patch of duct tape that's covering his mouth.

He looks like someone beat the crap out of him and I don't have to ask to know it was David.

The moment we enter the room, Kellin's eyes shoot over to mine, looking me up and down, covering every single inch of me as if he's searching for signs of injury, and when he finds none, I see his relief.

That is until his eyes settle on my hand David is holding.

They linger there for a long beat before sliding slowly back up to mine with a question in them. And when I give him no response, I see anger and betrayal take the place of the question.

Despite all that David said, my instinct is to run to him. Is to throw my arms around him and make sure he's okay. But I hold on tight. Hold all my cards close to the chest and wait for David to start revealing his.

"Here sweetheart," David says tenderly, giving me a kiss on my cheek. "Have a seat." He pulls over an old wooden deck chair and I do as I'm told. I sit quietly, staring over at Kellin as I try to make sense of the impossible. David saunters over to him and rips the duct tape from his mouth. I wince because that had to hurt like hell and Kellin didn't even so much as flinch, though his lips are now cracked and bleeding.

His slate-blue eyes haven't left mine, even as David crouches down and gets right up in his face. Tears sting the backs of my eyes, but I push them down. Emotion will get me nowhere right now, and without knowing exactly who and what Kellin is, the only one I can rely on right now is myself.

My fingers twitch to move, itch to react, but I clasp them together in my lap, forcing myself to stay calm and neutral.

"Sweetheart, you've already been introduced to Kellin Shaw, but I'm not sure you know him." David turns back to me. "I'm assuming he never mentioned to you who he works for?"

I shake my head. “He’s a cybersecurity consultant. I don’t know the name of the company he works for.”

Kellin’s eyes don’t react to my words, but I catch the smallest of perceptible smirks on his lips before it’s just as quickly gone.

“That’s what he told you?”

I tilt my head at David. “Yes.”

David turns back to Kellin, rears back and punches him in the face with a sickening crunch. A yelp flees my lungs before I can stop it, my hands covering my mouth to try to stifle my cries. Kellin starts to fall back off the stool, but David grabs his shoulders, jerking him up to a sitting position. Blood pours from his nose and he turns to spit some onto the ground.

“You lying bastard,” David shouts in his face. “Tell her who you are. Tell her who you work for. How you’ve been using her from the start.”

Kellin’s eyes meet mine, and the moment he opens his mouth, the first of my tears start to leak. “I work for the Central Intelligence Agency.”

David already told me this, but having it confirmed from Kellin...hurts.

I knew he had secrets he couldn’t tell me. I knew he was holding back. It’s not even that he works for the CIA. It’s that David was right, which means he’s telling the truth about Kellin.

My eyes hit my lap. I don’t want to hear any more.

“Alanna,” Kellin pleads my name, and I shake my head.

I need a second.

I need a lot of seconds because I’m so absolutely wracked with fear and heartache that I’m finding it difficult to breathe.

“Tell her how you’ve been using her,” David demands.

I hear Kellin spit again, likely more blood. “Nearly five months ago I was shot in a safe house in Las Vegas. I had called my boss with a critical piece of intelligence and two

hours later, I was shot. My boss, it turns out, was running an international terrorist organization, receiving drugs and guns from a French dealer. But there was a third member involved in this, someone who was helping to distribute the drugs and guns both in the US and in the Middle East. They were also laundering the millions of dollars that were coming in through a charity. At first, I didn't know who the third person was. Then I discovered it was Senator Gerald Beaumont."

My stomach clenches so painfully, so violently, that I double over the side of the chair, retching onto the floor. My head is spinning, my skin crawling, and I can't right myself. Cold hands meet my face, pushing me back into the chair and forcing my gaze up. David's face fills my field of vision with a smug, satisfied grin that contradicts the concern he's trying to force into his eyes.

"I'm so sorry, sweetheart. My poor sweet, girl. My poor, naïve girl. Now you understand now why I have to destroy him."

"Your father has been detained and is likely already under interrogation at Langley," Kellin continues, his voice calm and apathetic. Like he's simply reading all this from some report placed in front of him.

"I don't care about my father. He hasn't been my father in nine years," I spit out, still staring up at David. I hate my father. I hate him for all that he did to me.

Doesn't Kellin understand that's not what's breaking me apart right now?

"Your father was blackmailed. Has been for years. Your... whatever this asshole is to you, has incriminating and embarrassing photographs on him. He's been holding them over his head. It's why your father removed the evidence of your assault that night." My eyes shutter closed, my body twisting away, digging deeper into the chair. "It's why he let you walk away from your family. But David here never did that. Did you? You've been stalking her forever. Waiting for the right time."

I hear David move away from me, back over toward Kellin. “Did you think I was going to let you have her?” David says with an amused laugh. “You were using her, you piece of shit. Don’t play it off like I’m the villain and you’re the hero in her world.”

“I didn’t discover that Senator Beaumont was the third person involved in this until after I met Alanna again. And I didn’t discover she was his daughter until this morning.” The way he says that. The sharpness of his tone. The steadfast authority behind it, has me opening my eyes to find him. He’s staring at me with pure determination, begging me to hear him, to believe him.

Yes, he works for the CIA.

Yes, they’re professional liars.

But that’s not what this is.

“You fucking liar,” David bellows, punching Kellin again, and this time, he tumbles back, falling hard on the floor behind him, unable to brace himself since his hands and legs are bound. “You knew who she was. You work for the CIA. Don’t feed her that bullshit.”

“I never looked her up. Never thought there was a need,” Kellin asserts, staring directly at me before looking up at David. “You, on the other hand, I looked in to. And I didn’t use the CIA for that. So all that you think you have that’s private, that will have the senator falling and not you? Guess again, asshole. If you make it off this boat alive, you’ll be joining your father-in-law in a nice two-by-four cell for the rest of your life without the benefit of even seeing the sky again.”

“You motherfucker,” David screams, coming off the rails completely. He punches Kellin again, knocking him back down before he slides out a gun. My breath catches in the back of my throat, my heart rate spiking to a new level.

David advances on Kellin who is still on the floor, unable to move or right himself. I clamor to my feet, a scream

hovering on my lips, unable to be expelled, just as David aims the gun directly at Kellin and moves to fire.



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# CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

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## Kellin

“That’s the last time I let you hit me, asshole.” I spit blood on the floor, and glance up in time to find David pointing his tiny bitch gun at me. I’ve let the bastard knock me around all evening for one reason and one reason only.

Alanna.

I needed to get to her. Needed to see her alive and hear straight from her that she didn’t set me up. I’ve been betrayed enough for one lifetime.

And for a half-beat, David almost had me sold that she was really his and not mine.

Her eyes when she walked in were colder than ice and deadlier than the gun he’s pointing at me. But then she sat down. Then he started talking.

“From this angle, it won’t take much to hit you,” David quickly retorts, and out of the corner of my eye, I see Alanna stand. If David really is about to shoot and kill me, I don’t want her to see it. Moreover, I don’t want her to think that what happened between us wasn’t real, because nothing in my life has ever meant even a tenth as much to me as what Alanna does.

I look over, meeting her beautiful hazel eyes. Eyes I don’t know how to live without. Eyes I don’t *want* to live without.

If she’s not mine, there really is no point to any of this.

It’s a strange realization to take hold of, but no less true.

“Whatever he told you about me using you isn’t true,” I tell her, needing her to believe me. “That’s not how this went. I meant what I said. I had no idea your connection to all this until this morning. I love you, Alanna. More than my own life.”

“I love you too,” she tells me as tears dance down her cheeks, and David roars out something unintelligible.

I watch as his finger presses in on the trigger. All I can do is hope I react at the right second.

The gun fires, a loud, harsh crack that echoes off the walls. I roll to my right, feeling a breeze and then a sharp sting along my side. But it’s the bellow of pain that calls my focus and has me jumping up to my feet despite the burn of the bullet I know hit me.

I don’t have enough time to undo the rope around my ankles, but right now, I don’t need it.

David is hunched over, grasping something in his side. He tucks his gun into his pocket before he pries the object free. Grasping a blood-coated fork in his hand, he stares down at it incredulously as if it never occurred to him that Alanna would go after him. He touches where she stabbed him, and I realize she got him not just in the side, but she went for his liver.

Damn. She wasn’t messing around.

David turns to her, his expression murderous as he charges toward her. Without hesitation, I take the length of rope between my wrists and throw it over his head and around his neck. I yank back with all my strength, cutting off his air and constricting his carotid arteries.

“Word to the wise,” I snarl in his ear. “When you tie someone’s hands, don’t leave six inches of rope between them. It allows for them to do this.”

I tug harder as David thrashes against me, but I don’t ease up, not for a second.

Alanna is standing here, watching with wide, terrified, slightly ill eyes, and I can’t kill a man in front of her.

David deserves to die.

He deserves everything I intended to give him.

But if I do it now, this way, it's in cold blood. It's an act of revenge, and Alanna should not be a part of this.

"Hand me his gun," I tell her, and she blinks at me, almost as if she's coming back to the room, and searches David's pockets while he continues to kick and thrash about, his hands digging into mine and the rope. If she doesn't hurry, he'll die.

Alanna searches around, finding the gun, and holding it up for me to see. I release David, watching him collapse to the floor in a heap, gasping and coughing as he attempts to suck air in through his damaged and swollen trachea.

Taking the gun from Alanna's shaky hands, I pistol whip him in the head before he can even think about doing anything else. He crumples down, his body lifeless on the ground, though I know he's alive.

It's more than the bastard deserves.

Alanna's trembling body crouches down next to him, checking his pulse, and when she finds it there she lets out a deep, guttural sob. Pocketing the gun, my hand slides around her waist, and I hoist her back up to her feet, directly into my arms. I wrap her up in me, holding her so close and so tight, breathing in the scent of her hair and rocking her as she comes apart in my arms.

"Are you okay?" I whisper into her, my lips pressing into the side of her face.

"I feel like I should be asking you that question."

Pulling back, I cup her face in my hands, staring into her. "I've had worse. So tell me the truth."

"I'm okay. I'm not great, but I'm okay."

My forehead drops to hers, my eyes closing for a second. "You have no idea how scared I was when I heard he had taken you."

I lean in and kiss her. I don't wait and I don't question. My lips meet hers, strong and commanding, but also sweet and tender, relief at her being here with me coursing like a salve through my veins.

All too soon, I pull back, fully aware of our surroundings and the fact that David won't be out for long. I quickly undo the ropes around my wrists and then bend down to untie my ankles.

"If you could get out of the rope that entire time, why did you let him do all that to you?"

I glance up at her as I kneel down, taking the two long pieces of rope, and tying David up. He'll never get out of this, no matter how much he struggles.

"I needed to get to you." Her teeth sink into her bottom lip, her hand touching my tender face as her eyes glass over with tears. "I'm okay, baby. I promise. Like I said, I've had worse."

"But..." She shakes her head. "You're hurt, Kellin. He shot at you."

I glance down and find the side of my shirt stained with a small trail of red. It doesn't hurt, more of a mild sting, and I know it's not deep. Once David is fully secured, I stand back up, running my knuckles across her flushed cheek. "A flesh wound. Lucky for me, I know a doctor."

"I don't make house calls."

I chuckle, leaning in and kissing her cheeks, her eyes, her nose, her lips. Everywhere I can so I know she's really here with me. That she's safe and alive and I can bring her home. No more David Weston. I will make sure of it.

She lifts my shirt up, taking a look at my wound, her expression stricken. "You could have been killed. He could have killed you." She blows out a weighty breath. "I can't handle that, Kellin. I can't lose you. Not like this."

"You won't have to. My days of getting shot are over. All I want is to be with you."

Just then the boat begins to slow, coming quickly to a stop. Alanna's eyes go wide with worry, but I take her hand, leaving David here.

He's not going anywhere I don't want him to go.

"I know some people," I tell her, leading her through the bottom of the massive yacht, up some stairs until we reach the back deck at the stern of the boat. Two boats approach the yacht in the darkness. One is a sleek, black speed boat. The other is a United States Coast Guard ship.

"You knew they were coming?" Alanna asks, awe in her voice as she watches them approach us.

"Yes. Despite David's arrogance and planning, I had a few tricks of my own."

So much has happened today. So many things have gone wrong. Daniel and the team I was meant to be leading are heading into Afghanistan to snatch up Mazir's asset. The last of all his connections. The end of this nightmare that seemed to have more wormholes the deeper we dug.

The senator is in custody.

Asher and Badeaux are dead. David's unconscious and tied up below deck.

And Alanna is safe, holding my hand, because despite all that's happened, she's here with me on the other side.

"I have so many questions," she whispers as the speed boat reaches us. Two agents hop out, tying the boat to the back of the yacht and heading our way.

"I know. I'll do my best to answer them all. But let's get you home first. Off this yacht."

"What happens to David now? And my father?"

"Your father is being held at CIA headquarters. And David will likely join him. There's a lot to weed through, and I imagine this mess is just beginning considering who your father and David are. It won't look good for anyone."

She blows out a heavy breath, running a hand through her hair. “Then I guess it’s a good thing I changed my last name.” She turns to face me, a small smirk on her lips. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you.”

I shake my head. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you either.”

Her grin widens, her hazel eyes sparkling off the lights of the boats. “No more secrets.”

Is that something I can promise her? The life of an agent is all secrets. But maybe my life as an agent has come to an end. Maybe it’s time to try on something else.

“No more secrets,” I promise. Knowing I mean it.

I lean in and press my lips to hers.

She’s my home. My reason. Nothing else matters.

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# EPILOGUE

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# Alanna

## *Six months later...*

Darkness is all shadows. Comprised of varying stages of light. That was a lesson I learned long ago, not only at the hands of my family, but directly from David. David who is now in prison somewhere in Colorado. Not even his father could get him out of the mess he made for himself.

Kellin's assassin friend, Gavin found a lot of things on David.

It turns out, David had a back door into my father's personal computer. And that back door, was tricable because David wasn't much of a hacker. He was, however, smart enough to strike a deal. Life in prison if they knocked off the charge of treason.

My father was a different matter.

Whether he was aware of what the crates were actually filled with or not, we'll never know. He told the CIA all about David. All about what he was doing and swore his innocence. Set to resign, and live a life in shame, he was ready to go to prison for five years. The night before he was to begin serving his sentence, somehow, the pictures of him having sex with men and other women leaked out, and that was the final straw that broke his back.

My father took his own life that very night.

I haven't had much communication with my mother.

Or my sister.

Last I spoke with them, they were hiding away in a house on St. Barts, too embarrassed by the men in their lives to show their faces.

I've put it all behind me.

Pushed the past away.

It can finally stay there, no longer able to haunt me.

"I still can't believe that when I go into work tomorrow, you won't be there," I tell Carter as I hug him goodbye. He leaves first thing tomorrow, driving up to Boston, and will start work as an attending OB-GYN next week.

"I know. That's going to be the hardest part of all of this." Carter kisses my cheek, giving me a final squeeze, and then stepping away from me. He glances over to Kellin and nods in his direction. The two of them I can't say ever became close or even friends, but there is unmistakable respect they share. "You take care of her."

Kellin smirks, coming in to stand beside me. "I will."

"Um, you do know Alanna, as with all women, can take care of herself, right?" Billie snarks, rolling her eyes. "You men and your testosterone. You think we actually need you to take care of us?" She snorts, turning in my direction. "Help a girl out here."

I laugh, reaching my hand out and Billie high-fives me. "Yeah. What she said."

"Okay." Carter throws his hands up in surrender, having been on this side of Billie and her female empowerment rants before. "Now I'm really going. Billie, are you coming with me or are you going to stay third-wheel to their duo?"

"I am never a third wheel. Alanna will always love me more than Kellin."

Kellin chokes on a laugh, and I tilt my face up to his with a shrug. "Sorry. Chicks before dicks is universal." I wink at him.

“Damn straight it is,” Billie agrees. “But I’m going too because it’s late and unlike you cool attendings and fellows, I have an early shift tomorrow. I’ll see you tomorrow.” Billie kisses my cheek and does a fist pound with Kellin. She can talk a good game, but the two of them have grown thick as thieves.

The door shuts and with it a heaviness sits on me. “I’m going to miss Carter. I think it’s amazing he’s moving to Boston, and I don’t regret for a second that I’m staying here, but still. He’s my professional counterpart.”

“We can go up to Boston to visit him any time you want.” Kellin wraps his arms around me from behind, dropping his chin to my shoulder. I blow out a sigh and he spins me around in his arms. “Got a second?”

“Huh?” I scrunch my eyebrows.

“Wanna go for a drive with me?”

“Now?”

He kisses the tip of my nose. “No time like the present.”

Thirty minutes later, we pull up in front of a house at the end of a secluded street and drive. I step out, walking up to the edge of what looks to be a massive estate. Only the headlights of Kellin’s car illuminate the path, and I’m not sure why he stopped here.

I turn to him, not daring to walk in deeper. I can smell the salty brine of the ocean. Hear the waves crashing gently against the shore. “Where are we?” I turn to Kellin, my eyebrows at my hairline. “You’re not in the CIA anymore. I don’t think working for Cole Security Forces will get you very far. We’ll get arrested if we’re trespassing.”

“This was my parents’ estate. I told you my mom immigrated from Ireland, but I did not tell you that she came from one of the top whiskey manufacturers there.”

I stare at him dumbfounded for a moment. “You like whiskey, you said that to me the night we first met at the frat party.”

He grins. “Yep. The stuff I had in the flask that night was my grandfather’s recipe and part of his secret stash.” My jaw unhinges, and he chuckles, walking over to join me as I stare into the dark property. “My dad was a four-star general. A lifetime Army man, as was his father before him. But his dad was also a widower from a young age and never remarried. He kept every penny he earned and invested well. This” —he points into the darkness— “is where I grew up.”

“You never mentioned anything.”

He shrugs. “It wasn’t so easy to talk about. After they died, Kayleigh and I inherited it. But it’s six bedrooms. Eight baths. Six thousand square feet. Neither of us were ready to take that sort of property and responsibility on, so we sold it and split the proceeds.”

“So why are we here, Kellin?” I ask, tilting my head and cocking a brow.

He grins. “Because the owners I sold it to put it on the market. Evidently the wife got relocated for work, so the family had to move. I jumped at it. Honestly, I thought of Kayleigh when I did. I wanted her and Sean to have it since she’s pregnant. But I was a little too late. You see, Sean already went and bought them a house near downtown and the courthouse and their offices. She told me to keep it. That it’ll be the place we have family holidays and gatherings. The glue of us. So I did.”

“Kellin,” I whisper on a strained breath. My eyes searching for things they cannot see.

“Do you want to see it? Better yet, do you want to move in here with me?”

“Kellin,” I yell this time.

“Come.”

He takes my hand and together we walk down the long path that leads to what I can already tell is a huge home. We step by the door and automatic lights illuminate, glowing a cast of shadows and beauty over the main house. White brick

and gray stone are all the eye can see. It's massive, as I expected by what he told me. But wow. I mean...*wow*.

"I'll rebuild the treehouse they took down. Once our kids are old enough, of course."

My head whips in his direction. "*Our* kids?"

"Two? Three?"

I smile. "Four, Kellin. I want four."

"Four it is then. I'd like to start whenever you're ready."

"Six months?"

"Sounds perfect. That gives me plenty of time to get down on one knee for you."

Damn him. I'm smiling so big. "Christmas is only a few months away."

He takes my hand, squeezing my fingers in his. "You don't think that's too cliché?"

"No. I think it's just about perfect."

"Then I may or may not propose to you during Christmas. But until then, come see our home with me."

He drags me into his chest, his hand cupping my face as he tilts down to kiss me. And kiss me he does. With tongue and passion and fireworks. And love. God, so much love.

THE END

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Thank you so very much for reading Surrender. I hope you loved Kellin and Alanna's story as much as I loved writing it. It's beyond exciting to be part of this very special world and I am so grateful to Corinne Michaels for this opportunity. I'd also like to thank my three beautiful girls and amazing husband who put up with me endlessly as I get lost in my writing world.

Special thanks to Gabrielle G. and my PA Danielle Rairigh for listening to me while I lost my mind over this book. I wanted it to be nothing short of perfect and that's not such an easy thing to accomplish.

This story is a cross-over between Corinne Michaels' Salvation Society world and two of mine. We first meet Kellin, as well as Gavin and Emma who are mentioned in this book, in my Las Vegas Sin series, particularly Darkest Sin, which is the last book in that series of stand-alones. That is a sexy romantic suspense series that I absolutely love. Carter is going to be getting his own story in a new series I have set to start releasing soon. That one is all about hot Boston doctors, and I'm so excited Carter will get his HEA!

Thanks again and much love!

Xo ~ J. Saman

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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J. Saman is a USA Today bestselling author who is addicted to Diet Coke, sour candy, and indie rock. She swears way too much (especially after a glass of wine) and has a penchant for sarcasm (or so her husband and children like to tell her).

She's an admitted lover of second chance romances, love triangles, and the perfect amount of angst. She is best known for writing contemporary romance filled with smart, strong women, and sexy alphas who have a softer side - especially for their women.